

The Long and Short of Mission Terms

The Director of AD2000 speaks of the virtues and vulnerabilities of long-term and short-term missions in Pakistan.

--LUIS BUSH

It has been said: "The day of the long-term missionary is numbered."

In early November, the world's population reached an alarming milestone of six billion, having doubled in just one generation (40 years). Though growth has slowed, the worst crunch will come to the poorest countries. But there is another long-term projection that is even more troubling, especially in light of the population projections. Some are saying that the day of the career missionary, one who lives long term in a country, is largely over.

As my wife Doris and I traveled through Pakistan last year, we were struck by the immense spiritual need. With more than 150 million people, it is the world's sixth most populous country just having overtaken Russia. These 150 million comprise many unreached people groups, as well as between two and three million Christians, most of whom are Punjabi. By 2030 current projections show Pakistan passing Indonesia as the country with the greatest number of Muslims. But along with the overwhelming needs of Pakistan, comes a great opportunity that sets it apart from other Muslim nations: it still grants missionary visas. Though Pakistan grants them, they are for, at most, five years at a time. Moreover, there have been recent moves by the government not to renew visas for career missionaries. Still, the word "missionary" is not a negative title there. On the contrary, there is genuine appreciation for the historic contribution of missionaries, especially in health and education.

Yet despite this great need and great opportunity, the number of Protestant missionaries to Pakistan is indeed falling. A respected veteran missionary indicates that the percentage drop in long-term missionaries over the last three or four years has been around 30 percent. This is a clarion call to pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers to this harvest field.

Among other stops in Pakistan, Doris and I visited a rural area in the Sindh Province. I was invited to meet with the believers of Sindh to encourage them to reach the more than 500 people groups in the province. I found myself working side by side with both national believers and career missionaries.

Pakistan is one of few remaining "traditional mission fields" in the world. The need for the long-term missionary, willing to work in partnership with the national church, is far from expired. While short-term missions have increased dramatically to Pakistan, we observed significant drawbacks.

Surprisingly perhaps to those of us that see Pakistan as an unreached country, at least a few Christians can be found in almost every town. Although most have come originally from oppressed Hindu castes, many are now educated and increasingly respected. The Church is open to inviting missionaries and is also awakening to its task of reaching all people groups with the Gospel. An increasing number of the missionaries coming to Pakistan are East Asians, who more readily understand Pakistani culture and often relate more quickly than

Westerners to the way Pakistanis think and react. In a place where religion, like language and other aspects of culture, is seen as something one is born to, foreign missionaries are especially needed to challenge and train believers in cross-cultural evangelism. Pakistani Christians are interested in sharing their faith, but have had little experience in bridging cultural differences between people groups.

I am not alone in this conviction. Kundan Massey is a Pakistani national, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ in Pakistan (with more than 150 national workers) and vice-president of United World Mission. "I appreciate the sacrifice and perseverance of long-term missionaries to my country," he said. "I have seen with my own eyes the fruits of their labors. In the last five years there has been a major advance in the Gospel. Long-term missionaries are still needed in my country to train and work along side of the rapidly emerging national work force."

In our three days of conference in Sindh, we noted their diversity. They were from many different mission boards and from various countries of origin. They had different ministry functions: doctors, nurses, engineers, translators, ethno-musicologists, administrators and Bible teachers. We watched them sitting on the ground for hours, attentive regardless of who was speaking. We noted their humility, forged in the furnace of daily difficulty. We observed their rich and meaningful relationships with nationals. But this depth of relationship and ministry had not come without years of work. Breaking the language barrier took time. Breaking the cultural barrier, including body language and non-verbal cues, took even longer. Their ability to communicate had come through understanding the culture as well as mastering the language. This had taken years of work to accomplish, but we saw the results in front of us. They had a wealth of experience not replicable any other way. In one province, just eight missionary couples have accumulated a total of 320 years of Christian service among them. One half of these couples are still baby boomers. We were profoundly impacted by the virtues and vulnerabilities of these long-term workers.

On the other hand, some say that without an exit strategy, long-term missionaries find no reason to leave. There is no clear sense of objective to accomplish, other than seeking to remain in the country of ministry indefinitely. It becomes too easy to get into a rut. It becomes difficult to hand control of a lifetime of work over to the nationals.

One long-term missionary noted: "The spiritual battle going on here is intense. Satan has had his grip on this part of the world. Wherever he has had his grip, the marks of his hand are seen in the form of poverty, disease, illiteracy, and misery. In no way does Satan want missionaries to be successful and open the floodgates of heaven and it's blessing upon a nation and a part of the world that is under his bondage." Several long-term missionaries expressed their heart-felt appreciation for the global church prayer focus and teams that have come to pray on-site.

Long-term missionaries provided a bridge for effective entry and ministry by prayer teams and short-termers. Out of many virtues of long-term missionaries there are several that stand out.

The Virtues of Long-Term Missionaries

1. Career missionaries are enriched by learning the host country culture.

Career missionaries who have been in their chosen country for many years can easily see how their longevity facilitates mission. A veteran missionary couple noted:

Having spent 43 years as missionaries in Pakistan, we daily experience the advantages of having been here long term. Knowing from the start that we had made a life commitment to this country, we were determined to learn the national language (Urdu) well, so that we could communicate the deeper truths of the Gospel and enter more meaningfully into the Pakistani ways of thinking and reacting. As we have made close friends over the years with Pakistanis from a variety of tribes, our lives have been immeasurably enriched and we have come to value

many of the strong points in their culture. One day we saved just enough pieces of cake to give one to each member of a village family we were visiting. We gave it to them inside the house where nobody would see. Immediately our hostess cut each piece into four and happily took it outside to share with the neighbors. We suddenly saw our selfishness!

Western Christians would do well to learn from their Pakistani brethren. For instance, Pakistanis do not see hospitality as an imposition, even if their own resources are meager. One Christian family, earning less than \$50 a month, welcomed a dozen guests from a nearby village. The host was delighted. "How wonderful that so many have come to see us. We are so privileged!" And he meant it. The little they had was generously shared.

The extended Pakistani family is also very precious. Each relationship has a specific name and relatives are called, not by his or her personal name, but by their relationship to you. You would call your Uncle John, "mamu", which means "mother's brother." Relatives take interest in all members of the extended family, which gives children a strong sense of security. Other family members immediately adopt orphans. Older people are also highly respected and sought-after for advice. Being vitally involved in all family activities, few feel "on the shelf" or unimportant.

2. Relationships have time to develop meaning and depth.

Long-term missionaries learn to do things in a non-Western way. In the West, education, training and skills win the greatest respect. Practical contributions in the field of expertise are highly valued. For this reason, many Western believers come to developing countries for a limited period of time in order to accomplish some program or complete some project. These short-term workers are valuable. But, in most of these countries, experience and long-term relationships are far more valued than education or skills, especially in rural settings. People take precedence over programs. It takes time, language and insight into cultural values to establish meaningful relationships that result in changed lives. The older you become yourself, the more influence you can have not only on friends your age but on successive generations.

3. Blessings flow to the next generation

Sometimes this cultural adaptation extends to second generation missionaries, who start out even better prepared for missionary life. A long-term missionary couple recognize this "head start" in their five children, now missionaries serving in several different countries. They are able to thrive in rugged environments: two in Pakistani villages, one without running water or electricity, another in Albania, a fourth in China and the fifth, in Bangladesh. They have many advantages over new missionaries who are coming for the first time. They have deeper understanding of the culture than we have, excellent pronunciation of the language, and a sincere appreciation for the music, drama and poetry of this country, even to the extent of being able to compose songs and poems. This opens doors and hearts in amazing ways.

Despite seeing many clear virtues, we also were keenly aware of the vulnerabilities of long-term service.

The Vulnerabilities of Long-Term Missionaries--A Reality Check

Clearly missionaries are not perfect. They make mistakes. Missionaries are, after all, real people.

1. Conflict

The primary cause of missionary departure from Pakistan over the past five years has been conflict with other colleagues. Most agencies either don't view conflict as a serious enough problem or their resources are so tightly stretched that on-the-field missionary care receives a low priority rank.

The multicultural missionaries coming from new sources, Asia, Africa and South America, have intensified this. These new missionaries often feel dominated by the culture of the former Western missionaries and unable to function freely as they would like within the mission structure. But in Pakistan, at least, their cultures are

actually closer to the Pakistani way of life, and they can catch on to the thinking and reactions more readily than Westerners. There is much we need to learn from one another. Some missions are now dealing realistically with these problems and providing trained personnel to help members adjust to Pakistan and each other.

Other causes for returning to the country of origin are family commitments for higher education, the stress of working in a counter-Christian culture, the constant bombardment of day-to-day living, and lack of support from those in their own missions.

2. Western Individuality

Missionaries come with preconceived ideas of what will work and how to win people to Christ. One of the biggest problems is the western emphasis on individuality and our insistence on individual decisions for Christ. Many have little concept of the power of the extended family and the strength of group decisions. So we continue to use methods aimed at the individual, which result in their ostracism and inability to communicate effectively to those close to them.

3. Delay of natural national leadership development

During the meetings, one of the missionaries said: "As long as missionaries are in a leadership role the national leadership will not develop as rapidly."

There is a natural historical, transitional, missiological and Biblical pattern of the role of the missionary from: pioneer to paternalistic to partner to promoter of the national. These stages can be observed in Pakistan today through different regions and contexts.

The Value and Pitfalls of Short-term Workers

People serving as short-term workers can be very valuable to the cause of Christ in a particular country.

1. They become inspired by their experience to go into long-term work and find what they have learned on a short term is good preparation for it.
2. They communicate their enthusiasm to their senders and home churches and often are able to involve them as well in hands-on missions.
3. They contribute in specific areas of expertise (i.e. on-site prayer, medicine, teaching English, fixing computers, etc.)
4. They can free full-time missionaries, who know the language and culture, from details such as office work or routine administration, which can be done without cross-cultural depth.
5. If young, they often relate to the youth of the country very positively.
6. If older, they usually adjust more readily, have more tact and understanding, and are able to handle lack of Western convenience and entertainment such as fast foods, big league sports, movies etc. Also they may have more experience in using (and repairing) outdated equipment often found in "missionary-receiving" countries.

But short-term service is no substitute for the bedrock of long-term missionary commitment. Short-term commitment has many drawbacks:

1. Few short-termers can function effectively without long-term missionaries alongside. This often consumes a great deal of more experienced missionaries' time and emotional energy.
2. Usually, it takes some months to recover from culture shock and adjust to the everyday realities of a country before being able to contribute much, limiting the length of effective ministry time even further.
3. Short-termers are often unmotivated to learn the language and therefore are unable to relate very deeply to most of the people.

4. While they are strongly motivated to accomplish the program they have in mind, they can be insensitive to the relationships damaged in the process, both with nationals and long-term missionaries.
5. Convinced that the Western way to do things is the Christian way, they may become critical of cultural differences and give the impression that they feel superior. It takes time to develop an appreciation for a particular culture's strengths.
6. In a country like Pakistan, short-term people often rebel against the way women are regarded. They fail to see the strengths of the society in this respect and feel called to disregard local customs as a matter of principle. This causes many misunderstandings and moral problems. (This matter can also become a serious concern to the couple intending to stay long-term. Many couples have left Pakistan because wives cannot adjust to the restrictions on women and the hassles women experience in this society. At the same time, the need for women workers is urgent. The strict segregation of Pakistani society hinders men from reaching women for Christ.)

A pitfall for both short-term and long-term missionaries is independence. Several people in Pakistan expressed concern with the recent trend of missionaries arriving independently of an established mission, or with just a local sending church behind them. With some notable exceptions, people coming apart from a mission board have a high dropout rate. Sadly, without the kind of support provided by the mission agency, most of them are soon overcome with discouragement. Lack of fellowship, encouragement and field accountability have caused many to abort their mission without either contributing meaningfully in the country or adding to their own sense of worth/purpose as God's ambassadors to other countries. It cannot be stressed enough that new missionaries must come under an organized mission or para-church organization that can help with orientation, language study, guidance and fellowship. In these days, most established organizations provide trained member care, which helps prevent many casualties on the field. Long-term missionaries often can provide such member care.

Conclusion

Pakistan has remained amazingly open to missionaries. Visas are available if one comes as a replacement for someone who is leaving a missionary post. There are few restrictions on ways of sharing the Gospel, as long as you do not criticize another's faith. There is such a strong interest in religion that this topic is one of the first to be introduced by people you meet.

Everyone is open to prayer when they are sick or in trouble. Many are grateful for the help they have received from Christian schools and hospitals. Now is the time--but it is a fleeting moment.

One respected international in Pakistan concluded: "Regardless of short-term or long-term, I would like to see both concentrating on national leadership. Now is the time for the leadership of the Pakistani Church to heed the call. The younger generation is ready, educated, and spirited. Both groups would do well to concentrate on partnering with nationals to fulfill the task."

Now is the opportunity but it may not last long. Why are so few long-term missionaries willing to come through these open doors?

Luis Bush is the International Director of the AD2000 and Beyond Movement based in Colorado Springs