

Top reasons for missionary attrition

Andrea Sears

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Overview

- ▶ 2017
- ▶ Online survey
- ▶ 739 former missionaries
 - ▶ Snowball method via email
 - ▶ Advertising in multiple newsletter sources for missions
- ▶ More than 70% from the United States originally
- ▶ 140 countries of service
- ▶ 65%+ women

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Methodology- 3 ways to measure

- ▶ Did you experience x?
 - ▶ Yes or no
- ▶ To what degree do you feel this influenced your decision to leave?
 - ▶ It didn't
 - ▶ It had a slight effect
 - ▶ It had a moderate effect
 - ▶ I had a strong effect

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Methodology- 3 ways to measure

- ▶ Strength factor
 - ▶ Weighted average of overall responses to second measure
 - ▶ 0 = did not experience
 - ▶ 1 = did, but slight effect
 - ▶ 2 = did, moderate effect
 - ▶ 3 = did, strong effect
 - ▶ Significance level = 1.15+

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Methodology - qualitative measures

- ▶ 19 open-ended questions
 - ▶ Responses analyzed and coded
 - ▶ Categories of response developed for each question
 - ▶ Proportion of respondents calculated for each category
 - ▶ Illustrative responses selected and quoted as examples to show the nature of the sentiments shared
- ▶ Ex: what *kinds* of serious health problems

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Average importance of category out of 100%

1. Family: 25.7%
2. Team/agency: 22.3%
3. Other (miscellaneous factors not mentioned in other categories): 10.3%
4. Health: 10%
5. Mental health: 9.5%
6. Host country: 6.6%
7. Spiritual: 6.5%
8. Financial: 5.2%
9. Expectations: 3.9%

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Family Factors: Quantitative Results

- ▶ I wanted to be close to my aging/ailing parents.
 - ▶ 50% of missionaries experience this
 - ▶ It affected the decision of 72% of them to some degree
 - ▶ Strength factor: 1.32
- ▶ There was a lack of options for my child/children's education.
 - ▶ 64% of missionaries with children experienced this.
 - ▶ It affected the decision of 61% of them to some degree.
 - ▶ Strength factor: 1.23

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Qualitative Analysis: Quotes

- ▶ "I found it impossible to experience cross cultural stress, financial stress, and extended family issues without all of that producing stress in our marriage."
- ▶ "My husband and I fundamentally disagreed on how hard and fast to push oneself. A wedge was placed between us that just caused deeper and deeper pain."
- ▶ "It is rare to see a mission organization in the States developing anything to help parents and their children."

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Marriage Stressors

- ▶ Extreme stress
- ▶ Isolation/lack of friends to talk to about issues
- ▶ Workaholism/lack of work-life balance
- ▶ Emotional health issues
- ▶ Disappointment of wife with her lack of a fulfilling role in the ministry, or role as a “trailing spouse”
- ▶ Sexual temptation and infidelity

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MK Stressors

- ▶ Unwanted attention
 - ▶ Positive
 - ▶ Negative
- ▶ Isolation/lack of social group
- ▶ Grief of losing the things left behind
- ▶ Reduced emotional availability of caretakers
- ▶ Resentment/anger
- ▶ Depression/anxiety

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WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

- ▶ Elder care and children's education are the top family concerns that send missionaries home.
- ▶ The high percentages of missionaries experiencing each factor mean that each family is experiencing multiple family stressors, perhaps serially over time, or perhaps at the same time.
- ▶ The Holmes and Rahe stress scale:
 - ▶ Proven to predict health outcomes: the more stressors, the higher the score, and the more likely a person is to become ill.
 - ▶ Compared to their passport-country cohorts, one would expect to see missionaries suffering more family-related stress and for that to be expressed through higher rates of physical illness, and higher rates of need for counseling and other family emotional support services.
- ▶ Flexible and family-friendly mission policies are needed to ensure that missionary families can thrive.

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Team Factors: Quantitative Results

- ▶ I received too little missionary care.
 - ▶ 71% of missionaries felt this.
 - ▶ It affected the decision of 75% of them to leave the mission field.
 - ▶ Strength factor: 1.46
- ▶ I felt that some of my team members lacked integrity.
 - ▶ 48% of missionaries felt this.
 - ▶ It affected the return decision of 63% of them to some degree.
 - ▶ Strength factor: 1.38

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Quantitative Results - continued

- ▶ I did not feel at liberty to pursue my passion/call within the team/agency that I was a part of.
 - ▶ 47% of missionaries felt this.
 - ▶ It affected the decision of 67% of them to leave.
 - ▶ Strength factor: 1.33
- ▶ There was conflict on the team.
 - ▶ 70% of missionaries reported this.
 - ▶ It affected the decision of 64% of them.
 - ▶ Strength factor: 1.31
- ▶ I struggled to understand my role on the team.
 - ▶ 57% of missionaries experienced this.
 - ▶ It affected the decision of 68% of them.
 - ▶ Strength factor: 1.23

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Qualitative Analysis: Team Conflict

- ▶ "I honestly think the conflict was due to a huge lack of self-awareness and emotional health. I used to think that knowing the Bible and knowing Jesus was enough, but now I realize that cross-cultural workers actually have to do their own inner work, including work connected to their family of origin and their own weaknesses, not just confessing sin but actually becoming aware of themselves."
- ▶ "The leader was chosen because he had been there the longest and not because he earned the role or was gifted for it. He was a poor leader..."
- ▶ "We discussed doctrinal issues in a theoretical way prior to leaving for the field. However, things that weren't considered as sin or immoral became roadblocks when in practice. We didn't dig deep enough into some of those issues to know that they would become a problem when we were on the field and past the theorizing stage."
- ▶ "Other team members were from different backgrounds and we had different views on life. They were from rural Ohio and we were from Los Angeles. We agreed on things biblically, but day-to-day things were a struggle."
- ▶ "To sum up causes of conflict: assumptions, money, supplies."

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Qualitative Analysis: Gender Imbalance

- ▶ "There were a lot of things I was restricted from doing by the ministry because of cultural expectations of women."
- ▶ "I tried delving into a few things but crashed each time because I lacked any support. My husband's required work week was 40+ hours and my time doing ministry after he got home was too much for our family. Our org did not allow him to reduce [his work week] to 30 [hours] so I could pick up 10 hours, for example."
- ▶ "Women ... were often not offered or given opportunities simply because they didn't 'think about it,' assumed they wanted to only be housewives, or because they would be working too closely with males."
- ▶ "I felt devalued in my gifts and abilities. My personal experience was not considered or even asked for. My husband was lauded as a hero for his work with the organization, and I felt like I was just supposed to smile and wave... My personal sacrifices were neither recognized nor appreciated by the organization."

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Qualitative Analysis: Gender Imbalance

- ▶ "A man on my team was uncomfortable with a woman teaching from the Word or even leading a discussion on a spiritual book. A 'go with the lowest common denominator' approach to women's roles meant that one man's 'no' was a final 'no,' as passive men did not speak up."
- ▶ "The majority of the leadership were men, with the exception of head administration positions (glorified secretaries). The Big Boys club, we called it."
- ▶ "Was tasked with things that ladies would normally do (e.g., cook, take charge of hospitality), which are not my strengths but more because of my gender."
- ▶ "As a single woman, I often felt that I would not have been spoken to in the disrespectful way that I was ... if I were a man or if I had a husband to stand with me."

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WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

- ▶ Top team/agency concerns that send missionaries home are a lack of missionary care, perceived lack of integrity by other team members, not feeling at liberty to pursue their call, team conflict, and role ambiguity.
- ▶ Work-life balance affects family life and the ability of the missionary woman to contribute her gifts and talents.
- ▶ Structure and clarity within the organization is an important job of mission leadership. Missionaries suffer when they are not sure what they are supposed to be doing or their role:
 - ▶ does not use their gifts,
 - ▶ changed from what was advertised,
 - ▶ or feels unnecessary.

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Host Country Factors: Quantitative Results

- ▶ While many missionaries did experience these factors, none of them reached a level of statistical significance.
- ▶ 0.87 was the highest strength factor, regarding security issues.

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Language Study and Language Struggles

- ▶ Most participants (76%) reported difficulty with the language, regardless of whether or how long they studied it.
- ▶ Those studying more than 6 months tended to have their language struggles factor less into their return decision.
- ▶ There is a relationship between length of language study and likelihood of ranking language struggles as having a moderate to strong effect on the return decision.
 - ▶ About 17% of those studying less than 3 months or not at all said that language was a moderate to strong factor in their return decision, whereas only about 3-12% of those studying more than 3 months did so.
 - ▶ Those who spent at least 3 months in formal language study stayed on the field for an average of 9 1/2 years, while those who did not study or studied for less than 3 months remained an average of 6-7 years.

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Qualitative Findings

- ▶ “What aspects of the local culture did you struggle with?”
 1. Honor/shame culture and indirect communication
 2. Income disparity
 3. Gender inequity
 4. Corruption/crime
 5. Demands of hospitality/less privacy
 6. Less focus on order/efficiency

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Qualitative Findings - Continued

► “What did you struggle with in your local relationships?”

1. Language barrier
2. Difficulty in reaching intimacy
3. Establishing trust
4. Time it took
5. Expectations
6. Distinguishing between true friendships and ministry

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WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

- While cultural issues do arise for many missionaries, it is likely expected, and was not a significant reason for attrition.
- Cultural struggles can be ameliorated by thorough language training, and this results in longer tenure.
- Pre-field education on locally relevant cultural and relational issues should set expectations appropriately and prepare the new missionary for what they will face.
 - While it may still be difficult, at least they will have appropriate expectations regarding local relationships and interactions.

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Health Factors: Quantitative Results

- I felt that stress affected my health.
 - 68% of missionaries felt this.
 - It affected the decision of 70% of them to leave the mission field.
 - Strength factor: 1.29
- I felt that stress affected the health of others in my family.
 - 50% of missionaries felt this.
 - It affected the decision of 68% of them to leave the mission field.
 - Strength factor: 1.30
- I experienced significant health problems.
 - 52% of missionaries felt this.
 - It affected the decision of 58% of them to leave the mission field.
 - Strength factor: 1.12

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Qualitative Findings

- Mental health reported more often as a concern than physical health
 - 120 reports of mental health conditions
 - Gastric issues were the next closest, with 82
- Contributing factors:
 - Stress
 - Environment/pollution/allergens
 - Lack of support
- “True Grit”
 - “Multiple cases of malaria, hepatitis, dengue fever, skin rashes, diarrhea, fungal infections, scabies, intestinal worms etc., plus a work-related accident that tore muscles in my chest (6 months recovery) and a broken ankle (motorcycle accident).”
 - “In one three-month span, had appendicitis, measles, chikungunya, and shingles.”

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WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

- ▶ We should expect our missionaries to have health problems, and be prepared with the care they need.
 - ▶ Health insurance
 - ▶ Counseling services
 - ▶ Missionary care
- ▶ Management of stress is a key component in maintaining resiliency and health on the mission field. Significant attention should be given to this topic in pre-field training and in on-field check-ins.

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Expectations Factors: Quantitative Results

- ▶ My team members did not meet my expectations.
 - ▶ 62% of missionaries felt this.
 - ▶ It affected the decision of 65% of them to leave the mission field.
 - ▶ Strength factor: 1.29
- ▶ My job responsibilities did not meet my expectations.
 - ▶ 50% of missionaries felt this.
 - ▶ It affected the decision of 64% of them to leave the mission field.
 - ▶ Strength factor: 1.11

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Team Members - Reasons for Unmet Expectations

1. Interpersonal dysfunction
2. Cohesiveness/community
3. Innocuous differences that made it hard to connect
4. Leadership
5. Disengagement

“The only way people fail to live up to expectations is if we forget that they are people who are still trying to die to self and can have bad days and seasons ... even if they are missionaries! In the end, you have to set your expectations on God, and as leaders build systems with accountability and systems to help protect people from leaning on anything other than God’s strength.”

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Job Responsibilities - Reasons for Unmet Expectations

1. Role not as advertised
2. Poor fit between job and skills
3. Workload
4. Poorly defined role
5. Put in a box
6. Inadequate leadership

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WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

- ▶ Expectation management is a key to whether missionaries feel satisfied with their experiences on the mission field.
 - ▶ How can we set expectations more accurately?
 - ▶ Can we prepare them better for team conflict, since it will inevitably happen?
 - ▶ The need for clear role definition mentioned in the team section would also help to set expectations correctly, resulting in greater satisfaction with the job.

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Spiritual Factors: Quantitative Results

- ▶ I felt that I had a new call to something back in my home country.
 - ▶ **55%** of missionaries felt this.
 - ▶ It affected the decision of **77%** of them to leave the mission field.
 - ▶ Strength factor: **1.61**
- ▶ I worked myself out of a job.
 - ▶ **33%** of missionaries felt this.
 - ▶ It affected the decision of **63%** of them to leave the mission field.
 - ▶ Strength factor: **1.18**

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Spiritual Factors: Quantitative Results

- ▶ I no longer felt called to my host country.
 - ▶ **40%** of missionaries felt this.
 - ▶ It affected the decision of **63%** of them to leave the mission field.
 - ▶ Strength factor: **1.18**
- ▶ I was no longer sure of my calling (or my spouse was no longer sure of his/her calling).
 - ▶ **38%** of missionaries felt this.
 - ▶ It affected the decision of **67%** of them to leave the mission field.
 - ▶ Strength factor: **1.15**

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Spiritual Factors: Quantitative Results

- ▶ While not high in strength factor, nearly half of missionaries reported:
 - ▶ A disconnection in their relationship with the Lord
 - ▶ Being unable to connect with a local church
 - ▶ Feeling that spiritual leaders and sending churches back home had forgotten about them
 - ▶ Being overwhelmed by spiritual oppression
- ▶ 1 in 3 noted that they were no longer sure that their methods of sharing the gospel were effective
- ▶ 1 in 4 reported that they (or their spouse, if married) were no longer sure of their faith

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What methods were people losing confidence in?

- ▶ Mass evangelism without relationship or follow-up
- ▶ Tools, programs, and thinking that were not contextualized to the culture
 - ▶ Sometimes donor-driven rather than need-driven
- ▶ Being assigned to roles that were unnecessary or needed to evolve
 - ▶ Locals needing to take more ownership
 - ▶ Needing to move away from the "white savior" model
- ▶ Having no well-defined methods at all

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WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

- ▶ Missionaries, though often viewed as spiritual super-heroes, struggle with issues of faith and intimacy with God just like everyone else.
- ▶ While spiritual maturity is likely a selection criteria, are we assuming too much about their ability to cultivate their relationship with the Lord on the field? How can we support this better?
- ▶ Many missionaries feel we should be re-evaluating our contextualization and methods to be innovative. While the Gospel never changes, the world does, and so should our ways of reaching it.

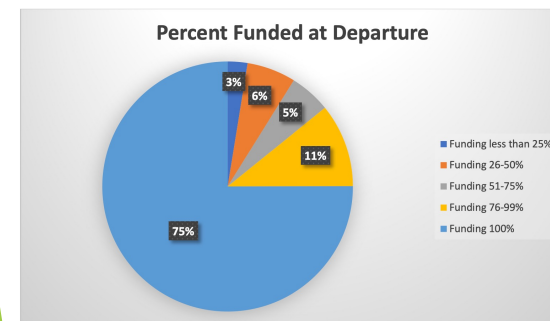
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Financial Factors: Quantitative Results

- ▶ None of the factors rose above a 1 in strength factor, though large numbers reported:
 - ▶ Being uncomfortable raising money (67%)
 - ▶ Financial support being low (53%)
 - ▶ Being unable to save money (45%)
 - ▶ Being unable to plan for retirement (42%)
 - ▶ Cost of living or inflation being higher than expected in their host country (41%)
- ▶ Though these factors did affect 44-55% of return decisions of those who experienced them, other factors typically had a stronger influence on that decision.

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Funding status



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Funding status - continued

- ▶ Those not fully funded experienced significantly higher levels of financial distress across all factors.
 - ▶ Experienced the factors more
 - ▶ Factors influence their decisions more
 - ▶ Two factors rose to the level of significance on strength factor:
 - ▶ Discomfort with raising money (1.26)
 - ▶ Low financial support (1.38)

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WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

- ▶ For missionaries who must raise funds, it is common to feel uncomfortable doing so, to struggle at least sometimes with low funding, and be unable to save or plan for retirement.
- ▶ Those who go to the field fully-funded (or nearly so) will fare better than those allowed to make a “faith decision” to go with low funding.
- ▶ While financial security is not the goal of any missionary, how can we make them less vulnerable financially in the long-term as they sacrifice some of their highest-earning years for God’s mission?

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Mental Health Factors: Quantitative Results

- ▶ I experienced burnout.
 - ▶ 59% of missionaries felt this.
 - ▶ It affected the decision of 74% of them to leave the mission field.
 - ▶ Strength factor: 1.54
- ▶ I, my spouse, or my child suffered from depression.
 - ▶ 62% of missionaries felt this.
 - ▶ It affected the decision of 67% of them to leave the mission field.
 - ▶ Strength factor: 1.41
- ▶ I, my spouse, or my child suffered from anxiety.
 - ▶ 58% of missionaries felt this.
 - ▶ It affected the decision of 70% of them to leave the mission field.
 - ▶ Strength factor: 1.41

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Mental Health Factors: Quantitative Results

- ▶ I experienced discouragement.
 - ▶ 84% of missionaries felt this.
 - ▶ It affected the decision of 70% of them to leave the mission field.
 - ▶ Strength factor: 1.28
- ▶ I had too many stressors.
 - ▶ 68% of missionaries felt this.
 - ▶ It affected the decision of 69% of them to leave the mission field.
 - ▶ Strength factor: 1.26
- ▶ I felt isolated/lonely.
 - ▶ 73% of missionaries felt this.
 - ▶ It affected the decision of 69% of them to leave the mission field.
 - ▶ Strength factor: 1.25

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Mental Health Factors: Quantitative Results

- ▶ I had a traumatic experience not covered above.
 - ▶ 36% of missionaries felt this.
 - ▶ It affected the decision of 59% of them to leave the mission field.
 - ▶ Strength factor: 1.23
- ▶ It was difficult to set boundaries on what was demanded of me.
 - ▶ 60% of missionaries felt this.
 - ▶ It affected the decision of 61% of them to leave the mission field.
 - ▶ Strength factor: 1.12
- ▶ Frequent transitions caused a lack of stability.
 - ▶ 67% of missionaries felt this.
 - ▶ It affected the decision of 64% of them to leave the mission field.
 - ▶ Strength factor: 1.12

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Qualitative Analysis: Trends

- ▶ Most common issues mentioned:
 - ▶ Depression (28% of commenters)
 - ▶ Anxiety (22%)
 - ▶ Robbery/insecurity (15%)
 - ▶ Death (12%)
 - ▶ Illness (11%)
 - ▶ Three way tie: accidents/burnout/team drama (9%)

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Qualitative Analysis: Quotes

- ▶ "Our Christian health-care co-op does not consider depression or mental health to be something real enough to address and does not cover."
- ▶ "Did not have access to a counselor."
- ▶ "Some missionaries discarded mental health issues saying depression and anxiety were sins. Christians should just trust the Lord and have joy in the Lord. This mindset led me and others suffering with mental health disorders feeling ashamed, embarrassed, or that our faith was lacking."
- ▶ "My anxiety seemed to have been caused by culture stress, a term I had never heard despite having a four-year degree in missions."
- ▶ "Setting boundaries within our team, and especially in the context of relationships with other men was something I just didn't know how to do at 25. I thought I had to fall in line with these leaders, so if they told our family we were having a prayer meeting at 5 am at our house, we said, 'uh...okay?' After several years under this kind of leadership, we realized it was taxing us past the point of burnout. Our family suffered from a lack of family time because of things like this."
- ▶ "Years of close experience with deadly violence. Friends killed, raped, kidnapped. Spiritual oppression over friends, ministry, community. It's costly to live that way, and we were not able to live in a healthy way like that for much longer."

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WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

- ▶ Most missionaries will experience significant stress to their emotional health at some point on the mission field.
- ▶ The missions community seems to be inadequately prepared to address it.
- ▶ Stigma about mental illness persist in the Christian culture, and it interferes with people getting the compassion and help that they need.
- ▶ There is a limit to the distress that missionaries can tolerate or subject their families to - it may differ greatly between them, but at some point the cost becomes too great and they recognize that they cannot serve and love others adequately if they are not healthy emotionally.

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Questions we should be asking

- ▶ What is really preventable/nonpreventable? Is it black and white, or is there some grey we should be paying attention to?
- ▶ How can we protect our workers from burnout and keep them physically and emotionally healthy?
 - ▶ Missionary care
 - ▶ Work-life balance
- ▶ How can we create and maintain healthier team dynamics?
 - ▶ Leadership training
 - ▶ Accountability
 - ▶ Conflict management
 - ▶ Inclusion of married women in mission
- ▶ How can we organize the work efficiently so that our workers know what they are supposed to do, feel productive, have meaningful work, and do not get overwhelmed?
 - ▶ Organizational design and human resources

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Further research suggested

- ▶ What makes missionaries feel cared for?
 - ▶ What additional things can we be doing to make them feel supported?
 - ▶ How can we get sending churches more involved?
- ▶ How can we keep missionaries thriving in their spiritual lives on the field?
- ▶ How can we help families achieve work-life balance and allow women who wish to be involved in ministry the time to do so?
- ▶ Generational differences
 - ▶ Why are younger missionaries staying on the field for shorter times periods?
- ▶ Which missions strategies and methods need to be re-evaluated?
- ▶ Are there funding models that would alleviate some of the financial stressors and discomfort?
- ▶ How can we raise awareness of mental health challenges on the mission field and ensure that help is available?

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Q&A

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