

When we look at the missionary challenges of our day, we see that suffering is a necessary ingredient. We are called to serve people who suffer, in contexts of war, extreme poverty and persecution. And those willing to go will not only suffer because of living in such contexts, but because they witness the extreme suffering of the local people. And often the missionary presence and service will seem insignificant in facing the huge challenges of such a context.

Biblical Reflections on Ministry and Suffering

Antonia Leonora van der Meer

I served as a missionary in Angola, from 1984 to 1995, during a war and under a Marxist government. It was not easy to serve there, or to set limits to a sense of responsibility to respond to the needs and demands for help which came from the local people.

There were only a few protestant missionaries; during the best year (1991, a short time of peace, before the worst war) just over a hundred from any origin and nationality, and during more difficult years we were around thirty, most of us Swiss and Brazilian. There were Roman Catholic missionaries as well, serving with love and perseverance.

Most Brazilians had not received training for transcultural mission. I was the happy one who had the opportunity to study at All Nations Christian College, U.K. Most of my friends had done a Bible Institute or Seminary, with no emphasis on cross-cultural issues. As a consequence, they suffered more from culture shock, and made mistakes which caused problems, because they had not been

prepared. And there was no member care. During those ten years, we received only one visit, of Rev. Elben Cesar, who went to visit his missionary daughter and lead a retreat for Brazilian missionaries. It was good! But not enough to keep us going in the midst of great stress and suffering. Two of our missionaries were kidnapped by the guerillas, several of us were caught in cross-fire during the war, some were evacuated when things got really bad.

Persecution usually was not very severe. But in my ministry with university students we faced some struggles which caused them suffering (one was imprisoned, seven were expelled from the university and forced into the army to fight on war fronts, others suffered threats). This helped me to understand the need to be wise, ministering in such a context. I also learned that there are always opportunities to share our faith, even though there is no official freedom.

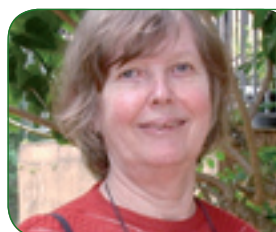
When I returned to Brazil, I decided that I needed to help our missionaries to be better prepared to go to the field and to

receive member care so that they could persevere. On reading the book: "Too Valuable to Lose", I saw suffering in missionary lives in many contexts, and the resulting attrition. This made me decide to do the research for my Doctorate in Missiology – which I did at the Asia Graduate School of Theology in the Philippines, on the issue "Understanding and Supporting Missionaries serving in Contexts of Suffering". I did an in-depth study on suffering in the life of Jesus and of the apostle Paul, and also field research, with questionnaires and interviews with missionaries working in areas where there is much suffering. I visited East Timor, Angola and Mozambique, and other missionaries participated by e-mail. I interviewed leaders from several agencies and churches. I had one hundred and twelve responses from missionaries and twenty-seven from sending leaders. What follows is a necessarily brief resume of the research.

Learning from Jesus as our Model in Suffering

According to Burkhard Gärtner (1986:724): "Christ's vicarious suffering means...for his followers not deliverance from earthly suffering, but deliverance for earthly suffering...he is our pattern and example. His suffering requires us as his followers to tread a similar path" (1 Pe 2:21).

The crucified Christ is the Christ of the



Antonia van der Meer is a Brazilian missionary who served with the student movement in Brazil, then became an IFES pioneer worker for 10 years in Angola, and for the last 11 and a half years has been working with the Evangelical Missions Center in Brazil as teacher and more recently as principal of the school. She is involved with the Brazilian Missionary movement in the areas of Member Care; Missionary Teachers Association and Tentmakers Association.

poor, who took the form of a slave to be with them and to love them. The call to follow Jesus is a call associated with His suffering, so to follow Him means to deny ourselves, take His cross and share His suffering (Moltmann 1973:46). Jesus suffered and was rejected. One can suffer and be admired but rejection takes away the dignity of suffering; the cross is about dying as an outcast. To be crucified with Christ means persevering when there is no support at all (Moltmann 1973:49-63).

To understand the need of the cross we must see not only our sin and guilt but also the just reaction of a holy God against these things. Just as grace refers to God's gracious holy personal activity, wrath stands for His personal hostility to evil, which does not diminish His simultaneous love for the offender (Stott 1986:102-109).

God and Christ took the initiative together to save sinners. God was unwilling to act in love at the expense of His holiness, or in holiness at the expense of His love. He satisfied His holy love by dying our death and bearing the judgment which we deserved. Our substitute was neither Christ alone, nor God alone, but God in Christ. In giving His Son, God was giving Himself. Divine love triumphed over divine wrath by divine self-sacrifice (Stott 1986:145-147, 156-160, 214-215).

Jesus' life was marked by suffering and rejection, which did not make Him a pitiful figure, for He was always clearly in control and gave Himself consciously and voluntarily out of His great love for us. Jesus brought new life through His death and suffering and prepared the way for us to follow in His footsteps, if we want to be instruments of God's restoring grace.

The Meaning of the Cross for Jesus' Followers

Jesus explained that commitment to the kingdom will often cause trouble. Jesus had consciously chosen the way of the cross, and His disciples need to be ready to follow Him. To be a disciple is to give absolute priority to Christ. Anyone not willing to carry His cross daily cannot be Jesus' disciple, so the cross is the defining characteristic of the lifestyle of the disciple, called to suffer the hostility of the world, for the cause of the kingdom (Lk

9:57-62; 14:25-35; Mt 8:18-22; 10:34-39; Yoder 1975:126-128).

To become Jesus' disciple is to accept the sacrifice and suffering to be endured in His service. Without self-denial, a taking up of the cross and following Jesus, there is no discipleship. Jesus' commitment to the Father and His acceptance of the shame of the cross became a model for His followers. To bear the cross is the only way to triumph over suffering. Jesus was preparing His disciples for global mission, for the building of His church among the nations. He knew that the kingdom of evil would declare war against His church, so He taught the disciples how to meet the violence which they would suffer (Mt 16:18, 24-26; 17:12; 23:33-36; Mk 6:4; 8:34-38; Lk 9:23-26; Bonhoeffer 1967:96-103; Josef Ton 2000:85-89).

The salvation of the world consists of two parts: the suffering of Christ for the sins of the world, followed by the proclamation of His salvation to all nations. This salvation will not reach the nations without the self-sacrifice of the messengers. When Jesus' disciples hear the call of God and preach the good news to the nations, live in humble obedience and love other people, they are sacrificing themselves for the salvation of the lost (Ton 2000:102).

The cross of Christ is the symbol of suffering service, a stimulus to patient endurance and the path to mature holiness. It becomes clear that suffering is indispensable to effective service. The place of suffering in service and of passion in mission is rarely taught today, but the secret of missionary effectiveness is the willingness to suffer and to die. Suffering and service, passion and mission, belong together, both in Jesus' experience and in that of His disciples. To share in His sufferings is to share in His glory, but the hope of glory makes the suffering bearable (Stott 1986:315-317, 320-323).

Jesus sent His disciples as sheep among wolves, as those who, at the same time, need to be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. It is not a question of violence against violence, but of readiness for martyrdom. It is to be prudent and sincere, not seeking harmful solutions (Lk 12:3-12; Mt 10:16-33). Jesus was concerned with the preparation

of His disciples for their participation in His mission, to help them to be aware of the persecution they would face and to teach them how to react to it. (Mt 10:17-18; Ton 2000:70-71). During persecution it is easy to lose one's self-control and do foolish things or provoke the authorities. Wisdom and innocence are absolutely necessary under persecution. Disciples will be hated by their family and by all men. In such a situation, the answer is not bitterness but persevering love (Mt 10:34-39; Ton 2000:75-81; Bonhoeffer 1967:237-239).

Learning from Paul in his Suffering in Ministry

Soon after his conversion, Paul was told that he had been chosen to carry Jesus' name before Gentiles and the people of Israel and that this mission would involve much suffering. Paul never sought suffering or provoked it unnecessarily through lack of wisdom. He used his rights as a Roman citizen to protect himself from being flogged by the Romans and from being lynched by the Jews (Ac 22:25-29; 23:16-24; 25:9-11). But he was willing to suffer when it was necessary to fulfill his calling.

Paul was ready to suffer for the proclamation of the gospel and was not ashamed of the consequences, for it was an honor to suffer for Christ. He wanted Timothy to follow his example and to be ready to suffer, because no one can preach Christ faithfully and escape persecution (2 Ti 1:11-12; 3:12; Stott 1977:42-43; Kelly 1983:154-155).

Paul showed that a biblical theology of glory is inseparably linked to a theology of the cross. God's way of action is through weakness, suffering and self-sacrifice, and this applies to Christians as well. Christ was humiliated and despised. So was Paul and so will Jesus' servants be (David Prior 1985:65-66). Paul understood that God had determined that the apostles should be willing to die as martyrs, something not to be seen as a tragic event, but as a commission given by Jesus (Ton 2000:148, 156, 165). As martyrdom is becoming a present reality for many Christians, we cannot continue to ignore this possibility and its implications as we interpret these texts. Tension and suffering are part of the body of Christ even today.

Paul expressed his deepest humiliation in the context of his experience of highest exaltation. About the precise nature of the “thorn in the flesh” it is probably best that God decided to leave us in ignorance. It was clearly very painful and humbling. So we can identify the thorn with our own deepest humiliation and pain. Paul’s thorn crippled his life, draining his energies. But it was permitted and overruled by God for His servant’s good. Its purpose was to keep Paul humble and dependent on God, and it taught him the secret of Christ’s power manifest in weakness (2 Co 12:7; Hughes 1977:441-442, 447; Barnett 1988:177-178; Carson n.d.:175).

Paul did not seek suffering but accepted what came to him from his Lord, because he knew that human weakness provided the opportunity for divine power. The weaknesses Paul took pleasure in were the ones which had to be endured for Christ’s sake; he never sought suffering to receive merit. We learn from Paul to discern God’s hand in painful circumstances, knowing that He remains in control. The answer to Paul’s prayers was the promise of more abundant grace to be able to live with his painful thorn (2 Co 12:9b-10; Hughes 1977:452-454).

In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul described how unbelieving people have their minds blinded by the god of this age and how God may enable them to believe, making “his light shine... to give [them] the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (4:6). This is the treasure which Paul carries in a weak earthen vessel. His tribulations and daily dying are for Jesus’ sake in order to spread the grace of God. As he suffers for the gospel, the truth shines, penetrating the blinded eyes of unbelievers (Ton 2000:145-147). The way Christians react to suffering is a powerful witness.

The above overview of suffering in the life of Paul reminds us that he was a true servant of Christ, a shepherd with a loving heart, a man conquered by Christ’s great and undeserved love. He was the apostle who worked the most and who took the gospel to many new lands. One of the secrets of his continuing perseverance in ministry and of his unbroken spirit was his willingness to suffer for Christ, with no restrictions.

What Does this Teaching Mean to Missionaries Today?

If we consciously follow Jesus’ model, we will learn to bear with any difficulties in team relationships with patient endurance, be ready to forgive and not to hold on to hurts in our heart, and be able to love those who are less loveable, not in our own strength, but by asking for His Spirit to shed His love in our hearts. We will be able to pray for those who persecute us. We will not seek our own glory and respect, but God’s glory. We will express our hurts and pains to our loving Father, but continue to be submissive to His will, knowing that He is Sovereign, and our present pains for the name of Jesus will bring us a reward of glory beyond all understanding.

If we follow Jesus we will be sensitive to the needs and hurts of others, listen to them with love and respect, identify with them and speak words of comfort and encouragement, serving according to their needs and our possibilities.

Those who suffer serving Jesus and spreading His kingdom may be very sure that they are never alone, for Jesus promised to be with us always, and He will keep His promises (Mt 28:18-20; Heb 13:5-6). We may not always feel His presence, because our suffering does hurt and sometimes nearly crushes us, but He will be near and not allow our sufferings to exceed our strength to bear them (1 Pe 5:10; 2 Co 4:7-11). This is a great encouragement for missionaries, especially in times of danger or extreme pressure.

Some Glimpses of Issues Raised by Missionaries serving in Hard Contexts

Of the agencies represented by the missionaries who took part in the survey, fifty-six came from interdenominational agencies, thirty-one from denominational agencies and twenty-five were sent independently by their own churches.

If we look at the attached Figure 1 and 2, we can see that those who were sent independently, with less training and guidance, felt greater needs in the area of pastoral and psychological care, in guidance for their ministry, in relationships with national leaders, in the studies of their children. And they

give similar reasons for possibly giving up, including burnout and feeling unable and rejected. These are people who have to cope very much on their own, learning on the job. Those sent by denominational agencies had more support and guidance, but still felt keenly a lack of available aid in times of crisis, concern for the security of their children, and the need for a more holistic support, and

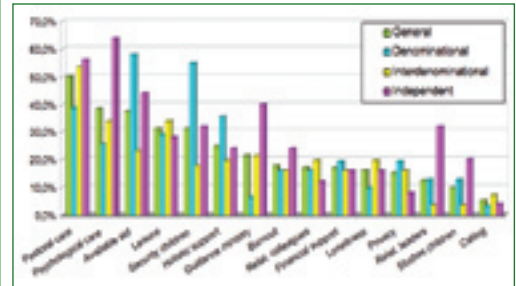


Figure 1: Needs of missionaries according to agencies

gave as possible reasons for giving up very similar needs as well as their struggle with bureaucracy and corruption. So these agencies still need to improve their support for their missionaries as well. Those from interdenominational agencies were better cared for on the whole, but felt a greater difficulty in relationship to colleagues, often living with multicultural teams without knowing how to solve conflicts. These give us some ideas about how to improve our service to them.

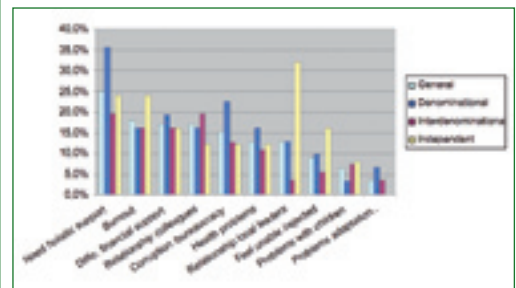


Figure 2: Reasons for attrition according to agencies

Some of the needs mentioned by Brazilians in contexts of suffering were:

Healthcare: This is one of the main concerns of missionaries. While thirty-five answered that they received healthcare, many still have no provision and, in emergencies, suffer greatly. Some may even die because of the difficulty in finding available aid. When asked what reason they might consider returning prematurely, fourteen answered “health issues.”

Pastoral and Psychological Care: Fifty percent of the respondents expressed the need for pastoral care and thirty-eight percent, the need for psychological care. Twenty-seven missionaries answered that they receive pastoral care. Few agencies and churches understand what life looks like in a context of violence and war. This makes it hard for the missionaries to share their needs and the suffering of the local people.

Emotional Needs of Missionaries
Loneliness was mentioned by eighteen missionaries, mostly single and married women. Single women feel lonely when they do not find deep fellowship with others, and they miss their family, friends and church very strongly. Missionary wives suffer when they do not have a specific function, being seen as mere appendices to the husband's ministry and not as "real" missionaries.

Depression or sadness was mentioned by twenty-one of the missionaries.

Family Issues, Security and Children's Studies: These are among the main concerns expressed by missionaries. They need wise guidance, starting during pre-field training. Most children will cope well, and grow through a transcultural experience, but some families suffer and may need to return home and receive special care. There is also a need to care for couples, especially during periods of stress in their relationship. Such help must be available on the field, and sometimes it may be desirable to send the couple back home for a time of restoration.

Relationship with Colleagues:
Relationships with missionary colleagues were mentioned by nineteen missionaries as a reason which could make them return prematurely. They need to be prepared for living and serving in teams. There are too many incidents of stress and discouragement because of difficulties in relationships with other missionaries because of a lack of preparation to listen to others, to solve conflicts and to forgive.

Transcultural Adaptation, Relationship with Leaders on the Field: Relationship with national leaders was mentioned by fourteen missionaries as a possible reason for returning prematurely. Patterns of leadership change from one culture to another. Missionaries



even mean the end of their service.

These issues are not entirely different from what other people go through. Missionaries are normal human beings, but they live in contexts that are unfamiliar, feel threatened by dangers to themselves

and national leaders may behave according to their own culture, and feel a lack of respect on the part of the other. Missionaries need to take local leaders seriously, listen to them, respecting them and refrain from acting or speaking in a non-contextual way.

Needs of Single Ladies: They have a greater freedom to serve, to travel, to interact with local people and even to face dangerous situations. They usually integrate sooner, learn the language better, develop good relationships and find satisfaction in their ministry and friendships. The issue of remaining single is a great challenge for many women. If missionaries are not well prepared and do not receive proper member care, they may enter into troublesome relationships, which may

and their family, unable to reach out to family, friends or their own church fellowship, and are often under great pressure. And the needs, suffering and violence affecting the lives of their local friends affects them as well. They may become beacons of hope, and share God's comfort.

It became clear in the survey that our missionaries need more consistent member care, appropriate training and guidance about their ministry. If we offer them continuing loving support, listen to them, help them in practical ways and also with their emotional needs, missionaries will feel strengthened to continue to serve, whatever the difficulties of their context. <<

REFERENCES CITED

- Barnett, Paul, *The Message of 2 Corinthians. The Bible Speaks Today*. (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988)
 Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *The Cost of Discipleship*. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. 1970) Original: *Nachfolge* (München, 1949)
 Carson, D.A., *Del Triunfalismo a la Madurez*. (D. Menezes, trans.) (Barcelona: Publicaciones Andamio, n.d.)
 Original: *From Triumphalism to Maturity* (Grand Rapids, 1984)
 Gärtner, B., "Suffer". In *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. (C. Brown, ed. Pp. 719-726. Vol. 3.) (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1986)
 Hughes, Philip E., *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians The New International Commentary on the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1977) (1st edition, William B. Eerdmans, 1962)
 Kelly, J.N.D., *I e II Timóteo e Tito: Introdução e Comentário (I and II Timothy and Titus: Introduction and Commentary)*. (Série Cultura Bíblica 14. G. Chown, trans.) (São Paulo: Vida Nova and Mundo Cristão, 1983) (Original: *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, UK, 1963)
 Moltmann, Jürgen, *The Crucified God*. (R. A. Wilson and J. Bowden, trans.) (2nd Edition. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1973) (Original: *Der Gekreuzigte Gott*, München, 1973)
 Stott, John R.W., *Guard the Gospel: The Message of 2 Timothy. The Bible Speaks Today*. (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977)
The Cross of Christ. (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986)
 Ton, Josef, *Suffering, Martyrdom and Rewards in Heaven*. (New York, NY: The Romanian Missionary Society, 2000) (1st edition, Romanian Missionary Society, 1997)
 Yoder, John Howard, *The Politics of Jesus*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975)