

*Bruce Swanson*

## **A Mindset and Department for Member Care**

*Member care is a core value that we build into our hearts and into our organizations. It is a way of thinking, and a way of being. The author offers many practical suggestions for cultivating the type of attitudes (mindset) and programs (departments) necessary to adequately support our mission personnel.*

I oversee a member care department for a large North American mission organization, and I can dedicate most of my working time to personnel issues. What a blessing! But, how can I write about member care and missions and make it helpful to the vast majority of mission situations around the world? Most agencies operate with fewer resources than my organization and I have available. In addition, many churches, worldwide, send workers directly, without using mission agencies. Very few churches are large enough or wealthy enough to feel that they have adequate resources to designate a person or department solely for member care.

The solution to my dilemma will be to focus on developing a “member care mindset”, rather than focusing solely on how to form a member care department. A member care mindset, when it exists, permeates the whole organization. A member care mindset shapes the policies, structures and working style of the agency or church. If the organization or church is resource rich, a member care department might naturally emerge. If resources are scarce, member care must be woven into the very fabric of day-to-day operations rather than “departmentalized.” Either way, the cross-cultural workers are not just sent; they are also prepared and preserved for effective service. And, when necessary, they are restored.

In this chapter I will examine some member care principles and dynamics that I believe are relevant for most sending organizations. I will apply them to situations where member care departments are a possibility and to situations where such departments remain a distant dream. In truth, the goal of a “member care mindset” must captivate every church or agency, no matter how big or resource rich. Member care must be part of everyone’s thinking; it must not be relegated to one or two full-time people in a department on the fringe of day-to-day operations. Nor must it be considered a nice option to include, if one can afford it. A member care mindset will help member care take its proper place as a core component of doing missions.

### **Why Is Member Care So Important?**

Understood in this full sense, member care, or preferably for me “personnel development”, is important for theological and pragmatic reasons.

### **Theological/Ethical**

Doing member care reflects God’s heart and Kingdom values. All through the Bible God challenged and stretched His people. He keenly desired their development into all they could be, to His honor and glory. Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, and Jesus’ disciples were never allowed to settle into their comfort zones. They were always being challenged to grow and mature.

At the same time, God provided rest, encouragement and restoration for His people. A few examples are the principle of Sabbath rest, His care of Elijah in the wilderness (1 Kings 19), Jesus pulling his disciples out of their hectic pace for rest (Mark 6) and John Mark’s restoration to mission service through Barnabas. In every New Testament epistle, Jesus commands His followers to encourage and build each other up.

So it follows that as leaders of God’s Kingdom workers, we should treat them as God does. We must not coddle them—that usually is not a problem! We must also be zealous for their growth, for their preservation, and for their restoration when wounded or fallen. How can we do Kingdom work without reflecting Kingdom values and ethos? Jesus’ Great Commission should be carried out in the spirit of his Great Commandment—to love one another.

Kingdom workers are not just pieces on a cosmic chessboard. They are individuals created in God’s image, highly valued and loved by God himself. Mission leaders must treat workers as God’s creation, as his children and as his servants, not theirs.

### **Pragmatic**

If we are to accomplish the task Christ left for us to do, we must be good stewards of the resources God has chosen to work through—people! The business world in Europe and North America and beyond has many examples that show how caring for employees is important for the company’s survival and success. Those of us in missions can learn from their experience.

The cost of not doing member care is revealed when a worker “crashes and burns”: the human suffering of the worker, his/her family and colleagues; lower morale when workers perceive they are valued only for their work, not for their person; lost credibility with people of the host country and donors back home; and huge amounts of money in salary, start-up costs, training; and repatriation. The quiet cost of not doing member care is revealed when a worker limps along, joyless, powerless, and ineffective.

A member care mindset should be at the core of doing missions because it mirrors God’s values and because it helps us accomplish the task.

## **Why is Member Care Such a Challenge?**

If member care is so crucial to missions, why does it often seem to be an afterthought? What are the barriers to developing a member care mindset? Let’s look at three of them that strike me as significant.

## **Task Over People**

First, I believe the Western church has been subverted, in part, by its culture. The Western world is materialistic and task oriented. People tend to be ignored. What matters is that the job gets done. Western churches and mission organizations have tended to do missions the same way. The task must be accomplished—all the more because it is a divinely ordered task. Unfortunately, the people doing the task have not always been a priority. Those of us who are mission and church leaders would never affirm such a thing consciously, but our decisions, policies, and structures too often reveal such a mindset.

It appears that this mindset has been too effectively modeled to the churches of Newer Sending Countries (NSCs) and that they are beginning to repeat the same mistakes. For example, workers all over the world are sent out without adequate contingency funds, without provisions for regular or yearly Sabbath rest, and are allowed to neglect their families and their own spiritual and physical health to do what sometimes amounts to three full-time jobs. These few examples could be multiplied many times over.

## **Lack of Information and Understanding**

A second barrier has simply been a lack of information and understanding. I grew up immersed in the post World War II missions emphasis in evangelical churches of North America. My home church lived and breathed cross-cultural missions. I heard the stories and read the books. What a heritage! Upon reflection, I now realize that we all considered missions to be something hard and demanding and that the workers just had to tough it out. The hardy, good workers hung in there; the weaker ones did not. That is just the way it was and there was not much to do about it.

Those perceptions I absorbed as a child contain a lot of truth. Mission work *is* hard, extremely hard at times. To a large degree, workers need to hang on and tough it out, honoring their duty to the Lord's call. However—and this is a huge however—the vast majority of good, hardy workers *will* wear out if not developed and cared for; not just the “weak” ones. We now have the information to understand how much leaders in missions *can* “do about it.” The very existence of this book and the growing movement in member care bear witness to the fact that the “critical mass” of knowledge has been accumulated. Now, the issue is putting knowledge into practice.

## **Great Need and Limited Resources**

A third barrier comes from a combination of infinite need and limited resources. The physical and spiritual needs of the world are so great and the resources so limited that we can feel compelled to pour all our money and person-power into accomplishing the task, neglecting the workers.

We could liken the situation to that of a rural evangelist who uses an old scooter to get from village to village to preach the gospel and treat the sick. If he has only enough money to either buy gas and medicines or replace a worn, crumbling tire, how can he not get the gas and medicines? People are dying without the Lord and the tire can always be stretched a bit further...and a bit further. Until, one day, the tire ruptures going down on a steep path. Then, the tire must be attended to--as well as the evangelist's leg, broken in

the crash. In the long run, the work suffers much more and so does the worker. But, in the press of the day-to-day need, it can be very hard to discipline oneself to look beyond immediate needs.

In missions, the choices can be hard ones. Is money spent on training the worker or feeding orphans? Do the workers receive enough salary to take breaks away from the work or is support stripped to the minimum so the association of churches can send out another family? The ongoing needs and compelling task lure us to “keep putting gas into the scooter”, putting the welfare of the workers and the work itself at risk.

It’s fairly easy for me, a member of an Older Sending Country (OSC), to point out the danger of focusing on immediate ministry needs and neglecting the worker. My country is so rich! It’s easier to put resources into both gas and medicine and new tires for the “scooter.” How much greater is the pressure for many in the NSCs where resources are more scarce! Organizations and churches in OSCs and NSCs can both pursue creative sources of funds and exhort believers to sacrifice. But eventually, the infinite need will put all of us in the same tension of having to choose between “more gas and medicine or a new tire.”

Jesus provides the example we need to escape the dilemma. In the early chapters of Mark, we see Him resisting being swallowed up by the insatiable, legitimate needs of the masses. Make no mistake about it--Jesus kept quite busy preaching the Gospel, healing the sick and delivering the demonized. But, He refused to let the unending need keep Him from following his Father’s agenda. He left behind needy folk to go to other villages to heal and preach. He took breaks in order to refresh Himself spiritually and physically. He followed the divine blueprint for His ministry. Jesus also shows us how to not let the need around us rob us of peace or joy. Jesus radiated life and joy. He regularly went to social events and “parties--He was even accused of being a glutton and drunkard (Matt. 11:19). Jesus was motivated to do the Father’s will, not to meet every need and opportunity for ministry around him (John 4:34; Mark 1:28-38).

Kingdom workers, today, need to follow the example of Jesus and their leaders must pave the way for them. In my visits with workers around the world, I’ve noticed that those who are most effective have learned how to relax in and enjoy good things about their local culture. They work hard for the Kingdom, but they also take time to enjoy life and the people God has put around them. Effective workers have also come to peace with the fact that they will never be able to meet all the needs around them. They are content to “simply” serve the Father with their best effort, pacing themselves for many years of service.

## **How Does One Begin?**

Let us assume that you are already convinced that member care should be a central part of your church, association, or agency’s strategy for doing missions. Let us assume that you are in the minority--that most of the decision-makers in your organization either do not see and/or prioritize the importance of developing and caring for their personnel on the field or in the home office. How can you begin to influence your organization with a member care mindset? (If your church or agency already is committed to member care, these same principles can be followed. It will just be easier to use them.)

- Pray and study the scriptures to better appreciate God’s heart for the development and care of His servants. Let the certainty grow in your own heart that this is a core issue for missions.

- Dialogue with your colleagues and with the leaders of your church, association, or agency. Your convictions, biblical rationale, and pragmatic arguments can be compelling and can help others re-think the Great Commission in the light of the Great Commandment. On the other hand, hearing your leaders' hearts and the weighty issues they face can help you understand the dilemmas they struggle with and keep a balanced view of the issues. Let them know of your heart for the lost and the ministry too!
- In partnership with your leaders, seek to educate your church or association of churches about the need to make member care a part of missions. Developing and caring for workers takes additional resources, and the churches, which actually send the workers, need to be willing to spend the time, energy, and money it will take.
- Preserve your relationship with anyone with whom you disagree. The Holy Spirit will better steer you all to God's will if you are united rather than divided. Leadership in missions is a spiritual endeavor and must be treated as one.

## Foundational Issues

Here are some of the basic issues that your church, association or agency should think through in order to develop a coherent strategy. They should help you make the development and care of Kingdom workers a central part of doing missions, whether it be through a department or "simply" in day-to-day operations.

### What Are We Trying to Accomplish?

Many times it can be helpful to write out a vision statement that describes the results of personnel development/member care. My own vision statement for my department reads: "The Missionary Development Department envisions a corps of well-prepared, hardy CBI International workers who evidence personal growth and increasing Kingdom impact, being energized by spiritual power; balanced living; organizational structures; and growing relationships with God, family, colleagues, and supporters."

A clear picture of the goal is the first step to reaching it. During all subsequent steps, you must always evaluate your options and decisions in the light of your vision statement.

*Exactly what is personnel development or member care?* There are no limits to what can be done in this arena; one can always do more. A clear definition of member care helps a member care department or an organization draw the needed boundaries. My own definition of member care involves the "formal and informal efforts to develop, preserve and restore Kingdom workers for effective service."

- "Formal efforts" can include workshops, medical check ups, study leave, regular ministry reviews, pastoral visits on the field, etc.
- \*"Informal efforts" can include body life principles from the New Testament, a church sending a tape of a service or the Brazilian football championship, a worker watching another's children for an evening, taking a regular day off, etc.
- "Developing" can involve training, mentoring, helping someone learn to cook with new ingredients, personal growth through difficulties, etc.
- "Preserving" can involve vacation policy, health insurance, coaching on stress management, evacuation for medical reasons or civil unrest, etc.

- “Restoring” can involve counseling, church internships, rest at a home church or retreat center, a church setting up a furlough apartment for their returning worker, etc.
- “Effective service” is the goal of developing and caring for workers. Member care must be the servant of the church’s, association’s or agency’s goal to extend the Kingdom. Of course, accomplishing the task must be done in accordance with Kingdom values.

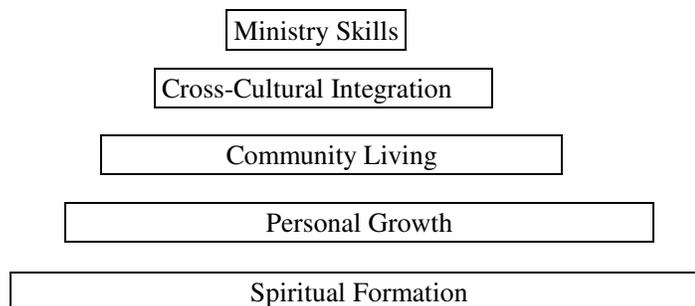
A clear definition of personnel development/member care will help an association or church weave such care into the fabric of its day-to-day operations. It will also help a member care department, if created, to focus its efforts and integrate them into the rest of the organization’s activities.

*Seek to organize your efforts through conceptual models.* The needs and possibilities in doing member care can seem limitless. Helpful models can help organize one’s approach and avoid chaos. Again, let me offer what my department does as an illustration. The flow of a worker’s life can be understood in terms of developmental phases of a personal or family life cycle with common challenges or developmental tasks (McGoldrick and Carter, 1982). For example, a married person’s life cycle can be organized into single young adult, newly married, young children, launching children, etc. Each phase presents the individual with fairly common tasks to master: adapting to a partner, adapting to children, learning to relate to your children as adults, etc. Member care can anticipate these challenges and help a worker meet them, including the unique complications generated by experiencing the life cycle in cross-cultural ministry.

The flow of a worker’s career can be broken down into a similar life cycle and phases. For example, being set apart for service, raising support, first-term language learning and cultural adaptation, return to home country, and so on (O’Donnell, 1987). Each phase has its fairly common tasks to accomplish. Member care can anticipate those tasks as well as prepare the worker for them.

Member care can also anticipate the unique challenges presented by the intersection of these two life cycles (Swanson,1993). Here are two examples. The challenges of language learning will be different for a couple with young children and for an older couple with no children at home. Also, being overseas accentuates the pressures a middle-aged couple can feel as their parents grow older and as their children enter adult life back in their passport country.

In my department, we seek to organize our efforts according to the following diagram. Based on research (Sikkema and Agnes Niyekawa1987; Kayser, 1994), we target our efforts at five arenas of an individual’s life. The lower arenas are the most important and each subsequent arena builds on the previous ones. This model helps us prioritize initiatives and helps us avoid ignoring foundational matters like spiritual formation.



To illustrate the relationship between these areas, consider a worker who is a great preacher in his passport country. That important ministry skill will be of limited impact if the preacher does not learn the new language and know how to connect at a heart level in the new culture. His ministry skill depends on integrating cross-culturally. If the preacher integrates well and preaches effectively in the new culture, his impact will be limited if he continually offends mission colleagues and nationals. His ability to live in community ends up being more foundational than both skills and cross-cultural integration. But, like this preacher, all workers cross cultures with blind spots and weaknesses. So, even more important is the worker's willingness to be humble, recognize his need to learn and pursue personal growth. Otherwise, he will be stuck in weaknesses that will limit his impact. Finally, even if the preacher successfully adapts culturally, graciously lives in community, grows as a person but neglects his relationship with God, he will be attempting to do everything in his own power. He will not last nor will his heroic efforts have the spiritual impact they could have if he was keeping fresh spiritually. So, spiritual formation forms the foundation for all else.

### **Developing Member Care Well**

Whether a member care mindset is woven into the existing structures of your church or organization or whether it is promoted through a distinct member care department, some basic principles can help you do it well.

### **Anticipate What It Will Take To Succeed**

Here are some personal observations gleaned from my own experience and from talking with colleagues in member care.

#### *Personal characteristics of the member care champion.*

- Conscious dependence on God and a commitment to personal spiritual health.
- Humility and a servant attitude. Someone with a member care mindset seeks to help others succeed. She/he is happy to see her/his fruit produced on others' trees. This attitude mirrors Christ's--He places His fruit on our branches as we abide in Him (John 15).
- Willingness to try new initiatives and take risks.

#### *Mutual trust and cooperation between organizational leaders or departments.*

- If a member care department exists, to be effective it must build relationships and trust with the other parts of the organization. Only then will it be allowed to influence decisions and gain access to needed resources to accomplish the goals of member care.
- If member care is to be woven into a church's or smaller organization's existing structures, each decision-maker must be willing to share information and be a team player with the others. For example, if someone in an organization wants to send a pastor out to encourage the workers, schedules must be coordinated, funds raised and dispersed, and permission granted for workers and the pastor to take "time off" for the visit.

#### *Credibility with field personnel.*

- All entities that send workers far away face the constant erosion of trust due to the distance that separates leaders from field personnel. Not having face-to-face contact can make it easy for all parties to misunderstand each other's decisions and motives, jump to conclusions and begin to second-guess each other. Acknowledge this dynamic and plan for it.
- Seek to model and teach a healthy strategy for dealing with a disagreement: for example, suspend judgement, assume there is information you don't know, and ask a couple more questions to get clarification.
- Keep in touch through regular communication and encouragement; *not* only when there is "business" to take care of.
- Do everything possible to increase face-to-face contact between leadership and field personnel.

*Active networking with others devoted to member care*

- Compare notes with others involved in member care, exchange ideas, and encourage each other in the process. Do this with others within and outside your organization, region, and discipline.

### **Establish Ground Rules for Promoting Member Care**

Wise principles are like a good road map to guide us as we develop member care in our churches or organizations. Here are some of the principles I hold to.

1. Scripture must be foundational for all that you seek to build into the life of the organization and into the lives of its workers (2 Timothy 2:16).

2. Make member care developmental, not just for "putting out fires." Even a crisis can be an opportunity to draw individuals, teams, and the whole organization or church to greater growth. For example, if national church leadership communicates to the mission leadership that it can no longer cooperate with a certain worker, two approaches can be taken. A "firefighter" approach would try to merely solve the problem, perhaps by convincing the worker to apologize to the leaders. A developmental approach will dig deeper into the situation and take the time to isolate the attitudes and behaviors (habitual, situational, cultural, or sinful) that generated the breakdown in relationship. It will help the worker understand those factors and seek to do his or her part to grow past them. It will, on the basis of that growth, seek reconciliation between the worker and national leadership and, hopefully, see a stronger partnership established. A developmental approach requires a lot more effort but yields deeper results for the worker and the Kingdom.

3. Understand that obedience to God and service for His Kingdom brings hardship and suffering, without exception (2 Corinthians 4:11-12). The goal of member care is not that workers will experience minimal difficulties. The goal is that they will be continually molded into the likeness of Christ and serve effectively as they face a manageable amount of difficulties.

4. Godly character and living is more important than being busy for God. Note that the New Testament qualifications for church leadership focus almost exclusively on character qualities, not ministry skills (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1).

5. Decentralize member care. Do not make it all begin with or flow through one department or through the home structures. That will only stifle it. The "holy grail" of member care is workers meeting their needs through each other (Romans 12; 1 Cor. 12),

through their adopted communities, and through their supporters, with help from their mission leaders.

6. Think in terms of systems; don't focus only on one person or facet of a problem. For example, if a worker is burning out through overwork, don't just focus on the worker and convince him/her to take Sabbath rests or relax. Consider the team with whom he/she works. Does it promote a culture of overwork? Consider the host culture. Does it reward workaholics? Consider church or agency policies and subtle attitudes. Do they give permission to be human and rest? Consider his/her family of origin. Did his/her parents show love only when he/she met their standards?

7. Preserve the dignity and responsibility of the worker.

\*The worker's well being, ultimately, is his or her own responsibility. The church or agency should help him/her fulfill that responsibility and certainly should not get in the way. Neither should the mission leadership take that responsibility from the worker and make him/her dependent.

\*Confidentiality needs to be carefully defined. How will personal or negative information about a worker be handled? How is it stored in the personnel or member care Department? Who will be told and who has access? How will trust and a sense of emotional safety be preserved?

\*Normally, do not let issues slide by. If danger signs surface in a worker's life or family, lovingly bring the matter up. Not to do so shirks a biblical responsibility and plays "Russian roulette" with the well-being of the worker, his/her family, and ministry. For example, let's suppose that, when staying with a worker's family, a visiting pastor notices that the husband and wife argue a lot and seem distant from each other. It would be easy not to ask about how they are doing and avoid what might be a difficult discussion. But the danger sign should be respected and, for the sake of the couple, their family, and their Kingdom work, they need to be lovingly **led** to explore and work on the matter.

### **Involve the Workers' Sending Churches**

Mission thinkers are recognizing that the local church is a **key** arena where a Kingdom worker is shaped for service (Giron, 1997). Mission agencies and associations of churches need to give the sending church a central place in the development/care process. Hopefully, the church is ready to assume its key role. If not, leaders of the mission enterprise will do well to help educate the churches they serve about the churches' role in member care. Here are some principles to help mission leaders partner with churches.

1. Screen for a candidate's spiritual grounding and maturity in his/her sending church. If the candidate does not have such a church community, beware!
2. Partner with the church to continue the worker's growth during the pre-field process and on-field ministry. For example, at CBInternational, we direct new workers to link up with mentors in their sending churches and coach them about how to do that.
3. Encourage a church and worker to build a deep, safe relationship so that as the worker encounters struggles and crises he/she has a safe place to debrief and to seek prayer and emotional support.
4. Encourage the church to actively encourage their worker with letters, emails, phone calls, visits, acts of kindness, etc., according to the church's resources.
5. Partner with the sending church as the primary arena of healing and restoration for a traumatized, wounded, or fallen worker.

6. Seek to involve the sending church in key decisions affecting the worker: for example, deployment, repatriation, engagement in high-risk ministries, and decisions to evacuate or not.

## **From Mindset to Action**

Sooner or later one must move past theory to action, whether those action steps involve creating a member care department or starting to shape day-to-day actions and policies of a church, church association, or mission agency. Here are some practical suggestions that should help you get off to a good start when you step out in faith and try the first initiative.

- Mobilize some prayer warriors to intercede on behalf of you and the member care mindset you desire to develop and translate into action.
- Take time to build trust and relationships with the key people whose support you need. Ideas new to your organization cannot stand on their own merit because they are untested in your context. They will need to stand on the strength of others' trust in you--in your integrity and competence.
- Consider the scope of issues that member care can influence and choose an area that will meet a keenly felt need among your church's, association's or agency's workers and leaders. There are many possibilities: training in language learning; teaching about culture; education of children; orientation to the organization; training in raising support; influencing policies about vacation, salary, insurance, and emergencies; restoration strategies for the tired or wounded; retirement planning, and so on. You must carefully choose an initiative that will meet a felt need, be fairly easy to do, and will yield results fairly quickly. An early success will generate confidence in the concept of doing member care.
- Help workers and leadership understand the value of the initiative you are proposing. Use examples of other churches or organizations that are already doing it and the positive results they are experiencing. In short, sell your idea. Remember, workers and leaders are not against caring for personal needs. But, the pressure of ministry needs and the weight of tradition will force any new way of doing things to compete for attention and resources.
- Start small and let the new member care initiatives grow slowly and naturally. Do not begin by creating notebooks full of complicated structures and procedures. Begin with simple, concrete actions and let new structures evolve to support and solidify member care that is already happening. Let form follow function.
- Seek to evaluate the effectiveness of your initiatives. Simple pre- and post-intervention testing, follow-up interviews, or opportunities for feedback can help fine tune your efforts and help demonstrate the value of doing member care.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

Doing member care is like Italian grandmothers making spaghetti sauce or Indian women making curry; every one has their own special way of doing it. The practice of doing member care will vary from church to church, from organization to organization, and from culture to culture. It must be that way to be effective. However, just as spaghetti sauce always involves tomatoes, member care always involves certain elements and principles. I trust that this brief review of some of those elements and principles will

help us all nurture and put into practice a member care mindset, and possibly develop a member care department, in the settings in which we serve.

### Reflection and Discussion

1. What is my motivation for promoting member care in my church or organization? Negative experiences of my own? Biblical convictions? A sense that others are doing it so I should too? How might my motivation impact my ability to bring about change in my sphere of influence?
2. Who are some key people in my church or organization that need to support any attempt to create a member care mindset or department and put it into action? How can I best gain a hearing and build trust with them?
3. What is my own vision of what member care will accomplish for our workers and church or organization? For the Kingdom?
4. How will I organize member care efforts? How will I establish priorities as I apply limited resources to an overwhelming array of possible initiatives?
5. What will be my first initiative/project? What steps will I take to launch it and evaluate its effectiveness?

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