

Member Care for African Mission Personnel

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Overview: The Chinese Church will do well to take heed to the issues that challenge the African Church, since they are similar. In the early years of sending cross-cultural workers, the Church of Africa often sent people who were not called, trained, or adequately prepared. A number of their best workers who did well in their own country returned broken and unable to do ministry. This led the African Church to rethink their selection, training, and equipping process. Adequate training and specialised cross-cultural training is mandatory for the survival and well-being of workers and their families.

A second major issue is the welfare of the workers families. The spouses and children are often separated from the workers for a long time. Very often no provisions were made for the education of children. Until the establishment of a hostel and boarding school, many workers and their families simply suffered in silence or resigned from their ministry. Wives of these workers are often neglected in the selection, training, and preparation for cross-cultural ministries as well.

Providing adequate health care and spiritual warfare training are the other two major areas of neglect. Many suffer needlessly, for example, from malaria and dysentery, and other preventable tropical diseases. Finally, educating decision makers and church leaders of the need for member care, training of member care providers, and the establishment of member care unit within the church or sending body are some solutions that have worked for the African Church.

Africa is geographically vast with great ethnic diverse. It has 56 countries and covers an area of about 30,000,000 square kilometers. The population is about 650, 000,000, or roughly 10% of the world's population. Africa is the continent with the highest growth rate and is estimated to have over 15% of the world's population by 2025. It has over 3,000 ethno-linguistic people groups who speak at least 1,995 languages. There are four main and official languages: English in 22 countries, French in 18 countries, Spanish in four countries, and Portuguese in one country. Six countries use an African language as the official, national language.

Africa has an abundance of natural and human resources and yet no other continent in the world has suffered such a series of natural, political, and economic disasters. Food production over the past 30 year has been on the decline and so unable to keep pace with the rapid population growth. As a result several places on the continent has and still is suffering acute famine. As rich and well-endowed as this continent is, 32 of the 40 poorest nations are there. Africa generates only 1.2% of the world's total earnings. Other factors affecting the African economy include corrupt government policies, foreign debts, and unending senseless wars that have claimed millions of innocent lives.

Into this context the African church has, in spite of the odds, continued to forge forward sacrificially. And lot had happened to God's glory, both by African and non-African mission personnel. But as we look again at how the work was done, we see the lamentable need to have better managed our human resources. Thankfully, I believe this is and will be changing.

For example, the Association of Evangelicals of Africa (AEA) was founded in 1966 with the purpose of "fostering unity and cooperation among evangelicals in Africa for the furtherance of God's Kingdom." The AEA at the initial stages began two commissions that have helped make a difference: the Theological and Christian Education Commission (TCEC) and the Evangelism and Missions Commission (EMC). The TCEC straightway founded two theological institutions for the purpose of training ministers and other Christian workers. The EMC initiated a missions training program as well as helped churches and missions agencies to develop their own missions training programs.

With this background in mind, we now approach the subject of this paper—the member care of African mission personnel. I will look at training and selection issues, family and MK issues including separation, and education, physical health, spiritual warfare, and some ways forward for African missions. The various case studies that I use are all true although the names mentioned are fictitious.

Training and Selection

Indigenous mission societies that sprang up as offshoots of western missionary efforts in Africa either saw little need for relevant missionary training or did not have the know-how to adequately prepare their staff before sending them out to the mission field. The practice was to send everybody who had a call for ministry, regardless of the nature of ministry, to a Bible school for training, where available. In most cases the students of the Bible school or seminaries were equipped for pastoral work in organized church denominations rather than the rugged missionary work which the African mission field demands. The effect was that Christians trained in Bible schools plunged into missions and were ill equipped for the challenges they were faced with on the fields.

A large denominational Church in the central African region was jolted into the practical reality of the need for effective pastoral care. One of its trusted, proven, and reliable workers was sent out as a missionary and had to return home devastated and broken and possibly never to go back to the field as a missionary anymore. Recently, a member of the mission board was asked to attend the AEA/EMC Member Care Consultation that took place in Cameroon in July 2001 (described more fully later). As you can imagine, the board member was very eager to learn more about member care, and he brought back many insights into what needs to be done to sustain their missionaries on the field. He told me that this missionary never received any form of training to prepare him and his family for what they would face on the field. It was assumed that he was prepared enough since he had known the Lord and served in the church as a worker for years. That was a costly mistake.

Another participant at the Consultation, from a French-speaking country, recalled with sadness how he had gone through Bible school training without ever having been asked at the point of entry if he was ever born again or had a conversion experience in the Lord Jesus Christ. The choice of students enrolled for training in that denomination in preparation for ministry, including missionary work, was never based on conversion experience or a conviction of a call into ministry. In some denominations it is based on the pastor's recommendation (who was trained through the same process) and on the candidate's educational qualification. Depending on his qualification, a candidate, after training, is either employed as a pastor with a parish or as an evangelist to assist the pastor, or to be posted to a remote village for church planting. In many parts of Africa pastoral ministry is regarded with the highest esteem, but in general not so with missions ministry.

The new sending agencies in Africa, mostly from the Pentecostal background as a result of the charismatic revival in the higher institutions of learning, were modeled after the faith missions of the early European missions. These African missions, like their predecessors, did not grasp the need for training either and the patient, careful selection of the missionary candidates. Most of them did not bother about any form of training but rather saw the period of training as a waste of time while souls were perishing in heathen lands. They felt that all they needed was the knowledge of the Bible to be able to tell sinners that Jesus loves them and came to save them from their sins. Armed with this knowledge they moved out in faith. Besides, many of these new sending agencies were being led by directors who themselves did not go through any form of training to prepare and equip them for their work especially in cross-cultural settings.

Out of zeal to send tens of hundreds of missionaries to several fields in and around Africa, some have recruited indiscriminately, without reference to anybody or the home church and without relevant missionary training. Many have gone out not only without the necessary skills, but also without adequate field supervision, mentoring, and appropriate care. In fact in some cases these missionaries went out by themselves to unreached and very difficult areas.

The result of this approach has been more harm than good. Some of these untrained missionaries have crashed woefully and returned home broken. Some of those who managed to weather the storms and stayed on, "spoiled" the work and shut the door to missions to the people groups they "served".

Positive Changes

After many faltering steps the mission enterprise in Africa over the years has, however, looked back in retrospect to see the "potholes" through which they stumbled and fell and have taken far-reaching measures in ensuring that the mistakes of the past are corrected. At least in the areas of training and selection, many mission agencies are now not only looking into the area of relevant cross-cultural training, but also seeking to work with church leaders to ensure that the right people are selected, trained, sent out to the field, and supported. Working together, the church has relied on the recommendations of the institution to determine whether or not the candidate is suitable, what kind of ministry the candidate will likely be most effective in, and whether or not the candidate will likely thrive in a pioneering situation. It is a slow process though, because some African church pastors do not yet see missions as the priority of the church; but we are progressing!

The EMC of AEA initiated a missionary training program in the early 1990s called School of Missions Eastern Region (SOMER) in which key trainers were further equipped to go back to their home countries to start schools of missions. At least 18 missionaries were trained to be trainers. This was very effective and as a result of the EMC initiative many schools of missions sprang up. African sending countries are putting in a lot of effort now in training their missionaries and especially to prepare and to equip them for the harsh realities of the African mission fields. For instance, the main sending countries such as Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, South Africa, and Kenya have training schools for missions. Here are some examples.

Agape School of Missions for Training in Discipleship and Missions—Nigeria

Calvary Ministries (CAPRO) School of Missions—Nigeria

Nigerian Evangelical Missionary Institute (NEMI)—Nigeria

Christian Missionary foundation—Nigeria

Foursquare School of Missions—Nigeria

Sheepfold Ministries Missions Training—Kenya

African Inland Missionary Training—Kenya

World Mission Center—South Africa

Ecole de Mission Inter-Africain au Benin—Republic of Benin

Adonai International Missions School, Central African Republic (CAR)

CERFEM—Tchad

Ghana Evangelical Missionary Institute—Ghana

The development of better training, to some extent, has served to reduce the occupational hazards of African missions. Churches with genuine and authentic missionary thrusts who have hitherto used only their Bible schools to prepare their missionaries have been able to take advantage of these new missions training centers to better train and equip their missionaries.

In August 1996 the AEA TCEC and the EMC jointly organized a workshop on missions training in Africa, held in Jos, Nigeria. Participants were invited theologians primarily from accredited theological schools and missionaries involved in training from ten different African countries along with the United Kingdom. The workshop centered on the need for integration between missions and theology. It was emphasized that for us to really win Africans to the Lord Jesus Christ "it is not only necessary to encourage enthusiastic Africans into missions, but also to give them solid, biblically-based theological foundations for that mission". A careful look at the curriculum of the theological institutions in Africa revealed that in most cases they did not reflect what could be considered an adequate program on missions and missionary training, even though "the spread of the gospel" frequently forms a part of these institutions mission statements. Many of these (theological training institutions) did not have much mission content. Some did not even have any course on missions at all. Pastors being produced by these institutions had little or no understanding of, and did not show much interest in missions. the training given them has meant that some of the graduates of our Theological

The workshop therefore saw an urgent need for our theological schools to include missions as an integral part of their programs and so also the missions schools to include theological foundations in their training. With this sort of balanced training and preparation every theological college graduate will have a "missionary sense and understanding, and every missions-trained graduate will have an adequate theological foundation". In this case it is hoped that both the missionary and the pastor will make disciples that will be mature balanced Christians making a difference on the African continent and in the world as a whole. One of the many practical outcomes of the workshop was the compendium *Training God's Servants* (1997), jointly edited by my husband, Bayo, myself, and Alan Chilver.

Another positive example is the EMC Training Track's launching of COMITA— Council of Missions Training in Africa. The EMC has discovered that whereas a good number of schools of missions are emerging, many still need to really improve their curriculum, use qualified trainers and teachers, and develop their philosophy of missions training. The result is that people are still being ill equipped and sent out. Training issues were further addressed at an all-African consultation was called for in April 1998 in Accra Ghana. The participants agreed that EMC should set up a body that could help all mission training programs improve in their quality, serve as a medium to exchange ideas and faculty, help produce and distribute quality resource materials for missions training. This in effect is serving as a regulatory body for missions training in Africa.

Other advances are seen in the training programs of two denominations. One large denomination in West Africa, the Evangelical Churches of West Africa (ECWA) pioneered by the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) targeted the rural area through its mission outfit called the Evangelical Missionary Society and began to train vernacular evangelists and preachers in their Bible Training Schools (BTSs) with the sole aim of reaching the local villages. The same thing has been going on in the African Inland Church (AIC) founded by the African Inland Mission (AIM).

Some Selection Procedures

The training institutions each have their different selection procedures and criteria. Most will require filling series of forms. The Agape School for Training in Discipleship and Missions, for example, requires candidates to fill forms, receive references from pastors (and sometimes from other respected Christian leaders), write exams, and undergo oral interviews before candidates are accepted for enrollment for training. Once in the school, the new students are given a full week of intensive orientation to prepare them for the rigors of the training. The orientation allows them to know what to expect and the rationale for each course. The training is three-fold: formal, non-formal and informal. Evaluations are based on all these areas of training midway and at the end of training by a team of trainers made up of not less than five people. The other forms of training carry more weight than the actually academic work, even though that too is very important. But a lot of importance is laid on character building. With recommendations from the training center, a formal interview is conducted by the leaders of the mission to determine whether or not a candidate should be accepted into the mission. A missionary is accepted into the mission on probation for one year initially and then full time after the period of probation, if found suitable.

Family and MK Issues

The typical African culture and religions have little regard for women and children. They are to be seen and not to be heard. They are usually not reckoned with when important decisions are made. And yet we know that strong nations are made up of strong family units, which include wives, mothers and children. Healthy family units make healthy churches and healthy nations. A church or a nation that does not care or have plans for its families, and especially for its children, is doomed to have problems of divorce, delinquency, crime and other undesirable things to grapple with. So it will be with any mission agency involved in sending out missionaries but not taking much thought about the family.

As inroads are being made in the areas of selection and training so also is the African mission slowly advancing in the area of the family. One especially important issue is the needs of children and the effect that they have on the mission as a whole. Some mission organizations in Africa consider only the man or the husband as the bona-fide missionary and have him posted to the field without any consideration for his wife and children. Experience has shown that either the wife or the children can destabilize work on the field unless the entire family needs are met.

A prime example of the type of family care a missionary family needs is the kind of care Messiah College is giving. My husband, Bayo, and I were both missionaries before our three children were born. We had our first two children in a little village where we were serving. Vehicles could only go in there once a week—on market days only. There was no kindergarten except a low standard public school some miles away, too far for a child to walk. And Bayo and I had no means of transportation. The only option left was for me to teach our children basic reading and writing skills at home (there wasn't any home school program in Nigeria then). This difficult experience led us to start a boarding secondary school for MKs a few years ago called Messiah College. It is our attempt to meet some of the teeming needs of MKs in Africa, starting with Nigeria. We of course were not the only missionary and ministry family facing the predicament of lack of provision for children education!

"This Church does not know how to appreciate people. It does not value its staff. I left for training and no one remembered that I had served here for so many years. It is not that I expect much, but just that they could have at least showed that I came out from among them and that they care. Now the church is doing the same with my friend who needs help with her children." These were the words spoken to me by Danuba, a quiet, soft-spoken and unassuming brother who had just enrolled for missions training. He had been serving with one of the leading evangelical churches in Nigeria in the area of education and had been nursing a vision of serving in cross-cultural church planting work. He subsequently resigned his job and enrolled for mission training, although with little support from his church.

I wondered, why was he telling me this? He had just introduced me to his friend, a widow, who wanted two of her children to attend our MK school, Messiah College. Apparently Danuba had tried to help enroll this lady's children in Messiah College the previous year but for the lack of sufficient funds she could not get the child enrolled. He decided to help her again with the process and to enable her talk with us in Messiah College.

The woman was despairing because of her inability to give quality education to her fatherless kids. "And their father died on active service with the church" she said. She despairs also because the church has not come to her aid with the welfare of the kids. And yet she herself is still on staff at the church, serving under this same organization in which her husband served and died. She and her kids survive on a meager allowance (her salary from the church, but it is far from being enough), supplemented by proceeds from the sales of buns and donuts that she makes herself, which her kids hawk on the streets.

While her son Dubai, 11 years old, was being interviewed for placement in Messiah College, he was asked if he would prefer to attend a public school near home so he could be with his Mom. His answer was, "I will spend most of my time hawking donuts and I don't enjoy doing that". He misses his Dad more when he has to hawk in order to earn money for the family.

Separation Issues

Ryang is a little twelve-year old girl who came to Messiah College in the year 2000. When she was asked about her parents during the interview preceding her admission, she began to sob. And she did that for quite a while and so pathetically that the panel was helpless and simply allowed her to weep. And even when she later regained composure she still would not talk about her family.

Messiah College then decided to make contact with the mission agency with which her parents serve and we made a startling discovery. We found out that Ryang does not get to see her parents often because they serve in a far-away mission field. The last time she saw her family was when she was eight. Messiah College may not be able to solve this problem; nevertheless we began to work at it. We said we were going to offer Ryang admission only on the condition that at least one of her parents comes with her on reporting day. This was an attempt to ensure some kind of security for Ryang, at least emotionally. Because she would at least see one parent and then she will have the feeling that her family knows exactly where on earth she is.

Tope is 17 now and is graduating from Messiah College this year 2001. When his father brought him to Messiah College in 1995, he was only 11. And for the next three years that followed he never set eyes on his family. He was constantly lonely, withdrawn, and quiet. He would not play around like other kids in the school. When the time for his class to write the Junior Secondary Certificate Exams were drawing near, we figured we must do something really quick so as not to jeopardize Tope's academic performance in the external exams. We had noticed that whenever he was withdrawn, he was weeping. We later discovered that he was weeping because he assumed and concluded that his parents or at least his family must be all dead! If not, he could not understand why he hadn't seen them. He concluded everyone was hiding the facts from him and not telling him the truth. The school then decided to facilitate the process of getting Tope to visit his family during one of the Christmas holidays before the external exams his class was about to write.

IAS I have spoken with missionary parents and leaders about separation issues, I have been surprised by some of the things I have heard. Shocked too! For example, many denominational church-based missionaries get posted for missions not necessarily based on call or convictions. They are actually basically trained (in vernacular schools) as pastors, then become missionaries, and then are posted to remote, usually government-forsaken villages with no basic amenities for survival. Some pastors manage to lobby for better and favorable postings by playing and dancing along to the tune and dictates of their leaders. Those who do not satisfy their bosses risk getting sent to difficult areas without consideration of their families' needs: such as school for kids, health matters, etc. These missionaries end up sending their children to live with relatives or friends who agree to help keep these kids while they attend school.

While I was still working on this chapter of the book, a missionary from one of the leading agencies came to my office to talk about his children and the possibility of enrolling his son in Messiah College. Talking with him I got to find out that while he was serving in a church planting situation, his children's education needs were not well met. This understandably really bothered him and his wife. His solution was to find a way to be re-posted to a more favorable location, with access to good schools. Somehow he managed to get elected (done by ballot) as a coordinator of several fields that required relocating to a city from where he could coordinate the work of the mission. It was from this "favorable" location he heard of Messiah College and came to see me. More often than not, many people get "favorably posted" by lobbying!

Some Issues for Missionary Wives

Very few mission agencies prepare and make use of the wives of the men that have been accepted and sent out as missionaries. It is only the men that are recognized as bona fide missionaries. If the wife cannot accompany the husband then the family is forced to separate. The wife remains in a nearby town or city with the children so she can keep her job and the children can go to school. In addition, the majority of the wives of missionaries are unschooled. While their husbands were being trained they were usually tending the children and caring for their husbands.

Thankfully, there are some changes happening. The trend now among agencies is to try to train the illiterate wives somehow. Many of them are taught how to be better wives and mothers, better home keepers and supporters of their missionary husbands. Some have added evangelism and other relevant courses to the Pastors/Missionaries' wives training.

Agape Missions and Calvary Ministries, for example, will not accept a married man or woman and enroll such into the training program without the spouse. The two must both have a call and both go through training and both be sent out as missionaries in their individual rights though as a couple. Agape Missions has developed a curriculum for basic training of missions candidates with no education background. This includes a literacy program from which wives of missionary candidates have benefited a great deal, have been graduated and sent out with their husbands as partners in ministry on their own rights.

The new sending mission agencies are generally not prepared for unexpected and untimely deaths of serving missionaries. There are cases of missionary families (as in the previous case I mentioned) where the husband/father and bread-winner has died, and the wife/mother and children are left alone and forgotten. Because no plan had been made for such an unforeseen time as this, sending groups do not seem to know what to do or how to handle the family in their grief and need. Many wives of dead missionaries and their children get forgotten and so of necessity they pull out of the mission and the missions community in order to survive. A few, very few, really remain to continue with the ministry following their husbands death.

A successful mission director in Cameroun was sharing the pathetic loss of two of his missionaries. One died in a ghastly motor accident leaving a wife and seven kids, and the other died of a prolonged sickness leaving two little kids. The two little ones were taken over by the family of the deceased, which is pagan through and through, to be distributed among the relatives for care. But the missionary had denounced idols and had in turn been denounced by his family before his untimely death. Knowing this, the director of this mission went to the dead man's village and single-handedly negotiated to retain the kids and to secure them for their mother. The wife and the kids of the other missionary who died in a motor accident all live with the director's family now. The mission director is still thinking of how to help them with their loss and their practical support, as the mission had no policy in place yet to guide in this area of bereavement and care.

MK Education

Missionary parents, of course, also really struggle with separation from their children and home. Noel, for example, had put in his resignation letter to his mission board. The leadership of the board then wisely invited him to the mission headquarters for a chat with the director. Noel had been a terrific and very successful evangelist and church planter who was penetrating the rural areas of an unreached people group and reaching out to the local people with the Jesus Film. He had won several people into the Kingdom of God.

The "thorn in his flesh" though was the issue of quality education for his children. In the search for good education for his children, he and his wife had distributed their children to different homes of relatives in different towns, some of whom were not Christians. Unfortunately this man's wife was not educated although he himself is a graduate of a theological seminary. May be she could have been of some sort of help to the children's education if she had some education. What kept gnawing at his heart and conscience was the fact that whenever he made his rounds to visit his children, he never liked what he saw of them. They were imbibing habits and traits their parents never taught them. The second child was beginning to steal, lie and curse. Such things broke his heart and prompted him to straightway put in his resignation letter from the mission. He did that with tears in his eyes--not because he no longer had the call to continue in service, but because of his children's needs.

In talking with the mission director, Noel openly shared what he was going through. At this the director sent Noel with a letter to us in Messiah College. It was that simple trip to Messiah College that sent Noel singing and rejoicing back to the mission field and to his ministry. His kids were admitted into Messiah College on a very huge discount. Messiah College solicited help from friends and supporters to supplement the kids' fees. After all, he never really wanted to quit the field. He was doing a fantastic job. But he felt a deep sense of responsibility and an obligation to his own kids. The story though is not over. We at Messiah College must still grapple with his kids as a result of separation and not growing up under the care and Christian influence of their parents.

Mallam Adamu has a very wonderful ministry reaching out to the desert and the nomadic people of northern Nigeria, Niger, and Chad. He and his wife are very powerful evangelists who have been able to impact Muslim villages. But the itinerant nature of their ministry can never allow their children to have a stable school life. This is because most of the areas they cover have no schools apart from Koranic schools. And actually, even if there are schools, this family works in very hostile environments where their lives are not always safe. Adamu's relatives are all Muslims so he would not want to send any of his children to any of them. He was in a dilemma until he was directed to Messiah College.

One of the strangest experiences to me is the case of Obi and Janet who are serving in Swaziland. They have three children. The oldest is schooling in Nigeria, and could speak English and a Nigerian language (the mother tongue) very well. The second child is schooling in Mozambique because Obi and Janet served there for a couple of years and the schooling was all in Portuguese. When they had to move to Swaziland, they had to leave this child behind with the family of a colleague to continue his education. The third child is with them in Swaziland and could speak some English and Swastika language.

Many African missionaries serving in countries where the *lingua franca* is different from the one spoken in their home countries (and usually where the educational systems are different too) are usually not able to afford international school fees for their children. The children either attend national schools and then cannot fit when they go back home or they are sent away to live with relatives.

The most painful thing here with the family of Obi and Janet is not just the separation, but also the fact that all three kids cannot communicate with one another when they come together! The parents were not willing to talk this issue over with the mission board that sent them out or even allow us talk to their leaders on their behalf. They did not want to be seen to be complaining or gossiping about their leaders. They would rather suffer and endure in silence or figure out their problems on their own. Likewise, many, if not most African missionaries will rather be silent over their pains and traumas or quietly resign or withdraw their services from the mission agency without stating exactly what the reason for withdrawal really is.

Joe and Pam were serving in Liberia when the war broke out and they had to escape. On their return to Nigeria they felt a call to go to Central African Republic (CAR), a French-speaking country. Now, the question was what to do with the children who had already started school in Liberia, an English-speaking country. The system of education in this new country is totally different. Their decision to enroll the children in Messiah College and to go to the mission field without them was a hard one. But the hardest part of the separation was the inability of the parents to afford air tickets for the kids to be able to spend holidays with their parents in CAR. In trying to work out a solution to this in order to ease the pain of separation, Messiah College approached the leadership of the mission agency soliciting some assistance for this family to unite at least once a year. But the leaders felt it was Joe's family affair and they ought to be able to work through the problems in a way that will suit the family without the "interference" of the mission.

Six years ago my husband and I met two families in Togo who were doing an excellent job of planting churches. Today, however, they are no longer on the mission field. The first family had a 19 year-old son who had dropped out of school at the age of 16. He had gone through the French system of education until the junior year of secondary level. The parents then felt he needed to continue in an English school, but because they could not afford the fees for an international school they sent him to Nigeria. His French schooling background could not allow him to fit into the English system of education in Nigeria. Invariably he dropped out, and was also jobless. In fact, his younger sister had a similar problem and just settled into an early marriage.

The second family, who had been instrumental in the planting of about fifty churches in northern Togo, had an equally pathetic experience. Knowing that they could not afford international school fees, they decided to keep their children in a city in Nigeria a couple of hours' drive away from the Togo capital city. They rented an apartment for their children where they lived all by themselves--about five of them of primary and secondary school ages. Each parent was paying a bi-monthly visit alternately. Eventually they understood the negative consequences and danger of this arrangement. Their best recourse, regrettably, was to resign their service as church planters and go back home.

I was talking with an adult MK from Chad recently as he reminisced about how he went through school. He shared how he had to ride horse back on a three-day journey from the mission station to the nearest school. Because of the hassle of going to school that way his younger brothers could not attend school. Instead they became shepherd boys and are now illiterate adults. Did it have to be that way?

Some mission agencies and a few denominational mission boards are looking into the area of MK education and are offering what they call "children's education allowance" to missionary families. In some cases, these allowances offset most of the schooling bills of the MKs, depending of course on their grade levels. But in many cases it is for the parents to make up whatever differences there may be. Messiah College, for example, as a service ministry to missionary families is always giving discounts ranging from 30% to 80%. This is always done in faith trusting that God will always provide the rest.

Another positive development is that three years ago, an evangelical group (the ECWA) opened a children's hostel West Africa. There are about 75 MKs presently of different age groups and grade levels being accommodated and most go to nearby schools including the ECWA staff school while some go through the pre-school and primary school program making use of the Accelerated Christian Education (or the School of Tomorrow) curriculum.

Physical Health

The health of African missionaries has not yet received much attention in many quarters. In general there is no organized, consistent, on-going health care provision. However in an emergency, there will be a "fire brigade" attention given to it. The African continent is largely a rural continent where basic amenities such as health delivery services are luxuries in many areas. This is especially true in the rural areas where missionaries are mostly found. It is a common fact that most missionaries hardly go for routine medical check-ups unless they are ill. And even then if it is a problem that they could manage on their own with self medication they will not hesitate to do so unless it become an emergency.

Malarial fever, typhoid fever, dysentery are some of the common diseases in Africa with which missionaries have to contend. Malaria is so common so that many people just treat themselves with over-the-counter drugs. Regular health checks-up are not common practice by agencies and so in many cases agencies have no particular physician specifically for the check-ups of the health of missionaries. There may be Christian physicians in private practice who may volunteer their clinics or their time to help missionaries and will often offer discounts for consultancy and treatment. Some mission agencies may have particular hospitals, clinics or mission-owned hospitals where they will refer their missionaries for consultations and treatment, but I am not aware yet of a hospital or a clinic in Africa set up solely for missionaries and their families.

The most threatening factor to the health of missionaries and their families is stress. This is so because most African missionaries do not take leave or vacations. They work and continue to work until they are no longer able to work. Many African missionaries work under very austere conditions and often they are stressed by many factors including long years of work without vacation, lack of adequate provision, family and children issues, trauma from civil or religious wars, communal clashes, and so on.

The children of a Nigerian missionary family who served in Sierra Leone become hysterical just by the mere mention of the name "Sierra Leone". They went through a number of traumatic experiences during the country's rebel war before they were rescued and evacuated by the United Nations peace keeping corps. No one had thought of doing any kind of therapy to help these children overcome the trauma that they experienced. The family never went back to Sierra Leone. They are in another country still serving as missionaries, but these children live in constant fear of anything that sounds like gunshots or war.

It is not uncommon to find one missionary doing the jobs of five people. Because of this missionaries need to go on vacation on regular intervals in order to maintain their physical, mental, and spiritual health and to avoid burnout. But that is not the case usually. Some consider themselves too busy to take a vacation or break. The work is too important. And where there are not enough people to cover the work, there is the fear that the work will collapse. Some think it is unspiritual to go on vacation when souls are perishing. It is never surprising to hear a missionary (and even his/her leader) boast of having not gone on any break for the past ten years of ministry! And yet there are some who would be happy to have a vacation if only they can afford what it takes to go on vacation (and with their families).

Mission leaders who have had cases of burnout in personnel are beginning to think of the general health of the missionary. As a start, some leaders are recalling their missionaries for "refresher" courses. Hopefully this input/break will help missionaries develop and improve themselves intellectually and spiritually, but also provide rest by getting them out of their work domain. For example member groups of the Nigerian Evangelical Mission Association (NEMA) send their missionaries for short courses or conferences organized by the NEMA owned institute—the Nigerian Evangelical Missionary Institute. These courses run for a couple of weeks or a few months. They are long enough to enable the missionary to learn and short enough to enable the missionary get back to base on the mission field.

Spiritual Warfare

Spiritual Warfare is commonplace in any typical mission field in Africa. In many cases the sending agencies or mission boards endeavor to set up consistent and effective prayer support for their missionaries (prayer support is covered more than financial support). Churches along with cell groups of various sizes and age groups have effectively mobilized for the prayer support of missionaries in the major sending countries. Women prayer groups are in the forefront of this kind of support.

Missionaries from Pentecostal church backgrounds are nowadays being trained to engage in spiritual warfare, praying against the territorial spirits that rule the regions or the tribes in which the missionaries serve. In fact some schools of missions include spiritual warfare or power encounter as a course in the curriculum. Prayers with long days of dry fasts, that is fasting no eating and no drinking of water or any fluids are part and parcel of the missionary work in Africa. Missionaries whose church backgrounds did not prepare them for power encounter, have had to learn in the hard way. Some sending agencies and churches have learned from their casualties as a result of demonic attacks. They had no choice but to now believe and to take action in the area of adequate preparation for power encounter and spiritual warfare.

A team of five missionaries—including a couple and three singles--were serving in Senegal when suddenly their health came under severe attack. The team leader developed inexplicable and excruciating pain all over his body. He could neither sit nor lay down. All the doctors he saw could not diagnose anything. His wife had persistent and bitter migraines. One of the men, a very effective cross-cultural missionary, went out of his mind with depression. The only team member left and able to function was a young lady, a short-termer. The team leader, sensing the danger they were all in, decided that the surviving missionary, the short-termer, who was also a novice on the field, should be sent with an SOS back to the mission headquarters. She also took along with her the depressed colleague.

The moment she stepped into the headquarters office with her sick colleague, she burst into tears (tears that have been suppressed throughout the duration of their journey) and it took her a few moments to be able to explain what was going on in Senegal. A quick prayer summons was sent round to all prayer partners while the director of the mission along with two others made a quick trip to Senegal to visit the team and pray. Within a week everyone had recovered with no medical intervention or explanation. But the man who was brought back home could not get back to the field for a long while. In fact, it took over ten years before he could get back to the field, and even then, not to the same field, but to another. And that was after receiving professional counseling for several months. This was spiritual warfare—genuine physical and emotional problems, but stemming from the enemy.

The Way Forward

In May 2000 at a continental missions conferences in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire called “Mission Africa” brought together missions and church leaders from around the continent. During this conference, the Evangelism and Missions Commission (EMC) of the AEA launched the member care track for Africa. The track works to increase awareness about member care needs and resources, especially among mission leaders. A main strategy is to hold member care awareness seminars and consultations in each region of the continent for mission executives and leaders. Initially communication between members of the track (and in general) posed a huge hindrance to achieving some of our goals. It is still difficult, especially in areas where telephone services are not very efficient and where the postal service is really slow.

In July 2001, the EMC convened a member care consultation in Cameroun for the central African region. It was attended by mission and church leaders, pastors, and some missionaries. It was really a valuable time, and there was a lot of brainstorming on what should be done on the issue of the care of missionaries in Central Africa. We decided to hold to organize a special awareness seminar for 2002, where many more leaders—the decision makers—will be invited to come and hear and also contribute. A regional member care committee has been set up for this region who will work together looking into the needs of the care of the African missionaries in the region. Also in the pipeline for 2002 is member care training for mission executives and/or personnel managers of missions agencies and boards for the West African region in 2002.

Travel within the continent is also expensive, especially by air, and probably more so than anywhere else in the world. So it is hard financially to meet together. In addition, the instability of some African countries make planning and attending member care/missions events difficult. For example, at the time the Cameroun consultation was held there were no participants from Central Africa Republic (CAR) as a result of the uncertainties caused by a rebel war and an attempt to topple the ruling government.

African missions has come a very long way. There is a growing member care awareness and I believe that some significant changes will soon take place to better support mission personnel. We are praying for more people to become involved in member care and to raise the standard of care. Our mission efforts will thus improve because our staff will be better prepared and cared for as they serve the Lord in missions.

Reflection and Discussion

1. What are some of the main logistical obstacles to developing member care in Africa?
2. What does a typical member care program/approach include for an African sending church/agency? How does it compare with the member care program/approach from your sending group?
3. Review some of the challenges of African missionary wives or missionary children. What could be done to further support them and help them contribute to missions?
4. List some ways that non-Africans could work with Africans to develop member care within organizations and at the regional level.
5. Recall some of the case examples in this article—positive or negative. Which ones affected you the most and why?

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