

FOUR LEVELS OF MEMBER CARE

~~~Neal Pirolo

Member Care? What happened to the few, the brave, the bold, the soldiers of the Cross? They were called; they went; they served; they died! Some even carried their belongings to the field in their own coffin! Has all this talk about member care turned the missionary venture into the coddling of a new breed? Is there a new strain of field workers with needs distinct to those of previous generations?

Or, is member care today a revitalization of an aspect of missions which was practiced even as long ago as the First Century that just fell into disuse until recently? Or, does the ease of communication today make people more aware of care, which has been there for missionaries of all generations? Or, does communication with field workers make us more aware of needs that have long been neglected?

These questions might provide incentive to explore the *theology* of member care. But the compass of this paper and of my heart is *caring* for the missionaries! What are we doing? What can we be doing? What should we be doing? What will we do? What *must* we do?

The ministry of member care is multi-leveled and multi-faceted: Multi-leveled in the cooperation of at least four levels of care: church, agency, personal and crisis care givers. It is also multi-faceted in the diversity of need of each individual field worker (including each child) in each of numerous ministry locations and situations.

Nothing could be clearer in my mind on this subject than the fact that there is a desperate need for these four levels to continue to increase their cooperation so that our missionaries are better cared for. After all, missionaries are too valuable to lose.

Each level has its strengths and weaknesses. Yet, in God's wisdom, the weakness of one is the strength of another. Thus, acknowledgement of this is the first step to the reconciliation between three of these entities: The church, agency and crisis level care givers. And learning about and incorporating yet a fourth contributing level—the *personal* level—of member care is paramount.

Agency Level Member Care: There are certain logistical.... Wait! Yes, this is part of the problem—starting with the agency level. Member care should begin long before any agency is involved. I believe that we need to begin at the church level because the Commission was given to the Church. History reveals that the Church, not unlike a wayward spouse, “divorced” itself from the Commission in 1793, when William Carey’s passion for the lost was squelched with the words, “If God wants to save the heathen, He will do it without your help or ours!” But also, like a repentant “spouse”, the Church is declaring their need to reengage fully with God’s Commission, recorded in Mark 16:15 and Matthew 28:18-21: “Go ye into all the world...preach the Gospel; make disciples.” Therefore, let’s begin with the Church.<sup>1,2</sup>

## **Church Level Member Care**

**To Identify and Nurture** The first issue at this level is the identifying and nurturing of a prospective missionary. This often begins long before that person even realizes a personal call. We do not need to go as far as the Church in Jerusalem did in changing Joseph's name to Barnabas when they identified his giftings. But, having done so, it was clear that he would be the one to be sent to Antioch. They definitely did not need an evangelist—a great revival was going on; they did need a reconciler—one who could make sure all things were being done decently and in order. They were ready to send him out when they sensed the need. (See Acts 11:22-24)

Likewise, the Antioch church wisely sent out (at the Holy Spirit's direction) an evangelist (Saul) and a reconciler (Barnabas) when it was time to go to the "regions beyond". (See Acts 13:1-4)

Thus, the focus of our church life should be outreach. Yes, the *life* of the church is *worship*, the *growth* of the church is *nurture*, but the *mission* of the church is *outreach*! Because outreach is our mission, we should be ready to send out our workers as God develops in us a compassion for the lost of the world.<sup>3</sup>

Nurturing the prospective cross-cultural worker is giving him opportunity to exercise his "cross-cultural muscles". Give him the opportunity of working within the missions fellowship of the church, praying for missionaries, ministering to internationals who live among us, participating in a *good* short-term trip. Doing something so seemingly mundane as helping a first term missionary sort through what to sell? What to give away? What to store? Where to store it?

Learning the discipline of commitment. Becoming a real "seedy" character! That is, filled with the Seed of the Word of God to be able to produce spiritual fruit. (Seedless fruit, you know, cannot reproduce.) Then also, to be a Student of the Word to be able to see that fruit mature—to go out and reproduce again.

To be clear, this nurturing could even begin in the church nursery! The boggles on the mobile above the crib could be globes of the world. That baby could be "touching the world" before it even knows there is a world in need. And the carpet in the toddlers room could be cut in the shapes of the nations of the world. He may not understand what he has "toddled" on until his third grade teacher brings the class to that room and shows them the location of the people groups for whom they are currently praying.

**To Sound A Clarion Call** As the church continues to nurture their prospective cross-cultural workers (themselves possibly not yet knowing who are the cross-cultural "parts") in their Body, the leadership needs to be sounding a clarion call that reflects the ethos of the church. Questions such as these help to clarify that call: Should our focus be on Pauline-style evangelism, going where the Gospel has never been preached? Are we more inclined to come along side of existing national churches and nurture them in the Word in such a way that they will go out and teach others? Do we have a compassion for the humanitarian approach? Do we want the personal call of the individual to determine our focus? Then, "*Write the vision, make it plain, so that he may run who reads it!*" (Hab 2:2)

**Decisive Point of Battle** Yet, in answering those questions, we must be clear that wherever that call would take the field worker and whatever it is that he would do, it must be at a *decisive point* of battle. The church must be able to answer two questions—both of them—in the affirmative: *Is it worth taking?* And, *Can we take it?* Is it worth spending ten to twenty years translating the Scriptures into an indigenous language? Do we have the personnel and stamina to support such a long-term project? If the first answer is “yes”, but the second answer is “no”, it is not a decisive point of battle for your church. Both answers must be in the affirmative. Or, consider: Is it worth directly partnering with national ministries? Do we have the resources (personnel and financial) to support *their* initiatives? Both must be answered with a “yes” for it to be a decisive point of battle for your church.

**The Rest of the Team** A major part of the pre-field preparation of a missionary is the development of his partnership team. Paul, a missionary of the First Century, wrote a Letter to one of his sending churches, the church at Philippi. In it, he addresses six areas of care they were providing for him. It is the church’s responsibility to ensure the missionary has a vital, functioning personal care team.

A number of years ago, a young man returned from a fruitful short-term trip. He sensed God’s call for him to return long term. The church leadership had confirmed his personal call. The missions pastor handed him a book to read to help him develop his partnership team. “I’m not gonna read dat book,” he retorted. The pastor calmly, but deliberately said, “We cannot stop you from *going* to that country, but if you want us to *send* you, you must read this book and develop a personal partnership team. While this may seem a strong position for the church to take, mission leadership who understand the importance of “the rest of the team”, will hold firm to it.<sup>4,5</sup>

**Agency Accountability** A fifth, equally vital responsibility of the church is to actively relate with the agency in the care they have agreed to provide for the church’s “feet”. I liken the missionaries being sent out by a local church as the “feet” within that Body. (Isaiah 52:7) And it must be clear by all four levels of care that missionaries are members of the spiritual Body, the Church, of which the local fellowship is a microcosm. A tragic myth within the missions community is that once a person joins a mission agency, they become a member of that “Body”. But a mission agency is *not* a spiritual Body. Assuredly, all who work within that organization are spiritual, but the spiritual Body is the Church. This important distinction helps to clarify the relationship between the Church and agency, maintaining that the agency is to assist the Church in fulfilling its Commission. Yet, by no means is this disregarding the vitality of the agency in the missions process.

## **Personal Level Member Care**

**A Scriptural Foundation** The Scriptural foundation for this most-needed and, unfortunately, still most-neglected aspect of the missions process, is found in the Letter of Romans, written later in the ministry of Paul, the Apostle. He had heard of an

Unreached People Group in Spain. After all, unreached peoples bore testimony to his life verse and working principle: *“I have strived to preach the Gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man’s foundation.”* This, of course, was based upon Isaiah’s statement: *“To whom He was not spoken of, they shall see: and they that have not heard shall understand.”* (Romans 15:20, 21; Isaiah 52:15)

In Romans 10, Paul was ready to spell out for us the whole missions process. Using the Gapless Linear Logic form of reasoning so well understood by the people of that day, Paul laid out his premise in verse 13. And because he had something very important to say, he established that premise in Scripture by quoting Joel 2:32: *“Whosoever shall call upon the Name of the Lord shall be SAVED.”* Using all the varied and creative “means” available to us, the goal of all missions endeavor is the salvation of the lost. Certainly, as John Piper takes it one step further: *“That worship for all of eternity will result.”*

Now, Paul begins a series of four (not three) questions with each new thought directly connected (without a gap) to the previous thought. Thus, he must begin his reasoning with the thought of calling. Question One: *“How shall they call on Him in Whom they have not believed?”* An easy concept to understand. No one is going to call on one in whom they do not believe. Next question, tied to the previous newly-introduced thought of believing: *“How can they believe on Him of Whom they have not heard?”* Again, a simple progression of thought. A third question: *“And how can they hear without a preacher?”*

**The Process Truncated** There it is! The question we have all been waiting for, or so goes the average missions conference. And with all the passion of a skilled orator, the one making the appeal can work up the emotions of many. Even to misuse the Scripture in Isaiah 6. For, after Isaiah said those “famous” words, *“Here am I. Send me,”* God sent him to his own people, not into a cross-cultural ministry! But, not to be concerned with such detail, to the front they come, making a “commitment” to be a “missionary!” Of course, many wake up the next morning, wondering what in the world did I commit to? This is one of the great tragedies in the Christian community. Whether it is in that appeal or just in the structure of a missions conference, a great opportunity is lost to additionally mobilize many into the ministry of serving as senders. Ninety per cent of conference attendees will never go to the field. Yet, without a clear understanding of all that is involved in Paul’s last question, they go home wondering *“Why did I waste my time at yet another missions conference? I’ll never go to the mission field, but that is all they talked about.”*

But the beauty of timeless Scripture is that Paul didn’t stop at the third question. He asked one more. And it is pertinent to note that when one is using this form of logic, he ends with the very most important point he wants to make. So, here is his final question. It has to be tied to the preacher, the one who goes, the cross-cultural worker, the missionary: *“And how can they preach (How can our missionaries be effective.) unless they are SENT?”*

SAVED....call  
Call....believe  
Believe....hear  
Hear....preacher  
Preach....SENT!

This final question then, draws our attention to the whole subject of “the rest of the team!” All involved in the sending process are vital, each in their roles. But, again, in the beauty of the Holy Spirit-inspiration of Paul’s words, so that those who serve as senders (personal level caregivers) do not get to thinking that they are the focus of missions, in verse 15, Paul brings our thoughts back full circle to the missionary by quoting Isaiah 52:7: “*How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the Gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things.*”

Those who go and those who serve as senders form a partnership team for effective cross-cultural ministry. The whole team *owns* the vision. “This is *our* ministry; the missionary is our field representative,” the team has been formed to understand. And each understands his part is vital to the successful fulfillment of the mission.

Though the one who scores the goal on a football (soccer) team may be credited with the “win” and might even bask in the applause given to him, he knows that the game would not have been won without the rest of the team. Or, Neil Armstrong who said it so clearly as he stepped foot on the moon, “One small step for a man, but one giant leap for mankind.” What acclaim he received when he returned to earth, yet thousands, possibly hundreds of thousands of people, played a part in his “one small step”. Likewise, though the missionary might allow the church, the agency, and/or the public to walk him up to the top step of the pedestal when he comes home, having experienced some notable success, he knows that he could not have succeeded on the field without a strong support team.

The six areas Paul addresses in his Letter to the Philippians (and that every missionary needs today) are moral support (the gift of encouragement), prayer support (the gift of intercession), reentry support (the gift of hospitality), logistics support (the gift of administration), communication support (the gifts of discernment and encouragement), and financial support (the gift of giving).<sup>6</sup>

### **Agency Level Member Care<sup>7</sup>**

Sometimes, it can be challenging to draw the line between the role of the agency and church in member care. Let’s look briefly at nine areas of agency level member care: Recruitment, Pre-field preparation, On-field care, Reentry, Home assignment, Prayer, Conflict management, Partnerships, and Contingency management.

**Recruitment** The agency will work with the church to assign the right candidate to the right team to the right field work in which he will be engaged. Often the church will initiate the choice of field, but the agency, seeing the overall picture of their field locations, is best suited to determine a “good fit”. With policies and expectations

communicated clearly between agency, church leadership and candidate, there will be fewer “oops” to hinder progress.

**Pre-field Preparation** The agency will ensure all their candidates go through cross-cultural and language training as well as the agency’s orientation process of home office and field practices. Logistical policies such as legal paperwork for who will be the parents for the children should both parents die on the field need to be addressed. Agency leaders will take the time to develop a personal relationship with the parents *and* the children, and the leadership in sending church.

**On-field Care** The agency will ensure that missionaries have a well balanced work/home life. There needs to be an ongoing check to ensure spiritual, physical, emotional, and social health. The agency plays a vital role in ensuring that the church is kept abreast with the progress of their missionary. The agency will coordinate with the sending church to ensure the missionary makes a smooth reentry back to their home country. The agency will give time (while still on the field) to begin a “wind-down” of work responsibilities, allowing the missionary to begin preparing for the changes he will experience back home.

**Reentry** The agency will coordinate with the sending church in the logistical needs of their missionaries. The agency, in discussion with the missionary, will plan for further education, debriefing opportunities, a time and place for the family to “regroup” in their new home setting. Agency level debriefing must ensure freedom for the missionary to speak freely, to be transparent in sharing the good and the not-so-good of their field experience.

**Home Assignment (Furlough)** The new term, home assignment, more accurately describes the activity of a missionary for the time spent between field experiences. Even during the recruitment process, possibilities of the agency’s requirements during home assignment should be clearly expressed. They should include rest...yes, a vacation, opportunity for additional training, representing the agency to new candidates/churches, spiritual renewal, and massive opportunity to relate with the extended family and friends.

**Prayer** The agency will aggressively promote and participate in specific intercessory prayer for each missionary by understanding the spiritual dynamics of the ministry the missionary is working in. They will network with agencies specifically called to intercessory prayer. They will ensure the sending church is aware of the missionary’s needs and opportunities for rejoicing.

**Conflict management** The agency will have clear, Biblical procedures to deal with conflict. Over the years, missionary teams have become more multi-cultural, adding that dynamic to interpersonal relationships. The agency will deal with team/personal conflicts quickly and with appropriate actions so issues will not escalate or continue to

erupt and cause disunity on the team. They will engage the sending church with situations before they escalate.

**Partnerships** The agency will dialogue with other agencies to share resources and search for new resources for member care. The agency will work closely with the sending church, ensuring that the personal partnership team is functioning on behalf of their missionary.

**Contingency management**<sup>8</sup> The world is becoming a very dangerous place in which to live. During the pre-field preparation, the agency will require a seminar on contingency training to the degree of intensity of the ministry location. The agency will ensure that each ministry location has a contingency plan in place for individuals, families and teams, based on the needs of that location. New-on-the-field personnel will immediately be given access to this plan. A review for “old-timers” would also be of value at that time. Missionaries will understand that in the time of a crisis, normal lines of communication will yield to the one given the charge of directing the situation. The agency will have clear policy on handling hostage situations. They will make provision for counseling of missionaries, to the degree of need. The agency will evaluate ongoing work in that ministry location. (Just to note: The federal government just enacted new laws governing the requirement for various documents to be on file, signed by the missionary, allowing certain procedures to be followed in certain hostage situations.)

### **Crisis Level Member Care**

The working relationship between the people and organizations concerned with member care has grown exponentially in the past twenty years. And it has proved its worth in missionary retention. This is good!

As we consider the Crisis Level, I believe there is an interesting parallel in a story I would like to tell: A psychiatrist (before he trusted in Christ) believed that if a concise and simple to understand prescription for healthy living could be written, and people could be taught to follow that prescription, we would have to spend less time and effort trying to help people out of their detours into mental disarray. Quite by chance, he says, he discovered that the booklet had already been written: The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5,6,7).

In like manner, I believe that to the degree that the already mentioned levels of member care more and more function in unity, allowing each to function in the areas for which they are best suited, the need for this fourth level of care would diminish proportionally.

However, unfortunately, in every war there are casualties. And missions is spiritual warfare at its “finest”. Thus, the need for the Crisis Level of Member Care.

Though this training is mentioned above as a responsibility of the agency, I believe that organizations that regularly deal in crises are best equipped to train field workers in crisis management. It is redundant to say that the world is becoming a less and less safe

place to live! Thus, learning the preventative and survival methods of crisis situations should be mandatory.

Then, for field workers who have “lost their way” in the eternal struggle between good and evil, those trained in mental health are best able to bring about a good solution. And, the other three areas of member care need to know when a situation is beyond their ability to handle. This, too, is training the Crisis Level people could provide for the other three levels.

## **The Way Forward**

**Agency-Initiated Reconciliation.** It was my privilege to speak about Church Level Member Care to a group of missionary candidates. Their agency had brought the senior pastor of each candidate’s sending church to join them for this training. With the foresight of wisdom, this agency established a division specifically for the purpose of reengaging the Church in the missions process. And they chose this most critical area of member care as their starting point. They saw this as the first and best place for the Church to get involved. In an after session with just the pastors, we came to grips with what would have to change in their church structure to take on the primary care of their missionaries. I would not let them say, “It won’t work in my church!” We grappled with the issues of how to *make it work* in each church.

**Church-Initiated Reconciliation.** A pastor was on the Board of a mission agency. They had just received the shipment of their custom edition of *Serving As Senders*. Though his drive home was long into the dark of night, he had finished reading the book on his arrival at home. (Not recommended, by the way—to read a book while driving!) Back at his church, he had his secretary type up a letter of resignation for each of the Mission Committee members. He called a meeting. He handed each one their Letter of Resignation and told them to sign it. Not sure what was going on, yet understanding the dramatic bent in their pastor, they each signed their paper. “Now tear it up,” he said. “This is to let you know that we are not ‘doing missions’ the same way anymore.” And he laid out the basic concepts of the book. Years later I was invited to do a “turbo-charged” seminar for the twenty-one Quest Teams, the name they had given to the people who had prayerfully committed to the team leadership of their twenty-one missionary families.

**Reconciliation: It *Must* Happen.** The agency and the Church must take the steps, as painful as they may be, toward reconciliation. And the finest point to begin is at member care. Whether it is initiated by the agency or by the Church, it *must* take place. And both *must* actively participate.

- Agencies must relinquish their attempts at providing the total care package. This begins by them being honest about the number of hurting members in their agency.

- Agencies must rewrite their Policy Handbook to require the missionary to have a sending church that has confirmed his personal call and a personal level care team, functioning in all six areas, *before* he departs for the field.



- Agencies must maintain an alertness to field related needs of their missionaries and engage the Church in the solutions.

- Churches must begin developing the team concept, including those who go and those who serve as senders.

- Churches must not allow their members to leave until they have a functioning partnership team, no matter how “desperately” they may be needed on the field.

- Churches must provide a dual commissioning service, holding the missionaries accountable to the task to which they have committed *and* to their church and the specific support team to affirm their commitment to the tasks to which they have pledged.

With a deep breathe of commitment, these are starting points at reconciliation. May God give us the wisdom, understanding *and* grace to begin taking these steps.

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<sup>1</sup> An allegory, *The Great Divorce*, expresses the need for cooperation between churches and agencies in the missions process.

<sup>2</sup> An article, *Member Care: A Shared Responsibility*, enlarges on the need for agencies to allow the Church to assume greater responsibility in the area of Member Care.

<sup>3</sup> Seminar notes, *The Mission of the Church* and an Mp3 by the same title, enlarge on this subject.

<sup>4</sup> An allegory, *FIRE*, communicates the need for partnership development.

<sup>5</sup> An article, *I'm Not Gonna' Read Dat Book!*, more fully tells this story of partnership development.

<sup>6</sup> Two books, *Serving As Senders~Today* and *The Reentry Team*, enlarge on this level of member care, both for the missionary and for the rest of the team. A DVD, *Developing Your Partnership Team*, specifically helps the missionary develop his team.

<sup>7</sup> This section on Agency Level Member Care is a summary of Peter Shanker's extensive four-part paper on agency level member care published in the Ethné Member Care Updates. ERI, with Peter's permission, is free to make them available to you.

<sup>8</sup> This section on contingency training is based on training offered by Crisis Consulting International. [www.cricon.org](http://www.cricon.org)

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