

RAISING THE STANDARD FOR MISSIONARY CARE

Neal Pirolo

The days of the missionary as a “Lone Ranger” or “Superstar” never should have been, but mission agencies, churches and even missionaries are coming to understand that the missions process requires a well-trained and coordinated team of diverse skills. Missions is a team effort.

William Taylor’s book, *Too Valuable To Lose*, emphasized this point. In trying to identify the cause(s) of missionary attrition (The appalling statistic that prompted this study showed that over 10,000 missionaries per year were “quitting”!), a group of 453 mission agencies from 14 sending countries analyzed those missionaries over a three-year period. It was discovered that 29% quit for “reasonable” reasons: A spouse died on the field. The surviving spouse felt it necessary to return home. Etc. But this left a shocking 71% that quit for what they called “preventable” reasons.

Those reasons were grouped in three very major categories: 1) Many needed a clearer direction from God to go. In other words, they had gone to the field when missionary work was clearly not for them; 2) Many lacked sufficient or proper pre-field training; and 3) Many lacked missionary (pastoral) care.

It is to this third issue that I direct this present writing: TO RAISE THE STANDARD FOR MISSIONARY CARE.

CONFIRMING THE CALL BEFORE THEY GO

Last Sunday I listened to a 12-year-old-girl read a Scripture—actually she started to read it, but stumbled over the words. And never finished it. It was her “confirmation” that she was supposed to go to an African nation to participate in an evangelistic crusade. “It will cost \$3000.00. Can you help me?” she asked the congregation. Until this moment no one except her parents had heard of her knowledge of “God’s will” for her. I am not saying it is not His will, but I do say, where was her team that spent time in fasting and prayer to hear from the Holy Spirit, “Separate unto Me...?” (Acts 13:2).

If Barnabas and Saul, leaders in their church, just returned from Jerusalem filled with excitement about the regions beyond, submitted themselves to the church for their confirmation of the call, why do some believe that it is not necessary today? And yet, the fields of the world are strewn with people (I dare not call them missionaries; the very word means “sent ones”.) whose call was never confirmed. Again, I cannot say

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that they did not hear from God. But it is sure a valuable “safety net” to have a team of people who have committed themselves to the task of confirming the call.

It was this confirmation that served as an encouragement to a missionary who was concerned with his youthfulness once he got out there. Timothy received two letters of encouragement from his supporting mentor, Paul. “*Don’t let any one look down on you because you are young.*” (I Timothy 4:12) “*Stir up the gifts that were identified in you when we commissioned you.*” (II Timothy 1:6) There it is! A group of people—a team—had been involved in sending young Timothy to the region of Ephesus.

PRE-FIELD TRAINING

“Oh, God called me. I don’t need any training. He will just tell me what to do.” I cannot count how many times I have heard those words spoken to me by zealous young (and not so young) missionary hopefuls. A seasoned missionary heard that a young, attractive blond lady from his church was planning to go to a nation in West Africa. Her youth pastor had said, “God called you? Then go! He will lead you.” Frank, the missionary, let me know that he had encouraged her on a number of occasions to call me about training. Time went by. Finally she called. I thought, “Great! She can attend our next ACTS 29 Training Course in Tijuana.” My thoughts were interrupted by her reason for calling. “Yes, Frank encouraged me to call you. I leave tomorrow. But I do have one question: “When I get there, do I call the American Embassy to pick me up at the airport?”

A bit extreme? Yes, but again, the fields of the world are strewn with people who lack the skills of living and ministering in a second culture. Where was her team, beginning with a knowledgeable youth pastor, guiding her through the “mine fields” of preparation? For it is spiritual warfare in the most intense battle of all time in which our missionaries are preparing to engage.

THE “REST OF THE TEAM”

Paul, in delineating the missions process, spoke of the need for missionaries with the question: “*And how shall they hear without a preacher?*” Clear. Simple. Easy to understand. And how we yearn for more to respond to His call to go. However, Paul did not stop with that question. He asked one more: “*And how shall he preach unless he is sent?*” Why has this question been ignored for so long? In the gapless linear logic Paul was using, by putting this question last, he was giving it the greatest emphasis. Yet, today, the “rest of the team”—those who serve as senders—are, at best, only given an afterthought. It is vital that we raise the standard of missionary care. Missionaries are too valuable to lose.

By the time a missionary’s call has been confirmed, all six areas of care that Paul, the Apostle expressed he needed, should be “up & running.” Experience has shown that each is as vital for missionaries today as they were for Paul two thousand years ago. And those who have taken the time and energy to build a strong personal support team will echo the truth of Scripture: “And how can we preach (how can we be effective) unless we are sent?”

MORAL SUPPORT

Moral support comes more easily from those with the gift of encouragement. Solomon said, “*A word spoken at an appropriate time is like golden apples in a silver bowl.*” (Proverbs 25:11) There are some people who can see and help others to see the “silver

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lining” through the blackest of clouds. This is the “Bon Voyage” crowd. The ones who see the glass half full instead of half empty. The ones who see things more and more from God’s perspective and are willing to voice their encouragement for the courageous and daring exploits of ministering in a second culture.

LOGISTICS SUPPORT

Logistics support is needed. By this time, the missionary should be “unencumbering” himself of all the details of his daily living that he may “please the One who has called him to be a soldier.” (II Timothy 2:4) What to sell? What to give away? What to store? Where to store it? Who will check in on grandma? Who will be responsible for...everything? Yes, there are details, and more details for a group of people with organizational skills who will become a part of the missionary’s team. Promptness of action, concern for details, and sound business practices are just three of the characteristics that are needed for these team members.

PRAYER SUPPORT

Prayer support is of first importance. In fact, it stands alone and above all other considerations in the care of missionaries. Not the “God bless our missionary” type of prayer. Rather, the “*effectual, fervent intercessory prayer of righteous people.*” (See James 5:16.) This part of the team requires people who make the commitment: “*Ever since I first heard about you, I have not ceased to pray for you.*” (Colossians 1:3) People who know how to “*tell God the details of their [missionary’s] needs in earnest and thankful prayer.*” (Philippians 4:6) People who know the significance of “*when you fast, don’t let people know....*” (Matthew 6:17) And people who know how to “*stand in the gap, and fill in the hedge.*” (Ezekiel 22:30) Prayer is not asking God to do something He is loathe to do; it is integrating and interposing in today’s world God’s Plan of the timeless ages. Mystery though it is, prayer is the force that links man to God’s sovereign will. (See Acts 4:28.) And God, for reasons known only by Him, ties His actions to the prayers of His saints. (See Genesis

COMMUNICATION SUPPORT

Those who are going to be responsible for communication support should be developing the network for the various types of communication medium and who will send and receive which: Praise & prayer notes, general newsletters, emergency issues, care packages, etc. Are there restrictions on what may be sent? Postage requirements? Insurance? Customs? Confidential terminology for restricted countries? The prayer support team, of course, will have the priority in this network. For we want their prayers to be offered with understanding.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Oh, yes, lest we forget: It will take a team of people who are wanting to increase their Heavenly Portfolio of investments! Wow! Doesn’t that sound a lot better than “I hate the thought of ‘raising support’?” That process—raising support—is almost as difficult as raising the dead! But, when the focus is on “investments,” it paints a whole new scenario. Certainly, those with the gift of giving will find it easier to manage this portfolio. However, everyone who really believes the Word: “*Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven where moth and rust do not corrupt...*” (Matthew 6:20), should be anxious to consider if this is where God wants his investment to go. Certainly we want to invest in the spiritual warfare at decisive points of battle. But that is not measured in “number of souls saved.” Rather, it is to be measured by where the Spirit of God is working.

REENTRY SUPPORT

“What’s the big deal? He’s just coming home!” And if the missionary has not had good training, his voice will echo the ignorance: “What’s the big deal? I’m just going home!” Experience has borne out the truth that reentry is usually the most difficult time in the life of a missionary. Reentry care needs to be “up & running” even before the missionary leaves. So little is understood about this area of care that special training is needed. Plus, even though one may have a scheduled overseas assignment of two years, an emergency may bring him home early. And it is those emergency trips home that can be the most difficult. Further, a missionary may do well on one reentry. That does not guarantee that the next one will be so easy. Also, each family member, as an individual, has specific needs at this time of reentry. (So great is the need for personal care at this time in the life of a missionary that I have written a book specifically on the topic: *THE REENTRY TEAM: Caring For Your Returning Missionary*. It is available on our website: www.eri.org.)

From the time when God begins stirring the heart of one to go to the mission fields of the world, through his time of confirmation, training and preparation, through his time on the field, and until he is fully integrated into his home culture at the end of his missions career, he needs care.

IT TAKES A TEAM

This total care unit not only needs training in the skills required, but also in teammanship. Part of the dilemma facing the sports industry right now is because so many are trying to be “superstars” and are not giving consideration to the team. What our missionaries are involved in is of far greater consequence than any “world cup!” They are dealing with the eternal destiny of souls. Each team member needs to know how his part fits into the whole, how to relate with the other members, how vital his role is, and how his lack of responsibility may be hurtful to the goal.

And, lastly, but foremost, we all must regard our investment of time, money, prayer—whatever it is—as a privilege. God is sovereign. He will be “*exalted in all the earth.*” (Psalm 46: 10) As Mordecai spoke to Esther: “*Salvation will come. God will save His people. But who knows but that such an hour as this, you have been called to the kingdom?*” (Esther 4: 14) And echoing down through the corridors of time, if you listen carefully, you will hear these words of encouragement. For, I believe with all of my heart, that each of us has been called to the Kingdom of God for an hour such as this. And we can reply with Esther, “*If I perish; I perish.*” And with Jesus, “*A body You have prepared for Me. I have come to do Your will.*” (Hebrews 10: 5-7) What a privilege to be about our Father’s business.

Neal Pirolo
EMMAUS ROAD INTERNATIONAL
7150 Tanner Court, San Diego, CA USA
Emmaus_Road@eri.org • www.eri.org • 858 292-7020