What Missionaries Ought to Know about Attrition

Sam and Vonda finally had all they could take. Vonda got diarrhea time after time, and Sam was so discouraged that he thought he might be clinically depressed. Their home church had a new pastor who had never met them, and he had persuaded the missions committee to cut their support in half.

They had a great idea for attracting people through teaching high-tech meditation, but both the field director and people at headquarters refused to let them use it. The field director always seemed to be critical of what they did and seldom encouraged them in any way. Other missionaries in their agency seemed to reject them as well, so they were lonely and their frustration was turning into anger.

After nine months of their two-year commitment, they purchased their plane tickets home on their own, packed up, and asked their parents to meet them at the airport.

Events like this have become too common. People spend months or years preparing to serve as missionaries. They raise many thousands of dollars to serve. Then they leave their place of service in a few months broken and discouraged. The missionary attrition problem became so serious by the end of the twentieth century that major studies of it were conducted.

Why do missionaries quit?

The World Evangelical Fellowship sponsored the Reducing Missionary Attrition Project (ReMAP) during the last decade of the 20th century. Between 1994 and 1996 ReMAP received surveys from 551 missionaries from 14 sending countries. In 1997 the results were published as a book edited by William Taylor and titled *Too Valuable to Lose: Exploring the Causes and Cures of Missionary Attrition.* One thing the survey asked was for the missionaries to indicate the seven most important reasons why missionaries they knew had left their agency during the previous five years. Excluding retirement, the top seven reasons for attrition are listed here in order.

- Child(ren): One or more of their offspring were unable to adapt to a new culture, or had needs related to education, health, or behavior.
- Change of job: They had completed an assignment or moved to a new post.
- Health problems: They had issues in mental and/or physical health.
- Lack of home support: They had inadequate financial, prayer, and/or other support from their passport country.
- Problems with peers: they had relationship problems with mission field leaders or fellow missionaries.
- Personal concerns: They had low self-esteem or were dealing with stress, anger, unrealistic expectations, singleness, loneliness, etc.
- Disagreement with agency: They had disagreements with their missionary sending body over policy, authority, etc.

What have agencies done?

After presenting the survey results the ReMAP report includes at least two chapters about each of the following areas.

- Selection: These chapters suggested criteria that were crucial to consider when accepting people for missionary service.
- Pre-field training: These chapters included suggestions for both formal and non-formal training before the recruits went to serve.
- Orientation: These chapters suggested such things as cross-cultural and language training before going.
- On-field training and supervision: These chapters included what needed to be done shortly after the recruits arrived on the field, and who would support them and hold them accountable.
- Missionary member care: Five chapters suggested pastoral care, psychological care, care of third culture kids, etc.

Work on ReMAP II began in 2002 and it gathered data from 22 counties, including 600 mission agencies with a total of nearly 40,000 missionaries. The results were published in 2007 as *Worth Keeping: Global Perspectives on Best Practice in Missionary Retention.* ReMap II concentrated on finding out whether or not the suggestions made by ReMAP actually increased retention. It found that mission agencies with at least 50 missionaries lost only about 6% of their missionaries each year, but smaller agencies lost missionaries at the alarming rate of 33%.

Do other Christian workers also quit?

One interesting question to ask is whether the attrition problem is found only among missionaries or whether it is also found in Christian workers remaining in their passport countries. It may be that such attrition is found among all Christian workers. However, if it is found only in missionaries, it would mean that working cross-culturally is the problem.

During the last decade of the 20th century, about the same time ReMAP was conducted, the Center for Social and Religious Research at Hartford Seminary received a grant from the Lilly Endowment to study the status of ordained women in Protestantism in the USA. The researchers surveyed thousands of pastors, both male and female, in 16 denominations. They received responses from 2668 women and 2170 men with an overall response rate of 49%. The results were published in 1998 as a book written by Barbara Zikmund, Adair Lummis and Patricia Mei Yin Chang and titled *Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling.* They found that, during the previous year, 25% of the men and 26% of the women had considered leaving church-recognized ministry or actually did leave.

About the same time ReMAP II began, the Duke University Divinity School began a study supported by the Lilly Endowment, a study about pastoral attrition. This research resulted in 9662 surveys from pastors who had left five denominations in the USA. Written by Dean Hoge and Jacqueline Wenger and titled *Pastors in Transition: Why Clergy Leave the Local Church Ministry.* The results were published in 2005.

This study also found that pastors were leaving their work in the USA as well. Although few good statistics exist relative to the percent leaving, the best study Hoge and Wenger found reported that 41.5% leave by the end of the first 10 years. 68.0% leave by the end of 20 years.

Why do other Christian workers quit?

In *Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling* (same time as ReMAP) Zikmund, Lummis, and Chang found the following factors

influencing clergy seriously considering leaving the ministry.

- Weak professional self-concept
- Not paid enough for ministerial work
- Not part of a clergy support group
- Feel the denominational executive does not recognize their abilities.

Chapters 3-9 in *Pastors in Transition* (same time frame as ReMAP II) appear in a section titled "Seven Main Motivations" as to why pastors left their ministry. Here are the reasons they left. Note how similar they are to the ones missionaries had reported.

- Preferred another kind of ministry
- Needed to care for children or family
- Had conflict in the congregation
- Had conflict with denominational leaders
- Were burned out or discouraged
- Left due to sexual misconduct
- Left due to divorce or marital problems

What can missionaries do?

Mission agencies have done much toward lowering attrition during the last two decades. That is good, but it is not the whole solution to the problem. The other part of the solution is up to the missionaries themselves.

Probably the best thing missionaries can do is to join an agency that has at least 50 missionaries serving in other cultures. Some agencies may say that they have 100 missionaries, but they count everyone who works in any way for the agency as a missionary. Of course, in one sense they are, but unless the agency has at least 50 people serving in other cultures, it is not likely to have the infrastructure to care for their missionaries. If the agency has 75 people at "home," but only 25 in different cultures, it is not likely to have what is needed to prevent attrition.

This has been my own experience in serving missionaries. Though we have heard occasional "horror" stories from people in large agencies, we hear these stories far more frequently from missionaries in small agencies. And we find them even more frequently while serving missionaries who have gone out with only their local church as their support when they are overseas. The worst of all is when people form their own group with a few friends and go out with no established support group at home.

When choosing an agency it is best for missionaries to ask what that agency has in place to help missionaries in such situations. Does the agency do the five major things agencies began doing following ReMAP? Does it have resources in place to help people facing the seven major reasons ReMAP found for quitting?

After joining an agency, missionaries should take full advantage of all the training, orientation, and supervision available. Those who avoid these are most likely to be the ones who become attrition statistics. Those programs have been put in place to prevent attrition.

Although the idea came up on the sections about pastors, it is important for every missionary to have some kind of support group with whom they can share the most intimate things. Everyone needs someone to talk with. It is best if that person is physically present, but if that is impossible, Skyping or talking on the phone is better than nothing. It is best if such contact occurs on a regular basis, preferably weekly.

To be forewarned is to be forearmed. That is, missionaries who find themselves in situations where they are experiencing the reasons missionaries and pastors quit can take steps to get out of the situation.

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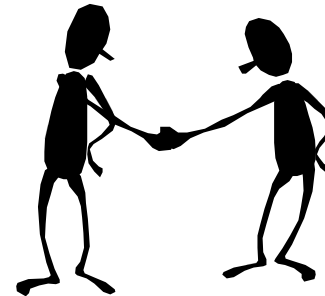
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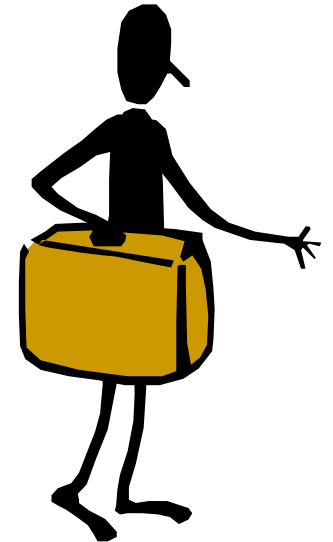Visit the following web site to access other brochures in the series:

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