



Member Care In North Africa: Finding Life in the Desert

ANKE
TISSINGH

If someone asked me what my most favorite sound is, my thoughts would immediately go to something I often hear on my member care travels in North Africa. It is the sound of the wheels on my little suitcase clicking over the tiles at the railway stations. That suitcase would hold a few changes of clothes but mostly mail and “goodies” to be taken to our workers. My member care trips give me tremendous joy as I become part of the lives of those serving in and around the deserts of North Africa. These dear people, like their national brethren, have such wonderful determination and a sacrificial commitment, with hope in their hearts that one day the church in this spiritual desert will again blossom.

Some Background

Although North Africa is certainly not all covered in desert, it is known for the vast Sahara Desert. This desert dominates most of the area and is greater in size than the United States. Within and surrounding the desert are cities, towns, camps, and villages where over 100 million people live. About 98% of the people of North Africa are Muslims who have had little or no witness of the gospel in a way that they can understand. The people in this area are hospitable and often open to talk about spiritual matters. Just as the desert literally flourishes when there is water and when seed is in the ground, so too we believe that North Africa will spiritually flourish in God’s timing. God’s promise is sure: The desert *will* bloom (Isa. 35:1).

Mission efforts have occurred in this area for 100 years. We stand on the shoulders of those who have given *all* to see North Africa reached. Some of them have never seen any fruit for their efforts. Currently, though, there is an

Timely field visits,
healthy teams,
proper orientation,
and good relationships
are like cool water
to a thirsty soul.
This is
especially true
for expatriate and
national Christians
living in
spiritually desolate
and often
isolated regions
like North Africa.

emerging joy, growth, and maturation in the North African church. In some nations, the church is just beginning to see its own potential and strengths. In other countries, the need for training is receiving much attention, and the North African believers choose the topics and write the curriculum. It is interesting to note that inner healing and right relationships are on that list, as well as understanding the importance of prayer for deliverance. Many have been involved in the occult before embracing Christianity, either through folk Islam or via widely practiced forms of superstition.

My husband Garry and I began taking short-term teams into North Africa in the early 1980s. Our main role was that of facilitation. We began helping others in their vision, setting long-term goals, getting established on the field, and remaining there effectively. This has evolved to include our supportive roles of pastoral care as well. We have often been deeply moved by the gratefulness that is expressed because of a visit from us or from something as seemingly small as a written message of encouragement. The Lord uses such visits and notes as timely reminders that the workers are indeed remembered, both by their colleagues and leaders and especially by their Comforter and Shepherd.

During a recent field visit, I took a 10-hour train ride to the southern part of the country. The next day, I was off on a five-hour bus ride over the mountains to reach a small team of women, all working in health care in the town. I felt so happy to have made it to them and, above all, just to be in their midst! As we shared a lovely meal together, I asked how we could best use our time together—how to make it worthwhile. With that comment, we all looked at each other, and I saw the answer all over their faces. Just the fact that I had come from so far on their behalf was the greatest thing I could have done. My presence was more valuable than any words that I could communicate.

Stressors and Strategies

Our workers encounter a plethora of stressors that affect their physical, spiritual, emotional, and relational health and also the quality of their work. Coping strategies are not always that simple to find.

Physical Health

Remaining healthy in our part of the world may prove to be a real challenge. Workers, like locals, are faced with the lack of fresh fruit and vegetables, the high price of meat, the unreliable provision of clean water or water at all, plus the presence of diseases such as malaria, cholera, typhoid, and meningitis. There is also insufficient or even no medical care in a number of locations where our workers have made their homes.

We try to teach our workers the basics of health care in this environment and creative ways to fix nutritious meals. We encourage them to consult by phone with a qualified nurse located at our home office in a nearby country. Werner's (1992) *Where There Is No Doctor* has been an invaluable tool. We also encourage them to have regular medical check-ups.

Language Stress

Language learning is a major stressor. In North Africa, workers need to learn at least two languages and sometimes three: French, Arabic, and a tribal language. Additional stress occurs when the children (because of their schooling) do not learn the language in which the parents are ministering. For example, the children may go to a French-speaking school, and the parents will lead a home-group with nationals in Arabic.

Work Stress

The fact that one needs to find “a reason for being there”—some acceptable job which would eventually give residency status for the person and his/her family—has proven to be one of the most challenging issues. One of the workers explained: “It’s almost like leading a double life. You live

with the “secret” of being there to share the good news. But then there is your public life and your job, which should give you the reason to stay in the country. How do you balance the two with integrity?”

The red tape in dealing with bureaucracy can become very wearisome and overwhelming, particularly if a worker is trying to start a legitimate business. Along with work concerns may come a long season of trying to sort out ministry options. “How can I/we best contribute to the building of the church in North Africa?” can be quite a perplexing question.

Workers often feel pressured to “look legitimate.” For example, they may feel compelled to leave the house in the morning and spend a full day at “work,” concerned that neighbors are checking up on them. They may spend so much time and energy at work that little time remains for what they really yearn to do—sensitively share their faith, disciple, church plant. There are no set guidelines as to how to work or connect with the culture. Workers need to consult with colleagues with more experience and come to terms with what God tells them to do, even when team members or other colleagues might question their priorities.

Spiritual Health

It is essential for workers to have learned to have a healthy relationship with God, before settling in a harsh, spiritually dry environment. It is axiomatic yet so true: our self-worth and identity need to be deeply rooted in our assurance that God loves us at all times. I have found that those who do have and prioritize their *loving* relationship with their Heavenly Father, which includes a disciplined devotional lifestyle, seem to have the greatest longevity. This is especially true for families that worship and sing together.

Relational Health

Loneliness may affect us all, even in the midst of a good team with healthy relationships. It can occur when our lives are too busy and when we allow our work/

ministry to become too demanding. We miss or even avoid the nurture of friends that is so necessary to maintain our emotional balance and sense of well-being. There are cultural expectations and restrictions which can limit one’s opportunities for recreation, such as going out for a nice dinner, taking a walk in the park or along the beach, or going to see a movie. Married women with children are the most isolated and most prone to experience loneliness. They come with strong convictions to do ministry, and although they accept their limitations because of children, language, and culture, they want to have deep soul friendships for sharing and intercession. Very few are in a location that allows such friendships to develop.

Although we would so like to see strong, mutually accountable relationships within teams, the reality is that very few examples exist. It can be very hard to share your weaknesses and be vulnerable with your team members when you know that each one of them already has so much to carry. I encourage each individual to have one “accountability relationship,” i.e., someone who can ask the hard questions at any time, such as: How is your thought life? Are you relaxing? Are you keeping to your set goals? Are you eating well, sleeping well? How is your social activity? Are you lonely? How is your walk with God? How is your marriage? Some field workers have this type of relationship with me, others share with a close friend locally, and still others share with confidants via email. Email may be the only real option in many cases.

These issues concerning friendships, loneliness, and accountability are not unique to this part of the world. Nor are they unique to missions. I’ve found, though, that it is a long and sometimes heart-breaking process to build long-lasting friendships that are free from expectations or hurts. Further, in trying to build friendships with North Africans, one often wonders, What do they really want from me? Perhaps vice versa too! Do they like me as a friend, or are they hoping I

will help them procure some form of legal residency in the West, or find them a suitable companion, or even help them financially?

Couples and Children

Since much time needs to be spent on language learning, building relationships with nationals, and building the team, married couples should not forget to keep their relationship as a priority. Communication skills in one's marriage should be learned before couples come into this part of the world. It is essential to have walked through right ways to resolve conflicts. Under stress, we all tend to blame our spouses or our fellow workers. Couples spending time with trusted couples has been a good way to provide mutual support and strengthen marriages.

There is no perfect option for a child's education. Parents must read, talk to other parents, and sometimes consult with education specialists. In general, it is important to communicate to one's children that they are in no way deprived. They may not have all the gadgets or opportunities their friends overseas have, but at the very least, they certainly have a much wider knowledge of the cultures of the world. Parents need to be careful to communicate by their actions that they trust God and that He gives the best, even though it may not be what they choose. Parents can trust Him also to build their children's characters in ways they are not ordinarily able to because of the new and challenging setting.

Singles

Singles on the field have a special place in missions. Single women, for example, usually have more time to build relationships and minister than their married counterparts. Their service as nurses, social workers, and healthcare teachers has sown thousands of seeds of the love of God in people's hearts. One particular challenge for the single ladies is that they have to come to terms with the fact that they can almost never be alone, except in their own little apartment. Creativity is

needed for both men and women on how to maintain a healthy social life, pursue hobbies, and nurture strong and lasting friendships, especially with nationals. Singles need to be assertive at times to ask for their particular emotional and spiritual needs to be met. Team leaders or couples are not always aware or in tune with the specific needs of singles and vice versa.

Teams

North Africa attracts pioneers. These are highly motivated people with noble ideas, determined to carry out their vision and calling. By and large, they are wonderfully committed workers who are prepared to pay a high price to remain. Not all of them, though, have great people skills or have taken the time to develop their skills in leadership or to be a good team player.

Much wisdom is needed in helping teams work through areas of conflict. Conflict of some type is endemic on any team. Some strong visionaries, for instance, might be quite unaware of the tensions created by their leadership or interpersonal styles. New workers coming with high expectations of what team life will be like may be in for some real surprises, once they are "stuck" in a small group of co-workers. The bottom line is that relationships with fellow Christians, even those with the same vision and calling, are not necessarily easy.

Conflict in a relationship can persist, even after intervention and counsel. People may just prefer to separate. In a frontier mission setting, we must be realistic and not expect that these draining conflicts take all the energy of the workers. Some can struggle with a heavy sense of guilt or sin in not being able to resolve a breakdown in relationship. All of this, of course, is a very difficult and painful process.

We see an increasing need for teaching leaders and mentoring them while on the field. At times, we might need to ask leaders to take time out to further develop

their leadership style, sharpen their administrative skills, or be in a safe place where they can receive correction, instruction, and healing. There is often a great deal of loyalty among workers towards their superiors, not wanting to say anything negative about their leaders. Team members may take a long time to share about their unmet expectations. New workers do not easily share their concerns which may be seen as criticism.

As caregivers, it is vitally important that we create a safe place where each worker can freely share about personal stresses and concerns. Not all relationships in our teams need to result in deep, intimate friendships. So we also encourage workers to develop meaningful friendships with folk outside their team, work, and agency.

Orientation

Teams and team members need proper pre-field orientation, regardless of their length of service. A good orientation should include a cultural briefing, time to explore one's lifestyle/work expectations, one's previous experiences with language learning and cross-cultural living, and preferences for privacy, hospitality, raising children, etc. Sensitively probing for deeper issues is a must: In what areas could I improve in relating to people? Do I carry bitterness or have unresolved, broken friendships? Have I suffered under abusive leadership? Do I have a good, deep understanding of a God of justice? How do I deal with suffering? How do I handle fear? (Fear is at the foundation of most of society in this part of the world, and Islam operates this way too.) Have I come to terms with fear of loneliness, loss of loved ones, imprisonment possibilities, singleness, etc.? Not all of these issues need to be "resolved" before going to the field, but they need to be considered seriously before committing oneself.

For single women in their first term, careful placement is required with other families or with other women on the team. They should not be placed alone. The

same advice holds for single men. We need to help them stay connected to others.

The orientation package should include discussion on how to respond to poverty, such as beggars at your door, and the possibility of your host country suffering drought. Decide in advance as singles and as a family how much you are willing to contribute daily, monthly, and yearly, so that in your own mind you have a sense of peace about contributions and are not influenced so much by guilt.

New workers, therefore, need to look at their own lives, know about the stresses they will face, and understand the possible pitfalls of life in a new society. Along with these things, though, we need to let them know that the North Africans are lovable people, people who can greatly enrich their lives, people who may become their brothers and sisters in the Lord. And we want each of our workers to know that we are right there with them, committed to help carry their burdens.

One "mechanism" that helps us support our field workers is the Member Care Working Group. This is an interagency affiliation of member care colleagues, currently representing eight organizations, which is under the umbrella of the North Africa Partnership. It provides a wonderful platform where we encourage each other, pray, join together in member care efforts, and plan visits/seminars for workers on the field. This group meets about four times a year and has been in existence for eight years.

Moving On and Debriefing

When for whatever reason, folk leave the field, it is so important to plan enough time to talk with them about their experience. I suggest a week of daily one- to two-hour sessions. Some things that could possibly be discussed include the following: What was good/bad about your experience? What successes/failures did you have? What lessons did you learn? What could we as leaders have done differently/better? What good did you leave behind? How have you said your good-byes and to

whom/what? Have you thanked people and they you? Do you sense God’s “smile” on your time? How much time do you need to unwind, rest, and recover? What awaits you in your next location or back in your passport country? What thoughts do you have about a new assignment? When closure is brought to field experience, it is much easier to move on, look to the future, and trust God for the next assignment.

This Holy Seed

Life for North African believers, especially young converts, is tough. There is immense pressure from the family not to leave Islam. Much rejection follows when they choose to obey Jesus. Our brothers and sisters very much need our prayers: prayer that they will find the strength to keep standing in their faith; prayer that they will experience deep joy as they persevere; prayer that their example would encourage others to come to faith in Jesus too. Their courage spurs us on. In fact, to see the price they pay—to lose family relationships, to be an outcast in the strongly knit community, to lose their job—is an encouraging challenge for each of us as workers to even stronger commitment to the Lord and His service.

What a privilege we have in sitting together at the Lord’s feet with these special expatriate workers and the national brethren. May He use us, each other, and His Word to speak comfort and hope to each of them. May we see in our days the fulfillment of God’s promise to pour out His Spirit upon North Africa, so that this holy seed of the church, which has lain dormant for nearly 13 centuries, will once again abundantly sprout and bring forth much fruit.

Case Study: Team Life, Team Strife

Following is a case study of a fictitious team working in North Africa. The issues, though, are common to many teams.

Elizabeth, a career missionary from Germany, joined a team in North Africa about four months ago. Her job had not been defined, and the hot, dusty, uninviting town made it hard for her to find any way to relax—be it going out for coffee, riding a bike, or just taking a walk to enjoy the sunset. Nonetheless, she feels very strongly about her call, and she wants to “make it on the field.” She is also well aware that culturally she cannot develop friendships with men. The team is made up of three single women and two American couples and their children.

Tensions with her two flat mates, a young lady from Korea named Hayyong, and Conchi, a highly qualified social worker from Chile, have been there from the beginning. Lately, though, they have become “too much to bear,” as Elizabeth wrote in her last accountability email to her home office. Hayyong keeps smiling and trusting the Lord to work things out, in spite of Conchi’s frequent negative comments about Hayyong’s culture, Elizabeth’s being “so different,” and the sense that Elizabeth really does not try to understand the Latino mindset. Elizabeth thinks it is much more an issue of personality than of culture, and she is prepared to talk and work through the personality clashes. Conchi has no time for that. With her many social commitments, she can only prioritize going to the team meetings, which mostly involve prayer and discussions about work assignments. Meals were initially agreed to be the time for relationship building, but Hayyong prefers her own cuisine, and Conchi has only twice sat down for a meal with her flat mates.

Elizabeth had wanted to focus on bonding with the culture, along with her team. Her ministry leader, however, felt that she was too vulnerable to be initially placed in a local family. So she would have to find other options to become familiar with the “ways of the land” and to be immersed in the local dialect.

The timing of Elizabeth’s placement was not ideal, a fact recognized by the ministry leader. Both families will be leav-

ing in the next few weeks, to be replaced by a family from Argentina and one from Mexico. These families are in language study right now. All team discussions are about the upcoming changes for the team and closure, not about Elizabeth's entry! The team's language is French, since it is the only language they all have in common. It is no one's first language, though.

Elizabeth would like to live with a missionary family from another agency, that has just moved to this town. They have given her a warm invitation to stay with them and to have her own room, and they hope that Elizabeth could help lighten the burden of home schooling their children. The idea of the move has been met with strong negative responses by her team mates. "Such a move would really destroy our testimony here in the neighborhood," Conchi and Hayyong say, "because people would never understand it and would think that we are not getting along well."

Elizabeth wants to stay strong, but she cannot see how she can cope much longer with these pressures, especially with the "underlying criticism" of Conchi. Something has to change!

Reflection and Discussion

1. Based on the case study and the information in the article, what are some of the main stressors for the three single women?
2. What might be some creative ways for these women to "unwind" after a demanding day at work and ministry?
3. How could a field visit from a trusted leader help this team and improve relationships?
4. The author describes several stressors and coping suggestions in the North African context. Which of these are the most relevant for your setting?
5. How do expatriate and national workers differ in the types of challenges that they face?

Suggested Readings

- Daniel, R. (1993). *This holy seed*. Harpenden, UK: Tamarisk Publications.
- Farmaian, S. (1996). *Daughter of Persia*. London, UK: Transworld Publisher.
- Hargraves, O. (1995). *Culture shock! Morocco*. Portland, OR: Times Editions.
- Mallouhi, C. (1994). *Mini-skirts, mothers, and Muslims: Modeling spiritual values in Muslim cultures*. Carlisle, UK: Spear Publications.
- Mernissi, F. (1988). *Doing daily battle*. London, UK: The Women's Press.
- . (1996). *The barem within*. London, UK: Transworld Publishers.
- St. John, P. (1990). *Until the day breaks*. Harpenden, UK: OM Publishing.
- . (1995). *Patricia St. John tells her own story*. Carlisle, UK: OM Publishing.
- Werner, T. (1992). *Where there is no doctor*. London, UK: MacMillan Press.



Anke Tissingh was born and raised in Holland, where she received training as a nurse. She joined YWAM in 1976 and moved to North Africa in 1983. Together with her husband, Garry, she co-leads the YWAM work in North Africa. Much of her attention is given to the pastoral needs of YWAM teams on the field, as well as providing assistance to other agencies. She currently coordinates the Member Care Working Group for North Africa. Email: 100767.527@compuserve.com.

Special thanks to Gail Whitney, Andy Lee, and Michele Martindale for their helpful review of this article.

