

Suffering Together and Sharing the Load

Two key ways missionary teams help build resiliency

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Resiliency is a necessarily popular topic in a world plagued with increasing rates of anxiety and mental illness.¹ As we consider the next generation of missionaries, how do we push back against these prevailing winds and grow mature, resilient Christ followers? We want to see missionaries who can maintain the course with faithfulness.

If resiliency is the ability to grow stronger through adversity and to adapt and withstand change over time, the mission field is a place where this will be most likely be tested and grown. For the missionary, a cross-cultural mission context is often ever-changing, unpredictable, challenging, and unstable. The difficulties of cross-cultural work will either be a catalyst toward resiliency or a hurricane-force wind that forces a person off the field.

Our missionary teams have great potential to build both the resiliency of individual missionaries and the ongoing resiliency of a work in a particular

¹ Skyrocketing rates of mental illness among youth are analyzed in depth in an ongoing open-source literature review of current research: Jonathan Haidt, Zach Rausch, and Jean Twenge, *Adolescent mood disorders since 2010: A collaborative review*. Unpublished manuscript, New York University, online <https://tinyurl.com/TeenMentalHealthReview>.

place. This demands something of each member of the team to walk humbly with the others on their team in the slow work of growth and maturity. I would like to highlight two ways teams can particularly contribute to resiliency.

Foundations offers an excellent definition of a missionary team: “an identifiable group of disciples who meet together regularly, care for each other selflessly, and partner with one another intentionally to make disciples and multiply churches.”² This is my primary focus when I discuss the role of the missionary team. Missionaries might also have co-workers in their orbit who are not specifically on their team. For that reason, I encourage the reader to also think about ways they can care well for nearby missionaries who might not be on their immediate team.

Suffering together: Teammates who bear the load as fellow sufferers

I grew up in rural, central Florida, where half of our 20 acres were filled with a grove of navel orange trees that produced the most delectable fruit imaginable. Like any fruit tree, those trees required regular care: watering, fertilizing, and protection from pests. This regular maintenance took work, but it was expected and normal. The trees grew hardy over the years, until one year when we had an unusual cold spell.

I remember my parents hauling out our few heaters and covering what trees they could with sheets to protect from several nights of sub-zero temperatures.³ It was hard, sleep-depriving work. And when it was over, they were able to save only about 6 or 7 of the mature trees.

The weather was too harsh, and the remaining trees without cover died. We replanted the grove, but as it often takes 6-8 years for new trees to bear

² International Mission Board, *Foundations*, v. 4 (Richmond, VA: International Mission Board, 2022), 87.

³ I am pretty sure this is also the year my parents woke us up at 2 am because it was snowing in central Florida!

fruit, I do not remember ever getting oranges off what was replanted. The damage was long-lasting and devastating.

Our orange trees had weathered all sorts of conditions: hot and cold, more than one hurricane, threats from pests and drought; but, that week the climate became so harsh that the only way they could survive was through others covering them with sheets. And when the cold passed and the sheets came off, those few protected trees continued to bear fruit.

So, it is with the cross-cultural missionary. The cross-cultural missionary journey is often one of deep suffering. Biblically, we know that suffering produces endurance and perseverance (e.g. Rom 5:3; James 1:3), but we are never meant to suffer alone. Yet, there are often sufferings so deep that we will be devastated without the covering of our brothers and sisters to help us bear up under them.. A robust theology of suffering in missions helps broaden our understanding of suffering. We bear with one another in it, and we persist in bearing with one another when the suffering is longer or deeper than we could imagine (1 Cor 12:26).

In Paul's letter to the Philippian church, the main reason that he cites for God extending his life on earth is to walk with them for their progress in faith (Phil 1:24-25). He encourages them in their sufferings, since they are now "engaged in the struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have" (Phil 1:30). He acknowledged a God-ordained role not only to further the gospel, but also to help his fellow sufferers in their kingdom-building work.

Several years ago, our family was expelled from the country where we were living with no notice. On the heels of years of increasing loss from others having to leave for similar reasons, as well as being in the early days of the pandemic, we experienced one of the deepest losses of our lives. In a day, we lost our community, our team, our kids' friends, our church, channels of communication with our local friends, our home, our pets, and years of investing in a church and ministry in our community. As we arrived in a nearby country with all our worldly possessions on a few airport carts,

that grief was deeper than I can describe. But we did not arrive alone. We arrived with a few other families who were experiencing the same loss. The safety, understanding, and help that came from sharing that together was instrumental in helping us endure.

After a season, we began to scatter to other locations, but a group of us met for a few weeks online to pray prayers of lament together while reading *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*.⁴ This corporate time of crying out to the Lord together did something in my heart that could never have happened in isolation.

Psalm 13 is one of the passages we prayed together, crying out to the Lord and directing our prayers to him. We voiced our complaints to him, “How long will I store up anxious concerns within me, agony in my mind every day?” (v 2). It felt like the enemy was winning, and we begged God to be the one to bring justice, “Consider me. . . .otherwise, I will sleep in death, My enemy will say, ‘I have triumphed over him.’” (v 3-4). And we entrusted ourselves together to God, “I have trusted in your faithful love. . .” (v 5).⁵

Scripture is full of prayers of lament, and most of these were written as corporate prayers of worship. Crying out to the Lord alongside one another is a biblical model for enduring crushing hardships.

Our sending churches often do pray for and support us, but there is a deeper level of fellowship in suffering that comes from those who are close beside us in the work. Just like a soldier can share understanding of the horrors of war with someone from their unit, so a missionary is uniquely positioned to understand their teammate’s hardship in a special way. We can “comfort one another with the comfort we too have received” (1 Cor 1:4).

As they do the work of evangelism and church planning, teammates do well to remember the call to encourage one another. The sufferings of life can

⁴ Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds Deep Mercy* (Chicago, IL: Crossway, 2019).

⁵ This follows the 4-part lament outlined by Vroegrop in *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*: turn to God in prayer, bring your complaint, ask boldly, choose to trust.

cloud our ability to see and celebrate the good. We have an impossible task, and we face failure daily. Yes, God will accomplish kingdom-sized things, but we do not always get to see results in the day-to-day. Many missionaries live in an encouragement-deprived vacuum. We need encouragement to stay the course through deep hardship. We must look for and celebrate faithfulness, the mercy of Jesus in each other's others' lives, and the places where good is happening—no matter how small. We need teammates who encourage one another to press on when language learning never ends or when a local partner we have been working with walks away from the Lord.

I have lost count of the times that others have helped me have courage to stay the course when I wanted to quit. I am not talking about false flattery or an emotional pep rally, but a rich scripture-inspired affirmation of the ways we are following in the footsteps of Jesus each day. The sense of isolation or loneliness we often feel on the mission field can lead us to dark places where we believe our sufferings can be faced only by leaving a location.

Sometimes leaving *is* the right thing to do.⁶ Longevity in a place is not the same as resilience. At times, teammates would do well to affirm the wisdom in moving to a new team or place or returning to a passport country. But when going is not the wisest decision, colleagues who listen to the challenges, empathize with the suffering, and then link arms to stand together are like those sheets my parents placed over our orange trees to protect them from the cold. Their support helps endure the challenging environment, building resiliency along the way.

As teammates and co-workers, we can help one another navigate sufferings and grow through them. We can lament all the ways the suffering of a broken world breaks in as we long for our coming king's return.

To consider: How are you comforting or supporting those around you who are suffering? How have others borne with you? How can we lament well together

⁶ This topic is explored with great nuance and skill in: Sue Eenigenburg and Eva Burkholder, *Grit to Stay, Grace to Go* (Littleton, CO: William Carey Publishing, 2023).

instead of calling others to keep a stiff upper lip and soldier on? Who do you need to offer a word of encouragement to today?

Sharing the load: Teammates who embrace a diversity of giftings

Working with others is often hard and messy. It requires navigating challenging conflicts and personality differences, and it demands communicating well. Relationships are complicated.

However, a multiplicity of people is the way God wants to accomplish his task. People with a diversity of giftings and skills work better as a whole than they ever could as limited individuals (1 Cor 12).

Perhaps one of the biggest detriments to resiliency among missionaries is the unrealistic expectation that they must be all things all the time. Only God is all-powerful, all-knowing and lacking nothing. We are, by God's design, created with limits.⁷ By his sovereign wisdom, he has given each of us spiritual gifts, but he has not given any individual all the gifts. He has granted all of us not only unique strengths but unique weaknesses as well. He has given us different personalities and experiences to steward, but we were not designed to do so alone.

Team members can help each other build resiliency and resist burnout when they embrace and promote a team culture that encourages people to not only know their strengths, but also celebrate the differences between teammates in strengths and weaknesses. If the goal of our missionary efforts is planting churches which contain a variety of biblical spiritual gifting, age, experience and personality, why would the path from entry to exit not also be marked with a corporate and full expression of gifts and teamwork? Teams do well to seek to honor the various members in the unique roles, abilities, and parts of a greater whole.

⁷ See Kelly M. Kopic, *You're Only Human* (Ada, MI: Brazos, 2022).

Do all the members on a missionary team have a basic understanding of how they are gifted by the Spirit to be strong in the work? Do they have an awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of others? Teams can unknowingly carry the unspoken expectation that all members need to look identical to one another as they carry out the work of building the kingdom.

I saw this beautiful diversity play out well on one of our previous teams in East Asia. One of our teammates was excellent and gifted in administration. As a team leader, I often felt guilty that I could not keep the team calendar organized or set helpful systems in place to keep us from getting bogged down in redundant tasks that could be done much more efficiently. But this young woman excelled at it, and would sometimes call me to ask, “Did you mean to schedule two team events at the same time on the same day?” I learned to see her gifting as a wonderful complement to my weakness. When I realized this, I turned many of those administrative duties over to her. Our team functioned much better, I was less burdened, and she was less frustrated with my lack of attention to detail.

A self-sufficient mindset is a recipe for burnout or isolating pride. Paul Ford encourages Christians to ask the questions, “Where are you powerful? Where are you weak? Whom do you need?”⁸ We were created to need the abilities and skills of the other, so that together we could work together to build his kingdom. This requires a humility and confidence that does not crumble when we realize that others will often outshine us. It also requires a gracious awareness that other teammates might not be strong in the same ways we are strong. If I excel at bold, competent, face-to-face evangelism and am a confident up-front leader, it is easy to think that everyone else must operate the same way. This kind of assumption, especially from a strong team leader, sets everyone up for frustration.

Team members build resiliency in one another when they recognize the unique gifting of each another and seek to encourage people in their

⁸ Paul R. Ford, *Moving from I to We: Recovering the Biblical Vision for Stewarding the Church* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2013), chap. 9, Kindle, loc 4212.

strengths. People grow resilient as they learn to function as part of a greater community and become more comfortable with the idea that both their strengths and weaknesses are part of God's design.⁹

To Consider: Do you know where both you and your teammates are gifted by God to be strong? Where are you weak? Who do you need alongside you to help in that weakness? To team leaders, are you expecting others on your team to lead or work in the same way you are naturally gifted, or do you allow others to flourish in their own way?

Concluding Thoughts

We do not want better, stronger workers to produce a product. We want godly, mature Christ-followers, who faithfully work to build his kingdom with increasing maturity, skill, and wisdom until Christ returns. These are deeply connected to and rooted in the refining work Christ is doing in all of us, especially through the sufferings of life. Scripture has much to say on this topic, and we know that much of how scripture describes growth in the Christian life happens in the context of a community co-laboring on the journey. As fellow laborers of Christ, we are all called to live out the "one-anothers" of scripture.¹⁰

In this article, I have described some characteristics of a team which fosters resiliency among its members. But it is not a prescription for what a team must look like in all ways, all the time. No team can (or should) be all the things for each other. Attempts to do so would be unhealthily co-dependent and restrictive. Healthy, resilient missionaries will most often have a variety of relationships and connections to community in a variety of places.

⁹ As a point of clarification, by *weakness*, I mean in areas of personality, giftedness, or natural capacity. I'm not referring to weaknesses of character or sin issues.

¹⁰ <https://www.challies.com/articles/one-another-the-bible-community/> - One of many excellent summaries of the "one-another" statements presented to us in scripture. We would do well to apply these to team relationships.

Too many teams overlook their own responsibility to one another as they do the kingdom building work set before them. May this article bring into sharper focus ways we can grow in helping our fellow missionaries, our teams, and our work to grow in resiliency as we endure for the long term.

Our teams are places in which we will live closely with other missionaries for a season, whether a few months, years, or decades. As we live so closely with our brothers and sisters on the front lines, we have a unique role in developing resiliency and maturity in Christ. Just like the work that went into protecting our orange trees on that cold weekend described earlier, we too can support our brothers and sisters on the field during great suffering. At the same time, we will do well to celebrate and grow in understanding the beautiful diversity God has designed within our teams.

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