

Center for Counseling & Growth

to stay, to flourish, to contribute

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Getting healthy and staying there

Introduction

I am here to be a counselor who focuses on the needs of missionaries and missionary families. The purpose of the Center for Counseling and Growth is to empower internationals to stay, to flourish, and to contribute in ministry. In October 1996, we officially came under the umbrella of the Taiwan Missionary Fellowship, so we are now a sister organization to this magazine.

In search of a normal missionary

About eight years ago, we came to Taiwan the first time, for a three-week visit! I asked for volunteers who would meet for a normal family interview. Only one family volunteered, and they were not at all sure they were normal at least at the time! Some people told me there was no such thing as a normal missionary family.

I think I understand this. Normal people stay in their peer groups, like all their peers, and do ordinary sorts of things. Missionaries, on the other hand, are sent out by sending agencies to foreign lands. If we are normal, to which norms are you comparing us? If we fit in naturally, where is it we fit? Wherever it is, we obviously don't stay there! So this is a healthy part of our experience being reconciled to the ways in which we are not normal.

The order is important

Let's talk about staying, flourishing, and contributing. First, I think the order is important. Many times I have worried so much about contributing that I did not flourish. Often I did not even stay. So now I am trying to reverse that order and I do not find it easy.

Here just eight months, I've already heard stories about good missionaries who didn't stay. If you're reading this, we hope you will come back! Nor can we take staying for granted now. Rather we humbly ask God for more grace for the future. Staying is a necessary first step for whatever else may happen, both for faith and for ministry.ⁱⁱ

As to contributing without flourishing, I think it is an empty cup. Even if God is honored by the contribution, I would not desire to be such a contributor. We all have our failures. When I look at those times in my life, it is with regret even if I may have made a significant contribution to ministry along the way. As to public examples, they abound. One might be King David. Certainly his contributions are among the finest so many psalms, such leadership in worship. Still, I cannot read his story without feeling the pain and regret both in his family, but also in his leadership, as reflected in his parting counsel to Solomon. As to private illustrations, we each have our own. If we are not bitter, by God's grace, still we grieve these things. Surely he came that we might have abundant life.

To stay

Staying is not a sure thing. The last issue of Taiwan Mission Quarterly included several articles about how things are changing. Apparently Taiwan is no longer unreached, even though none of the missions has succeeded at reaching Taiwan. In this issue, we also discover the more successful independent churches. They may have reached about 25% of those who are currently Christians in Taiwan. Sadly, though, this success amounts to less than 1% of the population of Taiwan.

If you are frustrated here, there is a large country with 50 times the population and twice the percentage of Christians just across the Taiwan straits. This country, I understand, also has the most unreached people groups in the world. It also once had the largest number of missionaries ever deployed to a single country. Russia is also a door we must go through right now. It may be shut at any time, and we all know how important it is to get in and get out quick!ⁱⁱⁱ

Just as each day has enough troubles of its own, so each country has enough as well. Still, Taiwan has its challenges to those who would stay. Besides the rapid pace of change, we could point to frustrating laws, difficult languages, pollution, crowding, and much more. To stay here requires acceptance of this environment as our own, not for eternity, but for both today and at least one tomorrow.

Staying is significant. It is the necessary foundation for flourishing and contributing. It is also the way we learn. Westerners say, Experience is the best teacher. Chinese say, Live until old, learn until old, still only know three tenths.

Staying does matter. I know I cannot persuade you to stay if you are not willing, but I believe that God can use us all right here in Taiwan. Yes, he could use us other places, too. Yes, it is unreasonable to expect the very people who were willing to move out in the first place to stay once they arrive. Yes, we are not the same as when we first decided to come. Staying will not make our challenges disappear. Nor will Taiwan suddenly become paradise. Yet staying gives us time and space to deal with the issues that we are just beginning to understand. In turn, we may begin to understand issues which until now have only been mysteries.

I have said this to encourage you to stay, but I know some of us will leave. Eventually we will almost all leave. There is never a good time to say, Goodbye. Still, when the time comes, I want you to know we will miss you. It will not be the same without you. Still, we also want to release you. Please do not let sadness become regret or regret become guilt. Instead, let your sadness when you leave be a memorial to how much you have invested and how much you care. Here eight months, Laura said, I miss Colorado, don't you? I said, Yes! And that's good! When we leave Taiwan, I hope we will also miss this place. This is my wish and prayer for us all. May we stay as long as God allows. When one of us leaves, may we be sad together, but without regret or guilt.

So now let 's flourish

Well, you are still here! Hurray! I like that in a missionary! On behalf of the rest of us Christians here in Taiwan, thank you! Those of you with family, sending, and supporting partners around the world, please give them our thanks as well. We know your family and ministry partners play an essential part in keeping you here. This is a gift to us of the Lord's grace.

In the last paragraph, I tried to weave together elements I think help us flourish, like...

- Self awareness: a sense of who we are in many ways. Romans 12:3 says, Think of yourself with sober judgment, according to the measure of faith God has given you. I believe this is relational awareness, not performance-based testing. Faith is reliance on God's connection, not an accomplishment.
- Shared identity: a sense of belonging to the communities we are part of, including missionaries, Christians, Taiwan, your town, your roots, and everything else. Missionaries are some of the most connected people I have ever seen! Romans 12:5 says, In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. "Wanting to belong" regularly outranks "getting the job done" as a motivation for language learning (and a lot more of life's difficult tasks)!
- Satisfied contentment: a willingness to be who and where we are without always wishing we were someone else or someplace else. Romans 12:6 says, We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. Being humbled in Taiwan reminds me in a new way that my ability to minister is strictly a result of God's grace. Did I deserve to be among the world's elite educationally? No, that was God's gift. Do I deserve to be functionally illiterate? That, too, is God's grace for me in Chinese. How amazing that God allows me to experience both at the same time. Our contentment need not come from our productivity. In any case, anything we produce will be unspeakably meager and tainted in God's eyes. Rather, in each new situation, we have a new opportunity to experience God's grace as it is given to us.
- Proactive involvement: not just responding to God's grace, but actively representing God in each other's lives. Romans 12:9-21 contains two parts. First, God calls us to speak and to act out his love. Then God asks us to give up putting ourselves first. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Interestingly, these are not our spiritual gifts which are to overcome evil. Rather these are challenges to all believers alike, even highly trained, specially transplanted missionary types.

- Grateful hearts: content and overflowing with hope, because the God of hope fills us with joy and peace. [Pray] that by God 's will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed.^{iv} Being out of my comfort zone forces me to confront how much of my contentment is simply familiarity. A year ago, as I sat in my recliner reading the Denver Post and watching TV, I wasn 't filled with joy and peace. I was simply zoned out and unplugged. This may be a pleasant escape, but it is no substitute for a grateful heart.

Paul was a great missionary. He was fearless and undeterred in evangelism. As Romans is written, Paul is busy thinking about passing through Rome on his way between Jerusalem and Spain.^v Yet surely Paul 's letter to the Romans has been used by God to influence many more people than Paul ever saw in Spain, assuming he got there. I think our lives may often be the same. We may get our hearts set on making one contribution or another, while God delights when we flourish right where we stand.

So what can we contribute?

Workers who cannot contribute something useful to tasks that matter will usually either go crazy or quit. Are missionaries exempt from all this? I think not. Most of us become frustrated when our desired contribution is rejected or disregarded. The simple solution is to delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.^{vi} This is a deep solution. All other answers stem from it. Here are three applications:

Negotiate mutual appreciation

As 1993 ended, I found my boss dissatisfied with my performance. I was relieved of my responsibilities. At the same time, I had just buried my mother and father. I was not ready to change jobs. As I sought God 's favor, as well as my boss 's, together my boss and I looked for alternatives. By God 's grace, we were able to find two projects, both of which went forward. In each case, my performance met with increased favor from others, and I also enjoyed the work.

Yet I believe this is the least helpful solution of the three listed here. The reason is that it required that I change my self-conception. These changes are often the most difficult. If you think you are a teacher, the most successful pastorate may still leave you feeling unfulfilled and left out of God 's design for your life. In my case, I had invested many years in preparation to be a counselor for missionaries. To work as a curriculum writer and software developer required a reframing of my sense of calling and giftedness. I found this hard to do, even when my efforts were affirmed by others.

Play the percentages

So when my job description changed, I looked for ministry opportunities outside my primary work functions. Like an architect who paints or a truck driver who farms, I became a researcher who did volunteer counseling. You can pick exactly what you do, since it 's your own time. For me this was individual discipleship and small groups. Do you save time in your life to do discretionary ministrythe kind you need not report on to the mission? Did you do volunteer ministry before you were a missionary?^{vii}

I also found opportunities to use my desired gifts with my coworkers and others I met while at work. I have heard and said that in the best jobs you get to do what you enjoy only 60% of the time. It follows that in the worst jobs you can do what you enjoy at least some percentage of the time. So I say, Look for the opportunities!^{viii}

Stay and flourish first

When I was in seminary, a TEAM recruiter told me to become a church planter first if I wanted to counsel missionaries. I had been doing church planting with Hispanics while in seminary, but I thought his advice was impractical. How could I raise support to be a church planting missionary when I did not feel called to do that? Wouldn't that be hypocritical? Of course, now many of you are thinking about what you raised support for and what you have done along the way. George McFall has a recent picture of me putting tar on the bolt holes in an old roof. Is this why I came to Taiwan?

Is it your heart's desire to contribute to the Lord's work in some meaningful, significant way? Then please do not neglect the things along the way as you wait for this significant moment. Even Billy Graham spent most of his time not doing crusades. After all, what God savors the most may not be the contribution you even had in mind to make. In hindsight, I believe I would have enjoyed that church planting assignment I could not imagine accepting when I was in seminary. I did enjoy the roof job, even though I ended up putting my foot through it. Along the way, I had some very stimulating conversations, perhaps as good as any in my office at Ta Yi Jeh.

ⁱ After the visit, we did not accept the invitation to come in 1989. Yet in hindsight, we believe that visit was an essential part of our willingness to come in 1996. Our family includes Laura, my wife, and our three elementary-aged children. Sarah was one when we visited. Joey and Robbie were born in 1990.

ⁱⁱ I guess this is similar to the biological need to survive before you can thrive, and to thrive before you can reproduce.

ⁱⁱⁱ If you do not understand how important it is to get in and get out quick," are you perhaps not American? I am suggesting an emphasis on quick results may reflect an American preference for avoiding the challenges of staying. America is, for the most part, a nation of immigrants, who all decided not to stay someplace else.

^{iv} Romans 15:13 is paraphrased. Romans 15:32 is quoted.

^v Romans 15:23-29.

^{vi} Psalm 37:4.

^{vii} Perhaps volunteer ministry for missionaries could be compared to dating for married couples.

^{viii} If you have figured out that writing is not my preferred work, you must be a counselor! Yet here I am....