

How high is the cost of discipleship for missionaries today?_40504

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How high is the cost of discipleship for missionaries today?

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When missionaries answer what they believe is Christ's call, a growing number also may hear echoes of the martyred German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wrote 60 years ago: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

Risk has been inherent in missions from the first century to the 21st century, many observers note. But others—including some mission-sending agencies—are asking hard questions about what counting the cost of discipleship means.

"The easy spots to do missions have all been done. We're left with working in some hard spots now," said Bob Klamser, senior associate for security with the Evangelical Fellowship of Mission Agencies.

The growth of Islam and the rise of militant Muslim extremists particularly make this a more dangerous world for Christian missionaries, Klamser said.

“Missions personnel are in greater danger today than at any time in recent history,” he observed.

Within one week in mid-March, four Southern Baptist humanitarian aid workers were killed and another critically wounded in a drive-by shooting in Iraq, and two Americans serving with the African Inland Mission International were shot to death in Uganda.

In the past 14 months, terrorists have killed eight Southern Baptist International Mission Board workers, and the shooting in Iraq was the deadliest tragedy in the board's history.

“If the number of missionary deaths are increasing, it is because the world is becoming more dangerous, and missionaries are everywhere,” IMB Executive Vice President Clyde Meador said.

“There is no change in the Great Commission or the New Testament as a whole, and therefore, there is no change in policy” at the IMB.

Danger is nothing new for missionaries, IMB spokesman Mark Kelly said.

“Missions has always been a dangerous enterprise,” he said. “In 1845, it was shipwrecks and malaria. Today, it's bandits and car wrecks. There simply aren't any safe places, even here in the United States. While safety is important, every missionary decides as part of obeying the missions mandate that it is better to serve God where he calls than it is to disobey and remain where it is 'safe.'”

Former IMB President Keith Parks, who went on to become coordinator of Global Missions for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, noted the board's current position is consistent with its historic policy.

“Running risks has been a constant part of missionary history. Both missionaries and mission board staff have had the spirit of taking the

gospel to the whole world, no matter where it leads, no matter what it costs," Parks said.

In addition to the "perennial threats" of "hostile governments and antagonistic religions," missionaries always have been subject to health risks and other dangers, he noted.

"No part of the world was ruled out because of danger, difficulties or hardships. Missionaries have served with courage and faith in spite of war, personal threats, stonings, burning of church houses, kidnapping, rape, imprisonment, house arrest and many other forms of danger," he said.

The board always has encouraged its workers to exercise "sanctified common sense" regarding risks, Parks said.

"Missionaries were urged not to court martyrdom. Each family had total freedom to follow the Lord's leadership in staying or leaving. Each family was to follow its own leading without judging how others were led," he said.

That's consistent with the example of the Apostle Paul in the New Testament, said Bill Tinsley, staff leader for WorldconneX, the missions network launched by the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

"There are times when Christians should seek safety as Paul did when he was lowered over the Damascus wall in a basket. But there are other times when Christians must walk into the center of the most dangerous circumstances, as Paul did when he made his final return to Jerusalem. No one should require another to risk their life. And we should always be prudent about the risk we incur, while being obedient to the Spirit of Christ," Tinsley said.

Parks, who served on the board that created WorldconneX, agreed. And he admitted he finds it ironic that few who ask whether missionaries should be

allowed to serve in dangerous places ask the same questions about military personnel.

“Why is this true? Is it easier to justify the loss of life to protect our American way of life than in extending the kingdom of Jesus Christ? Many do not recognize we are in a spiritual war. It appears American Christians tend to use our cultural standards of safety, comfort and success rather than Jesus' high-risk, self-denial standards,” he said.

The slain and injured IMB workers traveled to Iraq to assess the need for water purification and other humanitarian aid projects, not plant churches or preach.

Calculating risks and benefits

Even so, they were Americans serving in a Muslim country occupied by United States troops.

For the IMB, those are risk-assessment factors that have to be weighed in deciding whether board-appointed personnel should serve in an area. But they are not insurmountable hurdles.

“Our approach is to focus on all the people groups of the world, and risk is a characteristic of a place, not a people group,” Kelly said, noting the board is not likely to change its policy based on the incident in Iraq.

“It's not clear that anything could have been done to prevent this attack,” Kelly said. “It's doubtful the attackers even knew they were Christian aid workers.”

Two European humanitarian aid workers were killed in a drive-by shooting in another part of Iraq the day after the five Southern Baptists were shot.

“Every effort is made to ensure the safety of Southern Baptist workers, but there are always possibilities that you just have to leave in the hands of a

sovereign God,” Kelly said.

U.S. military involvement would be reason enough for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship to keep its personnel out of a country, said Gary Baldrige, co-coordinator of Global Missions.

“We will not have anyone in places where the United States is occupying a country, mainly because it is too easy for them to be seen as agents of the U.S. government rather than who we are,” Baldrige said.

In some parts of the world, the best way to strengthen a Christian witness is by supporting national groups or personnel from countries who may be more welcome than Americans, he noted. The Fellowship's missions philosophy emphasizes indigenous leadership and values international partnerships, he added.

“Most of the time, we are catalysts in a cooperative effort that may involve many groups. Frankly, Americans—or Westerners in general—may not be effective in many situations in some parts of the world a lot of times these days,” Baldrige said.

Making tough decisions

Mission-sending agencies face at least two hard decisions: whether to send personnel into potentially dangerous locations and when to pull them out of places when safety risks outweigh any potential benefits.

“There is no one best way to make those decisions,” Klamser noted. “The world is just too varied.”

The Evangelical Fellowship of Mission Agencies recommends that its cooperating bodies establish policies for information-sharing between field representatives and central offices.

“Then those decisions can be made more analytically,” he said.

The IMB has longstanding policies in place to evaluate risks, Kelly noted.

“A strategy coordinator considering options for getting the gospel to a particular people group would factor safety issues into a decision about sending personnel to various areas where members of that people group live,” he said.

“Leadership at both the regional and administrative levels would be involved in a decision to seek personnel for a particular place. A candidate has to express interest in going. And, of course, a trustee committee has to agree that God is indeed at work in sending a worker to the place.”

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's administration increasingly is assuming most of the responsibility for deciding when missions personnel should pull out of unstable countries or stay away from dangerous places, Baldrige noted.

“It's not our intent to put (CBF representatives) in harm's way or keep them in situations where they are endangered,” he said.

The decision to stay in a potentially dangerous situation or leave the country “traditionally has been the individual missionary's call, but increasingly that's become our decision,” Baldrige added.

The mission-sending agency's legal liability is one factor that has influenced the policy change, he noted.

“The first reaction of agencies is to want to centralize those kinds of decisions at headquarters, but there needs to be a partnership between headquarters and the field level,” Klamser observed, based on 20 years of working with a variety of evangelical missions groups.

Sometimes the decision to stay is best made by personnel in the field; at other times, when communication is restricted, the decision needs to be

made elsewhere, he said.

Screening missionary candidates

Another challenge is screening personnel. Personality inventories, extensive interviews and character references can help sending agencies make sure candidates are courageous risk-takers, not foolhardy thrill-seekers looking for an adrenalin rush, Klamser noted.

If a candidate claims a call to a potentially dangerous area or among a people group in a high-risk situation and no other Christians can affirm that call, it raises a red flag, he noted. "There needs to be consensus."

A willingness to listen to the collective wisdom of the church and the mission-sending agency is imperative for Cooperative Baptist Fellowship workers, Baldrige said.

"We want entrepreneurial types who are self-initiators and who can make things happen. But we want them to be cooperative team players, not Lone Rangers. They have to be willing to take direction from the wisdom of the body," he said.

From his perspective of 50 years of missions involvement, Parks sees some factors that make the current situation regarding missionary danger different than the past.

Globalization and the risk of terrorism.

"The capability of terrorist groups and individuals to send information, money, personnel and other resources all over the world rapidly and the inability of nations to control this or be held accountable have increased violence and danger for everyone," he said.

As a result "danger is more widespread and less predictable" than in the past, he added.

“After the Bali bombing in Indonesia, some missionaries were urged to go to Singapore. They felt safe and stayed in Indonesia. Soon after, a terrorist attempt in Singapore was thwarted. Where are the safe places? New York? Madrid?” he asked.

- ◆ Targeting people from the industrialized Western Hemisphere.

“It is very possible that some missionaries killed recently were simply identified as Westerners,” Parks said, adding that others have been killed by random acts of violence.

Klamser agreed, pointing out sometimes “targeted violence” is aimed against American Christians in particular and sometimes against Westerners in general. “And missionaries are involved in those spots more often.”

- ◆ Religious extremists.

“Religions are more militant on a broader scale than they were in previous times,” Parks said.

“This kind of violence is not localized nor just aimed at missionaries. At least 160,000 non-American Christians will be martyred this year in more than 50 nations.”

Klamser put it even more directly: “There is a direct clash between Christianity and Islam, based on core value beliefs.”

- ◆ Redeployment of career missionaries.

Policy changes in some missions agencies, such as the IMB, have led to some long-term missionaries being transferred to new places to meet current agency objectives.

“Previously, most missionaries were in familiar environment, speaking the

local language and dependent on local persons for advice and even advocacy. This is not true to the same degree today. Missionaries in new circumstances are more vulnerable," Parks said.

- ◆ Increased short-term and volunteer involvement.

While he affirmed the role of volunteers and short-term workers in missions, Parks said their presence on the field creates the "potential for increased deaths."

That places increased responsibility on agencies that try to equip volunteers for missions, said Don Sewell, director of the Texas Partnerships Resource Center.

"Rising numbers of volunteers automatically increases risk because more people are potentially stepping into harm's way. And the risks are heightened even more if the volunteers have poor or non-existent orientation to the culture, political situation, religious background and lifestyle of their targeted people," Sewell said.

Texas Partnerships does not focus on high-risk areas, but it does seek to serve churches that may choose to send volunteers to "red-zone venues," he said.

"We believe volatile locations are best addressed by long-term missionaries who are far better equipped to deal with the cultures, religions and languages.

"We depend on long-term missionaries to know when there is an appropriate level of safety and stability sufficient for the deployment of volunteers.

"The greatest value of the volunteer would be to support the long-term missionary, coming alongside this person after the missional foundation has

been well-established.”

IMB officials disagreed with the idea that more volunteers equates with greater risk.

“The rising number of volunteers does not seem to be working out to an increased risk. Many volunteers go without connection to or direction from a sending agency. For those who do, the agency seeks to give guidance and training as appropriate,” Meador said.

Short-term workers need long-term preparation and orientation, Parks agreed.

“Growing up with a typical American perspective does not equip people to live wisely in other cultures. Spiritual commitment and religious zeal are not enough to avoid serious problems,” he said.

Retreat or advance?

The world is a more dangerous place for missionaries than it was a few decades ago, but that doesn't mean Christians should retreat from the calling to missions, Parks said.

“Quite the contrary. There is a greater urgency than ever. More people are going out into eternity without even the chance of knowing Jesus Christ,” he said.

Missions strategies should be reviewed constantly and changed when needed, but the biblical mandate for missions remains unchanged, Parks concluded.

“Some things are worth dying for,” he said.

“And obeying Jesus Christ is at the top of this list.”

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.