



Field Care For Asian Missionaries In South Asia

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Being a missionary on the field is an enormous challenge that cannot be taken lightly. My interest in working in the member care area began out of a desire to see the missionaries in my organization fulfilled in their ministry. I had seen missionaries begin to lose their enthusiasm for their ministry after a number of years on the mission field. This is not to say that they had lost their call or their love for the unreached. Rather, there seemed to be some underlying struggles and stresses that made them want to give up. My desire was to help them run the race so that they might finish well (1 Cor. 9:24).

Asians tend to view member care very differently from their Western counterparts. Asian churches and mission organizations are often afraid that “too much” care from them will “spoil” their missionaries. Some are even of the philosophy that missionaries should be willing to suffer all for Jesus and for the sake of carrying the gospel. “There are others that believe too much care can become a distraction and ultimately make workers less resilient and effective” (O’Donnell and O’Donnell, 1992, p. 13). Because of this mindset, Asian churches and mission organizations are very cautious when giving care to their missionaries. Missionaries who genuinely need care are afraid to ask, because they could be branded as “not self-sacrificial in their ministry” or, even worse, “not fit to be on the mission field.” Often they live with unmet needs and suffer disappointments with their mission organizations or sending churches.

It is a challenge to know exactly what should be considered as adequate member care for such a diverse group. The needs of Asian missionaries are very different from those of Western missionaries or those from the Middle East or Latin America. How or where does one even begin?

In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of Asian missionaries working at home and abroad. How do we care for the new and growing wave of Asians who are counting the cost to take the gospel to the unreached?

This article reviews five areas of need, focusing on the situation in South Asia: finances, singles, families, children’s education, and vacation/home leave. Several suggestions are offered for meeting the challenges of care in this immense and diverse region.

What I write in this article is the result of some of the successes and failures from providing care for our missionaries who are on the frontlines working as church planters among the unreached peoples of South Asia. Many of the issues faced by our national missionaries are also common for Asians working in other Asian countries. Working in South Asia, as a Malaysian, has challenged me to look at different ways to provide better care for Asian missionaries in general.

Issues Faced by National Asian Missionaries

Stress of Financial Needs

“My wife has been sick for two years, and we do not have enough money for her to seek better treatment. We barely have enough monthly financial support to meet our family needs,” says one missionary. Some workers do not have enough money to travel to their ministry locations if they are working in several villages. “In many of the prayer meetings, the missionaries pray for their financial needs to be met. If they waited for all their needs to be met, India and the world would never be reached with the gospel” (Rajendran, 1998, p. 108). These workers took a step of faith and trusted that God would indeed meet all their needs. “We need to realize that the lack of money is just as definitely from God as the provision of money” (Cunningham, 1991, p. 51). So the basic perspective, for better or worse, is that the lack of finances should never deter or stop us from serving God.

When we visit our church planters in their ministry locations, we are constantly confronted by the reality of their financial needs. These are genuine needs. Some of them do not have enough finances to send their children to school or have regular monthly support to meet their family necessities. How I wish I had answers to their dilemmas! The ideal would be for the sending churches to offer financial support, yet some churches in South Asia are

not in a position to support themselves, let alone a missionary from their church. Some of these churches are also hesitant to support missionaries who are working with parachurch organizations.

A common expectation is that the sponsoring church or mission will financially provide for the missionary, but there is often a problem with asking for such support. Asian missionaries often have a mentality that to ask for money for their monthly support is equal to begging. They believe that if God has called them, then He will provide. One missionary told me that she had no problem raising money for others but not for herself. It is much easier to speak for the needs of someone else than to tell the church of one’s own needs. In the Asian culture, it can be shameful to ask money for oneself, but it is an honor to help someone else raise support.

In our organization, we are working closely with our church planting teams to help them with income-generating projects to earn income for themselves. Some of these small businesses are making Indian pickles, greeting cards, etc. These micro-enterprises allow our workers to be more independent of outside support, as well as being a testimony to the community. We are in no way saying that we do not trust God to provide for all of our needs or that the sending churches/agencies do not need to take more responsibility for missionaries’ support. But we need to be creative with whatever means we have, in order that we might continue to stay on the field. The Apostle Paul himself was a tentmaker, working to support himself in the ministry (Acts 18:1-3).

We also help workers raise support from other interested organizations and their local sending churches. A key to this effort is writing and visiting their pastors in order to build relationships. We also help missionaries write prayer letters to people who are looking to support missionaries but do not know whom to support.

Recently we were able to network with a South Asian organization called Missionary Upholders Family (MUF). This organization links missionaries with individuals and families who are interested in supporting missionaries. The interested group will then adopt a missionary and pray for that person and his/her work. The MUF group also supports the missionary financially each month. This involvement is a positive sign that South Asian churches and Christians are taking part in reaching the lost with the gospel through their giving and prayers. The India Missions Association has also published a timely book called *Management of Indian Missions* (Sunder Raj et al., 1998). A chapter is dedicated to helping missionaries save money by showing the different savings plans that are available in India.

Single Men and Women on the Mission Field

To be single in the South Asian context can sometimes bring shame both on the individual and on his/her immediate family. For example, sometimes single men and women are not respected in the communities where they are working. Workers are only considered “adults” if they are married and have the responsibility of taking care of a family of their own, thus demonstrating that they are able to handle life. For parents, the marriage of their children means that they have done their duty as parents. For a woman, marriage means that her future is secure, with someone to care for her. For a man, it means that his position is secure, with recognized authority.

Arranged marriages are common in the Asian culture. One young woman in our mission was asked by her family members to leave the ministry, because they had arranged a life partner for her. She felt obligated to submit, even though the proposed husband was not a believer. This cultural norm may seem strange and even repulsive to cultures that believe in individual freedom to choose a life partner. In many South Asian cultures, though,

matchmaking is an area that mission organizations need to take into account, and possibly, although arguably, it is a role they should provide for their missionaries.

Mission organizations in many ways act as parents to the single missionaries in their organization. This can include looking for a life partner for them. It is a big step for single missionaries to leave their homes and serve on the mission field. For many, it involves a form of “giving up their family” and belonging to another one. In this case, they become a part of the “family” in the organization where they are working. I believe that as mission agencies look after the future life partner of their single missionaries, these workers will not be forced by their families to return home to get married. One idea is that mission agencies could partner with other mission agencies and act as “marriage bureaus” for their missionaries. This is a need especially for the frontline missionaries, who face the shame of being single in the community where they are working and who also receive pressure from their non-Christian families to be married.

Aside from the usual struggles of feeling alone and not fulfilled, single missionaries who are working in South Asia need to be careful in relating to members of the opposite sex. Men and women in this culture do not mix freely in public, and to do so raises great suspicion. “Living in a marriage-oriented society poses peculiar problems for singles” (Foyle, 1987, p. 29). Can a person be in ministry and still be single in a society that looks at marriage as the norm for everyone? One solution is that in our mission we work in teams, with both singles and married couples working alongside each other. The married couples provide a “covering” for the singles, which is accepted in the South Asian context. In this way, one can reasonably mix without the fear of being questioned or frowned upon.

Family Commitment

“My parents are old and they need my help, as there is no one at home who can

take care of them. I am afraid that I have to leave the mission field, although this is not my choice.” “I am the oldest son in my family. It is my duty to care for my parents. I have to earn enough money to take care of them and my younger brothers and sisters.” These issues are very common in Asian cultures, where children are expected to care for their family. It is considered a dishonor to the parents if their children do not care for them in their old age. Honoring parents includes providing for their material needs. I have seen many missionaries leave the mission field because their parents needed their help. Are we to abandon our parents for what we or others may perceive as the “higher” calling that God has for us? This is a tough decision that most Asian missionaries have to face and answer.

I believe that we can find some alternative solutions. For example, is there a place on the mission field for parents? In one case, a missionary’s mother moved to the field location to live with her son and his family. There, she was able to help care for the grandchildren, thus freeing both parents to continue their work.

In another case, one of our national missionaries had to raise extra monthly support to provide for his parents. His parents released him to the mission field, but they were not financially independent. His Western coworkers did not understand why he gave money to his parents when he did not have enough for himself. Another missionary gives monthly support to her parents primarily out of respect and honor to them. I believe that helping to provide for the parents of missionaries will not only bless the parents, but will show the community that we practice what we preach. If we want to see more Asian missionaries released into the mission field, mission agencies need to make room for changes in policies, such as having parents of missionaries joining their offspring in the field. The question is, are we ready for such radical changes? Is this also part of our call to mission?

Children’s Education

Many missionaries wrestle with schooling options for their children. For Asian missionaries, the concern is often that they do not have the money to send their children to school. “Some missions have no money earmarked for children’s education, and thus children and parents suffer. The struggle has at times made the missionaries leave mission work” (Rajendran, 1998, p. 114). There is no easy solution. A large percentage of missionary children are not able to pursue higher studies due to either poor social skills, lack of finances, or lack of access to schools or colleges near where the missionaries are working. “We cannot neglect the education of the children of the missionaries, as they are an integral part of their parents’ ministry. One of the reasons why missionaries leave the field is because of the education of their children” (Jones, 1995, p. 101).

There are a number of boarding schools that are available for the children of national missionaries in Asia. The issue here is not just the type of boarding schools that are available but the costs involved. In an international volunteer organization like ours, there is room for partnership in helping Asian missionaries to raise support for the education of their children. We have churches that adopt and support missionaries. I believe it is time for us to explore the idea of “adopting” the education of missionaries’ children. This will ease the burden of the missionaries, and they will be able to concentrate on their ministry. Inter-mission agencies need to work together in this area to find a better solution to help provide better education for the children of our national missionaries. As member care providers, we can assist our missionaries and our organizations in finding available resources.

Vacation and Home Leave

Vacation and home leave for many means going to a beach resort or another

nice place for rest and refreshment. Such breaks are necessary, and they help missionaries return to the field ready to continue. One Indian missionary told me that it is so nice that the foreign missionaries are able to take a vacation or go on home leave, but she has nowhere to go nor the funds to do so. For her to take a holiday means going to stay with her non-Christian family, which is not a conducive place to rest. For some missionaries who are from non-Christian backgrounds, going home for a holiday might mean having to endure idol worship in the home and the rituals associated with it. One of our missionaries is mocked by her family members each time she goes home, because she chose to be a missionary. For others, going home really is a holiday. One man gets to be spoiled by his mother's cooking and watch television when he goes home. After a week of these luxuries, he is refreshed and ready to get back to work.

The ministry of hospitality can provide vacation alternatives for missionaries. As member care providers, we can periodically open our homes to frontline workers who need a break. These individuals may not have the finances to take a holiday, but for them to leave their location for a week and be "spoiled" by member care providers can be most refreshing. Another example was when a group of my friends raised some money and sent me on a holiday. Their generosity blessed me and gave me the desire to do the same for other missionaries who are isolated and need a break. Finally, mission agencies could seriously consider opening mission guest houses that are affordable and easily available, designed especially for Asian missionaries.

Other Suggestions for Practical Member Care

As the number of missionaries grows, so also does the need for more member care providers. This is especially true for the teams that are working in remote or sensitive areas. These places are not easy

to get to on a regular basis. In some sensitive locations, though, to have an "outsider" visiting the team may attract more attention and raise suspicion. In such areas, the member care providers are not allowed to visit the team. What do we do in situations like these? Here are some strategies:

Further Training

Missionaries are often so busy with their work that they do not take the time to receive personal input. Some of them do not have the funds to do so, or the sending churches do not see the need. A friend told me that he had been on the mission field for 10 years without a study break or an opportunity to receive teaching input into his life. What missed opportunities! Our need for ongoing learning, be it formal or non-formal, stays with us as long as we live.

Member care providers can play a part in helping missionaries to find a training location or options for training. This does not necessarily mean that they must leave their field location for an extended period of time. There are a number of institutes that provide distance learning for those who are motivated. In our organization, we have numerous training programs that are three months long. These programs enable missionaries to have a short break from the field and at the same time receive input into their lives. We also make available ongoing training that lasts for a week, designated for our frontline church planters. The ongoing training is held twice a year, thus enabling the missionaries to put into practice what they have learned. At the same time, they are refreshed spiritually and physically by the break in routine.

I believe that we can learn from corporations who seek to increase the productivity of their company by sending their workers for further training on a regular basis. The company's purpose is to motivate and upgrade their workers. It is a good investment, in hope that the workers will bring more quality and productiv-

ity to the company. We have a number of good examples from the business world concerning the management and care of personnel. Company staff are given good incentives, often with big bonuses and attractive vacation packages. Yet in Christian organizations, sometimes we are not even willing to send our workers for more training to be further equipped. This must change!

Ongoing Member Care

Field visits

One missionary said that no one had visited him in the four years he had been on the field. On occasion, he and his team did receive letters from their field office, but that was all. When I first heard about this state of affairs, I was saddened, and I was reminded that most sending mission agencies and sending churches do not visit their missionaries on a regular basis. This is not to say that they are at fault or do not care for their missionaries. The distance, travel time to remote areas, and finances make such visits difficult.

Nevertheless, contact between member care providers and missionaries is crucial for the effectiveness of frontline missionaries. On his missionary journeys, the Apostle Paul never failed to encourage the believers wherever he went. His is a good example to follow. As member care providers in our organization, we set up a regular schedule to visit each church planting team on location at least once a year. We also bring our missionaries to a central location for further training, refreshment, and refueling two or three times a year. In this way, the missionaries are not left alone too long without outside contact and input.

Tapes

Phil Parshall's (1988, p. 75) article, "How Spiritual Are Missionaries?" gives a sobering insight into the spiritual state of some missionaries. Devotional time and prayer life, Parshall found, are often short and inconsistent. I believe that member

care providers can help meet some of the spiritual needs of missionaries by sending good Bible teaching tapes. In addition to visiting our teams, we also send them teaching tapes or articles each month. These servants give out so much, and they need renewing and refueling. One of our team leaders thanked me a few years ago for sending teaching tapes and teaching notes to his team. He said that as a team they wait eagerly each month for these materials. They listen to the tapes as a team and then discuss them at length. The team leader files all the teaching notes he receives and occasionally uses them as a tool to teach new believers.

Cards

It is so important to remember the birthdays and wedding anniversaries of missionaries. "My wife was ready to quit and go home because she felt so alone and was very discouraged. She began to wonder if anybody really cared. That same day when she was ready to quit, she received a birthday card from a member care team. Just a simple card encouraged her so much, and she began to have a change in attitude towards people and her work." Don't underestimate the blessing that a card or a letter can have. It communicates loud and clear that others—friends—really care. And anyone can send a card or write a letter!

Prayer

Workers on the frontlines need to be surrounded with prayer. Member care providers can be a channel to raise prayer support, especially for church planting teams who are isolated without many outside contacts. We can link the teams with churches, interest groups, and resources to support them in prayer. A few churches and interest groups have contacted us and have expressed a keen interest in praying for South Asia. As member care providers, we have written to these groups and have suggested a few teams for them to choose from. We have had the joy of linking a number of our church planting teams with

interest groups who will stand alongside our workers in prayer as well as in some financial support.

Members Caring for Each Other

Missionaries are great sources of mutual care, especially in isolated areas. Barry Austin (1992, p. 60) in his article, "Supporting Missions Through Pastoral Care," wrote that in difficult settings we need to find creative ways to support our people. He said that ultimately the primary resource for care rests with those who are actually working together. We need each other for support and growth. In Hebrews 10:24, we are encouraged to spur each other to love and good works. We encourage our teams to find a prayer partner with someone from their team or outside. We also encourage them to find someone to whom they can be accountable personally and spiritually, in addition to their team leader. Regular fun time, outings, and sharing of meals are some of the team-building activities that we encourage our teams to maintain.

Area Member Care Providers

Missionaries in our organization are located all over South Asia. The vast area makes it a real challenge for member care providers to assure adequate care. To deal with this geographic reality, we have set up a program for training area member care personnel in different regions. They are thus physically located closer to the church planters. These member care providers are appointed by their leaders, and they receive ongoing training at least once a year from the main member care department in Pune, India. Our goal is for each church planting team to have a member care provider that is close to their ministry location, and especially to train Asian member care providers.

Although we have the burden and the heart to care for our missionaries, we still lack the "professional" training. This includes the areas of counseling, mental health professionals, crisis care, and oth-

ers, as discussed in an article by Richard and Laura Mae Gardner (1992, p. 315), "Training and Using Member Care Workers." I would especially like to see member care providers be better equipped in crisis care and mental health counseling. The current political atmosphere in the Asian region raises the need for us to be prepared for the crises that could arise.

National and International Member Care Partnerships

Member care is not the work of one organization or church but the ministry of the body of Christ providing care for all of our missionaries. We in South Asia are still at the beginning stages of working together with agencies, both nationally and internationally. There is a great need for more networking between agencies, churches, and other mission organizations.

During the past few years, our organization has been able to partner with a few national mission agencies. We have been able to share resources and counselors, as well as provide counseling and crisis care training for our member care workers. Member care forums have been organized to provide a place for member care personnel to meet each other, discuss issues, and share resources and ideas. The India Missions Association has set up a member care consultation group to meet the growing needs of Indian missionaries. Our organization is part of this group. We have the joy of inviting one of the members of the consultation group to teach at our training program. Our member care workers have also attended some of the member care training programs that are offered by other mission organizations. We are young, but we are on the right track.

Conclusion

In closing, I would like to encourage Asian and especially South Asian member care providers to embrace the call to nurture the missionaries that are being raised up by God. But we must do this together.

The challenges and needs are before us. At times they may seem overwhelming, but we have a great God who enables those who trust in Him.

Reflection and Discussion

1. In what ways does your mission organization practically support single missionaries? How important is finding a life partner for your missionaries?
2. What types of provisions are made for the parents of missionaries in your organization? What would it take for a missionary from your culture to return to be with his/her parents?
3. How does your organization help with the financial needs of missionaries, especially those from Newer Sending Countries? Are income-generating projects viable options?
4. What are some of the needs that member care providers have? How does your organization care for the caregivers?
5. In what ways could networking with other groups further support your missionaries? How could other groups benefit from partnering with you?

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