

“Teddy bears” to the rescue

A serious answer to the problem of missionary burnout and other psychological problems amongst missionaries.

This was written in mid 2003, in an attempt to answer the growing problem of missionary burn-out. Shortly after finishing it I personally entered a very challenging time in my life and ministry. I thank God for the “teddy bears” in my life, people who would listen and encourage me, continually pointing to Jesus, who held the true answers in His hands.

Any church could begin to put into practice some of the things I this chapter. Nearly every church could appoint a “teddy bear”, to visit and minister to their missionaries outside the loop of the missionary sending organization.

Introduction

I am writing this paper as a result of 25 years of experience as a Christian Psychologist, 3 years teaching missions in a seminary, and more than 25 years of practical missions experience, both in home missions and for the past 14 years in overseas missions.

Since arriving on the mission field I have been astonished at missionary wastage in terms of burnout, culture shock and other psychological problems.

I have been asked to help in many situations, including cases of severe mental breakdowns, marriage and family breakdowns, physical, spiritual, sexual and other abuse, guilt produced by inability to “perform” to targets, inability to cope with culture differences(one of the people who suffered in this area had just finished an M.A. in missions, specializing in enculturalization!), People who misunderstand the role of a missionary and as a result do nothing and others.

When I asked a meeting of missionaries a few years ago how many felt a need of more support in any of these areas a surprising 65%, said that they did. When asked why they did not seek that help from their sending agency more than 75% said that their agency would not understand and might send them home.

As a result of all this I began to seek a model that would help these folk fulfil their missions whilst at the same time not compromising the overall work of the church in the field.

A true story

A few years ago my wife and I had the opportunity to help in a difficult situation. A young Korean missionary arrived in the town where we were working, in Northern Spain. She spoke hardly any Spanish at all, (less than a British tourist in Benidorm, or an American tourist in Tijuana). But as she spoke some English, the local church leaders asked Elaine and I to “keep an eye on her” and help her however we could. She was given two tasks by her church, first to start a branch church for Koreans living in the area. She was to do this by inviting them to meetings where she would play videos of their pastor in

Korea. Everything including praise, worship and prayers was on the videos, the people who came to the meetings were no more than spectators, who were then expected to tithe and more to the work. The missionary was expected to be a sub-pastor to this group, but was never allowed to teach or share, all of that came on video from Korea. Her second task was to start a Spanish Church, within six months. It is hard to imagine how hard this task is even for missionaries with perfect Spanish, coming from similar cultures. But for someone with no Spanish coming from a radically different culture it is almost impossible. I know that the Lord can do whatever he wants, but in this case it was clearly just a church working by it's “method”. Fortunately she was also taken under the wing of a young Korean couple who attended our church. They helped her buy her necessities and deal with the administration. But from the very beginning we saw problems. The Koreans who attended her meetings were divided amongst themselves, which put a great pressure on her, especially as some wrote to Korea criticizing her work. Instead of supporting their missionary, the church put her under more pressure. She increasingly became depressed and withdrawn, spending days at a time closed in her flat. She said that she was praying and fasting, but, in reality she was showing classic symptoms of depression. The times that she spent with us, (we insisted on two mornings per week) subtly changed from times of prayer and mutual encouragement into sessions to deal with her increasing depression. At her request, I wrote to Korea, explaining the difficulty of her task here, in the light of Spanish social and cultural differences. Their response was interesting, seeming to have more to do with a multinational business than a Church. They sent her more money, and a bigger and better computer and video system. Obviously this did nothing to help her emotional and spiritual needs, which by this time were being almost entirely met through the young Korean couple, Elaine and I. At the end of about four months the pressure from the Korean Mega Church increased. They were concerned that she had still not yet started the “native” church. She tried to explain that there were already three Spanish churches in the town, and that these churches met the needs of the town, but the home-church said that as we were not part of their organization she was keeping blessing from the people there. She told us that she was going to enter into an extended time of prayer and fasting. We said OK, but we still wanted to see her twice a week, and the Korean couple would call in to see her every night with juices and tea, to keep an eye on her health (the husband was a doctor). After two weeks she missed an appointment with us, but sent a note saying that she was going to visit a friend in another town. For ten days neither we nor the other couple had any contact with her.

Then the couple came to see us, saying that a neighbor had heard sounds coming from her flat. With the agreement of the owner, we broke into the flat, and found a lamentable scene. She had been closed up there for the whole time, "fasting and praying", she was in a state of almost total mental and physical collapse, and there was evidence that she had even attempted suicide. We considered sending her to the local mental hospital, but decided against as she would not be able to communicate there. The wife of the Korean family moved in with her, the doctor and I visited twice a day, until she began to recover. With our help she wrote to Korea explaining what had happened. Their response was to send a ticket ordering her to return to Korea straight away. And an order for a transport company to send all of her things to Korea straight away. At her request I wrote a complete report on the physical, mental and spiritual condition for the doctors that she was sure would be waiting for her on her return. We took her to the airport, and that was the last we saw of her. The local ministers fraternal decided to write to her home-church, raising some important questions about their missionary method, and their lack of care and understanding for this young woman. Needless to say they never replied, after all, they were one of the biggest churches in the world, who were 8 church leaders from another country to question them. This sad story has an even sadder post-script, about two months later we received a letter from the missionary, saying that on her return, she was taken to the churches mission headquarters, where they had

spent a long time telling her off, saying that she had bought shame and a bad image on her church. They then dismissed her from her job, and threw her out of the church. No medical or psychological help was offered. She was out. Fortunately, she had a friend who invited her to live in her house until she was able to recover and seek work and fellowship elsewhere.

Other Examples

You may feel that that story was exceptional and would never happen in a western setting the following two stories should help you to see that that is just not so.

A missionary couple came to see me about problems that they were having with one of their children, who was later diagnosed to have a serious mental condition. They had been on the field over 13 years, and their child had never been tested until I came along when the child was in his mid to late teens. The condition was congenital and would have been spotted by and paediatrician, psychiatrist or psychologist. The whole family fought to deal with this "problem". It led to younger children being severely abused by the disturbed child, the mother being terrorized by the child and the father as he sought to hide, their "monster", from society. When people from his MSO finally found out about the situation their only answer was to send missionaries home, at which the missionary threatened to sever all links with the MSO. They wisely decided to keep them on and try to help as best they could. The disturbed child is now in prison, the family is in deep trauma and in reality need extended family therapy which they are not getting, the ministry of this couple is now practically nil.

Another missionary couple confessed to their MSO, that they were having marriage problems. The response of the MSO was to try to withdraw them from field service. The couple changed MSO, whilst on the field. During a furlough, the new MSO asked the couple to go on a psychological preparation weekend. Whilst there the psychologists conducting the weekend noticed some severe problems in the marriage. The MSO arranged a period of marriage counselling before they returned to the field. They greatly benefited from the counselling that they received and were soon back at work in the field. However the character traits that caused the original marriage problems had not really been addressed and these soon generated other problems, marked out by the missionaries' inability to work as equals with anyone, be they fellow missionaries or locals. The psychologists had felt that this missionary had particular gifts in teaching others for missions, this was confirmed prophetically at this time by someone from outside, however the missionaries could not accept this and continued to plug away. Later they moved to another part of the country where they began to "plant a church", after six months work they opened a church and mission centre (fully funded from their home country), the church consisted of their family plus one other new Christian. The buildings now stand empty, their rent is still being paid from abroad but the family have been on furlough now for over 18 months. This missionary family are not welcome on the field by fellow-workers (missionary and native), they cannot raise sufficient support, they have their children in potentially abusive situations where they are being used to raise funds for the mission and once again their marriage is suffering. On top of this their actions mean that 000's of dollars of mission funds is being squandered on buildings that nobody can use.

So what is the answer to these alarming situations?

Most MSO's have a system of supervision and accountability, which in theory means that situations like this should not occur, with regular reports expected and supervisory field inspections. However, in my experience reports often contain exaggerations and even outright lies. One missionary I know counts how many people respond to "alter-calls" for ministry at the end of each service, and then submits that as the number of conversions when he makes his report. Most of the people in his church have been saved 20 or more

times! Another missionary who visited our church to minister once, submitted a photo of the church with him and I outside, under the caption, "The church that **** planted in ****, **** with the new native pastor" Unfortunately, I look anything but "native", and one of my friends saw a copy of the photo and sent me a copy. When I challenged the missionary, he spoke of the pressure that he was under to "Perform". It is clear that the majority of missionaries see supervision and accountability reports and visits as being a threat to their ministries, rather than a support.

In the world of counselling, we often recommend non-managerial supervision. That is caring non-critical accountability and supervisory support, apart from the managerial structure of the organization, thus

taking away the need to “perform”, or tell lies. I know that some MSO’s have tried to institute this type of accountability structure within their organizations, but in my experience there are still problems of confidentiality and the consequent cover-ups of errors and bad practice.

I feel that what is needed is for each missionary to be accountable to a “teddy bear” (Please see the attached appendix “Teddy Bear Therapy for an explication of this term), from outside their organization.

So how would this work?

I would envisage a two tier team with a psychologist supervisor supporting one or more “teddy bear” field supervisors.

These field supervisors would seek to visit the missionary and his family for a couple of days once or twice a year.

The field supervisor would offer a confidential listening ear to the missionary, reflecting their real situation, so that should a missionary be passing difficulties they would have an unbiased helper to help them through.

Should the field supervisor see a situation that needs more help, they would have the option, together with the missionary to ask for further help from the psychologist.

Also if the field supervisor sees a situation of real danger (abuse, and/or a situation of mental breakdown, burnout etc), they have the option to ask the psychologist to intervene, but only having tried to get the missionary to voluntarily call in the psychologist

After each field trip, the field supervisor would have a supervision session with the psychologist, in order to assure their objectivity.

The field supervisor would keep a complete record of each visit, which can be passed on to the psychologist or a replacement, if necessary.

Should the psychologist be called into help a missionary, any such consultation would be totally confidential, unless there was any real risk to the missionary, their family or co-workers or a third party. Such risks would include risks to physical, emotional or mental health, risks of physical, psychological or sexual abuse or any other grave risk.

Other than the above mentioned exceptions, any help that that the psychologist would be given freely and confidentially, in order to re-establish them in their ministry.

Should a grave situation mean that the psychologist has to inform a third party, he would make a confidential report to a named officer of the MSO.

I would envisage an average field supervisor being able to visit 50 – 60 missionaries, with a psychologist being able to supervise between 2 and 8 field supervisors.

I would envisage a cost of \$30,000 per field supervisor, including: salary, employment expenses, travelling expenses and the costs of the psychologist. This would mean a cost of about, \$5 – 600/ missionary family per year. This may seem a lot, but I would envisage that it would reduce missionary fall-out to almost nil. (These costs are based on a field worker based in Northern Spain, and operating in Western Europe)

Conclusion

I am convinced that this is a real and present need. I would like to head up a new team to act as a practical model for others to follow. I am willing to correspond and attend meetings with the aim of extending this vision and remain fully at your disposal, in this matter.