

Missionary Member Care from Cradle to Grave
--By Dave Wickstrom of Missionary Resources Connection
Part 1 of 4

A number of years ago I was involved in a discussion group regarding the needs of missionaries, and one of my colleagues said something like, “I think missionaries need member care from the cradle to the grave.” What did he mean? And what did the professional counselors, educators and medical professionals in the group mean? Why was Member Care needed, and how was Member Care going to be provided? In this first of a four-part series, we’ll look at what Member Care involves and why it is needed. In the following three parts of this series we will discuss (1) the stages of a missionary’s career; (2) what types of member care are needed in each stage; and (4) who can and should be involved in missionary member care.

Why Member Care is Needed

To address the issue of why Missionary Member Care is necessary, one need look no farther than the Bible. In the very first book, Genesis, we read that God said, “Let US make man in OUR image.” Despite the messages we receive from our culture, that the “self-made man who can take care of himself” is what we should aspire to be, God, from the very beginning, created us to be social beings, people who at our very core need relationship. Member care is, in a very real sense, the fulfillment of the second greatest commandment: to love your neighbor as yourself, and the process of providing member care for missionaries fulfills many of the Scriptural “one another” mandates. That is basically what Member Care is about. It is about providing support, nurture, encouragement, exhortation, guidance, comfort, and financial, emotional, spiritual, and relational backing so that missionaries can thrive as they seek to fulfill the Great Commission of reaching the world and making disciples of all nations.

“But why,” someone may object, “do missionaries need these things? Aren’t they spiritual giants, and don’t they have all the resources they need for life and godliness as II Peter chapter 1 says. Didn’t God say in Philippians 4:19 that He would supply all their needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus? It seems that if missionaries need to have care provided for them they must not be very spiritual, or they must not be relying on God?” These questions often come from common misconceptions about the nature and calling and provision of missionaries.

The first misconception is that missionaries are members of the Super Spiritual Saints club and should be above all the petty and nitty gritty needs that the world seems to have. Many people have the belief that “those missionaries are at the very top of the Spiritual Totem Pole and are always and totally dependent on God to meet their needs. Unfortunately, when people hold to this view, the missionaries who are in a concerted and hard-fought battle against spiritual enemies often end up returning home tired, defeated, worn out, depressed, discouraged and often burned out. People, especially in highly developed countries, often are not aware of the intensity of the battle going on and the accompanying stresses faced by missionaries.

Actually, the metaphor of a battle is a good one because citizens of a country would not even think of sending soldiers into battle without a good support team behind them, without strong supply lines and without the logistical support needed to feed, clothe, and arm those soldiers. In addition, soldiers in the field need medical care, times of rest, times of recreation, times behind the lines and away from the battle front where they can regain their strength, be encouraged, and get resupplied. The same is true of missionaries. Missionaries are just people who are called by God to serve Him on the front lines of a raging spiritual battle. In fact, one of

the toughest Christian soldiers ever to live and who happened to be one of the first missionaries sent out was the Apostle Paul.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 7, Paul gives a clue as to what he faced and many missionaries face today when he wrote, “When we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no REST; we were HARRASSED at every turn; CONFLICTS on the outside; FEARS WITHIN.” Thankfully, he didn’t leave us without the rest of the story, for he goes on and writes, “But God who comforts the DEPRESSED (yes, that is the word—depressed), sent Titus. And He comforted us, not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever” [emphasis mine]. This is MISSIONARY MEMBER CARE at a core level, and it was provided not only by God but by God sending one of his people to comfort a hurting missionary. If this very tough missionary needed Member Care during the first century, then certainly today’s missionaries--who may not be nearly as tough as Paul-- also need Member Care.

In another place, (I Corinthians 16:15) Paul wrote about other missionary Member Care he received. Some of the first converts in Achaia, the household of Stephanas, “devoted themselves to the service of the saints...and they supplied what was lacking...and refreshed my spirit.” For this ministry to him and other Christians, Paul was very thankful and pointed out that “such men deserve recognition” for the care they had given. In both of these passages, Paul recognizes that his needs were taken care of and provided for by God, but God used PEOPLE to do it!! That is what Member Care is about!