

Pejorative Presumptions about Missing Missionaries: A Response to Peter Brierley's *Why Our Missionaries Quit*

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Abstract

A review of the WEF research on missionary attrition, reflecting strengths and key problems in the inquiries and the analysis procedures, suggesting improvements in research rigor. Noting characteristic issues in research conducted in multinational contexts. *From a paper for the Overseas Missions Study Center (OMSC), December, 1996.*

A trustworthy maxim within the arcane world of social science research is that unless research is designed and carried out with great rigor and self-discipline, the findings will show just about what the researcher expected to find.

Part I—The Intentions

The World Evangelical Fellowship research into missionary attrition represents an important milestone. Now that the work of the Christian mission is so widely shared across the world, the importance of international planning and collaboration is gaining recognition. Thus the value of sharing insights from the varied experiences in missionary deployment and operation is driving the mission movement in general toward a more open and responsible reportage.

Pragmatic concerns about solving such a problem as the rising attrition rate among missionaries are valid but secondary motives for good research. Indeed, pragmatic motives are sure to prove less important than *discovery of insights* leading toward fulfillment of the command of Jesus Christ to *make disciples*. Whether longer or shorter missionary assignments have anything to do with this more important outcome is among the many things that need to be better understood. But if the highest intention of research, to encounter truth more clearly, can be honorably fulfilled, then indeed a corner will have been turned.

Among sporting events nothing looks more chaotic than the start of a marathon race. Great clusters and clumps of participants crouch nervously awaiting the starting gun. And off they go in more or less the same direction! Before long the mass has transformed itself into a long straggling line of flushed and panting athletes, each running the race in his or her own way. Remarkably, the race is not officially over until the last person has struggled across the line.

So it is with the first several tries at international research by any group or cluster of groups. Despite the best intentions, the willingness to join together and to start out in the same direction at the same time, the differences in skills, resources, preparations, and behaviors becomes evident quite early, and at the end of things everyone is scattered across the landscape. As participating researchers in the early attempts of UNESCO to encourage and co-sponsor large-scale international research on educational standards and outcomes, we were simply overwhelmed, again and again, by the lack of common vocabulary and comparable categories of data. Nearly twenty years went by as conferences, commissions, hearings, and diplomatic-level treaties of international commitment hammered out the basis for doing

international studies by pooling data. What was necessary, and stubbornly resisted, was standardizing the definitions and changing the very basis of record-keeping in the individual nations' ministries of education, interior, national development, and other related governmental units. Until data were being kept in the same categories and with a common agreement about the meanings of categories and standards, only frustration and misleading comparisons emerged from the international studies.

Agreeing on the meanings and criteria for categorical judgments and descriptions requires negotiation and compromise. Consider an illustration from international comparative research on literacy: In the large studies that attempt to compare national literacy rates, the knowledgeable reviewer soon becomes aware that *literacy* is claimed by some nations in terms of normed criteria and data from national-scope testing programs, by other nations in term of numbers of people having been enrolled in a primary school for as few as three years, by still others in terms of political persons' estimates based on their own opinions, and by positions adopted for government or agency propaganda.

Validity is severely threatened by the way international data are generally collected. A research study is typically initiated "high up" in the international leadership sector. Some sort of international representation is convened to discuss the issues and questions to be investigated. The "hub" or center of the study will then select one or more agencies to represent each nation; such agencies are rarely disinterested and objective parties to the research. The people asked to supply the data bring very different cultural backgrounds; one of the few things they usually have in common is that they are "internationalized" or "westernized" people, often being only slightly intercultural yet somewhat remote from their own original context.

Each of these agencies will then solicit data from its most convenient and "trusted" sources, whether or not these sources will add up to a representative sample. Control of the sampling plan and the resulting reliability of the data are passed into the hands of the data sources themselves. Is it surprising that the aggregate of data in the study will be contaminated by bias and discrepancies? Can data in such a study be respected as a basis for "encountering truth more clearly?"

Even worse is the problem of deliberate misrepresentation. Political and ideological biases underlie this source of unreliability. National pride, international competitiveness, and organizational paranoia cause certain agencies, even national governments, to hold back their submissions of data until they get a look at their competitors' data; then after belatedly adding their own data, somewhat tailored to fit their own image of themselves, they can bring themselves closer to the top in terms of whatever qualitative issues are at stake. Truth is rarely as important as prestige. Nations at the lower end of the distributions are typically in a terrible quandary. If they bias their national data downward, it will increase the likelihood of receiving international assistance funds; if they bias their data upward, they will be seen as stronger and "higher" in prestige among the nations. This sort of political opportunism often prevails over any sort of commitment to objectivity and truth.

Do we encounter any similar problems in research on Christian missions? Perhaps we have forgotten Barrett's *magnum opus*.¹ More to the point, do such problems affect such a study as reported by Brierley? Without a doubt, yes.

¹ David Barrett. *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Study of Churches and Religions in the Modern World, AD 1900-2000* (Oxford University Press, 1982).

Part II—The Report

Peter Brierley has addressed an important topic: **causes for missionary attrition**. His concerns are evident and his intent is honorable. The sheer bravery of this paper and the research upon which it is based are impressive in ambition and for Brierley's innovative use of data. Brierley presents his summative conclusion in a blunt statement at the beginning rather than after the evidences are presented: "We have a problem!" (p.1).

Semantic hurdles and complicated management issues are encountered in the data collection and analysis in this sort of international and intercultural research. There is more to be concerned about in the WEF research procedures than in the research outcomes. In reference to the techniques of data gathering and analysis, indeed there is a problem. The highly generalized summative comment should be, Brierley is right.

The most convincing elements of Brierley's findings are reassuring. Almost, he persuades the reader that the incidence of missionary attrition is substantially less than previously indicated. If one accepts the 5.1% *per annum* rate of missionary departure from the field as the current norm (4.3%, if those who return to the field under different affiliation are deducted), the missionary vocation stands up quite positively.

"Measured over the years 1992-94, the average number of workers who leave is . . . 5.1% of their mission-force. . . . One missionary in 20 is being lost to missionary service each year" (Brierley, p.1). If this summative finding is compared with church ministries within the United States, for example, it is similar or, in most cases, lower. Compared with the labor force in general, the missionary data fall at the high end for tenure and job security. Given the complexity and the increased demands of international and intercultural service in recent years, the missionary career would seem to be astonishingly free from disruptions. In most fields of steady employment, retirement alone will typically account for 4% to 5% leaving the workforce each year.

A major ground for skepticism arises from the difficulties inherent in quantitative research in social contexts. The problems are not unique to studies of missions and missionaries. A similar array of problems confronts each demographer and social scientist who attempts a multinational study drawing from multiple data bases:

1. The *conceptual equivalency* problem is not easily solved no matter how well the language translation is done. Even across social sectors and educational levels within one society, social terminology is shaped variously. A researcher cannot be confident that any two respondents are reading, comprehending, and responding in an equivalent manner. What is a *missionary*? This question has never been easy, partly because there is no single biblical exemplar, and partly because the actual work of missionaries in the contemporary world is so widely varied. What is *attrition*? Is it "leaving" or "quitting?" Is it following God into a new ministry or is it getting out of God's will? And just what is an *acceptable* reason for "leaving?" And what is so *unacceptable* that it must be called "dropping out" or "quitting?" This problem of uncoordinated and evidently non-equivalent concepts constitutes a serious burden in the doing of this research as well as in reporting it and in reading the report.
2. The *validity-of-response* problem is always a threat. As David Barrett's work demonstrated, the level of precision among data sources varies substantially. Some have "hard data" at hand and are vocationally attuned to the disciplines and rigors of research data-gathering; but data are rarely available in a completely parallel form, so extrapolating and estimating must be done. Others, especially those who are afraid that they will appear a bit less than competent if they are not

forthcoming with specific data, will make “educated guesses.” Still others will answer almost any question in terms of what will be most pleasing to the inquirer or will put one’s own work in the best possible light. Which of these types of unreliability has distorted the reports from given sources the researcher can only guess. The tendency thus is to confess the “possibility” of error and proceed with the analysis as if nothing were seriously amiss.

3. The *mixing* of differing types of subjects or data often results from the frustrations and embarrassments of trying to keep precise accounts in the face of obviously non-parallel reports from the separate agencies. In the Brierley report, for example, the mixing of data on short-term and long-term missionaries seems to result from widely differing definitions and substantially varying ways of reporting attrition data. Thus, the frustrated analyst stirs it all together and later resorts to imposing arithmetic correction values, attempting to make belated differentiations. Validity can be achieved only by agreement on comparable definitions of categories at the outset, collecting of the *original* data in these precisely defined and separated categories, and analyzing the data independently from the individual sources before allowing any aggregating of data across categories or data sources. The common rush to make large-scale statements and international generalizations works against disciplined analysis on a nation-by-nation basis. It then becomes almost impossible to back up and repair the gaps.
4. The *missing data* problem is especially troubling in a research that attempts to establish national or international norms, and most especially in a body of data that will be used for comparative purposes. Unless the data are truly whole and truly comparable, mischief may result. For example, since data are more readily forthcoming which show things that are positive, commendable, and “good,” extraordinary steps must often be taken to fill in the missing data; otherwise a more-rosy-than-real picture emerges. Unless all relevant cases in the truly representative sample are presented in the document files, bias of the sample must be assumed. Any voluntarism within the sample, leaving an agency free to report or not to report; leaving a respondent free to decide independently which cases to omit, or worse, eliminating late or slow respondents, reduces the validity of the sample. Sometimes this sort of biasing is beyond the control of the researcher, although controls and adjustments are often attempted. To illustrate: if a missionary society has not identified a probationary missionary (a first-term missionary, for example) as a “regular” or “career” missionary, any first-term attrition tends to be reported as if the departed missionary had been a “short-term” missionary. This aberration in record keeping, alone, makes research of the sort that the WEF Missions Commission has undertaken akin to comparing apples and oranges.

Any research of attrition which does not differentiate the key variables at every step of the process, especially such variables as “short-term” or “long-term,” whether the subject is early or established in the position, in new to missionary service or more experienced, married or single, wife of missionary or appointed woman missionary, specially educated or not, aware of having been called or not aware of a call of God, older or younger, teen-aged children or not, long-standing health problems or not, previously experienced in ministry or not—is sure to be misleading, ultimately requiring all sorts of arithmetic “weighting” to try to salvage the analyses. If data had been collected and analyzed precisely in terms of these variables *before* aggregating the data, many useful correlations could have been anticipated and examined. And Peter Brierley’s task would have been far more rewarding.

5. The *predetermined category* problem exists to some extent in all surveying, but it is most acute in the design of surveys that use ambiguous categorical labels which are open to diverse interpretations or that lack evidential grounding in previous smaller and more precise research. The

various disciplines of social science now generally recognize the importance of case studies and intensive ethnography as the foundation for survey instrumentation, and especially for the *categories* used in the wording and the analysis of data from short-response instruments. The major trouble with predetermined categories is that they predispose the research to look into certain concerns at the expense of other concerns. Unless the same concerns happen to be really important across all venues, findings will be limited and biased in ways that are difficult to detect.

6. The *quantitative* problem underlies all of large-scale demography and almost every questionnaire-based study. What constitutes a *unit*? That is, what counts as “1”—is far less manageable than it would appear to a layperson. Counting hands for anticipated attendance at a group dinner is a classical illustration. Does each hand in the air represent one person? *Better hold up two hands if you are bringing your spouse—unless he is also here and holding up his own hand. . . . What if I want to bring my sister-in-law and my brother?*

Brierley describes brave attempts to solve various quantitative problems. Tables of numbers allow comparisons, but they are not often instructive in matters of causation and basic understanding. Quantities are valuable if the problem is how widespread is something such as missionary attrition, how do agencies and nations compare, and what characteristics are correlated? Statistical analysis is a craft undergirded by a substantial body of research and a highly professional set of standards. For many purposes related to assessment and planning in the changing world of missions, we need these disciplines, and we need the patience and cooperation to use them correctly.

Part III—Socio-Theological Assumptions

Of greater concern in this study is not the methodology so much as the underlying assumptions. About ten years ago when the possibility of missions as a revolving door began to emerge research was based upon several assumptions—later rejected—that reappear in the Brierley report. They are hard to shake, and it is easy to be sympathetic. Nevertheless, they must be challenged. After ten years, some of these assumptions are still tempting but theologically untenable. It is especially important not to design research inquiries into missionary attrition in terms of purely naturalistic phenomena or in terms of momentary perceptions and judgments of people. Being a missionary is not an ordinary job; it is a spiritual calling.

Some of the causes for attrition are *preventable*, and thus they *should* be prevented.

Contemporary scholarship tends toward reducing everything to rational decision-making. (After all, “if we know the right things to do, we will surely act on them.” Compare Paul’s confession in *Romans* 7:15, 16. If we just get the shortcomings classified we can treat them with the right preventatives and things will go along ever so much better. Is this premise delusional? In this fallen world, a good place to start on missionary attrition is to identify the more preventable hindrances and give them the first attention. Again, it sounds good, but initiatives attacking hindrances so easily end up hurting the wrong people! All of this discussion is so that we can organize an intervention? Even in this simple logic of identifying hindrances there lurks a nest of difficulties. Interventions and preventions are hazardous, especially as organizations try to shape the behavior of persons. Standards are important, yes. Qualitative goals are important as well. But to presume to change the direction of a person’s life by rejecting the “preventable reason” and urging a “cure” seems to be a bit more interventional than God would suggest. Further, it is obviously plain pragmatism that leads us to prefer the survivor and disdain the person is *called away from* the missionary career. Pragmatic reasoning causes us to look at ministry through misshapen lenses.

Where should we look to find deeper understanding of missionary attrition? Where does the “quitting” problem arise? In the missionary? In the preparation of the missionary? In the decision-making process? In the nature of the assignment? Somehow, the “quitting” problem is in the missionary or in the failure to help, support, challenge, or reward the missionary in the right way at the right time. This assumption is one of the most tempting. It would seem that although it is best to leave the matters of calling to God, we could learn important truth about missionaries if we examined the outcomes of education, counseling, mentoring, and organizational planning that affect the service of missionaries. But some troubling evidences are too readily overlooked by this research. They are not very hard to see, although the categorization and basis of analysis are so erratic as to cast doubt on the worth of another analysis. But curiosity alone makes the reader eager to see where the truth may actually lie! A careful re-examination of these very data could lead to some startling and contrary conclusions. There are troubling evidences that could lead into important changes. It will require more interviewing rather than checking boxes on a questionnaire. It will require many hours of patient and pointed conversation. In sum, to really open up the attrition question will surely turn into a more demanding chore than has been undertaken to date . . . that dissonances occur between the images, expectations, and other anticipatory assumptions on the one hand, and the realities, discoveries, and actual circumstances on the field on the other hand are devastating to many new missionaries. Especially when missionaries are recruited among people of limited social involvements, minimal intercultural experiences, and strong materialistic preoccupations, the call of God must be emphasized transcendently. It may be only the craving for targets-to-dump-guilt-on that interests the researchers? Attrition may be God’s way of “clearing out the pipes for better flow! Perhaps if the attrition rate and its causes were better understood, we could possibly see God “freshening” His work force. *As Americans, we tend to assume that more is better and less is loss.* In a sort of suspicious, conceivably unholy way, the Brierly study pushes us closer to the position that attrition may be a God-given process of assuring that the mission of the church will be steadily protected against the small-minded exploiters who would lead the field into a glut of inadequate buccaneers whose very presence on the field distorts the work of the Gospel. So I will mildly hold my tongue from here on and try to keep watch on the paths where God leads.

What can be learned from this research may be divided into two categories: evident generalizations from the findings and guidelines for future research. The first of these lists is not as extensive as the mass of data may suggest, largely because of the difficulties arising from confusions in the analyses. The second category likely constitutes the more important steps forward.

Evident Generalizations. The findings revealed in the Brierley report suggest that indeed the return from the mission field can be productively examined. The most evident generalizations include these:

1. Countries vary widely in certain characteristics of missionary attrition.
2. Substantial differences are seen in the comparisons of “old sending countries” and “new sending countries.”
3. Normal retirement is seen as the most common reason for departure from missionary activity.
4. Lack of home support is a commonly reported contributor to attrition among many of the new sending countries.
5. Certain problems widely encountered and widely reported in other research into attrition are minimized in these data, for example, cultural factors including language development and

functional effectiveness in the new culture, intra-team disharmony, and conflicts with the agency's home office and its policies.

Guidelines for Future Research. After this brave start by the WEF investigators, it should be possible to organize some smaller-scale bi-national or tri-national comparative studies. It is now evident that greater attention to small details and especially more personal inquiries into underlying difficulties will be valuable. Among the issues that the data from the WEF study suggest are the following:

1. How much of the variance in missionary characteristics seen in the comparisons of Old Sending Countries with New Sending Countries can be attributed to a relatively younger missionary community in the latter?
2. What correlations can be made between dominant approaches to recruitment of missionaries and any of the factors associated with attrition?
3. To what extent do agencies report data based on estimates or guesses?
4. What studies of missionary experiences and behaviors have been carried out as a basis for the judgments about "preventable" and "unpreventable" contributory factors and conditions?
5. How much do the standards of categorizing *acceptable* and *unacceptable* experiences of missionaries vary? . . . from one agency to another? . . . across nations?
6. What sort of missionary assignments are more commonly associated with early and unplanned departure?
7. What happens to "former" missionaries? Is "leaving the agency" the same thing as leaving missionary service or leaving Christian ministry? Where else do they go?
8. Where is attrition lowest? In what sorts of missionary deployment? . . . from which countries or regions? . . . among missionaries of what age, educational, and experiential background?
9. How do marriage and family responsibilities relate to attrition?
10. Which "polite" answers to questions about attrition serve as disguises for more deep-seated problems?

Is attrition is essentially the same thing as quitting? Categories of cause in the Brierley project include some benign sorts of leaving-the-field that hardly justify such a pejorative term as *quitting*. Even less kind is "being *lost* to missions" and "*dropping out*." Further, the judgmental category system (preventable/unpreventable) raises curious questions: Is being asked to take a post in the home office preventable or unpreventable? Is a senior missionary's being pulled away from leadership responsibilities in Latin America in order to move to Russia to take up a co-mission assignment preventable or unpreventable? Indeed, just what do these terms suggest about who is in control? Have we glanced away from God just for an instant here? Whose mission is this, after all?

The Call of God Changes

Surely God moves His people from place to place, from ministry to ministry, and back and forth from "home base." Is this what is meant by "changes" in the call of God? The increasingly mobile and eruptive nature of many of the cultures of humankind surely calls for a greater flexibility and mobility in

missionaries and missionary deployment. Indeed, responsiveness to the call of God is hardly a once-for-all-matter. It is a matter of daily renewal. A good awakening prayer: *"Good morning, Father. Here's another day that is yours. By your grace, I'm ready. Lead on."*

The New Testament pattern of movement, change, mobility, and early departure seems largely overlooked in the modern missionary era. We value permanency, stability, fixed-place institution-building and long-term possessiveness. These are the very characteristics now getting many missionary efforts into difficulties in the field. Last longer on the field? Is this a good idea? Always? Until missionary service is once again presented as a demand for sacrificial *mobility*, we will see more and more attrition problems.

For whatever it may be worth, only one "guiding light" assumption is left: **It is important to help those who are called and prepared as missionaries to last as long they find themselves clearly within God's will for their lives.**

EPILOGUE: With thanks and apologies to Peter Brierly, attrition is sometimes a good thing, the result of processes by which God enriches, renews, and energizes his work in the world. God finds ways to use many, holding onto the few for even more extensive service in a given place. His warnings are still timely, and the article is a fine case example of how to do research in multicultural contexts.