

The Dangerous Myth of the Invincible Missionary

by Andrew Shaughnessy



There's a myth present in the church, often unspoken, of the invincible missionary.

The invincible missionary is called to the far ends of the globe to do tasks that are much too difficult for your average Joe Christian. They plant self-sustainable churches on a bi-weekly basis, learn obscure dialects of local languages with ease, and leap cultural boundaries in a single bound. Do they face trouble? Of course they do, but only the external, dramatic sort—spiritual warfare or government persecution, for example. Theirs is not a job for the faint of heart or the weak. And those who are truly called are calm, confident, and uncomplaining in their chosen lot, filled with perpetual joy and peace, and laughing in the face of countless trials.

But here's the uncomfortable truth—missionaries are ordinary Christians following extraordinary calls. (P.S. That's the same

extraordinary call with which you and I have been charged). Though missionaries face plenty of intense and unique challenges on the field, these ordinary Christians have the same emotional and psychological struggles when employed by a missions agency and shipped off to Timbuktu as they might in the pews of your local church.

We are all broken

“Look at what you’re struggling with in your own life, and then pray for your missionary,” said MTW missionary and counselor Alice Hatch, “because he or she is probably struggling with the same thing.

Like you and me, missionaries are broken human beings, cracked mirrors imperfectly bearing a fractured image of their Creator. And just like the rest of us, they may struggle with finances, their marriage, parenting, addictions, and sin patterns that are hard to kick. Missionaries deal with clinical depression, the loneliness of singleness on the field, and conflict with their co-workers, bosses, churches, and friends. On top of that, cross-cultural ministry is incredibly stressful. Though overseas ministry can be incredibly rewarding and joy-filled, it can also be extremely draining, discouraging, and anxiety-producing.

And that’s scary, right? Consciously or unconsciously, we often subvert our theology of grace and expect superhuman, doubt-free, tough-as-nails, un stumbling perfection. There’s a reason you don’t get many missionary newsletters outlining how the man or woman you support with your finances and prayers is struggling with debilitating depression, doubting God’s sovereignty over injustice, or questioning whether they are really making any kind of impact at all—and it’s not because everything is peachy. It’s because it’s bad PR. Yet I can almost guarantee that you know missionaries in the field who struggle with all of those things.

God uses the broken

And that’s OK. Christ’s grace and God’s sovereignty covers this too. The sufferings, doubts, and weaknesses of your missionaries do not mean that God cannot use them to build His kingdom. On the contrary, the only sort of people that exist in the kingdom of God are

the broken kind.

“I gave a talk at a church one time on what MTW is looking for in our candidates, and my first point was that we are looking for sinners,” said Alice. “We want sinners that know the grace of God and His mercy and forgiveness, that know how to handle the fact that they are sinners because they’re going to be working with sinners and trying to reach sinners.”

Caring for the broken

With that framework in mind, Alice Hatch and Rich Greete, both professional counselors under MTW’s Member Care Department, deal with emotional and mental health issues on a day-to-day basis, walking with the missionaries every step of their career, from the moment they come to MTW as a candidate to the moment they leave. They perform psychological assessments of missionary candidates, taking great care to seek well-balanced individuals who are most likely to succeed on the field in what can be very stressful assignments. They provide onsite counseling at MTW trainings, area retreats, and conferences, assess new field leaders, and debrief missionaries at the end of their terms. Anywhere MTW missionaries gather, member care counselors are there, ready to see to the emotional and psychological needs of our missionaries with compassion and grace.

“Most things we do are to try and keep people connected to the organization and at optimal performance in their personal lives,” said Rich. “For example, processing what it’s like to live multi-culturally. To be able to emotionally understand what people are doing, saying, and communicating in one culture, and then to come back stateside and try to readjust to how people do things differently in a U.S. culture.”

Global network of missionary counselors

As part of an overarching member care strategy, MTW has set up a global network of career missionary counselors who can address these needs in their respective fields. Some members of the network are fully licensed, others have advanced degrees in counseling, while those who are considered apprentice members will receive

supervision from a licensed counselor. Additionally, any MTW missionary can call Alice or Rich and make an appointment to talk to them for psychological counseling or emotional support.

Week to week, Alice often meets remotely with missionaries struggling with depression, anxiety, relational issues, team conflict, marital and parenting problems, and singles combatting loneliness.

“Being on the field is very, very stressful,” said Alice. “Depression and anxiety are just natural reactions to stress. All of these things are extremely normal, but they are painful. Sometimes just talking to somebody about it can help.”

Rich, who specializes in trauma, deals with a whole range of issues with missionaries: from team dynamic issues to counseling a missionary with a history of emotional abuse to helping a team deal with the death of a fellow worker.

Several years ago a missionary approached Alice and Rich with a grave situation. A local national partner pastor’s daughter had been sexually abused by an uncle from age six to 11, and the parents and the missionaries had just found out about it. The girl was severely depressed, suicidal, acting out and flunking out of school.

“Working with sexual abuse victims is my specialty,” said Rich. “So I explained the therapy, and went down for four trips over a five-month period. ... And she just completely turned around, free from shame and no longer depressed, having forgiven the perpetrator and experiencing the joy of the gospel.”

Fast-forward a year later. The girl’s parents told Rich that she was now thriving. She has been elected student body president, and other kids are writing her notes saying: “When I grow up, I want to be like you. I’m being sexually abused. Will you help me?”

Through the process, other women came forward with their own stories of sexual abuse, including the girl’s mother. Rich returned to

the same country, started training local women in counseling, and wrote a manual called Christian Trauma Therapy that has been translated into two languages.

Providing tools, giving hope

“We had one missionary couple in a country where there’s lots of random violence, drugs, lots of gangs in their city,” said Alice. “One day the husband called me and he was just falling apart with anxiety. Couldn’t sleep, couldn’t function, absolutely consumed by anxiety and fear of the very real violence.... Now, with anxiety there are some very specific interventions and tools that you can use to control it. I taught him some tools and the guy turned around. One night they had already gone to bed and two blocks from their house one of the gangs shot up the local police station. So there was all this gunfire going on, but they were able to manage it and be OK. He was able to get relief by having someone talk to him and help him deal with what was a very disabling situation for him.”

“I really feel like I can give people hope,” Alice added. “I can’t necessarily solve their problems. I can’t fix them, but I can give them hope. A lot of my counseling is spiritual—giving them God’s promises and helping turn them to the Lord.”

Helping missionaries thrive

“Member care is not just a perk,” said Brian Deringer, who heads up MTW’s Member Care Department. “It’s not a necessary evil, a nicety, or babysitting people so they feel better about themselves. Member care is a key, strategic missionary endeavor for seeing God’s kingdom come, in that it helps keep people on the field, hopefully thriving, healthy, and resilient, so that they can give their whole hearts to what God has called them to do.”

Global missions is, in many ways, taking the battle to the front lines. Whether facing the nihilism of post-Christian Europe or the horrors of post-civil war African states, the hopelessness of Tokyo, or the desperation of Asian red light districts, our missionaries around the world are faithfully taking their little lights to the darkest parts of the

world to speak truth and joy and wonder. And they do so not as muscle-bound supermen, but as broken, fallible, ordinary Christians stepping into the breach.

When you fight on those sorts of front lines, wounds are inevitable. Wounds of loneliness, of doubt, of broken hearts and fractured souls. But, as Alice so beautifully puts it, these are honorable wounds, because they were earned in battle for the kingdom of God.

It's high time we start treating them as such.