

## Interviews: Preparation and Field Realities

*Overview: The following interviews were conducted over two days during a recent conference in Asia. Part of the information was gathered in private and part in an open session for whoever was interested in member care. The interviewees are from different parts of China and include sending churches, trainers, a “mission agency”, and the missionaries themselves. What is not included here are the comments in the conference by other church leaders from China. The interviews asked about how workers were screened and trained as well as field problems and the member care for them. Some of the common concerns and issues which warrant further study and discussion, including: homesickness, conflicts with colleagues, understanding individualistic mentalities from the West, and the need for greater cross-cultural understanding and experiences. In addition, it was noted that tent-making church planters (e.g., businessmen that start churches in other countries) have a different set of member care concerns.*

### Interview One: Pastor of a Sending Church

#### Background

- local independent city house church originally started by an Australian worker
- has Back to Jerusalem vision and sees work among Muslims in China as a starting point
- has sent their first workers—a family of three (husband and wife in mid-30’s and their one-year-old boy)—to NW China\*\*
- church’s main thrust is in relationships

\*\* The family has been on the field for a year. They returned home once for a visit after the year and do not plan to be back for another two years. Lord willing they would stay on long term. When they first went on the field, they ministered with a team. Their co-workers included Korean pastors and other workers sent from the NE house churches. Doesn’t sound like the couple would stay on with them. Their initial work there was among the Hui people involved helping the planting of a local church and the training up of workers sent from the NE house churches. They intend to open an English school for outreach.

#### Worker Screening

- the pastor and the missionary couple have grown up in the church together, so they have known each other for a long time
- the couple have served in the home church for two years before going on the field
- they demonstrate a strong love for the Hui group and have a clear calling to the NW
- they, in particular the wife, have a vibrant spiritual life (the pastor said the wife is spiritually stronger than she is)
- strong marital relationship
- good relationship with home church and both parties see each other as spiritual partners

#### Worker Preparation/Training

- independent reading from material either given/recommended by others, sometimes western workers
- ministry in home church

#### Problems Faced on the Field

- loneliness, partly due to absence of co-workers from their own age group and wife often left at home
- lack of a worship community
- difficulty in working with other team members as mentality and working style different (find others more task/work oriented than people/relations oriented)

### Member Care Provided

- the pastor scouted the field before sending their missionaries
- financial support
- call once a week
- equipped them with a computer
- church members sent care package on own initiative
- a team will visit them this summer followed by other teams
- budget set aside for visits and gifts to the missionaries' parents, particularly on major festivals
- allows for weakness and lack of ministry "results"

### **Interview Two: Trainer and Sender**

#### Background

- the house church network functions as church, mission agency and training school
- the workers are primarily trained for home missions, with the exception of missions to Mongolia
- have already sent out more than 30 workers
- the average age of the missionaries is 23-24 years old
- they are sent out in teams of 3-6 people

#### Worker Screening

- church does the screening
- pick those who have a genuine call

#### Worker Preparation/Training

- students first have one year of basic Bible school training from which those with potentials would be sent for further training (usually after one year, one-third would return to the workplace; one-third would stay in local church ministry; and one-third would be trained as workers)
- potential workers would be sent to training schools that offer 2-3 years of training
- other than academic subjects, students would also be taught how to support themselves (tentmaking is encouraged as the church/mission body cannot provide them with much financial support. Some schools teach them a trade)
- graduates would then be sent on 2 years of home missions after which they would be re-evaluated and marriages arranged (romancing is forbidden while in training or on the field. Team members would be keeping an eye on each other. Although workers can turn down their leaders' choice of spouse for them, their future life partner would still be picked by the leadership)
- promising workers would then be assigned fields on longer terms

#### Problems Faced on the Field

- don't know how to rest as they are too busy (this often leads to different areas of weaknesses)
- spiritual renewal
- team living and co-working (team members often from different parts of the country)
- I would suggest nutrition/diet as one of the problems (some missionaries may have gone without meat for a whole year. It is unsure whether it's due to financial reasons or a taboo with host culture. Could be both)
- persecution from locals lead to weakening of love for their persecutors

Member Care Provided

- financial support of 300 yuan (a little over US\$30) per month for six months. From there on, the worker is expected to support him/herself (e.g., workers in Mongolia have started a farm)
- visit workers once a year
- workers get to come home once a year
- budget for visits and/or help to workers' parents (e.g. during Chinese New Year). If the parents have any problems, the church is expected to take care of them. Money has been set aside for compensation to parents if the occasion arises

Desired Broadcast Programs for Workers

- inspirational/devotional
- motivational (to help keep their missionary zeal going)

**Interview Three: Worker to Asian Muslim Country**

Background

- 30 year-old single female
- sent from a local house church pastored by a western worker
- been on the field for one year
- have been overseas before going on field and so have some form of cross-cultural exposure
- have team (non-Chinese) in host country helping her settle in and taking care of a lot of living arrangements

Worker Screening

- have clear calling
- feels primary screening consideration should be the missionary's personal relationship with the Lord
- spirituality a must especially in Muslim countries where evangelistic activities are forbidden

Worker Preparation/Training

- pastored home church
- feels no matter how much preparation or training one has, will still be unprepared for the shock/surprises one gets on the field
- feels best preparation is to cultivate a strong personal relationship with the Lord as modeled by own pastor (a western worker)

Problems Faced on the Field

- homesickness
- biggest struggle not in language or finances but in loneliness as there's no one to talk to (first three months most unbearable, almost broke down)
- as a single woman on the field sometimes beset with loneliness and homesickness, can be tempted to enter into relationships not ordained by God (she was tempted in this area once and overcame that by [1] writing to home church for prayer; [2] praying hard and acknowledging own needs; and [3] posting God's Word on the walls and declaring her determination to follow God's will)

Member Care Received

- pastor e-mails her everyday and would call once a week
- church committed to pray for her whenever (feels once a week is not enough)
- visits from pastor

- can afford to be transparent with church

#### **Interview Four: Worker Couple to Asian Muslim Country**

##### Background

- the husband is 36 years old and the wife, 31
- sent from one of the larger rural house church networks as part of the BTJ movement
- called to be workers back in 1996 but the church was not ready to send them leading to strained relationship (relationship has since been restored)
- they were again stopped from going out in 2003 as the rural church lacked the funds to send them out
- wife was in the ministry much earlier than husband, husband was in managerial position with a business before being called into missions
- both have attended as well as taught in the ministry training schools with wife having taught for 10-11 years
- been on the field for three months

##### Worker Screening

- did not discuss the screening, if any, they themselves went through but demonstrated clear vision and calling
- feel that many of the young workers only “have the vision” that is primarily passed onto them from leaders but don’t have a personal calling to missions

##### Worker Preparation/Training

- prepared for three years
- have studied and taught in ministry training school
- attended language schools
- feel that present training for workers is impractical, inadequate and too simplistic:
  - training is primarily based on the home missions experience of leaders/trainers who are out of touch with the countries where they send their workers
  - language training should be based on true calling, e.g. there are those who learned Uighur but have no calling to that people group, leading to a waste of time and resources
  - some of the trades, such as hairdressing and shoe-making, taught to workers candidates are impractical in the countries they are sent to
  - many of the worker candidates are young. They are full of zeal but often lack discipline, daily living skills, and spiritual, ministry and life experiences. Some of them can’t even find work at home, how much more so in other countries
  - during the 2-3 years of training, students are often shut out from outside world because of security reasons. This often leads to their being out of touch with the real world
  - most students attending training schools have already had at least one year of theological training. Training schools therefore should not spend so much time in basic doctrine but offer classes in the history of western and Arab nations etc.
  - a wider selection of subjects should be offered to students so their training can be tailored according to their burden/calling or to the needs of the target countries e.g. worship, and not preaching, is what draws people to church in Mideast countries, so classes in that would be more profitable
  - need bona fide missionaries to teach so that the training offered would be more relevant
  - to prepare students for ministry in the Mideast in particular, the curriculum should be a balance in theological training as well as teachings in trades and survival skills

### Problems Faced on the Field

- quite beside self with homesickness—very touched if there's one letter/e-mail from home
- lack of means to communicate freely with those at home for security reasons
- sense of abandonment
- inability to have a handle on the language at this point leads to frustration and a sense of uselessness, inadequacy and helplessness (found that just knowing the official language of the host country is not enough as most of the people are illiterate and only know their own dialect)
- occasional conflict with and difficulty in relating to workers from other countries and cultures, e.g. those heading to the same place as they are would refuse to give them rides and would just ask them to take public transportation (there seems to be some bruised feelings from episodes like that)
- financial difficulty as rural church can only afford to provide them with 1,000 Yuan (almost US\$121) per month. They want to be self-supporting but lack the money to start a business. This leads to a series of other hardships and unhappy feelings:
  - totally unprepared for the amount required for rent (tenants are asked to pay a deposit of six months' rent. Also, one pays 14 months' of rent for an 11-month only lease)
  - want to be self-supporting and asked church to loan them money to start a business, but church has no money. Also appealed to western workers on the field, promising to pay them back in a year's time but request was turned down. Feels rejected, abandoned and hurt
  - saddened by the difference in the level of living comfort between the western workers and themselves e.g. they don't have cars, computer or TV like everyone else
- lack knowledge of the country they were sent to
- know that conflicts among younger workers are not uncommon

### Member Care Received

- apparently there's little if any
- best to have a third party who can act in the open to liaise between home church and the workers
- would like to have prayer support, phone calls and a simple letter from home to cheer them

### **CONCLUSION**

- Almost all, if not all, have not lived anywhere outside of China prior to their field assignments. So homesickness can be quite overwhelming for them
- 60+ workers from the larger house church networks will be going into SR countries next year
- Rural culture: communal mentality has strong values of helping each other out, but this can lead to a 'cultural conflict' with the more individualist mentality of western culture
- In general, cross-cultural conflicts with other workers seem inevitable
- Chinese church may be too used to being helped → psychologically imbalanced when request for help rejected
- Most churches are basically unaware of the countries that they are sending their workers
- Some of the conference attendees basically feel that the church is still not ready or is ill-prepared to send out workers.