

Resilience in Ministry despite Trauma

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The global context is changing. Many countries are now being called high security alert nations. For example, the continent of Africa has become a more violent place to live and work. At any given time, there are a number of countries involved in ethnic wars, on the brink of a coup d'état, or in turmoil of one kind or another. Inevitably, when populations are at war, people risk being suddenly displaced through political evacuations.

Working in these kinds of settings are people associated with non-governmental organizations, relief and development agencies, and missionary organizations and the uncomfortable fact is that they will very likely experience personal trauma during their time overseas. For those bringing the good news, the troubled settings in which they minister are the new frontier for the gospel. Nations in crisis need a message of hope now more than ever.

Recently, a project¹ was conducted to discover factors that contribute to the resiliency and retention of missionaries who have gone through traumatic events in their missionary career in Africa and yet continue to serve there. In this case study, some key factors were identified and analyzed which seem to contribute to resiliency in western missionaries in Africa. These factors were also emphasized in the Best Practices of their mission agencies.

Factors that contributed to missionary retention despite trauma

In the project, missionaries who had experienced various types of trauma were interviewed. These missionaries had been able to continue in their missionary calling after their particular trauma. Two questions were considered:

- What pre-trauma factors contribute to the retention of these missionaries?
- What post-trauma factors contribute to the retention of these missionaries?

Four factors that missionaries brought into their trauma event were: a strong personal “call” to be where they were, a preparedness from birth, words from God, and sturdy relationships.

Four factors which emerged after the trauma were: experiencing the keeper side of God, hearing authoritative leadership voices, quickly finding new ministry foci, and benefiting from functional networks.

Three unexpected results from the trauma event were a less encumbered way of living, embracing sudden transitions as doors to new ministries, and a reshaped life for future ministry.

¹ Ronald Brown, 2005. Self-identified retention factors by western missionaries in Africa who have experienced traumatic events. DMin project. Trinity International University.

What mission agencies can do for their missionaries

Further research suggested several things that mission leaders can do in order to enhance resiliency and longevity in missionaries who have gone through traumatic events. In the study, thirty missionaries who did not quit despite having experienced traumas such as political evacuations, rape, car-jackings, armed home invasions and robberies were asked about factors which contributed to their resiliency and longevity on the front lines.

Here are seven things the mission agencies did which their missionaries found helpful:

1. Created networks of relationships

The good relationships that resilient missionaries enjoyed with other missionaries were most often cited as a retention factor. Their missionary sending agencies had ensured that missionaries worked on teams and provided training and coaching to nurture good team relationships. This Best Practice earned “post-trauma pay-off” when fellow team members helped provide a “soft landing” for each other.

Another useful network that agencies had established was the regional network. This network was used when missionaries evacuated to surrounding countries to find temporary shelter and safety. Agencies that plan regional gatherings will inadvertently provide for the development and expansion of a wider network of relationships for their missionaries. This larger network will sometimes pay dividends in missionary resiliency at a later time.

2. Acknowledged the trauma

If the mission leadership does not acknowledge in some way the trauma that a worker has endured, then an elephant enters the room. The trauma suffered by a worker can have an enormous personal effect yet the description of this same event might make a fairly minimal emotional impact on mission leadership as the e-mail describing the trauma is quickly scanned. The onus is on the leader to acknowledge the event and to actively find out how the worker is coping after a trauma.

After a very traumatic event, one missionary family was back in their homeland for a short time. They spoke in glowing terms of their mission leader who came, along with his wife, to visit them. “It was more than an e-mail message. He came with his wife”. That action spoke volumes, and they felt that the pain they had endured had been validated by the visit of a key leader. This contrasted with another family who, after a very tense and traumatic robbery, did not hear anything from their leadership. “It was as if they (leaders) didn’t care”. The family felt very much on their own, and they felt hurt by the lack of leadership response.

3. Stayed in the region

Mission teams with evacuation protocols which include a first level of evacuation to another country in the region (as opposed to a direct return to the homeland) seem to fare better after a traumatic event. According to the project data, what gives the evacuee the most benefits in survival and resiliency is the loving support of existing relationships.

Personal relationships are often stronger on the field than in the homeland. The level of empathy on the field is frequently greater because it is easier to find people who have gone through similar traumas.

4. Spoke words of wisdom in love

At crucial junctures in a missionary's life, the carefully chosen words of a leader are most welcome. One missionary had faithfully worked for twenty years in a certain country. Following an evacuation, however, she received an invitation to join a ministry team in another country. Despite that attractive opportunity, she felt committed to her original task. When her mission leader came to visit her, he said, "You have permission to leave. I think you should accept that invitation from another country." Only then was the missionary's burden lifted and she was able to change assignments without feeling guilty about abandoning her post and the project.

It is evident from the project data that missionaries are strongly committed. They are not easily dislodged. In fact, missionaries will often regard leaving or moving as failure or betrayal of a heavenly mandate. What can override this false notion is a well-spoken timely word by a mission leader who has earned an adequate trust level. A leader like this has clearly listened and understood the situation, and therefore can, as it were, speak for God.

5. Developed a theology of risk and suffering.

According to the results of ReMAP II, mission agencies with high resiliency practice good screening procedures of mission candidates. One component of good screening should be the requirement that candidates develop their own position on risk and suffering.

In the past, agencies would require candidates to prepare a doctrinal statement but this document did not usually include a position on suffering. Now, as more and more candidates are placed in high security alert nations, it can be safely assumed that they will inevitably face trauma. They will be robbed, they will get sick, and they will be traumatized. Hence, candidates should be required to consider these risks and to develop their own theology of suffering.

Developing a theology of risk and suffering before going overseas will put suffering into its proper context, and thus foster resiliency in missionaries. This is crucial for those growing up with a western cultural view of suffering which says something is wrong if we suffer, so we should avoid suffering at all costs. A young mother came to the field with a typical western cultural view of suffering. She thought that if she would do the right things, God would protect and look after her family and she would not suffer.

Seventy-four percent of those interviewed mentioned that they had advanced in the development of a Biblical view of suffering. One quoted John 16:33, "In this world you will have trouble". Another remembered that Jesus was a man of sorrows acquainted with grief, and so we should expect suffering as we walk in His footsteps.

One mission leader believes that when agencies target unreached peoples they should expect suffering. Consequently, they need to be better prepared by putting on the appropriate armor and building a sufficient prayer base.

6. Fostered a sense of duty.

One surprising discovery in the study was to note how many missionaries referred to their farm upbringing where they learned values such as hard work, finishing a task, duty, perseverance and sticking with the project. A Vietnam veteran had also learned these core values. He brought into his missionary career the notion that one stayed at his post until the orders were changed. Quite a few workers who had suffered trauma shared this sense of determination not to run away when trouble came. They were more determined to survive trauma, and to push on and get the task done. Mission executives need to consider how to identify and nurture a sense of duty in their mission candidates.

7. Affirmed the call.

Sending agencies must continue to grapple with how the concept of “the call” is expressed today. Do missionary candidates apply out of a desire to do something good in the world? Or because of a set of felt needs? Or from a sense of injustice? If so, how do those sentiments translate or morph into a strong conviction that holds strong during troubles and trials? How is that call developed? Where do new recruits have an opportunity to develop their sense of call?

Maybe the deeper question is how God speaks and calls people today to follow Him in mission work. Whatever the language or semantics used, sending agencies who assign people to high security alert nations must feel satisfied and confident through the screening process that new recruits are called to serve in such places. Ensuring a firm call at the beginning, and testing that call in ministry, will definitely contribute to resiliency after trauma.

Discussion Questions:

1. Consider the pre-trauma factors and post-trauma factors that contribute to retention of missionaries. Which of these factors are most important in your missionaries in their ministry context? What other factors have contributed to their resilience in ministry?
2. Discuss the seven things that mission agencies can do to help their missionaries who have gone through traumatic events. Which of these Best Practices could be developed further in your organisation? What other Best Practices are relevant to resilience through suffering and trauma for your culture?

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