Man of sorrows, what a name for the Son of God, who came ruined sinners to reclaim.
Hallelujah, what a Savior!

When Isaiah looked forward to the coming of the Messiah he penned what appears to be a strange description of God’s chosen Servant. “He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (Isa 53:3). How could the Messiah be despised and rejected? How could he know sorrow and grief? The answers are given in the Gospels which portray Jesus in just these terms and where the Lord himself tells his disciples that they too must become people of sorrow as they give up the world, take up their cross, and follow him (Matt 16:24–25).

Sorrow and grief are profoundly central to the Christian gospel. Indeed, the gospel is meaningless without a suffering Christ who comes for a suffering people. This reality, as C. S. Lewis rightly points out, “creates, rather than solves, the problem of pain, for pain would be no problem unless, side by side with our daily experience of this painful world, we had received what we think a good assurance that ultimate reality is righteous and loving.” How do we make sense of a suffering God? How do we make sense of a suffering Christ? Why does Christ suffer? Sorrow and grief are profoundly central to the Christian gospel. Indeed, the gospel is meaningless without a suffering Christ who comes for a suffering people.

In the next two articles Richard S. and Ian Prescott consider the place of risk facing missionaries who bring good news about Jesus to people who may not want to hear it and to places where political, social, medical, moral, and other risks abound. While we wonder how to respond to suffering for the faith, the Bible is clear that neither the Apostle Paul nor his companions had one approach toward risk that was applicable in all circumstances. These papers further challenge us to temper our fear of suffering for our beliefs in the light of the greater risk that others will not hear the gospel.

Turning our attention to forms of suffering that are hidden to many, Lightyear and Donna Jennings highlight mission to people with mental illness and other disabilities. The needs here are great and growing, with wide-open doors for us to expand our ministries where few labor. Engaging this work will require some reeducation as we build a theology that understands mental illness and disability and recognizes that people who suffer in this way are created in God’s image and that when they become members of Christ’s kingdom they are given gifts to serve along with the rest of us.

The common view that unites worship and celebration is corrected by the biblical reality that some sixty of the Psalms were written as laments to help individuals and communities draw near to God in times of suffering and pain. That such a large percentage of Israel’s “praises”—which is what the Hebrew title of the book means—have this function should alert us of the need to see lament as a God-given means of worshipping him in times of trouble and grief. My article, “Worshipping God through Suffering,” aims to broaden our understanding of the worship of God by providing a basic introduction to biblical lament and suggesting ways in which it can be used in the church.

Bee Bee Sng’s article considers the motivations of Christians who take part in disaster relief work and the outcomes of their ministry. Her focus on relief to a community shattered by an earthquake shows how Christian professionals can work well with local leaders as they share the love of Christ with needy people in practical and sustainable ways.

The final paper dips into CIM history by recounting a story of brigands kidnapping and murdering missionaries who sought to serve the Lord during a time of political upheaval. Claire McConnell sets the stage for the report by Mary Craig by relating the history of the time and providing some additional information to complete the story.

In a world where none of us can escape trouble and pain, we need to find refuge in the One who “has borne our grief and carried our sorrows” because he not only understands them, he has effectively dealt with them by his suffering on the cross. Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Sorrow and grief are profoundly central to the Christian gospel. Indeed, the gospel is meaningless without a suffering Christ who comes for a suffering people.
Suffering and Mission: Narrative Research from Cambodia, with Special Reference to Cambodian Church History

Yuzo Imamura

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1. Introduction: Suffering in today’s world

Every single day, we read stories of suffering in the newspaper. Tsunamis, hurricanes, an Ebola outbreak, multiple terrorist attacks all over the world, bombings in Syria, and countless mental and psychological collapses. The list goes on. It seems that the world is full of suffering. We ask ourselves agonizingly, “Lord, can this be your will?” It is so commonplace that a Google search of “theology of suffering” yielded 22,800,000 hits in 0.57 seconds as of 10 October 2017.

In Cambodia today, more than three decades have passed since the devastation of the Khmer Rouge, yet the scars left by the Pol Pot regime and the following civil wars are still tangible in the society. On the one hand, physical suffering such as that which is experienced by land-mine victims is observable. On the other hand, psychological suffering such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression are invisible, yet they have tormented countless people. According to a 2012 report, between 15 and 35 percent of those who survived the Khmer Rouge and experienced violence associated with armed conflict suffer from PTSD and even more people within the general Cambodian population suffer due to a wider transmission of Khmer Rouge-associated trauma.³

Dictionaries define suffering as “the state of undergoing pain, distress, or hardship”¹ and “physical, mental, or emotional pain or anguish.”¹³ They do not say where it comes from or whether it is beneficial or totally harmful.

In reality, there are different views on suffering. For instance, people who live in highly industrialized countries such as Japan, find suffering to be an unpopular word as they are often convinced by the mass media that making our lives easier, smoother, and barrier-free is of ultimate value. They are constantly advised to eliminate suffering in their lives as much as possible by using high technology or the spirit of kaizen (continuous improvement).⁴ Alternatively, they ignore suffering or think it doesn’t exist in their lives while they strive to keep up with a very fast-paced life. Even if there is suffering they can seek help from experts such as counselors, psychologists, or folk beliefs. The motto is “to manage, reduce, and cope with stress, anxiety, or trauma.” On top of that, they are prone to blame the socio-political and economic system for their suffering. As a result, there is very limited space to consider biblical ideas of persevering, enduring, and living with suffering. But once cross-cultural workers from those countries land in Third World countries like Cambodia, they are overwhelmed by suffering such as poverty, injustice, lack of social security, etc., that the local people face.

Persecution (including martyrdom) is just one form of suffering. Tieszen reports that to some scholars “any unfortunate experience befalling a Christian is considered persecution.”⁵ Certainly, persecution comes in various forms and intensities, and it hurts Christians physically, psychologically (mentally or emotionally), or socially. Tieszen rightly says, “We cannot define the event based on the level of pain it might cause, or the level of intensity in which it occurs. Instead, a definition of
persecution encompasses actions spanning the full range of hostility.⁶

Before exploring the biblical perspective on suffering, I would like to note that while suffering can be subjective, some types of suffering—such as natural disasters—are evident to everybody. The Bible says that suffering not only gives believers sorrow and pain (e.g., Job of the Old Testament) but also brings joy (e.g., Acts 5:41; Rom 5). But such an epistemological discussion lies outside the scope of this paper. Rather than reviewing suffering in terms of non-Christian philosophical analyses, whether ancient, medieval, or modern, this paper will focus on what the Bible tells us about suffering.⁷

2. What the Bible tells us about suffering

Countless books and articles have been written on suffering. Hence, it is not necessary to duplicate this information here. Recently, an OMF e-Learning module on “the Way of the Cross,” the Theology of Suffering 101, was prepared and will hopefully help those who are not familiar with suffering.⁸ Here, foundational teaching and practical issues surrounding suffering are explored briefly.

2.1. Suffering is a part of the normal Christian life

The Bible does not deny that the Christian suffers. Tim Keller rightly says:

The Book of Genesis begins with an account of how evil and death came into the world. The wisdom literature of the Old Testament is largely dedicated to the problem of suffering. The Book of Psalms provides a prayer for every possible situation in life, and so it is striking how filled it is with cries of pain and with blunt questions to God about the seeming randomness and injustice of suffering. The books of Job and Ecclesiastes are almost wholly dedicated to deep reflection on unjust suffering and on the frustrating pointlessness that characterizes so much of life. The prophets Jeremiah and Habakkuk give searing expression to the human complaint that evil seems to rule history. NT books such as Hebrews and 1 Peter are almost entirely devoted to helping people face relentless sorrows and troubles. And towing over all, the central figure of the whole of Scripture, Jesus Christ, is a man of sorrows. The Bible, therefore, is about suffering as much as it is about anything.⁹

While we try to eliminate suffering, the Bible tells us suffering can be beneficial and indispensable to our Christian life. Indeed, suffering is a gracious gift from God (Phil 1:29). Next, we will explore possible meanings of suffering.

2.2. Certain meanings of suffering

Because we instinctively pursue answers to the purpose or meaning of suffering, we should be careful to note that the Bible does not give a clear answer to why we face suffering. It only addresses how we can handle it. Here are some meanings that are found in the Bible.

2.2.1. Suffering as God’s justice and judgment

Genesis 1–3 explains that suffering entered the world as a result of the original sin of the first human beings, Adam and Eve, who turned away from God. Paul later wrote, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 6:23). Their disobedience of the Creator’s will and the breakup of their relationship with God have filled the world with suffering: spiritual alienation, inner psychological pain, social and interpersonal conflict and cruelty, natural disasters, diseases, and death (Gen 3:16–19). In addition, Psalms and Proverbs suggest that suffering can be directly related to transgression (Ps 32:1–5; 38:1–4; Prov 12:21; 13:20–21; 22:3; 27:12).

2.2.2. Suffering as God’s mystery and his good intention

Trying to discover the reason for evil and suffering drives us to consider the bigger picture that is God’s plan which is far beyond our understanding. There are hard questions, like the way Joseph was sold by his brothers to Egypt. However great a setback he suffered, Joseph endured and trusted in God through every single episode of suffering. In the end he came to understand God’s big picture, “a great deliverance” (Gen 45:7, NIV), and said, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Gen 50:20). Like Genesis’s picture of Joseph, Job and Ecclesiastes richly demonstrate that much of suffering is not directly related to justice and judgment; rather it is God’s mystery that is beyond our understanding (Deut 29:29). Joni Eareckson Tada views her suffering in this way: “My suffering is redeemed for His purpose.”¹⁰ This view resonates with Romans 8:28 where Paul writes, “All things work together for good.” Peter encourages us to entrust our souls to a faithful Creator even when we do not understand our circumstances (1 Pet 4:19).

2.2.3. Suffering as God’s means for strengthening our faith and holiness

God saves us and shows us the infinite depths of his grace and love through weakness and pain. Dan McCartney writes, “Christ learned humanhood from his suffering (Heb 5:8). [And therefore] we learn Christhood from our suffering.”¹¹ God disciplines us through suffering (Heb 12:10–11). Just as Jesus has experienced our humanity through suffering (Heb 2:18; 4:14–15), we are also able to grow in Christ-likeness and care for others who are suffering, as we suffer. Job acquires a deep knowledge and experience of God through suffering (Job 42:5–6). The Psalmist writes that suffering is good for us and leads us to have a better understanding of God (Ps 119:71; cf. Jas 1:2–4). Likewise, Paul encourages us to be prepared for “an eternal weight of glory beyond comparison” (2 Cor 4:17) and “the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18). Peter clearly states we will be restored, confirmed, strengthened, and established by God in the end (1 Pet 5:10; 4:12–14).

2.2.4. Suffering as a display of God’s glory

Jesus came to us and suffered for us chiefly through his death on the cross as Isaiah prophesied in chapter 53.
Piper meticulously expounds the glory of God that comes through suffering. He summarized the achievements of Jesus Christ by his suffering as follows:12

1. Christ absorbed the wrath of God on our behalf (Gal 3:13); 2. Christ bore our sins and purchased our forgiveness (1 Pet 2:24; Isa 53:5); 3. Christ provided a perfect righteousness for us that becomes ours in him (Phil 2:5–8; Rom 5:19); 4. Christ defeated death (Heb 2:14–15); 5. he disarmed Satan (Col 2:14–15); 6. Christ purchased perfect, final healing for all his people (Isa 53:5; Rev 7:17); and 7. Christ will bring us finally to God (1 Pet 3:18). The ultimate reason that suffering exists in the universe is so that Christ might display the greatness of the glory of the grace of God by suffering himself to overcome our suffering and bring about the praise of God.

2.3. Suffering and its five challenges to the character of God

While an atheist is free from the problem of evil, religious people, including Christians, from ancient times have struggled to tackle questions arising from the problem of evil. That is why the study of theodicy develops. Theodicy is defined as “an attempt to show that God is not responsible for evil,” or “the justification of a deity’s justice and goodness in light of suffering and evil.”14 There is no space to describe all ideas of theodicy here, but five practical challenges when we consider suffering and God are noted: (1) a suspicion about God’s omnipotence; (2) a suspicion about God’s sovereign control of the future; (3) a suspicion about God’s goodness; (4) a suspicion about God’s love and presence with us; and (5) a total rejection of the idea of evil and suffering. People surrounding us might conclude that “if there is a good god, there should be no evil. But in reality there is evil in this world, so that a god who is both good and powerful cannot exist.” It is easy for them to miss the great teaching of suffering and thus develop a very myopic understanding of the gospel. All Christians are required to develop a biblically-sound understanding of each aspect of God’s character through sincere study of the whole Bible, and then live out the word of God.

3. Suffering in Cambodia and her church

Since the first Protestant missionaries with the Church and Missionary Alliance arrived in Cambodia in 1923, the gospel has not been received well. After forty years of work there were just 734 baptized believers in good standing in the Khmer Evangelical Church started by the C&MA. Ellison estimates that there would have just been just over two thousand “Christians” in Cambodia just before 1965.15 In 1965, King Sihanouk expelled all missionaries, and evangelical church leaders were ordered to close their churches when diplomatic relations with the West were terminated. But, in 1970–1975, missionaries were allowed to return to Cambodia with the rise of a pro-American regime. In 1972 the Khmer Evangelical Church held two evangelistic campaigns in Phnom Penh. Dr. Mooneyham of World Vision was the guest speaker, with music provided by the Palermo Brothers and also by the Danibelles. In these two campaigns more than three thousand people made public decisions to accept Christ. Before the war broke out in 1970, there were only three congregations in Phnom Penh.16 It was recorded that there were ten thousand believers in thirty congregations in Phnom Penh in 1975 when Pol Pot’s regime took control over the country.17

Cambodia experienced a notorious massacre during the Pol Pot regime (1975–1979). Today, many tourists pay a visit to both S-21, a former torture center converted from a high school in Phnom Penh, and the killing fields across Cambodia, as well as the Angkor Wat complex, a World Heritage site. More than one million lives were lost in less than four years of the Pol Pot regime. These four years were the darkest period in the history of Cambodia. Furthermore, its effects are still fresh and can be observed in daily life. Almost every household lost loved ones in that period. Because of Pol Pot’s systematic elimination of national leaders and intellectuals, poverty and poor education have been major problems in Cambodia since the 1980s.

The situation is improving very slowly and Cambodia has recently escaped from its “poor country” status and joined the “low-income country” category.18 When the Vietnamese army entered Phnom Penh on 7 January 1979, a few hundred Christians were still alive on that “liberation day.”19 Ellison provides a list of thirty-three pastors and church leaders and found that twenty-seven of them were martyred or died as part of the policy of enforced starvation. By the end of 1979, eighty percent of Cambodia’s believers had been martyred during the horrors of Pol Pot’s Killing Fields. But even after the Killing Fields, difficult situations continued for Cambodian believers. Following the fall of Pol Pot’s regime, the new government persecuted the Church—confiscating Bibles, refusing to allow church meetings, and keeping known Christians under surveillance—until 1990 when the Cambodian Protestant Church was officially recognized by the government. It was reported that there were only about thirty small churches across the country in the early 1990s.20 The number of believers has grown significantly in the last twenty-five years, and it is now estimated that there are more than 250,000 believers in over two thousand churches.21

There are several other occasions besides the Pol Pot period when the Cambodian church suffered. In 1946, after the Second World War, the political vacuum gave rise to the nationalistic movement called the Khmer Issarak Movement, which was an anti-French nationalist movement that quickly split into competing factions. By the time of independence in 1953 all but one of these were incorporated into Prince Norodom Sihanouk’s political structure,22 but many Christians were persecuted and the first Cambodian Christian was martyred by members of the movement.23

Mr. Taing Chhirc was a high rank military officer, a major in the nation’s armed forces, and a strong Christian leader. He was General Secretary of the young Cambodian Evangelical Church. In the summer of 1973, he spoke at the Keswick Convention in England, issuing a challenging call to raise awareness and prayer for his country.24 On the way back to Cambodia, he stopped in Singapore and talked with the directors of the Overseas Missionary Fellowship at 2 Cluny Road, assembled in Central Council, inviting this mission likewise to follow him into Cambodia where the harvest was great and the laborers all
4. Qualitative research on suffering in Cambodian Christians’ lives

Qualitative research is an approach that allows us “to examine people’s experiences in detail by using a specific set of research methods such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, life histories, etc.” It can thus provide complex textual descriptions of how people experience a given research issue. It provides information about the “human” side of an issue, that is, the often-contradictory behaviors, beliefs, opinions, emotions, and relationships of individuals. Qualitative methods are also effective in identifying intangible factors, such as social norms, socioeconomic status, gender roles, ethnicity, and religion, whose role in the research issue may not be readily apparent. It helps us to interpret and better understand the complex reality of a given situation and the implications of quantitative data.

Nowadays, qualitative research methods are used in social science, medicine, and anthropology, among other disciplines.

I have chosen a narrative research method as the suffering that the Cambodian people have faced could be very different from the suffering I have experienced and imagined, and could vary between different Cambodian Christians. In addition, I am curious about their interpretation of their life experiences as Christians. Qualitative research could help us to learn from both their experiences and their perspective on suffering. One question that I was most curious about is how the Pol Pot genocide affects their life. While this is a time-consuming research method that further challenges my linguistic ability of analysis, I have conducted a life story interview with Cambodian Christians using the Khmer language. The whole interview was recorded with the interviewees’ permission. After each interview, the transcripts were typed verbatim. The abstracted stories from my interviews are summarized below. In this paper, the interviewees’ names, ethnicities, and place names are changed or withheld in order to protect their identities.

4.1. Cambodian Christians’ life stories

Story 1 is about a Khmer man in his fifties. When he heard the gospel the first time, he was a teenager in a refugee camp in Thailand. He lost his parents during the Pol Pot era. He went to a refugee camp with his friend when they heard that they might be able to get some means to earn a living; his four brothers and sisters were separated from each other while travelling from Phnom Penh. At the refugee camp, he started attending a church on Sunday and joined a youth-group activity because many people, including his friends, went and many people said that the Christians helped their daily life more than others, including government organizations. After a couple of months, when many people were getting baptized he thought that he could gain some benefits too, so he also got baptized! He looked back to this event later and concluded that he neither had faith in Jesus nor experienced any spiritual transformation.

In the early 1990s, the UN encouraged people in the refugee camps to go back to Cambodia. Finding himself an orphan, he went back to Phnom Penh, was reunited with his brothers and sisters, and stayed with his uncle and aunt. But he and his siblings were not welcomed by his uncle and aunt due to the shortage of food. In addition, he had to work hard to take care of them while studying English to get a better job. His family origins can be traced back to Mainland China—his grandparents migrated from there to Cambodia and his father taught Chinese at a Chinese school. His family followed many gods including those worshipped in Taoism, and anything that provided merit for their lives. After his marriage, he moved to his wife’s province and started to work with a Christian NGO.

Through working with missionaries, he was convinced that Jesus was the only Savior and got baptized a second time, this time after a sincere conversion. Looking back on his life, he said that he did not feel miserable during the Pol Pot time or while he lived in the refugee camp. He said that everyone was in the same situation. Everyone felt equally hungry due to the lack of food. He felt he suffered more after he became a Christian and was baptized a second time than during the Pol Pot era. He was dejected that his good friends left. Their sudden change of attitude towards him and termination of their friendship hurt him very much. His siblings and relatives also discontinued their warm relationships with him. Their reasons were his refusal to join them in drinking alcohol, smoking, gambling, etc. They also considered him a traitor to Buddhism. But he has been able to stay with Jesus because he has received much better benefits from Jesus. He mentioned a couple of passages from the Bible that helped him to go through his suffering. For him, the greatest news is that he understands his future destiny (John 14:1–3; Rom 8:31–39; Rev 21:3–4), living with the true God forever with eternal life and the incomparable peace from God. He came to understand God’s purpose in his life and has no more fear of death. It is indeed the good news that he needed in order to live his life at that time.

Story 2 is of a man in his twenties from a minority tribe. His family was not
affected during the Pol Pot time. He never heard of anyone being killed by Pol Pot’s soldiers. The first time he heard of Jesus was from his uncle. It scared him because he heard that he would go to hell if he did not believe in Jesus Christ. He and his family believed in many gods, both Buddhist and animistic. Ten years later, he got into trouble when his motorbike was stolen. He was ashamed as he lost face with his family and community. He was helpless and had no more hope to restore his face among them. Suddenly he remembered his uncle sharing that Jesus took his shame on the cross and he could restore him by the power of the cross. He asked his uncle for more teaching on this good news. Later, he got baptized. Since then, he felt no more shame. Moreover, he has an unshakable hope and peace in Jesus, and is always thankful to Jesus for his goodness. He boldly shares the good news with people in his community. When he shares the good news, he is intimidated by others who do not believe in Jesus. But he does not feel lonely at all, rather he gives thanks to the Lord that he belongs to the community of believers.

Story 3 is of another man in his twenties from a minority tribe. His family also had a normal life during the Pol Pot era. The first time he heard of Jesus was when evangelists came to his village seven years ago. One year later, he joined a church conference at a district town, far from his village, because he wanted to see the town. But at the conference he clearly understood that he was a sinner and received Jesus as his Savior. Then, straight afterwards, he started to suffer from an unknown disease, which affected the right side of his whole body, causing numbness and pain. He got medical help from missionaries and stayed in a mission hospital in Phnom Penh for one month. After he became sick, his family repeatedly offered pigs and chickens to the forest gods. But his disease was not healed. He resisted joining their “satanic worship” because he believed Jesus would heal him because he is love. When discharged from hospital, his numbness and pain was almost healed except for the right side of his abdomen. His family was amazed that his disease was healed without any help from their gods, and all of them decided to believe in Jesus as their Savior. He is happy that all his family turned to Christ Jesus and wants to serve him forever.

Story 4 is about a Khmer man in his forties. He was born to a poor family and used to work for the military. It was years ago when he first heard of the salvation Jesus brings—through a Bible school student who came from Phnom Penh to share the good news in his city. After he became a Christian, he resigned from military service and started serving in a church while working as a night guard for an NGO office. He has a beautiful wife and two children. His family faced many challenges, especially in the last decade. First, he had a difficult relationship with his wife, as he was too busy at church and with ministries. Their relationship had become sour and tense. After reducing his time in church and ministries, their relationship improved. Second, shortly after his relationship with his wife improved, he was taking a shower from the well outside his house when a coconut fell and hit his head. He was almost killed, but God saved his life without any after-effects. Later, his wife got a strange illness that lasted many months. Local doctors could not help her so she traveled to a neighboring country a couple of times, but her symptoms did not improve. She ended up unconscious and they rushed her to one of most expensive private hospitals in Phnom Penh without thinking of the medical fee. She was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease and slowly improved. Every time she visited the hospital after her discharge, she had to pay an expensive bill, but God provided for them through many miraculous ways. In the same year, his daughter started stumbling and falling down and was later diagnosed with brain tuberculosis. By God’s grace, she received medical treatment and was healed a year later. Very recently his work-place lost its NGO status and came under the government. As a result, his salary was cut by more than half. His family is struggling to make ends meet and send two children to a middle school. But he and his family continue to serve the Lord faithfully.

4.2. Insightful findings from the stories

These interviews show that the experiences of the interviewees vary from person to person, generation to generation, and tribe to tribe. But the life stories generally seem to focus on their faith, probably because the interviewer was a missionary. Although these stories are still in the process of analysis by the author, some prominent findings will be presented here.

There are a couple of key words regarding faith in Christ Jesus, suffering, and how to endure sufferings. First, regarding faith in Christ Jesus, socio-economic, physical, emotional, and/or spiritual crises and sufferings are observed to be a reason for seeking Christ Jesus. Because many communities in Cambodia have a “shame” culture, they took the opportunity to seek the ultimate solution from the Savior rather than from within their community when they faced trouble with their family members, close friends, and/or community. Suffering could prepare one’s heart and mind to look for the Truth.

Second, suffering is not stereotypically linked to the Pol Pot era or refugee experience. To the contrary, relationship issues (which also trigger a seeking after Jesus Christ) were the foremost cause of suffering mentioned. Because of their faith in Christ, they suffered from conflicts in relationships with family, relatives, and close friends. Their friends cut off their friendship. The community ostracized them for being Christians. In addition, many mentioned dealing with the feeling of “loneliness.”

It is interesting to see that the suffering in their lives is related to their faith. It is also surprising that they did not see themselves as being pitiful or poor when they experienced the same situation as others during the Pol Pot era. As outsiders, we tend to feel sorry for the locals when we see their lives are much harder than ours and that they have greater problems. When we are involved in a development project, it would be helpful to get an insider’s perspective in order to avoid giving too much or inappropriate aid, which might lead to dependency. However, this unexpected finding, related to their experiences during the Pol Pot era, might have resulted from the depth (or lack of depth) of the interviewer’s relationship with the interviewees. It is rare in Cambodia for people to share
about the suffering they experienced under the Pol Pot regime with
someone they do not yet trust, as they might end up getting into trouble,
such as becoming the subject of gossip, in the community. Further interviews
with a more established relationship with the interviewer will more clearly
address this point.

Third, the interviewees shared key Bible truths about enduring suffering
by faith. These include their eternal relationship with God, their Lord and
Savior; the power of the resurrection; God’s protection; God’s indescribable
eternal love; eternal life; a clear destination after death. Their sharing
suggests that it could be helpful for them to understand the nature of the
Trinitarian God, the work of the Holy Spirit, the theology of suffering, and
their belonging to the new community of believers as their community is a
shame-based and relationship-oriented culture.

Fourth, it would be impossible to
generalize this, yet if the interviewees
(e.g. Story 3 and 4) had accepted Jesus
Christ as Savior prior to suffering,
you could look back on their
sufferings that God’s means of
strengthening their faith and holiness.
(See section 2.2.3.) Indeed, they have
clung, in the midst of sufferings, to
God’s faithfulness and goodness by
faith and prayers and waited for his
glory promised. And after that, they
have praised him and shared his
greatness with others. On the other
hand, those who suffered without
knowing Jesus but came to know Jesus
later (e.g. Story 2) tended to think that
their sufferings drove them to thank
God for his good intentions toward
them and their family. (See section
2.2.2.)

Fifth, in view of Cambodian church
history (Section 3 and 5.1), the fact
that quite a few people came to Christ
in Cambodia and in refugee camps
has been recognized as a revival. And
yet, some apparent conversions might
have been insincere as indicated in
Story 1. It could be instructive to
examine when a rapid increase in the
number of Christians takes place
under perilous conditions. A careful
follow-up study on those who came to
Christ in refugee camps would be
beneficial, particularly one that focuses
on the long-term relationship between

Lastly, it would to be helpful if more
interviews are conducted on people
from different backgrounds, such as
gender (female or male), ethnicity
(Khmer or other minorities), and
religion (Folk Buddhism, animism,
Islam, or others) and analyzed.

5. Implications for missions
and church

5.1. Suffering and church
growth

The second century Church Father
Tertullian wrote, “The blood of
martyrs is the seed of the Church.” It
is a well-known belief among
Christians that suffering helps churches
grow. We see many examples of this in
church history. For example, nobody
would have imagined fifty years ago
that there would be more than seventy-
five million Christians in China
today.33 Cambodia is no exception.
According to Cormack, Cambodia
experienced two revivals before the early
1980s. The first happened from
1970 to 1975 in Cambodia and the
second took place between 1975 and
1981 in the refugee camps.34 As
reported in section 3, there were only
three congregations in Phnom Penh
before 1970, yet more than three
thousand people accepted Christ as a
result of the 1972 evangelistic
campaigns. More people came to
Christ through evangelistic efforts such
as those organized by brother Chhirc.
Cormack reported:

The year 1973 ended with about one
thousand two hundred Christians
in Phnom Penh celebrating the
Saviour’s birth in their various
and sundry meeting places. This
represented a near one hundred
per cent annual increase from the
three hundred souls to be found
four years earlier in 1970 ... 1974
was going to be an even more
abundantly fruitful year than 1973 ...
By mid-year the church in the
capital had increased to upwards
of 3,000. A growth rate in those
six months alone outstripping
the entire growth of the church
throughout its fifty year history.35

It was also reported that fewer than
one thousand Christians survived the
genocide during the Pol Pot regime,
but many people came to Christ in the
refugee camps until the early 1980s.

Looking back on Cambodian church
history, we can also see another period
of rapid numerical growth in 1990–
2010 (Figure 1).37 From 1996 the
Protestant church doubled in size every
two years until 2010.38

Estimates indicate that there are now
more than 230,000 Protestant
Christians in Cambodia in more than
two thousand churches. That
Cambodia has “the modest two
percent annual growth of Christianity
from 1910 to 2010 masks the impact of
Pol Pot’s genocide in the 1970s.”39
Cambodia’s Christian growth rate in
2000–2010 was the fastest in South
East Asia at 7.28 percent, followed by
4.80 percent in Timor.40

Now, the question of whether
Tertullian’s phrase could apply to
the Cambodian church needs to be
asked. Although there are few analyses
of the reasons why so many people
came to Christ, suffering is one of

Figure 1: Christians in Cambodia
the key factors which contributed to church growth. Besides the factor of suffering, other factors helped to spur church growth both in 1970–1975 and 1975–1981. First of all, there was the supreme work of the Holy Spirit. It has been suggested that God prepared Cambodia for the next decade’s suffering when the Cambodian church grew just before the Pol Pot regime took over. When they sensed a very ambiguous and unstable political situation, many people sought God. Regarding the 1975–1981 church growth, which took place mainly in refugee camps, suffering and devastating life situations stirred the hearts of many to look for God. But as Cormack honestly shares, “In the context of the dull and uninspiring refugee camps, Christianity was very attractive.”

As mentioned by the brother in the first life story (Section 4), his first baptism that took place when he did not have faith was a joyous event at the refugee camp. Cormack writes of the latest church growth that, “the direct correlation between the level of Christian philanthropic aid and church growth cannot be allowed to escape our attention here.”

In fact, the church prior to 1993 was a handful of isolated, small, underground groups, but from 1993 onwards, every major denomination, large Christian NGOs, and many missionaries arrived in Cambodia. It was common in the later 1990s that many young people went to the churches where a western missionary worked in order to get free English and/or computer-skill instruction so they could seek a better job.

Another interesting phenomenon could be observed in later part of the first decade of this century. According to the Evangelical Fellowship of Cambodia, the number of new church plants started to decrease after 2008 (Figure 2). Their analysis came up with various reasons, but one strongly-suggested reason is materialism. Cambodia started to enjoy relative peace and a stable society, which promotes more economic activities. As the growth of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) shows (Figure 3), Cambodia’s economy has steadily grown since the last coup d’état in 1999. But at the same time, Cambodian people have started losing their interest in Christianity. It leads to the next point related to the prosperity gospel.

### 5.2. Suffering and the challenge of the prosperity gospel

The “prosperity gospel” is one of the biggest challenges in mission today. The Cape Town Commitment defines it as “the teaching that believers have a right to the blessings of health and wealth and that they can obtain these blessings through positive confessions of faith and the ‘sowing of seeds’ through financial or material gift.” If we say that we have a right to the blessings, we reject suffering. If we then experience suffering, we face problems in our faith. In the second Cambodian life story, when the brother shares the good news with his fellow villagers, he is often asked, “How much monthly salary can I get if I believe in Jesus?” Literally it means, “What kinds of benefits do I get from the Christian God?” It is a big challenge for him to share the good news with people who want to get tangible, material benefits. As he shared, “They always mocked me when I explain about heaven, eternal life, and the kingdom of God, which are invisible things.”

Prosperity theology is very common in Cambodia where churches or Christian NGOs, which provide a tangible benefit such as financial support for the poor, are very popular in the community. Many people do not come to a church to hear the gospel, but only want to get the immediate, tangible blessings. As a result, it is very hard to share the good news. While there are no statistics, there is a general feeling that many people in Cambodia respond positively toward Christianity, but very few continue to worship God after several years. It surely relates to a lack of discipleship, but the tangible blessings could also be a key factor in this. In rural areas, many people respond to Christianity through experiences of God healing their sicknesses by prayers or contemporary medical services provided by Christian NGOs.

![Figure 2: The number of newly-planted churches in Cambodia](image)

![Figure 3: Gross Domestic Product of Cambodia. Data from World Bank (last updated 18 Sep 2017).](image)
It would be an important approach to share the good news with them through healing in this country. The Lausanne Movement rightly deals with the prosperity gospel. In particular, the Akropong Statement is very helpful for us to defend the biblical teaching on suffering.

5.3. Suffering and evangelization

5.3.1. Suffering as a wake-up call to lukewarm Christians

The Bible says suffering is a part of discipleship. But those who come from relatively comfortable countries without tangible persecutions and sufferings may have overlooked the great teaching on suffering in their life. In addition, if affected by the secular worldview which says that comfort and convenience are essential human rights, our perspective on suffering might be skewed. Suffering may have little chance to contribute to our growth in Christ while we try to ignore or view it as a curse to be avoided.

For example, Japan has enjoyed a peaceful society for more than seventy years. Japanese Christians love religious freedom since it means there is no public persecution of their faith. In accordance with the Japanese value of social harmony, many do not proactively seek opportunities to bear witness to their faith in public, as this might upset harmony. As a result, their presence is often that of the “hidden Christian,” as the statistics show the number of Christians is less than 1% of the population. They sneak in and out of church without telling their friends. When they are encouraged to share the gospel, they view themselves as being unworthy to tell the good news. They feel that sharing the gospel brings shame rather than honor. The church and mission societies should address this reality. Interestingly, when faced with unexpected suffering due to natural disasters, Japanese Christians took it as a wake-up call to share the gospel. Following the 2011 Tohoku earthquake, even though Christians were a bit confused regarding a biblical response to such an unprecedented disaster, they have done much good work in the disaster area. The preparation for suffering is crucial, as is developing a sufficiently deep knowledge of the Bible and a strong, vital prayer life so that we are not surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon us to test us and we don’t conclude that something strange is happening to us (1 Pet 4:12).

Christians need to present their understanding of biblical truth to those who are suffering. We must proclaim and teach “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27).

5.3.2. Suffering as a threat to gospel workers

Second, failure to develop a theology of suffering could threaten the Christian worker’s life. In most cross-cultural and pastoral settings, Christian workers face numerous challenges, including suffering. If they are unprepared for it and do not understand the meaning of suffering biblically, they cannot survive and often terminate their service prematurely.

John Stott’s classic dictum remains relevant.

The place of suffering in service and of passion in mission is hardly ever taught today. But the greatest single secret of evangelistic or missionary effectiveness is the willingness to suffer and die. It may be a death to popularity (by faithfully preaching the unpopular biblical gospel), or to pride (by the use of modest methods in reliance on the Holy Spirit), or to racial and national prejudice (by identification with another culture), or to material comfort (by adopting a simple life style). But the servant must suffer if he is to bring light to the nations, and the seed must die if it is to multiply.

It is important to recognize that we are tempted by such things as popularity, pride, material comfort, and racial and national prejudice, and that these temptations often challenge us in a difficult and stressful situation and become a stumbling block for the kingdom of God. If dying to these things is suffering, we would like to suffer well. Sunquist rightly sums up, “Mission is from the heart of God, to each context, and it is carried out in suffering in this world for God’s eternal glory.”

5.4. Narrative research as a powerful tool for mission

While interviewing Christians about their life stories, I came to realize that narrative research is a powerful tool for opening up a people’s worldview. That is clearly so when it comes to their perspective on suffering. As noted at the beginning of this study, one’s perspective on suffering is obviously subjective, and it is never easy to understand each person we evangelize or disciple. While it is wonderful to find many books being published on suffering, we cannot apply these studies and findings uncritically to the people in our context. Narrative research provides a strategic tool to help us accomplish our vision and mission. It helps us to practice incarnational ministry—one of our core values. Though it takes time and requires local language proficiency in the case of cross-cultural settings, it is worth doing for God’s glory.

6. Conclusion

It is critical that every Christian understands suffering from a biblically sound perspective and lives out their faith through the difficult situations they face. By God’s grace, the Cambodian church continues to grow through varied sufferings. Narrative research could address the questions of what kind of suffering Cambodian Christians face and how Cambodian Christians recognize their sufferings and keep their faith in Christ Jesus. The battle against the prosperity gospel is right before us. It is necessary not only to defend the gospel apologetically but also to proclaim the whole gospel effectively in our context. If suffering could be our cross, we would like to live out our suffering well. Indeed, if we obey his calling, God will glorify his Name through that cross.

I end with the words from the OMF General Director’s admonition at Urbana 15.

Your talents, your gifts, your profession cannot change the lives of people. That cannot bring hope to the people. It’s only in Jesus. So my encouragement to you is love the Word of God, the Truth will bring
change. Love the Word of God. Study the Word of God. And live out the Word of God by your lives because as you live out the Word of God people see that and are attracted to Jesus Christ. That will change people. Let God be using you as a change agent. But in the end it has to be the Truth that brings changes. So let the Word of God be in your life as you study, meditate, and live out the Word.33


4 Kaizen is the famous core value of Toyota. The infamous Toyota Production System (TPS) is a corporative decision-making process which is essential for the success of kaizen.


6 Tieszen, “Redefining Perseverance,” 43. On the one hand, extensive hostile actions could include beating, torture, isolation, or imprisonment. On the other hand, mildly hostile actions would include ridicule, restriction, certain kinds of harassment, or discrimination.

7 Timothy Keller surveys these three areas in chapter 2 of Walking with God through Pain and Suffering (New York: Penguin Random House, 2013), 35–63.

8 The author contributed to the content of this module.

9 Keller, Walking with God, 5–6.


12 John Piper and Justin Taylor, Suffering and the Sovereignty of God (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 87–89.


15 J. Paul Ellison, A Short History of the Cambodian Evangelical Church known in Cambodia as the Khmer Evangelical Church with Particular Attention Being Given to People Movements and Some Factors Related to Church Growth. Paper presented at Cambodian Christian Mission Round Table Conference, San Jose, California, 1991.


20 This number of churches is from Keith Carey, ed., Global Paper Digest (Pasadena: U.S. Center for World Mission, 2011): 9. Others cite different numbers of churches. Some say there are 750 churches (e.g. OMF International), others mention 3,000 to 7,000 congregations (e.g. Interserve), or 1,224 Protestant churches (e.g. the 2010 International Religious Freedom Report published by U.S. Department of State, http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010/148661.htm (accessed on 28 March 2016). Steve Hyde, in his 2012 report, suggests that the different numbers of churches given would be caused by “different definitions of what a church is or incomplete research”. A nation-wide statistics research by MK2021 is now ongoing. The number of 2,920 churches is registered as of 25 August 2017.


22 Don Cormack, Killing Fields Living Fields (Crowborough, UK: MARC 1997), 75–79.

23 Cormack, Killing Fields, 130–133.

24 Cormack, Killing Fields, 133.


26 Cormack, Killing Fields, 326.


31 In this method, the relationship between interviewer and interviewee is affected by the way the interviewee is interpreted.


Mission in High-risk Situations

Richard S.

Richard S. served in the Philippines for thirty years. During this time he served first among the open-access people and then among a restricted-access people. He has spent many years in leadership roles. He has also given much time in non-formal and informal training. Richard holds a doctorate in Intercultural Studies. He is married with three daughters and seven grandchildren.

Paul wanted to appear before the crowd, but the disciples would not let him. Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theater. (Acts 19:30–31)

After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. Coming over to us, he took Paul’s belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, “The Holy Spirit says, ‘In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.’” When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, “Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.” When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, “The Lord’s will be done.” (Acts 21:10–14)

Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: “Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.” (Esther 4:15–16)

Scripture is very rich in examples of risk and the response of God’s servants to risk. What the Bible does not give is a “Concise Guide to Ministry in High Risk Situations.” Even so, we find both relevant teaching and principles about these situations in Scripture.

This paper seeks to draw out this teaching and the relevant principles, explore some writings on the subject, and make application for missions today.

There is a range of kinds of risk that a cross-cultural worker may face. Those listed below are the kinds which will be addressed in this paper.

1. Physical risk because of being specifically targeted due to nationality or ethnicity.
2. Being caught up in political or social unrest because of being “in the wrong place at the wrong time.”
3. Being targeted by a government or religious community that is unhappy with the discipleship aspect of our work and either intends physical harm or seeks to facilitate our departure from the country.
4. Risk to physical, emotional, or spiritual health whether due to health conditions, medical standards, spiritual and moral climate, or the stresses of cross-cultural disciple making.

As a Fellowship, we serve under very meaningful Vision and Mission Statements.

Our Vision:

Through God’s grace, we aim to see an Indigenous Biblical Church Movement in each people group of East Asia evangelizing their own people, and reaching out in mission to other peoples.

Our Mission:

We share the good news of Jesus Christ in all its fullness with East Asia’s peoples to the glory of God.

1. God and mission

We believe that bringing glory to God is our highest calling. There are a number of ways that our lives, through words and actions, can bring glory to God. Our primary calling as a Fellowship is to bring glory to God through sharing the good news of Jesus Christ in all its fullness with East Asia’s peoples. Much could be done to unpack that statement, but in brief, we are committed to speak words that give understanding to the good news of Jesus and to choose actions that further demonstrate the truth of this good news. Another way to put it is that we are to be disciples of Jesus whose faith has impacted all areas of our lives and who make similar disciples of Jesus. Being disciples of Jesus, we live out the teaching of Jesus in all areas of our lives, proclaiming his teachings, and calling others to become disciples who do the same.

Our vision and passion, as we live out and speak the good news of Jesus, is to see the development of Indigenous Biblical Church Movements (IBCMs). If the fruit of our work is IBCMs, our local disciples will, of necessity, carry on this work among their own people and others.

Making disciples of Christ, even in our home country and culture of origin, is by its very nature counter cultural. Following Christ always requires that we “do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world” (Rom 12:2).
But, as cross-cultural missionaries, we have the added dimension of being called to take this counter-cultural message into nations not our own. These nations have their own sets of laws that we must recognize. They have religious belief systems that range from somewhat resistant to violently resistant to our message. They have cultural norms that range from some level of accommodation to complete and sometimes violent rejection of what is seen to be foreign and destructive to their way of life.

Our calling is to bring the good news of Jesus into these settings. This paper aims to delineate an appropriate response to the range of risks mentioned above.

2. Keeping the balance

We fulfill our calling by living in submission to the sovereign God who brought us into relationship with himself through the blood of Christ. The last commission of Jesus was to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19–20). This clear commission and the call to obedience to God have led some well-meaning Christians to fearlessly make gospel proclamations no matter what the consequences. These consider upholding God’s honour and dying for Jesus to be their highest calling.

But such fervency is tempered with another set of instructions. “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God” (Rom 13:1). Does this mean that if the government says we should not evangelize, we won’t? That is a big subject, but the example of the Apostles indicates that when commanded not to speak in the name of Jesus, they felt God’s calling superseded the instruction of the authorities.1 We thus read that “Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, ‘Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard’” (Acts 4:18–20). The conclusion we draw is that we do need to submit to the laws of the land in such cases, and that living out our faith and making disciples may cause us at times to choose not to obey a specific law.

Within the question of balance is the question of how strongly we present our message in the face of local views. Peter gives a brief but essential answer to this question in 1 Peter 3:15–16.

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

The communication of our message needs to be clear, which speaks to cultural relevance. It also needs to be gentle and respectful, spoken out of a life that reflects the message. The offence of our message needs to be the offence of the cross rather than our personal offensiveness.

3. Dealing with risk

While keeping the twin balances of God’s sovereignty with submission to governments and strong persuasion with gentleness and respect, we have to grapple with the issue that we are called to places where there are real risks. As Anthony Parker writes, “Given the inevitability of risk, would it not be futile—or even unfaithful—to seek to avoid it?”2 We also see from biblical examples and recent history that God’s servants do sometimes suffer and even die in the line of duty. As an organization, we have to manage these risks and seek to respond appropriately. In today’s world when media coverage is often opposed to Christian mission and with many constituencies that are quick to pursue litigation, while managing risk wisely, we must guard against the temptation of being overly cautious and excessively risk averse.

Hudson Taylor is said to have written, “Unless there is an element of risk in our exploits for God, there is no need for faith.”3 Although that is not Scripture, there is truth in the statement, and the Fellowship has at times become overly risk averse. Reflecting back into our history, a snippet is found in Emily Blatchley’s diary in which she records that Hudson Taylor asked, “Are we...prepared to stand firm in the cause we have undertaken at all risks?—tho’ suffering, slander, persecutions, forsakings, to characters blackened and believed to be black, even by those who have hitherto been friends?”4 This is still a valid question to ask today.

During our history we have experienced persecution and martyrdom. We recall the sad event of the Boxer rebellion and the loss of fifty-eight workers and twenty-one children. When writing about the hymn “Facing a Task Unfinished” in the recent Canadian OMF Heart for Asia,
Jon Fuller records, “During the civil war, missionaries had been withdrawn from their stations in 1927. Twelve CIM workers and five associates had been martyred.”

David Garrison, working with a group of researchers, makes the uncomfortable observation that places where God is working and the church is growing rapidly are often places where missionaries experience suffering.8 Nick Ripken in his workshop entitled “The Missiology of Suffering,” states, “Expatriate workers need to embrace a lifestyle that includes suffering, persecution and martyrdom.”9 Can we cope with that today?

### 4. Understanding our risks

I do not believe God is honored by unreasoned risk taking. There is a concept of “reasonable risk,” which is calculated through the use of an assessment tool. Parker writes, “Missionaries and their agencies should … adopt security protocols that limit their exposure to risk.”10 I also believe there is Spirit-guided risk taking that sometimes calls us to take risks that go beyond human reasonableness. I use the term “Spirit-guided” very carefully. For some, taking risk is the adrenaline thrill of adventure and may not be God honoring at all.

In Acts 18:9, when Paul was feeling quite insecure and fearful, the Lord spoke to him in the night and told him not to fear but to speak, and assured him he would not be harmed. In Acts 21:4, fellow believers, “through the Spirit,” urged Paul not to go to Jerusalem. Acts 21:10–14 makes it clear that the prophesied events were a message from the Spirit, so Paul actually knew the risks involved. In Acts 20:23 he speaks of being warned in every city that prison and hardship were facing him. To state the obvious, Spirit-guided risk taking requires walking very closely with the Spirit.

There is a simple tool that helps us to assess risk. To use this tool, a list of potential risks can be identified. A grid can then be created wherein the group doing the risk assessment plots the probability of certain risks becoming a reality in one of four quadrants.

The crisis impact is similarly estimated and plotted on the grid. Crisis impact measures the impact on an individual, team, or the whole organization should the event take place. For example, if there were a potential risk that a government would cancel visas for foreigners, the crisis impact, should the event take place, would be very high. Affected workers would need to relocate. The work would be greatly impacted.

By charting the potential risks and impacts on a grid on a scale of one to ten, it can be seen which potential risks have both a high probability and a high crisis impact. The purpose of going through this exercise is to take action to reduce either the probability or the crisis impact or both.

A risk assessment is only as valuable as the quality of the information the assessors are using. How can an individual or a group of workers credibly assess a risk? Multiple sources of information are available, and each one provides a key component. International news allows us to read about political climates. Local news gives another important source and dimension. It is usually important to have multiple sources of international and local news. In many situations, good relations with local government officials is a key source of information. Building relationships with key officials can be a worthy undertaking. If there are local officials who also share our faith, they often feel a duty, as a members of the family of God, to pass on important insights. Another very important source of information is local friendships. Friendships with believers are great but, even if the local friend is not a believer, friends are friends and care for each other. By bringing together a small group of workers, each with their network of sources, a reasonable risk assessment can be undertaken. We also have the Spirit of God working in our midst, prompting information to come to us at the appropriate time. With the risk assessment in hand, well-reasoned decisions can be made.

#### 4.1. Physical risk and nationality/ethnicity

We often hear it said that, “missions today is from everywhere to everywhere,” and I agree. In this context we have to recognize that the world we live in is filled with prejudice and very long memories about the actions of our forefathers. Even the current actions of our nation of origin can create problems. The only time I knew for certain that there was a group actively looking to kill me was immediately following a US bombing mission on a Muslim state. The fact that I am not an American was irrelevant. To the locals, I looked like an American. The only time I blocked a ministry team from visiting our region was when an ethnically Chinese team was coming from Canada and Chinese were being randomly picked up in this ministry location and held hostage for the purpose of extorting a ransom. In both of these cases we either took ourselves out of immediate danger or kept the target persons out of the danger zone while the situation was critical. These were not seen as good reasons to die or be taken hostage. In both cases a return to location was possible when the immediate threat was reduced. This is an example of how risk assessment plays an important role. As we build relationships in our ministry context, those we relate to come to see us separately from the
generally held view of our nationality or ethnicity. Frequently, friends will defend us before the general public who still associate us with the prevailing view regarding our nationality or ethnicity. There are times when the prevailing view is too strong and the only acceptable action, often with the encouragement of close local friends, is withdrawal.

4.2. Risk and political/social unrest

We are not called just to the safe places. We need to recognize that God is often working very powerfully to call people to himself when situations are unstable. Political and social unrest are means the Lord uses to cause people to look for new answers to the meaning of life and God’s people need to be there to provide the biblical answers. Being in such places has an element of risk. Foreign governments are very quick to call their citizens out. There are many reasons for their quick action and some of their purposes are not at all in line with ours. If we lived only by these governmental calls, we would not be able to get our work done. We would be safer, but ineffective.

There is also the matter of the local people, and in particular the local church. There are two issues we must consider with regard to the local people. First, what does it look like to them if we are always running scared? Recognizing that we teach more by our actions than our words, we need to ask an important question: what are we teaching the young church when we pull our people out of these risks? Example after example could be given of local Christians who expressed appreciation for cross-cultural workers who stayed through perilous times. There are more examples of bewildered, disappointed local believers who watched those committed to their discipleship leave. Phil Parshall relates his own experience of remaining through the 1971 civil war between East and West Pakistan.

He writes, “the national Christians simply could not believe their spiritual leaders would so quickly leave them to face the crucible alone.”3 Again, risk assessments are important, but I believe we are in greater danger of leaving too soon than of staying too long.

The second consideration with regard to local believers is when our presence as foreigners could endanger them. While this paper was being written, a conference, which included teaching by foreigners, in a Creative Access Nation was cancelled because the context was coming under increased scrutiny by government officials. If the event went ahead and the officials shut it down, it would not have been the foreigners who would have suffered the consequences. It would have been the local believers and it is not wise for foreigners to put local believers at risk of imprisonment or worse.

4.3. Targeted by government or religious radicals

There are some work situations where aspects of our faith are seen as blasphemous and extremely dangerous by either the government or religious leaders or both. This is most strongly seen in Muslim settings where our belief in the deity of Christ is the ultimate blasphemy and the community must be guarded from this belief at all costs. Much has been written about the best approaches and the avoidance of unnecessary offence and I am in full support of that. The fact remains that there are people in these contexts who would kill the messengers of Christ with the same understanding the Jews had when they killed Jesus. Jesus warned us that the servant is not above his master. As he was persecuted, so will we be. Are we prepared for that? Again, I am

Minka and Margaret: The Heroic Story of Two Women Missionaries Martyred by Bandits
Phyllis Thompson (Thailand: OMF, 1976)

OMF missionaries Margaret Morgan and Minka Hanskamp were captured at gunpoint by guerrillas in April 1974 while attending to leprosy patients in a rural clinic in Thailand. It was in March 1975 that their bodies were found in the jungle. Thompson traces the two very different lives—Margaret’s, unimpeded by major calamities; Minka’s, tumultuous and varied. The account also vividly portrays the life of leprosy patients in Thailand and the ministry among them.

The Triumph of John and Betty Stam
Geraldine Taylor (OMF, 2013)

A moving account of the influence of a young missionary couple on others before they were martyred in the 1930s. It was a tumultuous time in China with the civil war between the ruling Nationalist Party and Communist forces. In December 1934, Communist forces unexpectedly overran the city where the Stams were living. They did not have enough time to flee the city and were captured. Taylor’s account includes personal writings from John and Betty that reveal the foundations that enabled them to face their final hour with calm and joyful assurance in God’s will.
concerned about our risk aversion. I do not write this lightly, having been sought out for execution, suffering the pain of burying two co-workers, and dealing with the loss of more colleagues after both events because they chose not to continue for fear that they would be next to die for their faith.

Following such events, a ministry review is essential. Should we have pulled out sooner? In both cases we did a thorough review. In the case of the first murder, there were no particular warning signs. Although the context was very opposed to our faith, the murder may have been a lawless group just experiencing the thrill of killing a foreigner. The local community and the officials grieved with us. Some offered to arrange an extrajudicial execution but we believed we needed to seek justice within the legal system, even though we knew the system might not produce results, which proved to be the case. In the case of the second murder, the warning signs were there and were taken seriously. The risk assessment was done. The appropriate actions were taken. But in human terms, a significant factor had changed which was unknown even to our local advisors in the community and among the law enforcers. These local people were as shaken as we were when the murder took place.

Under conditions like these we did not belittle those who chose to leave the ministry context for fear that they might be next. But we did applaud the courageous group that went back after both events because they chose not to continue for fear that they would be next to die for their faith.

### 4.4. Risk to physical, emotional and spiritual health

There are contexts in which we work that we know are unhealthy.

- When you cannot see across the street
- Work that we know are unhealthy.
- There are contexts in which we
- There has been no further incident.
- Risk assessment was done. The
- Indicators of chronic sickness need to be responded to. But we accept that
- I believe this is an acceptable risk.
- These are very different kinds of risk, but real all the same.
- Risk assessments are still a valuable
- Risk in all the areas stated above is

When workers with health conditions are called to areas where the medical system cannot respond adequately, the risks should be assessed. If the worker believes God has called them to live with known risks, Fellowship leaders should prayerfully consider allowing risks that go beyond conventional medical wisdom, while putting in place adequate responses that recognize the possibilities.

When law and order is known to be inadequate, cross-cultural workers should follow practices of personal safety, at least to the level of the local people. Beyond that, prayerful risk taking may be appropriate.

Where moral decadence provides continual temptation, safeguards should be put in place. Paul thus gave the following exhortation, “So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature” (Gal 5:16). Part of living by the Spirit is putting ourselves out of temptation’s way. Nurturing our spiritual lives both individually and in community is essential. Having adequate accountability is also necessary. Accountability partners need to have the right to confront or propose the withdrawal of a worker when there are signs of probable failure.

### Conclusion

Our highest calling is to bring glory to God. Our primary task is to share the good news of Jesus in all its fullness with East Asia’s peoples. The greatest risk we face is that we do not fulfill our calling and do not carry out our task.

Cross-cultural workers need to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. Risk in all the areas stated above is a part of the mission enterprise. It is right to manage risk with quality information. Appropriate precautions need to be put in place. Our workers need to be prepared spiritually, physically, emotionally, and mentally for the challenges they will face. We need to work within the boundaries of reasonable risk and Spirit-guided risk taking. Above all, we must bring this life-giving message to those who live in the dark and difficult places, empowered by the Spirit of God, and guided his wisdom. MRT

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5. Jon Fuller, Canadian OMF Heart for Asia 57 (April 2016).


Ian C. H. Prescott

In 2003, the world was hit by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, commonly known by its acronym SARS. SARS was a viral disease that quickly infected more than 8,000 people and caused nearly 800 deaths in 37 countries. The majority of cases were in China where there were more than 5,000 cases, resulting in 349 deaths. The largest outbreak struck Beijing in Spring 2003, where more than 2,500 probable cases of SARS occurred. The authorities responded by placing thousands of people in quarantine in a military camp and closing all primary and secondary schools.

At the time, although I was not based in China myself, I was responsible for a small team in Beijing. What should the team members do in these circumstances? One couple’s work was with students but, because of SARS, the students had either been sent back to their homes in the countryside or confined to campus with makeshift brick walls preventing anyone from entering or leaving the campuses or their housing area. As this couple was due to return to their home country in a couple of months anyway, we agreed that it made sense for them to return early.

Another family from another country lived in an apartment with their two small children. Schools were closed and people were afraid to meet. The streets were empty and those daring enough to go outside mostly wore masks and kept their distance from others. This couple, who were largely confined to their apartment with their kids, wrote: “although [our kids] are adorable as ever, we are going crazy at home.”

What should they do? They were gifted mobilizers and, as they did not seem to be able to do much of value in Beijing where they were at the time, I suggested they should return home for a few months and then come back to continue their work after the SARS crisis was over. The wife’s response was, “Ian, I am ready to die for the Lord in Beijing.” Her husband, who was inclined towards leaving, later described this in a prayer-letter as her “irrational martyrdom mentality.” My response was, “I would prefer that you left for a few months and then returned to live and serve the Lord for a further twenty or thirty years in Beijing.”

Who was right? Was she being irrational or faithful? How would we decide? Who should make the final decision? What should they do? In looking at risk, we need to ask ourselves: Are we overly risk-averse or naively risk-foolish? What risks should we take and what risks should we avoid? How should we decide? Who should make the final decision? And when it goes “wrong,” how should we react? Who is responsible?

1. The context of our risk-taking

Risks are not taken in isolation. Jesus’ words in Luke 21 remind us of the context and nature of our risk taking for the gospel:

10 Then he said to them: “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. 11 There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven.” 12 ‘But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. 13 And so you will bear testimony to me. 14 But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. 15 For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. 16 You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. 17 Everyone will hate you because of me. 18 But not a hair of your head

Faith, Risk-taking, and Suffering in Mission

Dr Ian Prescott has served in Asia for more than thirty years. He started in the Philippines during the tumultuous years following the People Power Revolution. He has since been involved in a number of East Asian countries with a particular focus on the development of work in creative access contexts and among under-served peoples.
1.1. We live in the time between the times: a time of change, uncertainty, and suffering

Jesus’ words remind us what to expect in the times in which we now live. His words are not just about the very end times immediately before his return. They are about the time between the times: the time between Jesus’ presence on earth in human form and the time when he returns to reign. In that time—the time in which we now live—things will be chaotic. They will be chaotic on the political front, and they will be chaotic on the natural front. As much as we may try to predict the times, they will be times of uncertainty. I was amused to receive an email a couple of months ago which said “we have reliable data on what the world will look like in 2030.” Do we? This passage reminds us that until Christ returns, we live in changeable and uncertain times.

We are fortunate to currently live in East Asia in relatively peaceful and prosperous times. It may not feel like that everywhere, but the broader picture across East Asia today is peace and prosperity. This is particularly evident if you compare East Asia to other parts of the world. Consider, for example, Syria, where half a million have died and 11 million have been displaced by war. Or Afghanistan, which is still in chaos following the US-led invasion in 2011. Or a number of countries in Africa which are almost entirely dysfunctional: Southern Sudan, Somalia, Yemen, Congo, etc. The Fund for Peace publishes an annual index of fragile states (previously called “failed states”). In their 2017 index, you have to go to number 30 before you find an East Asian state—North Korea. Myanmar is next at number 35. Many parts of the world are much more fragile than East Asia.5

East Asia’s current peace and prosperity is also emphasised if you compare the last forty years with the disruptions that took place earlier in the twentieth century. These include: World War II—when an East Asian country, Japan, was a major aggressor and most of East Asia was affected; the rise of communism, civil war, and the Cultural Revolution in China; the Korean War; and the three Indo-China wars which raged from 1946 until 1989.

However, until Christ returns and reigns, we have no promise that peace and prosperity are inevitable. In East Asia, some of the threats to peace and prosperity are increasingly evident. These include the situation in North Korea with the increasingly strident rhetoric between North Korea and the USA, an increasingly assertive China with the USA playing a much diminished role in the region, more militant Islamization, and ethnic violence—probably ethnic cleansing—in Myanmar resulting in the displacement of more than half a million Rohingya. Are the storm clouds gathering?

1.2. Risk and suffering are unavoidable

In the times in which we live—the times between Jesus’ ascension and return—risk and suffering are unavoidable. As I noticed in a friend’s Skype status at a time when he was being forced to leave China, “Life cannot be made secure.”

John Piper has written an excellent book called Risk is Right: Better to Lose Your Life than to Waste It,4 in which he reminds us that “Risk is woven into the fabric of our finite lives. We cannot avoid risk even if we want to. Ignorance and uncertainty about tomorrow is our native air.” He says he wants to “explode the myth of safety” and “deliver you from the enchantment of security. Because it’s a mirage. It doesn’t exist.”5

1.3. Followers of Jesus will experience additional suffering

Are Christians surprised when they suffer? Nearly always! However, as followers of Christ, we are not promised that we will escape this turmoil and suffering. Rather, in Luke 21:12, we are promised additional suffering that comes to us because of our testimony for Christ.

But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you before kings and governors, and all on account of my name.

In the first century, Peter had to write to new believers telling them not to be surprised “at the fiery ordeal that has come upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Pet 4:12). That exhortation is still needed today.

I remember asking a leader of a group in North Africa that had been particularly effective in seeing Muslims come to faith what their key approaches had been. I was expecting a discussion on different approaches to contextualization. His answer was, “teaching them to suffer and being ready to suffer ourselves.”

Our discipleship in Asia needs to include preparing new Christians for suffering. In some of our contexts, the churches seem overrun with imported approaches to discipleship developed in the West. These approaches rarely have very much to say about suffering. In much of East Asia, suffering is a reality that new believers need to be prepared for, not surprised by.

Jesus addresses that preparation here in Luke 21:14, where he says, “Make up your mind not to worry beforehand” (NIV). He wants us to know about the difficulties ahead so that we are not surprised but trusting God, not fretting or worrying about them, nor expecting that we can always make detailed preparation for the unknowns.

It is worth noting that in the bigger picture of church history, prosperity has often been more fatal to the life of the church than persecution.

1.4. In this context, we bear testimony

It is in this context of change, uncertainty, and suffering that we are to bear testimony to Jesus. Thus Luke 21:13 tells us that “This will be your opportunity to bear witness” (ESV).

Situations of risk and uncertainty are also situations of opportunity. When I taught at All Nations Christian College, one of my students was a former officer in the Royal Gurkha Rifles who had also served with a mission in Nepal. He did his MA dissertation on risk.5 He complained that most documented approaches to risk, including those of the large Christian organizations he studied, viewed risk almost entirely as...
something negative—“the probability of something negative happening in the future which will cause suffering, harm and loss.” Risk, from their position, was to be removed, reduced, or mitigated.

Godwin analysed Paul’s approach to risk and concluded that “Paul’s understanding of risk includes the traditional concept of risk as threat, but is not limited to it. When facing situations of physical danger, Paul analyses the situation not only in terms of the threats they present but also in terms of opportunities.” Godwin concluded that “risk [is] defined by both threat and opportunity in a relationship of creative tension.” Godwin’s conclusion was that, as Christians, our risk assessment not be limited to threat assessment but should also include opportunity assessment.

As we face change and uncertainty, we need to ask: “What opportunities is God creating in the turmoil of the 21st century in East Asia?” For example, the Rohingya, an East Asian Muslim people, are being forced out of a country where it was exceedingly difficult to reach them. Is there more opportunity to share the love of Christ with them in Bangladesh than there was in Myanmar?

As the missiologist Max Warren reminded us: “For effective obedience to the great commission the one thing supremely needed in every age is a lively response of Spirit-inspired opportunism, ever alert to the certainty that God will provide different opportunities in different circumstances.”

1.5. Called to take risks for the gospel

What will be the cost and the risks of taking those opportunities to bear witness to Jesus Christ?

One of the most helpful books about risk is Anna Hampton’s recently published Facing Danger: A Guide Through Risk. It is both pastoral and practical, coming out of her and her husband’s experience of serving and being responsible for people in Afghanistan.

Hampton talks about “cross-cultural risk for the sake of the gospel” which she defines as: “risk entered into for the sake of carrying the gospel cross-culturally with a high probability of experiencing great loss.” All Christians are called to suffer for Christ but “only some Christians are chosen to risk their lives for the sake of the gospel.” It is helpful to recognize that this “cross-cultural risk” is part of our calling.

In fact, a number of times in the New Testament, those who took risks are mentioned and honoured. In Antioch, the church chose for leadership those “who had risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 15:25). Paul makes a point of naming Priscilla and Aquila, who “risked their lives” for him as a fellow worker (Acts 16:3) and also Epaphroditus, who “almost died for the work of Christ” (Phil 2:25–30).

2. Our history: CIM, OMF, and risk

What about OMF’s history as a Fellowship?

When Hudson Taylor started the China Inland Mission (CIM) in 1865, China was not a safe place to go. By 1860, of the 214 male missionaries in China since the arrival of Robert Morrison in 1807, forty four had lost their lives and fifty one had lost their wives. The average life expectancy was seven years. Yet Taylor refused to be satisfied with settling in the safer treaty ports but pressed to go inland. He also sent single women, to the horror of many. There were many risks and at times missionaries paid the cost, to the extent that the CIM once published a book titled Martyred Missionaries of the China Inland Mission with a Record of the Perils and Sufferings of Some who Escaped.

Taylor was also ready to take organizational risks in the development of the Fellowship. One that initially filled him with fear was allowing North Americans to join OMF: “I had not the remotest idea of our visit to America affecting the China Inland Mission thus…I was much concerned—I might almost use the word frightened—at the thought. It soon became clear, however, that God was working.”

A favourite quote on risk, often attributed to Taylor, is: “If there is not an element of (extreme) risk in your exploits for God, there is no need for faith.” (Sources vary as to whether or not the word “extreme” is included.)

When I reflect on this quotation, I want to know more. When did Taylor say or write this? What was the context? What risk was he facing? What lack of faith concerned him?

However, I have not been able to track down the original statement or any information on the original context.

Is this quote that helpful? The important thing is not to take risks to prove our faith but rather to do what is necessary to be faithful to our calling, even if it involves risk. Pursuing risk is not our calling, reaching East Asians is.

2.2. CIM statement on risk

I am much happier with a CIM statement on risk: “While we do not court danger, we are committed to a life which may involve it.”

When I was introduced to this statement by my student, William Godwin, I thought it expressed a much more balanced approach, but again, I wanted to know who said this and why.

The context was China in 1948. CIM missionaries were scattered throughout inland China. A civil war was raging and advancing communist forces were steadily taking over more and more of the country. A missionary with another mission had just been tried by a People’s Tribunal and executed. This was a shock because “such a thing had never happened before. Missionaries had been killed in riots, murdered by bandits, and died as prisoners of war, but this execution ‘by the will of the people’ was new.” In the face of the threat of communist rule, CIM policy had been to withdraw CIM members when a territory was about to come under clear communist control.

The General Director, Bishop Houghton, proposed a change of policy, that instead of withdrawal in the face of communist advance, “the mission be prepared to remain on in China, even under a Communist government.” Thompson records:

The outcome of the meeting was the unanimous decision to withdraw no more workers from areas in danger of Communist invasion and occupation. Those in the provinces next in line of attack would be advised to remain at their posts.
If they wished to withdraw, they could do so, but it would mean resigning from the mission.

All members were informed of the new policy. As they read the message, they came to the words: “If the conditions made it impossible to do effective work, or if the degree of risk to life was high (it is not our business to carelessly throw our lives away) we should think differently.” Then came the challenging reminder that “while we do not court danger, we are committed to a life which may involve it.”

In 1949, forty-nine new missionaries were welcomed to China (the 49ers) at a time when most missions were rapidly downsizing the numbers of their personnel. Only 185 members of the CIM were advised to withdraw. The year 1949 ended with 737 adults and many children still in China, as well as 119 in associate missions.

2.3. Our values
Our OMF values express that we are willing to take risks:

We are passionate to reach the UNREACHED
- Keeping a sharp focus on the neglected frontiers
- Constantly evaluating and innovating in line with our vision
- Taking prayerful risks and persevering with the task God has given us

However, our value is not that we must take risks to prove ourselves or to prove our faith. The statement on risk is an expansion of our value of being passionate to reach the unreached. Our primary value is not that we take risks but that we reach the unreached and we are willing to take risks prayerfully when effectively reaching the unreached requires it.

3. Our example: Paul and risk
How should we respond to risk? The risk management literature typically identifies four ways to respond to risk: risk avoidance, risk transference, risk limitation, and risk acceptance. There is not enough space to look at all the biblical material, so I will concentrate on the example of Paul in Acts.

Hampton is quite negative about people using Paul’s example in discussions on risk because they tend to pick one incident and then generalize from that. I think her caution is justified if we take any one incident on its own and try and generalize. It is important that we look at the variety of ways in which Paul responded to risk. We actually have a number of examples in Acts.

3.1. Paul often avoided danger and took the path of risk avoidance
- Acts 9:23–25: In Damascus, there was a conspiracy among the Jews who were watching the gates to kill him, so his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.
- Acts 9:29–30: In Jerusalem, where Paul was “speaking boldly in the name of the Lord” (v 28), the Jews tried to kill him and so some believers took him to Caesarea and sent him to Tarsus.
- Acts 14:5–6: In Iconium, there was a plot to mistreat and stone Paul and Barnabas, so they fled to Lystra and Derbe where they continued to preach the gospel.
- Acts 14:19–20: In Lystra, Paul was stoned and left for dead … so he left for Derbe to preach there. (Paul later returned quietly to Lystra, to encourage the believers, not for public preaching.)
- Acts 17:5–10: In Thessalonica, his opponents formed a mob, which dragged his companions before the officials. As soon as it was night, Paul and Silas were sent to Berea. On arrival in Berea, they went to the synagogue to preach the gospel.

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- Acts 17:13–15: In Berea, the Jews stirred up the crowds. In response, the believers immediately sent Paul to the coast and on to Athens. In Athens, he was soon debating in the Aeropagus.

- Acts 19:23–20:1: In Ephesus, there was a riot and he moved on to Macedonia.

- Acts 23:12–22: In Jerusalem, Paul learned of a Jewish conspiracy and obtained a guard of 470 soldiers (200 soldiers, 70 horsemen, and 200 spearmen) to protect him as he traveled to Caesarea.

- Acts 27:9: There was a serious risk of shipwreck, so he tried—unsuccessfully—to stop the journey.

3.2. Paul sometimes embraced danger and took the opportunities despite the risks

- Acts 14:2–3: In Iconium the Jews stirred up some Gentiles and poisoned their minds against Paul and his companions. In the face of this, we might have expected them to leave but instead they “spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord.”

- Acts 16:16–40: In Philippi Paul and Silas were mobbed, flogged, and thrown into prison. An earthquake broke open the prison doors but they saw this as an opportunity for evangelism, not for escape. The next day, the magistrates sent officers to release them without charge. But they refused to go quietly and insisted on a public apology and escort before they would leave. This was most likely done to protect the emerging church by clearly establishing that they had done nothing wrong.


3.3. Principles

Paul clearly refuses to give up on the overall mission of taking the gospel to the Gentiles while being ready to be flexible about how that is worked out. In the face of danger, he was ready to relocate but not to relent. He moved on and preached the gospel in the next place, while looking for opportunities to continue to support what had been started in the previous place. At times, such as on his journey to Jerusalem, he went ahead despite the clear knowledge that trouble was sure to come.

I notice that for Paul, risk and perseverance went together, as they do in our values: “taking prayerful risks and persevering with the task that God has given us.” His decisions were also motivated by a concern for the impact on fellow believers. His refusal to go quietly in Acts 16:37 was for the sake of others. And his moving on was often to give them peace. Thus, it was only after Paul was sent to Tarsus that “the church throughout Judaea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace”… and church growth! (Acts 9:31).

3.4. Embrace risk or avoid risk?

How do we decide whether to embrace risk or avoid risk? Hampton writes, “Mature courage helps us know whether we need to stand firm, move forward, or retreat to fight another day. There is a difference between courageous retreat and cowardly retreat, between courageously remaining and cowardly remaining.”

But how do we discern the Spirit’s speaking to us in a high-risk situation? There is an interesting example in Paul’s journey towards Jerusalem.

In Acts 19:21 Paul decides to go to Jerusalem and then on to Rome. When he hears of a Jewish plot against him, he tries to avoid unnecessary danger by changing his route (Acts 20:3b). However, he knows that going to Jerusalem means possible trouble and tells the Ephesian elders: “I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me” (Acts 20:22–23).

As he continues his journey and reaches Caesarea, the Lord sends the prophet Agabus to warn of what is ahead for Paul. Agabus is a prophet of proven reliability, having predicted the famine in Judea that prompted a collection from the church in Antioch (Acts 11:28–30). In a graphic warning vividly acted out before Paul and the believers, Agabus delivers the message that, if he goes to Jerusalem, Paul will be arrested and handed over to the Gentiles (Acts 21:10–11).

The people’s response is to plead with Paul not to go to Jerusalem (Acts 21:12). Paul’s traveling companions (see Luke’s “we”) also join in the plea. The people weep as they try to persuade Paul (Acts 21:13a; see 20:37). Paul’s answer that they are breaking his heart shows how hard all this is on him (21:13a). But he explains his stand: he is not only willing to be bound but also to die for the cause (21:13b). Finally, the people give up, resigning themselves to “the Lord’s will” (21:14).

Why were the warnings given? The believers and Paul’s companions clearly believe that they were given so that Paul could change his plans and avoid danger (as he had done in Acts 20:3). Paul believes that the warnings have been given so that he can prepare for the trials ahead but not so that he can avoid them.

Who is right? A big challenge is to understand what God is saying when different believers come to different conclusions. This difference of opinion is very clear here. The believers “through the Spirit urged Paul not to go to Jerusalem” (Acts 21:4b) and again (including Paul’s own team): “We and the people pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem” (Acts 21:12). In contrast, Paul says “compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem” (Acts 20:22).

It is notable that the believers urging Paul not to go to Jerusalem did so “through the Spirit” and Paul’s decision to go to Jerusalem was “compelled by the Spirit.” How do we reconcile the two? Some commentators struggle with the theology of this. For example, Ajith Fernando writes “The Spirit could not possibly have given two contradictory messages in such quick succession.”

It is certainly a theological conundrum but it is also a practical reality. In my experience it is quite common for deeply committed, Spirit-filled Christians to come to different conclusions about what God is saying. The way forward is not usually to try and decide who has the Spirit and who doesn’t. But these are not abstract theological discussions in which we can compare our views and agree to
differ. These are real-life situations where a decision has to be made.

There are usually many different parties who are seeking the Lord and have a stake in such decisions and their outcome. In mission that usually includes: the member, their immediate family, the church in the context, field leadership, homeside leadership, the home church, and family at home.

With the certainty that we will face practical situations where Christians differ but a decision has to be made—sometimes urgently—it is important to establish in advance how such decisions will be made and who has the authority to make the final decision.

4. Our present context:
OMF, faith, and risk in the 21st century

The risks that we may face in our present context fall into four main areas.

4.1. Risks because we are called to serve in a more dangerous context (health, personal safety, medical care, violence, natural disasters, etc.)

Pursuing our calling often requires us to come alongside people who live in more risky situations than we are privileged to come from, though this is not always the case. A Filipino relocating from Manila to Japan, or an American relocating from Chicago to Singapore is moving to a less dangerous context and reducing many risks. However, often we are asked to serve in more dangerous contexts than those we come from. Those risks are because of our location rather than our testimony; they may include:

- Higher risks of traffic accident (e.g., Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam)
- Higher risks of violent robbery (e.g., Philippines, Cambodia)
- Higher risks of illness due to air pollution (e.g., China)
- Higher risks to health because of poorer healthcare

4.2. Risks because of our testimony to Christ and opposition to it (arrest, expulsion, attack, abduction, death, etc.)

There are other risks that are more specific to our ministry. They arise because of opposition to what we are doing. Hampton states that “The trends of the twenty-first century appear to be leading to increasingly severe risk to Christians wherever they are, but especially for those purposefully moving into cultures hostile to those following the teachings of Jesus the Messiah.”

One could make a long list of examples; the following are just a few.

- Risk of trouble, even violence, because we share the gospel.
- Risk of governments criminalizing our work. For example, Meng Lisi and Li Xinsheng, two young Chinese missionaries, were recently killed in Pakistan. They were abducted by armed men masquerading as policemen. Initially, they were assumed to be some of the thousands of Chinese workers. When it was learned that they were missionaries, the Chinese government’s response was to crack down on the churches that sent them.
- Risk of increased antagonism to our work in previously “Christian” countries. For example, in the UK it is increasingly unacceptable to seek to change someone else’s view about God, but it has become a government imperative to change their views about marriage.

4.3. Risks because of the stresses of cross-cultural service (mental health, stress on families, etc.)

Some risks arise mainly from serving in cross-cultural situations.

- Risks to mental health because of the extra stress of cross-cultural living.

- Risks to our families because of the stress of separation, limited educational options, etc.

4.4. Organizational risks

There are risks that arise as we become part of a large and complex organization.

- Risks in the legal and fiscal realms, which get increasingly complicated as we operate in many different legal and fiscal jurisdictions.
- Risks of legal action because going into a high-risk situation for the reasons we do looks irresponsible and irrational from a secular risk analysis standpoint.
- Risks of organizational change. If we don’t change, we will die. But the wrong change can also be damaging, even fatal.
- Risks of unpredictable government action: for example, recent decisions by the US government has severely affected ministries in North Korea.

5. Our vision:
Worth the risk

When we look at all the different risks that we face, it is important that we do not only focus on the risks to ourselves, or to our family, or to our organization. The reason that we exist is because of the bigger risk, the risk that: 

As Ralph Winter often said: “Risks are not to be evaluated in terms of the probability of success, but in terms of the value of the goal.”

We believe this is a danger with eternal consequences and puts into perspective the other risks that we need to take. We mustn’t make the mistake of making an absolute priority of our personal safety or our organizational security, over and above the needs of the peoples of East Asia who do not have the good news. We need to be willing to take risks for the sake of opportunities for the gospel.
risks to take and which ones to avoid as we seek to be faithful to that. If we are aware that “it is right to risk for the cause of Christ” but do not do so, we may miss God’s purpose for our lives and might even waste them.20

The Luke 21 passage that we started with ends with Jesus saying two apparently contradictory things: “You will be betrayed...and they will put some of you to death...but not a hair of your head will perish. Stand firm, and you will win life” (Luke 21:16–19). This is a reminder that for the Christian, death is not the end. God’s victory in the long-term is assured but what will happen in the short-term is something that we must trust God for. However, the life that really matters is the life lived for God, which is the life lived with God and which will continue with him whether that is during our time of service here on earth or eternally with him in heaven.

As Paul said: “I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace” (Acts 20:24).

Now we are in a new order, a new history. We must assume that our strategy and tactics will, in some respects be very different from those of the past. The commission remains. Our duty is faithfulness. I do not forget the conviction from which I stated that God is uncontrollable. What he may do in our present history, only God knows.21


5 Piper, Don’t Waste Your Life, 81.


10 Godwin did find a slightly broader view of risk as “uncertainty” rather than just “threat” in the international standards (ISO 31000:2009) and argues that “the ISO risk management process makes room to accommodate the biblical conception of risk [as opportunity as well as threat], but does not go so far as to advocate its application in terms of the need for opportunity analysis in risk management processes.” Godwin, “Redeeming Risk,” 27–28, 37.


13 Hampton, Facing Danger, x, 29.


17 Hampton, Facing Danger, 68.

18 Hampton, Facing Danger, xii.


20 Hampton, Facing Danger, 4.


22 For example, a fireman goes into a burning building to rescue someone and we give him a medal. That’s risky but the risk makes sense. We risk ourselves and our families by moving to a more dangerous situation in East Asia and we may be criticized. The risk does not make sense to the world—and “the world” may include our families back home who don’t share our commitment to sharing the gospel with East Asians.


24 Hampton, Facing Danger, 68.


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Facing Danger: A Guide through Risk
Anna E. Hampton (New Prague, MO: Zerdagli, 2016).

This book offers a practical theology of risk forged out of decades of field experience and research. Hampton shares breath-stopping personal stories of difficult, risky choices in the complicated, hostile contexts of living and ministering in Afghanistan and Central Asia. She presents insights about risk from the Old and New Testaments, essential elements of cross-cultural risk assessment and management, risk myths, and practical application on developing endurance strategies, shepherding in a time of risk, and balancing the tension between the leading of the Holy Spirit, wise stewardship, and God’s invitation to risk. She also includes an insightful section on raising children in risk environments.
Mental Health and Mission

Lightyear

Lightyear is a social researcher working in Southeast Asia, training governments in good practice and churches in cross-cultural mission.

Introduction

M ental illness remains widely misunderstood, and yet represents a significant issue for missions in the twenty-first century. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, because of the prevalence and effects of poor mental health amongst the people whom we serve; and secondly, because of the prevalence and effects of poor mental health amongst those who serve cross-culturally. I will argue here that mental illness represents to mission work, in some ways, the twenty-first century equivalent of communicable diseases of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries such as leprosy and tuberculosis, as it is poorly understood, highly disabling, socially stigmatizing, and often a chronic condition which has profound impacts on sufferers and their families. Moreover, where communicable diseases represented a major threat to the lives and well-being of cross-cultural (and local) workers in previous centuries, it is arguable that mental health represents the single biggest threat to prolonged and effective service of mission workers today.

1. Mental health and illness: a brief history (of what we mean)

Michael Foucault¹ and others² describe the conceptualization of mental illness through time, showing how the forms and behaviour, and subsequent “categorizing and policing” of mental illness have changed through history. Industrialization plays a key role, in that increasing universalization of rights, roles, and expectations also defines the boundaries of normality, in terms of behaviour, which previously were defined and managed more locally in rural, agrarian societies.³ This is significant in an era of both increasing and changing industrialization (sometimes termed Industry 4.0)⁴ where job and income insecurity, migration, cyber-threats, and rapidly changing identity politics represent emerging threats to mental and social well-being.

The role of culture in mental illness is significant, both in terms of how mental illness is defined and managed.⁵ However, increasingly, the construction of culture is undergoing change, again largely due to technological advances enabling globalized communication. Thus, whilst understandings of culture based on widely understood norms may have validity, people from different cultures interact, consume, and produce “culture” which represents fusions of different strands.⁶ As cultural constructs change, so the understanding and classification of mental illness also change.⁷

Religious beliefs inform understandings of mental health⁸, from mental well-being approaches found in Buddhist meditation⁹, to more behavioural perspectives found in Islamic teaching.¹⁰ In most traditions, definitions are highly varied and frequently include the involvement of evil spirits and other supernaturally attributed phenomena.¹¹

Within the Christian worldview, too, a diversity of perspectives exist on mental health, with some perspectives more rooted in Enlightenment-based biomedical models, and others functioning almost exclusively in the spiritual domain.¹² Whilst much is often made of the dichotomy between “Western” and “Eastern” perspectives on mental illness, careful analysis of popular beliefs reveals that the differences are less stark than sometimes presumed. Even within the evangelical tradition, perspectives of and approaches to mental health vary, from seeking medical help to applying spiritual disciplines, dealing with hidden sins, and exorcisms. Evangelicals remain divided on the validity of some approaches, such as psychotherapy, drug treatment, or casting out demons.¹³

The first point, then, is an appreciation of the historical and cultural rootedness of concepts of mental illness. But at the same time, this should not discourage us from engaging—“Well, depression means something different ‘over there’ so there’s not much we can do”—but rather encourage us to respond. An approach to mental well-being which has its rooting in identity in Christ and in the createdness of human beings provides a starting point which can enable engagement with different perspectives on mental health and illness without descending into meaningless relativity. An understanding of worldview is a critical element to our understanding of mental health. In other words, cross-cultural workers who engage deeply with worldview issues are well positioned to engage with the complexity of mental illness.

2. Mental illness globally (and where you live and work) and missionally

The World Health Organization describes mental illness as the leading cause of ill health and disability worldwide.¹⁴ Promoting mental health and well-being, and the prevention and treatment of substance abuse,
are integral parts of the Sustainable Development Agenda adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 25 September 2015 to transform our world by 2030. In much of East Asia, signs of declining mental health are expressed in a variety of ways: increasing suicide rates and drug and alcohol abuse. Moreover, social trends—including changes in technology—paradoxically may contribute to new forms of mental illness, such as gaming addiction.

When described using standard medical definitions, the forms or categories of mental illness differ based on the approach, but broadly speaking encompass conditions such as depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, manic-depressive disorders, personality disorders, addiction, and mental illness associated with other medical conditions. Again, however, how these are defined and managed is often contingent upon the particular context—cultural, religious, and economic. What we can say, however, is that mental health issues, however they are defined and managed, represent an increasing problem in East Asian and other countries that is not matched by a corresponding increase in resources available to address the issue.

The historical example of leprosy demonstrates that a concern for people affected by leprosy drew upon the biblical examples of Jesus healing lepers and gave rise to a significant mission movement which embraced a multi-dimensional approach, with medical, social, and spiritual care. The early responses to what was a poorly understood and much feared condition left a legacy whereby mission groups contributed to the global elimination of the disease and, in many places, brought lasting change to the way affected persons are treated. In the context of the twenty-first century, mental illness, in its various forms, in many ways reflects the challenge to missions that leprosy was in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: poorly understood, highly stigmatizing, often chronic, widespread but equally largely ignored, and needing a very holistic approach. In those days, it was people with leprosy who were frequently characterized as the “least, the last, and the left behind.” In our day, and perhaps as has always been, the least, last, and left behind are increasingly likely to include people with mental illness or learning disabilities—and where women are often disproportionately stigmatized and excluded.

Thus, the second point: how should we respond to the issue of our day, an issue which potentially represents a far more serious and widespread missional challenge than even leprosy did in previous centuries? How does our mission outreach acknowledge and respond to the rapidly emerging yet unmet needs of people with mental illness, where a holistic approach—much like that towards leprosy—is not only possible, but required?

3. Mental illness and mission workers

Recent surveys indicate that mental-health related issues are amongst the top seven reasons for what is known as “missionary attrition.” Analysis of medical records of early returned LDS (Latter-day Saints) missionaries by Drake and Drake indicated that mental illness alone was responsible for premature return in 38 percent of early returnees. Mental illness “is overrepresented in early returned missionaries (ERMs) compared to their peers who complete their full term of expected missionary service”. The challenges and hardships missionaries face may overwhelm their coping resources and exacerbate the turmoil, anxiety, and crises of emerging adulthood.

Expectations and Burnout: Women Surviving the Great Commission

Sue Eenigenburg and Robynn Bliss (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2010).

This book presents insights both from personal experiences and findings of research and surveys from the field. Eenigenburg and Bliss write with realism and honesty to demonstrate how burnout can happen and discuss ways to develop realistic expectations and yet maintain faith in God to accomplish the impossible. Even though it was written specifically to women, the practical ways it offers for recognizing expectations will help cross-cultural workers in general, whether new or experienced.

Embodied Hope: A Theological Meditation on Pain and Suffering

Kelly M. Kapic (Downers Grove: IVP, 2017).

Built upon strong theology and his family’s experience with prolonged physical pain, Kapic journeys with readers through different levels of the struggle to understand suffering. Beyond addressing questions that often accompany sorrow, he invites readers to a renewed understanding of embodied hope in the incarnation, cross, and resurrection of Christ. Drawing from Luther and Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Life Together, Kapic calls us out of isolation into the consolation of the communal life in Christ. The practical aspects he includes offer wisdom, guidance, and consolation for the hurting, the healers, and the helpers.
Thomas and Thomas\textsuperscript{25} draw parallels to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and suggest a “mission-related stress disorder” (MRSD) as a “framework for understanding and assisting missionaries with the effects of stress during and after their missions.”\textsuperscript{26} However, lack of specific inquiry into mental-health-related issues in surveys such as ReMAP\textsuperscript{27}—possibly reflecting the paucity of awareness or acknowledgement of specific mental health issues—means that the issue of mental health is often approached either through more well-known and well-accepted forms (such as post-traumatic stress disorder)\textsuperscript{28} or using non-specific euphemisms of processes (such as “Burnout”)\textsuperscript{29}. This illustrates the first of three problems: the lack of a reasonable common understanding of mental health, fueled by the social unacceptability of mental health in Christian society, which leads to imprecise terminology which paradoxically makes it more difficult to recognize and render assistance. The inability to properly “name” what is happening may hinder attempts to help.

Secondly, the lack of a common framework for understanding potentially limits the kind of help that can be received. Those defining mental illness from a purely biomedical perspective may shy away from interventions drawn from a more spiritual/supernatural epistemology; yet evidence would suggest the need to consider multiple perspectives in the approach to mental illness.\textsuperscript{30} A substantial body of research gives insights into specific considerations for longer and short term workers,\textsuperscript{31} female workers,\textsuperscript{32} third-culture kids,\textsuperscript{33} and those in more traumatic circumstances,\textsuperscript{34} as well as practical ways to help early returnees.\textsuperscript{35} The concept of resilience building\textsuperscript{36} forms part of a three-fold area of focus: preparation\textsuperscript{37}, prevention—largely through awareness and understanding of stressors and the development of systems which promote good mental health—\textsuperscript{38} and early identification and management\textsuperscript{39}, with an emphasis on building awareness, coping and communication skills\textsuperscript{40}, identity issues, and resilience.\textsuperscript{41}

Thirdly, and linked to the first two points, is the shift in approach away from locating mental illness or mental health primarily in the person (who is labeled “weak,” or “mentally unsuited”) or an event (which is said to be “stressful” or “traumatic”) to viewing mental health as an outcome of more complex interplays between people, circumstances, beliefs, and expectations. This has the potential to lead us to articulate better questions on how to reduce the degree to which mental health issues impair the work of missionaries. Here, we come back to the point made in the introduction, where we appealed to a parallel understanding between the threat posed by tuberculosis in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to missionaries, and the threat posed by mental illness in the twenty-first century. It is not just the size of the threat, nor the degree of ubiquity: ultimately, where the incidence of tuberculosis has been reduced it has been achieved by addressing the illness from multiple angles—better nutrition and housing (the basic circumstances of living), vaccination, identification of people at higher risk, early and effective treatment, and public campaigns of awareness. Arguably, a similar approach is needed with mental health—careful attention to the circumstances of living, preparation (including identifying people and situations of higher risk), and early intervention—all done against a backdrop of increased public awareness. What could that look like for a mission organization? Here are five suggestions:

1. Develop an organizational culture which allows proper naming and discussion of mental health issues. This should not be satisfied with using convenient euphemisms, but acknowledge the wide range of forms which mental illness takes.

2. Analyze the “conditions of living” and working for workers. This should include not only the obvious stressors—war, poverty, culture stress—but organizational issues such as conflict, poor communication, unrealistic expectations, and isolation. The question is then asked “How can we develop more healthy working conditions in these circumstances?”

3. Address issues of resilience from the beginning. Again, this should not only try to locate resilience in the individual, but in groups and structures. This should include paying attention to maintaining healthy spiritual and emotional well-being and providing resources to facilitate that.

4. Increase awareness of administrators to identify situations of high-risk or early signs of mental illness. This links to point (1) where a culture of openness is needed, as well as increased understanding of what mental illness is.

5. Integrate approaches to address issues of mental health which take into account differing belief systems and needs. This argues neither for the primacy of a biomedical or a supernatural epistemology, but rather that people are likely to benefit from more than one approach. Integration includes specific attention to development of awareness and skills, such as how to communicate with others (concerning mental illness), coping mechanisms, and dealing with issues of shame and guilt.

**Conclusion:**

**Wounded healers**

The concept of the “Wounded Healer”\textsuperscript{42} may be apt, and leads us to two conclusions. Firstly, when looking back into how the challenge of leprosy-affected persons inspired a particular mission movement in the previous two centuries, accepting the conceptual relevance of mental health in our context can potentially give rise to new forms of integral mission to socially excluded people across the world—of which there are already numerous examples.

Secondly, when looking at addressing the issue of mental health amongst workers, we may well find it harder to separate this from outreach; and perhaps the outreach is best done by organizations which have a deep self-understanding of the issues of mental health and experience in enabling rehabilitation of people with mental health issues. In other words, our outreach is linked to our internal understanding of mental health, so that the issues need to be considered simultaneously. MRT

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\textsuperscript{1} Michael Foucault, *History of Madness* (New York: Routledge, 2013).


\textsuperscript{3} J. Cooper and N. Sartorius, “Cultural and Temporal Variations in Schizophrenia: A Speculation on the Importance of Industrialization,” *The British Journal of Psychiatry,*
Almost ten years ago, our long-prayed-for son entered the world and, with him, an involuntary rerouting on a long and steep journey which my husband and I would never have chosen. Two years later, with our newborn daughter in our arms and toddler son on our knee, we sat in the consultant’s office holding the words “Autism Spectrum Disorder” and “Profound Learning Disability” in our heads while their implications slowly filtered down to our hearts.

Words in a label which carried the force and weight of profound loss for me, my husband, and our lives in Southeast Asia. Forced to relinquish the lifestyle we enjoyed, the friendships we had cultivated, the work in which we had partnered, and the lifelong dreams we had envisaged together, we reluctantly left our home in Southeast Asia and began a very new flavour of life, family, work, and ministry in the United Kingdom.

The challenges of “re-entry” for us were engulfed and drowned out by being plunged into the underworld of learning disability, autism, and challenging behaviours. We grappled daily with society’s prevailing intolerance of and belittling attitude towards those with such a disability, but perhaps the most painful was the struggle we experienced in our local Christian communities to see Micah embraced and included. Our vision, thinking, training, experience, and work had revolved around contextualised ecclesiology, and as we observed the integration of our son’s disability in church life through this missional lens we could only perceive huge gaps. We held to our biblically framed understanding of what church could and should be among a local community, particularly to the vulnerable, but our personal experience and observations of how church treated those with a disability pointed to an overwhelming disparity between theology and practice.

We observed that the attitude of our churches towards those with a disability—particularly a learning disability—is subtly but potently informed by and tinged with that of the world. Specifically, we experienced:

• The lack of personal engagement by the church family with these boys, girls, men, and women as individual people in genuine friendships,

• The low priority given to bringing these people to Jesus as seen in the allocation of effort and resources,

• The attitude of paternalism in which the “strong and able” minister to the “weak and disabled,”

• And the failure of orthodox Christian theology to engage with the type of humanity experienced by those living with a learning disability.

Re-reading Scripture through a new lens

The scope and perspective of my familiar, tightly held Christian theological framework was no longer sufficient to answer my plethora of questions about Micah: How do we identify imago Dei in his humanity that is intermingled with such complex needs? How does a boy who understands few words engage with “the Word” unto salvation? How do we perceive the role of such a profoundly disabled individual with his obvious dependencies as an integral and indispensable part of the Body of Christ?

Reading familiar texts through the lens of disability shifted my focus from an objective, detached theological agenda, to a more subjective, relational engagement with the narrative and...
characters of the text. My story became one with the mothers who brought their children for Jesus to bless, only to be excluded by the disciples (Mark 10:13–16); or with the father who travelled a long and challenging journey to bring his son to Jesus for healing, but the disciples argued over their failure to heal (Mark 9:14–29).

Additionally, reading Scripture with the families outside the church who walked the path of Autism and Learning Disability with us, highlighted the failure of the church to missionally speak with relevance to those “on the outside” whose lives are dominated by disability.

Disability theology

During this time, I began to investigate disability theology, which is described as the attempt by disabled and nondisabled Christians to understand and interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ, God, and humanity against the backdrop of the historical and contemporary experiences of people with disabilities … [resulting in] a variety of perspectives and methods designed to give voice to the rich and diverse theological meanings of the human experience of disability.

These writings transformed my grief and despair to joy and hope, and I recognised that my son’s value, purpose, and potential could be realised not only because of his disability, but because of the same. However, as my understanding of Micah from the divine perspective grew, the greater was my frustration at the failure of the church to engage with these truths and demonstrate them in community.

Thus, while the implications of reading Scripture in the light of disability theology centre on the person (and those closely associated) affected by the presence of disability, the ramifications of disability theology are such that their full value cannot be unleashed until they are embraced by and embodied in the whole Christian community and applied to a wider set of issues in society.

A missiological opportunity

Disability theology has exchanged formative dialogue with various strands of theology, particularly ecclesiology, soteriology, and moral theology. However, writing in the Journal of Disability and Religion, Conner regretfully states that, “notably absent in this discussion have been contributions from the field of missiology.”

The Cape Town Commitment, endorsed by many mission agencies, urges the engagement of church leaders and mission partners with the global community of those living with various disabilities. It is not surprising that an estimated 15 percent of the world’s population, living with one or more disability, have been referred to as “an unreached people group,” 90 to 95 percent of whom have no access to the gospel. More poignant for the work of OMF is the assertion that “over the next quarter century it is likely that the Southeast Asian countries will experience the greatest international growth in the number of disabled people.”

Research carried out by Chaney in ten Southeast Asian countries refers to the huge challenges faced by people with disabilities in the areas of poverty, education, healthcare, access to public services, justice and law, and employability.

What efforts are being made to move towards those commonly labelled as “the disabled”, in our church communities, field strategies, and leadership discussions? How will we begin to listen to their voices, so long silent in our missional thinking and outside of the scope of our ministry? What place have we given to the disabled experience in our missiological hermeneutics and analysis of gospel, culture, and church?

From Belfast to Bangkok to Beijing, those who bear any responsibility for the formation, growth, and leadership of the global Christian community, must begin to engage with the barriers in our communities for those living with disability, both structural and attitudinal. Barriers which create the prevalence of an “us and them” scenario, which devalue individuals because of their disability.

Missiology offers the opportunity of identifying and addressing cultural barriers to disability within local cultures, local church contexts, and to cross cultural boundaries by suggesting a contextual ecclesiology, inclusive of those with disabilities. Is it time for the strands of missiology and disability theology to blend in response to “one of the major opportunities and challenges for missiology in the twenty-first century” and form a disability missiology?

Against this backdrop, church leaders and missiologists must jointly ask: What is the biblical perspective of disability? How should the Christian faith and our Christian communities impact and include the local disabled community? What biblical message about disability must we convey to our society?

The Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry, relationships, and priorities are heavily dominated by his engagement with those living with some form of disability. Indeed, he defined his own identity and mission with reference to releasing humanity from various forms of disabilities (Matt 4:18; 11:5). Working towards an informed response to the questions above, requires that we adopt a new hermeneutical stance from which we reread Scripture, no longer to those with disabilities, but alongside them, rereading passages in a new light. Understanding passages through the lens of disability, we are enabled to see real people with real issues, move beyond our tendency to spiritualise references to disability, or to read a healing passage and solely extract a proof of the divinity of Christ.

A divine encounter

For the purpose of this discussion, it is helpful to take two passages of Scripture and merge the two incidents together. Mark 10:46–52 and John 9:1–41 record episodes in which Jesus encounters and heals a man with visual impairment—a man described as “blind”. How do we carry that one word? Factually and objectively with a theological detachment, or do we perhaps jump directly to the spiritualisation of being blind, as Jesus himself uses the experience of blindness to highlight our inability to perceive what God is doing? Or can we pause, listen, and attempt to enter in to the weight of that one word for the individual man whose total existence has been defined and shaped by its implications.

Held within this dramatic episode are four main players. Three of these players will be discussed now and the fourth player will become evident in the conclusion:
Mainstream Society: Those who belong on the inside of the city walls, those who create the buzz of city life, those holding value extending to the business and relational networks within it.

The disabled man: Excluded from the city networks, is a sub-section of society, wherein the blind, lame, deaf—the disabled—belong together, condemned to the roadside, outside the city gates. Perhaps this man, hoping that one individual in the busy crowd, having made a lucrative business transaction, might fulfil the Mosaic law of almsgiving in his direction.

In the Southeast Asian city where we lived, men and women, with similar needs from families without state benefits and with restricted capacity to provide, were literally transported to the edge of the marketplace early each morning where they were left to procure whatever means of charitable income they could manage.

The disciples and the “great crowd following”: Jesus’ followers walk past this man and his associates, hear his cry for mercy directed to Jesus, but silence him. There is no place for this man in the city, and there is no time for his voice in their agenda for Jesus. The disciples, unwilling to engage with this man as a fellow human being, fail to appreciate the experience of being blind, place him as nothing more than the object of a theological discussion, asking the question: who sinned—was it this man or his parents—that he was born blind?

In our post-Enlightenment cultures, the prevailing question of disability is “how”: a focus on the neurological, genetic, physiological, and behavioural causes and cures of disability. This is accompanied by Western individualism’s more nuanced cries of “why me, why must I suffer”? Yet, for many hearts in our Asian contexts, the question of disability is phrased, Why am I being punished this way? Who has cursed me? However, in our churches, the question of disability is channelled in a single direction.

Blind man: Those with disability: Image of God

Central to Jesus’ engagement is the man born blind. Whereas others ignored and silenced him, Jesus notices him and creates a place for his voice. For this man who was excluded, on the periphery, Jesus brings him near and draws him into a personal interaction. While he was previously devalued, dependent, the recipient of obligatory almsgiving, Jesus gives him dignity, by asking “what do you want me to do for you?” Finally, Jesus heals the man by removing the impairment, allowing him to see, and transforming his life.

This incident also deeply impacted the man’s family, those ‘disabled by association’. The disciples’ question reflects the perception of societies and cultures around the world which seek to attribute blame, point out fault, and label with sin. Cultures shaped by honour-shame, in which the community’s response to the stigma of disability is as burdensome as the disability itself.

Had Jesus’ focus been limited to this man, had his interaction with this man been a direct and discreet removal of the disability, the medical model of disability might have been embodied. This model of disability focuses on the individual and the impairment in which treatment of the disability is channelled in a single direction.

Eiesland describes the parallel attitude of the Christian Church as being shaped by the goal of “normalisation” of those with disabilities: “Our bodies have too often been touched by hands that have forgotten our humanity and attend only to curing us...Healing has been the churchly parallel to rehabilitative medicine.” Have we focussed so heavily on the labelled diagnosis, the impairment, the deficiency, the atypical shape of their bodies, or behaviours that we fail to see and appreciate the boy, girl, man, and woman in the breadth of their humanity? The narrow criteria by which we understand the wholeness of the person leads to a limited understanding of healing that, in turn, fails to engage with shalom—the wellness of physical, intellectual, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual aspects of personhood.

Pivotal in my own search for theological understanding was to seek out the shape of imago Dei integral to Micah. Arguably, orthodox Christian theology limits our understanding of the person, character, and capacity of God, which is formulated according to the criteria and experience of an able bodied, able minded humanity (e.g. humanity has strength, but God is infinitely stronger; humanity can love but the love of God is infinitely purer and broader).

Within this framework our systematic theology volumes generally locate the “image of God” in humanity under the categories of being logical/rational, having capacity and desire for relationship, and enjoying a level of creativity—none of which can be easily defined in my son! By limiting imago Dei to criteria experienced in a humanity exclusive of disability, the Christian church effectively implies that the image of God can be diminished in the presence of profound disability.

From this stance, the Christian church “assumes that getting rid of...disabilities is the chief concern of people who are disabled and the ideal for all people.” Is our subconscious hermeneutic for understanding disability too closely bound up with sin, lack of faith, and “the Fall”? Does the lack of engagement with disability in our churches reflect our unwillingness to grapple with these theological issues? How do we understand the image of God in my son, Micah, who can be more destructive than creative, whose mind’s logic we fail to understand and in whom the traits of Autism form barriers to him forming meaningful, two-way relationships?

Could it be that Micah’s vulnerability points us to another aspect of the divine character and modus operandum, highlighting that God chose to make himself vulnerable, in creation, in the cross and in the church? Can Micah’s high level of dependency point us to an understanding of the divine beyond independent, perfect,
powerful transcendency, and towards his character of dependency outlined in the Triune community. Inclusive Christian communities become the context for the recognition that “rather than being inequitable with the image of God, it turns out that the lives of people with profound intellectual disabilities actually reveal God,” highlighting some forgotten aspects of theology. In doing so we formulate a broader understanding of who God is.

The image of God has traditionally been interpreted within an anthropological and a creationist framework, but a theology of disability may extend our understanding of imago Dei through the lens of Christology, soteriology, and ecclesiology, wherein “the image of God begins to be restored in the body of Christ when each individual is affirmed for that they have to attribute to the total image.” Within this framework, the type of healing advocated by Yong occurs in inclusive Christian communities when “people with disabilities find redemption from disability, not when they are healed, but with the removal of societal barriers.”

Yong’s use of the term “redemption” points to the vision that God is active in creating something beautiful from that which society perceives as defunct and broken.

**Disciples: Church: Body of Christ**

In light of this, we return to Jesus’ encounter with the man born blind. It is vital to note that in this (and many other occurrences in the Gospels), Jesus did not act alone; this was no discrete, direct interaction solely focused on one man, Jesus chose to mobilise his disciples, instructing them to engage with this man, commanding: “call him to me.”

The disciples’ response to Jesus’ command required them, as individuals and as a group, to turn their attention to this man, formulate appropriate words, move towards him, place their hands on his arm and guide him through the crowd towards Jesus. By engaging the disciples in this way, Jesus effectively shifts the position of this man from being the object of their detached discussions, to the focus of their personal interactions. In doing so, Jesus used his intentional commands of inclusion to teach and shape his disciples to know and follow him to a deeper level.

By shaping the engagement of his disciples with this man, Jesus’ management of the situation is comparable to the social model of disability. This model highlights that the actual impairment is only one strand of suffering associated with disability. It is hugely augmented by the barriers imposed on the individual due to society’s perceptions of his or her disability.

Integral then to any discussion on disability and the church are the Pauline reflections on the Christian church as the body of Christ (Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 12). No longer holding an attitude of “them and us,” leading to division and exclusion, the Christian church embodies a new community, wherein each member is part of the divine arrangement, connected and interdependent. Paul, understanding our natural but fundamentally flawed default towards the strong, extends this image with the radical statement that “those who seem to be weak, are indispensable” (1 Corinthians 12:12–27) and require a special honour, dignity, and respect.

Even where Christian communities and missional enterprises have responded to include those with a disability, the ministry is generally directed from the strong and able to the weak and disabled, based on the one-sided premise that people with disabilities need the church. Engagement with the world of disability has been one strongly shaped by paternalism, denying the individual any contributory role in the body of Christ, any responsibility as an image bearer, defining them merely as the recipient of others’ strength.

Missiologically, we must acknowledge and act on the recognition that the global disabled community is largely “unreached”. However, the engagement envisaged under The Cape Town Commitment acknowledges the reciprocal relationship that exists between the church and people with disability. This document, key to missiological strategies and discussions, outlines a mandate to “minister to people with disabilities and to receive the ministry they have to give…to think not only of mission among those with a disability, but to recognise, affirm and facilitate the missional calling of believers with disabilities themselves, as part of the Body of Christ.”

Our missional engagement with this “unreached people group” has a two-pronged motivation: both to bless those with disabilities and to be blessed through them.

Each person, with or without disability, has been assigned a role to bear the image of God within the body of Christ. As we reread Scripture and revise our theologies, missional structures, and traditions alongside those who offer us the lens of disability, it is worth exploring how the church can perceive and empower each member’s contribution to the body of Christ not only despite any disability, but also through any disability.

The human default veers towards power, strength, and ability and yet the biblical metanarrative reiterates that God’s strength is made perfect in weakness. Shifting to such an attitude of inclusion requires “our own conversion, so that our eyes can truly see, our ears can really hear, and our other senses can be fully activated to receive and be transformed by what such people have to offer.”

Our focus within OMF must not only include the geographical spread or the theological depth of the church, but also carefully consider the shape of the church in our various Asian contexts. Conner asserts, “the expansion of the gospel, in terms of ‘missio dei’ is more about the Gospel expanding toward a fuller expression” and “what is at stake in contextualising is the fullness of the body of Christ, the very diversity of Christian humanity is necessary in order for the church to be complete.”

Consequently, it is not an option for our Christian communities, our missional strategies, and our theological discussions to opt out of efforts to include people with disabilities. Jennie Weiss Block highlights that this is an integral characteristic of the church which is the “quintessential inclusive community” because “the gospel of Jesus Christ is a call to a new world where outsiders become insiders” and our identification with Jesus Christ, as our “copious host”, necessitates our role as his “co-hosts.” Inclusion of those with a disability in our churches is a natural outworking of the Great
Amos Yong, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

People of God
The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the
its own ends. In the Asian setting, it
reminder that “the Christian
of the kingdom provides an important
Understanding the church in the light
treatment of those with a disability?
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Understanding the church in the light
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community does not exist simply for
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is imperative for the church to model
its Christian faith and life both within
its own community and in the wider
social setting of other communities.”

City: Society: Kingdoms

Returning to our Gospel passages,
we focus now on the general public
who tolerated this man in exclusion,
overlooked, and largely ignored him.
He, in turn, was wholly dependent on
them. Jesus steps into this social order
and demonstrates the kingdom values
he proclaimed, values which radically
challenged values prevalent in the
wider, observing society.

While Hudson Taylor’s model of the
contextualised gospel is celebrated in
OMF structures and strategies, less
prominent is the question of how we
demonstrate kingdom values in issues
which confront local society and
oppose local culture. At the interface
gospel, church, and local culture,
we are called to expose beliefs and
practices which stand opposed to the
rule and reign of God. Specifically,
how can we challenge the negative
social constructs surrounding the
perception of, provision for, and
treatment of those with a disability?

Understanding the church in the light
of the Kingdom provides an important
reminder that “the Christian
community does not exist simply for
its own ends. In the Asian setting, it
is imperative for the church to model
its Christian faith and life both within
its own community and in the wider
social setting of other communities.”

The Great Commission itself implies
an integrated, active approach to
proclaiming and demonstrating
Kingdom values, for “When we are
expected to teach to obey everything
he has commanded us, we are
certainly expected to do everything
he has commanded us.”

How can OMF empower and mobilise Christian
communities to missionally fulfil the
actions encouraged by the Cape Town
Commitment to “rise up,” “stand
alongside,” “resist prejudice,” “fight
for,” and “advocate for” the needs of
individuals and families who live with
disability, not just in the church, but
in the “wider society?”

How does OMF’s vision for “church
planting movements” embody Jesus’
proclamation and demonstration of the
kingdom? Do we need to adapt our
processes and structures to facilitate
the sending of skilled workers to
support local churches and ministries
in key areas relating to disability?

How can we be instrumental in
rewriting the narrative of society in
regard to disability as we pray “Your
Kingdom come”?

Swintons points out that “the context
of Jesus’ acts for justice was focused on
the coming Kingdom” and this “new
community is called to work towards
justice, but according to its own
criterion.”

As the Christian church
speaks into the social order of the local
community, the national government,
and on the global level about the
issues affecting people with disabilities,
we do so to point to, to reveal, and to
identify with the coming kingdom—
our ultimate vision. Consequently,
we are missionally empowered as
our Christian witness to the world
is enabled. An intentional, effective,
and inclusive church community (in
Belfast, Bangkok, or Beijing) can
cut through cultural assumptions
and reveal how the church in its
teology and practice has become
acculturated in ways that prevent
it from functioning faithfully.

Correspondingly, Conner states
that “in this missiological way of
thinking, people with disabilities are…
necessary contributors to the calling
of Church to bear witness to the
ongoing redemptive work of God in
this world—proclaiming the Kingdom
of God is at hand.”

Without the vital role of individuals with
disability, the church’s witness is diminished.
Conner quotes Newbigin who argues
that, “without that witness from its
own membership, the Church’s witness
is distorted and deceptive, and the
Church’s discipleship is irrelevant
to the real world in which men and
women live and suffer.”

Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability
and Hospitality
Thomas Reynolds, (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008).

Reynolds presents disability from a theological perspective combined with the experiential perspective of bringing up a son who has multiple disabilities. He argues that the biblical story is about strength coming from weakness, redemption resulting from God’s vulnerability, and disability as a way to explore vulnerability with others and with God. Bringing together a diverse body of literature with arguments drawn from theological, philosophical, and sociological perspectives, the book includes resources to help individuals and churches to foster hospitality toward people with disabilities.

The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the
People of God
Amos Yong, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

Yong develops a theology of disability drawn from insights of biblical scholarship on disability and his experience of caring for and engaging with a brother with Down syndrome. He rigorously examines Old and New Testament passages to highlight how disability has often been misconstrued and reinterprets the passages from the perspective of the disabled with the aim of dismantling the bias held by the non-disabled. Yong calls the church to remove the underlying stigma towards the disabled and to become healing and truly inclusive communities that value people with disabilities.
Conclusion

In conclusion, we return to the Gospel passages to identify a fourth party whose presence and purpose was intrinsic to Jesus’ encounter with this blind man: God—the One to whom our image bearing points, the One who makes himself manifest in his body, the One who reigns as King throughout his kingdom on earth. Jesus states that this man and his experience of being blind, was ultimately “that the works of God be made known.” In this divine encounter, God’s transformative power and overarching purpose were potently displayed.

In light of this, we move towards those who experience disability, hoping to facilitate more divine encounters of the same. We move forward carefully, progressively formulating a disability missiology on the journey we share with men, women, boys, and girls living with disabilities.

The parable of the great banquet depicts the Master’s servants urgently “going out” towards those on the margins. We also, must “go out” and cross boundaries so as to “bring in” those who because of their various disabilities are excluded. Why? Not primarily for the benefit of those on the outside, but so that the Master’s house—the global church—will be “full”, complete, and mature, inclusive of all men, women, boys, and girls from all people groups, whatever their ability or disability.

In partnership with other organisations, OMF (UK) is hoping to co-host an academic conference in 2019 that would bring together disability theologians, missiologists, and practitioners to facilitate the interface between disability theology and mission. If you would like to be kept informed about this initiative please write to uk.nd@omfmail.com.

If you are involved in this area of ministry and would like to be part of a Fellowship-wide network of practice, please email donna.jennings@omfmail.com.

4 Countries in focus were East Timor, Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos.
6 White outlines how “the Christian community has a history of devaluing attitudes towards people with disabilities,” through which they are largely relegated to “the outside.” White, “People with Disabilities,” 12.
9 Rieser outlines that the medical model of disability “sees the disabled person as the problem...the focus is usually on the impairment...with the medical and associated professions’ discourse of cures, normalisation and science.” Richard Rieser, “Disability Equality: Confronting the Oppression of the Past,” in Education, Equality and Human Rights, Mike Cole, ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 135, quoted by Chaney, “Comparative Analysis,” 411.
11 Could it be that the low priority and lack of resources given to missionally engage with the profoundly disabled is due to a subconscious belief that they do not bear image Dei?
13 “The God we Christians must learn to worship is not a god of self-sufficient power, a god who in self-possession needs no one; rather ours is a God who needs a people, who needs a son. Absoluteness of being or power is not a work of the God we have come to know through the cross of Christ.” Stanley Hauerwas, “Suffering the Retarded: Should We Prevent Retardation?”, in Critical Reflections on Stanley Hauerwas’ Essays on Disability: Disability Society, Disabling Theology, John Swinton, ed. (New York: Haworth Press, 2005), 296.
14 “If God is trinity; if the Son is begotten and dependent on God; if God is a God of self-communicating love, then perfection is different. It is not comprised of independence, power or transcendence.” Hauerwas, “Suffering the Retarded,” 105.
18 Rieser sees the “loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others due to social barriers.” Rieser, “Disability Equality,” 135, quoted by Chaney, “Comparative Analysis”, 411.
26 Support in the areas of Education, Health, Therapy: teacher training, therapists (speech and language, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, behavioural therapists), the development of diagnostic procedures and understanding; Missional Business: using local resources to produce disability aids (wheelchairs, walking frames, feeding aids, communication aids); enterprises that provide sustainable means of providing income for families affected by disability; Christian voices into the shaping of public policy; engagement with government legislation regarding disability and ensuring its implementation.
27 Swinton, “Who is the God We Worship?” 304.
28 Swinton, “Who is the God We Worship?” 293.
Worshipping God through Suffering

Walter McConnell

Life does not consist of nothing but warm sunny days and peaceful ease. Suffering, in some form, affects us all, causing us to cry out in pain or scream that life is unfair. Many things—the loss of a spouse through death, divorce, or dementia, inability to find a marriage partner or conceive a child, failure to find or keep a job, psychological or sexual abuse, physical pain, depression, etc.—rob us of the joy we desire. Equally they impact our relationship with God, particularly with regard to worship. How can we worship God in and through our suffering? If worship is all about celebration and praising the Lord for all the good things he has done, how can I approach him in my grief and pain? Do I have to “fake it” and pretend that things are OK when they’re not? Do I need to quit attending Christian activities until I can get it together again and I feel like praising God?

These questions show how difficult it is for many of us to come to God in worship in the midst of personal suffering. They also show that our understanding of worship is often inadequate. Worship is not merely a matter of singing from a joyful heart about the wonders of who God is and the marvelous things he has done. At its most basic, worship—as it is developed in the Bible—consists of bowing down before God in submission to his will, fearing him for his majesty and power, and serving him in our daily lives whether by specific acts of worship or by simply doing that which pleases God. As our relationship with God encompasses all of life, it is possible, indeed essential, that we learn how to worship God through the rough times when mumbling, “Praise the Lord, anyway,” simply won’t do. Thankfully the Bible not only alerts us that we can worship in times of pain, it also helps us along the way by telling stories of people who called out to God in their need and preserving literary forms designed to be used by those bringing laments to God. It thus provides models and materials to be used by those who grieve or otherwise experience trouble.

The Bible nowhere disguises the reality that life can be difficult. In the beginning Adam’s sin forced him from the blissful garden to face an existence of painful, sweaty toil in order to have food to eat. His son Cain, after killing his brother Abel, was driven from the land and forced to wander from place to place as the ground refused to yield its crops to him. In these examples, suffering came as the result of one’s sin. But this is not always so. Noah, the righteous and blameless man, was required to build an ark in order to rescue his family and the animals of the world from the great depravity of other people in his time. Though chosen by God, Abraham and Sarah lived a nomadic existence and felt the pain and shame of not being able to bear a son until old age. Concluding that Joseph had been torn apart by wild animals, Jacob refused to be comforted and cried out that he would descend to Sheol in mourning for his son. Hannah’s inability to bear a child, compounded by the provocation of her rival, prompted her to cry out to God that he might give her a son. David experienced the sting of sin when his adultery with Bathsheba was uncovered and when the child she bore died despite his fervent prayers. Later in life he had other reasons for calling out to God due to personal attacks from his associates and family members. Many of the writing prophets were caught up in the sin of their people to the extent that they were carried off into exile, or, in the case of Jeremiah, to Egypt.

These Old Testament stories are but a small sample of the Bible’s instruction on how people respond to difficulties in life. Far from exhausting the biblical testimony about trouble and lamentation, they are supplemented by numerous New Testament accounts of broken people seeking Jesus for healing and of the apostles suffering for their testimony that Jesus was the Christ. According to Paul, the apostles faced pressures that were so far beyond their ability to cope that they despaired of...
This paper addresses biblical teaching of suffering, loss, and disappointment, our way to worship God in the midst of trouble or despair so that they can get back on track. To help us find our way to worship God, in the midst of suffering, loss, and disappointment, this paper addresses biblical teaching about the nature and use of lament, particularly in the psalms of lament.

What is a lament?

As used in the Bible, a lament can be an action associated with mourning (such as wearing sackcloth or beating one’s breast) or a poetic or musical composition (e.g., a dirge) that would be recited or sung during a period of mourning. In Old and New Testament times laments were practiced by all people in society and were commonly led by the king and prophets, both of whom might write the dirges that would be sung (2 Sam 1:17–27; 3:33–34; 2 Chron 35:25). Any situation that causes a person or group to mourn can prompt a lament. Even potential tragedies can be seen as a reason to bring a lament to God. Although the Hebrew words are immediately associated with the actions of lament, the composition is more important for our purposes as we study the biblical texts. The biblical laments, however, exist to guide us through the actions.

The most accessible biblical resource for those facing difficulties is the psalms of lament. The psalms experienced all the seasons of life. They knew what it is to rejoice and they knew what it is to grieve. In every experience they would turn to God, let him know what they felt, and ask him to help them through. No matter that suffering was God’s punishment for personal sin or the result of someone else’s sin, the psalmsists acknowledged that life can be extremely difficult and that it is right for a believer to bring their pain, confusion, and frustration to God. Their psalms of lament provide models of the right way to complain to God. Lest someone think that these psalms were a rarity, it is commonly noted that around sixty of the 150 biblical psalms are laments, making it the largest grouping of psalms by genre.

Such predominance of laments at the very heart of Israel’s prayers means that the problems that give rise to lament are not something marginal or unusual but rather are central to the life of faith.... Moreover they show that the experience of anguish and puzzlement in the life of faith is not a sign of deficient faith, something to be outgrown or put behind one, but rather is intrinsic to the very nature of faith.

Since more than one-third of all the psalms fall into this category, we are presented with a tremendous challenge. Why would God place such an emphasis on lament in the Bible? Could it be that they were included simply because Israel specially needed this type of psalm due to their regular persecution and because they frequently fell under God’s wrath due to sin? What is true for the Old Covenant community is equally true for the church. The New Testament testifies that Jesus, his apostles, and the early church faced major opposition and persecution. As Jesus told his disciples, “In the world you will have tribulation” (John 16:33). He similarly informed them that, “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (John 15:20). And whether trouble comes from without or within, lament, as a God-given resource, empowers us to present our needs to God and ask him to resolve our difficulties and bring us back to praise.

One other thing we should learn from the amount of space given in the Bible to lamentation is that, “The lament itself is a form of worship.” While many will find this contrary to everything they have heard about worship, the prominent place lament has in biblical narrative and its key position in the Psalter make it clear that saints have long considered lament to be an important means of worshipping God in difficult times. It is our way of entreating him for mercy in times of difficulty. It is our means of reassessing our situation in light of God’s power and grace. It is how we should approach God with honesty and hope that he will meet us in our pain, sympathize with us in our confusion, and enable us to praise him again. Note that the connection between lament and worship gives us grounds for reassessing our understanding of what worship is and does. Far from being limited to singing songs of praise, worship takes hold of all of life as we live it out in humble service before God.

The psalms of lament are, from an emotional point of view, the opposite of a hymn of praise, as they are experienced as “psalms in a minor key” that provide words for those in trouble or despair so that they can
raise their complaints and petitions to God. Though commonly divided into individual psalms of lament and corporate psalms of lament, there is an additional distinction between them, as some locate the source of difficulty in one’s circumstances and seek God’s deliverance while others identify God as the one who brings the trouble and entreat him to withhold his hand. No matter what circumstances prompted their composition, these psalms acknowledge that life can be most troublesome and that the affairs of life often make it difficult if not impossible for God’s people to express joy and sing his praises. Laments are therefore primarily intended to help people present their needs to God and ask him to resolve their difficulties and bring them back to praise.

Lament psalms are prayers addressed to God as the one who understands our difficulties and who is entitled to intervene. By praying these psalms we are directed to identify the source of pain and to look beyond it as God leads us through our trials and heartaches and restores our ability to praise. They thus become models to follow, guides that lead us from pain to praise, from fear to faith. Indeed, as the believing community acknowledges that life is fraught with danger and disorder, these prayers become “an act of bold faith.” No matter what brings our difficulties, these prayers give us the opportunity to express tremendous confidence in God. The way the laments restore us to praise anchors them in communal worship, for it is only in the presence of others that one can rightly praise God. Though most Christian worship is bereft of lamentation, we would benefit from its rediscovery.

Psalms of lament make it clear that pain and difficulties come from many sources. Enemies (whether military or political) threaten (Ps 13:2; 22:6–8, 12–13, 16–18, 20–21; 44:10–16), rulers abuse their authority (Ps 58:1–2), illness weakens, and death seems imminent (Ps 38; 41; 88). Even so, lament psalms do not identify the enemies or illnesses with any detail. In this they contrast greatly from laments found in the historical books of the Bible that expressly state the circumstances in which they were uttered (e.g., Josh 7:7–9; Judg 21:3). Even so, their lack of specificity greatly helps those who use the psalms as they can be adopted to suit many different circumstances. This allows modern worshippers to read their problems into the psalm as they use it for prayer.

The place of lament in the Psalter indicates that God is interested in pain as much as he is in joy. This should give us hope to approach him for help during a time of difficulty. Even more, we should be encouraged that even as God has helped people in the past he will help us now. The words written by the psalmists encourage us that we too can dare to approach God in anger, fear, and doubt because that is how we feel at the time even if it does not reflect our reasoned theological beliefs. One who comes to God in grief or pain does not have to pretend everything is alright or come up with the “right words” that God will accept. Rather, they can know that they can trust God to accept their feelings even when they don’t know what to say. And even though we may not receive a speedy answer to our questions, the fact that we address God as the one who hears and will answer indicates that the light of faith has already begun to penetrate the clouds of despair.

Even so, simply praying a psalm of lament does not ensure an instant solution to all problems so that God’s people will only experience praise. Those who have lost a loved one cannot, by prayer, bring them back or rid of the grief that will ever

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**Suffering and the Sovereignty of God**

*John Piper and Justin Taylor, eds.*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006).

This book offers both theology and the practical outworking of applied theology as its contributors—John Piper, Joni Eareckson Tada, Steve Saint, Carl Ellis, David Powlison, Dustin Shramek, and Mark Talbot—speak out of their first-hand experiences of suffering. The anthology of essays, written in different styles presenting different experiences, offer a compassionate biblical and pastoral examination and urge readers on to look to Christ in suffering to find the greatest confidence, deepest comfort, and sweetest fellowship they have ever known.
pursue them. Raising a lament to God does not free a person entering the early stages of Alzheimer’s from facing a future of fear and forgetfulness. A woman who cries, “How long, O Lord?” as she agonizes over an abusive relationship may not be instantly freed from her assailant. It is therefore essential that we never consider lament psalms to be magical formulas that ensure praise will immediately fill the lives of those who pray them. As the crisis that leads to the lament may last for a long period of time before it is resolved, we may need to pray the psalms of lament over and over again as we face our trials.11 But as the form of biblical lament indicates, those in trouble need to be steered in the direction of hope. God hears our prayers, cares about our situation, and will come to our aid. Since God will certainly intervene, we can be sure that praise will follow.

Lament and the church

Lament is rarely given a substantial place in the church, as worship is usually equated with joy and celebration. Expressions of pain, fear, or grief are regularly viewed as symptoms of unbelief or treated as embarrassing abnormalities that should be politely ignored. Strangely, this sideling of the hurting is similarly present in many modern funerals which have replaced ministry to the grieving and proclaiming the gospel message that death has been overcome in Jesus Christ with a simple recounting of what made the deceased special. This situation is unacceptable because it marginalizes suffering and those who suffer and because it ignores a great body of biblical material that was written to help people through difficult times.12 When we leave no room for lament in our worship we may well give the impression that people struggling with grief, trauma, and abandonment are either substandard Christians or that they have been left to plough through their difficulties on their own.

Few Christians have experienced relief from grief or pain through a liturgical use of biblical lament. The closest that most of us have to experiencing relief from grief or pain through lament comes through praying prayers of confession and absolution. While some may simply mouth the words and fail to experience any change, the prayers are designed to lead us from despair to joy as we acknowledge that in spite of our sins, God forgives us and assures us that we receive pardon through Jesus Christ. In many services, the prayer of absolution is followed by a hymn of praise to emphasize the joy that one should feel after being forgiven.

Although the words used in these prayers are often taken from the New Testament, they reflect themes that reverberate throughout the psalms but are most closely related to the seven psalms of penitence which have been recognized from the early Christian centuries—Psalms 6; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; and 143.13 Although the early church often reserved these psalms for those who were sick or dying, they quickly became an integral part of personal piety of those seeking deliverance from sin and guilt. Modern Christians who are burdened by sin can similarly employ this ancient biblical pattern. If one of these psalms was read and commented on during confession, the congregation could more intelligently adopt the words of the lament while bringing their needs to God. Similarly, a sermon based on one of these psalms could help a congregation understand its purpose in ancient Israel and how to use it today when confessing sins.

In addition to serving as an aid in confession, psalms of lament can be used in many other ways. Since God is the great physician, prayers for the sick can be meaningfully incorporated into worship. Individuals who are ailing can come forward so that hands can be laid on them and prayer offered up for their healing. As many of the lament psalms were written for those experiencing physical illness, there is great pastoral value in making them part of our prayers. Not only do they provide the suffering with words to express their feelings and fears to God in faith, they also point them to the hope that God will hear their prayer, intervene for them, and give them reason to praise his name again. Learned in public worship, these words from the Bible can be taken home so that a person can address God again when praying for oneself or someone else.

Psalms that can be prayed for the sick include Psalms 20; 38; and 41. One should be careful in the use of these psalms as some of them relate illness to personal sin. Such a psalm should be used in a case where sin is present but perhaps exchanged for another when sin is not an issue. Another caution in the use of these psalms is that the words uttered should never be considered a magical formula for physical healing. Long ago the Jewish Rabbis warned that the Psalms were only for spiritual healing and that those who used them for physical healing were guilty of sorcery and should be considered heretics.14 While they may be overstating the case here, their warning should be heeded lest we descend into sub-Christian practice.

While psalms of lament should be used when praying for the sick, to limit them to that function implies that those suffering from other problems are less significant. The welcome that Jesus showed as he embraced the world of his day should impel us to welcome everyone in need to come for prayer. “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28). The weary, the burdened, the abused, the ignored, the unemployed, all need Jesus and all can be strengthened by praying the psalms of lament and searching for God’s hope that is an integral part of the prayers.

Reaching beyond the individual, when a church, a nation, or the world is facing a crisis of some sort, services of lament are in order. People throughout the world are suffering for any variety of reasons—natural or manmade. Earthquakes, typhoons, tsunamis, wildfires, and volcanic eruptions strike without regard for one’s religious orientation. The same can be said with regard to war and social disorder. In other cases, Christians can be singled out for direct attack by governments or other members of society. When disasters of this kind hit, it is only right to demand of God, “Why?” When evil is constantly perpetrated, how can one not ask the Judge of heaven, “How long?” and then plead that he put the evildoers in their place and destroy their works? When trouble or disaster hits a large body of believers, the appropriate response is to bring a corporate lament to God whether during the main weekly service of a church or a special service.

Services of lament are particularly needful when it becomes impossible to take part in a service of praise that contradicts personal and corporate
feelings and experience. At such times, bringing heartache and confusion to God may be the only thing that makes worship possible. Joining their brothers and sisters in lament gives sufferers an opportunity to take hold of the faith of others who are grieving along with them or have grieved in the past. When the group has worked through the time of trouble by bringing it to the Lord of all mercy and receiving his answers, it becomes possible for them to return to God with words of praise.

The use of lament in worship need not be reserved for exceptional times of tragedy. It can, and arguably should, become part of our regular worship of God as we traverse the seasons of the year. One of the best ways that this can be done is to integrate lament into our celebration of the Christian Year. As this cycle of feasts developed in early church history, two penitential seasons—Advent and Lent—took prominent place. Sadly, for many churches today the penitential longing of Advent and Lent has been eclipsed by the glory of Christmas and Easter (and often obliterated by the glitter of commercialism). Even so, our desire to experience the joy of Christ’s birth and resurrection should not deprive us of time to consider the wonder of the incarnation that brought on our Savior’s suffering. By becoming man, the Creator faced obscurity, the Almighty experienced rejection and ridicule, the Righteous One endured temptation without giving in to sin, and the eternal Lord died for the sins of others. These sober realities require somber reflection. As the seasons of Advent and Lent are designed to give us time to consider these themes, we should avail ourselves of this opportunity. This does not mean that the seasons should only focus on fasting and solemn thoughts. Advent and Lent, while not designed to follow the structure of the psalms of lament, work in a similar direction since they begin by focusing on sin, suffering, and weakness, and end with celebrations of hope and joy. Like the laments, both seasons are imbued with eschatological hope. As the Old Testament saints remembered God’s past salvation while awaiting deliverance from their times of trouble, those who celebrate Christmas and Easter remember what God accomplished by sending Jesus as they await the resurrection life for ourselves.

**Conclusion**

Restoring lament to our worship clearly benefits the church in numerous ways. In recognition that life is not always joyful, it allows us to live through the difficult times in God’s presence. This is true whether the difficulty is the result of a natural disaster, traumatic experience, or chronic illness. The inclusion of lament may allow those who may have felt marginalized due to their problems to enter into worship in a new way. It can help us come to a new perspective about sin and the hope we have that Christ has sufficiently dealt with it on the cross. As we follow the pattern set out in the psalms of lament, we learn that we can boldly bring all of our troubles before the Lord who will hear us, intervene for us, and give us the hope that we will praise him again in this world and be freed from trouble in the next. MRT

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8. Though generally categorized as psalms of lament, some scholars refer to them as psalms of complaint or psalms of petition. It can also be reasonably argued that they could be categorized as psalms of prayer. See Broyles, “Lament,” 386–87. Since all of these motifs are present in some but not all psalms that follow the genre, the use of one term as a label should not diminish the importance of the others.
13. Of these, Psalm 32 is usually categorized as a psalm of thanksgiving rather than a psalm of lament. According to Broyles, only Psalms 32; 51; and 130 are clearly concerned with sin and forgiveness. Broyles, “Lament,” 389.

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**A Sacred Sorrow: Reaching Out to God in the Lost Language of Lament**


Card draws from laments of Job, David, Jeremiah, and Jesus to encourage recovery of the lost language of lament as the pathway to worship in the wilderness of pain and suffering. Appendices include selected extra-biblical laments. The companion book, *A Sacred Sorrow Experience Guide*, leads readers through fifty days of Scripture readings and reflective questions to write their own laments. The theme of lament amidst fear and pain is also captured in beautifully written songs with thought-provoking lyrics in Card’s album, *The Hidden Face of God*. 

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**Worshipping God Through Suffering**  Walter McConnell  39
The Axe and the Tree: How Bloody Persecution Sowed the Seeds of New Life in Zimbabwe

Reviewed by David Harley

On the night of June 23rd 1978, eight British missionaries and four of their children were massacred in an isolated mission school in Vumba, Northern Zimbabwe. This book tells the story of the events leading to this massacre, the response of the mission community, and the subsequent impact of this tragedy on the growth of the church in Zimbabwe.

From one perspective it is not an easy book to read, for it speaks of the heartbreak of those who lost friends and colleagues, and of their struggle to understand the purposes of a sovereign and loving God. At the same time it is an inspiring book, providing as it does a model of faith, love, and perseverance.

Peter and Brenda Griffiths, who built up this mission school, were not present on the day of the massacre, but had to cope with its aftermath. They believed that forgiveness was the only appropriate Christian response to what had happened. Through their willingness to forgive and their determination to persevere in their God-given calling, they were able to play a critical role in the development of the Elim Church over the next thirty years. The most poignant moment in the book describes the impact on those who committed this atrocity of the message of forgiveness in Christ and the willingness of Christians to forgive.

This book is based on many years of study and meticulous research. It is a significant contribution to the history of Christian mission and provides a vivid illustration of the tensions faced by Christians living under persecution and caught up in a war of liberation. The author is not afraid to address the difficult political and theological questions raised by this tragedy.

Many people can write. A few have exceptional descriptive powers. Steve Griffiths is one. Every chapter reflects the mood and tensions of the period about which he writes. Many passages evoke the beauty of southern Africa in which he grew up. This book is well written, informative, and inspiring. I found it challenging and informative. It moved me to tears. It may do the same to you.

It’s OK to be Not OK: The Message of the Lament Psalms

Reviewed by Andy Smith

The book is available in print form in the Philippines and in digital form from most e-book providers.

Pastor Rico Villanueva assures us that it is not sinful to experience these feelings. We are, after all, engaged in a serious battle. Occasionally, things do not go as we expect. God will not punish us for pouring out our emotions to him. Further, expressing our feelings could improve our witness to non-Christians by revealing a different side of our faith and hope.

Villanueva mentions the benefits of expressing our difficulties. It can give us and others more realistic expectations about the Christian life. It can help us name our struggle which can both prevent it from becoming something darker and lead to healing. It opens the doors for others to suffer with us. In addition, it grants them the permission to express their difficulties. Plus, many who face their struggles get to know God in new ways.

By urging Christians to lament, the book prepares us to respond to tragic events. Thus it can help us deal with the loss of a loved one, prodigal children, health challenges, natural disasters, manmade disasters, and crime. It can also help missionaries respond to disappointments such as lack of fruit in mobilization efforts, being under-appreciated, or, harder yet, opposed, and working towards but not yet seeing a movement of any kind.

Read this book. Preach its message. Give copies to others. Study and discuss it in groups. Learn to lament together. For lamenting will help us face hard times in healthier ways and it will make it possible for us to minister to each other in new and important ways.
The Role Christian Values Play in Motivating International Christian Ministries’ Collaboration in Disaster Relief Work

Sng Bee Bee

Disasters like earthquakes and tsunamis devastate whole communities of people, resulting in a large number of fatalities and the displacement of many people. In the past, when a disaster has shattered a community, churches and other Christian ministries have been among the first to respond by providing humanitarian aid and have often played a significant role in disaster relief. Their humanitarian effort—consisting of medical aid, rebuilding of infrastructure, providing equipment for purifying water, rebuilding houses, counselling those suffering from trauma, and teaching children—provides visible, practical, and influential witness of the love of Christ for the affected people. In addition, Christian organisations are concerned about holistic development and their involvement takes place at both international and local levels where they have operated on a long-term basis.

Christian ministries have also been known to have close contacts with and a good working knowledge of disaster-affected communities and are able to provide sustainable development work in the form of education and medical services. In terms of social engagement, Christian organisations often act as an intermediary body between the government and the people, in the sense that they offer social and voluntary services in society.

In many countries, Christians also provide social welfare by running private hospitals, drug rehabilitation centres, and HIV relief programs. Christian ministries also play a significant role in disaster and post-disaster recovery work as they are prepared to stay in the region for many years and are committed to sustainable, long-term community development. Therefore, the disaster relief work of Christian ministries has significant long-term impact on communities in which local people can witness Christian love and values in action through the professional work of Christians.

The social engagement of Christian organisations shows that they are participating in the wider shared interests, goals, and values of society. Their motivation for social engagement lies in their sense of duty and moral obligation towards the needy. In addition, the church’s social engagement is a phenomenon that has historical significance. For these reasons, it is important to examine the perspectives of Christian professionals regarding the impact their professional work and accompanying Christian values have made on communities that have been affected by natural disasters. The outcomes of this study will show the impact of an authentic Christian life on one such community.

2. Research questions and methodology

The questions this paper addressed are:

1. What is the nature of the disaster relief work performed by the Christian organization?
2. How do Christian values and beliefs motivate and shape the professional work of the Christian relief workers?
3. What are the effects of Christian disaster relief work in the affected community?
This paper involves a case study of a Christian ministry which is involved in disaster relief work in East Asia. This study utilized in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with professionals who worked in the disaster affected area. These professionals include a businessman, an engineer, an English teacher, a physiotherapist, and a project coordinator. The engineer and English teacher made short trips into the area and were involved with intensive Summer English programs for the youth who lived in the epicenter of the earthquake, while the physiotherapist worked in the physiotherapy clinic set up by the Christian ministry for a year. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants and the Christian ministry involved in this study in order to maintain confidentiality.

3. Background of the Christian professional ministry

A few years ago a major earthquake wrecked whole cities near the epicenter and resulted in the loss of tens of thousands of lives. This disaster drew large numbers of Christians from both local churches and international Christian NGOs who volunteered their medical, counselling, and educational expertise to help the victims. Soon after the earthquake happened, IMC (a pseudonym for an international NGO) began to work with local officials to provide international aid workers such as trauma doctors, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, counsellors, and youth workers to help the victims. The local government provided the overarching management of the NGO’s voluntary projects in this earthquake relief work and allocated the sites for the various NGOs to share their expertise in helping the victims. From the time of the earthquake, IMC continued to run English programs for children who were affected by the earthquake. It also provided medical services and training for local doctors who lived near the epicenter of the earthquake.

As this paper will show, the ministry of Christian professionals, operating through an international NGO, plays a significant role in cooperating with local governments to provide training of local doctors and teachers, and to assist the sustainable recovery and development of disaster hit communities. It will also show that Christian professionals are motivated to cooperate with the government to provide urgent medical attention to the people in these areas by their Christian values and biblical teaching that their faith should be shown by their actions of helping the needy.

4. The nature of Christian professionals’ involvement in the Christian ministry: Responses from interviews conducted

IMC’s involvement in the disaster relief work maintains two main foci: medical work in the areas of physiotherapy and training of the indigenous doctors and physiotherapists, and English teaching. Their Christian medical personnel aimed to develop the skills of the local professionals so that they would be more able to contribute to the development of their community. Those who were involved in community development were motivated by the biblical understanding that they should show compassion to the needy. As Psalms 145:9 states that “The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made,” they believed they should demonstrate his compassion. At the same time, they maintained that their role was not to proselytize the locals but to demonstrate their Christian compassion through their unconditional professional service.

Peter, an engineer, joined a small team of Singaporeans who went to the area to conduct an intensive Summer English program for students who were affected by the earthquake. Even before this trip, Peter had worked with IMC to develop a prototype business in a rural community that was part of a poverty-alleviation program. This business venture enlisted members of the local population to produce clothes, cushion covers, and other gift products based on indigenous tribal designs.

Peter explained that his belief in God and his love for the people led him to participate in community development work. He also explained that this organisation is not confrontational in preaching the gospel. Instead, the Christian ministry believed that Christians can influence the indigenous people by demonstrating their Christian values and the way they live their lives. He elaborated that the emphasis of their community development work lies in building relationships.

The relief team needed to overcome geographical and cultural barriers to facilitate the relief effort. Callie is a Canadian who has been taking teams of teachers from North America to teach English to the children in the schools in the earthquake affected area. Like Peter, she was motivated by the relationships she has established with the local people. However, she confessed that while she initially found planning the English teaching programs and procuring materials difficult, as she made more trips to the area and built relationships with the students she became more familiar with their needs. She became better equipped to adjust the teaching program to match their learning needs.

Christian professional ministry has an advantage over international NGOs as they have a better working knowledge of the culture and needs of local people than the larger organizations whose presence and work in the community last for a much shorter period of time. James, a Singaporean businessman who has worked in a factory in the country that was affected by the earthquake, was responsible for recruiting counsellors for the affected people. He highlighted the importance of counselling, explaining that the rapid economic development of the country has resulted in growing materialism and individualism which threaten community bonds and has led to emotional problems. In the earthquake-affected parts of the country, counsellors are needed to help the indigenous people overcome post-traumatic syndrome disorder. As James says,

The area needs social workers and counselors, because, as it grows economically, people focus on personal growth and materialism. This results in broken relationships, causing pain and hurt to people. So the needs are changing from seeking basic survival to seeking money, 向钱看, 向钱走, seeking material wealth and all that. When people were only striving to quench their basic thirsts and survive personally, people’s relationships were more of a support. But since people are 同苦不能同富, as your neighbor grows richer, you become jealous and all that. You start
to have problems and all that. So we have to help them to be reconciled since their needs have changed. Of course, the increasing focus is on attending to their emotional and spiritual needs, while not minimizing their need for basic physical survival. So the role has increased from one of providing basic healthcare to providing other needs. I see three words, what do you call it, 第一是生存 (survival), 第二是生活 (living), 第三是生命 (life). From 生存 to 生活 to 生命, emphasizes one’s relational life, one’s quality of life.

The changing needs of the area have motivated Christians who minister there to review their strategy to ensure that they meet the needs of the local community. Tight regulations led IMC to focus on building the capacity of local professionals so that the State can see the validity of their work in equipping the local people to help themselves. Sally, a program coordinator who recruited teams of professionals from Singapore and facilitated the coordination of their programs in the area, reiterated the need to meet the needs of the community.

The resources that IMC provides for the community have evolved. While previously, hospitals regularly requested medical equipment, rapid economic development means they can now afford to purchase such equipment themselves. However, they do not necessarily have the expertise to use this equipment. IMC’s role was therefore to provide medical expertise to train them to use the equipment. Sally says:

The needs of the rural places where we are working in have not changed. There is a lot of development in the area. So, the hospitals stopped requesting equipment like CT scanners which they used to ask for ten to twenty years ago. Now, what will happen is they will probably show you their CT scanner and they will confess that they don’t really know how to use it. “Can you send someone to help us?” So, what we can do now is to provide the expertise to train them to use the medical equipment. So, we still have a niche in sending specialists. We are very privileged in Singapore to have a lot of specialist doctors who are believers and are willing to go to provide the training to the doctors in the area.

5. Analysis: The role of Christian ministries in disaster relief and development work

According to the interviewees in this research, Christian professional ministries provide needed resources in disaster-affected areas such as medical equipment, medical and education services and training, volunteers, and leadership models. In addition, the interviewees explained that through the relief work of IMC, the local community witnesses how a team made up of people from different cultures can work effectively. This exposure to multicultural teams helps the community to become more open to external resources, training, and exchanging ideas. These ingredients are needed for the development of the community, so Christian workers need to be sensitive to the local cultures. Furthermore, the Christian relief teams are careful not to present a different standard of living to the people in the sense that they can afford more material things than many of the local people.

In addition, the local government officials acknowledged that Christian humanitarian work provides crucial resources to disaster-hit areas in the form of medical equipment and treatment, trauma counselling and education, and that the commitment of the Christians leads to more sustainable community development in affected communities. Social harmony is an important aspect in the local people’s worldview. IMC’s volunteers received the feedback from local officials that they clearly recognise the benefits that Christian work brings in the areas of community development and humanitarian efforts. Historically, the literature on the work of Christian NGOs in China shows that Christian ministries have been responsible for improving education and medical services in the rural communities. They have proven to be effective in improving elementary education, health care, media, and social welfare, all of which have long-term effects on society. The social engagement of Christian ministries provides solutions to problems resulting from the rapid decrease of the agricultural economy and rapid urbanization of the country in East Asia.

The multi-national and multi-cultural nature of IMC Christian teams serves as a model of interdependence and community building for indigenous communities. They also provide a model of how foreign personnel can work with local communities. Furthermore, Christians work towards sustainable development, with the goal of supporting the local culture, developing existing trade and skills, and improving the self-esteem of the people by helping them to be effective in their current type of economy. The tagline of Christian ministries like IMC is: “Give a man a fish and you feed him for one day. Teach him to fish and you feed him for a life.”

Cooperation of multi-stakeholders in working towards culturally sensitive and sustainable development is crucial. Greater collaboration from well-resourced and committed agencies such as those of Christian ministries, “could lead to an increase in cohesive, well-informed and grassroots-orientated development policies and service delivery.” In addition, “one of the strengths of faith-based organisations is their longstanding presence and commitment to humanitarian work in developing countries.” Having said this, the key criteria of effective humanitarian work are sustainable development, cultural sensitivity, and partnerships with local authorities.

6. Challenges

According to the interviews conducted in this study, the benefits that IMC brings to the local community are tremendous. However, the interviewees revealed that the international nature of Christian work can result in gaps in coordination and facilitation. The labour-intensive nature of humanitarian work means that IMC has to engage in massive recruitment. In addition, its dependence on multi-national volunteers requires coordinating the schedules of the volunteers with the schedule of the recipient communities. This means that coordinators are needed both in the country that receives the relief and the countries that send the relief workers. Close communication is needed among these coordinators so that expectations and needs can be clearly communicated.
in order for them to be met.

In addition, the interviewees admitted that the immense cross-cultural differences and the sheer load of coordination needed often results in lapses of communication and coordination. This is not to say that international NGOs in general do not face such problems. Rather, it means that the IMC teams need to undergo cross-cultural and team-building training so that the diversity of the cultures and giftings of the team members become the strengths and assets of the teams. Ultimately, it is the commitment and faith of the Christian members that motivate them to work towards filling such gaps.

**Conclusion**

In summary, the nature of IMC’s disaster relief work is marked by an emphasis on professionalism and commitment to skills, attitudes, and values of work. The interviews indicated that team members are also committed to overcome both challenges in the disaster hit areas and coordination of the teams. This entails that they place their calling from God and needs of the affected community above themselves. Colossians 3:12 describes the attitudes and spirit that Christian workers, like those in IMC, should have: “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” The IMC Christian workers believe that they show this kindness, compassion, gentleness, and patience through their professional work and the way they relate to one another both in the teams and with the local people. Through this long-term and sustainable work and presence in the community, the local people have been touched by the unconditional love of the IMC workers. This is also the incarnational model of ministry that Jesus himself showed us in the New Testament. As a result, the local people witness Christian values in the work, actions, relationships, and lives of the workers. Gradually, this situation has the effect of transforming the whole community from within as they observe the difference in the lives of Christians. In conclusion, this research demonstrates that Christian ministries can bring significant benefits to disaster-affected communities. MRT

**Killing Fields Living Fields: Faith in Cambodia**

*Don Cormack (Tain, UK: Christian Focus, 2011).*

This is an inspiring account of the history of the Cambodian church starting from the 1920s when it was first planted among rice farmers of North-West Cambodia. Its slow and painful growth was followed by fifty years of nearly fruitless toil culminating in a period of spiritual awakening amidst indescribable devastation under the Khmer Rouge. Cormack recounts poignant stories of individuals he knew personally and testimonies passed on to him to tell the heart-breaking and hope-inspiring story of God’s work and intervention on behalf of Cambodian believers amidst suffering.
The later part of the 1920s was a time of great turbulence in China. Wracked by civil war, city and countryside alike suffered under the fighting. Added to this was suffering through the earthquake at Kansu, plague, and famine. And then there were the frequent violent raids by brigand bands, some hundreds strong, which occupied cities and towns for days on end, pillaging and carrying off food, possessions, and often men, women, and children to be held for ransom or killed. In this mayhem, which in some areas was heightened by anti-British and anti-Christian sentiment that at times led to riots, missionaries had to make the decision to stay at their stations or evacuate to the coast. Many mission stations were commandeered by the soldiers as billets or hospitals, as they were usually among the larger compounds. Consular pressure resulted in most leaving the interior stations. But for some leaving where they were known and trusted to make a journey of thousands of miles through treacherous territory was not a viable option so they stayed at their posts. Of course for the Chinese themselves there was no real choice and Christians and non-Christians together suffered under these horrendous conditions.

The missionaries were not immune to this suffering and the pages of China’s Millions from 1927 recount many stories, two of which will be mentioned briefly along with a fuller account of a third.

**An Ultimate Sacrifice**

Dr. G. Whitfield Guinness arrived in China in 1897 and mainly worked in the province of Honan where he saw two hospitals established in the capital Kaifeng. It was here in March 1927 that numbers of wounded soldiers came for treatment. One of these had typhus and Dr. Guinness took on his case. The call to evacuate came just as Dr. Guinness went down with fever. While they were able to evacuate him along with the others to Peking, he died of typhus four days later. D. M. Gibson writes: “The end, yes, faithful unto death, an honourable end, a soldier’s end, and yet not the end of life: rather the entrance into life more abundant. The end of weakness, but not of worship; the end of limitations, but not of loyalty; the end of pain, but not of praise.”

**“A Perilous Journey by Raft”**

Orders to evacuate the stations in the far northwest province of Kansu came in April 1927, and so fifty gathered, thirty-eight adults and twelve children, in Lanchow to begin the journey down the Yellow River on eight specially built, small, light sheep-skin rafts. Apart from having to navigate the natural hazards of rapids and whirlpools, these travelers had to dodge the bullets from local pirates who demanded a toll for safe passage of each raft. Having paid the toll once, the frightened raftsmen insisted it was safer to travel only by night. The Yellow River is notorious for sandbars and inevitably one night all eight rafts were grounded. The next morning (5 June), having freed his own raft, the leader of the party, Dr. George E. King, went to the aid of the other five rafts still grounded. After all but one of the rafts were free, he waded into the river to help with this last one but was carried away by the swift current and drowned in a whirlpool. His body was never recovered. Dr. King had been born in China to CIM missionaries and had come back to China as a medical missionary in 1911 at the age of twenty-three. He spent most of his missionary career in Lanchow at The Borden Memorial Hospital. Today at that hospital, now the Number Two Hospital in Lanzhou, there is a museum which tells the history of the hospital. This story is recounted in full and so the witness of Dr. King and the King he served continues.

**“In Perils of Robbers”**

On 8 April, 1927, C.I.M. missionaries Mr. and Mrs. Slichter, their son John (6), and daughter Ruth (3) and a fellow
missionary Miss Mary Craig, travelling from Anshun in Kweichow to Yunnanfu, left the town of Loping in the province of Yunnan under the protection of armed Militia and soldiers. A day into their journey they were attacked by a large band of robbers with tragic results. The following is a letter to the Deputy Director in China, George W. Gibb, written by Mary Craig a few days after her release by the robbers.

Letter from Mary Craig:

Having but to-day secured pen and paper, I want to take this first opportunity of writing you of the brigands’ attack upon us and our subsequent captivity...

On Friday morning, April 8, we left the city of Loping under escort of one hundred armed Militia and soldiers. About noon of that day it was decided we should not go on, but wait until more soldiers could be sent to strengthen our escort. By next morning these had come, and we set forth again. It was reported that there were two places where the robbers were bad, and the first of these we succeeded in passing in the course of the morning. This was Saturday, April 9. It was about 2 o’clock, I judge, when only about ten miles from this city and our journey’s end for that day, our escort became quite excited. They had sighted a number of robbers on a knoll some little distance beyond us to the right of us. There must have been some of them in hiding in the thickets through which we were passing for, in a few moments, when we came out into a clear place and began to ascend a small hill the robbers opened fire on us. Our coolies became terrified, dropped our loads and chairs and ran. So did our escort take to their heels and run. Being left alone our party got down and ran too. For a time, I lost sight of Mr. and Mrs. Slichter and the children, but by crawling on my hands and knees I was led—by the Spirit of God, I believe—to where they were, crouching down in a rice field—this to avoid being struck by flying bullets.

We summarize only the painful details of the shooting and stabbing. Three of the robbers attacked the missionaries, and heedless of their cry for mercy, one of them took aim and fired at Mrs. Slichter, who was holding little three-year-old Ruth in her arms. The bullet struck the child in the head, and passing through tore an ugly gash in Mrs. Slichter’s left wrist, as it fell to the ground. Another robber stabbed Mr. Slichter in the back with his bayonet, evidently piercing the heart, killing him instantly. He fell without a sound. The child lived for about fifteen minutes, but was entirely unconscious all the time. Thus God graciously spared them any conscious suffering.

Another group of robbers coming upon us robbed Mr. Slichter’s dead body, snatched Mrs. Slichter’s and my glasses and my hat and sweater which I was wearing.

After this we were left alone with our dead and our sorrow for perhaps half-an-hour, while the robbers ran on to fight our escort, of whom, we learned later, twenty odd were killed and a number taken captive. Returning from the battle the brigands took Mrs. Slichter, John and me off with them to a near-by village. After much agonizing pleading on Mrs. Slichter's part, the body of Mr. Slichter was brought into the village and tossed into a stable. They refused to bring Ruth’s body, but Mrs. Slichter and I succeeded in carrying her thither ourselves. Next morning when we saw Mr. Slichter’s body it had been robbed of all clothing. Under the cruel, unsympathetic and evil gaze of these terrible men and with a little dirty tub, which held still dirtier water, we managed to bathe and reclothe the body and place it, with that of Ruth’s, into a coffin obtained in the village.

On our daily moves in and out and over the hills during the next week, I need not dwell. There were terrible days filled with suspense and terror. Food was given us, but we could eat little, and sleep came in fitful, troubled naps. But God was always near us, and His comfort and strength were unspeakably precious.

On the Friday—after our incarceration began the soldiers from this city came to seek our release, but after a short battle with them the robbers became frightened and turned and fled with us. The soldiers pursued, much to our fright and terror, as we had to run up over the hills with the bullets flying all round us and very near us. After retreating for a distance of ten miles we came upon a little deserted village, where we spent the night.

Next morning I was released. At day break the robbers rode off with Mrs. Slichter and John and left me behind, telling me to go with a letter they had written, to the soldiers and say to them that if they continued to pursue them and fight they would kill Mrs. Slichter and John. I found the soldiers and they promised they would not fight. They then sent me here to this hsien city, where I'm being kindly looked after by the magistrate and his wife in the yamen.

Nothing definite has been heard of Mrs. Slichter and John since I left them. About a thousand soldiers hold the passage round about the robbers about twenty miles from here, and the officials...
are hopeful of securing Mrs. Slichter’s release in a day or two now. The family of the leader is being held until he releases Mrs. Slichter.

Comfort in sorrow

Mr. Allen came from Yunnanfu, reaching here last Wednesday. What his presence means to me in this time of grave uncertainty none but our Heavenly Father knows. All day he is busy seeing officials, sending telegrams and attending to any number of smaller details which have to do with Mrs. Slichter’s and my welfare.

The coffin which we got out on the hills was sent here last week and Mr. Allen has been busy to-day purchasing a better one, and having the bodies transferred to it under proper conditions, so it can be taken with us to the capital for burial. Greatly he strengthened and encouraged me by his clear exhortations on the Word and prayer. Truly I praise God for giving me the blessing of his presence and help at this special time.

Our intention is to wait here until Mrs. Slichter and John are released, which we trust in God’s good providence will not be long now.

I might say that Mrs. Slichter’s wound in itself is not serious. It is quite superficial and, unless it becomes infected from lack of care which, since I left her, she may have difficulty in securing, it should heal all right. We are praying that God may keep her from all untoward effects from the bad environment she is forced to be in these days.

All we had is gone, save a few of the children’s clothes and a little bedding. But what are things? Gladly do we let them go, and happy will we be without them, when once again our dear friend is with us. “Our God is able to deliver thee” are words that filled my thoughts all the day and night before my release, and to-day they have taken hold of me again. God grant that we may see them fulfilled on behalf of our sister very soon.

P.S. On reading over this letter, I find I have said nothing of how wonderfully Mrs. Slichter is being sustained through all her sorrow and grief. While she is greatly stunned by the blow, yet she yields uncomplainingly to the will of God, and is trusting Him for all that is to come. I am sure none of us can conceive of the hardness of her lot now that she is alone with John among those evil men. But one thing we can all be sure of is that God knows all about it and never leaves her. We trust her implicitly to Him, believing He will carry her through. When I left them she and John were both well.

1 The names of places in this article follow the spelling used in the China’s Millions.
2 D. M. Gibson, “A Brief Tribute to my ‘Chief’,” China’s Millions [June 1927]: 92.

China’s Millions 1927–1928 is available for download at
http://findit.library.yale.edu/catalog/digcoll:221343

For readers who are interested in other volumes of China’s Millions published by China Inland Mission: Searchable PDF copies of volumes of China’s Millions are available at the Internet Archives and Yale University Library Digital Collection at https://archive.org/search.php?query=%22China%27s%20Millions%22 (Internet Archives) and http://findit.library.yale.edu/ (type ‘China’s Millions’ in the search field),

Editor’s comments:

On 25 April 1927, Mrs. Slichter and John were rescued by Colonel Chang Ch’ung. Morris Slichter was born on 30 June 1884. He worked as a flourist in Toronto Canada before going to China to join the CIM at the age of 31, arriving there on 19 October 1915. In Chongking on 4 November 1919, he married Miss Irma L. Newcombe, an American from Morganfield, Kentucky. She had arrived in China to join CIM on 11 November 1915 at 21 years of age. They worked together in Anshun, Kweichow and had two children, John and Ruth. After Morris and Ruth were murdered by bandits on 9 April 1927, Irma remained in China until 1931, resigning from the CIM in April 1932. Miss Mary Isabel Craig, a nurse from Philadelphia, arrived in China in 1913 and joined the CIM on 5 January 1925, aged 36. After the events recorded above Mary remained in China, marrying Robert G. Walker, a British CIMer, in Chefoo on 5 December 1932. After Robert’s death in 1949 Mary continued in China, leaving in the early 1950s when all missionaries had to leave China. She then worked in the UK office until 1956. She died on 18 January 1960.
New Books from OMF Members

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*by Jojie Wong, illustrated by Jether Amor. ISBN 9789710097197*

Eric Liddell ran, and ran fast! He ran so fast that he became an Olympic athlete and gold medal winner. While many learned about his track triumph by watching the award-winning film, “Chariots of Fire,” they may know little about the rest of his life. Eric—who was born in China—had a deep love for people and wanted to serve God as a missionary. After the Olympics, he returned to the land of his birth to be a teacher, where he was incarcerated among other foreigners in a prisoner-of-war camp. In spite of the hard life in the camp, Eric’s positive attitude and helpful spirit was so evident that someone who knew him said that he “came as close to being a saint as anyone I have ever known.”

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