



The Case of the Disappearing Missionaries: *Reflections on Missionary Recruitment and Retention*¹

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Are today's career missionaries staying in the field as long as they thought they would? Are they really making missions a long-term career? Whatever happened to the missionary-for-life? These questions are being asked, especially in missionary-supporting churches. Is there really a problem? Missionaries are still being recruited. They are arriving on the field. Many are persevering. Nevertheless, missionary turnover is increasing. Some of those who thought they would be on the field for a lifetime are coming home. Is it a trend? Where will it lead? More importantly, should we try to turn it around?

Is the Problem New? Perhaps the proportion of missionaries who actually stay on the field for a career or a lifetime has never been as large as believed. Perhaps, like accident and crime statistics, the situation seems to get worse whenever it is observed more closely. Indeed, one of the difficulties in examining this issue is the dearth of reliable data, present and past. Perhaps the commitment of today's missionaries varies more widely than in the past. Are today's missionary recruits somehow lacking in motivation, courage, and a consciousness of God's call? Or perhaps the problem may be related to the way missionaries are being recruited.

In Tune with the Times. Surely the American cultural context is shifting as rapidly as any in the world. Young people grow up in a bewildering environment that sends all sorts of contradictory signals. The persistent secularization of the American society has made the building of spiritual relationships very difficult.

Christian valuing of family. Perhaps as a response to recent Christian appeals for more concern for family relationships, prospective missionaries are asking more questions about provisions for their families. No candidate should be faulted for a responsible attitude on matters of family welfare and solidarity, but dangers lie in the unbalanced presumption that all decisions about the future of one's children must be planned and contracted before bringing God's providence into the discussion. Old-timers in mission shake their heads in dismay. How could such a worthy matter as concern for spouse and children become such a blinding preoccupation?

Career planning. Employment in modern society has become less stable, less secure, and more nomadic. Job security and predictability of working conditions are at the center of attention for many recent college graduates.

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Today's missionary candidates, especially those who have been most aggressively recruited by missionary agencies, come from a socio-cultural milieu in which it is not only wise, but even expected, that a job-seeker will ask many penetrating questions about working conditions, job security, assessment and promotion policies, leave policies and support for further education, retirement plans and other benefits, as well as provisions for family. In today's job market a professional-level applicant who did not ask such questions, and insist on solid answers, would likely be disqualified. Historically, missionary agencies have not dealt with such questions as a matter of first priority. Those who don't understand this issue assume that these concerns signify a lack of spiritual depth.

The importance of seeking worthy goals and realistically lining up needed resources is not an unknown theme in Jesus's teaching (Luke 14:28-32). But compulsive career planning simply goes too far. Since following Christ is a matter of willing sacrifice, the necessity of reorganizing one's priorities and living with an unpredictable future should be a central theme in recruitment. It may discourage some, but likely not those who are truly called.

Specialization and Technology. Procedures of mission organizations reflect the *industrial revolution*. For efficient industry, specialized parts must fit together in a manageable machine which can be controlled from the top. The criterion of *job-fit* has become a major feature of the publicizing of missionary "opportunities." Thus, depersonalization has increased. Beginning with missionary medicine, then radio, then aviation, and now computers, missionary activity has become increasingly a matter of technologies and specific mechanical-technical skills. In many missionary organizations, the appeals for missionaries now show all the specificity of job recruiting in business and industry. Is it any surprise that today's recruits ask all sorts of questions about what they will be expected to do, where, and with what sorts of resources?

Modern Management. A major outgrowth of the technological-industrial approach to missions is a substantially new form of mission management. In times past a cluster of face-to-face missionaries in a given field was organized as a decision-making unit. Management and decision-making have now been removed from the field to a home office stacked deep with bureaucracy. Concerns about adequate funds and the efficient running of the organization increase day by day in the modern mission; individual missionaries are assumed to be thankful that someone else is handling these matters.

The assumptions and procedures of modern management have reshaped the modernized world into patterns of relationships that are more mechanical and less humane. These effects are felt within the church and its institutions. Managerial *control* has become a more dominant feature of missionary life. One consequence is the decreased use of direct communications (face-to-face conversations, use of the telephone and handwriting). Indirect and technological means are on the ascendancy. After the typed letter came the Telex, the FAX, and now E-mail. Masses of donors in multiplied churches hear from their missionary through a Xerox machine. Replacing the old-style heart-to-heart talk with the field chairman, today's periodic written report to headquarters (on a preset form, no less) signifies the non-reciprocal accountability that drives many younger people right over the edge. The requirement of formal written reports on various aspects of the missionary's activity has now become standard practice. A common complaint from the missionary is that such reports, once filed, seem to fall into a

black hole; feedback is rare. The locus of accountability is moving farther from the field at the very moment when the relationships between the mission from abroad and the churches on the field are becoming more tenuous. *Management by objectives*, unless it is handled in a highly participatory way, is seen as stifling the creative spirit of dedicated newcomers.

Pragmatic use of demography and a marketing approach to goal-setting may be necessary; but many young people are simply not having any part of it. Emphasis on quantitative assessment of outcomes is not appreciated; many of today's missionaries worry when they feel that more attention is being given to counting things than to understanding things. (See Jim Reapsome's column in EMQ, October, '95.) When they discover that an over emphasis on organizational management and centralized control has followed them all the way to the field, they don't settle well into the missionary career.

The Semantics of Spirituality. Idealism and a sense of calling are more motivating before one gets to the field. The language encountered early in recruitment is often more biblical, in its vocabulary, images, and style, than the language of subsequent interactions with the organization.

Conflicting language and images underlie one of the greater misunderstandings about today's younger Christians and their outlook on Christian missions. The vocabulary of those who seek mission placement today is different from the Christian vocabulary of the past. In times largely past, evangelical Christians tended to live in two semantic worlds: the words and phrases used to talk among Christians about spiritual matters and the ordinary terminology of common life. The way to talk as insiders and the way to talk among outsiders was distinctly different. The hangover of this effect can be noted in "Christian" radio and television.

Today's younger Christians, especially the increasing proportion coming from young-adult conversion, have not been acculturated to *church-talk*. Some of the most likely prospects for missionary candidacy find even the words *call* and *commitment* somewhat awkward. Many are inclined to question the sincerity of those who shift their conversational styles according to the level of assumed piety of the situation. Perhaps their avoidance is a reaction to the careless and stylized overuses of pious in-group language. Identifying with the Epistle of James, younger Christians are likely to be suspicious of symbolic piety; they generally respond far better to evidences of spirituality that are not trumpeted by holy vocabulary. This shift is more sociolinguistic than spiritual, *per se*. To judge these people as less appropriate or less ready for missionary experience than their counterparts in earlier generations is shortsighted. It tends to dissuade some of the more serious and deeply spiritual candidates.

Marketing Missions. The effects of modern marketing techniques should not be underestimated. In the interest of more effectively communicating the missionary call and bringing workers into the harvest, the corner-cutting that a marketing approach requires has resulted in a view of missions as a collection of jobs to be filled. A full capitulation to modern marketing may be just around the corner: Marketing says, "Abbreviate the appeal. Make it punchy, startling, and emotionally compelling. Show people what they will gain and how they will profit. Offset any resistance with preplanned rebuttals. Get a commitment before people think carefully. Persist until it is easier for the buyer to say *yes* than

to let the harassment continue.” This sort of strategy will fill positions--but with the wrong people. Whose work is this? Should mission agencies be *calling for recruits* or *recruiting the called*? Missionary recruitment must always be subordinated to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Immodest Proposals. Complaining about the characteristics of candidates is not apt to be useful. After all, the mission itself, through its advertising and its recruitment procedures, virtually creates its own candidates. If anything is to change, it will need to begin with recruitment itself. Several suggestions follow:

1. The emphasis in missionary recruitment should center clearly on spiritual issues. Make no mistake: the messages of recruitment determine who will be recruited and what the recruits will want to talk about.

2. The truth must be told. Those who are truly appropriate candidates need to be given a clear picture of the missionary role and the conditions on the field.

3. The search for missionary candidates should be broadened. God is calling people from many walks of life and from many backgrounds. Missionary agencies need to continue and extend the search for ways to be responsive to new types of candidates, many of whom are more experienced and more mature, thus bringing with them more complex concerns.

4. Missionary recruitment should be based on warm relationships and constrained technology. People need to see Christ in every contact with the missionary establishment.

Author's note: This article is based on research begun a year ago during an assignment as Senior Scholar in Residence in the Overseas Ministries Study Center in New Haven, Connecticut. More than one hundred evangelical missionary agencies have provided contemporary and archival material reflecting their statements of purpose and the philosophy of mission strategy which have been transformed one or more times since World War II. These materials were graciously provided in response to a request in which I briefly outlined the procedure of the research.

The major concern has been to discern the shifts in emphasis and the development of assumptions about the following:

- How the nature of the Christian mission has been defined and described,
- How the missionary calling and career vocation have been understood and represented,
- What assumptions and procedures about recruitment of candidates have been operant, and
- What clues can be deduced in order to understand the assertion that today's missionary recruits are systematically different from those of the past?

The research is not complete, but preliminary analysis of the documents and a series of interviews of missionaries, recruits, candidates, executives, and church leaders in other nations have led to the conclusions in this article. Reactions from the missionary community and from the missionary-supporting communities are welcome and may prove to be useful in the ongoing analyses of the data.
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