

CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO WORLDS:  
COUNSELING THE MISSIONARY COMMUNITY

A Paper

Submitted to Dr. Craig Garrett

of the

New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Course

Counseling in Ministry: COUN5202

in the Division of Church and Community Ministries

Haylee K. Holeman

B.A. Mississippi College, 2019

March 26, 2020



## CONTENTS

### Section

1. Introduction.....	1
2. General Needs of the Missionary Community.....	2
Departure.....	2
Arrival.....	4
Field Life.....	6
Re-entry.....	7
3. The Biblical Perspective Concerning Counseling Missionaries.....	8
The Missionary Task.....	9
Caring For Missionaries.....	9
4. Conclusion.....	10

## 1. Introduction

Missionaries are unique among the greater Christian community because they sacrifice the comfort of their home country to go live among people of a new culture and worldview than themselves. Oftentimes, churches perceive missionaries as “super-Christians” and forget that missionaries are people with difficulties just like everyone else. However, in the past few decades, counselors and other mental health researchers have changed their perspectives concerning missionaries’ mental health, and many missions organizations, such as the International Mission Board, now strive to prioritize the mental well-being of their missionaries.

In order to understand how to minister to the missionaries, one must understand the unique challenges of each group--whether children, adults, or retirees--in order to effectively counsel them. The term for one who counsels missionaries is “member care.” Kelly O’Donnell defines member care as “the ongoing investment of resources by mission agencies, churches, and other mission organizations for the nurture and development of missionary personnel.”<sup>1</sup>

The basic member care model consists of five spheres which influence one another: master care, mutual care, sender care, specialist care, and network care.<sup>2</sup> Master care comes from the missionary maintaining a strong relationship with the Lord. Mutual care is the idea of self-care, in which the missionary cares for his or her own well-being. Sender care originates from the missionary’s sender, whether their sending church or missional organization. Specialist care

---

<sup>1</sup> Kelly O’Donnell, “Introduction,” in *Doing Member Care Well: Perspective and Practices from Around the World*, ed Kelly O’Donnell (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2002), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Kelly O’Donnell, “Going Global: A Member Care Model for Best Practice” in *Doing Member Care Well: Perspective and Practices from Around the World*, ed Kelly O’Donnell (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2002), 16.

refers to the missionary receiving professional help for specific issues. Network care means that a network of resources is available to the missionary for support.<sup>3</sup> Each of these facets of member care are important to the well-being of every missionary. However, the specifics differ for each person depending on life stage and amount of time on the field.

## 2. General Needs of the Missionary Community

One of the similarities among all missionaries no matter what sub-group they belong to is the process of adjustment to their new overseas life. Missionaries experience four stages of adjustment: departure, arrival, field life, and re-entry.<sup>4</sup> Each individual experiences these stages differently, but they all go through the same ultimate cycle. Each stage also involves a different sphere of the basic member care model, but the first sphere, the master care, must support all the other stages because without maintaining a healthy relationship with the Lord, all of the other relationships are more likely to fail.

### *Departure*

The departure stage refers to the time in the missionary's journey when they are readying themselves to leave the United States and move to their new country. This stage involves the mutual and sender care spheres of the member care model because the missionary must gain closure for their own satisfaction as well as to help them maintain their relationships when they are not physically present anymore. The most important need for missionaries in this stage is a

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 17-18.

<sup>4</sup> David Pollock, "Developing A Flow of Care and Caregivers" in *Doing Member Care Well: Perspective and Practices from Around the World*, ed. Kelly O'Donnell (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2002), 28-29.

proper goodbye to the people, places, and culture with which they are familiar. In this stage, the missionary's primary and most important caregivers are the sending church and family because they are to help ensure the missionary leaves their home country with closure and peace.<sup>5</sup>

One common technique for mastering the proper goodbye is called the "RAFT" technique. Though this method is most commonly used for missionary kids, it is also recommended for adults as well. The steps of this process are: reconciliation, affirmation, farewells, and think ahead.<sup>6</sup> The first step, reconciliation, means resolving any conflict one might have with people who the missionary is leaving behind in the States. The second step is affirmation, and during this time the missionary should reassure those who they are leaving of their importance in the missionary's life. Farewell is the third step, and this refers to saying goodbye, not only to people, but to places and even possessions that the missionary is leaving behind. The final step, think ahead, is the process of not only mourning the goodbyes, but looking forward to future reunions and the excitement of what is awaiting in the new country.<sup>7</sup>

Each of these steps in the "RAFT" technique are important in the departure stage because it helps the missionary gain closure before they leave. This process ensures that missionaries have as few regrets as possible and can leave for the field with a sense of peace. The proper goodbye is vital because without it, the following three stages of the adjustment process are even more difficult.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>6</sup> Jean M. Larson, "Transitions and the TCK" in *Raising Resilient MK's*, ed Joyce M. Bowers (Colorado Springs: The Association of Christian Schools International, 1998), 78.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 78-79.

### *Arrival*

The second stage of adjustment is the arrival stage. This refers to the period of time during which the missionary first steps off the plane into their new country and spends time introducing themselves to the culture. Usually this involves some sort of orientation to address cultural issues and reassure the missionary that they must be patient with themselves in the learning process.<sup>8</sup>

One of the most common roadblocks that missionaries experience during the arrival stage is culture shock. Culture shock is stress which occurs when a person comes into contact with a new culture. This can result in feelings of anxiety, confusion, and general social discomfort.<sup>9</sup> When dealing with culture shock, the spheres of the member care model that the missionary must invoke are the specialist and network cares because they must rely on missionaries who have already experienced culture shock to share resources and help them through the process. However, the missionary must also tap into the mutual care sphere because they have to remember to care for their own well-being as well. 5

The missionary goes through four stages when confronting culture shock: honeymoon, hostile, opening up, and adjustment.<sup>10</sup> Missionaries experience the honeymoon stage when they are fascinated and enamored with the new culture. In this stage, everything is wonderful, and the

---

<sup>8</sup> David Polluck, 28.

<sup>9</sup> Cristina Dorazio and Madonna G. Constantine, "Culture Shock" in *Encyclopedia of Counseling*, ed. Frederick T.L. Leong, Elizabeth M. Altmaier, and Brian D. Johnson (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Inc. 2008), 1106. EbscoHost.

<sup>10</sup> Doris L. Walters, *An Assessment of Reentry Issues of the Children of Missionaries* (New York: Vantage Press, 1991), 80-81.

missionary wants to dive straight into all that the new culture has to offer. The second stage, the hostile stage, occurs when missionaries become homesick and begin seeing the flaws of their new home. They become angry and frustrated, and they mourn for their old lives. During the third stage, the missionary begins opening up to their new culture. They gain more knowledge of their new environment and embrace the attitude of perseverance even in the midst of struggles. The fourth and final stage, adjustment, means that the missionary finds the balance between their old and new cultures. The stress diminishes, and they can settle down into their new lives with a better sense of peace.<sup>11</sup>

One of the most important people in the missionary's life during this stage of arrival is their mentor. This person becomes their primary caregiver by welcoming them into the culture and acquainting the missionary to the community, both by showing them around and introducing them to persons of peace. This mentor can be another missionary who has lived there for a period of time already or a native of that culture who can provide a friendly face for the missionary.<sup>12</sup> This is especially helpful when the missionary experiences culture shock because they have one or multiple people who can empathize with their emotions during their hard times.

### *Field Life*

As the stage of arrival ends, the field life stage begins. Once the missionary gets into the adjustment stage of culture shock, they can begin organizing their lives and establishing a new "normal." They also begin to form quality relationships with others on their missionary team as well as with nationals, and these relationships become foundational for the missionary's well-

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> David Polluck, 28.



being.<sup>13</sup> In this stage, the most important spheres of the member care model is the Network model because missionaries must rely on each other for support and build deep relationships with one another.

This field life stage often determines whether the missionary will stay on the field long term or return back to the United States. The relationships that the missionary forms during this time are vital to their success on the field. Interpersonal relationships can either make or break a missionary because each person must be willing to work together and encourage one another. Missionary teams are unique because they are a variety of ages, field experience, and personalities, and each person is pursuing the same call from God.<sup>14</sup>

Also in the realm of relationships, conflict-resolution strategies also impact the success of missionaries on the field. Conflict can arise between team members, missionaries and nationals, and even among the missionary family itself.<sup>15</sup> Much wisdom is necessary when dealing with conflict because no matter how hard one tries to avoid conflict, it is inevitable when working with a group of people who all possess unique personalities and visions. If a missionary experiences extreme conflict of some sort, these close relationships become even more important because they provide some measure of peace and counsel to which the missionary can turn.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>14</sup> J. Russell Turney and Greg Mundis, *Leaving a Legacy: Increasing Missionary Longevity* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013), 42.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>16</sup> Anke Tissengh, "Member Care in North Africa: Finding Life in the Desert" in *Doing Member Care Well: Perspective and Practices from Around the World*, ed Kelly O'Donnell (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2002), 112.

The way in which a missionary handles interpersonal relationship plays a large part in determining whether or not they will stay on the field long term. If the missionary cannot form deep relationships, they risk feeling discouraged and will more likely return home. These friendships that the missionary initially forms in the arrival stage continue to be the primary caregivers for the missionary during the field life stage because without those solid relationships the missionary will likely feel homesick or lonely. On the other hand, when the relationships are strong and well-established, the missionary will find that they feel almost if not just as much at home in their new culture as they did in the United States.

### *Re-entry*

Often, returning back to the U.S. is more difficult for missionaries than leaving for the mission field. Once again, they are having to go through that process of departure by saying proper goodbyes and resolving conflicts just as they did before.<sup>17</sup> Though they are returning to a familiar place, the missionary still experiences the same process of goodbye as when they left the U.S. For this stage, the most important spheres of the member care model are sender care and mutual care because the sending church is responsible to care for the missionaries as they experience trials such as reverse culture shock, but the missionary must also care for themselves and allow time for grief and adjustment.

Once again, the RAFT process is useful for ensuring missionaries gain the proper closure that they need when leaving the field. Yet, on top of that, they also need a specific debrief

---

<sup>17</sup> David Polluck, 29.

system, whether that be through exit interviews, peer counseling, or some sort of retreat.<sup>18</sup> Two specific types of debriefing are especially helpful: operational debriefing and emotional debriefing.<sup>19</sup> Operational debrief refers to work-related experiences and is normally conducted by the sending agency or church. Emotional debriefing handles the missionary's feelings and personal experiences, allowing the missionary to express their emotions and self-evaluate. Each of these processes are important for ensuring the mental health of the missionary as they navigate their changed personalities and prepare to re-adjust back to their lives in the U.S.

### **3. The Biblical Perspective Concerning Counseling Missionaries**

The Bible contains various passages concerning missionaries, both in regards to the reason why missionaries are needed and how the church can support the missionaries while they are on the field. Counseling missionaries has been necessary ever since Paul went on his first journey, and the needs of missionaries today are almost exactly the same. Though the context has changed, the methods for caring for missionaries have stayed consistent.

#### *The Missionary Task*

Before one can counsel and care for missionaries well, it is first necessary to understand the missionary task and what it entails. Jesus Himself describes the missionary calling, showing the importance of this particular ministry work. Two passages to help the church better understand the missionary calling are Luke 24:44-49 and Acts 1:8.

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 30.

In these two passages, Jesus describes the missionary task as preaching the gospel to all peoples. Missionaries start in their home countries and then travel around the world to preach Christ's death and resurrection and the "repentance for the forgiveness of sins."<sup>20</sup> This calling requires much sacrifice, as these missionaries must leave their home comforts and live among foreign lands, often learning a new language on top of adjusting to new cultures. As seen in the previous sections concerning the stages of adjustment for missionaries, the task is daunting and missionaries require a lot of care. Luckily, the Bible provides passages to guide the church in caring for missionaries as well.

### *Caring for Missionaries*

One of the greatest missionary examples that the Bible provides is the Apostle Paul, and the ways in which the New Testament church supported Paul's work show the church today how to care for missionaries today. Acts 13:2-3, Acts 14:14-28, and 2 Corinthians 7:5-7 are specific examples of how the church can support missionaries in the departure phase, the re-entry phase, and the field life phase.

The first passage, Acts 13:2-3, shows the church at Antioch laying hands and praying for Paul and Barnabas as they get ready to embark on their first missionary journey together. This process of prayer and sending is important in the departure phase for missionaries because it provides spiritual support for those being sent. In the RAFT illustration, this would involve the affirmation and farewell steps of the departure process. As they proceeded on their journey, Paul and Barnabas were strengthened spiritually and in Acts 14:24-28, they were able to re-enter to Antioch with news of God's provision and answer to the church's prayers.

---

<sup>20</sup> Luke 24:46-47. Unless otherwise specified, all Scripture references are in ESV.

The third passage, Romans 2 Corinthians 7:5-7, demonstrates the way that the church in Corinth supported Paul when he was suffering through spiritual warfare in Macedonia. Titus found Paul and reported to him that the church was praying and mourning for his suffering, which encouraged Paul and helped him to keep going in the midst of hardship. In the same way, while missionaries today are on the field, keeping in touch with their churches back in the U.S. and knowing people are praying for them provide them the zeal to keep pressing forward in the task to which God has called them.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Missionaries are a unique group who require special attention when it comes to counseling. They experience hardships which few can understand, so the way in which the church supports and counsels them is vital to their success. However, because they are such a particular group, few people in the church understand how to relate to them. Through understanding tools such as the basic member care model and the stages of adjustment, counselors, churches, and missionaries themselves can understand better how to care for missionaries and tend to their needs.

11

Many missionary sending agencies such as the International Mission Board provide resources to help churches better discern missionaries' calling and how to help them pursue it. It is becoming more common for missionaries to discuss mental health and find resources to help them persevere through their struggles. Though missionaries are a particular group, with effort and research, counselors and churches can support missionaries' general and specific needs and therefore accomplish the mission which Jesus lays out in Luke 24 and Acts 1--to get the Gospel to all peoples on earth.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Dorazio, Cristina and Madonna G. Constantine. "Culture Shock." In *Encyclopedia of Counseling*, edited by Frederick T.L. Leong, Elizabeth M. Altmaier, and Brian D. Johnson, 1106-1107. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Inc. 2008. EbscoHost.
- Larson, Jean M. "Transitions and the TCK." In *Raising Resilient MK's*, edited by Joyce M. Bowers, 72-84. Colorado Springs: The Association of Christian Schools International, 1998.
- O'Donnell, Kelly. "Introduction." In *Doing Member Care Well: Perspective and Practices from Around the World*, edited by Kelly O'Donnell, 1-10. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2002.
- O'Donnell, Kelly. "Going Global: A Member Care Model for Best Practice." In *Doing Member Care Well: Perspective and Practices from Around the World*, edited by Kelly O'Donnell, 13-22. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2002.
- Pollock, David. "Developing A Flow of Care and Caregivers." In *Doing Member Care Well: Perspective and Practices from Around the World*, edited by Kelly O'Donnell, 23-32. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2002.
- Tissengh, Anke. "Member Care in North Africa: Finding Life in the Desert." In *Doing Member Care Well: Perspective and Practices from Around the World*, edited by Kelly O'Donnell, 109-116. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2002.
- Turney, J. Russell and Greg Mundis. *Leaving a Legacy: Increasing Missionary Longevity*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013.
- Walters, Doris L. *An Assessment of Reentry Issues of the Children of Missionaries*. New York: Vantage Press, 1991.