

# Reflections on suffering and danger

written from the sidelines of the world tentmaking movement

Tentmakers in contexts hostile to Christianity face danger and suffering for their faith in Jesus. It feels fraudulent to be writing about this as I sit in my study at home in one of the most peaceful countries in the world. Yet, I write as a retired trainer of tentmakers and missionaries. I write as a long-time pastor and also as a former missionary.

Have I lived in a context of persecution? No, but I have lived in a setting of occasional violence and danger. Have I suffered for my faith at the hands of a hostile community or government? No, but by observing over time, training and meeting many practitioners, occasionally passing through dangerous contexts, and brushing up against fear and suffering, I have picked up glimpses of helpful truth. It is these glimpses I share.

## Six steps to minimize dangers

If we are honest, not all the suffering encountered in sensitive or dangerous settings is the fault of the hostile country. Sometimes, as missionaries, we make mistakes—whether through lack of preparation or lack of wisdom—which causes a reaction from those amongst whom we live. Here are six preventative measures that can minimize triggers of suffering and danger. These factors should be considered by both agency and individual.

### 1) *Have I/we thoroughly studied the laws of the country we plan to work in?*

Sometimes tentmakers break the law and cause a reaction simply because they do not know the law thoroughly. It is all very well

to have a blanket belief that we should serve God rather than people, but it does in fact help to know what the laws are. This knowledge needs to be current, needs to recognize regional variations, and needs to include an understanding of the principles on which that law is based. In other words, laws often reflect a mindset and not just a regulation.

### 2) *Have we also studied well the cultural and religious factors we will encounter?*

I never fail to be surprised at the scanty and haphazard preparation many tentmakers have before entering a difficult setting. Our preparation needs to be thorough, specific to the country and region, and informed by up-to-date knowledge of recent cases and news. This is particularly so in short-term teams, which often are so caught up in the adventure that they overlook the dangers and sensitivities. The relative youth and immaturity of many short-term teams simply adds to this problem. Around the world, there is a long catalogue of incidents that led to danger, expulsion, imprisonment, and damage to the existing church simply because a team on a very short visit made mistakes they would not have made if preparation had been more thorough. We also need to recognize that in studying another religion, one generally opposed to Christianity, that its outworkings will not be the same in every country

or region. For example, each country in Northern Africa's approach to Islam needs to be understood in terms of that country and its history.

### 3) *Do we understand how that country sees our own country of origin?*

I remember being in a particular country during a military coup. We watched tanks roll by from the guest house window and watched as a machine gun post was set up behind some petrol pumps! When it was all over, we went out in our agency vehicle and drove amongst the celebratory crowds. We had a Kiwi insignia on the door. New Zealanders were, at that time, very highly thought of in that country. Everywhere we went, we enjoyed a warm response. In contrast, at the instructions of their embassy, Americans were behind closed doors because of the local attitudes to Americans. This is not a reflection on either culture, but recognition of the fact that our country of origin often affects how we are perceived and how freely we may act.

### 4) *Do we understand what is happening right now in that place, in that people group, and why?*

Within big countries there are subcultures, regions, local variations. Driving once in a particular setting with a colleague, we both noticed the road was very quiet with

Derek Christensen

*Derek Christensen has recently retired following a career as a pastor, missionary and theological educator, specializing in mission and tentmaker training. He is the immediate past chairman of Tentmakers International and is now an Ambassador at Large for them. He has founded two tentmaker agencies and has served on many boards related to cross-cultural work. He lives in Auckland, New Zealand.*

### 3. Detlef Blöcher, DMG, Germany

Mission Agency Leadership

*What policies and guidelines does your agency have when sending SHORT-TERM missionaries to dangerous contexts?*

- Short-term missionaries are not sent into high-risk situations.
- Short-term missionaries do not work without experienced longer-term missionaries.
- Principles and policies for longer-term missionaries apply also for short-term missionaries.

*What policies does your agency have when sending LONGER-TERM missionaries to dangerous contexts?*

We enquire about their theology of suffering as an integral part of the selection process (we expect a written assignment).

- Required pre-field training, including simulations.
- Required on-field orientation by local partner organization.
- Team ministry approach (support team), mutual care.
- Cooperation with national churches and partner organizations in the place of service.
- Careful risk assessment and security guidelines.
- Sixteen pages in our manual that cover: risk assessment, crisis prevention (risk avoidance), development of crisis management plans and its implementation, intervention in events like armed robbery, arrest and interrogation, natural disasters, rape, hostage taking, kidnapping, criteria for evacuation, sudden death of team members, natural post trauma reactions, critical incident debriefing of team members, mutual care, helping children in crisis situations.

*Do you have a written summary statement giving a Biblical theology of persecution or martyrdom?*

- We expect all new missionaries to write an assignment on their personal theology of suffering.
- As a mission we have a theology of suffering (in German). In brief:
  1. We are created in the likeness of God (immense value)
  2. We are fallen of creation
  3. We are created for heaven, not earth
  4. The world is completely lost to sin; in persecution and violence, sin shows its true character
  5. God reveals the nature of the fallen world by permitting suffering to happen
  6. There is no discipleship without suffering
  7. God's judgment is on a fallen world (and each individual is part of it)
  8. There are spiritual dimensions of disasters and persecution

(the devil hates Jesus and his people)

9. In the last times persecutions and disasters will increase
10. God's children honour God even through pain and suffering
11. They live out God's character, show His grace and compassion with people in need
12. They live a dedicated, committed and sacrificial life in obedience to God's word
13. We know that we will not change the world to the better and still live out God's character and set prophetic signs.
14. We believe in unity of the global body of Christ in times of suffering and persecution (prayer support, practical help, advocacy)

*What guidelines do you have in case a missionary, or a child of missionaries, is kidnapped?*

- We have two pages of guidelines in our manual (in German).

*What guidelines do you have regarding monetary ransom of a kidnapped missionary?*

- As a mission, we do not pay any monetary ransom, as such a practice would invite the kidnapping of more missionaries.
- If the family of the abducted person wanted to pay a small ransom, our mission would probably tolerate this, yet it needs to be small (symbolic).
- We may consider other demands (development projects, sending of missionaries) if it is a neglected people group and their demands appear legitimate and there can be a peaceful resolution.

*What post-trauma care is given to your mission force family that has gone through a situation of violence, illness, death?*

- The manual gives guidelines and practical steps on how to serve a team member when no specialist is available.
- CID by a trained professional for the whole mission team (as they all feel vulnerable) if possible.
- Provide extensive time for inner resolution in the country of service or a safe place (e.g., 6 – 12 months).

*What kind of pre-field missionary training do you give or encourage for contexts of danger, violence, persecution or martyrdom?*

- Pre-field training, including simulation of a kidnapping/armed robbery.
- Life in community (team) and practical care for each other (trusted relationships).

no pedestrians, a very bad sign. We immediately turned back and took another route. Later, a young couple coming along that road didn't know the signs, drove on, and were ambushed and badly injured. The incident stemmed from events that had taken place between tribes in that place over the past fortnight. We had general training in the culture

of that country, specific training regarding urban politics, and local knowledge through experience of what was happening right then.

**5) Have we made use of all the training available in preparation for that setting, including training available from secular providers?**

Not every agency knows everything! Tentmakers in particular are going to serve in secular settings. Have we checked out the information others in our field have gained? Have we listened widely and wisely? Have we moved like Jesus, amongst the "ordinary people" and not confined entirely to our Christian subculture?

#### 6) *Have we registered with our embassy in the country of choice?*

Do we know what the policy of our government is in cases of danger, kidnapping or similar threats? Do they know about us? Sometimes, we are so concerned about being citizens of heaven we neglect some obvious earthly assistance. Our own government often has problems when there are crises or natural disasters because a high percentage of

our citizens living in the other country have not registered their presence with the embassy. Sometimes, there are issues sometimes of security but that is another question...

#### Five responses that may be helpful if the worst happens

Hostile reactions to tentmakers range from being asked to leave by revoking a visa

through kidnapping, injury or death in a flare up of violence. There are current examples of these reactions, and all the points in between. Here are five helpful responses to negative situations that every tentmaker should be prepared to engage.

#### 1) *Activate my network*

Are my contact networks strong, well organized and easy to activate? Often when

#### 4. Bob Creson, Wycliffe Bible Translators, USA

##### Mission Agency Leadership

*What policies and guidelines does your agency have when sending SHORT-TERM missionaries to dangerous contexts?*

*What policies does your agency have when sending LONGER-TERM missionaries to dangerous contexts?*

The policies are the same both for long-term and short-term personnel:

- **Risk Assessments:** Without carrying out Risk Assessments an entity is not positioned to plan for corporate or personal security. This is the first step in preparation for contingency planning and must be repeated at regular intervals to reflect changing conditions in the US and at other locations where Wycliffe USA staff are assigned.
- **Staff Working in High Risk Areas:** Countries of the world where Wycliffe USA staff members work are often areas of greater-than-average risk to personnel. Wycliffe recognizes its responsibility with partner organizations to weigh the risk to which its staff members are exposed against the urgency of its task of serving the language communities of the world.
- **Contingency Plans:** Contingency Plans will always be based on a current risk assessment. The planning process should focus on mitigation of risk as well as management of a crisis should it occur. It is not possible to develop an adequate Contingency Plan after a crisis has started. It is far better to think through possible emergencies and considered options in a time of calm. Decision-making will usually be better where a plan is in place. The Contingency Plan is a dynamic document, frequently updated, and should be in harmony with local conditions. It is intended to be a guide-

line for specific local actions and not a substitute for common sense. The plan should be user friendly and reflect the worst-case scenarios.

- **Personal Contingency Plans:** All of the above applies to Personal Contingency Planning as well. Personal Contingency Plans should be registered with and approved by the entity administration.

*What guidelines do you have in case a missionary, or a child of missionaries, is kidnapped?*

*What guidelines do you have regarding monetary ransom of a kidnapped missionary?*

Members held hostage

- **Ransom:** The payment of ransom encourages the taking of hostages. Wycliffe USA advises its members that they are being assigned to a partner organization where it is the policy that no payment is made nor actions taken that would likely perpetuate extortion, ransom or blackmail. This does not, however, preclude the possibility of negotiations to obtain the release of the hostage.
- **Evacuation of Family Members:** In order to gain the release of a hostage at the earliest possible time and in light of the experience of previous hostages, family members of the hostage will normally be evacuated to their home country, or perhaps to a neighboring country, as soon as possible. This requirement may be waived by the CMT if it is determined that the evacuation of a family or family member would be detrimental to the best interests of the family or of the host partner.

*What post-trauma care is given to your mission force family that has gone through a situation of violence, illness, death?*

Policies regarding post-crisis responsibilities

## GLOBAL VOICES

- **Debriefing:** Wycliffe USA Personnel who are directly involved in a crisis will participate in a debriefing process facilitated by a counselor or a qualified de-briefer. The initial debriefing should ideally happen within 72 hours of the resolution of the crisis, followed by a second debriefing within six months. The VP for Personnel is responsible to ensure that such debriefing occurs.
- **Post Crisis Evaluation:** In order to improve the response to major Organizational Level Crises, whenever Wycliffe USA manages an Organizational Level Crisis, Wycliffe will conduct a review within 60 days of the resolution of said crisis. Wycliffe expects partner organizations to do the same.

*What kind of pre-field missionary training do you give or encourage for contexts of danger, violence, persecution or martyrdom?*

Training

- **Initial Training:** Wycliffe USA field assigned members should receive Contingency Preparation Training appropriate to their location, role and field term prior to or shortly after reaching that assignment. It is the responsibility of each Partner Organization to determine how and where this information should be delivered. In cases where there is no Host Partner organization Wycliffe USA will ensure that adequate training is delivered prior to releasing that staff member for service.
- **Ongoing Training:** Partnering entities are expected to provide ongoing Contingency Preparation Training for staff as well as Crisis Management Training for administrators and those assigned to security and crisis management roles.

something bad happens, kidnapping or imprisonment for example, our first reaction is to let people know so that those outside the situation can begin to act. Am I able to activate that network? Do I have the means of getting in touch? If I am in a sensitive area, are people checking that I am all right? Do our children know what to do? If we get trapped in the middle of a violent outbreak, do we have emergency supplies? Step one is often to activate those networks.

## **2) Having done so, expect my agency to act in a well thought out manner**

Has my agency or support body put in place a strong response policy with good networks itself to government and other significant players? Tentmakers in particular need to know this is in place. Some agencies are small and new (and often inexperienced). When I make contact with the first point in my network (if I am able) then I need to know that the backup team behind that contact knows what to do.

## **3) Act in a manner consistent with my Lord towards the person/s hurting, threatening, holding me**

The way I react initially often affects what happens later. A wild outburst of anger, threats (my government is bigger than yours), an attitude of racial superiority...these may further endanger me and inflame the situation. Have I worked through the issues involved in treating these people as those for whom Christ died, those whom God continues to love? Am I able to maintain, at the very least, a spirit of quietness, respect and common sense? I haven't been kidnapped, shot at or imprisoned, but I have been marched off towards the cells and then locked and boarded up in a house while an angry and drunk husband tried to break in with a machete. The thing that surprised me in these incidents was that I stayed fairly calm. What bothers me is my response to the times in my own little country when another driver does something stupid, a shop assistant is less than helpful or a colleague cuts across what I am doing without telling me. It seems to me, after many years of the Christian walk, that winning the tiny daily victories is the key to the bigger ones that may challenge us in the future.

## **4) Minimise collateral damage**

When I am arrested, questioned, observed or monitored, have I the capacity to see this within the larger picture of God's people in this place, or am I centred on myself and my own situation? My response is both preparatory (being prepared to act in such a way that others will not be compromised) and a response mechanism at the time of danger (how should I best act in this situation to preserve the integrity, security and ministry of others, even if it means sacrificing my own work and how I perceive my own contribution?). God has an uncanny capacity to carry on the work of His Kingdom, even when we are removed from what we are doing. On the other hand, many stories are emerging currently of kingdom work damaged severely because of the lack of wisdom of foreign Christians who consider their right to go where they want with the gospel of supreme importance, even when it means a government may expel all foreign workers in a region because of the "rights" clung to by a few or even a single individual.

## **5) Draw on spiritual resources and reserves built-up over years of Christian life**

It is inspiring sometimes to read the biographies of some Christians captured and held for long periods of time. Terry Waite made great use of Scripture he had memorized. Others sing hymns and songs they have known. Still others practice spiritual disciplines built into their lives over a long period of time. Do we have those resources? Have we built them in? Do we know they are there as a means of God's grace in the toughest times? I have seen people tackle a major physical challenge (running a marathon, climbing a mountain, swimming "to that rock out there") only to crumble because the physical hardness and endurance have not been built-up. Likewise, I have seen God's people crumble because their spiritual reserves have not been built-up.

## **Groundwork - four theological exercises**

In the end, how we react and how we cope depend not just on techniques, networks and mental toughness, but also on our core beliefs. I suggest that the following four questions are important to work through before the crisis comes. I offer no comment on the "answers" you should find. I simply

suggest they are vital questions.

### **1. How do I see myself in terms of my role and my definition?**

Am I a missionary? Am I a missionary undercover? Am I simply one of God's people, being God's person in this different place according to my gifts and my opportunities?

### **2. How do I view the people I encounter here, whether I encounter them in good times or in danger?**

Are they people hopelessly trapped in sin and evil, people under the shadow of a religion born of Satan, or people with hopes, dreams, longings and urges just like me and for whom my Lord has an equal love?

### **3. How do I view the future of the Kingdom in this place?**

Is God's work up to me, under the control of the Spirit, or a partnership of local believers, Spirit and visiting encouragers? This question relates to both the sovereignty of God and the nature of the Church. A related issue that bothered me for many years is this: Do I consider myself divinely protected? How would I react if I knew I was going to die or be seriously harmed, despite my belief in the all encompassing love of God? Many years ago, a number of Christians working for an agency were captured in Africa. Two were New Zealanders. One was shot and killed. The other was wounded and escaped. The one who escaped came back to New Zealand and spoke widely of the goodness and protection of the Lord. This left unanswered the question of how the Lord had treated his colleague who was killed.

### **4. How do I view the religion/belief systems of this place and this people?**

How does God see people in this place? How does He plan to deal with them? What means does He have for meeting the whole range of needs that they have and where do I fit into His plan? These questions raise theologies of salvation, evangelism and social action.

Enough! Except to say that my observation is that our capacity to cope is generally in direct proportion to the preparation done beforehand, in learning and training and in Christian lifestyle. <<