

Caring for Missionaries:

Who Ministers to Those Who Minister?

Missionary care is about coming alongside global harvest workers to support and minister to the whole person as they minister to others. The goal is not simply for missionaries to survive, but to thrive and be fruitful. You and your church have a unique opportunity to reach out to missionaries – to those who are on the front lines and need support in multiple forms. You may not feel like you have much to offer, but you have an opportunity to participate in a larger network of supporters who extend their reach cross-culturally through the hands and feet of the missionary. Thriving missionaries are empowered by God and His Church to expand His kingdom and raise up disciples for the glory of God.



Missionaries have a unique calling – to leave their homeland, family and friends, move to an unfamiliar place, and learn a new language and culture. Though the calling is high and God is with them every step of the journey, their life and work is challenging in ways many people do not understand well. No one is a super-Christian, missionaries included. Missionaries need spiritual support and care, like any member of a congregation ... except they are oceans away! Read on to learn more about the kinds of things that bring stress into a missionary's life and some ideas on how you and your church can best come alongside your missionaries.

What are some of the stressors missionaries and missionary kids experience?

- ◆ Overseas ministry can be immensely rewarding ... and immensely challenging. Missionaries have good days and bad days. They get excited about their ministry, but they also get discouraged. They go to church, but they may or may not always have a meaningful worship experience due to language and cultural differences.
- ◆ Like anyone else, missionaries are most in need of encouragement during times of stress and transition (returning to the U.S. for home assignment, returning to the field, welcoming a new baby, wondering how to care for children's education and needs, releasing a child back to the U.S. for college, changing ministries/fields, enduring illness, dealing with an extended-family situation, facing financial challenges/uncertainty, etc.).
- ◆ It is especially difficult to be separated from family and friends during holidays, weddings, funerals, crisis situations and other times when extended families gather. If the family does not fully support and understand the missionary's calling to cross-cultural ministry, this adds an extra layer of complexity.
- ◆ All missionaries experience a normal period of culture shock and adjustment when they arrive on a new field. It can take a few years for them to learn enough language and culture to function in a new setting. It is known to take up to seven years to become fully integrated. They may feel especially alone and isolated during this process. There is also reverse culture-shock and a period of reorientation when returning to the U.S. While they have adjusted to a vastly different lifestyle, life in the U.S. has also moved on and changed while the missionary was away.
- ◆ Missionary kids not only deal with the normal stresses of going to school and learning, but also have to negotiate other languages and cultures in the course of their education and daily lives. They experience many of the same issues as children of pastors, but often to a greater degree. When an MK returns to the U.S., they may not feel they have come "home," but that they have left "home" because they are probably more adapted to their country of ministry than to the U.S. They often feel different and misunderstood.
- ◆ Learn more – Read books such as *Serving As Senders: How to Care for Your Missionaries While They Are Preparing to Go, While They Are on the Field, When They Return Home* by Neal Piolo. Visit websites such as paracletos.org/resources/articles/, missionarycare.com, missionary-care.org, servantcare.com, linkcare.org, and ismk.org.

What are some ways you can help? (What other ideas do you have?)

Pray for your missionaries ... lots!

Pray for missionaries often and for specific needs; rally as much prayer support for them as you can. Follow your missionary closely through newsletters, blog posts, Twitter, Facebook and personal correspondence. Use this information to regularly pray for and publicize specific prayer requests as appropriate – not just for ministry needs, but for personal and family needs as well. Let them know you are praying for them. (Be sure to use extra caution in publicizing needs for creative access missionaries.)

Don't just give your funds, give your friendship.

Be proactive in reaching out to your missionary, even in small ways. Ask how they are doing. Send cards and gifts on special occasions. Let them know about yourself and your church. Find ways to show love and care for them when they visit. Invest in the kingdom of God by giving friendship and resources freely to your missionary, without expectations of what they must do in return.

Have their back – be an encouragement.

Discover specific, meaningful ways you can encourage your missionary. Listen carefully to learn their felt needs and how your church can most effectively minister to them.

- ◆ Can you assist with a logistical need (housing, transportation, new clothes, provisions, etc.) while they are on home assignment? Can you help facilitate a retreat, outing, or special time of refreshment for your missionary and family?
- ◆ Do they have a college student in the U.S.? Consider sending care packages, pray, and think of other ways you can encourage them. The transition to college is a challenge for MKs; it is very difficult to begin finding your own way in life while half a world away from your family support system.
- ◆ Most missionaries enjoy gift cards for e-books and music – these can be given online quickly and free of postage. If you send an electronic gift through a web site such as Amazon, follow up to be sure they received it.
- ◆ Care packages and supplies for ministry are a great way to encourage, but it's vital to choose and send wisely. Always check with the missionary before you send a package overseas. Check shipping logistics, costs and customs fees early in your planning, and follow specific instructions for how and where to ship. Be open to donating funds for the missionary to purchase items, rather than sending them yourself, as in some countries there can be an unpleasant surprise for the missionary in the form of a large customs fee in order to receive a package.
- ◆ If your missionary is in a creative access country or has a challenging security situation, carefully follow their lead to learn how you can best communicate and encourage.



Continue to care for them when missionary service is over.

Even if your missionary's return was anticipated (such as retirement or a career change), it is a major transition. You and your church can help them find resources, settle into the faith community, adapt to their new life, and engage in fulfilling ministry. If a missionary must take a break from ministry or end overseas service earlier than expected, they may return with many thoughts and emotions to process. In any case, return means grieving the loss of the ministry and friends overseas. The missionary will need time to readjust and possibly help to heal. Who is often equipped and experienced in coming alongside people facing such challenges? You and your church!

Thank you for your love and care for our missionaries!