**Going Through Caring:**

**Responding to the Great Commission by Caring for Missionaries**

Ruth C. Chang, Psy.D.

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Matthew 28:18-20 (NIV)

The Lord is raising up Chinese believers to respond to the Great Commission. Whether these Chinese are from different parts of the world or from within China, a great number are being sent out. While most believers may not be called to leave their homes to respond to the Great Commission, it does not mean they cannot fulfill this call. They can join the “sent ones” through their love and care. I call this “*living out the Great Commandment to fulfill the Great Commission.”*

Missionaries are normal human beings with normal human needs – physical, emotional, and spiritual. As they leave their familiar places and go to serve elsewhere, they will go through what normal human beings go through when change happens in their lives. They will need the support of others to be able to adjust and serve well. The role of those who do not go is just as crucial as those who do go. Without the support of those who stay behind, life for those who go will be much more difficult. The question to ask is, How can those who stay behind be actively involved in the lives of those who go out?

This is a question that Chinese churches and sending organizations are just beginning to grapple with and address. The reality that many Chinese missionaries do not survive well in the field has pushed churches and organizations to find answers. Thankfully, a remedy may actually be right in front of us – the love of God’s people!

But first, some faulty thinking deeply ingrained in the Chinese church must be overcome. After that, practical ways to love missionaries and be involved in their lives can be shared, and members of the church can be motivated to join in!

**Correcting Deeply Ingrained Thinking**

A common misconception is that the role of people in the church in missions is only two-fold – 1) give money, and 2) pray. While these are very important and crucial to missionary sending, they are not enough! Church members, small group fellowship leaders, and leaders all need to realize that what is most lacking for their missionaries is deep love and commitment.

Another misconception is that when missionaries become part of a missions organization, their care will be managed by the organization and the church no longer has a responsibility to do anything anymore except to continue giving and praying. Church members must realize that missionaries need love and support from the folks who know them well. It is true that the relationships between missionaries and their organization grows closer the longer they serve; over time trust is built. But missionaries do not necessarily have the closeness of relationship with people in the organization like they have with people with whom they served and worshipped in church. Any person in the congregation can be a vessel of love that the Lord can use.

**How Can Church Members “Go” Through Caring?**

During AFC’s CMC 2024 (Ambassadors for Christ Chinese Mission Convention) in Baltimore, Maryland, Dr. Yih Jia Chang and I led a workshop on how churches can support their missionaries. I have selected a few points from that workshop to highlight here. All activities can be done by an individual, a small group, or a fellowship – anyone willing to adopt a missionary or missionary family and focus their caring.

**Keys to Helping Well**

Before going into the specific areas in which church members and fellowships can get involved, it is important that general guidelines are very clear to all who want to help. Then skills and activities can be taught in order to love our missionaries well.

* **Listen and respond well**

Listening is the most basic of helping skills that we need to learn, yet it is not that simple. It is very easy to be so focused on our own thoughts that we really do not listen well to others. Anyone can begin by learning to simply listen, then paraphrase what you have heard. Resist the temptation to provide answers and give advice. A good Bible verse to memorize is James 1:19: "My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry….”

* **Keep up regular communication**

In order to care well, we need to know on an ongoing basis what is happening in the lives of our missionaries. Regular contact is essential. It is helpful to have a key person who commits to regularly communicate with assigned missionaries. If you are friends with a missionary, do your best to maintain regular contact. These personal connections as friends can be very encouraging to the missionaries.

Work with the missionary to determine which methods of communication are best for them, whether emailing, texting, social media platforms, and calling.

Regular communication needs to be two-way. It is not only asking how the missionaries are doing and what we can do for them, but also keeping them posted on what’s happening in the home country and the home church. This helps to keep them connected with the home church and home country, provides a continued sense of belonging, and prevents disconnection.

* **Provide timely response during emergencies and urgent situations**

Emergencies might happen and church members should step in to help if needed. Involving congregants during these situations is a great way to build relationships with the church’s missionaries.

**How Do We Love our Missionaries Well?**

There are many ways to love on our missionaries. In order to makes these suggestions clearer, think of them according to time frames: before a missionary leaves, while the missionary is on-field, and when they return.

**Helping Missionaries Prepare to Leave**

Lay church members can do many things to support aspiring missionaries. One is to be a mentor as they seek clarity regarding God’s call. Provide encouragement and support as they go through the process of deciding where the Lord is calling them to go, what is the best time to go, how to care for their children, and what organization to join. This is a time when an intercessory prayer for them and together with them is meaningful and helpful. They will appreciate eager listeners.

After the decisions regarding the place to serve, timing, and organization are made, the preparation to go moves into full swing. It is a crucial time for individuals and fellowships to actively offer their assistance. Preparing to go into missions is a very stressful time due to the number of decisions to make and things to do. One of the practical things to offer is help with business in the home country that will need to be continued after they leave, such as home rental, tax payments, banking, or taking care of elderly family members’ needs. It relieves them of a huge worry and can allow them to be more focused on their mission. These require long-term and continuous commitment.

Practical help with packing up is invaluable. They might need storage space for belongings they are not taking with them. They might need temporary housing prior to leaving and meals. Someone to clean their home after they leave will be greatly appreciated. Church members might be able to provide a time or place of quiet and respite before their departure. You may be able to think of many more helpful things to do.

**Caring While Missionaries are on the Field**

Once the missionary has left for the field, the most important thing to remember is regular contact, and there are so many convenient and varied ways to do so. Of course, certain precautions, depending on their place of service, need to be followed. One church pastor shared that he sacrifices his Sunday evenings, going to bed late after a day of preaching and teaching, to make sure that he connects with the missionaries the church has sent out. For him, he is still their pastor. Although lay people do not have the responsibility to be their missionaries’ pastor, they have the calling to continue to love on these missionaries who are their brothers and sisters. We should not swamp them with many calls, but if a few people connect regularly with them, it provides the emotional support they need and prayers will also become more relevant and in accordance with their needs.

As mentioned in **Key to Helping Well** above, emergencies can happen. As friends and brothers and sisters in the Lord, church members might be called to respond when there is an urgent need. What will your response be if one of your missionaries is injured while on the field? What if a missionary’s parent near you is seriously ill? What if war breaks out and there is a need for your missionaries to evacuate? How will church people respond? The missions board or committee would be wise to establish guidelines for care before an emergency arises.

One of the most practical ways to care for missionaries while they are on the field is to visit them. It can be a personal visit; it can be a short-term missions team getting involved in their work. For my husband and me, the visits of several church members spread throughout our time in the field were so special to us. We enjoyed their visits and we also put them to work, for example, by sharing at a fellowship time and cooking for guests. Visiting missionaries provides a firsthand view of their lives and will make prayers for the missionaries become more realistic and alive.

Missionaries gather many benefits from these visits. Visitors might bring them much needed supplies. They might be able to give the missionary a much needed break from the stresses of their work and allow them to focus on being with their guests. They might provide them a delightful date night and watch the children. Missionaries need direct and personal emotional support, which is particularly important during the first two years in the field. We thoroughly enjoyed taking our guests to visit different places we served and also sightseeing together. Without these visits we would have probably left without seeing the famous sights around us!

However, there are cautions regarding visiting missionaries that need to be heeded, according to Dr. Yih Jia Chang. First, do not become a burden to them. Yes, you may need to have them do a few things for you as part of your preparation, but do not let the planning and preparation fall completely on their shoulders. Second, do not demand following your own agenda and what you want to accomplish. Visitors’ plans need to be in accordance with the needs and desires of the host, not the other way around. Guests can share their desires and what they can offer, but not insist on them.

The purpose of the visits is to serve and love the missionaries, not become a burden to them. In our experience, our director’s wife came to visit and stayed for a month with us. She was not a burden at all, and showed eagerness to learn about our work. We traveled all over to allow her to meet the people we were serving. She also opened opportunities for us to meet people she knew who were well-known believers; she created connections for us. That was an unforgettable visit! When we visit our missionaries, we can create wonderful memories for them!

**Caring for Missionaries When they Return**

Returning to one’s home country after many years as missionaries is called *re-entry*. Some people have the mistaken notion that this should not be difficult because they are returning ‘home.’ Wrong. There is something called ***reverse culture shock!*** Missionaries may have gotten so used to their host country that when they return, home is not comfortable or familiar anymore. We often hear stories of missionaries who decide to retire or live the rest of their lives in the country in which they served rather than live in their passport country. Just as culture stress and shock happens when missionaries first arrive on the field, reverse culture shock occurs when they return. If church members have been caring well for their missionaries while still on the field, the shock may not be as severe for them.

Prior to their return, think about helping to arrange transportation, temporary housing, and children’s schooling. Some organizations and churches have homes for missionaries, but if your church does not have this to offer, church members can search for other options.

One of the sources of disappointment and sadness for returning missionaries is the feeling that the people in their home church are not really that interested in their stories and their lives. They might not feel welcomed back. These disappointments can easily be prevented if regular connection with at least one fellowship in the church has been maintained throughout their time away and that fellowship welcomes them back. Having many individuals keep personal contact can also minimize missionaries’ feelings of being lost in their own home church when they return. Church members can help them feel welcomed, and should not assume they still have the sense of belonging they had prior to leaving.

Missionaries need to share their stories. They need a period of time to think through what they’ve experienced. Church members need to listen well and with eagerness. Allow them to talk about what they learned while serving, what they will miss most, and what their concerns are about returning. How we listen to them becomes an “informal debriefing” for them. Debriefing is talking and sorting through what happened, what is happening now, and what they anticipate will happen in the future. It is a means for them to clarify how they will move on.

One of the expectations that churches have of their returning missionaries is that they will make reports in various fellowships and churches. Ask them if arranging their speaking engagements for them would be helpful. Promotion is important to create anticipation and excitement so that listeners are primed and eager to hear. Making sure that missionaries have enough rest prior to arranging speaking opportunities is imperative.

Ongoing care for missionaries throughout their mission life is so important. It impacts their emotional and spiritual health from pre-field preparation through their return or retirement.

**Conclusion**

There are many ways to “go” and respond to the Great Commission without going. When we learn to love our missionaries well, we are part of the teams that go! My suggestion is for you to pray as to how God is calling you to be involved in the Great Commission. What is he asking you to do beside regularly giving and attending prayer meetings? How can your ability to love and care be used by God to bless your missionaries and contribute to their mission? How can you “go” without going?

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