

# More than Counseling

**T**he member care world is developing and growing. “Member Care” once meant counseling for missionaries. Now we see a movement to provide practical support that far exceeds the earlier practice.

The article by Kelly O’Donnell in this issue of *Mission Frontiers* portrays the scope of member care, so I won’t repeat that here. Rather, I’ll share with you what missionaries are telling me about ways their sending church or agency can partner with them to improve their success rate in planting churches in the remaining unreached people groups.

Success, in my estimation, is completing the Great Commission while exhibiting the love expounded in 1 Corinthians 13. A veteran missionary in Central Asia said to me, “Our message of a transforming relationship with Isa (Jesus), of salvation by grace, was most believable and had the greatest fruit when our message of God’s love was lived out in their presence.” Others have told me that locals who observed successful resolution of conflict between missionary workers saw the basis for a credible message: “Behold, how they love one another.”

## Don’t Forget Us!

“Where are your parents and grandparents?” asked the Afghani boy of his Western playmate. The Afghani was struggling to understand how the Western family came to live in their village but left their extended family back home. We leave many of

our most important friends and family when we go to the field. When not successfully navigated, this reality can result in greatly diminished effectiveness. Staying successfully connected with our existing support system, while building another system on the field, is key to successful transition and longevity.

*“Please come and spend time with us.”*

Making well-planned visits to the field is one way to stay connected with your workers. A well-planned visit is one where we go as “learners” to provide encouragement and support. The first key is listening and observing. Numerous workers have told me of the encouragement they receive when their pastor comes to spend time with them. It is beneficial for both church and worker to insure that their relationship be more than monetary. These visits help dispel the unproductive thinking “Are they really doing what we support them to do?” and “Do we really mean anything to those people back home?”

*“Help us stay accountable.”*

It is hard to be completely forthcoming with people who don’t know us and love us. Mutual respect is a sign of healthy relationships. The difference between a financial ledger and reality is well illustrated by the recent collapse of multibillion-dollar companies. Building and maintaining relationship with your workers may make the difference between the startling news of collapse and the ability to provide help and account-

ability along the way. Do you have the relational respect as well as the relational authority to provide meaningful accountability?

Accountability goes beyond financial responsibility. It has been my experience that missionaries welcome pastoral care, which extends to supporting and tracking their spiritual growth. To know someone through the seasons of their spiritual and relational growth is as important for your flock on the field as at home. For church planters, who often feel that they are reliving the book of Acts, your ongoing correspondence and relationship will make you their Paul or Barnabas. Do you want to influence the pastoral care of newly-reached peoples? Pastor your workers on the field.

*“Please actively invite us to stay connected to our church home.”*

What can be done to stay connected? This may start with an honest assessment of your desire to stay connected. If years have gone by with little meaningful contact, it still may not be too late to turn this around. Are you the sending church of a missionary? When a number of churches and individuals are financially supporting your worker, there is often the expectation that “someone else” is pastoring and meaningfully relating to Bill and Sally in Bonga-Bonga Land.

In recent years I have come to know a pastor of a small church in Arizona. To hear Randy tell the story, you recognize that they have sent some of their best when they sent “Tom” and “Lisa”. Randy says that if the senior pastor is not enthusiastic about their workers planting a church in this unreached people group, then how can he expect the congregation to reach out to them?



*Jerry Reddix, Psy.D., is a worker with Missionary Care International, based in Southern California. Dr. Reddix provides consultation and training in member care to local churches and mission agencies, especially those focused on mission frontiers. He may be reached at DrReddix@cs.com or toll-free at (877) 569-4281.*

A limited budget does not stop this small congregation from doing a great job staying connected through visits, mail and logistical support. Other churches contribute to the support of this couple, but Tom and Lisa know where their home is and who provides primary care for them.

*“Please tell our sending agency and sending church to stay connected on our behalf.”*

I am pleased to see increasing efforts being made by agencies and churches in this regard. When it comes to pastoring and personal contact, there is a role for both church and agency. When the one knows what the other is doing, the support is more focused and the worker is less likely to feel abandoned and forgotten.

A missions pastor for a large church has this approach: “I interview agencies to see if there is a good fit with our people before we approve their working with the

care for our people.” This type of partnership utilizes the strengths of church and agency.

### **Get to Know What Our Life in the Field is Really Like**

Here is where I need to focus on the role of suffering. Participating in the sufferings of Christ is normative in every Christian life. Furthermore, without exception, every long-term worker I have spoken to has experienced suffering in ways that exceed their experience back home. We often don't know about this suffering unless we are in close contact. After all, it is hard for any of us to speak of our difficulties and our reactions to suffering. This is especially true when workers are concerned about being seen as

which we are tracking with each other over time makes possible sharing in each other's sufferings and rejoicing in each other's triumphs. “Weep with those who weep, and rejoice with those who rejoice.”

Some of the usual and customary stresses in the life of a cross-cultural worker are relatively easy to anticipate or observe. Other, subtler stresses are only known by those who understand the specifics of living in a particular location and the history of the worker.

*“Does anyone really know what we are going through?”*

These less-obvious challenges are part of the stuff of missionary life. Frequent transitions can be discerned “between the lines” in the typical prayer letter:

- “We have wonderful opportunities to minister in the next village.” (Translation: Dad has been gone for days or weeks while local warlords battle in the city.)

- “We had an inspiring missionary conference.” (Translation: We needed to move children and possessions over mountain passes to an unfamiliar location, and we pray we don't have problems crossing the border when we try to return “home”.)

- “We finally received our visa to remain in the country.” (Translation: After years of needing to leave the country every few months and living with the uncertainty that we might not be able to stay, we can now settle down, unless the government changes and we have to go through this all over again.)

- “We have seen the new church grow and appoint elders.” (Translation: We may now be asked to leave the country because the new church is visible and not welcomed in this place.)

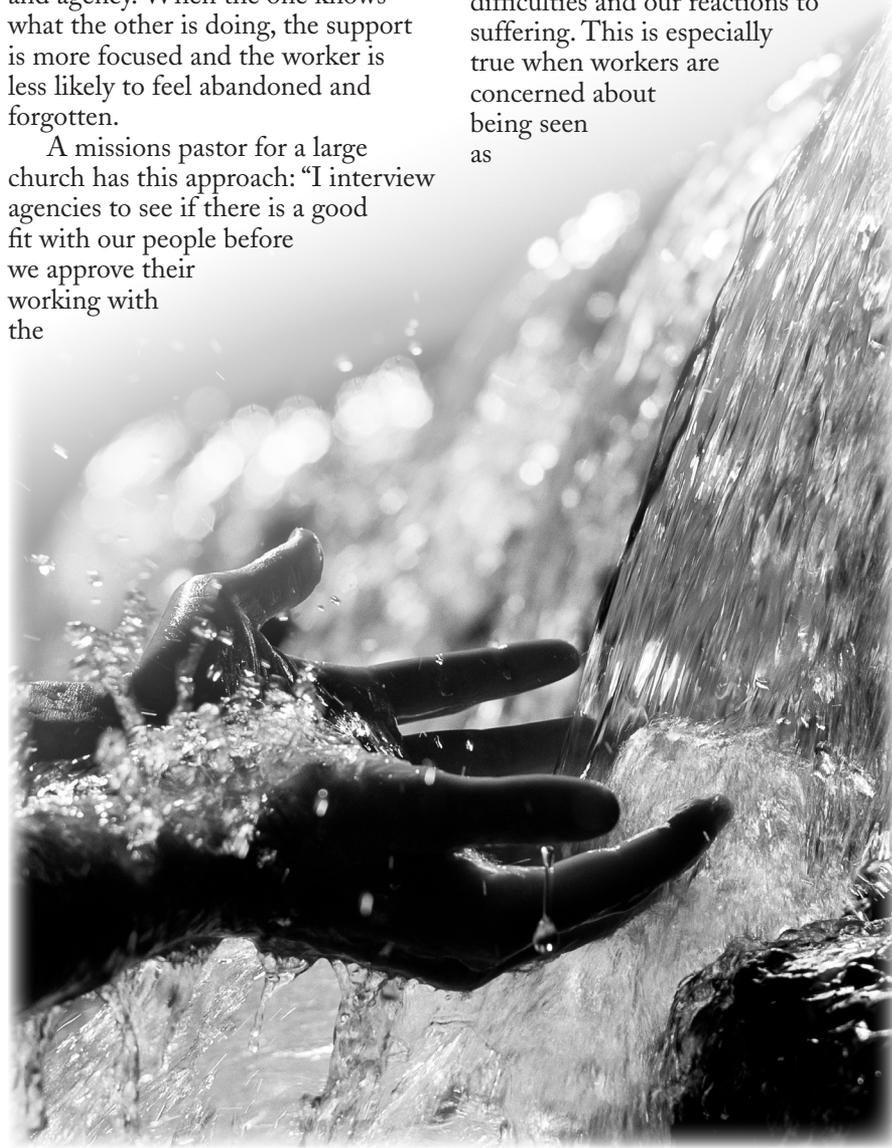
- “Our son has been accepted with a full scholarship to a college of his choice.” (Translation: How will he do? When will see him next? Is there money for us to visit him if he needs our encouragement?)

*“We are doing OK. How are you?”*

When we look closely at life on the field, we see another category I call “chronic stress” – the stresses that become so familiar that the worker may not recognize them as stresses.

agency. We want them to know what we will do to provide pastoral care and connection and want to know what they do to train, support and

weak or unspiritual. The principal antidote to this type of shame is to have honest, grace-oriented relationships with our workers. Relationships in



This lack of recognition may reflect helpful adaptation, but it can sometimes come at the price of physical or emotional breakdown.

One category of chronic stress is

it difficult to form longstanding relationships and can be misunderstood by peers back in the home country.

Often forgotten in the missionary picture are parents, grandparents

partner to work through just one of those books ...”

Spiritual health is not just a private matter. Fellowship with fellow believers brings to us the benefits of the “one another” truths in Scripture. Do your frontier workers have the opportunity to worship with others? Is there someone who will correspond with them as a spiritual mentor?

---

## ***Do you want to influence the pastoral care of newly-reached peoples? Pastor your workers on the field.***

### **Help Us Plan for Crisis**

One arena in which relationships between church, agency and worker can be severely tested is the arena of crisis. Confusion, disorganization and blame are all likely to happen when there is not adequate planning and a relationship of trust between these entities. The net effect of no planning or insufficient planning is to damage the workers and possibly the work in ways that could have been avoided.

A crisis can be defined as any event or events that disrupt the usual way of living and working. I bring this up with church-planting teams by asking the question, “What three or four predictable events would disrupt your church-planting strategy and work?” I ask churches, “What event or events on the field would disrupt your normal life and put demands on the church which could be disruptive to business as usual?”

Here is a list of crises that are likely in the frontier missions context. It is possible to make contingency

concern for physical safety and health. One mother told me that when she was a single worker she didn't pay much attention to the almost-weekly bombing and brief skirmishes that happened in her city on a disputed border. However, now as a parent she was suffering frequent anxiety attacks and was talking with her husband and the sending church about relocating.

As workers in jungle environments know well, vigilance is a principal defense against illness. I have noticed that this vigilant self-care does not translate so well in urban environments. I see workers ignoring signs of relational, emotional and physical distress, and sometimes it takes a pastoral visit to point out the difficulty. Like the frog which remains in the gradually warming water, some workers get boiled before they recognize they have been exposed to chronic stress.

*“I really appreciate those who faithfully remember our birthdays and special days.”*

Another category of chronic stress is relational loneliness, which affects singles, married and children. One single woman had 27 different roommates in her 15 years of field service. Singles are often “assigned” a roommate because of cultural necessity; personality differences aside, this is a major issue.

Stability of friendships is sometime very difficult to maintain. David Pollock and Ruth van Reckon highlight this in their book *The Third Culture Kid: Growing Up Amongst Worlds*. I have heard David describe the “quick release” approach to MK friendships. Not knowing how long they will have to be with a peer, MKs can connect quickly and let go quickly. This is an adaptive behavior, but can make

and significant others. I like to refer to all these as the missionary family. What can your church do to connect with these important members of the missionary team? Opportunities for blessing your field worker abound in the arena of their family “back home.”

*“We are hanging in there, please pray for our devotional life.”*

Some supporters are surprised to realize how missionaries can struggle with spiritual dryness. “What do we have, if we don't have Jesus?” one worker asked of his colleagues at a recent spiritual retreat. Someone retorted, “And what will happen if Jesus doesn't have us?”

Spiritual vitality is so key. Just look at the volumes of books and helps available in the average Christian bookstore in the USA. I watched a woman who had just returned from a remote location, where she had served a four-year term. Her eyes filled with tears as she glanced over the abundance of spiritual helps at our local Christian bookstore. Some days later I asked this woman about her reaction in the bookstore. She lamented, “If I would have had a prayer

plans for each of these: (a) travel-related injury (with possible evacuation to receive care) or death; (b) other sickness, injury or cause of death; (c) natural disaster requiring relocation; (d) evacuation for various reasons (e.g., persecution, armed conflict); (e) moral failure of the missionary, necessitating removal from the field; (f) crisis with a family member in the home country (e.g., with a parent or child in college); (g) compromise of information or security (e.g., a church web site makes inappropriate comments, Christian or secular media inappropriately comment on missionaries' work, computers are taken, phones are tapped).

The cooperation of church and agency can keep a tragedy from becoming a debilitating crisis for the church-planting team, church and agency. Be prepared. Ask your workers about their contingency plans, and work on a complementary plan that is realistic for your church or agency. Ask the agency their policy in times of crisis such as political unrest or sickness of a worker. Unspoken and unreconciled expectations create common problems when time comes for response to crises.

### **Help Us Locate Specialists Who Can Increase Our Effectiveness**

Help from specialists is a way of life for the resource-rich Western world. Finding a specialist willing to go to workers in the field is not too difficult. But, as one worker said, "We need someone who understands what life is like in this place, our limited resources, our limited energy, and our need to make cultural modifications to many Western ways of doing things." At a debriefing I was leading, one worker from a war-ravaged location coined the term "disaster tourist" to identify those specialists who are not really prepared to help in the local context of disintegrated infrastructure and danger. He said that much time was spent caring for specialists rather than "doing the work we are here to do!"

This is a dilemma: how to elicit appropriate expertise and meet the expectations of the field worker looking for advice that will work in their location? I have found that those

specialists who are willing to go as learners, to ask "what is it like here?", are the ones invited to return. Humble service by specialists, many of whom have respect and prestige back home, speaks volumes about Christ and His love.

I encourage you to prepare a list of specialists, e.g., in your church, that you could mentor toward serving your workers in the field. To help you, I repeat here the eight specialty domains mentioned by Kelly O'Donnell in chapter 1 of *Doing Member Care Well*: (1) Pastoral/spiritual (retreats, devotionals); (2) Physical/medical (medical advice, nutrition); (3) Training/career (continuing education, job placement); (4) Team building/

---

## ***The cooperation of church and agency can keep a tragedy from becoming a debilitating crisis for the church-planting team, church and agency.***

interpersonal (group dynamics, conflict resolution); (5) Family/MK (MK education options, marital support group); (6) Financial/logistical (retirement, medical insurance); (7) Crisis/contingency (debriefing, evacuation plans); (8) Counseling/psychological (screening, brief therapy).

### **Is It Really "Furlough"?**

Those highly anticipated trips "home" from the field are such mixed experiences. Good books and other resources can help you prepare for the time your workers are at home. Neil Pirolo's *Serving As Senders* and *The Reentry Team* are good choices with good insight. Much can be done to make the experience a good one for workers, families and churches. Don't let this be an event that just "comes and goes" with little planning. Each trip back to the home church or home country is full of possibility for blessings and refreshment.

One common theme for workers on "furlough" is to overbook themselves speaking, visiting, studying, seeing "all the family" and generally not resting. You can help by recommending and giving accountability to a furlough plan that includes rest.

The plan could also be to help with logistics like housing, transportation, getting schoolbooks and supplies, and arranging medical, dental and other health checks. It can also help if you sponsor dinners where a number of supporters can come in one evening to hear news and enjoy time with their missionaries.

### **Pray, Pray, Pray**

Just as we have experienced times of difficulty in prayer, so have our missionary friends. Let's be plain and practical in this matter. Those who have stopped praying (for any reason) are in serious danger of missing the mark. The words of Jesus are compelling: You did all these things in my name, but I never knew you. Ouch!

Prayer is an intimate subject. Asking someone about his or her prayer life can be comparable to asking about his or her sex life. (And what if they ask *us* about *our* prayer life?) Yet if we want to be successful in church-planting and in the sending and supporting of church planters, we need to be prepared to appropriately ask.

### **Conclusion**

In this article I have highlighted areas that missionaries have brought to my attention. I have touched briefly on issues that are more complex than my comments may suggest. If you want to learn more, I recommend the two most complete books on member care presently in print: *Doing Member Care Well* and *Too Valuable to Lose*. (See the William Carey Library advertisement elsewhere in this issue of *Mission Frontiers*.) I strongly recommend these books to every church and sending agency. Read the research, reflect on the applications, and find your place in the final frontier of discipling the peoples and demonstrating the command of Jesus to "love one another as I have loved you." 🌐