

MEMBER CARE: IT IS MUCH MORE NEEDED THAN YOU THINK

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Jewel was a single missionary serving in another culture and country. She had been a missionary in 2 countries, and this was her third. She had been involved in a lot of pioneer and frontier work and was known to be hardworking, resilient and focused. After a fruitful ministry of about 18 years as a missionary, she found herself losing interest in her work. In between times, she had suffered a health condition which took about 9 months to be diagnosed. Her experience during the 9 months of hospital visits for tests and treatments was traumatic, so much so that she dreaded seeing a hospital even from afar! In the midst of her current struggle, she received a message from her International leaders asking her to take up a higher responsibility. Jewel burst into tears! She was not interested in any leadership position. She didn't even know what she wanted! Jewel didn't understand that she was having a burnout experience; neither did anybody notice the crisis she was going through. After all, Jewel is known to be resilient.

What was the problem with Jewel? She needed help; she needed member care.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is not to provide training in member care. It is rather to highlight the need or key role of member care in missionary work and to make proposals as to how each organization can initiate a member care structure. The ideas in this paper are derived from personal experience, training and materials on member care.

They are of course not exhaustive.

What is Member Care?

Let us take a look at some definitions. Kelly O'Donnell defined Member Care as the "ongoing investment of resources by mission agencies, churches and other missions organizations for the nurture and development of personnel. It focuses on every one in missions (missionaries, support staff, children and families) and does so over the course of the missionary life cycle, from recruitment to retirement".^[1]

Another definition is that "member care is the ongoing preparation, equipping and empowering of missions personnel for effective and sustainable life, ministry and work"

THE ROLE OF MEMBER CARE IN MISSIONS

Ronald L. Kotesky explained that missionary member care is done to help missionaries develop so they will have an effective and sustainable ministry.^[3] From the above, we can see that the definition of member care and the reason why it has to be done is related. What can be seen to be important in the two are the missionary's wellbeing as well as his or her effectiveness and sustainability on the field. The paucity of missionaries against the great need in missions as our Lord noted in Matthew 9:37 is still a reality today. It will therefore be wise to ensure that these few missionaries are well enough to do their work equally well and last long on the mission field. The question then arises as to how these can be ensured. I'll approach the subject by first highlighting what could constitute hindrances to the wellbeing, effectiveness and sustainability of the missionary, and then suggest how member care

^[1] Kelly O'Donnell, "Introduction: To the Ends of the Earth, to the End of the Age" in *Doing Member Care Well: Perspectives and Practices from Around the World*, ed. Kelly O'Donnell (California: William Carey Library, 2002), 1

^[2] Definition agreed by the Global Member Care Network of the WEA Mission Commission in 2008 in *Guidelines for Good Practice in Member Care*. Unpublished

^[3] Ronald L. Kotesky, *Missionary Member Care: An Introduction*, PDF Version, 2013, 40

can play a role in addressing such issues.

Things That Could Work Against the Missionaries' Effectiveness and Sustainability on the Field

1. Lack of Self Care or Poor Self Stewardship

The missionary call requires a life of sacrifice; he is expected to give up some comfort to be able to take the gospel to remote areas. This is in line with the Scriptures as Jesus in Luke 9:23-24 demanded self-denial for fruitful discipleship. At the same time, the first part of the greatest commandment as recorded in Matthew 22:39 - love yourself - is a commandment to take care of self. Yet, many missionaries fail to treat their bodies as the temple of the Holy Spirit - that is, having enough rest, eating well and exercising regularly. As such, the missionaries "set themselves up for a premature departure from the work to which God has called them".

[4] Ronald Kotesky and Mary Seitz noted also that just as athletes take care of themselves so that they can do their best, missionaries must maintain themselves so that they can be most effective in bearing God's message.^[5] But unfortunately, sometimes missionaries fall into the trap of performance; they not only drive themselves but others in unhealthy ways to achieve their goals.^[6] Productivity certainly decreases when areas of stress increase. The story of Jewel above is an illustration of this fact. Jewel overworked herself and exhausted her physical and emotional reservoir and was no longer functioning well.

Member Care comes in here to encourage missionaries to see the need to strike a balance between their work and personal health. Member care could ensure that every missionary, whether on the field or in the office takes a day off every week, strictly for

rest. In addition to this, every missionary must take a period of leave annually, during which he should undertake a medical checkup. Missionaries should also be encouraged to regularly check their spiritual, physical, and emotional gauges by using inventories.^[7]

2. Lack of or Inadequate Member Care from Sending Organizations

There are times when an organization's focus is much more on the success of ministry and projects such that the physical and emotional health of its staff takes a back seat. This might not be a deliberate act, but such an oversight can be costly and lead to discouragement on the part of the missionary and possibly lead to a high attrition rate. The lack of home support - that is support from the sending missions organization - as one of the reasons for the attrition of missionary.^[8]

The Bible shows that Jesus expressed personal interest in the wellbeing of his apostles. In Mark 6:31, Jesus took his disciples out for rest after they had returned from preaching. Again, the Gospel of John recorded that Jesus even prepared breakfast for them (John 21:10-13)! Kotesky pointed out that the Corinthian Church was very sensitive to Paul and his companions' need for member care that they sent Titus to provide it (II Corinthians 7:6-7)^[9]. These are enough biblical bases for organizations to take a personal interest in the wellbeing of their missionaries. As such, the role of member care here will be to ensure that annual or quarterly retreats are organized, where missionaries will have the time to be refreshed spiritually, physically, and emotionally, excluding a time of long fasting. Member care will also ensure that constant communication with missionaries on the field

[4] Ibid.,58

[5] Ron Kotesky and Mary Seitz, "Stewardship of Care and for Christian Workers: Biblical Basis" in *Missionary Care: Mission and Mental Health Resources* accessed May 10, 2020, <http://www.missionarycare.com/brochure.html>

[6] Ajith Fernando, "Joy and Sacrifice in the Lord" in *Doing Member Care Well*,234.

[7] See examples of inventories provided by Mobile Member Care Team.

[8] William D. Taylor, "Introduction: Examining the Iceberg Called Attrition" in *Too Valuable to Lose*, ed. William D. Taylor, (ebook, World Evangelism Missions Commission), 1997.

[9] Kotesky, 28

is maintained concerning their wellbeing and not just their work.

3. Lack of or Insufficient Financial Support:

A noticeable reason why African labourers are few on the mission field is not the lack of call but insufficient financial support. Raising funds for upkeep and ministry to the unreached can be a major source of stress and distraction for the missionary due to poor response from the Body of Christ. It is an added stress when missionaries spend all their leave period trying to raise funds instead of finding time to rest. The resultant effect is that these missionaries return to their respective fields exhausted. It becomes a distraction when a pastor amongst an unreached people spends most of his time on the farm instead of on the pastoral work, due to his denomination's financial policy to get his salary from the church, even a church amongst unreached peoples! Romans 10:14-15 highlights the importance of being sent by the Body of Christ to the unreached, and this sending includes a supportive financial responsibility. The role of member care here would be to encourage missionaries who work with mission organizations to maintain a continued relationship with their respective local churches, from where they could be financially supported. These local churches would see these missionaries as equally working for the kingdom of God and not against it. Member Care could also advocate for a review of the financial policy of some denominations to encourage productivity on the field.

4. Square Peg in a Round Hole:

This is an idiom expressed to refer to someone in a situation unsuitable to his abilities or character.^[10] When a missionary is serving outside his or her gift area, it can be quite a struggle. Bill Hybells noted that when spiritual gifts are identified and are used under the direction of

Jesus Christ, there is an affirmation from God and the person will feel more energized. Conversely, serving outside your gift area can drain the person out^[11] I know a case of a missionary who suffered a nervous breakdown because of such a situation. Some of these cases arise because of a lack of labourers, in which case postings could be done without consideration of gift areas. The role of Member care here would be to help in the screening of candidates, helping to evaluate how they may serve best so that such problems can be prevented.

5. Interpersonal Relationship Problems among Colleagues:

Philippians 4:23, we see Paul pleading with Eudia and Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord and even requested the Philippian Church to help deal with the relationship rift. Paul noted that the women were hardworking, but at the same time, they had relationship problems.

Interpersonal relationship problems can be a major source of stress on the mission field. Some of the underlying causes could be poor personal self-care leading to transferred aggression, inordinate desire for recognition and fame leading to unhealthy competition, abusive leadership and a general lack of mutual respect - just to mention a few. Some of these conflicts make the atmosphere so toxic thereby hindering proper fellowship and effective ministry. Chronic cases in some mission organizations have resulted in withdrawing the "troublesome" missionaries from the field.

Admittedly, missionaries are expected to know the word of God concerning good interpersonal relationships, but because we have such problems on the field, it goes without saying that applies to real-life can still elude them. They will therefore need external help from others who are gifted in the area of counseling and conflict mediation to handle such issues and this is where member care can

^[10] Definition from Google Dictionary accessed May 26, 2020.

^[11] Bill Hybells, "Reading Your Gauges", Leadership Spring, 1991, in "Crisis Response Training Manual, (Workshop for Leaders and Peer Responders in Cross-cultural Service, 118, 2015)

play an important role.

Other Areas of Coverage

Apart from the above, there are other areas in missions where member care is very much needed

1. MKs (Missionary Kids or Children of Missionaries):

Children whose missionary parents keep moving from place to place, have their own share of crisis. Their constant change of schools and leaving of old friends sometimes affect them psychologically. Some of them even have problems with their parents being missionaries! Member Care could design programmes to help them cope with such struggles and also to make them feel special.

2. Transition:

Missionaries who move to new fields or countries generally feel out of place in their new service area and could go through struggles and even frustration in settling down. They therefore need to be welcomed and made to feel at home. They need to be integrated via an orientation on how things work in the new place.

Another aspect of transition is reentry into one’s country. Missionaries who have spent long service years outside their country would also need a programme of reintegration into their own country.

3. Losses:

Missionaries lose relatives, spouses, converts, colleagues and so go through a period of grief. Member care personnel should then be available to help them go through the grief process so as to facilitate recovery from the loss.

4. Retirement:

Most mission organizations start with zealous young people as their staff. The idea of a pension scheme for them is therefore far removed; until they start aging. The realization of this might come late. The role of Member care here will be to suggest workable pension schemes for their missions organizations and to prepare missionaries to start well ahead of time for retirement, to guard against redundancy and depression.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Who is to provide member care?

The practice in some organizations is that member care is provided by the immediate leader of the missionary, However, this leader is at the same time loaded with other responsibilities such as administration, ministry to the unreached or the Body of Christ as well as family responsibilities. This leaves little or no time for the leader to provide care for those he is leading. Most of the time he assumes they are doing quite well spiritually until a crisis such as a missionary beating up his wife draws his attention! He will at this time face a lot of criticism for his shepherding skills.

To avoid such overload and embarrassing situations therefore, it will be advisable for each mission organization/ church to delegate the ministry of member care as the sole responsibility of the chosen staff. The staff should be composed of member care facilitators and providers.^[12]

Member care facilitators are those who have administrative gifts and apply them in arranging and playing the logistic roles involved in member care mentioned above, which are ensuring that missionaries go for medical checkups, organization retreats, vacations, retirement schemes, maintaining contact with the local churches of missionaries and for “missionary showers”^[13] and any other thing that will bring refreshment to missionaries. Member care providers are mostly those who are sensitive to emotional needs and serve as counselors. They can come alongside missionaries in crisis.

^[12] Harry Hoffman, Member Care Foundation and Pyramid of Care, accessed on Youtube, April 27,2020.

^[13] Some denominations organize pastor showers once a year, during which church members are encouraged to bless their pastor with gifts. Missionary showers can be done as well.

An important qualification is that both categories should be experienced missionaries, being in a better place to understand the special needs of missionaries.^[14]

CONCLUSION

Member Care ministry involves the investment of resources, just as other ministries on the mission field. The labourers are the ones doing the ministry; without them, the harvest cannot be reaped. The importance of caring for them therefore cannot be overemphasized. Every role that member care has to play involves finances. As such, member care should have some priority in our ministry budgets, and that is if we agree that the missionary should be well enough to be effective and sustainable on the field.

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^[14] Kotesky, Member Care, 17