Missions from Korea 2015: Missionaries Unable to Continue Ministry in Their Country of Service

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According to the most recent questionnaire survey conducted by the Korea Research Institute for Mission (KRIM) at the end of 2014, there were 20,467 Korean missionaries working in 163 countries through 162 mission agencies. Compared with the figures at the end of 2013, the number of missionaries grew by 1.9 percent. Of the 20,467 missionaries, 10,779 were members of interdenominational mission agencies, 9,306 belonged to denominational agencies, and the remaining 382 missionaries were members of supporting organizations.

The ten countries receiving the most Korean missionaries are, in order, China, United States, India, Japan, Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Turkey, Cambodia, and Russia. Half (50.6 percent) of all Korean missionaries work in these countries. Of the top thirty receiving countries, thirteen are so-called creative-access countries, meaning that overt missionary activities are restricted by the government. Altogether, a little less than half (46.9 percent) of all Korean missionaries serve in forty-seven creative-access countries.

In 2014 there were 304 Korean missionaries (1.5 percent of the total) who returned home, choosing to terminate their field ministry before the expected time. An important reason for such missionary attrition is the overall decline of churches in Korea, which represents a waning support base. The quite different matter of involuntary withdrawal of missionaries from the field is also a critical issue in Korean missions. Many missionaries have had to leave their field because of forced deportation, visa restriction, reentry denial, epidemic diseases, and social unrest, among other reasons. The number of missionaries who were forced to withdraw, tallied separately from the cases of attrition, grew from 117 persons (0.6 percent of the total missionaries) in 2012 to 215 persons (1.1 percent of the total) in 2013, and further to 267 persons (1.3 percent of the total) in 2014, for a total of 599 missionaries in the last three years. The outcome of involuntary withdrawal differs from that of missionary attrition in that most of the missionaries who have been forced to leave their mission field have eventually sought to enter ministry in a new country of service.

Hee-Joo Yoo and Eun-Mi Kim studied the issue of expulsion, conducting in-depth interviews with seven missionaries. The participants in this study were missionaries who were unable to continue in their chosen country because of visa restriction or reentry denials. The interviewed missionaries had each been involved in cross-cultural ministry for between fifteen and twenty years. The qualitative data was analyzed using Colaizzi’s method to highlight the psychological processes of the missionaries, and the primary purpose was to clarify implications for missionary member care. The interviewees were selected from among those who evidenced basic psychological stability in their daily life.

Important theme clusters of the narratives of the missionaries were identified as follows, in chronological order: (1) difficulty in securing the necessary visa extensions and anxiety about being exposed as missionaries; (2) having to leave the country on short notice; (3) feelings of rejection, with regret over lack of spiritual results; (4) consolation from God, with release from the pressure of having to hide their true purpose for being in the country; (5) community care and recovery; (6) personal reflection and acceptance of a new status outside the former country; (7) readjustment and beginning a new lifestyle; (8) extension of identity as missionaries, and (9) eventually sensing the sovereignty of God.

Psychologically the missionaries interviewed were characterized by tension and anxiety before and after their expulsion, which was related to worries about the possible exposure of their missionary identity in their respective countries of service. They initially underwent feelings of rejection and resentment, sorrow at separation from local believers, a sense of loss because of deprivation of ministry bases, and also regret for insufficient fruits of their ministry. But over time, they experienced feelings of relaxation or freedom, reflection, comfort, and acceptance. The missionaries made conscious efforts to interpret their negative experiences positively, trying to adjust their thinking to appreciate the sovereignty of God as they worshipped God, shared with others, and reflected by themselves. They eventually sought to reestablish and extend their missionary identity (now not fixed to a certain country), and considered possibilities of relocation in a new country.

The psychological experiences of the research participants were directly influenced by practical matters relating to housing and readjustment in Korea after their sudden expulsion and relocation to Korea. Insofar as churches were effective in helping their reentry, the missionaries began to experience a sense of consolation and comfort from God. The role of the community of believers was critical in the process, leading to missionaries’ viewing their negative experiences in light of God’s sovereignty.

Missionary kids (MKs) often felt uprooted and homeless, for in leaving their country of residence, they lost friends, neighbors, and everything that was familiar. In ordinary circumstances it is to be expected that MKs will experience reentry shock when they attend Korean schools in what is to them an unfamiliar atmosphere. But in the crisis of unplanned loss of ministry, parents alone cannot address the issue of MK care. Mission agencies need to allocate human resources to support MKs in such cases.
Phenomenological analysis of the interview data reveals the stress that missionaries undergo while working in creative-access countries, where they need to disguise their missionary identity. After deportation or being unable to reenter their country of ministry, research participants reported a noticeable sense of relaxation or freedom, not surprising, for they no longer had to hide their true identity.

In dealing with missionaries who are prevented from continuing their ministry, member care needs to be proactive and preventive, not just reactive. Seminars on stress management need to be planned for missionaries facing such situations. Policies and regulations for home assignment need to be implemented in such a way that missionaries will have sufficient time for recuperation before their next assignment. Mission agencies also need to offer debriefing opportunities to expelled missionaries, inviting experts who understand the principles and process of crisis debriefing. In some traumatic cases, individual sessions of grief counseling need to begin no later than five or six months after the traumatic event. Debriefers and counselors need to be attentive to the missionaries' sense of loss, for they have lost their home itself as well as their ministry base.

The apostle Paul warns us in 2 Timothy 3:12: “Yes, and everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (New Living Translation). Persecution may not be a big issue in traditional missionary-sending countries, but it is one of the most significant problems in the mission field. Paul's exhortation to vulnerable missionaries is, “But you must remain faithful to the things you have been taught. You know they are true, for you know you can trust those who taught you” (2 Tim. 3:14 NLT). Remaining faithful to the cause, regardless of difficulties and hardships, and supporting those undergoing personal disruption are important concerns in Korean missions.

Korean Missions as of December 2014

Missionaries
- total number: 20,467
- annual growth rate (percentage): 1.9
- members of interdenominational agencies: 10,779
- members of denominational agencies: 9,306
- members of supporting agencies: 382

Mission agencies
- total number: 162
- sending/supporting: 116/46
- interdenominational/denominational: 147/15

Receiving countries
- total number: 163
- missionaries in the top ten receiving countries (percentage): 50.6
  (China, United States, India, Japan, Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Turkey, Cambodia, Russia)
- number of creative-access countries: 47
- missionaries in creative-access countries (percentage): 46.9

Missionary attrition (2014)
- Persons/percentage: 304/1.5

Unwanted Withdrawal
- 2012 persons/percentage: 117/0.6
- 2013 persons/percentage: 215/1.1
- 2014 persons/percentage: 267/1.3
- 2012–2014 total persons: 599

Notes
1. The term “missionary attrition” covers the case of missionaries who decide to quit and return home prematurely for various reasons; the figures for attrition include missionaries who are recalled by their churches or mission agencies. “Involuntary withdrawal,” in contrast, encompasses every way in which a host country either refuses the continued presence of a missionary (such as by deportation, not renewing a visa, or denying reentry) or has conditions that make continued work in the country impossible (such as epidemics or social unrest). Neither of these categories includes missionaries who retire or who die while serving in the field.
2. The figures shown for missionary attrition and involuntary withdrawal are based on reports received from fifty-three major Korean mission agencies plus estimates of attrition and involuntary withdrawal experienced by the remaining sixty-three smaller mission sending agencies. Using percentages based on the major agencies’ detailed reports, estimates were made for the sixty-three smaller mission agencies. The totals given in the text combine these two figures.