

How to Pray for Missionaries

by Ron Shaw A pastor for 27 years before serving as pastor-at-large for Mission to the World for 8 years and director of the Spiritual Life Department for 6 years. He continues to work with the Spiritual Life Department and visits mission fields, while also serving as the pastor of senior ministries at Arden Presbyterian Church in Arden, N.C.

1) Pray for the health, safety, and physical well-being of missionaries and their families.

Missionaries, especially in the two-thirds world, are exposed to **diseases** that can be particularly devastating, such as malaria (from which more than one million people in Africa die every year), hepatitis, parasites, and other illnesses transmitted through dirty water which often must be filtered and/or boiled before it can be drunk. Sometimes the only place to purchase meat is from stores and the open market where refrigeration is not used. Vegetables, fertilized with human excrement or heavily sprayed with unhealthy chemicals, have to be carefully washed in a Clorox or iodine mixture before being eaten. Missionaries may also be exposed to **outbreaks of illnesses** such as typhus and meningitis, or even cholera or plague. Healthcare, especially in the case of emergency surgery or special medication needs, may be extremely inadequate. **Environmental health concerns** arise from living in many of the world's major cities (e.g. Mexico City—one of the largest cities in the world with about 25,000,000 people) where air pollution is a very serious problem—resulting in health hazards ranging from elevated lead levels in the blood from the use of leaded gasoline, to breathing air laden with sewage particulates.

Some of our missionaries have been **abducted** and **robbed**, or their **homes have been invaded** for the purpose of robbery. In the past, it has been unusual for such break-ins to be accompanied with the threat of violence, but it is now becoming more common. Some of our missionaries are in **places very unfriendly to Christianity** and **to Americans** in particular. Some of our missionaries have been through **civil wars** or **armed strife** in the regions where they live. Simply **driving a car**, in much of the world is, by our standards, much more chaotic and also more dangerous. Missionaries are sometimes exposed routinely to danger in travel or to the possibility of hitting and injuring or even killing a pedestrian. People in much of the world walk very close to or on the road and just do not seem to have an understanding of how devastating it is when a person is struck by a car. If a missionary should hit and kill a pedestrian the legal and social consequences can be very serious, to the point of being jailed, having to pay a heavy fine, or to be forced to leave the country even though it was not his fault.

Adequate, safe, affordable **housing**, which is appropriate and which promotes ministry, is also important. In addition, finding **a reliable automobile** for an affordable price and then finding parts and a competent and honest repair shop can also be a tremendous problem.

Pray for all of these kinds of needs for your missionaries, but most of all pray for them to have a bold and joyful witness when the Lord withholds these temporal “necessities.”

2) Pray for the marriages and family lives of your missionaries.

Are missionaries such super spiritual people that they are not tempted to immorality or sexual lust? We all know the answer to that question. I think that one of the reasons that the church does not pray for missionaries is that it has put them on an unrealistic spiritual pedestal where they do not deserve to be and from which they may fall. There are missionaries who have yielded to the above-mentioned sins and whose marriages have even ended in divorce.

There are cultures, in which some missionaries serve, where pornography is displayed more openly and is more readily available (e.g. on newsstands and on TV), and where behavior and dress are more provocative

than in the United States—this especially will constitute a temptation to male missionaries. **Pray that your missionaries will have a commitment to a regular day off, that they will take their yearly vacation time, and that husbands and wives will spend time together on a regular basis to nurture their relationship.** It will be difficult to do these things because of the press of ministry responsibilities. Missionaries are also very careful about how they use their supporters' money, and no missionary has money in great supply. As their supporters, encourage your missionaries to set aside some time and some money for a periodic date and a vacation. **Pray for quality and quantity time together for husbands and wives.** A wife can sometimes feel neglected on the field because her husband is so whole-heartedly dedicated to his ministry that he sometimes forgets about his wife and children and their needs. The wife, on the other hand, may be "stuck at home" with the kids, not as involved in ministry and meeting others, or learning language as rapidly as her husband. She may also, for the first time in her life, be dealing with and trying to manage a house helper.

Missionaries, especially those who are in their third or fourth term, may be dealing with the reality of **aging and infirm parents** in the U.S., and they may feel caught between two competing and equally important responsibilities: God's call on their lives and God's command to take care of their parents. **Pray for the ability to see things clearly and for wisdom from the Lord in this matter of parental care.** A missionary is often faced with this issue at the time of their greatest productivity.

3) Pray for MKs (missionary kids)

Missionary kids, typically known as Third Culture Kids, have many special challenges and opportunities. They have a passport country and an adopted country. Soon their adopted country is going to be very much their home, and America, their passport country, will become increasingly foreign to them. MKs have many things going for them and, for the most part, tend to be very healthy emotionally, socially, and spiritually. They are usually bright, adaptable, creative, possess strong cross-cultural skills, have had a variety of life experiences, and are fairly unworldly in a good sense. Missionary families tend to be close knit, and MKs usually relate well to adults.

Pray for MKs as they learn to make friends among (and learn to relate with) their peers when they are on home assignment in the U.S. or when they return for university or college. MKs can find it difficult to identify with their peers in the U.S. since their life experiences tend to be vastly different than the experiences of those who they meet stateside.

Pray about the issues of schooling. Will it be home schooling, public school, private Christian school, international school, or boarding school? **Pray for the multiple transitions an MK must make, especially for their transition back to America, which often occurs after graduation from high school and at the time of entering university or college.** At this impressionable time, parents and kids will often be living in different countries, and likely separated by an ocean on different continents. The separation for both parent and child can be acute. This is a critical time for missionaries as some make the decision to return to the U.S. more or less permanently at this point—again, just at the time in their missionary career when they are becoming the most useful.

4) Pray for POMs (Parents of Missionaries)

Missionaries will experience various responses from parents when they announce that God is calling them into missionary service and that they will be moving to Timbuktu. POMs have various reactions to such announcements, ranging from great joy because their children are answering the call of God, to lack of understanding and even anger over the fact that their children are wasting their lives, to disappointment over the "loss" of children and in some cases grandchildren, and many other responses. The missionaries themselves will also be dealing with emotions regarding their parents depending on the age and health of

their parents and also the spiritual condition of the parents. For example as POMs become elderly and infirm and perhaps are not believers, their missionary children often feel a significant tension between their call and God's command to care for their parents, especially if the missionary children are the only Christians in the family. I have often thought that just as some churches "adopt" MKs when they return to America to reenter American culture for college or career, it would be most helpful for churches to "adopt" POMs, to be the agents of Christ's love and grace—especially when those POMs have reached a stage in life when they need additional care.

5) Pray that the spiritual lives of missionaries will be healthy and growing.

In a pioneer church-planting situation, missionaries may have no church available to them. In most church-planting situations if there is a church, it will be small, weak, and immature. There will be little or nothing available as a ministry to the missionaries' children or youth. Even if there is an indigenous church, a new missionary will receive little or nothing from the church services until they become proficient in the language.

Most missionaries are not able to depend on their home church in the U.S. to provide sermon tapes and other materials, and they can experience a sense of isolation from the Christian world in the West. For example, if they do not have easy access to the Internet they may not know what the best Christian books of the last four or five years are since they have been on the field. Missionaries, more than other Christians, must take a very high level of personal responsibility for their personal spiritual growth and health.

Pray that your missionaries will have a strong personal assurance of salvation-grounded in Christ alone (through grace, faith, and the gospel). Doubt paralyzes, but assurance liberates. Only those who are secure in Christ and know it, are free to give themselves away for others. **Pray also for your missionaries' personal and family worship, that they may joyfully and profitably study the Bible and pray, as well as engage in other acts of worship such as singing hymns and Christian songs.** John Piper in his book, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, says, "You cannot commend what you do not cherish." This means our missionaries must have a vital, growing, and deep experience of God if they are to lead others into relationship with Him.

6) Pray for team relationships.

Missionaries are strong willed, independent, with strong ideas about what needs to be done and how it needs to be done. Just to survive on the field requires a strong person. When you put a group of people like this on the same team

and ask them to work harmoniously together, it can be a very tall order indeed. If a team is international in its make-up, the problems are increased with many differences such as language and cultural values. In fact failure to get along with each other is a perennial problem with mission teams and is the number one reason for missionary recall.

Yet Christ-like team relationships are extremely important to effective mission work. We cannot separate the Great Commission from the Great Commandment. A mission team is a miniature church, a model church, which people are watching in order to see something supernatural, to see something of Christ, to confirm and validate the supernatural gospel which the team preaches. What the world needs to see in the life of the team is supernatural love in the team's interpersonal relationships, in order to know that these are Christ's true disciples. **Pray for humility, flexibility, and teachableness for your missionaries.**

Pray also that this Christ-likeness in relationship may extend to indigenous Christians and to relationships with the home office.

As you pray you may read and reflect upon John 13:34-35; Philippians 2:1-11; I John 4:7-21.

7) Pray for friendships for our missionaries.

When we ask our missionaries on the field for specific prayer requests, we are often told, particularly by the women, that they would like us to pray that God would give them **one good friend**. Sometimes missionaries go to the field with the expectation that another member of the team is going to be a best friend, but this often does not happen. Missionaries leave family, friends, and church behind and missionary life can be lonely. This **loneliness** can be especially severe at holidays and other times when they normally would gather with family or friends.

8) Pray for cultural adjustment and language learning and competency.

This is an important area for prayer, especially for the new, first term missionary-but even the veteran missionary will always need to become more proficient at the language and more at home in the culture. Most new missionaries have to deal with **culture shock** as they adjust to their new, strange, and perhaps even somewhat frightening adopted culture. Literally everything is new and seems out of control, for example; language, customs, different values, a different world and life view, aspects of everyday life which we take for granted in our home culture (e.g. shopping, banking, buying gasoline-or it may be called petrol), renting a house, getting the car repaired, hiring and supervising house and garden help, schooling for the children, and the list goes seemingly on without end. To a new missionary, these differences are often incomprehensible and sometimes seem simply wrong or stupid, thus producing stress in their lives, resulting in culture shock. Eventually culture shock goes away as the vast majority of missionaries successfully adjust to the culture. Yet even veteran missionaries who have been on the field for three to four terms can experience cultural fatigue. This is a weariness produced by those cultures which are so different from our own (e.g. in their view of women, as in the Muslim world), or in which business and government are so bureaucratic as to be nearly incomprehensible, resulting in great stress whenever one has to deal with such entities. This kind of cultural fatigue is never absent and missionaries must find ways to successfully deal with it and adapt to it.

Acquiring **language competency** is absolutely essential to effective ministry. This competency will take many years in some languages, which are difficult. Some cultures are very unforgiving concerning the slaughter of their mother tongue by foreigners, while others praise every sincere effort to speak their language, even when laced with mistakes. Missionaries have differing abilities and aptitude for language learning. Some will do well; others will struggle their entire missionary career and just get by. Language learning must go beyond the ability to converse about the weather or children and the other things of ordinary life. It must include the ability to present and discuss religious and philosophical ideas, such as God, sin, grace, substitutionary atonement, salvation, and many other biblical topics, in a way that is understandable and makes sense in the culture.

Language learning can be arduous and discouraging, so pray that the Lord will provide perseverance for this effort.

9) Pray for victory in the arena of spiritual warfare.

The gospel message is that the Lord Jesus defeated the devil and the spiritual forces of evil at the cross, and not only did He defeat them, but He publicly humiliated them as well (Colossians 2:15). In fact most of Colossians chapters one and two speaks of the superiority of Christ, His deity, and His power that is available for the Great Commission and His defeat of Satan. **Pray that your missionaries may, by faith, live, and work**

daily in the reality of this victory of Jesus-especially when their labors for the Lord are painfully slow and seem to be producing very scant fruit.

Pray that they will claim Christ's victory and, by faith, will believe that He possesses universal authority (Matthew 28:18), that He has been raised and exalted to the right hand of the Father far above all rule, authority, power, dominion, and title, and that the power that raised Christ is still at the disposal of the church and at work in the world for the accomplishment of God's eternal saving purposes (Ephesians 1:19-23).

Pray that your missionaries will not make the mistake of thinking that Satan is a virtual god, nearly equal to Christ. Pray that they will see how puny Satan is in comparison to the Incomparable One, Jesus Christ.

10) Pray for opportunities for the gospel, and for boldness in taking those opportunities to share the faith.

Pray for conversions, and for opportunities to disciple new converts and to plant churches.

Pray that your missionaries would be protected from discouragement and depression, and that they would be joyfully faithful to their calling with an optimism based on the purposes and promises of God-persevering even (and especially) when progress is minimal.

Some parts of the world are extremely secular and disdain the gospel (e.g. parts of Western Europe). In France, on average, it is said that it takes 17 years to plant one church, and that the church will not be very large by American standards. In the Muslim world of the Middle East and North Africa there can be great hostility to Christians and the Church-especially toward those indigenous Christians who are bold enough to evangelize Muslims. To become a Christian in such cultures is to invite persecution and even risk one's life. The price for following Christ may literally cost a disciple everything, including life itself. Christian workers who live in these places will find the lack of response, and even frequent defections of professing converts, to be very discouraging indeed. Some have worked for decades and have seen only a handful of people come to faith in Christ. Even in places like Africa and South America, where Christianity has been present for well over a century or longer, the church is often worldly, legalistic and shallow, or a paganized, syncretized Christianity is practiced, which little resembles true Christian faith. **These are only a few examples, but they illustrate how difficult and discouraging missionary life can be, so we need to pray for encouragement for our people on the field.**

11) Pray for the national church that is being established, whether by our missionaries alone or in partnership with national believers. Pray for the training of strong, male, indigenous leadership for the church, and for the willing transfer of leadership at the appropriate time from the missionaries to the national believers (this is commonly known as indigenization).

In such a process pray that the missionaries will have a willingness to accept significant change. As paradigms for mission work change (e.g. as a missionary may move from being the frontline church planter to being a trainer/facilitator for the national worker to be the frontline church planter) missionaries have to make changes for which they do not always feel well-equipped. They may not be as happy with their new role or they may wonder what they are supposed to be doing. If the change is significant enough, they may even have questions about staying with their mission or in mission work at all. Pray that missionaries will be adaptable and willing to accept change, because the likelihood is that they will have to do so several times during their missionary careers.

12) Pray for missionaries to have a willingness to suffer.

Suffering for Christ is not only the cost of discipleship, but suffering is the means of advancing the gospel. Genuineness of faith is not seen in thanking God for the temporal blessings He gives, anyone can do that, but in joyfully thanking God when He deprives us of temporal blessings and gives only Himself. Suffering provides a most powerful opportunity for witness.

13) Pray for more laborers for the ripe harvest fields of the world.

The biblical strategy for recruitment is prayer, Matthew 9:35-38.