

VOL. 9 • NO. 2 • WINTER 2018 • 201-210

CARING FOR MUSLIM MINISTRY WORKERS IN NORTH AMERICA

Mike Urton

Abstract

Numerous studies have been conducted on the causes of undue stress among missionaries serving overseas. This article represents the first such study conducted among missionaries working domestically among diaspora people groups. The focus is on a particular group of diaspora missionaries in North America, namely those serving among Muslims. It includes a survey of missionaries in this context who were asked to list their top stressors in ministry. The results are organized into relevant categories, along with suggested coping methods for these stressors. It concludes by demonstrating how caring for these missionaries will assist the broader Christian community in Muslim ministry.

INTRODUCTION

It has long been known that missionaries working in an overseas context have faced certain challenges that have created undue stress. These stressors at times can result in a reduced effectiveness in ministry, burnout, or attrition. Many studies have been conducted to discover the root causes of these issues among overseas missionaries, such as the ReMap I&II (Reducing

Missionary Attrition Project) studies,¹ in order to deal with them. However, no comparative studies have been done for missionaries working cross-culturally among diaspora people groups in North America. Yet, as people have continued to migrate from their countries of origin to destinations in North America, the number of missionaries sent to reach these people with the gospel has also grown.

Studies done for overseas missionaries can be helpful to those working in a diaspora context, but those working overseas do not experience certain stressors in this context. The following study focuses on a group of missionaries working among Muslims in North America. While this is a specific slice of missionaries working in North America, hopefully the lessons gleaned will be applicable to those serving other people groups.

The present study includes responses sent via email from ten missionaries. Participants were asked to share about their top two or three ministry stressors. Suggested stressors included issues of finances, interpersonal relationships, culture (for example, the mixing of North American culture with the culture of origin), health, or organizational factors (sending organization or local team). While these were the suggested categories, respondents were free to share other stressors that did not fall into one of the suggestions. They were also given permission to share stressors voiced by their teammates or other Muslim ministry workers. Out of the ten responses received, only one could not be verified as working among Muslims, yet these responses were included because they were deemed helpful to the outcome of this study.

The responses were grouped into five categories. These categories include face-to-face ministry, support raising, relationship with sending organization, spiritual warfare, and other stressors. This list begins with the most frequently mentioned stressors, of which face-to-face ministry and support raising were tied. Since we are searching for patterns of stressors in this study, a particular issue had to be mentioned more than once in order to be considered in the top four categories.

The category of other stressors includes those issues that were mentioned only once. A study with more respondents may find these stressors occurring more frequently.

Before moving on to the findings, we will define the terms *stress* and *burnout* in order to bring clarity to this study. Ronald Koteskey defines stress as

¹ ReMap I “included data from more than 400 agencies with a total of nearly 20,000 missionaries from 14 sending countries.” ReMap II, entitled, “Worth Keeping: Global Perspectives of Best Practice in Missionary Retention,” “included data from 600 agencies with 40,000 missionaries from 22 countries, and it contains more than 400 pages of valuable information.” Ronald L. Koteskey *Missionary Member Care: An Introduction* (2013), 45–46, accessed December 21, 2016, <http://www.missionarycare.com/missionary-member-care-an-introduction.html>.

“a process involving environmental events (stressors), our own reactions to the stress, and the resources we use to cope with the stress. . . . Note that the stress you feel depends both on the events and on your resources.”²

Marjory Foyle offers three different components to stress—the event itself, appraisal of the event, and coping methods that help to flesh out Koteskey’s definition. The event itself “is usually something external to the individual, and out of personal control, both factors determining whether or not it will be stressful.” Deciding whether or not a particular circumstance is harmful to us is the appraisal of the event. This is followed by the third component of coping methods “employed to deal with the situation.”³

When stressors are left to build or the coping methods to deal with them are overwhelmed, a person can reach burnout. Foyle puts forth this definition of burnout originally coined by Freudenberger: “to deplete oneself, to exhaust one’s own physical and mental resources, to wear oneself out striving to reach some unrealistic expectation imposed by oneself or the values of society.”⁴

This portrayal of missionary burnout by Koteskey adds a helpful dimension to Freudenberger’s definition:

You find it hard to get up and go to work in the morning. Work used to be exciting and you used to look forward to what you did with people, but now you are just tired and it takes a great deal of effort to get out of bed. You wonder what is wrong. Could it be that you are suffering from burnout? Could a really committed missionary burn out? You may only be in your first term; certainly you couldn’t burn out in just a few years, could you? Wouldn’t God keep you from burning out? Is it better to burn out than to rust out? What about that old gospel song that says, “Let me burn out for thee, dear Lord?”⁵

Now that the parameters of the study have been outlined, and the terms *stress* and *burnout* have been defined, we will turn our attention to the participants’ responses. These responses will be organized according to the five categories mentioned above. Again, since we are looking for patterns of stressors, only the top four categories will conclude with suggestions for coping methods.

² Ronald L. Koteskey, *What Missionaries Ought to Know: A Handbook for Life and Service* (2015), 24, accessed December 21, 2016, <http://www.missionarycare.com/what-missionaries-ought-to-know.html>.

³ Marjory F. Foyle, *Honourably Wounded: Stress Among Christian Workers* (Grand Rapids: Monarch Books, 2001), 28–29.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁵ Koteskey, *What Missionaries Ought to Know*, 159.

FIVE RESPONSE CATEGORIES

Face-to-Face Ministry

In this category, a particular stressor that emerged was working with people in unstable situations. This is the result of dealing with those who have come out of a traumatic refugee or immigrant situation. Since the lives of these refugees/immigrants are so unstable, ministry to them can also be unstable. As one respondent put it, “they come for help, then they are gone.” Thus, a lack of both longevity and spiritual results in evangelism and ministry occurs. Also, since refugees/immigrants can have very high needs, much time can be spent on helping them in areas such as paperwork and language learning, so that little time is actually spent on spiritual ministry.

Another participant described his experience of working with a Muslim Background Believer (MBB), which also highlights this element of instability. He wrote that this particular MBB suffered from issues like extreme paranoia, skepticism of other Arab Christians, and poor decision-making that was contrary to advice given. The MBB’s poor decisions resulted in “financial and emotional expenses,” according to this missionary.

As a result of the ongoing stress created by dealing with people in these unstable situations, a missionary may begin to exhibit a symptom of burn-out known as emotional exhaustion. Koteskey also refers to this as “compassion fatigue.” This is when a person feels drained, used up, and overwhelmed “by the needs people come with.” As Koteskey concludes, “It is not that you don’t want to help, you just do not have what it takes to help anymore.”⁶

It was also mentioned that “there is a challenge in ministering the Gospel to Muslims.” The issue is that a missionary faces “family and community displeasure” by inviting Muslims to follow Christ. One respondent asks the question, “Down deep, how do Christian workers deal with asking Muslims to make decisions that will lead to persecution?” As he points out, the temptation here might be to change the message in order to avoid the problem of persecution for those who convert.

Still another participant highlighted having “to take more initiative to connect with Muslims” here in North America as a stressor. This is juxtaposed to an overseas context in which a missionary is surrounded by Muslims, making it much easier to have contact with them.

Suggested Coping Methods

1. Firm Boundaries

When dealing with Muslims and MBBs in unstable situations, having firm boundaries may be an appropriate coping method. It would be helpful for

⁶ Ibid., 159.

missionaries to decide what and how much help they are willing to give with issues such as paperwork and language learning. This should be weighed with their goals in mind of how much time they would like to devote to other activities like evangelism and discipleship. Certainly the ministry of helping can overlap with evangelism and discipleship, but they are not always one and the same. Thus, decisions should be made as to how much time and energy will go into each activity. Developing a set of goals that assist in defining the missionary's priorities can help accomplish this.

2. Empathy and Integrity

With regard to the struggle of family and community pressures versus sharing the gospel with Muslims, Foyle points out that overseas missionaries face a similar issue of not understanding family pressures that the nationals to which they minister face. Her solution is for the expatriate missionary to love and respect the national first and foremost. She believes that this will cover over misunderstandings of how to behave properly.⁷

While this is a good corrective to keep in mind when dealing with Muslims cross-culturally in North America, it is also imperative that missionaries seek to uphold the integrity of the gospel message when sharing with Muslims. A combined love and respect for the person and their culture, along with communicating the gospel truthfully and graciously, may bring some ease to the tension of family/community pressure versus the invitation to follow Christ.

3. Self-Care

The energy that it takes to be intentional about consistently seeking out Muslims and MBBs to interact with and minister to should be balanced with appropriate self-care. Taking regular days off, scheduling vacations, and engaging in activities that one enjoys can assist in this.

Support Raising

Developing and maintaining a base of adequate financial support was another key stressor mentioned by participants. The issues of not having a regular furlough or home assignment to work on support raising, the time involved to raise support as a domestic missionary, and donors discontinuing their support were all listed as stressors. One respondent added that she believed that stateside missionaries were viewed as inferior to overseas missionaries, making it more difficult to raise necessary funds. Another highlighted that this can be especially stressful for those who are approaching retirement.

The difficulty that ethnic staff have in raising support was another finding in this study. One participant stated that the system of support raising that

⁷ Foyle, *Honourably Wounded*, 110.

his organization employed seemed to work for the white staff but not as well for the staff of color. In his observation, this had led to some ethnic staff leaving the organization altogether.

Foyle, in her study of missionaries, also discovered “deputation-related stress” to be among factors contributing to “psychological symptoms.” She also found that another problem concerning support raising was “the willingness of supporters in some countries to donate only to the religious aspects of the work, which they call ‘ministry,’ and not to the other things missionaries may do to serve their people in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ.”⁸ This is similar to stressors mentioned above in which potential donors may view domestic missionaries as somehow doing a lesser type of ministry.

Suggested Coping Methods

1. Valuing Stateside Missionaries

The emphasis with this coping method actually lies with the sending organization. Sending organizations should demonstrate that they value missionaries working cross-culturally in North America as much as they do those serving overseas. This can be done by communicating to their church and individual partners how they value the role that domestic missionaries play in reaching migrant people groups like those from Muslim countries. Missionaries working in this context can play a role by being involved in conversations with their organization about strategies for communicating domestic, cross-cultural ministry. Having a voice in how this is shaped may help in alleviating the feelings of inferiority and struggle mentioned above.

2. Developing Effective Strategies for Ethnic Staff

Again, this is a task for the sending organization. Perhaps a good starting point would be to interview ethnic staff who have seen some measure of success in raising financial support. These interviews may reveal patterns and successful practices that could be employed by other ethnic staff. Furthermore, staff of color should be included in these conversations, which are designed to shape effective support raising strategies for them.

Relationship with Sending Organization

A lack of understanding and support by the missionaries’ sending organizations were among the stressors in this category. These issues seemed to manifest themselves in the forms of the organization lacking a vision for cross-cultural work in North America, operating on “old paradigms of geography-driven ‘fields,’” and not understanding diaspora mission. In one case, this frustration has been compounded by the fact that the mission-

⁸ Ibid., 85.

ary's sending organization accepted her to serve as a cross-cultural, domestic missionary but has not provided the necessary "spiritual, emotional, or developmental support." She continues, "This has been frustrating, devaluing, and discouraging. At multiple junctures we have been looked for a new organization, but unfortunately, there are few options."

A study entitled, "Long-Term Outcomes of an Intensive Outpatient Program for Missionaries and Clergy," also found a disconnect between missionaries and their sending organizations. While this study measured how involved a sending organization was in their members' follow-up from an intensive outpatient program (IOP), some of the responses from their participants have application for this current study.

Those who felt like their sending organization lacked involvement had similar reactions to some of our respondents. One person commented, "Our sending organization hasn't offered us any follow-up to encourage continued restoration/resettlement."⁹ Another expressed her frustration by stating, "Get into my husband's life and mine! The only reason they know anything is *my* pursuit of them. There was minimal time, energy, interest, sense of responsibility, or care during time on the field when they knew of serious issues that had happened, or afterward once we had returned to the USA."¹⁰ The common denominator between this study and ours is that the missionaries in both of them greatly desired more involvement by their sending organization.

Suggested Coping Methods

1. Member Care

Missionaries working cross-culturally in North America should be included in the member care structures of their sending organization. Koteskey offers a picture of how member care might look: "This may be something routine such as regularly scheduled visits from a pastor asking, 'How are you doing?' Or it may be as rare as a psychologist rushing to get to a missionary within a couple days for a trauma debriefing to help prevent post-traumatic stress disorder."¹¹ While this is a task for the sending organization, the missionary can help by communicating to their organization about their need for care.

2. Vision for the North American Context

In order for missionaries in North America to feel like their ministry is valued, the sending organization should have a vision for diaspora ministry in this context. This vision can be developed in collaboration with those who

⁹ Christopher H. Rosik, "Long-Term Outcomes of an Intensive Outpatient Program for Missionaries and Clergy," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 30, no. 3, 179.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 181.

¹¹ Koteskey, *Missionary Member Care*, 17.

are already engaged in this work, both inside and outside the organization. Here again, missionaries within the organization ministering in this context should be included in the formation of the vision.

3. Staff Development

A focus on professional development of diaspora mission workers may also help in alleviating some of the stressors mentioned above. This could take the form of promoting them within the organization and providing opportunities for ongoing education. These could be opportunities presented by the sending organization or pursued on the missionary's own initiative. Freedom and opportunity in this area may create hope that a missionary has a future in the organization.

Spiritual Warfare

The Bible tells us that ministry brings with it opposition from Satan and his evil forces (Eph 6:10–12, 1 Pe 5:8–9). This is certainly no less true for missionaries, as Koteskey comments, “Missionaries are on the frontline of a spiritual war between the powers of good and evil, and their battles are even worse.” He continues, “With social support absent, emotional needs unmet, and living in a strange culture, why would Satan not take advantage of them as well?”¹²

This phenomenon of spiritual warfare was also mentioned as a stressor by our participants. One wrote, “I believe that ministry to Muslims involves so much spiritual warfare, and this is often overlooked. Lately I have (been) observing insane levels of spiritual warfare in so much of ministry to Muslims.” As this respondent points out, since this is an unseen issue, it can often be overlooked as a significant stress factor.

Suggested Coping Methods

Scripture has so much to say on this topic that we can take our coping methods directly from the Bible.

1. Prayer

Scripture commands us to “Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes” (Eph 6:11). Ephesians 6:12–17 details the armor of God given to us to stand our ground against these evil forces. Missionaries working among Muslims in North America may find it helpful to meditate on and pray through the armor of God as a regular practice, in order to sustain them in ministry. They should also mind Paul’s command in verse 18 to “pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.”

¹² Ibid., 44.

2. Regular Time in God's Word

Ephesians 6:17 refers to God's Word as "the sword of the Spirit." Hebrews 4:12 says, "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." Scripture is the instrument that cuts through Satan's lies and spiritual attacks. This is why those working cross-culturally among Muslims should have a regular time to study and memorize God's Word, so that when these attacks come, they will be able to discern them and stand firm.

3. Support from Fellow Believers

At the end of this passage on the armor of God, Paul encourages believers to "always keep on praying for all the saints" and asks the Christians in Ephesus to pray for him (Eph 6:18–19). This highlights how prayer is a means through which believers can support one another in the spiritual battles they face. Fellow missionaries, the sending organization, or those in the local church can practice this.

Other Stressors

This category represents stressors that were mentioned only once among the ten participants in our survey. However, they are worth listing, because as noted in the introduction, a larger sampling may show that some or all of these are patterns of stressors for those ministering among Muslims in North America.

These other stressors include:

- Relationship to the local church
- Missionaries who served overseas missing that context
- Singleness
- Caring for elderly parents
- Underutilization of ministry giftings
- Lack of training for ministry
- Lack of a unified identity
- Lack of a unified team.

CONCLUSION

The hope for this study has been to try to identify patterns of stressors for those serving among Muslims in North America. The aim of the coping methods is to offer strategies for dealing with these stressors, which will help to avoid burnout and assist in longevity in ministry. Given the facts that this study is among the first of its kind and the sample size is small, much more work needs to be done in this area. Perhaps these findings will be useful to inspire future research on this topic, so that those serving

among Muslims in North America will be able to develop long and resilient ministries.

Diaspora ministry to Muslims is a very difficult undertaking, often with little fruit. Those engaged in it need to be dedicated for the long haul, in order to see God's kingdom advance among Muslims in this context. This is not a task that can be accomplished alone. Studies like this one are not only helpful in supporting these missionaries, but are also beneficial to the sending organizations and churches that walk alongside them. Developing care tools like these will assist missionaries, their organizations, and local churches in working together to see the gospel take root among Muslims in North America.

Bibliography

- Burns, Bob, Tasha Chapman, and Donald C. Guthrie. *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us About Surviving and Thriving*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013.
- Foyle, Marjory F. *Honourably Wounded: Stress Among Christian Workers*. Grand Rapids: Monarch Books, 2001.
- Ingram, Chip. *The Invisible War: What Every Believer Needs to Know About Satan, Demons, and Spiritual Warfare*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006.
- Koteskey, Ronald L., *Missionary Member Care: An Introduction*. 2013. <http://www.missionarycare.com/missionary-member-care-an-introduction.html>.
- . *What Missionaries Ought to Know: A Handbook for Life and Service*. 2015. <http://www.missionarycare.com/what-missionaries-ought-to-know.html>.
- Rosik, Christopher H. "Long-Term Outcomes of an Intensive Outpatient Program for Missionaries and Clergy." *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 30, no. 3 (2011): 175–183.

About The Author

Mike Urton serves as the associate director for the COMMA Network (Coalition of Ministries to Muslims in North America). He has been serving among Muslims and Muslim Background Believers in the Chicago area for fifteen years. Blogs authored by him can be found on the COMMA Network website in the editorials section where he writes under the pseudonym Malik Ibrahim <http://commanetwork.com/editorials/>. He is also the co-author of *Journey to Jesus: Building Christ-centered Friendships with Muslims* published by Tyndale House. Currently, Mike is a Doctor of Ministry student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. You can contact him at mwurton@gmail.com.