

Research and Data on Missionary Attrition Worldwide

*The following information is adapted from an article, “Exploring the Faces of Attrition” by William Taylor which appeared in **Mission Frontiers**, January 1, 1999, Vol. 21:1-2). Taylor has been the Director of the World Evangelical Fellowship and was editor of the seminal book on the subject of missionary attrition that came from the ReMAP study, **Too Valuable to Lose: Exploring the Causes and Cures of Missionary Attrition** (1997).*

In 1994, the World Evangelical Fellowship Missions Commission launched a seminal worldwide research project, Reducing Missionary Attrition Project (ReMAP), to address specific issues related to long-term missionaries and undesirable attrition from active field service. ReMAP studied mission leaders in 14 different nations (8 from the newer sending countries such as Korea, Brazil and Singapore, and 6 from the older sending countries such as the U.S, U.K, and Australia).

The researchers first defined the difference between acceptable attrition and preventable, undesirable attrition. There will always be attrition that is accepted as a normal part of missionary life: normal retirement, issues related to children or aging parents, health issues, natural movement into another ministry role, etc. Preventable causes of attrition can include lack of home and financial support, problems with colleagues and/or mission leaders, inadequate pre-field or on-field support and training, an unclear sense of calling, lack of commitment, poor cultural adaptation, etc.

The overall goal of the study was to reduce undesirable attrition in the long-term missionary body and thus increase the effectiveness of the global mission task force. The researchers listened to and dialogued with missionary colleagues around the world and unearthed some key findings.

In terms of the global missions force, it is estimated that 1 career missionary in 20 (**5.1%** of the mission force) leaves the mission field to return home **every year**. Of those who leave, **71% leave for preventable reasons**. If we estimate the current long-term, international, cross-cultural missionary force at 150,000 strong--a very conservative number--an annual loss of 5.1% would be **7,650 missionaries leaving the field each year – 5430 of them for preventable reasons**. Over a four-year term, this attrition figure jumps to 30,600. Seventy-one percent of those could be prevented--almost 22,000.

Just the financial implications in light of training and sending out of long-term missionaries are dramatic and calculable. But the human implications in terms of the

missionary themselves and the impact upon the national church are staggering and incalculable.

The ReMAP study found that three important factors greatly decrease the rates of undesirable attrition: (1) a good pre-candidate process (proper screening, sending and supporting by sponsoring churches and mission agencies), (2) adequate pre-field training, and (3) adequate on-going support and training for the missionary on the field throughout his or her career.

This third area is the one that has lagged behind the others in its development within mission sending agencies and sending churches. In the past decade there has been a concerted effort on the part of many organizations, especially those in the West who are more well established (including CRM), to help provide better on-field supervision and counseling services for its staff. However, on-going training continues to be an area of great need for most on-field missionaries, and many are responsible to provide or procure this type of learning and development for themselves. But, in the midst of ministry demands and the stress of living cross-culturally, this investment in one own growth and development is often one of the things that goes by the wayside. One of the keys of Refocusing is that it provides a way for missionaries to participate in on-going learning and development in their own geographic area (rather than travel back to their home country) and also to have the support, encouragement and input of peers from other organizations to encourage them to make their own on-going development a priority. In turn, they build the capacity to have the ministry, spiritual and emotional resources to invest in others in ministry over the long haul.

Missionary Attrition in Cambodia, Japan and China and the Need for ReFocusing Networks for Missionaries

Currently there are no nationwide missionary attrition studies available for any of these nations. However, from our own long-term missionary experience in Asia, and from talking with other veteran missionaries, preventable attrition is certainly a significant issue in each nation.

Cambodia

In Cambodia, our team was originally invited to Cambodia by veteran missionary Mark Smith (CRM/InnerChange) because of the alarming rate of attrition occurring among long-term cross-cultural workers in that nation. In talking with other mission leaders there and from our own observations, Cambodia is a very stressful place to live and work long-term. In addition to expected attrition causes in a third-world setting like Cambodia (health problems, issues with children's schooling, etc.) fatigue and burn-out seem to be

particularly widespread among the missionary community. Many Christian NGO's send their staff to Cambodia with unrealistic expectations of what can be accomplished in a given timeframe, even by Western standards. Coupled with working in a third-world setting where corruption is endemic in the system, discouragement and burn-out among NGO staff is not uncommon. For several of our ReFocusing Leaders network participants working for Christian relief/development agencies and NGO's, each one has sole responsibility for directing the agency's entire work in Cambodia and also training and overseeing 200-300 national staff. An impossible task! These same missionaries also have young families and little or no on-going support and training from their sending agencies. It's burn out and attrition waiting to happen.

Other mission leaders talk about the sense of urgency that permeates the mindset of missionaries in Cambodia. Helping to rebuild a nation devastated by war and genocide, it's easy to feel overwhelmed by the great spiritual and physical needs in Cambodia. In addition, there is often a sense that, at any time, government could shift course and the openness with which missionaries are allowed to work in Cambodia could quickly evaporate.

And, of course, as on all mission fields, there are the typical inter-personal issues that can arise in any team or organization. But overwork and stress can greatly compound these issues.

We have found in the ReFocusing in Cambodia that one of the greatest benefits that missionaries gain from the networks is the encouragement and accountability to take regular personal spiritual retreats – extended time to spend with the Lord, reflecting and listening. This has been life transforming for a number of our participants. Another key benefit has been encouragement to take the time to invest in their own growth and development. Many missionaries in Cambodia are responsible for training and developing scores of nationals, but they are often not provided with resources for their own on-going training and development. The “tank” quickly runs dry, and this is a key factor in attrition. Network participants have expressed deep gratitude for “permission” to take retreats and training in how to keep themselves healthy and growing in the midst of a community of like-minded colleagues who are in the same boat as they are to provide encourage and support.

Japan

After living and working in Japan for more than 25 years each, Barry, Rob and Jean have all witnessed first-hand unnecessary attrition among missionary colleagues. Japan has been called “the graveyard for missionaries”, primarily due to the limited response by Japanese to a concerted effort from thousands of evangelical missionaries since WWII. Without a long-term mind-set and the ability to weather the discouragement of slow

progress and lack of fruit, missionaries can become discouraged or lose sight of their long-term vision for ministry. In addition, the cost of living in Tokyo is one of the highest of any city in the world, and economic stress can also take its toll. Attrition among missionaries in Japan seems to be higher than average, and community-based support and learning networks like Refocusing fit well within the relational culture of Japan and its church.

China

Each member of our leadership team has only limited experience in China. But missionary colleagues who have worked long-term in China have described the stress of working in a restricted-access nation with limited opportunities for on-going training and development. Community-based learning networks like ReFocusing seem like ideal venues for providing the on-going training and development needed for long-term viability in a setting like China.