

# CHURCH LEVEL MEMBER CARE

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 carrying 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 of wimps? Is there a new genus or strain of field workers with needs distinct to those of previous generations?

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 action, 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 writing 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?

Nothing could be clearer in my mind on this subject than the fact that there are four levels of care: Agency Level, Church Level, Personal Level and Crisis Level. That there is a vital need to recognize the place and acceptance and responsibilities of each level is primary.

Secondly, there is a desperate need for these four levels to cooperate so that our missionaries are better cared for. After all, missionaries are too valuable to lose.

Each level has its strengths and weaknesses. Yet, the weakness of one is the strength of another. Thus, acknowledgement of these facts is the first step to the painful reconciliation between three of these entities. 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.... Yes, this is part of the problem—starting with the agency level. Member care should begin a long time before any agency is involved.

Church Level Member Care: I believe that we need to begin at this level because the Bible begins at this level.

## **Identify and Nurture**

The first issue at this level is the identifying and nurturing of a prospective missionary. This will probably begin long before that person realizes a personal call. We need not go as far as the Church in Jerusalem did in changing his name from Joseph 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; 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.

Likewise, the Antioch church wisely sent out (at the Holy Spirit's direction) an evangelist (Saul) and a reconciler (Barnabas).

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*; the *mission* of the church is *outreach*! [ERI has available a CD (or paper) enlarging on this subject.] And we should be ready to send out our workers as needs present themselves.

Nurturing the prospective cross-cultural worker is giving him opportunity to exercise his “cross-cultural muscles”. 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.

### **A Clarion Call**

As the church continues to nurture this prospective cross-cultural worker, the leadership needs to be sounding a clarion call that reflects the ethos of the church. 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?

### **Decisive Point of Battle**

Yet, in answering that question, we must be clear that wherever that is and whatever it is, that it is a *decisive point* of battle, being able to answer two questions—both of them—in the affirmative: Is it worth taking? 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.

### **Agency Accountability**

A fourth, equally vital responsibility of the church is to make sure the agency is providing the care for its “feet” that the agency’s literature says they will. Horror stories could be written about missionaries sent home as failures, because the agency put them in a position for which the worker and the agency knew he was not suited.

If you care to dialogue with me on this subject, I would enjoy that.

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