

## Missionary Attrition: Its Relationship to the Spiritual Dynamics of the Late Twentieth Century

by

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Missionary attrition is either a fairly recent phenomenon, or has only recently been thought of as one that is worthy of attention. As such, material on this subject is very limited. Apart from a few journal articles, the only available text focusing exclusively on this subject is *Too Valuable to Lose: Exploring the Causes and Cures of Missionary Attrition* (Taylor 1997). The outcome of a long-term venture called ReMAP (Reducing Missionary Attrition Project) undertaken by the World Evangelical Fellowship, this work includes the results of the ReMAP international research carried out between 1994 and 1996, as well as analysis and discussions on various aspects of attrition by a competent team of writers who have themselves served or are currently serving on the mission field. These contributions will be referred to throughout this essay.

Globally speaking, 5.1% of all career missionaries leave the mission field every year, and 71% of these leave for preventable reasons. This could represent a total figure of up to 7,650 missionary dropouts every year (Taylor 1997, 13). Taylor defines attrition as "The departure from field service by missionaries, regardless of cause" (1997, xvii). He distinguishes 2 types: the first, unpreventable attrition, is caused by retirement, completion of a contract, medical leave, or a legitimate call to another ministry; the second, preventable attrition, could have been avoided by better initial screening or selection, more appropriate training and/or more effective shepherding

during missionary service. This second type, also referred to as "problem attrition" by Paul McKaughan, is the focus of this paper.

McKaughan questions whether missionary attrition is really a problem (15-24). According to him, missionaries today should not be expected to make lifetime commitments because this is not the norm in the secular world today. While there may be validity in his argument, this essay agrees with Taylor (1997) that missionary attrition is indeed a problem.

Some believe that missionary attrition is as old as the missionary enterprise itself. Paul McKaughan argues that it started with John Mark in Acts 13: 5, 13 (18). Others like Donovan and Myors, believe it to be a recent phenomenon which did not even exist until 1966 (41). While it is difficult to conceive that no attrition took place in over 1900 years of the church's existence, Donovan and Myors may be on the right path in that the problem has taken on monumental proportions only during these latter years of the twentieth century. This dramatic increase in the attrition rate makes it a contemporary concern worthy of study.

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What accounts for the marked rise in the attrition rate? Could it be that the younger generation of missionaries are lacking in commitment, have no backbone, and/or are, simply put, "wimps"? The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between some of the major causes of missionary attrition and the spiritual dynamics of the late twentieth century in the

first instance, and then to compare and contrast these modern spiritual dynamics with those of previous eras.

### Reasons For Attrition

The top six reasons for missionary attrition from the ReMap Results are listed in Table 1 (Brierley 92). In some cases, the ReMAP survey showed a gap between the "real" reason and the "safe" reason. The "safe" reason is one that, in the mind of the missionary, is deemed to be acceptable by supporters. Leaders were more likely to cite an unpreventable reason than they believed was actually the case

(24% - 29%), and more reluctant to write down a personal reason than they thought was actually the case (23% - 25%).

TABLE 1  
LEADING REASONS FOR MISSIONARY ATTRITION

All Countries	Old Sending Countries	New Sending Countries
1 Normal retirement	1 Normal retirement	1 Lack of home support
2 Children	2 Children	2 Lack of call
3 Change of job	3 Change of job	3 Inadequate commitment
4 Health problems	4 Health problems	4 Disagreement with agency
5 Lack of home support	5 Problems with peers	5 Problems with peers
6 Problems with peers	6 Personal concerns	6 Health problems

The ReMAP study reveals health and family concerns as the primary reasons for attrition. It is interesting, though, that two of the top three reasons given by New Sending Countries (NSCs) are spiritual in nature. This would justify a claim of a direct link between missionary attrition and spiritual dynamics. Interpersonal relationships rank high on the list for both Old Sending Countries (OSCs) and NSCs, and are perhaps an indication of where the focus of missionary training and screening should be.

Frank Allen suggests that the popular belief that most missionaries leave the field because of poor interpersonal relationships is a myth (118). He believes that poor relationships

indicate deeper problems, which may include lack of gifts, culture shock, unfulfilled expectations, family problems, and language difficulties. However, it seems unlikely that a missionary would cite such an ignoble reason to cover up others. Lack of funds or the Lord's leading would be more acceptable reasons.

Previous attrition surveys done by different sending agencies, that is, the Evangelical Alliance Mission (Pocock 122), Conservative Baptist Foreign Mission Society (Camburn 127), and World Gospel Mission (Bushong 129) lend support to the above results. Family related issues, interpersonal conflicts and physical and/or emotional health were also their main concerns.

Did missionaries of other eras have similar problems? If so, how did they handle them? Were their spiritual dynamics enough to take them through?

### **The Spiritual Dynamics of Three Eras**

Ralph Winter has distinguished three significant eras in modern missions history and identified three key people who were of vital significance during those eras (18-23). The first, William Carey, ushered in the coastlands era in 1792; the second, J. Hudson Taylor, the inland era in 1865; and the third, William Cameron Townsend, the era of the unreached peoples in 1934. These three missionary stalwarts all overcame tremendous hardship and endured great stress in their missionary careers. What enabled them to endure to the end? What were their coping strategies? What were the spiritual dynamics which operated in their lives? What was the relationship, if any, between their spiritual dynamics and their coping strategies? In short, what prevented them from quitting? Were they men of greater faith, greater spiritual power than the modern missionaries?

#### **Early 19th Century: William Carey**

Family and health problems are some of the major causes of attrition today. Carey was not spared these. His first twelve years in India were riddled with family problems. Within a year of the family's arrival in India, their five-year-old son, Peter, died (Beck 103). He had to deal with a wife who was mentally deranged and verbally abusive (Beck 108-125). His children were seriously affected, and, according to Neill, grew up as undisciplined ragamuffins (262).

Beyond all this, Carey had to also struggle with loneliness in his first years in India (Beck 116).

Carey was also beset by interpersonal relationship problems. He had problems with fellow missionaries, as well as with his superiors on the mission board. His latter years in India were marred by a dispute with the sending agency, the Baptist Missionary Society (Beck 168), which got so bad that in 1827 there was a formal separation between the Serampore missionaries and the latter. The arrival of additional missionaries from England gave rise to interpersonal conflict, or misunderstandings, between the new arrivals and Marshman, one of the Serampore trio. While it is not certain to what degree Carey himself was involved in these misunderstandings, it can be safely assumed that he was affected by them.

How did he deal with all these trials? He had to deal with little or no financial support, the death of his son, and the insanity of his wife. Yet, he continued working, eventually giving forty years of unbroken service in India. What kept him there? In his loneliness he poured himself out in his journal, which became his only friend (Beck 116). A journal entry he made very early in his stay in India gives a clue:

14 June 1795. I have had very sore trials in my own family from a quarter which I forbear to mention. Have greater need for faith and patience than ever I had and I bless God that I have not been altogether without supplies of these graces from God tho (sic) alas I have much to complain from within (Beck 117).

*What kept William Carey on the field after having obeyed the call was faith in the sufficient grace of God in all situations.*

This reveals the agony of a man struggling to hold on to his faith in the midst of trials. He displays a shameless dependency on the graces of God. His journal and prayer apparently were his coping strategies. His spiritual dynamics included the obligation he felt to answer the missionary call in obedience to the Great Commission. What kept him on the field after

having obeyed the call was faith in the sufficient grace of God in all

situations. No doubt, when life looked bleak, he was also able to hold on to his own watchword: "Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God" (Neill 262).

Late 19th Century: J. Hudson Taylor

Taylor, like Carey, also had his fair share of difficulties with health and interpersonal relationships. Despite these challenges, he did not become a missionary attrition statistic. He suffered ridicule from fellow missionaries at the Chinese Evangelization Society (CES) mission station who did not agree with his method of going native and going inland. He suffered ill health, and tremendous disappointment

when this forced him to abandon the work he had started and return to England for several years (Taylor 1981a, 241).

At this point he could have blamed God for his illness; he could have been upset with God for taking him out of China just when he was getting into the project. He could have felt rejected by God and not bothered with missions anymore. What kept him from doing this? His time in England turned out to be a very key period in the development of missions for it was during this period that he founded the China Inland Missions. However, it was only on hindsight that he realized how necessary a step this separation was (Taylor 1981a, 241). He reacted then by making valuable use of his time, spending quality time in the study of the Word, praying for more workers and speaking to others about the needs of China.

Taylor's spiritual life was marked by a compelling desire to give back to God in self-denying service out of gratitude for his love and blessings, along with a sense of the imminent return of Christ that took him to China in the first place (Taylor 1981a, 237). He was spurred on in his time of illness by the immense burden he carried for perishing China, a burden which caused even further deterioration of

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his health. He also believed firmly that God answered prayers. He proved this in his own life in times of peril. In a late edition of his pamphlet *China's Spiritual Needs and Claims*, he testifies of how the Lord, in answer to prayer, showed himself faithful in times of sickness, need and danger—which included the murderous intentions of men (Taylor 1981b, 248-49). His spiritual dynamics, then, involved an unrelenting faith in the promises of the One to whom he had committed his life and who had placed on his heart this enormous burden for China. This is perhaps best expressed in his own words, which according to the editor of *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, are a testimony of his life: "There is a living God. He has spoken His word. He means just what he says, and will do all that He has promised" (Taylor 1981b, 244).

#### Early 20th Century: William Cameron Townsend

Not unlike his predecessors, Townsend, the founder of Wycliffe Bible Translators and the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), faced challenges in his relations to coworkers and in his personal life. His associates criticized him for his secular relationships with the Mexican government officials, as well as for his church policy—which stipulated non-sectarianism. How did he handle these criticisms?

Townsend addressed the criticism regarding his relationship with the Mexican government in a very practical way. He wrote a crucial policy letter to all SIL members (missionaries), which was followed by a second more blunt letter addressing his critics, who had also openly criticized the Mexican government. He appealed to them to recognize their mistakes. When this failed to pacify two of his more vociferous members, he tried individual persuasion (Hefley and Hefley 115). The result was that one critic calmed down while the other resigned in favor of general missionary work.

Much more challenging than the above was the death of Townsend's wife Elvira on December 24, 1944. This blow came after having already lost his parents and three of his close friends (Hefley and Hefley 126). The following extract from a statement he wrote for her funeral says much about the spiritual dynamics which kept him in times of trials:

If I have been devoted to my Lord's service in the past, by his grace my devotion shall be a passion from now on. . . . If I have permitted hardships, dangers, pleasures, and the powerful chords of human love to swerve me at times from full obedience, henceforth "none of these things shall move me," neither shall I count my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy. . . . This pledge is not taken lightly. It has been burned into my soul, and though the branding processes have not been easy, the pain now seems like nothing as I visualize the fruit and joy of a truly all-out effort for my Saviour and the unevangelized tribes that need him so (Hefley and Hefley 125).

Motivated by the recognition that Jesus came to save the lost (Matt 18:11-12), he was determined to find every lost tribe to give them the word of God in their own tongue.

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This motivation kept him going in spite of setbacks as he focused on the future rewards of his efforts. This is what he declares in self-denying Pauline-like style (Phil. 3:10). For all three stalwarts, common threads in their spiritual dynamics seem to have been faith in God and self-denial. How do the spiritual dynamics of the late twentieth century compare?

### **Late 20Th Century Motivation / Spiritual Dynamics**

One of the primary motivations of current missionaries is the fulfillment of the Great Commission. According to the Rev. Gerry Seale, this is God's mandate for the entire church, including for the people of the Caribbean (1993). In *A Biblical Standard for Evangelists* by Billy Graham (9-11), one of the fifteen affirmations of the evangelist is the commitment to the Great Commission, with a willingness to go anywhere, do anything and sacrifice anything in that process. This sacrifice, Graham elaborates, will include loneliness and separation from loved ones, as well as frustration with fellow workers, all of which are among the top five reasons for attrition according to the ReMAP study. Endurance, perseverance and dedication, with a



focus on the future reward of hearing the words of the Lord, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:21), must be part of today's spiritual dynamics, as far as Graham is concerned. These are, no doubt, a part of the dynamics, which have kept him going all these years.

*The spiritual dynamic of the late twentieth century is marked by deep commitment to the goal of "a church for every people and the gospel for every person by the year 2000."*

One of the main expressions of the compelling call of the Great Commission in the late twentieth century is the AD2000 movement. As the new millennium approaches, the race is on to achieve the goal of "a church for every people and the gospel for every person by the year 2000." This movement, which has attracted the participation of a large number of churches worldwide (Wood 32), focuses on the unreached people groups of the 10/40 window and emphasizes project evangelism. Thus, the Great Commission is a powerful part of the

modern missionary's spiritual dynamic.

In sum then, the spiritual dynamics of the late twentieth century are marked by the realization that the fulfillment of the Great Commission is the responsibility of every Christian from every part of the world. Every Christian is called to participate in the fulfillment of the Great Commission in order that the gospel will be proclaimed in every part of the world. This has been expressed in a proliferation of short-term mission projects, and in some cases, great sacrificial obedience.

There is, however, a certain difficulty in proposing a universal set of spiritual dynamics, especially in the Western world where individualism reigns. How can the same set of dynamics allow some to stay and others to go? It must be remembered that as high as the attrition rate may be, relatively speaking, the figures still show that the majority of missionaries do stay. It is possible that these successful missionaries represent the dynamics only of those who do persevere, especially in light of the fact that the number two and three reasons for attrition from the NSCs are spiritual in nature: lack of call and inadequate commitment. One could hazard a guess that other factors

do enter the mix when it comes down to individual spiritual dynamics. Kath Donovan and Ruth Myors argue that the distinctive generational perspective of the missionary helps explain the current high attrition rate (41-73). Using the three twentieth century generations distinguished by Thomas Sine (1991), Donovan and Myors show that the specific characteristics and contextual issues of each of these generations affect their attitude towards missions. Sine identified three distinctive generational perspectives: the Boosters, born between 1927 and 1945, the Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, and the Busters, born between 1965 and 1983.

*The Boosters.* These experienced the hardships of World War II and the Great Depression. Therefore, they tend to be frugal, hardworking, single-minded, persevering and committed. Their leadership style is usually authoritarian. It is not surprising, therefore, that they view missions as a lifetime commitment to one particular people or country, and with one particular mission agency. They tend to speak of a special mystical call to missions which is the basis of their commitment.

*The Boomers.* These were made aware of the horrors of war and so grew up protesting and questioning. They tend to be pragmatic, idealistic and tolerant of different lifestyles. Usually their loyalty is to people rather than to institutions. When it comes to missions, therefore, they tend not to commit themselves indefinitely, but generally for a short-term period with the possibility of renewal. Their pragmatic mind makes them focus on the ministry in which their gifts are best used, and view their call as simply a match-up with the most suitable job.

*The Busters.* These are the most likely candidates for missionary attrition. Born in a world under threat of nuclear war, they are inclined to be uncertain about the future and generally pessimistic. Many have experienced a fragmented family life and have been victims of abuse. As a result, they have a fragile self-esteem and are looking for lasting relationships. They often display strong group loyalties, as well as a high tolerance level for diversity. In light of all this, this group could hardly be expected to rush into long-term commitments. Unable to see too far ahead, they prefer the project approach to missions, which allows them to commit for only short-term periods. This view of missions, which focuses primarily on

the unreached people groups, is in contrast to the traditional view of missions as process (Dougherty 276).

Erickson has pointed out that the younger generation is characterized by, among other things, an egocentric mindset and low work ethics (142). There is emphasis on freedom and autonomy, and a strong resistance to any form of authority. Work is no longer seen as a means of glorifying God. The last four decades have seen a major shift from hard work to leisure. He criticizes the church for having also undergone a similar shift, which has changed her emphasis from serving God to enjoying God (Erickson 143). He decries short-term missions as an offshoot of this general shift, pointing out David Hesselgrave's (37-38) diagnosis that this short-term trend is due in part to the new approaches to self-fulfillment.

Erickson also suggests that these new approaches may stem in part from the charismatic emphasis on personal benefits (144). The charismatic movement, which mushroomed in the late seventies and the eighties, in line with the world's pursuit of personal comfort and happiness, has tended to stress personal prosperity to the detriment of "the fellowship of sharing in Christ's sufferings" (Phil. 3:10). It could be argued that all the above characteristics are egocentric in nature, and it would not be too difficult to see how these could contribute to a low level of commitment to missions.

The missionary of the late twentieth century, then, starts out with the same spiritual motivations as does his predecessors of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, other ingredients from the current culture and prevailing theologies have been added, creating new variations in individual spiritual dynamics. Today's missionary needs to be especially discerning in determining what to accept and what to reject of these new generational influences.

### **Analysis**

Missionaries with a mentality that is resistant to authority would certainly be prone to conflicts, not only with the mission board and directors, but also with their peers. Coming from a culture which says "my pleasure first," the focus of the missionary enterprise can easily be lost even after having gone out in obedience to the Great Commission. In this way a missionary trip can easily be transformed into a sightseeing tour. Furthermore, in seeking self-fulfillment, it is the parable of the talents rather than the parable of the sower, which is

at work (Taylor 1997). These two paradigms can yield very different views of missionary service.

In addition, the charismatic faith movements do not prepare missionaries well for illnesses and other hardships that will come in spite of, and sometimes even as a result of, faith (Heb. 11: 35-38). Townsend, based on the statement he wrote for his wife's funeral (Hefley and Hefley 125), obviously had a better perspective of the place of suffering in the life of the believer than many of the charismatic faith movements.

But what of the shift in emphasis from serving to loving God? Is this such a bad thing, in light of the greatest command: "Love the Lord thy God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37)? This command emphasizes relationship with God. However, the second greatest commandment emphasizes selfless service to one's neighbor (Matt. 22: 39). It would seem, then, that the two, relationship and service, need to be balanced. This is what is exemplified in the life of J. Hudson Taylor. His love for God and his gratitude for all God's blessings led him to self-denying service (Taylor 1981a, 237).

And what of the project view of missions? The focus on the more disadvantaged people groups seems to be in the right place. Furthermore, it has the distinct advantage of avoiding the danger of missionaries becoming too paternalistic, and of hindering the development of indigenous churches, a problem which has plagued missions for decades. The downside, however, is that it could lead more to interest in the project than in the people themselves.

How adequate, then, are the spiritual dynamics of the twentieth century? In comparing them with the spiritual dynamics of the preceding centuries, one realizes that the Great Commission figured prominently in the spiritual dynamics of the nineteenth century and of the Apostolic Age. The difference lies in the cultural, political and theological factors which contribute to the individual spiritual dynamics of the late twentieth century. The dynamics are varied, and have proven adequate for many. Prospective missionaries, as well as experienced missionaries, need to be more adequately briefed and counseled on the type of spiritual dynamics that will be necessary for survival and successful ministry on the field.

### Summary

We have examined some of the major reasons for the present day problem of missionary attrition. In comparing these reasons with the difficulties faced by three prominent stalwarts of the modern missionary movement, it is clear that the challenges faced today, though differing in details, are not new. However, the spiritual dynamics of those men were able to keep them on the field. It has been shown that whereas the spiritual dynamics of the late twentieth century are generally adequate to keep missionaries on the field, some aspects of the individual dynamics, among them an egocentric mentality and a prosperity theology, are not conducive to unswerving commitment, and could, therefore, be linked to missionary attrition. Commitment is key for service, as Jesus said: "No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62).

If the Caribbean Church is to play its proper role in the fulfillment of the Great Commission, careful attention must be given to selecting and preparing its missionary candidates. The discipleship process in the local churches, and in the pastoral and missionary training programs, must place greater emphasis on commitment, patient endurance of hardship and persecution, and the spiritual discipline of prayer. Only those who have learned these lessons in their Christian ministry to their own people will be able to survive Christian ministry to different ethnic groups whose cultures are hostile to the Christian message.

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