



Attrition: The Missionary Experience

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1. PREAMBLE

This is an experience that should be discouraged by the leadership of all missions' agencies. The only way to stop the attrition from field missionaries is for the leadership to do the needful for the missionaries so that they can remain in the fields. Part of the reason for missionary attrition could be because of some misconceptions and myths about missions and some excuses that can be avoided before move out to the field. From the general perspective, missionary attrition could be divided into two categories; 'Preventable' and Unpreventable' attrition; Taylor defines them as follows:

Unpreventable attrition is understood as acceptable or unacceptable attrition such as retirement, completion of a contract, medical leave, or a "legitimate call" to another ministry. Preventable attrition points to more delicate issue-attrition that could have been avoided by better initial screening or selection in the first place, or by more appropriate equipping or training, or by more effective shepherding during missionary service, (1997:17).

The leadership of the church and mission agencies know what to do in order to retain or keep their workers in their various places of ministries. Every Staff is to be encouraged to accomplish his or her calling, vision, burden and passion in their area of ministries. It is the duty of every employer to provide an enabling working environment for her workers at all times.

2. COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS AND MYTHS ABOUT MISSIONS

Many people are afraid of missions because of false ideas about missions. Here are some common ones:

1.) Missions are for professionals only.

Response: All are called to be involved in some part of missions according to the Great Commission

2.) A need does not constitute a call.

Response: Awareness of man's lostness plus Christ's command amounts to a call

3.) The "indigenous" national church does not want or need foreign missionaries.

Response: The national churches want and desperately need biblical missionaries, not to tell them what to do but to equip and train them in evangelism, discipleship, church planting.

4.) Missionaries are superhuman spiritual "giants"

Response: Missionaries are "real life" people who sin and also struggle with God's will and their circumstances, but who are trying to be obedient and faithful

5.) Missionaries can't do anything else well.

Response: If a person is unfit for other kinds of work, they are probably unsuitable for missionary work-it takes skill, training and experience to be an effective missionary

6.) Missions are for women.

Response: There are more women than men on the mission field because men have refused to go

7.) Missions are merely a budget to be met with money.

Response: Missions is more than money, it is praying, giving, and going. Please all can give, all can pray, and all could go, (1989:57-58).

8.) Since I have not been “called” to missions I don’t have to go.

Response: Missions is more of a command than a call-a matter of obedience, not an option. If church members would stop looking for a call and start being obedient to Christ’s command there would be plenty of missionaries. Every Christian should desire to do God’s will-nothing more, nothing less, and nothing else, (1989:58-59).

3. EXCUSES PEOPLE GIVE FOR PARTICIPATING IN MISSIONS

Excuses rob us of so much. Using excuses to get out of world outreach only makes us the losers, for we miss out on much excitement, growth and personal fulfillment. Excuses are robbers and robbers have to be exposed, caught and dealt with. Therefore, below are most popular excuses for getting out for world missions. The writer is advising the reader to deal with these excuses, for in doing so you will gain much, (1984:22).

I am too important

God, however, had a lesson to teach us; that those who seek just for themselves, lose out in the end. The world tells us that if we look after ourselves, number one, we will be happy. According to the Lord though, the exact opposite would occur: we will lose much happiness, joy, peace and contentment. God has made us in such a way that true happiness and fulfillment only comes when we look not just to our own interests but also to the interest of others (Phil. 2:4).

The reason that many of us are unhappy, lonely or downright depressed is that we think about nothing but ourselves; our wants, our hobbies, our houses, our looks and our peace of mind. Even though Christ wants us to extend his kingdom worldwide, it appears that all we want is a marriage partner or a nice home, a good school to send the children to, and more money and time for our pleasures. Many of these things are important, but they are not what life is all about. Being united to Jesus and seeking to further his cause is what it is all about.

Our feelings often tell us to get all wrapped up in our wants, wishes and fancies, but if we let this happen, we will surely suffer. Instead, listen to God’s word, where he asks us to care about the needy in the whole world. Jesus died for all both the rich and the poor. We all have a part in reaching these important people and in doing so we will enrich our own lives as well, (1984:22-23).

4. ALL RELIGIONS LEAD TO THE SAME GOD

Religionists claim that all religions are of equal importance and all lead to the same God. Their argument does thus:

‘All religions come from the same God and lead to the same God. All the sincere followers in these religions will be accepted by God. Jesus Christ is only one of many. They have Krishna, Buddha, Mohammed; they don’t need Jesus. Christians must learn to be accepting and tolerant. It is rude and arrogant to expect that all others must become Christians and believe that Christ is the only way to God’.

The idea that all religions lead to the same God is just one big attractive lie. The following are the reasons. Firstly, it is illogical. How can all religions lead to the same God when they are all so different? The god of the Hindu is plural and impersonal; the god of Islam is singular and personal. The God of the Bible is the Creator of the world, but the divine in Buddhism is not creative. Salvation for the Buddhist is losing all desire, for the Muslim it is keeping the law, but for the Christian it is knowing Jesus as Saviour and Lord. If all religions come from and lead to the same God then this God must be very confused about himself, the world and man.

Secondly, it is impossible. If it is just up to man to find God then man is doomed to failure. God is too great for finite man to reach. Man cannot reach God through self-effort. In the Bible we see the

marvelous picture of God coming down to man in the person of Jesus Christ. If Jesus is equal to Mohammed, then, of course, there is no need to convert the Muslim. The Bible makes it quite clear, however, that Jesus is unique, and that he is the only way to the Father (John 14:6). We have got to tell adherents of other religions about him, for their eternal destinies are at stake, (1984:24).

5. WE ARE ALL GOING TO HEAVEN IN THE END ANYWAY

There are assumptions and perceptions about who qualifies to go to heaven. One of such perceptions is that since God was and is still the God of love, he would never condemn people to hell. This implied that everyone is going to be saved in the end therefore why bother to tell people about salvation through Christ? Some call this line of argument universalism. The Bible declares this teaching as wrong. Even though Jesus died for all men, each person can only receive and experience salvation when he accepts Jesus as Savior and Lord (Eph. 2:8). Hell exists, and those who reject Jesus will go there for eternity (Matt. 7:13; 25:32-46; Rev. 20:10-15). There is a final judgment. God is going to accept some and reject others (Matt. 25:31, 32; 2 Cor. 5:10; Heb. 9:27). God is a God of love. He is also a God of justice (Rom. 2:5-11), of holiness (1 Peter 1:16) and of anger (Deut. 13: 17). We need to know the God of the Bible and not the god that fits into man-made excuses and schemes, (1984:24-25).

6. THE DAY OF MISSIONS IS OVER

The writer has given some statistical data above about the unreached people group all over the world. Based on those men and women got involved in reaching the non-believers with the Gospel. This brought about bringing thousands of Christians worldwide into the Church. Continents and nations like Africa, Latin America, and Asia are forging ahead spiritually. In light of this, is the day of missions over? Is there still a need? Despite the growth in the third World Churches there are still million who have not heard about Jesus Christ.

Dr. Ralph D. Winter of the United States Center of World Missions, states that to reach the unreached in Africa and Asia alone, we will need one hundred times more missionaries than we are now sending. Dayton and Wagner, both authorities on missions, have stated that 80% of all unreached peoples will only hear the good news if cross-cultural missionaries are sent to them. Are you still saying there is no need? (1984:25). In the Scriptures, the question is being asked, "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news", (Rom. 10:14-15, NIV), (2005:944).

It is not my Thing

World outreach is not our idea. It is God's idea that is why people are involved in these global missions. This attitude is held by many sincere and believing Christians today. We so often think that world outreach is for the called, the dedicated or the specialist. Most of us are leaving world evangelism to some group of people. The end result is that everyone thinks everyone else is doing it and, because of this, hardly anything gets done at all. World outreach is not an optional extra in God's book; we are all called to be involved in it. Whether we are intelligent or 'dumb', old or young, modern or traditional, rich or poor, God wants us to be involved. The only way missions will become the interest of all people is by missions becoming the interest of believers one by one. So don't wait for others, begin to do your vital bit now, (1984:25-26).

7. DEFINITION OF ATTRITION

When someone responds to the missionary call, he does not sign any document indicating the number of years he or she will spend on the field. Usually, the intention of missionaries is to retire when it is due for such missionary to retire. But there are instances when the missionary is force to leave the field before the retirement age. This is why J. Herbert Kane defines missionary attrition as, "Those who for one reason or another failed to complete the term of service for which they signed up, (1973:55). Also, Paul McKaughan stresses the fact that, attrition can be a situation in which missionaries ". . . leave the field before the mission or church feels that they should," (1997:18).

Attrition in the Bible

There are records from the Scripture revealing how men involved in the ministries that left before time for different reasons. The church should learn from the past leaders and effect corrections today. The following Scriptural passages would help us greatly on the topic under review: “Now Paul and those with him left Paphos by ship for Pamphylia, landing at the port town of Perga. There John Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem”(Acts 13:13, NLT). Also, we see that: “Demas has deserted me because he loves the things of this life and has gone to Thessalonica. . .” (2 Timothy 4:10, NLT). William D. Taylor gives us three different types of missionary attritions.

1. Acceptable Attrition.

This type of attrition cannot be avoided by any field missionary because this could come as a result of retirement, health problems, change of job or children education.

2. Preventable Attrition

This attrition could be because of lack of support from the home church, the missionary’s interpersonal relationships with people he is reaching with the gospel, lack of orientation for the missionary before leaving for the field, lack of good testimony about the missionary, having questionable character as a missionary, having little knowledge about the people he works among.

3. Attrition among the Vulnerable

Those who fall under this category of attrition are young missionaries, singles, and the inexperienced people serving in the different missions’ fields. Kelly O’Donnell observes soberly that:

Attrition, historically, has been part of the cost the cost church has paid for penetrating the enemy’s darkness. People in battle are vulnerable and inevitably get hurt. Our weaknesses as people and as sending agencies also make us vulnerable. So, let’s put attrition in perspective. Whether be considered preventable or unpreventable, desirable or undesirable, missionary attrition happens as we work together to prevent the eternal attrition which hovers over the un-reached peoples of the earth, (2002:8).

Frank Allen in his article ‘Why do they leave? This is a reflection on Attrition’ in Evangelical Missions quarterly, discovered that there are five reasons for missionary attrition, which are as follows:

- a.) When there are no gifts from people to assist. He found that candidates who had never ministered as evangelist and church planters in America wished to do so in a strange culture using a foreign language.
- b.) Cultural shock: Candidate, often due to ethnocentricity, refused to accept the changes necessary to adapt to a different culture. Or, many would succumb to ‘culture fatigue’ caused by the continuing adjustment to different way of doing, thinking, and speaking
- c.) Unfulfilled expectations: Candidates were not permitted to do the work they expected to do.
- d.) Morals: although relatively few in number, some due fall into sexual immorality. Temptation is always, present because of close contact with other missionaries and nationals. In other cases, a sense of loneliness or isolation may lead to problems.
- e.) Family problems: There is probably the major reason for missionary attrition. Problems between parents and children may cause early departure from the field. Problems between spouses may cause emotional tensions in the children. Parents, especially husbands may be so busy doing the Lord’s work that insufficient attention is given to family needs, (1988: n. p.).

8. UNDERSTANDING THE CAUSES OF MISSIONARY ATTRITION

In the life of a missionary, care should be taken not to allow lack of a call, faith, prayer support, financial support, lack of adequate training theologically, lack of family support, stress, anxiety and burnout to make him or her attrit from the mission field. The above could cause attrition in the life of a missionary.

The following are steps to causes and cures of missionary attrition:

- Key-phrase: It is people who make up missions.
- The key-word: Pastoral care
- Biblical Foundation:
 - 1.) Jesus' mission: Luke 19:10, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."
 - 2.) Jesus gave everything He had, even His life: Phil. 2:6-8
 - 3.) We are asked to show a similar attitude (v.5), "Your attitude should be the same as that of Jesus Christ".
 - 4.) As Jesus was deeply concerned about us, we need to be concerned about our fellow human beings, to start with our brethren in ministry. Phil. 4:10, "I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it."
 - Renew your concern
 - Create opportunity
 - Member Care
 - 5.) The secret of Member Care is knowing the person, feeling related with him or her and setting priority in being of help at any time when needed, (1 Samuel 18:1).
 - 6.) Member Care involves the whole body of Christ, (1 Cor. 12:25-27).
 - 7.) The need for care starts with the church, (Acts 13:1-3; 15:36-39).

9. HOW TO CURE ATTRITION

(A.) Record-Keeping

One important emphasis of the training workshops will be on implementing record-keeping systems that will, in themselves, help to monitor and reduce attrition losses. By keeping accurate records, our mission partners around the world will also be assisting the Missions Commission when we attempt to carry out future attrition studies. Accurate information is the key to accurate analysis of this critical subject, (1996:12).

(B.) Develop a Support Base for Missionaries

Another focus of the equipping of churches and mission agencies in relation to attrition issues will be to create a greater understanding of the systems that are involved in developing and supporting missionaries. There are critical points where a little more attention and effort may result in much greater overall effectiveness and efficiency, as well as reduce preventable attrition. The writer has come to observe that not all attrition is preventable. Normal retirement, death, and evacuation for political reasons cannot usually be avoided. There is not a single, precise formula for lowering attrition. But on a more subjective level, mission agency administrators did have some inclinations about what might help. Following are the seven factors they considered most important:

- 1.) A clear calling for mission work from God (the most important factor by far)
- 2.) A very supportive family and/or spouse
- 3.) A good relationship with other missionaries and colleagues
- 4.) The ability to maintain a healthy spirituality without external support
- 5.) The ability to adapt to different cultures and learn languages
- 6.) There should be regular supervision, pastoral care, and other support
- 7.) There should be regular financial provision from the home church, (1998:13).

According to John C Thiessen:

It is very important for a missionary and the pastor to have mental and nervous stability. They must be able to remain calm in the face of the most distressing circumstances. They will be called to sickbed, scenes of accident, homes of bereavement, and to other places where people have gone all to pieces. Their steadying and assuring voices may do a great deal to restore order and calm. It will often be their responsibility to be the bearer of sad news and they must find the best way of approach. Thiessen added as saying that, before a missionary or pastor leaves for the field, such a person should be able to meet the spiritual qualifications, but if they fail this, all their other qualifications will not be able to make them successful. The individual person must be a Christian. Without the new birth they will not have adequate conception of spiritual things, there will be no clear understanding of Christian experience, no ability to lead others to faith in Jesus Christ, nor are they able to build up the saving faith in Christ would undertake pastoral work. In addition, such should be Spirit-filled (Eph. 5:18). This is a command by God and they need it in order to understand the Word of God they are going to preach. Finally, being Spirit-filled will help the person to preach the Word with power, (1962:23, 29).

(C.) Selection: As we have seen in the example of Acts 13, selection starts in the church, (1998:2).

- It is a matter of prayer by the church and individual candidate
- Selection criteria should be set by the church
 - 1.) Identification and authentication of the missionary call be ascertain by church leadership
 - 2.) Calling versus Gods timing be taking seriously
 - 3.) Spiritual maturity; Born-again experience; Right motivation; Good relationships with others; Ability to cope with stress; Good biblical knowledge.
 - 4.) Available skills and talents and possibility to practice them within the context of the church
 - 5.) Active involvement in church activities
 - 6.) Family situation.
- Coming alongside the missionary (church and candidate becoming one team).

Selection is a natural process of recognition and validation of a person who has a genuine call from God to missions. God knows who to call for missions because He created us. He created each of us for a certain task. For instant in Jeremiah 1:5 “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born, I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.” Only then, after having followed above mentioned aspects, the mission agency can be approached. A new round of selection will follow at the agency, (1998:2).

(D.) Training: Also training finds its foundation within the church.

- 1.) As every Christian a mission-candidate needs discipleship training. Only people closely around the candidate know if and how this training has been put into practice and has become an attitude of life. A missionary will produce (in a contextualized manner) what he or she has received from the local church.
- 2.) Secular training like secondary school and graduate training at university
- 3.) Professional and vocational training. As church leaders we need to encourage more nonprofessional missionaries to consider getting such training to enhance their missionary career
- 4.) Practical evangelistic training by church at its own right or in conjunction with mission agency. Also consider here Short-Term activities.
- 5.) Bible school and/or degree training
- 6.) Specific training by the agency like:
 - a. Cross-cultural communication
 - b. Language training

- c. Stress and crises intervention
- d. Financial business (fundraising, financial situation of receiving country)
- e. Writing of newsletters, reporting to leadership in agency and church
- f. Job designated training.

Always keep in mind: All training should focus primarily on the development of our “being”, anticipating that “doing” and “knowing” will facilitate that development, (1998:3).

(D.) Pastoral Care: This should involve the whole church, being the Body of Christ. Considering missionary work this care starts with selection of candidate, deals with training, has the role of extended arm of the church on the mission field and is available on re-entry to comfort and help the returning people to readjust. Pastoral Care encompasses the following elements:

Understanding the special needs of missionaries, guidance, counseling, sharing, communicating, friendship, fellowship, visitation, crisis care, prayers, encouragement, affirmation, (1998:3).

Special attention needs to be paid to the missionary FAMILY

- 1.) The roles of missionary’s wives
- 2.) Missionary’s children
- 3.) Pre-field orientation of school aged children
 - a. On field missionary kids’ education
 - b. Assistance at and after re-entry

(E.) Partnerships:

Realize the function of each member (missionary, sending-and receiving church, agency, school) within the Body of Christ. Each has its role, but all have the same duty: To glorify God and to let the world know that Jesus is Lord. Knowing this compels us to co-operate.

Ways of co-operation:

1. Churches:

- a.) support a missionary family as a group of churches
- b.) arrange together to have Short Term activities
- c.) train candidates in conjunction with receiving church

2. Agencies:

- a.) Find a common standard for selection, which will strengthen the national movement as a whole.
- b.) Refer candidates to each other. A candidate with a genuine call not necessarily needs to be the correct person for the first organization he visits, so help him to find the correct agency
- c.) Establish a joint mentoring system with field leaders on the field. Better to have one experienced field leader to deal with missionaries from three organizations, than to have three less experienced leaders.
- d.) Get to know each other cross culturally. It is expected that all the missions’ agencies should co-operate with each other, (1998:4).

3. Churches and Agencies

- a.) The recognition that, if possible, neither church nor agency should function independently will help missions to move forward significantly beyond this century
- b.) Investigate and invest in knowing each other and making use of each other’s skills
- c.) Know the desires and expectations of the receiving churches

d.) Involve the national training institutes and bible schools in the preparation of the candidates, in “post field training” when on furlough and in professional training at re-entry. It is very important for the church, the agency and the training center to enter into dialogue to see how they can best integrate their resources, (1998:4).

10. SUMMARY

Attrition can be avoided by the recruiting church denomination or mission agencies. This is when the leadership see it as a responsibility to provide pastoral care for the Staff. The church should have a policy guiding her and the Staff that is recruited. The Staff should be given the policy statement of the organization and be allowed to read and understand the contents of the policy. It is left for the individual to accept the offer of the employment or not.

When a church denomination or mission agency recruit a missionary, it is their responsibility to come up with the take home package for the Staff. It is when adequate care is not given to the Staff that will make him or her to leave the ministry before the expiration of the contract. The mission agency will not see productivity and efficiency from the missionary in his or her place of ministry when such is left to move round to look for a support for the ministry the mission organization has employed him or her to do for them. Finally, before an individual leaves for mission field, the fellow should make sure that he or she is a Christian, Spirit-filled, call and such person is ready to let go personal interest above the spiritual need of the ministry.

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