

What Missionaries Ought to Know about Member Care

You keep hearing about member care, but wonder about it. You are doing all right and wonder why anyone would need help. What is member care anyway? Since God cares for them, why would missionaries need member care from other people? If missionaries did need it, who would give it to them? How would missionaries go about getting such care, if they ever did need it? Let us consider some of these questions about member care.

What is member care?

Many words can be used to describe what takes place in member care. Some of those words are friendship, encouragement, affirmation, help, and fellowship as well as sharing, communicating, visiting, guiding, comforting, counseling and debriefing. All of these, and more, are facets of member care given by someone who understands the special needs of missionaries.

Of course, all Christians have the care given by the Holy Spirit, the one whom Jesus promised in John 14-16. Translated “comforter,” “counselor,” or “advocate,” the Greek word (paraclete) literally means one called or sent for to assist another, someone who has been invited to stand by our side.

In addition to the Holy Spirit, God often uses other people to come alongside and help us, whether we are missionaries or in other vocations. Most people in your passport country have others they can call on for help, whether pastor, counselor, or friends in a small group—such as a Bible study group. Among missionaries who are members of

some mission agency or church, the term used for this process of having someone come alongside to offer help is “member care.” This may be something as routine as a regularly scheduled visit from a pastor asking, “How are you doing?” Or it may be as rare as a psychologist rushing to get to you within a couple days for a trauma debriefing to help prevent post-traumatic stress disorder.

Who needs member care?

In modern individualistic western cultures where people learn to “make it on their own,” even Christians may believe that they do not need help from anyone except God. They may believe that asking for help is a sign of immaturity or weakness, a lack of faith or spirituality, or perhaps a symptom of illness—either mental or physical.

At the training sessions during the orientation of his twelve disciples Jesus told them where to go, what to take, what to do, and how to deal with conflict. He was not kidding when he went on to tell them to be on their guard because he was sending them out like sheep among wolves (Matthew 10). Today as you face the wolves of missionary life whether they are malaria, dengue fever, parasites, depression, anxiety, conflict, burnout, grief, guilt, temptations, assault, the violent death of a colleague, or demonic forces, you may need someone to come and stand by your side.

At the similar orientation session for the seventy-two others, Jesus sent them out in twos (Luke 10). No one went alone. First Church in Antioch commissioned Paul and Barnabas to leave on their first term (the first missionaries), and as they left, John went with them as well (Acts 13). When Paul and Barnabas could not agree on who should go

along with them on their second term, they parted company and went out as two missionary teams of two each (Acts 15). There were no “Lone Rangers” (even the Lone Ranger had Tonto, his national companion). Instead of being a sign of weakness, a lack of faith, or a symptom of illness, asking someone for help is a sign of normality, reality, and health.

Everyone seems to recognize that lone missionaries in frontier work need member care, but so do administrators in the home office. Even people in the secular world know that it is “lonely at the top.” Though surrounded by people, chief administrators may feel very alone and need someone to come alongside.

In every war there are many support staff for every soldier on the front lines. When soldiers come back from the front, they are expected and allowed to report that the battle was terrible, that they were anxious, discouraged, and that the conflict was awful. Some say, “War is hell.” Missionaries are on the frontline of a spiritual war between the powers of good and evil, and their battles are even worse. They need even more support staff, more member care during which they can share their inner battles, because they are literally in a war with the forces of hell.

Who gives member care?

Of course, anyone who cares can give member care. It may be a high school friend, a distant relative, a retired neighbor from your childhood, or anyone else. However, most often member care comes from four major sources.

- Your Sending Church. Ideally much member care comes from your home church. Members can send letters, call

you by telephone, send packages of special things you miss, communicate with you by e-mail, and come visit you. Unfortunately, in these days of much education (going to college and then to seminary) missionaries often lose close connections with their home churches. They may have not really bonded with the last church attended before going overseas so that the churches commissioning them may not really feel like their sending church. Thus they may receive little member care.

Likewise, your support may be in rather small amounts from many churches or many individuals. Since no church really feels like you are their missionary, you may receive little member care from anyone. When a pastor leaves a church, the new pastor may not know you well and may give you little member care.

- Other Missionaries. The people most likely to deeply understand what you are going through and be able to empathize with you are other missionaries. The missionaries you work with are the ones best able to come alongside, but if you share too much, that may affect your working relationships. You may be able to form a bond with missionaries from other agencies in the area, if there are others nearby.
- Your Agency. Many medium-size and large agencies now have people whose assignment is to give member care. These may be pastors, veteran missionaries, counselors, and so forth. They may be at centers in different parts of the world, or they may travel from country to country giving care to missionaries in that agency.
- Member Care Specialists. At times you may rather talk with someone completely

outside your agency. You may have personal problems that you do not want to share with anyone in the agency or for which you think there is no help in the agency. Pastors, counselors, social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists who specialize in missionary care are available to come alongside and help.

How do I get member care?

Ask for it. Tell people when you need help. Find someone you can ask for help when you face the wolves of missionary life.

- **Your Sending Church.** If you do not feel like you have a sending church, ask a church to play that role for you. Tell them you want to be “their missionary,” and ask for care from them. You may even want a coalition of churches geographically near each other to be your “sending church” and furlough in their area. Tell them that re-entry and furlough are difficult, and you want their help especially during that time. Tell them that you need letters and phone calls while on the field; then tell them when you are getting too much e-mail so that they will not expect immediate, personal replies.
- **Other Missionaries.** Form support groups with others on your field in your agency or nearby. Meet regularly for Bible study, prayer, and general care for each other. Form accountability relationships with two or three others.
- **Your Agency.** Tell your administrators when you need care. Ask them to find someone to give you regular pastoral care if they do not already have someone playing that role.
- **Member Care Specialists.** Some organizations specialize in supplying on-

field care for missionaries. This may involve a cost, or the care may be free. Other organizations provide care in sending countries, places where you can temporarily withdraw from the battle and receive help from mental health professionals.

The order of Stephanas

The missionary, Paul, wrote to the Corinthians about missionary care he received. The household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and Paul noted that they had “devoted themselves to the service of the saints” (1 Corinthians 16:15). Paul said that he was glad when Stephanas, Fortunatas, and Achaia arrived because they brought just what was lacking. He wrote, “They refreshed my spirit.” That is just what people do for missionaries today when they provide member care—they bring what is lacking and refresh spirits.

People supplying member care do not need to be mental health professionals to be of great help. Literally hundreds of studies have shown that paraprofessionals (people who have received some basic training in the rudiments of counseling) can be just as effective in helping others as are those who are licensed or certified by some state board or agency.

Thus, sensitive people from your sending church, empathetic colleagues on your field, understanding administrators in your agency, or professionally trained member care specialists can be of great help as you face the wolves among whom God has sent you.

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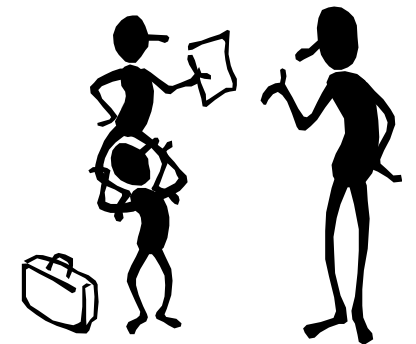
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