



The Pearls and the Perils: Practicing Psychology in Mission/Aid Settings

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Member care is an interdisciplinary field that focuses on supporting mission/aid personnel in their work and lives. It is founded upon the Biblical command to love one another (John 13:34,35) and on the ethical sense of duty to help vulnerable people. This commitment to love one another and duty is tested in many ways, individually and collectively, and often in the “furnace of humiliation”. Our love for the Lord (the *Pearl of Great Price*) is also tested, being refined by the many challenges (the *perils*) that we all face.

For the last 20+ years, my wife, Michèle, and I have lived in five countries, and consulted with workers/agencies (faith-based and secular) in some 40 countries. Together with trusted colleagues, we continue to grow, struggle, and learn new things as we practice psychology internationally. In particular, we have had to carefully navigate tricky, overlapping issues that involve relationships, pathology, organizational politics, and the “demonic.” We were not always adequately prepared to deal with such sobering, and at times debilitating issues. Like our mission/aid clients, some of our greatest challenges have been to maintain hope/perspective in spite of helplessness, injustice, and relational malaise. Here’s just one of many wise words (Sirach 2:1-6) that have helped us keep our hope/perspective in hard times.

My child, if you are going to serve the Lord, be prepared for times when you will be put to the test. Be sincere and determined. Keep calm when trouble comes. Stay with the Lord; never abandon him, and you will be prosperous at the end of your days. Accept whatever happens to you. Even if you suffer humiliation, be patient. Gold is tested by fire, and human character is tested in the furnace of humiliation. Trust the Lord, and he will help you. Walk straight in his ways, and put your hope in him.

We have found that professional competence requires honing both our “contextual” skills and our member care skills. In other words, as practitioners we need to understand and manage the multi-faceted settings (contexts) in which we provide our services. We must intentionally seek out collegial wisdom and support, plus develop relational savvy, organizational expertise, and spiritual discernment in order to “do member care well”. And in some cases, especially involving the pernicious perils of “dysfunction, deviance, and devils,” these seemingly ancillary skills are essential in order to simply survive! Here’s a related note from my 2006 diary, a year noteworthy to us for its major challenges.

Character, context, competence: wrapped in compassion, colleagues who are true friends (not just friendly colleagues), and above all Christ. If there were a “formula” for surviving and contributing in the member care world, this for me would be it—these six “Cs.”

In these three presentations and four papers I review some of the main challenges that have confronted the mission/aid communities as well as ourselves. Character and competence, like *pearls* in an oyster shell, continue to be developed through the various challenges—and at times *perils*—that we all encounter. I will share stories, key principles, and research that reflect our experiences and those of mission/aid personnel from around the world. Although much of the focus is on personnel per se, it is important to recall that their *raison de être* is the special people who receive their services. I address three topics:

1. Staying Healthy in Difficult Places

Historical notes on member care, adjustment issues and research for workers, and future directions.

2. Promoting Health and Managing Dysfunction

Principles for safeguarding workers/senders in light of the reality of personal/organizational dysfunction.

3. Developing Guidelines for Good Practice

Ethical principles and human rights commitments to upgrade the work in member care and mission/aid.

4. Growing as Good Practitioners

Resources, readings, and reflections for personal and professional growth in member care.



1. Staying Healthy in Difficult Places.

Opportunities, danger, duty, hell. Staying sane—and alive—in unstable, crazy places is a serious challenge for mission/aid workers. In this presentation we'll explore how the member care field helps workers manage such challenges. The foci include: an historical overview, struggles of workers, supportive resources, and future directions. We'll look at how mission/aid personnel, like many of the people with whom they work, are exposed to malaria, land mines, natural disasters, debilitating relational conflicts, and the ongoing experience of

human misery and poverty. We'll examine how mission/aid workers and their sending groups must cooperate together in order to maintain a healthy work-life balance: adequate preparation, positive health behaviors, support for workers' families, debriefing, crisis counseling, and training opportunities. We'll review some personal accounts by mission/aid workers from around the world, and consider how best to practice member care in light of future realities, including the development of psychosocial/health skills to work in complex humanitarian emergencies and training member care workers from around the world.

2. Promoting Health and Managing Dysfunction. “Yesterday he prayed for me, today he preyed on me.” This presentation explores two important and overlooked areas for health in mission/aid. They are the role of human *dysfunction* (problems from significant weakness/wrongness, e.g., leadership abuse, psychological disorders, moral failure, harassment) and the role of *discipline* (correction to restore people/organizations which violate others e.g., independent reviews, counseling, recovery programs, remedial training, and dismissals). Further developing our capacity in these two areas is fundamental for safeguarding workers/senders and maintaining effective operations. We will look at five essential resources for personal/organizational health: conflict resolution guidelines, discipline/restoration procedures, organizational assessments, human resource departments, and whistle-blowing protection. We will also reflect on ways to upgrade friendships/trust among as we review perspectives from Sirach, Francis of Assisi, Machiavelli, and Orwell.



3. Developing Ethics and Good Practice.

“I believe in discretion, not confidentiality.” “I’m too busy to follow-up that difficult matter—give me a break!” “This mistake must not discredit us by coming into public view.” Member care is a broad field with a wide range of practitioners and perspectives on what is ethically permissible. As this field continues to grow, it is important to offer guidelines to further clarify and shape good practice. In this presentation we will explore several ethical principles and human rights commitments to upgrade the quality of the supportive care that we offer mission/aid staff. We consider five types of guidelines: member care worker commitments, sending group principles, ethical rationalizations, specific ethics codes, and

human rights principles. Ethical care is a mentality, a practice, and a commitment, based on moral law.

4. Growing as Good Practitioners.

Go broadly and grow deeply. This article provides three types of materials that are fundamental for personal and professional growth. It includes resources/tools for supporting mission/aid workers; readings/training on adjustment and survival; and reflections/teaching on health and dysfunction. The material comes from a variety of sources that can help practitioners grow as they cross: cultures, sectors, and disciplines.



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The Pearls and the Perils—Goals and Objectives

1. Staying Healthy in Difficult Places—Goals and Objectives:

To overview the member care field and major adjustment challenges for mission/aid workers

To inform/inspire mental health practitioners, students, and others about viable ways to offer member care

Participants will better understand how to connect and contribute to the international member care field

Participants will identify three to five resources to review and to apply to their life and work

2. Promoting Health and Managing Dysfunction—Goals and Objectives:

To discuss the neglected subjects of dysfunction/discipline in mission/aid, including staff abuse and fraud

To identify strategies for sending groups/staff to promote health in their organizations and relationships

Participants will better understand the serious nature of dysfunction and strategies/materials to manage it

Participants will identify three to five principles for dealing with dysfunction in their life and work

3. Developing Guidelines for Good Practice—Goals and Objectives:

To overview ethical codes and principles that are relevant for the practice of member care in mission/aid

To investigate the foundational role of human rights for supporting workers and those whom they serve

Participants will better understand how ethics and human rights are essential to do member care well

Participants will identify a main ethics code and a related code to further apply to their life and work

4. Growing as Good Practitioners—Goals and Objectives:

To provide a variety of materials to stimulate personal and professional growth in member care

To explore materials to help practitioners to cross: cultures, sectors, and disciplines.

Participants will better understand the need to connect with a variety of resources to do member care well

Participants will identify a specific international sector that they wish to study further.

Member Care—Defined

Member care is the ongoing *investment of resources* by sending groups, service organizations, and workers themselves, for the *nurture and development* of mission/aid personnel. It focuses on *every member* of the organization, including children and home office staff. It includes *preventative, developmental, supportive, and restorative* care. A core part of member care is the *mutual care* that workers provide each other. Workers receive it and they give it. Connecting with resources and people in *the local/host community* is also key. Member care seeks to implement an adequate *flow of care* from *recruitment through retirement*. The goal is to develop *resilience, skills, and virtue*, which are essential to helping personnel stay *healthy and effective* in their work. Member care thus involves both developing *inner resources* (e.g., perseverance, stress tolerance) and providing *external resources* (e.g., team building, logistical support, skill training).



Dr. Kelly O'Donnell is a consulting psychologist living in Europe and specializing in member care. Professional emphases include crisis care, good practice/ethics, team development, and practitioner affiliations. Kelly holds graduate degrees in clinical and community psychology, and studied theology and psychology at Rosemead School of Psychology at Biola University, USA. Together with his wife, Michèle, who is also a psychologist, they have lived in five countries, and enjoy traveling internationally to consult and teach. They have two daughters, Erin, aged 19, and Ashling, aged 15. Kelly has published about 50 articles in the member care field, as well as editing: *Helping Missionaries Grow* (1988), *Missionary Care* (1992), and *Doing Member Care Well: Perspectives and Practices from*

Around the World (2002). Kelly and Michèle's weblog and web offer *Reflections and Resources for Good Practice*.
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