

Wounded Healers

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Overview: The Work of God must not destroy the Worker of God: Married couples in cross-cultural work need to have healthy marriages in order to work effectively in the ministry. Every couple has areas where they need to grow, of course, and together there will be many ups and downs in their relationship, family, and ministry. Intentionally working at good communication, having couple times together, and getting supportive input from books and friends are very important. Even strong, healthy couples on the field—and anywhere of course--can go through significant struggles in their relationship. But when couples arrive on the field with major unresolved areas, and significant secret struggles, the results can be catastrophic. We are only as healthy as our secrets.

“Pastor,” the voice on the other side of the world said, “I just want to let you know that my husband is next door living and having an affair with a single lady missionary.”

In between her cries and tears, Jane began to tell me her story. They had arrived on the field during their first term and placed in a difficult missionary station a few hundred miles away from their closest fellow worker. Their nearest fellow worker was 100 miles away. There was no electricity or drinking water. As first term missionaries, Fred plunged into the work and had done a wonderful job, building a well, providing power for their home. Their marriage, which was not very strong, began to crack under the weight of ministry in a [challenging] field. They would have done better if they were at home, but here in a foreign land under the stress and strain of ministry, their marriage was dying a slow death.

In the course of time, Jane carried a child fathered by one of the local believers. Her husband contacted a local doctor to perform an abortion. With much reluctance the doctor aborted the baby. They completed their term and returned home for a year of furlough. During the same year, no one at home knew that their marriage was dead. A brief report from the counselor indicated that they needed to work on their marriage but suggested nothing serious, so their agency and church sent them back to the same place,

It was during the second term, that a new single lady from the same region where they were from joined the team. As time passed, the mutual attraction between the husband and the new lady missionary began. It became an open secret among the three of them. They would take dinner together and he would remain in her house next door to help clean up but would remain with her until late in the night. Sometimes, he would simply return in the early morning just before the sunrise.

Months passed and Jane found herself alone in bed crying herself to sleep each night. It took great courage for her to call the pastor since it meant their dreams of serving in cross-cultural mission would end. She would also be blamed again for blowing the whistle. She would have to bear the weight of his anger and wrath. In her pain, she decided that she needed to talk to someone she could trust and decided to call her pastor.

The pastor asked the agency for permission to fly immediately to meet the couple and help them. He was told to call the field leader and let the field deal with the issue first. As the field leader was on his way for furlough, he was not available. So the assistant was called upon to visit them immediately. The assistant called later to tell the pastor that they did not find any major problem that would warrant the return of the couple. Months passed and the desperate wife continued to call the pastor regularly. When the field leader finally returned to the country, a few months later, he was invited to speak at the same station where the couple were assigned. This allowed him the opportunity to find out first hand what was going on.

The field leader discovered that the situation was worse than one could imagine. He immediately requested the pastor to fly out and meet the couple in the station. Before flying out to meet the couple, the pastor had sought permission from the supporting church to fly the couple to another country for intensive counseling before they would return home. The church had agreed to cover the expenses and allowed them to rest in that country for a whole month.

After six months delay after he was first contacted by Jane, the pastor arrived at the field headquarters. The field director told him that they had immediately sent the single lady to the capital city and go through counseling with the field director's wife. The pastor was asked to take a long car ride to meet the couple in their field station and help with their immediate departure to get counseling in another country. It was a painful time for everyone involved: the family, their church, the agency, the field workers, the national church, and the pastor.

The pastor, the agency and the church were in constant contact with the counselor in the neutral country. The couple was sent to a residential counseling ministry especially established for pastors and missionaries. During the four weeks, they met in groups with other hurting couples, had individual as well as couple counseling sessions with qualified psychologist. In the summary report, the counselor outlined 5 [five] major steps for recovery and reconciliation. A month after the couple returned to their home country, the leaders of the church sat down and talked with them. The agency and the pastor also met with the couple. However, the husband continued to be unrepentant and non-operative. It was later learned that the husband, Fred and the other single lady missionary were still in contact with each while the couple were undergoing counseling. All efforts of the church leaders and members, the agency, and friends to reconciliation and save the marriage failed.

Fred finally divorced Jane and remarried the single lady missionary. Meanwhile, the church continued to support the Jane and her daughter from the marriage with Fred. A job was found for her and the Christian employer was very kind and helpful in her recovery. Although Jane was thankful for the help the church gave her, she refused to continue her counseling with another counselor.

Applications

Consider these four points.

- Firstly, while spiritual maturity of the missionary is foundational, it is not the only measure of readiness for cross-cultural mission. On hindsight, there were indications along the way during pre-field preparation that pointed to the weak health in the couple's marriage. A previous pastor and some members had questioned whether they were ready for the field. They had expressed general concerns without specific reference to their marriage. However, the agency, the counselor and the church failed to pause and take serious preparatory steps such as dealing with the concerns expressed by members and previous to help the couple simply because they were seen to be spiritually mature leaders.
- Secondly, the field leaders acknowledged their failure in assigning first term workers to a very difficult mission station. Even a couple or seasoned missionary would find the mission station a challenging place to minister. Living in a Third World rural environment without electricity or running water and not having the support or mentoring from a senior missionary are sure receipt for failure.
- Thirdly, the counselor's assessment of the couple during the initial application process as well as when they were home after the first term was inadequate. One wonders about the skill level of the counselor who did these assessments, and also about the type of assessment that was actually done. Current practice in many places requires a thorough assessment of the background, stability, and physical health of the couple, their marriage, and any children. In this case, a single sentence report after their first term re-entry interview stating that the couple had to work on their marriage wasn't adequate or sufficient. (We now know that at the couple's first initial assessment, the counseling community lacks adequate acknowledge of the process and specialized training in missionary personnel evaluation.)

- Fourthly, member care needs to be given a higher priority on the field. It is irresponsible to send workers on difficult assignment without the provision for pastoral care and constant visit. For example in this situation, this couple would have benefited from regular visit by the field supervisor, an annual visit from the pastor of the sending church, and working under a senior missionary for the first term. It appears that the field leadership didn't have in place an adequate member care plan either for ongoing members need or emergency situation. While sending church trusted and depended on the agency at home and on the field to provide adequate member care, the lack of manpower and financial resources at both ends, often create a vacuum in this area. Good intention and lip service must give way to action.

My suggestion:

My fellow brothers in the Mainland, in your as you bring the gospel "Back to Jerusalem", please don't sacrifice the lives of the workers unnecessarily. Care for them so that together we will hear, "well done, good and faithful servants" from the Master's lips.

God bless you!