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A Friend Indeed ...

(Member care for Missionaries)

“I am fine ... my needs are met ... I am quite safe in my corner ... Don't cross my boundary ... I'd rather not have my fingers burnt.” Does this medley ring a bell? If your heart is familiar with the lines of this song, God is calling you to wake up and dirty your hands for Him.

Care is love's baby! Care demands your time and wide-open eyes. You probably are in the dark about the needs of givers. Their smiles and a strong front are perhaps camouflaging. A closer look will tell you the story behind every face. A childish comment that **missionaries** are sympathy-seekers can escape the lips of one who got back only ungratefulness and a seemingly bad reputation, only for jumping in when the house was on fire. It's a godly responsibility where we cannot afford to overlook the needs of our neighbour missionaries. Every member needs to care for the other. When one eye cries, can the other remain dry? When one organ suffers, the others suffer along. Have we grown leprous and lost that ministry of sensitivity? Your pot may run dry some day!

Missionaries need care as they are on the giving end most of the time. They need to receive as well. They are not angels. Mere human beings are they with needs just like any other. Branded as people who are expected to lay down their selves, they burn themselves beyond restoration. This is nowhere near Christian humaneness. While their choice to lay down some major desires are to be appreciated and honoured, sacrifice should not be spelt as their lot. It's a conscious choice they have made. This costly choice should not crush them. Churches today use these toilers as curry leaves to have their dishes flavoured and get their sacks heavy. How insensitive!

With a genuine understanding that missionaries are people with feelings and unique personalities of their own, how can one care for a coworker in pain?

Having worked as a Staff Counsellor of the Blessing Youth Mission for six years (1996-2002), I would say with welled-up eyes that the crucial and critical needs of these special people remain largely unmet. By crucial I mean that sense of security, significance and self-worth. These legs of a three-legged stool, when shaky, speak on the stability of the individual. The sense of belonging, importance and worth has to be periodically assured though they are something one has to find in God.

Member care is most effective on one to one rather than in groups. Every person has unique issues, and blanket answers don't often help. People don't have problems which can be easily solved by formulae applied in the past by forerunners. What works for one need not work

for the other. What is a major issue for one may seem minor for the onlooker. Missionaries need to be listened to with real empathy, genuineness and warmth. Their hearts cry for that kind of a Christian attention. Pat answers and spiritual-sounding advices are nowhere on their list of needs.

Doesn't that quiet unassuming native worker who has sincerity running all through his veins deserve an appreciation now and then for his unnoticed yet honest work? Wanting to be noticed and applauded is a normal desire which need not be baptized and buried. On many occasions the aching voices are quietened by the heavy shepherding of the local mission heads. These groans hardly reach the ears of the mainline leadership. This is also an important arena where caring members can step in and be a voice to the voiceless.

Men and women responding to the call at the altar, lay aside their hard-earned certificates, jobs, families, ambitious selves and take the rocky ministerial road. This comes from a heart deeply convicted. But soon the missionaries question their own convictions and the commitment that burned within them just a few months or years ago. Depression sets in. The shock of facing strange cultures, unrealistic expectations, disappointment of delayed fruits, and missing the funeral of a loved one are major stressors. A caring member with a heart of understanding will be a precious asset at these junctures. Ignored and undealt depression has the power of infectivity. Contagiously it spreads into the others and they together form a whining choir. The evils of gossip, isolation, lethargy, bad attitudes and rebellion are quick to follow.

The missionary who is a loner is most unsafe. Solo players don't make good team members in a football or a hockey team. Coworkers need to join in, flood him with real love, motivate to socialize and keep him warm, close to the fire of togetherness. Aren't two better than one (Eccl 4:9-12)? When one falls the other helps him to get back to his feet. Mutual help should be extended in times of real struggles. "If two lie down together, they will keep warm; but how can one be warm alone?" (v11). Mutual encouragement gives warmth. Ephesians 4:16 reads, "From whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share and causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love." Every joint functions and every part does its share. Jesus is the perfect Model. He never was a loner. "The twelve were with Him" at every stage (Lk 8:1).

All well-meaning coworkers unfortunately don't turn out to be fine counsellors. Barefoot counselling skills is the dire need of every member who wants to non-judgmentally care for the other. A refined knowledge of helping a member comes to terms with grief, resolves conflicts, handles crises, manages stress and deals with depressions. This is handy only when the helper's testimony and the personality tally.

A difficult member who has all the skills to assist will have no bees swarming around them. Their words will be empty. The caring member should live a life in which their words will be valued. Be wise and stay away if you are tempted to damage and corrupt minds. That's care, too. Be a builder and nothing less.

Best intentions are no substitutes for everyday helping skills. Members who yearn only to heal wounds should make empathetically listening, reflecting, sensitively and clearly communicating, assisting in self-understanding and tapping the hidden potentials of the worker behind the screens a part of them, so it will flow naturally with no taint of artificiality.

Missions today have grown to be so voluminous that the care for the individual has become a lost art. Members caring for one another is a life-saving first-aid. It keeps missionaries from knocking at the door called suicide. While enhancing every skill of counselling and member care, the grace of God is the only balm and strength which keeps the mental health of every tearful missionary intact.

Caring for a neighbour friend in the mission field seldom buys garlands or a roaring applause. It's a quiet yet powerful ministry. Draining, though it may be, jump in and be a saver! Great will be your reward in heaven! Give the discouragers a smile and carry on. Turn a deaf ear to loud gossip. Be a Barnabas and a Lydia. The fruits are on the way ... and a crown to surprise you!

Give love and care and it'll flow back to you!

(D)
Parental Guidance

