



On your marks

Since the persecutions in Jerusalem, the city of Antioch in Syria had become the new centre for the Christian church in the first decades of Christianity. It was where the first 'followers of the way' (of Jesus) were given the name 'Christian' (Acts 11:26). Among the church leaders here were Barnabas and Saul, who later used the Roman version of his name – Paul.

It wasn't long however before the church that was established in that city began to look outwards with a missionary zeal for the wider non-Jewish world beyond its boundaries. Following a time of prayer, that church remarkably set apart two of its best teachers to go overseas as missionaries.

Barnabas' family came from Cyprus, so he was an obvious choice for this first evangelistic mission to new territory. Cyprus became the scene of conversions and a dramatic confrontation as the gospel took root among the Cypriot people. The following outline explores that story with ideas to use with a small group or within an all-age celebration.

Get set

You will need:

- an outline map of Cyprus from the back of a Bible, an atlas or the Internet
- a long piece of rope and some empty cardboard boxes to represent the cities of Salamis and Paphos on the island.

Go!

Background to the story

Barnabas was a key player in the development of the church at Antioch. When he arrived there, he recognised that God was at work bringing non-Jews into the Christian family of faith. He was prompted to go and find Saul who, after his initial dramatic conversion, had spent many years in study and isolation working through what it meant to believe that Jesus was God's Messiah. Barnabas brought Saul to Antioch and together they disciplined the church, which became an increasingly important centre for the Christian church in this part of the world.

Two important marks of it being a spirit-filled church soon began to emerge. Firstly, the people of the church responded generously with financial help during a famine that left their fellow Christians in Jerusalem in great need (Acts 11: 27-30). Secondly, at a later date, they were open to God's leading to release their two key leaders to travel away from Antioch as missionaries first to Cyprus and later Turkey. This is where the story for this outline starts.

Opening up the story

The church in Antioch was both culturally and ethnically mixed:

- Barnabas was from Cyprus
- Saul was from the south coast of Turkey
- Simeon might well have come from sub-Saharan Africa
- Lucius was from the north African coast
- Manaen had royal connections with King Herod's family.

God's Spirit had brought together many very different people, but all united in their love and service of Jesus.

Conduct a short, informal survey of your group to investigate:

- Global connections through family and friendship links. How many international connections can you identify?
- Different characters, experiences and gifts among your group: some will be shy and others outspoken; some will be activists and others more reflective; some people prefer to be with large groups and others on their own; some will be full of creative ideas while others will have practical and organisational skills.

It was prayer that united the mixed team at Antioch. And it was to this group that God's Spirit revealed the next step for their young church.

As you talk about your many differences, which are brought together through your shared faith in Jesus, keep your eyes and ears open to each other's words because this can be how God's Spirit directs your group or your church to a new piece of mission.

Telling the story

The island of Cyprus is a very distinctive shape. It looks a bit like the side view of your left hand with the fingers clenched except for a thumb angled slightly outward and downward, and the index finger pointing forward. See if your group can imitate the island's shape with their hands - use an outline map of Cyprus to help.

This pointing-forward shape of your left hand can help to tell the story:

- Barnabas and Paul sailed west to the island - *move your pointed finger westward, and up and down, as if on the sea.*
- They land and travel west across the island, pointing people to Jesus - *direct the pointed finger to a picture of a cross or maybe there is a cross in your church or group area you can use.*
- They meet Elymas, who has been waving his magic wand about to trick the Governor into following him - *wave the pointed finger like a magic wand.*
- Paul challenges him, calling him a liar who is stopping people hearing about Jesus - *shake the pointed finger as if telling someone off.*
- Elymas is blinded and can't work out the way to go - *move your pointed finger randomly as*

though lost.

- The governor puts his faith in God – *point the finger upward*.
- The whole of Cyprus comes to hear about Jesus – *return to the original island shape with your left hand*.

Talking about the story

- I wonder how Barnabas felt, being able to tell his friends and family on the island about Jesus.
- I wonder why Elymas wanted to stop Paul and Barnabas influencing the Roman governor.
- I wonder why the governor was interested to find out what Paul and Barnabas had to say.
- I wonder why Paul was so firm and angry with Elymas.
- I wonder what impressed the governor most – the blindness that Elymas suffered or the things that were shared about Jesus.

Barnabas took his young cousin, John Mark, with them on this trip to Cyprus. Imagine what sort of letter Mark would have written home to his mum in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12). I wonder which part of 'Mission Cyprus' he would have found the most interesting, puzzling or memorable.

Playing with the story

Clear as large a space as you can on the ground in the middle of your meeting area or somewhere visible to as many people as possible. Create an outline map of Cyprus in this space using a long rope and position some empty cardboard boxes in roughly the right places to represent the port of Salamis and the city of Paphos. Invite people to come and help you with this.

Now have a go at enacting the drama of 'Mission Cyprus'. You will need three people to be Paul, Barnabas and young John Mark arriving at Salamis. Maybe they stayed with Barnabas' family there?

As a group, they went 'across the island', telling people the story of Jesus. The challenge here is for each of the three missionaries to try and say the most important things about Jesus in just three sentences each time they stop at five imaginary towns. You could change the three people for each stop and see what new key phrases they come up with.

The local people would have asked questions about what they were hearing. Invite others to imagine what those questions might be.

Finally, you could play-act the story of the governor, Paul and Elymas. Invite three people to act this out, using the following outline of their characters and then let them create the conversation between them:

- The governor, Sergius Paulus is an intelligent man open to hear about something new. Perhaps he was interested in someone else called Paul!
- Elymas, whose dad was called Jesus (which was a common name then) is afraid of losing his influence with the Roman governor.
- Paul, who can see how important it is that the governor comes to believe in Jesus, is annoyed



about anybody getting in the way of the 'good news'.

Reflecting on the story

Why not make this story of mission work on Cyprus a way to focus on prayer for existing mission work linked to your church. There are many people who, like Paul and Barnabas, feel that the Holy Spirit has asked them to go to a different country and culture to share the story of Jesus. Like Paul and Barnabas, they will sometimes meet opposition and will need to know the best way to act. Also, as in the story, it's often important that the key leaders in a new place get to hear the gospel and come to believe for themselves.

Maybe you can invite someone who is involved with prayer for missionaries to come and talk to your group about a particular part of the world, keeping it short and uncomplicated, and using some pictures of people with particular needs.

Here is a summary prayer you could all say together:

Thank you, Father God, that you want everyone in the whole world to know how much you love us and what Jesus has done for us. Help those who travel to other places to share this news, and help us to share it too in the places you send us this coming week.

Amen.