

Missionary Member Care from Cradle to Grave
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Part 2 of 4

In our last MRC newsletter we discussed what Missionary Member Care involves and why it is needed. In this edition we take a look at the stages of a missionary's career. In the next newsletter we will discuss types of member care needed in each stage.

Stage One—The Call, Initial Application and Appointment

Most missionaries in reflecting back on their missionary career can point to a time when they first developed an interest in overseas work or when they had a sense of call to the mission field. For some it was early in life as a child, maybe shortly after conversion or after growing in the Lord and hearing about missionary work. For others it was in college when they were challenged by a speaker in church or at a missionary conference. For others it was while they were in the midst of their careers that they sensed a growing or perhaps even full-fledged sense that God wanted them to “fulfill the Great Commission and go into all the world to make disciples.” This sense of call, however, was then followed by the question of where to go and how to get there.

A time of reflection and prayer, of talking with different missionaries and various mission agencies, then making initial application to a mission board or to a sending church can be an intense time of searching, confusion, asking questions and being asked many questions then filling out mounds and mounds of forms as application is made. Various sending agencies, whether churches or mission boards, have very different personality or ethos, and each has different policies and procedures for making application and joining a mission. For most missions, there are numerous phone calls to be made, many pages of personal information—personal testimony, educational background, family influences, church membership, Bible knowledge, and psychological tests to be completed. This is followed by travel, interviews with staff of the mission, and hopefully ending with appointment by the sending agency. The appointment procedure usually involves giving the new appointment a list of recommendations or requirements which must be fulfilled prior to departure for the field. It will also typically include an invitation to an orientation time with the mission which is the next stage.

Stage Two: Orientation to the Mission and Support Raising

Stage two can be an exciting and also exhausting time of opportunities and challenges for new missionary appointees. After the excitement and affirmation which accompanies being appointed as a missionary, the new appointee has to learn more about the mission, its policies and procedures, potential countries of service and ministry opportunities, and expectations for fund-raising if the missionary is to be financially supported overseas. Orientation typically can be one to three days of learning about the sending agency, either learning very little specific information or being “flooded by a fire hose of information” with little time to process that information. Or the orientation time can be as much as a three-week intensive time of learning about the agency, its core values, its insurance plan, resources available for the missionary, educational provision for children of missionaries, a special children's orientation for children to learn about the mission and the country to which the family is going, and further exposure to the needs, opportunities and challenges of working in certain countries. It is usually during the orientation program that missionaries learn about support-raising and the mission's expectations, provision for and methods of raising support for overseas service.

For some missions, usually denomination-based groups, once someone is appointed all the financial needs and expenses of the missionary are covered. The missionary may then be asked to visit some churches to tell of the work and to ask for prayer and challenge people to serve. For most missionaries, however, specific strategies are laid out as to how to raise money, prayer support and relational support, accompanied with the expectation that the new missionary appointee will visit many churches, tell about the work and ask for prayer and financial support. The new appointee is also encouraged to talk to friends and relatives to describe the work and to lay out the financial needs. Then,

after orientation is completed, the new appointee is released to do support raising, a process that on average takes about two years and involves miles and miles of travel, endless presentations about the work, visiting churches, contacting friends and relatives, making hundreds of phone calls, and eventually reaching a point of having enough funds to make the trip to the country of service.

Stage Three: Entry into the Country and First Term of Service

Now that funds have been raised and the missionary is ready to leave, there are the details of getting a passport and visa, scheduling a departure date and obtaining airline tickets, saying good-bye to friends and family, then traveling to a country about which the new missionary may know very little. Landing in that country, the missionary is hopefully met by experienced missionaries who will help with the transition into the work. Finding appropriate housing, learning about the culture, often trying to learn a new language, being advised on cultural expectations and principles having to do with health, safety, shopping, transportation and a myriad of unexpected details can be quite daunting for the new missionary. The first term can be both an exciting and discouraging time of feeling like a child having to learn all the important facets of living in this new world. Sometimes it is difficult to find the right mentor and guide for this transition, and it is during this first term that missionaries often begin wondering, “Why am I here? Did I make a mistake? Am I cut out for this type of work? Did God really call me?” It is a time of trying to develop new friendships, of adjusting to culture shock, of fighting off new and often exotic diseases. A time of joys, sorrow, pressures and either confirmation and affirmation or loneliness, discouragement and depression can ensue. Often it is a combination of all of these, often leaving the new missionary with a sense of confusion, a riot of mixed feelings and feeling a lot of pressure and also accompanying family members. It is also during this first time that missionaries are astonished and dismayed to see old and perhaps negative habits and patterns emerge which had previously been overcome. The first term is definitely a time of significant challenges, hopefully accompanied by joys, affirmations and comfort which help carry them through trying times.

Stage Four: First Furlough/Home Assignment

Many missionaries report that transitioning back to their sending country is more challenging and difficult than the entry into and first transition to their country of service. Why? Missionaries *expect* the transition to their country of service so it is normal and less stressful than finding out that they have become accustomed to their new country and are returning to a home country that has changed since they left it. They also have new cultural and personal values and often have a deeper and more comprehensive view of the realities of the world, its suffering, its opportunities, its challenges. For many missionaries on their first home assignment the people of their home country often seem shallow and values held by fellow citizens often seem frivolous. These feelings are accompanied by the realities of often having to travel a great deal during home assignment visiting supporting churches, meeting with friends and family, telling stories of the work overseas and often having to raise additional support. The stresses on single missionaries and on missionary families can be severe. Many report that they returned from home assignment, which was supposed to be a time of rest, refreshment and rejuvenation, more tired than when they arrived. It can be a time of encouragement and building up. But it can also be a time of disillusionment, discouragement and disappointment.

Stage Five: Subsequent terms of service

After the initial entry into overseas service and after the first home assignment, missionaries return to service, but these times do not usually require as much adjustment and are not accompanied by the culture shock endured during the first term. However, there are the daily realities of often not having all the luxuries of “home”, of it taking more time to complete tasks of daily living, of dealing with the ongoing challenges of changes that come from getting more experience and growing older. For families, children go through the various stages of development and the accompanying needs for education, developing friendships, navigating the challenges of puberty and adolescence, getting launched into college life—all this while living in a foreign country in which communication with the “home” culture and obtaining necessary resources can be difficult. Complicating these terms of service

can be the many adjustments which have to be made when economies are disrupted or are failing, when there are changes in governments and government policies toward expatriates, and when there are unexpected tragedies or traumas like military coups, deaths of friends or family members at home or loss of fellow workers. In addition, there is the disillusionment of learning that a fellow missionary has suffered from a moral failure and has had to leave the field because of it.

Conflicts with other missionaries also complicate life and drain energy from missionaries in general or at large. In fact, it is these conflicts which often cause the greatest stress on co-workers. These tragedies and stresses, however, often result in triumphs of people coming to Christ, new believers being strengthened in the faith, children successfully being launched, all of which also bring changes, losses and sadness. For singles, there can be all of these joys and hardships, along with the disappointment, sadness and disillusionment of realizing they may never be married, they may never have children of their own and that they often have to take care of themselves alone. Hopefully singles have developed a good support system of national friends, fellow missionaries, and other expatriates in the country of service as well as maintaining friendships at home through regular communication and occasional visits by friends and family. The life of a missionary is certainly filled with all the choices, challenges, successes and failures, adjustments and routines people at home face. Except on the mission field, there are the accompanying realities, joys and challenges of living in another culture far from the passport country.

Stage Six: Return from Overseas Service and Retirement

Returning from missionary service is often the most difficult of all the stages in the careers of missionaries. Whether the return is because of health issues of family and educational concerns, or whether it is because the work has been completed in their country of service or it is simply time to retire, adjustments are multiple and complex. Questions like, “Well what do I do now since all I’ve known is missionary work?” and “How am I going to make it financially?” are often accompanied with other questions like, “How will I fit back into my home culture? I feel so connected with the culture overseas.” And, “Will my health needs be met, and where shall I live; with my family, near my home church, at a retirement village or where?” It is often near the end of missionaries’ lives that they feel most alone and often unwanted or useless. It is also at this time that their means of income dries up as churches and individuals often discontinue supporting them since “After all, they are no longer on the mission field.” Fortunately for some missionaries their sending agencies and/or churches have set aside a retirement income for people of retirement age, and some continue to provide health coverage even after the missionary has retired. Other agencies actually have communities or villages where retired missionaries can live and grow old in the company of missionaries they may have known and worked with overseas. For most missionaries who have returned from the field either prior to retirement because of various concerns or at retirement, their needs—financial, emotional, relational, and physical—do not disappear. How will they be provided for and who will provide the Member Care needed for these returned warriors? Our next installment of Missionary Member Care from Cradle to Grave will address these issues along with the concerns that accompany the other stages of missionary careers.