

PSYCHOLOGY OF MISSIONARY ADJUSTMENT

Marge Jones with E. Grant Jones

Stanley M. Horton, Th. D.
General Editor


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Chapter Five

The Letdown

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Although the criteria for choosing missionary candidates could be as varied as the mission boards that hold them, several attributes would probably appear on all lists, such as strongly motivated, good self-concept, high achiever, and experienced. Some candidates may have felt a vocation since childhood, preparing for many years for a life-service overseas. In most, if not all, cases, the candidates will have had successful career experience in their home country or they would not have been accepted by the mission board.

Harold Bernard and Wesley Huckins found that a person projects the self he would like to become into an occupational situation, using the job as a means of becoming that self.¹ The candidate before going to the field has already projected himself into the work situation. Through the orientation process, he has studied the culture, the country, and the situation. He has probably talked with missionaries and nationals who have impressed on him the desperate need on the field and how he is uniquely qualified to meet the need.

Western society is strongly success oriented. All bookstores, both secular and religious, carry how-to books. As David Cummings noted, "The implication is that if we just follow this or that for-

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mula, we will be successful."² Candidates have learned the formulas in their preparation process. They leave for the field with the latest spiritual and material tools necessary for the ministry. They have been God-called and God-endowed for their calling.

The new missionary is encumbered with a number of expectations:

1. Self-expectations
2. Perceived national church expectations
3. Mission board expectations
4. Supporting church expectations
5. Missionary colleagues' expectations

Many of these expectations may be unrealistic, for example, a desire for immediate fluency in the language, an immediate acceptance by and close relationship with nationals, and a satisfying, gratifying ministry with results during the first few years of service. Failure to reach these expectations could greatly affect a person's self-concept.

Bernard and Huckins state that "[p]robably *the focal* aspect of man's adjusting is his self-concept. One's self-concept influences the way he sees people, opportunities, obstacles, failures, and successes. . . . As one matures, his self-concept comes to be influenced by the skills, knowledge, and competencies he develops."³ Candidates have developed the skills and gained the knowledge and competencies recommended for their ministry. With this strong self-concept, their expectations for success are generally high.

SHATTERED IDEALS

Why then are 20 percent to 50 percent⁴ of new missionaries failing to return to the field after their first term? As has already been noted, adjusting to a new culture produces stress which can reduce achievement. If self-expectation slightly exceeds performance, this may lead to higher achievement. But for new missionaries, self-expectation could greatly exceed performance, creating even greater internal turmoil and conflict. When they discover that they cannot accomplish what they feel they should be accomplishing, their ideals can be shattered and discouragement and a sense of failure can result.

Janice Dixon has listed several major causes of frustrated expectations. One cause is naive expectations based on self-image. Because the sending churches think of missionaries as superpeople, new missionaries go to the field feeling that they are God's answer to any problem. They expect to see instant results, feeling that they have missed God's call if these do not materialize. They also go to the field eager to make friends, expecting the same eagerness from the host people. However, they often discover that, rather than being treated as welcome guests, they are regarded as unwelcome intruders. The sentiment may well be, "Yankee, go home, but keep on sending us your money!"

Other causes mentioned by Dixon are the problems of adjusting to a new culture, different living conditions, and family problems. Many times the wife, who is left out of the excitement of the work but carries a lot of the burden, finds adjustment impossible. "The new missionary, picked for leadership skills and all-around talent at home, suddenly is thrown into the role of a learner, a student begging for a chance to serve. No one knows his or her worth, or even cares. But rather than losing self-confidence, the new missionary may need to revise expectations and find a way to be accepted on local terms."⁵

Candidates may also have an unrealistic expectation of the spirituality of the national church leadership. When sending reports to their home churches, missionaries will naturally write spiritual success stories, dwelling on the strengths of their national colleagues rather than on their weaknesses. Arriving on the field, however, new missionaries are suddenly faced with frailties and failures among those whom they had considered spiritual giants. They may also find that the accepted standard for Christian living is much lower than the expected biblical standards in their home church or denomination. They are often faced with the dilemma of working closely with an organization with whom they do not agree on any number of principles.

Veteran missionaries can also be a part of the letdown process. The personable, dynamic speaker who seemed so warm and caring suddenly becomes a workaholic, expecting the new missionary to find his or her niche, learn the language, and do the work assigned. The expected time for spiritual refreshing together never materializes. Although the new missionary may well feel

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that the veteran's lifestyle and philosophy of missionary work are antiquated, they are the norm for the field.

Another source of frustration can be the mission board, whose attitude toward the appointed missionary may seem different from that perceived by the cultivated candidate. Helpful hints may well become ultimatums as the honeymoon turns into a serious working relationship in which the new missionary is accountable to the board for all his or her actions. Even in the few situations where an eight-hour workday exists, the missionary is on twenty-four-hour duty and can be called to task for anything he or she does during what might be called leisure time as well as during ministry time. John Doe has become John Missionary with the feeling that the individual has been swallowed up by the ministry.

FACING REALITY

Dixon and Cummings agree that one of the most important ingredients in facing reality is the time factor. Cummings maintains that success-oriented candidates, reflecting the society that has nurtured them, will expect quick results and will often have short-term commitments to a specific task. They will be critical of veteran missionaries who may have worked for five or ten years before seeing concrete results. "When their own programs don't produce results within the time frame allotted, they may fold their tents and go home."⁶

Dixon feels that new missionaries need to have a long-term view of who they are in God's plan and recognize the time and effort needed to develop fruitful work. God is molding servants who need to learn to take orders and to submit. "He desires Spirit-filled servants who develop fruit of the Spirit as well as gifts of the Spirit, to advance against the kingdom of darkness. . . . To survive, missionaries need prayer, a willingness to grow, and common-sense expectations."⁷

Another reality that new missionaries must face is that they now work with a group, that most of the world is made up of relational societies where people look out for each other rather than for self. Group decisions control all the actions of the individuals whether or not they agree with the policy. Cummings points out that Western society's emphasis on independence hinders its missionaries' ability to function in a relational way.⁸

Therefore, interdependence needs to be taught with the realization that a person cannot be committed to another person or group and still maintain his or her independence. That is, the individual's personal desires may have to be subject to the will of the group.

Fred Renich suggests the following as reasonable goals for first-term missionaries:

1. A good foundation in the language.
2. Satisfactory adjustment to the climate, customs, culture and people on his field.
3. A thorough working knowledge of the mission.
4. An understanding of the field, its problems, demands, and potential.
5. Some awareness of his gifts and place in the work.
6. A deepening confirmation of his call as a result of a growing sense of belonging and a consciousness of being useful.⁹

Cummings suggests that mission boards need to take more time to train, disciple, and channel those who are the products of our society's emphasis on independence, goal setting, and success, for these attitudes will be "counterproductive and destructive in the relational societies to which most of our candidates go." The goals set by the board or the individual may not be God's goals or geared to His timetable. Missionary Paul expected instant converts when he gave his testimony in Damascus after his conversion experience. Instead, he barely escaped with his life, and then spent three years in the desert, learning how to integrate his Old Testament knowledge with new covenant theology (Acts 9:20-25; Gal. 1:15-18). Bible scholars estimate that fifteen years passed between Paul's conversion and his first missionary journey.¹⁰

BOGGED DOWN IN DETAILS

One missionary who withdrew from the field during his first term wrote, "I found that the missionary 'success stories' are very rare exceptions to the overwhelming mass of routine or unsuccessful activities of the missionary's day."¹¹ Many of the activities necessary to living in third world countries have little or no relation to the missionary's perceived ministry. Buying food, getting fuel, paying bills, going from one government office to another for necessary visas, work permits, building per-

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mits, or any number of other permits necessary for daily activities will often take up the majority of the missionary's time. Prayer, Bible study, and preparation for work ministry are often relegated to the hours between 7 P.M. and 7 A.M., leaving little or no time for family life, recreation, and much-needed fellowship.

Another frustrating but very necessary part of missionary life is the paperwork required by the mission board. Because of increasing government regulations on nonprofit organizations, the need for detailed financial reports is mandatory. Many missionaries find themselves accountable for large sums of money designated for the national church, whether or not they have had accounting or bookkeeping. There may be routine progress reports to the mission board and/or sending churches. In those organizations where missionaries are responsible to raise their own funds, there is the need for constant contact with supporting churches or individuals.

Although all these routine activities have been explained during orientation, new candidates have little concept of how time-consuming such activities will become. Focus is, and should be, directed toward work ministry, building vision, excitement, and expectation. Some mission boards now recruit short-term personnel specialized in office procedures, especially accounting. Also, on a number of fields, qualified nationals are hired to handle routine duties, including those dealing with government agencies. Some mission boards send out full-time missionaries as business agents whose only duties are to take care of these onerous but necessary details.

ADMINISTRATIVE HEADACHES

To illustrate the stress of having to make decisions, E. Rae Harcum reported a famous experiment done by J. V. Brady. Brady placed pairs of monkeys in restraining chairs. Electric shocks were given to both at regular intervals. One monkey, designated the "executive," could turn off the shock for both itself and the other monkey by pushing a lever. However, the executive monkey usually developed stomach ulcers; the other did not, even though both received the same number of shocks.¹²

Administration, because of the very nature of overseas work, becomes, to some degree, a part of every missionary's life. As the

representative of a foreign agency, whether in some remote village or a teeming metropolis, whether working alone or with dozens of compatriots, each missionary will have administrative duties. A number of mission boards have all the missionaries on any given field organized in some sort of fellowship with a chairperson or moderator, secretary, and treasurer. Committees are formed for evangelism, education, medical work, and many other projects.

On fields having limited missionary personnel, new missionaries may well find themselves with administrative duties they are not prepared for and do not feel capable of accomplishing. But because they want to cooperate, to fit in with the team, or simply to do a job that must be done because there is no one else to do it, they find themselves with unwanted responsibilities. Marjory Foyle gives three fundamentals for administrative appointments. The pattern for appointing and changing administrative personnel should be written into the constitution. Persons gifted for the job and with the proper qualifications should be trained and appointed. An impartial third party should be available to hear legitimate complaints against the administration.¹³

Myron Loss has suggested fifteen tips for survival, which may help alleviate much of the letdown experienced by first-term missionaries:

1. Set reasonable goals.
2. Don't take your job description too seriously.
3. Be committed to joy.
4. Maintain good emotional health.
5. Remember that you are human.
6. Don't be afraid of being a little bit eccentric.
7. Be flexible.
8. Don't take yourself too seriously.
9. Reduce your stress where possible.
10. Make your cultural change gradual.
11. Forgive yourself; forgive others.
12. Establish some close friendships with people from the host culture.
13. Be thankful.
14. Be an encourager.
15. Take courage; someone understands.¹⁴

Perhaps what Loss is suggesting is that the letdown process will be greatly diminished as new missionaries learn to remove

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their mask of perfection. Recognizing their own limitations, admitting to their own problems and shortcomings, asking for help when needed, not expecting too much of themselves or others, will help them face reality without losing sight of their goals.

¹Harold W. Bernard and Wesley C. Huckins, *Dynamics of Personal Adjustment* (Boston: Holbrook Press, 1975), 302.

²David Cummings, "Programmed for Failure—Mission Candidates at Risk," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 23 (July 1987): 240–46.

³Bernard and Huckins, *Dynamics*, 22–23.

⁴Because statistics change each year with each mission board, exact percentages are difficult to obtain.

⁵Janice Dixon, "Unrealistic Expectations: The Downfall of Many Missionaries," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 26 (October 1990): 388–93.

⁶Cummings, "Programmed for Failure," 240–46.

⁷Dixon, "Unrealistic Expectations," 388–93.

⁸Cummings, "Programmed for Failure," 240–46.

⁹Fred C. Renich, "First-Term Objectives," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 3 (Summer 1967): 209–17.

¹⁰Cummings, "Programmed for Failure," 240–46.

¹¹Cary Tidwell, secretary of Personnel and Family Life Department, Assemblies of God Division of Foreign Missions, Springfield, Mo., interviewed by Marge Jones, July 1992.

¹²E. Rae Harcum, *Psychology for Daily Living: Simple Guidance in Human Relations for Parents, Teachers, and Others* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979), 119–20.

¹³Marjory F. Foyle, *Overcoming Missionary Stress* (Wheaton, Ill.: Evangelical Missions Information Service, 1987), 118.

¹⁴Myron Loss, *Culture Shock: Dealing with Stress in Cross-Cultural Living* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Light and Life Press, 1983), 85–101.