

Why Missionaries Leave the Field Prematurely

By Savanna Schneider

There are still about 7,000 people groups in the world who are considered *unreached*, according to the Joshua Project.¹ That is, they “lack enough followers of Christ and resources to evangelize their own people.”² Thus, it is necessary for the Church to continue to mobilize missionaries to the mission field. Equally important to mobilization is retention, which is the concept of keeping missionaries on the field long-term. Unfortunately, about 5.1% of missionaries leave the field every year.³ This is a problem because losing missionaries means losing the potential for deep and meaningful ministry to people, which often requires long-term work. It can also mean losing a Christian presence entirely in an area where Christianity is rare or completely absent. Moreover, of the 5.1% of missionaries who leave the field every year, about 71% of those leave for preventable reasons.⁴ So, what exactly are these “preventable reasons” causing missionaries to leave the field? According to many sources, some of the major reasons are (but are not limited to) issues such as culture shock, unmet expectations, conflict, lack of finances, and lack of call. Although many mission organizations have been able to identify these preventable reasons and provide potential solutions, it should be noted that further studies must be conducted in order to increase missionary retention.

¹ Frontier Ventures, “Global Statistics,” *Joshua Project*, https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/statistics (accessed September 4, 2018).

² Ibid.

³ William D. Taylor, *Too Valuable to Lose* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1997), 13; Russ Turney, *Leave a Legacy: Increasing Missionary Longevity* (Puchong: Asia Pacific Theological Seminary Press, 2013), 19, 28; Scott Moreau, *Introducing World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 243.

⁴ Taylor, *Too Valuable*, 13.

Culture Shock

Culture shock—a hot topic when it comes to missionary circles. Yet, it is still among the top reasons for missionary attrition. So, what exactly is culture shock? “Culture shock is the incapacitating experience of: anxiety, confusion, value dissonance, discouragement, and identity challenges that result from trying to get one’s needs (and wishes, preferences) met in unfamiliar or unavailable ways in a new culture.”⁵ Culture shock is caused by many factors, such as:

- Loneliness
- Pressure of adjusting to a new culture (language barriers and different customs)
- Constant demand on one’s time/overwhelming workload
- Lack of adequate medical facilities
- Pressure to be a constant, positive witness to nationals
- Confusion over one’s role in the local church
- Lack of privacy
- Inability to get away for recreation or vacation⁶

Although culture shock is not preventable, missionaries can be prepared to handle the stress of culture shock to prevent them from leaving the field.

Therefore, preparation before entering the field is important for preventing missionary attrition. This process of preparation (also known as orientation) can last anywhere from a couple weeks to several months. Some of the outcomes of effective training will help the missionary to better understand the people to whom they are sharing the gospel, to be better cross-cultural

⁵Kelly O’Donnell, *Global Member Care: The Pearls and Perils of Good Practice* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2011), 27.

⁶Marge Jones and E. Grant Jones, *Psychology of Missionary Adjustment* (Springfield: Gospel Publishing House, 1995), 31; Russ Turney, *Leave a Legacy: Increasing Missionary Longevity* (Puchong: Asia Pacific Theological Seminary Press, 2013), 19, 28.

communicators, to become less ethnocentric, and to minister appropriately and effectively in a cross-cultural setting.⁷ As one can conclude, all of these outcomes will help the missionary adapt better, thus, lessening the intensity of culture shock. However, culture shock is inevitable.

Therefore, it is also important for missionaries to receive counsel and support once they enter the mission field, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next section.

Unmet Expectations

Unmet or unrealistic expectations missionaries have before and while on the mission field can become major points of frustration. For example, many missionaries enter the field thinking they will be able to minister immediately, not taking into consideration language barriers and the amount of time it takes to become accepted into the culture.⁸ Likewise, many missionaries enter the field having a distorted self-image, believing they will be the answer to all of the peoples' problems. When this is not the case, impatience can set in, leading to discouragement and missionary failure. This is especially true for missionaries who come from Western cultures (like America), where quick success is applauded and anything else is looked down upon.⁹ Moreover, these expectations are not only related to what missionaries expect of themselves, but also the national church, the mission board, supporting churches, and colleagues.¹⁰ Because of this, it is easy to see how quickly burnout can happen when a missionary is trying to please multiple sources.

As with culture shock, it is important for missionaries to have proper training and preparation before entering the field. This includes a realistic expectation of themselves and the

⁷ Jones and Jones, *Psychology*, 22-24.

⁸ Taylor, *Too Valuable*, 244.

⁹ Turney, *Leave a Legacy*, 31-32.

¹⁰ Jones and Jones, *Psychology*, 66.

challenges they will face while ministering cross-culturally. Yet, it is also important to understand that stress caused by moving to an intercultural setting as a missionary is inevitable. Although the degree of stress (and even disillusionment) varies from person to person, mission organizations ought to provide support and counsel while missionaries are on the field.

Thankfully, this is a well-known concept in the mission world known as “member care.” According to Kelly O’Donnell¹¹ in his book *Global Member Care*:

Member care seeks to implement adequate *flow of care* from *recruitment through retirement*. The goal is to develop resilience, skills, and virtue, which are key to helping personnel stay *healthy and effective* in their work. Member care thus involves developing *inner resources* (e.g., perseverance, stress tolerance) and providing *external resources* (e.g., team building, logistical support, skill training).¹²

Thus, member care’s goal is to ensure missionary retention by providing continual support for missionaries—spiritually, emotionally, and physically. Although the broad term of member care includes preparation/orientation (as mentioned in the previous section), it is important to note that while most organizations have some sort of pre-field training for missionaries, they do not all provide continual and adequate member care for missionaries on the field.¹³ According to one study, “mission agencies with high investment in member care...had a third less annual attrition in the years 2001-2002...than low member care agencies.”¹⁴ They were also rated as having higher organizational performance and higher organizational practice.¹⁵ Therefore, if mission

¹¹ Psy.D., consulting psychologist in Europe and CEO of Member Care, Inc.

¹² O’Donnell, *Global Member Care*, 10, (original emphasis).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

¹⁴ O’Donnell, *Global Member Care*, 42-43.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

organizations want to be successful in the area of retention, providing adequate member care is a must.

Conflict

Conflict can tear people apart or bring people together, depending on how it is handled. Unfortunately, many people do not know how to handle it well, which is why conflict is another major reason missionaries are leaving the field. According to ENGAGE,¹⁶ “only 57.4% of respondents agreed with this statement: ‘In my organization, we address and resolve conflicts in healthy ways.’”¹⁷ This is a problem due to the fact that “the majority of the mission world is now operating on the basis of teams.”¹⁸ Therefore, there is greater potential for conflict when more personalities and opinions are involved.

However, conflict should not be a reason missionaries are leaving the field. In fact, “moving through conflict situations can promote relational healing and deepen the bonds of community between team members.”¹⁹ If this is true, then how can missionaries learn to productively handle conflict when it arises? According to Russ Turney, conflict management training should be part of the missionary training process.²⁰ Likewise, Harder and Foote explain that “training and support for conflict resolution is time-intensive, but the alternative to lost work

¹⁶ ENGAGE is a multi-agency research project surveying staff satisfaction, field-role fulfillment, and agency support.

¹⁷ Cited in Ken Harder and Carla Foote, *Help Your Missionaries Thrive: Leadership Practices that Make a Difference*, (Colorado Springs: GMI, 2016), 47.

¹⁸ Rob Hay et al., *Worth Keeping: Global Perspectives on Best Practice in Missionary Retention*, (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2007), 176.

¹⁹ Harder and Foote, *Help Your Missionaries*, 49.

²⁰ Turney, *Leave a Legacy*, 78.

and broken teams is even more expensive on many levels.”²¹ Thus, including conflict management training within member care could solve a lot of issues and potentially prevent missionaries from leaving the field prematurely. In the end, conflict is bound to happen, but missionaries can be equipped with the right tools in order to resolve conflict in a healthy, productive way.

Finances

Having adequate financial support while on the mission field is important in order for missionaries to thrive, but it can also be a setback. To explain, “as the cost of supporting missionaries increases (because of inflated living expenses overseas), the competition for church mission funds becomes keener.”²² Because of this competition, a huge amount of pressure is placed upon missionaries who rely on raising their funds. Not only do many missionaries feel like they must compete for churches’ support, but many also feel like beggars as they desperately try to raise money in a limited amount of time. This image and pressure has a negative impact on missionaries and causes some to go home early or give up going overseas altogether.²³

However, there are potential solutions. For example, instead of churches supporting numerous missionaries at small amounts, one church could pledge 30 to 60 percent of a missionary’s support, or a sending church could provide 80 to 90 percent of the support, and the rest is raised by the missionary or missionary’s family.²⁴ As a result, the church would only be responsible for a few missionaries and the missionaries, a few churches. This would ease the pressure of contacting and visiting numerous churches and also allow the missionary to serve his

²¹ Harder and Foote, *Help Your Missionaries*, 50-51.

²² Jones and Jones, *Psychology*, 26.

²³ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁴ Jones and Jones, *Psychology*, 27-28.

or her supporting churches in a deeper and more effective way while on furlough. In addition, many missionaries today are becoming bivocational overseas. Teaching English and opening up small businesses are becoming popular options for missionaries who want to creatively engage the culture but also raise money at the same time. Yet, this could potentially distract some missionaries from ministering effectively if they are spending more time “working” than actually “ministering.”

Lack of Call

Some say the “missionary call” is an outdated term,²⁵ but others still believe the call is as important as ever when it comes to missionary retention.²⁶ Unfortunately, a lack of call or a lack of purpose is another reason why missionaries are leaving the field prematurely. According to DeLonn Rance, the call is a work of the Holy Spirit who calls some to leave their nation in order to take the gospel to another nation, and it is the desire to obey God’s call that produces long-term commitment on the mission field.²⁷ Likewise, David Hesselgrave explains that the commitment to the call of God is what enables missionaries to live moral, ethical, and spiritual lives, which is the foundation of doing missions work.²⁸ After all, if God has not convinced prospective missionaries that cross-cultural ministry is what He has planned for their lives, then who or what will stop them from leaving the field when escape seems like the only bearable option?

For this reason, the screening process of missionaries is extremely important. Therefore, mission agencies must look for some key qualities in prospective missionaries, such as

²⁵ Hay et al., *Worth Keeping*, 94.

²⁶ Hay et al., *Worth Keeping*, 94-95; O’Donnell, *Global Member Care*, 39.

²⁷ Rance is cited in Turney, *Leave a Legacy*, 34.

²⁸ Hesselgrave is cited in Turney, *Leave a Legacy*, 35-36.

endorsement from church leadership, past experience in ministry, and a verbal articulation from the candidate explaining their call and motivation for ministry.²⁹ Doing this kind of ground work could save agencies and churches a lot of money. According to one study, “it costs \$500,000 or more to recruit, select, train, and keep a missionary on the field for the first four years.”³⁰ Now consider the wastefulness of such monies when given to a candidate who never truly showed the signs of a tested call and left the field after the first couple years. In the end, as great as it would be to get as many missionaries onto the field as possible, a tested calling is vital in order to maintain long-term work and steward finances wisely.

In conclusion, there are many preventable reasons causing missionaries to leave the field prematurely. Culture shock, unmet expectations, conflict, lack of finances, and lack of call are some of these reasons. Nevertheless, adequate preparation and member care can resolve many of the issues related to culture shock, unmet expectations, and conflict. Finances and calling, however, seem to have fewer clear-cut answers. Yet, with more research and a willingness for agencies and churches to look for new solutions, the future for missions has the potential to be brighter than ever.

²⁹ Hay et al., *Worth Keeping*, 93-95.

³⁰ Harder and Foote, *Help Your Missionaries*, 4.

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