

A Comprehensive and Individual Perspective:  
A New Model for Assessing Missionary Needs in Order to Prevent Burnout

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### Abstract

In the last 20-30 years, missionary burnout has become a popular topic in the missionary care and support community. Although much research has been done on the issue, few studies have provided a comprehensive approach to the study and appropriate care of these missionaries. The goal of this research was to present a model that more accurately represented missionary struggles while incorporating past findings on missionary burnout. Four retired missionaries were interviewed about their experiences on the field, and their estimation of the model's relevancy and helpfulness. Despite similar experiences amongst the participants, the responses further confirmed the individual nature of the struggles missionaries face. The interview data supported the model, and provided further steps for research and development.

### A New Model for Analyzing Missionary Burnout

As the evangelical Christian community continues to recruit missionaries, the issue of missionary burnout has gained the attention of many mission agencies. Gish (1983) conducted one of the first studies on the topic that defined missionary burnout, and suggested that it was a problem in need of further research and corresponding intervention. Out of the 549 missionaries Gish (1983) studied, only 56% intended to return to the field after they came back to the States to rest and raise further support. This percentage of seemingly premature dropouts awakened many in the missions and psychology communities to the possible need of counseling and preventative support. In the following years the need for using psychology in this support was realized (Hall & Schram, 1999). Mental health workers began to work in missionary assessment and further research.

Gish's (1983) study not only quantified and brought attention to the issue of missionary burnout, but also identified 65 stressors that could increase the missionaries' stress levels, and thus their likelihood of burnout. When these findings started impacting missionary care, Carter (1999) replicated Gish's (1983) study to examine if the stress had decreased (Kotesky, 2011). Instead the study found that the 306 missionaries surveyed had experienced more stress. The same stressors that negatively affected the missionary's in Gish's (1983) study were still prevalent in the missionaries in Carter's (1999) study.

In the years since, many studies have been conducted on the issue of missionary burnout. Although growth has taken place in the areas of missionary care and support, little current research has shown a change in terms of the burnout rate. In 1997 the latest burnout, or attrition, rate was reported at 5.1% per year, and 71% of those cases were

preventable. (Cousineau, Hall, Rosik & Hall, 2010). In addition, few studies have examined missionary stressors in light of the setting, occupation, and personal factors by which an individual missionary is affected. The goal of this research is to provide a framework based on past studies and current trends in order to aid mission agencies in individually and holistically supporting missionaries.

### **Literature Review**

In order to build a framework for future research and support, past research must be utilized to provide a foundation. Hall and Schram (1999) summarized the advances of missionary care and the gaps that still needed to be filled: More advanced research, clearer ethical guidelines in working with missionaries, and moving beyond the traditional role of professionals helping missionaries. Many of these gaps that existed 12 years ago are still present today, especially in the area of more advanced research (Keckler, Moriarty & Blagen, 2008). Most of the studies done on this topic are theses and dissertations that do not have the funds or reputation to support long-term and continuing research (Hall & Schram, 1999). Unfortunately, this leads to articles that take many pages to suggest what would seem to be common knowledge. Schaefer, Blazer, Carr, Connor, Burchett, Schaefer, and Davidson (2007), for example, came to the conclusion that unstable settings lead to more stress. Although this finding could have helped in recognizing a way to make missionaries more resilient to this stress, it was not related back to a theoretical construct outside of the ministry environment that could have provided such information.

On the other hand, there are articles that have the potential for uncovering a part of the problem, but have too small or too specific of a sample size to be extrapolated out

to the general missionary population. For example, Bagley's (2003) study on 31 Wesleyan missionaries suggested that missionaries either are more resilient to stress's influence, or they are less likely to admit their stress than those not in the missionary population. These Wesleyan missionaries exhibited much higher trauma prevalence rates and multiple trauma exposure rates than prior studies conducted on the general population. Surprisingly, 22.6% of the missionaries surveyed reported childhood abuse. Due to the sample size, it is hard to determine why this abuse was so prevalent in the missionaries who were studied. Did the trauma encourage them to seek healing in the Lord? After seeing Him work in their lives, did they decide to devote themselves to helping others find Him? Although these missionaries were exposed to more trauma than the average person, they ranked their stress levels as lower than would be expected. This finding could suggest that adults who experienced trauma as children may be more resilient to stress on the mission field, but it is hard to use this data for more than speculations due to the sample size. On the other hand, these speculations do provide evidence that the issue of missionary burnout and resiliency is more multi-faceted than many studies acknowledge.

There is a growing frustration with the lack of helpful information provided in the numerous studies conducted over the years (Hall & Schram, 1999; Keckler, Moriarty & Blagen, 2008). As a result, it is becoming evident that the problem is not with the data being gathered, but rather with how researchers classify missionaries and their susceptibility to burnout. Most missionaries are grouped and studied together, despite the large differences between one missionary and another. Studying them this way, in large groups, regardless of individual differences, reduces the ability of research to

demonstrate the needs of the individual. This generalization provides little help for member care workers to aid missionaries in coping with the issues they battle on the field. Without the correct support, the missionary burnout rate could continue rising.

As the issue appears to pertain to how missionaries are studied, it is important to examine exactly how member care workers and mission agencies view missionary burnout (Keckler, Moriarty & Blagen, 2008). Because most studies view burnout as nearly synonymous with posttraumatic stress, it seems the factors of context and resilience receive very little attention. In addition, as Bagley (2003) suggested, many missionaries believe, due in part to the pressures of the Christian culture, that burnout or admitting stress is a sign of weakness or lack of devotion to God. As such, they may underreport their struggles and stress, making it a challenge to find the root problem and help them.

Based on Bagley's (2003) findings, there seems to be a pressure put on missionaries to be impervious to normal stress reactions. By making missionaries seem stronger than the average human when it comes to stress, the church culture greatly decreases the view that missionaries have struggles like other Christian workers. Many studies that are focused on missionary burnout and retention do not delineate between the personal, contextual, and vocational factors that have been historically tied to burnout. Often all missionaries are assumed to be doing the same thing, even though missionary occupations range from pastor to pilot to executive to veterinarian. In the Comprehensive Missionary Wellness Model proposed by Keckler, Moriarty, and Blagen (2008), occupational wellness was included in the top six categories, due to its impact on the missionary. The stress that comes from one's occupation will range widely depending on

what the occupation entails. The stress a pastor will face and its consequences will be very different from the stress experienced by a pilot. In addition, married missionaries will face different stressors than single missionaries, especially if children are involved (Carter, 1999). Some agencies require vigorous testing and training before a missionary goes on the field, while other mission agencies require little training. Moreover, as it is with any occupation involving people, every individual has a different history, coping strategy, relationship with God, maturity in Christ, and support from family or home churches (Keckler, Moriarty & Blagen, 2008). These factors must also be accounted for when classifying missionaries.

Before going further it is important to define the term “burnout” that has been, and will be used in this paper. In ministry, and occupations that involve helping people, such as nursing, the term for “a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job” is referred to as burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1984; Maslach, Schaufeli, Leiter, 2001). In occupations other than helping professions, or if a person’s role is primarily administrative, the same response is termed “tedium” (Maslach & Jackson, 1984). Although missionaries may be working in occupations that would not be considered helping professions, their ministry as a missionary would be considered such. Therefore, the term “burnout” will be used throughout the description of this model, although missionaries may also be experiencing tedium.

As burnout can happen to anyone in a helping profession, it is not solely a term used in missionary care (Maslach, Schaufeli, Leiter, 2001). On the other hand, missionaries often do the work of those in helping professions such as providing medical and counseling aid, thus they may experience many of the same stressors, except they



must also deal with cultural differences. Surprisingly, when 100 missionary couples were given a tedium/burnout scale and were compared to helping professions serving in their own countries, missionaries' scores were not significantly different (Chester, 1983). As this data is not recent, another study would need to be conducted to verify if this pertains to missionaries today as well.

In response to the findings on the varying stressors missionaries face, a new model will be created for viewing and categorizing missionaries. It is intended that this model will provide insight into the factors that make certain missionaries more resilient to stress leading to burnout. After proposing this model, retired missionaries will be interviewed to determine whether their experiences support this model. Limitations of this study will then be examined along with suggestions for further research to help missionaries better follow the call of God for their lives.

### **Model**

The new model being proposed consists of five-parts useful for defining missionaries so that individualized care may be given to reduce stress and prevent burnout. Many studies of missionaries grouped them all together, disregarding the differences in stressors that often occur. In addition, past experiences and resiliency play a significant role in the way missionaries cope with the stressors that occur. All missionaries are different, with varying levels of strengths and weaknesses in diverse areas. If a mission agency or church hopes to keep its missionaries strong, stable, and thoroughly equipped, their care must be as idiosyncratic as those they are helping. This model aims to be a first step in providing a way for member care workers and agencies to categorize missionaries, analyze their stress, and aid in the development of individualized

care. There are five dimensions to this model: Occupation, Context, Life Stressors, Personal Factors, and Support (See Appendix B for the diagram).

**Occupation.** The first dimension of this model consists of the missionary's occupation. Although in the past the stereotype of missionary was that they are all pastors, the trend in the missions community is heading toward tent-making. Tent-making ministry is defined as "the pastoral service or service of the Word by the pastor or servant of the Word who, for one reason or another, also has a so-called secular occupation or is involved in a secular enterprise" (Manala, 2004, p. 1400). The term tent-making comes as a reference to the work Apostle Paul did in the New Testament. Paul made and sold tents in order to provide money for himself, so he would not have to be a burden to the churches he was ministering to. In recent years, the rise in tent-making ministries has been due, in part, to the economic downturn and to the closing of many countries to missionaries. The state of the economy has greatly decreased the abilities of missionaries to raise the money they need. If they can support themselves partially through a job or trade, they can offset the negative effects of the economy. In addition, if missionaries have trades that can get them into a closed country, it is easier for them to stay under the radar of governments who are antagonistic to Christianity.

Missionfinder.org is an online organization that helps connect potential missionaries to tent-making opportunities in other countries. Listing over 21 categories for mission occupations, missionfinder.org provides evidence to the trend toward tent-making and to the diversity found in missionary occupations. From teachers to farmers to athletes to counselors, missionaries now are very rarely only pastors. As missionaries are not only involved in helping professions, using the term "burnout" for all responses in the

missions community may be incomplete, as some may be experiencing “tedium” as well (Maslach & Jackson, 1984; Maslach, Schaufeli, Leiter, 2001). Formulating support for the missionary may be more comprehensive if member care workers consider how the missionary is also an employee, battling the demands of an everyday job under the pressures of another culture.

**Context.** The second dimension of the new model is the missionaries’ context. It seems almost crucial in the Christian church’s definition of missionaries that they must serve somewhere other than where they are from, whether this means going to another state or to another country. Regardless of how far the destination is, every location comes with its own culture, expectations, and risks. Missionaries must learn this culture if they hope to relate with the people they are trying to reach. The cultural adjustment is one that many missionaries never fully learn to juggle. They must be able to fully adapt to the new culture, while not completely losing their own culture, which could make them seem incompetent to supporters when trying to communicate or raise funds. Cultural differences add much stress to missionaries, especially new ones who may not have received sufficient training from the organization, or gotten exposure to that culture prior to leaving (Gish, 1983). The time between deployment and the first furlough is when the most missionaries leave the field because adjusting to the culture is too difficult.

Language is another aspect of context. If a missionary is not able to adjust to the language difference, it can add much stress when they attempt simple tasks, such as getting groceries or meeting new people. Fully mastering a culture’s language and terms can prove to be a very long-term task. Even those who become fluent in a language may never come across to a native as similar to them. Little pronunciations or facial

expressions will always be a sign to native speakers that the missionary is an outsider. Unless missionaries know how to deal with this separation, it can add much stress and fear to their lives. This explains why communicating across the language barrier was one of the most stressful factors stated in Gish's (1983) study.

Finally, safety is almost always a context issue when moving to a new location to minister. Schaefer et. al. (2007) suggested that unstable settings were directly related to the extent to which a missionary experienced post-traumatic stress. As countries are closing their borders to missionaries and Christians, many cultures can be hostile. Even in countries whose governments are not directly opposed to missionaries, factions in the communities are often severely opposed and are not afraid of making it known. For this reason, many mission agencies require that missionaries take very strict safety precautions to protect themselves. Depending on the location, this can mean 12-foot walls and hired, personal guards. Adjusting to this, and learning to live, thrive, and minister under it, is certainly not a simple task. As Schaefer et al. (2007) found that, despite the measures taken, no amount walls or guards can protect missionaries from post-traumatic stress.

**Life stressors.** The Life Stressors dimension of this model is where most of the prior studies on missionary burnout fit. Through this model, it is easy to recognize that the issues these studies discovered are only part of the overall picture. Gish (1983) discovered 65 stressors that a missionary faces on the field, many of which pertained to balancing work and family needs. As human beings, there are monumental developmental crises that will arise in missionaries' lives. Finding a spouse, adjusting to the birth of a child, nursing illnesses, raising children from infants through adulthood,

sending teenagers to college, and coping with the death of a parent are only a few examples. Even people in their home environment, who do not have to struggle with language and cultural barriers, face huge difficulties when these situations arise in their lives. In missionaries' lives, these crises are exacerbated by culture and language struggles, as well as a desire or longing to be at home with their families during such times. These life events often end up being the final stressors that lead to missionaries leaving the field. Proper support through the occupation and context stressors could prevent this outcome (Irvine, Armentrout & Miner, 2006).

Experiencing trauma on the mission field is expected due to the context stressors, occupational stressors, and others that play into a missionary's everyday life. Irvine, Armentrout and Miner (2006) conducted a study on 173 missionaries to learn about the traumatic stress they face. Of the missionaries studied, 80.1% reported experiencing traumatic stress while on the field. Of those, 35% admitted to still experiencing symptoms to this day. Despite the heightened possibility of experiencing catastrophic events, Irvine, Armentrout and Miner (2006) were surprised to find that non-catastrophic stressors had a greater impact on missionaries than the catastrophic stressors. This would imply the life stressors discussed in the previous section could lead to posttraumatic stress. As most of those stressors cannot be taken out of the missionary's environment, how a missionary is able to cope through these stressors becomes a focal point.

**Personal factors.** As Bagley's (2003) study suggested through his survey of 31 Wesleyan missionaries, it is quite common for those who have experienced trauma in their childhood, such as abuse, to be more resilient to stressors leading to PTSD. Although the missionaries in his study reported a very high amount of traumatic

incidents, they reported far less post-traumatic symptoms than would be expected based on their experiences. Although the research was conducted on too small and specific of a population to fully extract a cause for this, three suggestions were made as to why there was such a relatively low symptom response. The first suggestion, as supported by other studies, is that by being exposed to many traumatic and stressful events as a part of their everyday life, missionaries build up a resiliency that is not found in the average American. Another suggestion was that many missionaries go on the field with a thorough knowledge of the risks possible. Those who make it to the field must be equipped and mentally stable enough to face whatever challenges may arise. A third suggestion was that missionaries may go on the field as a demonstration of their faith, and this revealing their hurt or stress would look as if they were less faithful. These three factors could have greatly influenced the low amount of PTSD symptoms that were reported.

It would be irresponsible to ignore the fact that 22.6% of the missionaries Bagley (2003) surveyed described a high level of childhood abuse. Ahmed (2007) reported that someone who has unresolved childhood trauma in his or her past is over 7 times more likely to experience PTSD. If this were the case, the sample studied by Bagley (2003) should have had an even greater amount of PTSD symptoms than they reported. It is possible they could have resolved their trauma through training and counseling before leaving for the field, in which case, their past experiences could have given them coping mechanisms to get them through the traumas they experienced on the field.

Bagley's (2003) study is just one study that points to the need to acknowledge personal factors, such as past experience and resiliency, when assessing one's coping

ability. That is why Personal Factors is the fourth dimension of this new model for assessing missionary stress and identifying the proper care needed in each case.

Depending on the missionaries' past experiences, they might need more training prior to going on the field and more debriefing during their service to maintain their ability to cope with the life stressors that will be a part of daily life.

**Support.** The final dimension of this model is the application piece. The four dimensions explained above either add stressors to a missionary's life, or help make them resilient to it. After analyzing missionaries' idiosyncratic strengths and weaknesses based on their occupation, context, stressors, and personal factors, the mission agency is better able to see what areas need more of their support and aid. When people think of missionary support, they often think of financial help, which is only a small part of missionaries' needs. Although steady and reliable financial support greatly decreases the overall anxiety that a missionary experiences, there are many more support areas that often go unnoticed. These going unmet can be far more detrimental to the missionary, in the short and long runs. The support a missionary is receiving is vital to his or her survival and duration on the field. In fact Miersma (1993) compared missionary traumatic exposure to combat exposure and found many factors that exaggerate the impact of stress on missionaries. Three of the seven factors related to a lack of support from home: Organizational support, Member Care support and support they receive through their personal faith relationship with God.

The support missionaries receive from their organization is vital to their success on the field. In their study Eriksson et. al. (2009) found that the more organizational support relief workers had, the less emotional exhaustion was present in their lives. This

emotional exhaustion was directly related to burnout rates. On the other hand, if these relief workers perceived a lack of organizational support, they were more likely to disconnect themselves from those they were trying to help. This disconnection, or depersonalization, was one of the more extreme forms of burnout. If positive organizational support can have that great a positive effect, and negative support such a negative effect, then it is crucial to know what types of support are most helpful.

Missionaries receive various types of support: Pre-field training, member care, and support from their personal faith with God. Firstly, the training one receives before leaving for the field varies greatly, from language and culture training to learning to solve conflicts, relate to supporters, and work with other team members. Some agencies even have training schools that missionaries are required to attend before leaving for the field. This training is proving crucial to a missionary's ability to cope and handle stress on the field. Training is also found to greatly increase resiliency to the stress causing PTSD and burnout. As Gish (1983) noted, pre-field training can alleviate even the most stress-producing factors. Irvine, Armentrout, and Miner (2006) suggested that pre-field training can provide a buffer to protect missionaries, especially those more susceptible to PTSD. Often times the most effective forms of training come in cross-cultural settings such as sending missionaries on shorter-term mission trips to their intended location before their deployment, so they can anticipate what will be required of them. As discussed in the context dimension, culture and language differences are one of the more stressful adaptations a missionary has to make. If they have undergone intense language and culture training, and experienced it before starting their term, they may demonstrate an increased resiliency to stress in those areas.



Secondly, missions agencies are beginning to acknowledge the importance of involving the mental health field in the care of their missionaries. Thus member care programs have been created to help take care of the psychological side of a missionary's health in an attempt to increase coping abilities. These programs have shown to have a significant effect on missionaries' psychological well-being (Keckler, Moriarty & Blagen, 2008). Unfortunately many missionaries are under the assumption that Christians should never struggle when serving the Lord, or that if they are really strong in the Lord then they can get all the help they need from Him. This leads them to think that seeking care from the mental health field is a sign of spiritual weakness and saying that their faith in God is not enough to get them through (Bagley, 2003). This belief greatly influences these missionaries' willingness to seek help, especially from someone inside their agency because they fear what might happen to their ability to minister if they admit that they struggle. Rosik, Richards and Fannon (2005) found that 80% of the missionaries they surveyed greatly desired Member Care but only from someone outside their mission.

When asked what kind of improvements could be made to support, missionaries almost consistently say that they desire constant, prayer-based, available care that is initiated by a pastor or counselor (Trimble, 2006). Ford (2004) found that missionaries attributed issues to a failure by pastoral care. They proposed that much of that problem is due to an unawareness of the congregation of the needs missionaries have and the struggles they face. By increasing awareness of the need and encouraging home churches to intentionally emotionally support the missionaries sent out from their congregation, great improvements could be seen in the mental health and resiliency of these missionaries.

The third aspect of support missionaries receive is through their personal faith and the support they receive from God. Often in the support and study of missionaries it is forgotten that most missionaries became so as an act of following God. They may have always wanted to follow the Lord to another country and so prayed and prepared for years until He gave them the go-ahead. Or He may have tapped them on the shoulder as they went about their comfortable life and they followed Him reluctantly at first. He may have given them a specific calling to a specific place and people group, or He may have simply given them a heart for a ministry and they went wherever they could do that ministry. Regardless of how and why they were called, most missionaries were called by the Lord through their personal relationship with Him to join Him in His work. If studies forget the aspect of a missionary's personal faith in God, then they leave out a majority of why a missionary is on the field, how he or she gets through impossible situations, and why he or she stays on the field despite the struggles. In fact, personal faith and support from God is such an important factor that Eriksson et al. (2009) found that missionaries' ability to feel supported by God was directly related to how well they were able to connect to those they ministered to. Due to this, they strongly encouraged missionaries to be fortified in their personal walks with Lord before they leave for the field.

Interestingly enough, organizational support and support from God were significantly correlated, meaning that an organization's support can greatly influence a missionary's ability to seek support from God (Eriksson et al, 2009). If a missionary is following God's will and bringing Him glory, then it is His will and desire to support and encourage them. To recognize the support He offers they must be able to seek Him amongst the stress of ministry. Ultimately missions work is only continuing to walk with the Lord

as He leads. It might mean following Him into another country with another culture, language and its own types of stressors, but it is only a continuation of thier walk. God is the ultimate counselor, and if member care professionals can encourage missionaries enough to seek the Lord, then He can give them the healing and strength they need to follow Him to the uttermost ends of the earth. As Philippians 1:6 states: “He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” If mission agencies and member care workers can get the missionaries to the point where they can be encouraged by God, He will do the rest.

In this model, five dimensions were proposed in order to help redefine missionaries and explore what makes them different from the average population. Occupation, context, life stressors, personal factors and support all make missionaries who they are. By seeing them as individuals with their own struggles and needs, one can know how to better support and care for them.

### **Method**

The intention of this model was to fill in the gaps left behind by the current literature on missionary care, and to fully consider all of the aspects in the life of a missionary (See Appendix B). To test the model’s potential to improve missionary assessment and fulfill its goals, a study was conducted. There have been many studies that have quantified the issues, and made mental and emotional stressors into numbers in a formula by way of surveys and questionnaires. Having recognized that all missionaries have individual needs, desires, pains, hopes, and struggles, an idiosyncratic research approach through interviews was needed. The purpose of this research is to begin to

present a model of missionary burnout that more accurately depicts missionaries' experiences while incorporating the past research on burnout

### **Participants**

In order to assess the relevancy of the model in missionaries' experiences, retired missionaries were the chosen population. As they have been on the field and have gone through their own share of struggles, joys, difficulties, and victories, it is hoped that they will be able to look back and transpose the model over their past to see if it fits their personal stories. Unfortunately many missionaries who leave the field due to stress struggle with reentry to their home culture, and often never go back into ministry. For the purposes of this study, missionaries were able to transition back to ministry in their home culture were used in order to have a healthy baseline of missionaries who may be more willing to discuss their struggles. To do this, retired missionaries were chosen who were on staff at a university's center for global enrichment. These missionaries are called Missionary Mentors and are paired with students who want to pursue a career in ministry. Their job is to share their personal experiences, struggles, and goals with their students, and thus there was little risk of them re-experiencing trauma because of the interviews.

Participation in the study was requested via email addresses supplied by the Center for Global Engagement. The emails gave a basic summary of the goal of the research: to test the potential and relevancy of the model being proposed to aid in missionary support. The potential participants were then asked to suggest a time for the interview that fit their schedule and a location that was most comfortable for them. This was to encourage an openness and trust between the participants and the interviewer in hopes that they would be more likely to disclose their genuine feelings.

Four missionary couples were requested to participate, but only four individuals were available for the study. All of the participants were married. Although desiring to keep some factors similar between the participants, diversity was also desired in order to examine if the model would be relevant to people from different contexts with different organizations and thus different support. As one missionary couple was unable to participate and two of the participant's wives, the demographic of the sample group differed from that originally planned. Two of the participants had worked on the same team in the same country, and have since work in recruitment for the same organization. This provided interesting results because, despite being in the same situation, they had very differing struggles. The other two participants were a married couple that served together on the field. Again, being in the same country with many of the same stressors provided enough similarities that the differences between their experiences, due likely to gender and personality variance, were more noticeable.

In order to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the participants, the missionaries' names, countries, and organizations were replaced with pseudonyms in order that readers could not trace responses from the interviews back to those on staff. In addition, missionaries signed an Informed Consent form when they agreed to participate in the study. Lastly, to reduce the risk of responses being affected by observers other than the interviewer, missionaries will be interviewed separately from their spouse. Only the interviewer has access to the true names of the participants and agencies.

### **Instruments**

In order to fully grasp the scale of missionaries' experiences, and thus the relevancy and potential of the model in supporting missionaries, interviews were the

chosen research method. After agreeing to participate in the study, making an appointment, and signing the Informed Consent form, the missionaries sat down one-on-one with the interviewer in the location the participant chose. In order to record the interviews, a tape-recorder was utilized. Participants were made known of this fact prior to the start of the interview. The interview had three levels of questions: basic information, their experience, and their estimation of the relevancy of the model.

**First level.** At the start of the interview, the goal of the questions was to simply get a feel for the missionary's history and where he or she would fit into the model. Participants were asked questions about their occupation and ministry on the field, their mission context, and the duration of their ministry. They were also asked about their family, how many children they had, and how old they were.

**Second level.** The majority of the interview questions pertained to the missionaries' experience on the field and the stress they encountered. Missionaries were asked questions pertaining to each category of the model, such as occupation, context, environmental stressors, personal factors, and support. In each category, missionaries were asked to report their challenges and the areas with which they had ease (See Appendix A).

**Third level.** Before the last level of interview questions, the interviewer introduced and explained the model being proposed to the participant through a diagram (Refer to Appendix B for the diagram that was shown). Afterward, the participant was asked questions based on their estimation of the model's relevancy based upon their own experience. Participants were asked if they could identify with the model's dimensions and if they felt any dimensions were absent or lacking and needed expansion. The

participants were then asked if they felt the model would help in knowing how to better support missionaries based on the support they received on the field. After their responses the missionaries' participation in the study was concluded. Upon completion of the interviews the interviews were transcribed and the personal names and references to country and organization were replaced with pseudonyms. After this process, common themes between the interviews were identified.

### **Results**

In order to test the model's relevancy to the issues missionaries face, interview questions were directly correlated with the five dimensions. Participants were asked to look back to their time on the field and identify the positives and negatives of their experiences in each dimension.

#### **Occupation**

After answering introductory questions pertaining to how old they were when they served, where they served, and how long they served, participants were asked about their job or goal while on the field. The first two participants interviewed had both served on the same team in the same location, and thus both described their job as primarily church-planting. When these missionaries served they got all their income from supporters in the States and thus did not hold an occupation in addition to their ministry. In addition, as the country they in which they served was open to Christians, they did not need a career that opened the doors of the country to them, as is the case currently in many countries.

As the first two missionaries interviewed saw their ministry as their primary occupation, they were asked how the ministry might have added stress to their lives. John

noted, “[There is a] bell-curve where the first years are very ineffective and then your effectiveness grows over time. And your stress level jumps up real high [at the beginning] and goes down. So it depends on what the stressors are.” What John was referring to, is the high stress levels a missionary experiences in the first years of service that then depletes as they get used to the surrounding circumstances. Oppositely, a missionary’s effectiveness starts out minimally, as they know very little about the culture and have few relationships with the natives. These two factors are negatively correlated, which is shown by the fact that, when one’s effectiveness goes up, their stress level goes down. This makes sense as missionaries come to an area to have an effect, and may be stressed by their ineffectiveness. Later into the interview, John was asked how long it was into his time on the field until he felt that he was having an effect. He replied, “Wow, um, that’s hard to put a qualifier on I guess... But I would say it was 5 or 6 years into it that we really began to see progress and growth and response at a significant level in terms of numbers I guess.” This undoubtedly impacted the high stress level John associated with his first years on the field.

Although these two missionaries did not have the stress of holding a job while they served, they have since seen many people have to do it and observed the stress that comes with it. Both John and Noah in their interviews discussed something they called B.A.M. (Business as Missions), which Noah described as, “Your business is your ministry.” He described this as different from tent making by telling a story:

This guy goes and works as a graphic designer in some company around the world and he gets off work at 5 o’clock and says, “Now I’m going to go do my ministry.” So he’s having burnout because he’s having to do that



job to get income, and then from 5 o'clock to 8 o'clock at night and holds Bible studies and does ministry. So he doesn't see his work as his ministry.

This comment provides a reasonable explanation as to why many people, who consider themselves tent-makers, experience burnout. The concept of Business as Missions is very new, and is only recently being introduced in the missions community, but is expected to reduce burnout.

The other two participants, a married couple, had a very different experience. They served in a mission agency that believes that about 18 people are needed on the field to support one couple that is actually in the village working with the natives. Ben and Rebecca had come into ministry expecting to do the church planting themselves, but after their time of language training, realized their skills fit better in support. Working as a supply buyer, helping in the guesthouse, being dorm parents, and working in maintenance, Ben described their occupation as "wearing many hats." As Rebecca remembered back to the jobs they had she remarked that many were harder than others, especially the guest house and boarding home jobs while taking care of five children of their own.

When asked how they saw their ministry throughout all those jobs Ben replied, "To see that the church was firmly established in the tribe and being a part of the team make sure they are. Any way you can alleviate any burdens for the missionaries actually living in the village... Like a football team: The quarterback might throw the ball but the guys way down have to receive it, and you have to have people blocking [for the receivers]." Ben saw his and his wife Rebecca's ministry as supporting the missionaries

in the village, but he did not see it as any less important. Rebecca felt that seeing their work have an impact on supporting the missionaries kept her encouraged. “Oh yea, I always felt like I was a part of the team,” she said, “That’s why we were there.” This team-player perspective, whether a part of their personalities or developed by the agency, is extremely valuable and greatly decreases the risk of burnout in those with more supportive roles.

### **Context**

When it came to the dimension of context, participants were asked questions based on the three sub-dimensions: Culture, language, and safety. As John and Noah both served in the same country, they made similar comments about the struggles related to the culture, especially when it came to the religion of the people. Serving in a country that has a history of cultural Catholicism, they argued was more difficult than working in an unreached area. Noah stated:

In [our country] the only religion is Catholic, It dominates life, society, the girl scouts, boy scouts... Not just church activity but social activity...

Catholicism infiltrates and permeates all levels of society, as well as all events of society, and I hadn’t been in a culture where one religion controlled and influenced how society even functions.

John said something similar:

A lot of missionaries come into a situation thinking they are planting churches on a blank slate but that’s not necessarily true, especially in a place like [the country] where the gospel has been for a long time. That

impacted how we approached ministry. There are advantages and disadvantages to working in reached and unreached places.

Despite the religious issues, both men did not struggle much with the culture in itself. John even commented that it was “enjoyable in many ways,” although he did admit that “Back in those initial days it was difficult. The living environment, the temperature, and all of that made it kind of stressful.”

When it came to language, John and Noah both struggled greatly. They attributed it to the first mission agency they were both affiliated with, which did not encourage learning the language or keep them accountable to learning. John, when talking about burnout stressors listed language as one of the top stressors, saying:

Language is a stressor factor too. ‘Cause you know after 14 years your friends there would think, “You should have this by now. Are you stupid? Do you not care about us enough to learn our language?” And if they saw that you were struggling in [their language], which they would prefer to speak, they would just switch to English for your benefit because they didn’t want you to be embarrassed... In terms of burnout I think that’s a big part of it because after a while you just get tired of struggling with this language and wondering if you are making and progress on it or if people are getting impatient with you.

Noah reflected the same struggle:

I think language is obviously the hardest thing because you’re moving into a new place and language is the life of communication. You can’t go to

the market and buy a banana... communication has to take place in this new language and new culture.

These two men's responses to the dimension of context seemed to confirm that this can often be stress inducing to missionaries, especially those newly on the field.

Ben and Rebecca, in comparison, went to a country that was close in proximity, and they had already been familiar with the culture and language. This greatly buffered the effects of culture shock for them. Ben did comment that his misconceptions when he had just gotten to the field confused him for a time but those wore away with exposure. Rebecca commented that because their country was so westernized, "there were so many similarities that that made the differences harder to like... like you expect them to be like you and when they're not it takes you by surprise." In addition to cultural similarities, both Rebecca and Ben had been exposed to the language prior to their language training so they did not struggle with it as much as Noah and John had. Even while Rebecca was raising three or four young children at the time she said she "picked it up" and learned the language faster than even her husband did. She remarked that she loves learning languages and that that may have helped her.

In terms of safety, although none of the participants struggled with it themselves, most of them did comment that in the future, many more missionaries will have to work through these issues. It must be noted that the variance in the participant's responses in terms of cultural stressors supports the idea that every missionary will have different needs. Noah and John both struggled with the language while Ben and Rebecca had an easier time. In addition, adjusting to the culture was different for both sets of missionaries

because they served in very different countries. This must be noted when attempting to meet missionaries at the point of their need.

### **Life Stressors**

When asked about the life stressors these participants faced, the biggest ones they listed were language and culture. Eventually the stress of raising children on the field was brought up, and all of the participants had different views. John was younger when he and his wife went to the field and thus had younger children, with some being born during their time of service. Noah, on the other hand, was older, and thus felt like they had had sufficient time to develop their parenting skills before leaving for the field. He let his kids play with the natives and insisted that it was the best thing he could have done for them. In terms of other stressors, Noah did admit that there were times that he and his family missed home, especially during the holidays. “The biggest probable stress is the loneliness in [the holidays] where you wish you could see them.” But did say, “Our missionary team became our family. Your missionary team becomes [...] closer to you than your real brothers and sisters and family. We would get together and have Thanksgiving in [our country].” Both John and Noah highly suggested going as missionary teams, this being one core reason. Noah, when asked about teams, said, “There is no question in my mind personally that the only way to go is a team.” This team aspect permeated most of John and Noah’s answers in their interviews.

In contrast, both Ben and Rebecca said soon into the interview that working with a team is sometimes the biggest stressor that sends a missionary home from the field. “A big reason people leave the field is because they can’t get along with their coworkers,”

Rebecca commented. Ben reported something similar in his interview when asked about stressors on the field:

That's the attrition rate you'll probably find. Most missionaries, why they leave the work or leave the field, they can't get along with their coworkers. Across the board, every mission organization you study that will be the problem. They can't get along with their coworkers so they throw the towel in and come home... It is very, very important to get along with your coworkers. I think the second most number-wise attrition rate is health. Either health of family members back home: going back to take care of mom and dad who need to be taken care for, or someone gets sick in the immediate family, like husband or wife or kids and needs to come back... [But] the highest attrition rate is can't get along with coworkers. So I just learned like "water off a duck's back"

Ben went on to discuss how he would view conflict between himself and his coworkers as the Enemy trying to stop them from following God's call on their lives. This helped him deal with any conflict that arose so that this attrition statistic did not describe him as well. Although Ben and Rebecca discussed the hardships of working with a team, Ben did say that he believes a missionary should: "Never [go] alone. A couple single guys, a couple single ladies, yes. Even though there's danger there at least you have someone... to lift you up." When asked about one married couple going together he said that if they are ministering in a city then it is okay, but if they are reaching out to a tribal area they need to go with at least two other couples in order to all be able to rely on each other.

This aspect of needing team members although they are often the biggest stressors needs to be regarded when dealing with missionary training.

As the three of the four missionaries interviewed were men, they only talked briefly of the stress or benefit of raising children on the field. Rebecca went very in-depth into the struggles and benefits she saw in raising their five children. For the children's elementary school, Rebecca had to drive them thirty minutes to the bus for the bus to take them thirty minutes to the school. It was very difficult on her to be far from the kids for so long. The stress of driving them early in the morning through the city traffic was a lot, but after all of this, her concluding comments were surprising:

You know, taking care of the kids plus full-time ministry... It's hard...

Actually I think it might be more stressful in the States because there's so much that pulls a family apart here. Everybody has something that they're doing and going a different direction... Like when we would come home on furloughs and stuff like that. It was like, you're just always running and it's harder to have time with your family... and definitely when we came back with teenagers. You know, in [our country] it's like we always sat down for dinner together and we did everything together because that's what it was, that's what life was. And then you get here. And this one's got soccer practice, and that one has this that and the other... all you feel like you're doing is driving people around... United States is not family friendly... at all. So in that was I feel like [raising children in another country] was less stressful. But just having children and doing full-time ministry anywhere is going to be more stressful.

This mother's perspective was certainly eye-opening to the different stressors that a missionary mother might face in another country, but also in transitioning back to the United States.

### **Personal Factors**

When asked about the personal factors that these participants felt prepared them for the field, both Noah and John listed many attributes and lessons they had learned that helped them. Noah had grown up working with his hands and had learned how to fix many things that proved helpful on the field. He told a long story about the well for the village breaking, and how learning flexibility before going on the field helped greatly. He reported, "I would have never thought that the well would break. I would have never thought I would spend ten hours a day under a coconut tree. I would have never planned that. That would not have been my strategy. But that was God's strategy and I had to be flexible with that." Undoubtedly this attitude helped Noah adjust well into the flexible nature of missions work.

Rebecca and Ben also had many experiences that prepared them for their mission field. As they served in a Hispanic country, their prior exposure to that culture and language helped them greatly. Ben grew up in Florida and said, "The Latin mindset is so much like the Florida mindset that it wasn't that big [of a switch]... You know, the temperature, the geography, everything was about the same so I had no problems with that." Rebecca described a similar experience:

Latin culture was probably already very familiar to me even though I didn't realize it maybe. So that probably made it a little easier you know, it wasn't terribly unfamiliar. I moved a couple times as a child so I learned



how to handle the stress of meeting new people and those kind of things, so I think that probably was helpful in moving to another country. For the training we moved from one place to another several times, so that helped when it came to packing, which is a stressful time for missionaries... So those were little preparations.

Regardless of the country the missionaries worked in, prior exposure to the culture, language, or to the skills and attitudes needed on the field helped greatly in adapting and thriving.

### **Support**

In terms of financial support, both participants agreed that lacking sufficient funds can add a lot of stress, but as this seemed an obvious fact, they spent more time dealing with their struggles with the other types of support. Both participants admitted that their agencies and churches were very little help with emotional support and that it came mainly from their team. Noah, when asked about emotional support from their agency or churches made this comment:

Well, we knew we were “prayed for,” whatever that means... we would get cards, we would get some letters... Our mission organization, the leadership, came one time in the ten years I was there to make a visit and see how everyone was doing... Outside of that, life goes on. We didn’t think a lot about America. You’re just there doing your work. Its full-time, it occupies your life. You’re 10,000 miles on the other side of the world. “Out of sight out of mind.” They don’t see ya, they don’t know that you exist. Our team became our support... When somebody is going through a

crisis the team shows up. Momma didn't come around the world to stay with you while you were having your baby. My wife went and stayed with that girl... So we become the helpers, not 'we' our family but the team to one another. That is the strongest bond of encouragement and network that helps us get through life and make it work.

Once again, the idea of teams was crucial to them and showed how much a team can help a missionary cope with stress on the field. Noah suggested that the information of this model should not only be made available to agencies and churches, but to team leaders because they are often the most influential in the individuals' lives. This should be considered if the model is made available for missionary support.

Ben and Rebecca also referred to their team often in terms of emotional support. Ben said that during their training they learned that their organization was like a family. The part of the family that made up their team was also responsible for personal ministry and calling out the sin they saw in each other's life. In his mind, this also transferred to spiritual support. The agency told him during training to focus on the Lord, and that getting daily personal time with God was important. In addition, the team on the field got together to encourage and pray for each other, and this was enough to keep Ben uplifted and growing spiritually. Rebecca shared, in terms of emotional support, that their training was very militaristic in style and that when the team landed in the country, many of the hierarchal attitudes remained. This, undoubtedly, made it difficult to seek out the teammates for emotional support. But Rebecca went on to say, "The mission began to see that, and hear that, and they were listening. And then they went way over to grace and now I think we're kind of leveling out a little bit. 'Cause that's sometimes what happens

when you see an issue, you might have a tendency to over compensate.” She seemed to be content with how her team supported her emotionally and was encouraged with the changes the agency has made regarding the issues that concerned her. Rebecca also felt that her spiritual relationship kept a pattern of continual growth.

At one point Rebecca shared that she wished missionaries had a place they were safe enough to share their struggles. When asked what she meant by “safe” she replied,

Safely meaning... if I’m having a problem with my supervisor and I need to communicate that somehow to relieve the stress without fear of being fired or dismissed because I’m having a problem with my supervisor... because my supervisor finds out and gets mad, you know? [...] Some kind of a way for people to... if nothing else, to talk it through and get it off their chest kind of thing... I think maybe even like having a third-party member care type of someone who is not necessarily on the field, but is coming to the field on a regular basis to, you know, just sit down with people.

This suggestion is not the first and it is certainly something that could be very helpful to missionaries, especially females who tend to cope better with issues after they talk it through. Rebecca certainly saw the need for this and felt that she provided a similar thing when she and Ben worked in the guest home. Even then, though, she said she wished she had someone who would do the same thing for her.

When it came to spiritual support, Noah restated many of the same sentiments he had about emotional support. He said,

The average church operates with the “Out of sight, out of mind” mentality. “Yeah we prayed for our missionary last week.” If you asked them where do they work and what do they do and who are they, they probably couldn’t tell you. But we were in some blanket prayer with all of the missionaries in the church... But the team on the field really is your spiritual vitality... And hopefully you have some personal spiritual life that you have developed prior to getting there and that will continue to grow.

When asked about his personal spiritual growth on the field, he described it as a constant growth through trials and tests, but did not specifically disclose how his personal relationship with God fared while on the field. John, in comparison, gave a very different look at spiritual encouragement from the team:

I think your spiritual life before you go is what it will look like when you’re there. We’re all developing, we’re all growing in our relationship with the Lord and everything but um... You know, maybe it was the team that I would go to for encouragement and help rather than the Lord a lot of times. And the stress wasn’t such that I was on my own and, “Lord if you don’t bail me out I’m going down,” you know? I’ve got my friends. I’ll lean on them, we’ll make it. Besides, it’s fun being with them. Maybe that’s a downside of a team too. That’s just a downside of carnality and just not walking in the Spirit like we should. But um, you know, I don’t think I was backslidden but whether I was really walking with the Lord in a growing, intimate way, in those initial years I guess it’s hard to say.

John then went on to admit how teams sometimes have a feeling of competition, which makes it hard to share your deepest struggles because you want to be the most influential one on the field. He also admitted that:

It was a stressor initially when I got there wondering if I'm there for the right reasons. Was I properly motivated to be here in the first place?

“What am I doing here? I'm gonna sink. No wonder I'm struggling with the culture. I called myself here. God didn't call me here. I called myself here.” [...] That was a real temptation for me: “Just throw it all in, go home. Just admit to everyone I'm here for the wrong reasons.”

When asked how his agency or churches helped him with this, he said, “I didn't have anybody asking me the hard questions. Nobody. Nobody. Even our close friends there on the team... Pretty much bore it by myself in silence. I'm not saying nobody did care... It's not like it was miserable all the time, but just, somebody to give me a good check-up would have been really healthy and appreciated.”

The contrast between John and Noah's responses to this section reiterates the fact that the support of missionaries needs to be individually based. Both participants worked on the same team in the same country, and yet had very different takes on how they needed to be spiritually supported. Noah felt the team was sufficient, but John did admit that he wished he had someone asking him the hard questions. This admission further enforces the need to make this care available to those who desire it. In addition, although Ben and Rebecca's sentiments were similar regarding their view of the emotional and spiritual support they received, Rebecca's desire for a safe, third party person she could

talk to should be considered. Her need may be similar among women based on how they process stress, and it could be more helpful to them than it would be for men.

### **Discussion**

Missionary burnout is a very real issue that has been found to permanently affect many missionaries (Cousineau, Hall, Rosik & Hall, 2010; Gish, 1983). Although more attention has been directed towards this issue in recent years, few steps have been made towards growth. Studies have been done and articles written but few studies have gotten to the core issue. Missionaries are often clumped together and studied as a whole, despite the striking differences between occupation, context, etc.

After analyzing the literature, this it was suggested that the lack of progress stems down to an issue in the mission community when it comes to defining missionaries. To aid growth in this area, a model was created that provides a road-map by which a mission agency or member-care worker can assess a missionary's needs. This model provides a way for agencies to see missionaries as individuals and yet not be overwhelmed by a vast amount of unorganized data. Based on a missionary's fit into the four dimensions of occupation, context, life factors, and personal factors, mission agencies can create an approach to give individuals the support they need. The interviews supported many of the dimensions of the model and, when asked, the participants felt that the model could help those in member care understand the missionary's individual needs. As two of the participants brought up the concept of business as missions, this would likely need to be included in the model under the occupation dimension. In addition, although the missionaries interviewed did not have to personally cope through major safety issues on the field, they did agree this is an issue for missionaries they know. Further research

would need to be done to support the need for this sub-dimension. In addition, as all four of the missionaries surveyed discussed the struggles and strengths of working on a team, it needs to be added to the model. As the team was often referred to as a main support system, it would likely go under the support dimension. In all, this study provided a mere stepping-stone for further research to continue examining the effectiveness and relevancy of the model.

### **Limitations**

As this study simply aimed at proposing the model, there are limitations to the data. Based on the qualitative nature of the study with its interviews, it is hard to quantify and claim with confidence the efficiency of this model. Although there were a sufficient number of participants for a qualitative study, more would be needed to be able to extrapolate the relevancy to the mission population. In addition, as stated, the missionaries interviewed are most likely the missionaries who have adapted to western culture and ministry the best. These missionaries' viewpoint on the model may not represent the sentiments of the missionaries who struggled greatly on the field and did not adapt well when coming back to their home culture. Moreover, by using retired missionaries, it is difficult to say that this model will be as relevant to missionaries currently on the field. Some difficulties missionaries face change through the years based on the current state of the world and governments' stands on missionaries. Although some stressors may change, most context, occupation, life stressors and personal factors have stayed similar across time.

### **Implications for Future Research**

As the intention of this study was to simply provide a starting place for future research pertaining to this model and missionary assessment as a whole, there are many future studies that could be beneficial. Although qualitative research was applicable to the goal of this research, a quantitative approach to testing this model would prove helpful for expanding the model's reliability to the broad missionary population. In addition, many organizations have changed the way they emotionally and spiritually support their missionaries, and thus research on current missionaries would be helpful and may reflect a different view on the dimension of support. Research into the stress relief a woman may receive from talking about her struggles may also prove helpful. A third party member care unit may be beneficial for women if they feel safe enough to discuss their issues in order to relieve stress and move on with their lives and ministry. A similar unit may be helpful for men as well, but tweaked according to research about how men may process and cope through issues.

In this paper the model has been utilized in terms of creating a better support system for missionaries, but there are more uses it can take. Simply redefining the meaning of a missionary and encouraging mission agencies and churches to approach them more individually would make proposing this model worthwhile. In addition, this model can include in-country missionaries and ministers by simply tweaking the dimensions of context and organizational support. For instance, a member of a church may feel called to minister to the people of a depressed downtown area in the same city as the church. The member may move to the district and their context would change drastically. Safety needs may increase as well as a large culture difference. The language also changes because the people in the area might use different slang and terms that, if



the church member does not learn them, he or she will be ostracized. If the church decides to pray for the member in their ministry, and sends teams of high school students to the area once a month to help, that member now has organizational support. By the terms of this model, that member who was called by the Lord to minister is now a missionary.

Although some factions may disagree with the inclusion of in-country missionaries, one must consider the Great Commission. The first location listed was Jerusalem, the city Jesus was in when He called His disciples to go and make disciples of every nation. If Christians do not first start by reaching out to their close community then they cannot be effective when going to the far reaches of the world. It would be beneficial if future research tested the efficiency of using this model for in-country missionaries as well.

There are many other potential uses for this model as it is simply redefines the views of missionaries, and encourages churches and agencies to see missionaries as individuals in need of individualized care and support. The model proposed in this thesis is hopefully the beginning of a new movement in the world of missions towards an idiosyncratic and holistic view and support of missionaries.

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## Appendix A

### Outline of the second Level of Interview Questions:

How would you define your job/occupation on the field?

- What about your job/occupation added stress?

What stuck out to you or surprised you about the culture?

- How did that add stress to your time on the field?

How did the language affect your life?

- How did the language bring you stress?

Was there anything about the culture that made life or ministry easier/harder?

Was safety an issue on your field?

- Did that enhance or reduce stress? How?

What environmental stressors did you face? (Raising children, death of a parent, sickness, etc.)

- How did these stressors affect your life and functioning?

What past experiences or prior training did you have that increased or decreased your stress levels?

How did financial support affect your stress levels?

What kind of emotional support did you receive on the field?

- How did this help decrease/increase your stress?

What kind of spiritual support did you receive on the field?

- How did this impact your stress levels?

How do you feel your personal relationship with God improved or struggled on the field?

- How did this impact your stress?

**Appendix B**

**Diagram of the Model Presented to Participants**

