

## ***MISSIONARY HEALTH – Identifying it early; Promoting it vigorously***

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Kandidatenselektion als Herausforderung für die Mission  
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**ABSTRACT:** This article approaches selection of missionaries from a multi-dimensional perspective of health. In other words, the selection process is based on the presence of sturdiness, rather than the absence of negative or questionable traits. Given the vastly different world new missionaries will encounter, we need a process that identifies and promotes hardiness, innovation, creativity, personal and spiritual maturity, and relational compatibility. The article suggests three ways to determine the degree of wholeness, and three ways to promote ongoing health. All of this must be based on a firm foundation of faith in Christ for salvation, including an organic relationship to the universal Body of Christ, and a Biblical world view.

The intent of this presentation is to focus on aspects of health during the selection process that will ensure (to the degree possible) a life of effective, God-honoring missionary service. However, some spiritual aspects must be acknowledged as foundational. These fall generally into three areas:

The recruit's relationship to God will be obvious, expressed in a variety of ways. These include a testimony of having received Christ as Savior, and a verbalized intention of following Him as Lord. The person will demonstrate a good working knowledge of Scripture, and the ability to interpret it for theological reflection and worship as well as the ability to apply it for purposes of nourishing oneself in Christian growth. These faith-commitments will be expressed in a practical lifestyle of purity, of godly relationships in all areas of life, and in godly practices of work, worship, word, and action.

The recruit's relationship to the Body of Christ, the local church and the universal church means that this person has established structures and relationships of giving and receiving, whether of funds, advice, or prayer—he or she knows the strength and safety of being part of a group of believers, both contributing to and receiving from them.

The worldview of the recruit is one that attempts to see the world as God sees it—God so loved the world that He gave...and we too must love the world as God did—not willing that any perish, but that all come to the knowledge of God as revealed by Christ Jesus. This means that the recruit is willing to learn to function as part of a multicultural, multigenerational mission work force, recognizing the connectedness of the world, and choosing to live as a citizen of heaven, rather than a nationalistic patriot. It means a willingness to live in the presence of danger and evil; having thought through a theology of risk, one is able to act and live out of faith, living wisely 'because the days are evil,' but not living in fear or with undue regard for safety or longevity.

Given these foundational factors (which may be discovered in various ways—i.e., the writing of a doctrinal statement, a personal testimony of Christian experience, the taking of a Bible knowledge test, references from pastor and friends, etc.), we move now to aspects of overall health and wholeness. I believe there are four basic elements, with two of these expanded or enhanced..

Health is normally assumed when physical systems are running well and functioning as they were designed to. However, from a missions point of view, we need a much broader definition, one that incorporates a dimension of hardiness which will enable the person to endure unusual stress and difficulty, and perform productively, without damage to self or others. Remember that new missionaries will experience very different and greater degrees of stress and difficulty than they have until this point. If they are marginal now, they probably will not be able to cope with these greater levels of pressure in strange circumstances.

The four elements constituting such health include at least these:

- ✚ **Physical health** is needed to do a field job. A person must be healthy enough to accomplish a task without putting undue drain on others, without drawing unduly on whatever support services as may be available, and without depending on drugs for mood control or sleep. (We recognize that some productive members rely on occasional sleeping pills, or medication for depression, or medication for control of cholesterol, diabetes, epilepsy, high blood pressure, etc. We must remember that when a candidate displays this dependence, the condition is likely to worsen under highly stressful conditions—rather than improve.)
- ✚ **Spiritual health** is evidenced when one has a keen sense of God's approval and draws daily sustenance and direction from Him. This person's desire is to please God by meeting His standards, and behaving like His child.
- ✚ **Relational health** is obvious when the person works well with others, giving and receiving without distrust, comparisons, or draining demands on others. The person sees himself in relationship to others and manages his impact on those around him. He is keenly self-aware and can moderate his behavior if necessary.
- ✚ **Emotional health** is evidenced when a person's moods are even, with a sense of contentment and a bent toward joy that is not dependent on externals. This person knows how to 'encourage himself in the Lord.'

Two of these should be amplified: the ability to work in teams of diversity, whether supervising those from other cultures or generations, or serving under the authority of someone from another country or culture, performing respectfully and productively when some of the directives don't make sense.

The second aspect that seems quite essential is the need to be lifelong learners, those who are self-aware and self-directed. Obviously this flows out of a healthy sense of humility, of energy to pursue learning, and ego strength sufficient to admit one does not know, but knows how to find out, and how to continue the learning process through accessing resources, and exhibiting discipline.

Hardiness is generally assumed to be a well-rounded strength. Resilience, which is related to hardiness, is that strength that enables a person to move through failure to new levels of production and wholeness, to 'bounce back' after being 'knocked down'. This assumes ego strength—but it is more than that. It assumes faith—but it is more than that. It is a quality that, should someone ask another if he was hardy, he probably wouldn't know how to answer. We seldom know whether we are hardy or not. In fact, we may feel very weak and inadequate. So it seems to me that hardiness is best described by the actions and attitudes one exhibits when

enduring hardship or when under prolonged pressure. The book of Philippians beautifully illustrates Paul's hardiness.

Nineteen traits are discernible in those who are truly hardy; these are described in the paper, *The Hardy Personality*, (Gardner, 1999). Following each trait is a series of questions that the self-aware person can ask himself or herself to determine his personal state of well-being by tuning in to his attitudes and behaviors.

If we should ask a new applicant for mission service, if he or she is patient. The likelihood is that they would say, 'yes.' However, none of us knows whether we are truly patient until circumstances arise to challenge that sense of patience. We learn best who we are under the 'test' of hardship and difficulty. Behavioral manifestations are more likely to be accurate than protestations of virtue.

If we are part of the selection process for young people approaching an agency for mission service, how will we determine the degree of health, or the degree of hardiness and resilience this person possesses?

I believe there are basically three ways of determining a person's state of emotional vigor and resilience.

The first is through established instruments such as the MMPI, the Millon, the 16PF, and others. These are legitimate and helpful, provided the professional stipulations are observed, and the tests are given appropriately. Further, the instruments and their results should be interpreted to the test-taker, the person involved. To use these instruments solely as an employment screening tool is inappropriate. That is, they should not be used to reject a person from mission membership on the basis of results given in the instrument. These findings may be used as foundation to a growth plan, giving more information to the person so he or she knows what areas remain for further work and growth, and is given some resources to do that. The findings may also be used by the mission agency in placing the person in an assignment and a location where he or she is most likely to be productive and successful.

The second means to determine resilience and hardiness is through history. Many thinkers say that 'the past is the best predictor of the future.' Such statements have some value, both negatively and positively. That is to say that a person who has a history of lying or blaming others is likely to repeat such behavior in the future, unless something drastic has happened to alter this life stance. It is also true that a person who has been innovative in puzzling situations, or loyal in relationships is likely to continue the same, with refinements as he or she matures. So getting a full history, a biography, of the person can be extremely helpful. This is obviously time-consuming, and requires interviewing skills, excellent note-taking skills, and well-developed interpretation skills. However, the entire process can be extremely satisfying to the applicant—"this organization cares about me as a person and wants to know me, to know where I come from, and what I am like." The history works best if person is shown the final results, and invited to add whatever details may not be accurate. It should also include an ending section of Conclusions, the impact on the interviewer by the interviewee. Maybe for unspecific reasons the interviewer is uneasy about this person, but can't identify the reasons, how much weight does intuition carry in drafting conclusions? If the interviewee displays great anxiety that the completed history contain negative material, and wants to adjust it to present himself or herself in the most positive light, this factor (and others) should be added. If the interviewee presents himself to the interview process in a disrespectful way, coming late, ungroomed, refusing to cooperate, or refusing to tell about some of his/her life events, this too should be noted.

The interview will demonstrate to both the interviewer and the interviewee what situations in life he has already overcome, what attitudes he has already displayed, what priorities he has already exhibited, or what areas of weakness need further work.

We recognize, of course, that this biographical interview does not replace the need to get an array of references from various people.

The third mechanism for determining the person's degree of health is observation. Simply by living in a communal setting for a week or two or more can give an enormous amount of information. Supposing the meals are served buffet style, and the applicant insists on being first, always or generally taking more than his share, making negative comments about the food, the food service, or the preparers—a lot of information is gained by observation at such times. How the applicant behaves with others or treats others, or keeps himself and his space clean, completes assignments or responds to requests—these small behaviors say a great deal about character.

Again, the references will be of some help here. However, a pastor has little opportunity to view his young members in their day-by-day life, or observe how they behave with others in communal situations.

Together these three mechanisms should provide a comprehensive profile of the person involved. If all three are utilized, the selection process is time-consuming, but thorough. One would hope that such a thorough procedure would furnish not only data on which to base entrance into a mission agency, but also information which would be provided to the applicant, and which would serve as the basis for a growth plan for the days ahead.

I believe any one of these mechanisms can serve a mission agency well. Certainly the giving of testing instruments will be the least time-consuming on the agency's part, but the most costly. The taking of a biographical history is time-consuming, calls for a good array of skills on the part of the interviewer, but is least expensive. And the period of communal living is likely to be highly productive, giving information about current behavior, but says little about the person's past, or the changes he or she may already have made.

The final section of this paper has to do with promoting ongoing health for the applicant. How is that done? How can a mission agency, particularly the professionals and personnel people involved in the selection process ensure that the applicant 'owns' his or her own growth, and continues to develop fully-orbed maturity and thrives in the days ahead as they serve within a given mission agency?

Once again, I believe there are three ways:

- ✚ Involve the applicant as much as possible in the entire selection process, letting him or her know that the ultimate purpose of this is to achieve a good 'fit' and assure ongoing happy service, helping the person to thrive in the role of missionary. This means that the attitudes promoting growth must be discussed and encouraged. (These appear in the Appendix.)
- ✚ Mechanisms for growth should be presented and encouraged. These include a growth plan, resources such as written materials, mentors or models, accountability partners, church relationships, among others
- ✚ Close oversight and regular monitoring on the part of the agency so the person is briefed beforehand on assignments, expectations, etc. And the person is debriefed at strategic points along the way—after traumatic or unusual experiences, at the end of a period of

field service, during highly vulnerable periods of service (early after arrival on the field, midway through a field term, or midway through the career missions experience, and as the mission service draws to a close). A statistic has been given that 65% of workers in a secular field are tempted to leave their jobs for lack of appreciation. One would hope that Christian agencies were more expressive toward their workers. I believe we should remember that missionaries seldom have the benefits of wage increases, company vehicles, designated parking spaces, and daily oversight by the supervisor. We should be quick to give genuine praise and appreciation to our workers. Another aspect of agency oversight has to do with confronting early when problems are observed. Confrontation is a source of great stress within missions, but without courageous feedback, our workers are left wondering if they are performing satisfactorily, or are allowed to continue damaging behavior toward those around them. So learning to give bad news (confrontation) in a good way is a skill to be learned by supervisors.

Obviously what I have described here describes the ideal situation. Most of us do not work in ideal conditions. Sometimes the selection process is carried on by telephone; sometimes the person resists all screening questions and efforts but insists that God has called him or her, and made it very clear that our agency is their choice. So the issue arises: how much risk do we take as an agency? How much time can we invest in a short-term worker? A further matter of concern: how stringent dare we be when the applicant is 40 years old with a record of successful Christian work behind him? Not only this, but the personnel staff often feels overloaded and tired, or disillusioned. And we may often feel inadequate or unskilled for the task we are asked to do. Supervisors on the field often have neither the time nor the skills to do the monitoring parts that are suggested here: assuring assignment fit, briefing and debriefing, and confronting when necessary. We in personnel are all too aware of our own faults and shortcomings, and our lack of growth.

Finally, we will all admit that the ideal situation seldom happens. I believe, however, that to the degree that we can incorporate any of the suggestions contained in this paper, we will improve our selection procedures, and serve applicants better. Even if we can't incorporate all of these, we could focus on some. Our aim should be to place well-screened candidates in situations and assignments where they will be productive and thrive, doing little damage to either the name or work of God, or their colleagues. We do this for the glory of God and the extension of His kingdom.

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## APPENDIX

The following attitudes seem to be essential if sustained personal growth is to take place.

- ❖ Openness to input, not only willing to receive feedback but soliciting it.
- ❖ Willingness to grow and change. Eagerness to develop Christlikeness.
- ❖ Freedom from defensiveness and denial.
- ❖ Awareness of the need to change and grow.
- ❖ Accurate discernment and insight.
- ❖ Creativity to develop a growth plan that fits
- ❖ Energy and discipline to implement the plan.
- ❖ Takes personal responsibility for self and his or her impact and behaviors.

-- Laura Mae Gardner

“It cannot be expected of any man or child that he be perfect. The issue is, does he march together with significant truth, and is he making progress?”

On Being Human

Note: The author has extensive experience in a variety of personnel roles—candidate selection and screening, interviewing, making assignments, briefing and debriefing, and oversight of others. Twenty-five years of field work have illustrated how important good selection and screening is to the effectiveness and compatibility of a person within a group of field workers. A good selection and placement process is of great importance. Those who function in these roles should be given training, and should be esteemed and encouraged. Their role is critical.