

Thoughts on Missionary Care by Nathan G. Sloan

The Monkey and the Fish

A typhoon stranded a monkey on an island. In a protected place on the shore, while waiting for the raging waters to recede, he spotted a fish swimming against the current. It seemed to the monkey that the fish was struggling and needed assistance. Being of kind heart, the monkey resolved to help the fish. A tree leaned precariously over the spot where the fish seemed to be struggling. At considerable risk to himself, the monkey moved far out on a limb, reached down, and snatched the fish from the waters. Scurrying back to the safety of his shelter, he carefully laid the fish on dry ground. For a few moments, the fish showed excitement but soon settled into a peaceful rest.

—An Eastern parable

- What was the monkey's motivation?
- Why did the monkey help the fish by taking out of the water?
- What did the monkey assume about the fishes culture, context and needs?
- How can this parable relate to caring for missionaries?
- What truths can we learn as member care provides from this story?

What is missionary care (also called member care)?

"The purpose of missionary care is to help missionaries remain whole throughout each stage of the missionary career life cycle. It involves supportive relationships and services which promote the missionary's ongoing adjustment and growth."¹

At Sojourn, we see missionary care in two ways, *proactive care* and *reactive care*.

- **Proactive care:** this includes all the front end and ongoing care that is provide by Sojourn Church and its members. This includes SOM, ongoing relationships, advocate teams, adoptive community groups, monthly group video calls, receiving short-term teams, accountability, ongoing education, etc.
- **Reactive or crisis care:** this is normally seen through our staff and missionary care providers responding to specific care needs. This often looks like a missionary unit asking for help or our Sojourn International team asking a missionary to get care. The most common form of reactive care is done through regular video calls or care meetings when missionaries are stateside. This can also include traumatic or crisis situations on the field where we need to respond by intensive care through technology, on site visits, or bringing a missionary home.

Missionary care is the same but different

People often have one or two perceptions of missionary care. They either think 1) it is just like the care they do at home and they need not adjustment how they care for missionaries or 2) It is totally different and they are intimidated and feel overwhelmed by caring for cross-cultural missionaries. Neither of these perceptions are true. In fact, people who provide care for people

¹ John Powell in Kelly O'Donnell (Ed.), *Missionary Care*. Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1992

in the church stateside can have confidence that much of what they already know and practice does transfer but not all of it. Missionaries are normal people but what they face are not always normal situations. Missionary care providers need to take time to learn some about what it means to care for missionaries and the often unique stressors they face.

One care principle does cross over clearly to missionary care. Often what missionaries need more than anything is for someone to listen to them- really listen. They need your presence. Many of our people are isolated in ways we, people living in the States and surrounded by Christians, will never experience. Ken Royer of Link Care Center writes about the five underlying questions our missionaries will be asking when they meet with you:²

1. Can I trust you?
2. Will you really hear what I am trying to say?
3. Are you genuinely interested?
4. Will you try to connect with how I feel?
5. Will you invest enough time to really understand?

If I can encourage you with one thing as you care for people it is to listen and provide an empathetic voice to an even greater degree than you normally do. As you do this, you will begin to hear both the similarities of those you care for Stateside and some clear differences.

² Ken Rover, Link Care Center, catalystservices.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Missionary-Care.pdf