

Building Friendships and Strong Supports

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If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. 1 Cor. 12:26-27

When individuals receive their call to the global harvest, both they and their chosen agency immediately begin to build a financial and prayer sending team. Without monetary resources and prayer, new recruits will not be going anywhere. But this critical and wise step is just the beginning of a greater team that must be built. An entire **relational support structure** needs to be created on various levels, both in the home country and in the field of service, to sustain the workers in joy and effectiveness. Ironically, in the age of constant communication and electronic capabilities connecting the globe, relationships are quite challenging and a bit confusing to establish. Yet these basic **friendships** at every level are the foundation blocks of life.

Our relationships are so important that recent research suggests that when it comes to our overall well-being, *“it may be our relationships that save us rather than our knowledge and skills”* (John Fawcett, 2003, stress/trauma consultant).

Relational support and strength are Biblically consistent and prioritized. To be alone in our trials and struggles may be for a specific period or purpose, but it is the exception in scripture and not the norm; Hagar, Joseph, Jonah, Paul. Numerous powerful examples are given to us of companionship for life’s joys, trials, challenges, and tests; Moses & Aaron, David & Jonathon, Naomi & Ruth, Daniel & his three companions, Esther & cousin Mordecai, Job & his three friends, Mary & Joseph, Jesus & the 12 disciples. God designed long ago that life was meant to be lived in partnership (Genesis 2:18) and in communities. Family, relatives, friends, churches, small group fellowships, neighbors, and colleagues must surround our lives. God has given us one another for multiple purposes of helping, encouraging, instructing, comforting, celebrating, grieving, forgiving, providing, warning, praying, and sacrificing. The following scriptures state our purpose or role in one another’s lives:

Genesis 2:18-24, Proverbs 13:20,17:17, 18:24,27:9,10,17, Luke 17:3-4, John 15:12-13, Romans 12:15-16, I Corinthians 12:26-27, 13:4-8, II Corinthians 1:3-6, 2:5-8, Ephesians 4:1-6, 4:29, Colossians 1:9,28-2:2, I Thessalonians 5:11-15, I John 3:11, 16-18

Like all meaningful and vital dimensions of our lives, time and attention must be given towards them. As critical a strong support structure is in our passport cultures, even more indispensable is our relational structure when living in a different culture, and engaging in ministry and spiritual battle. All self-care models for overseas workers will emphasize the top priority of this relational support structure.

The following is an outline for ***evaluation, reflection, organization, and implementation*** of a healthy, balanced social support structure for ministry effectiveness overseas. Whether one is a veteran or a new recruit, an honest assessment of one’s relationships is encouraged. Veterans are encouraged to re-evaluate their support as field workers frequently move and contacts shift. Whether a re-evaluation or an initial assessment, it is never too late to create and invest, in your relational support.

This support structure will become your most solid, dependable friendships on every level. These people will help sustain your vitality and effectiveness on the field longer than any other factor. Enjoy the fine art of creating a beautiful support and friendship structure.

I. EVALUATION

Everybody has a list of acquaintances and friends. But a cell phone directory or an e-mail list does not equate to an active social support network. To be health-promoting and protective, a relational network needs to comprise people who know each other very well and remain in close communication. Attributes of meaningful relational support would include: (adapted from Fawcett)

- personal commitments to one another with trust and understanding (emotionally, spiritually, vocationally)
- ability to offer and receive affirmations of worth, advice and criticism
- access, availability with opportunities to meet either in person or engage from a distance

II. REFLECTION

- List everyone who you know well and remain in contact with. How do you communicate? e-mail? telephone? in person? When did you last meet physically? Do they understand your work and purpose? How would they receive your struggles? Would they want to hear? How close and safe do you feel with them?
- Of the above list, designate who you have history with (known from childhood or college), who is a recent relationship, who do you connect with on a spiritual level, who provides insight or serves in a mentor capacity for you, who is at the next stage of life (10-15 years older), who is a professional/ministry advocate for you?
- Do you have relationships with both marrieds and singles? Peers, seniors and children? Males and females? Notice whether you have a variety of ages and life stages in your network. Reflect on what each age and stage would uniquely provide for you and you for them.
- What did your relationships in this network of people look like when you started as an overseas worker? How has it changed over time? Are changes contingent upon you or the other person? What do you miss, desire?

III. ORGANIZATION

The most obvious and clearest grouping for field workers is between those local and those at a distance. Draw a diagram representing your social network. Under each person's name, note where they live and how much you desire to remain connected to them. (Remember the three critical attributes above)

- The necessity of **distant/passport culture friendships** is that they are stable, you generally have roots and shared experiences with them, they understand your same heart culture, and they are not experiencing your same cross cultural, local struggles. They can offer perspective, calm, and neutrality.
- The necessity of **local friendships** is that they are physically present to offer strength and solidarity, they are living your present reality, they are more accessible or immediately available, and can provide practical help.

Example of a strong relational support structure:

Distant List should minimally include:

- 1- Larger prayer and donor team
- 2- Home church pastor, ministry leader, small group
- 3- A close, reliable contact at headquarters
- 4- One to three same-gender peer friends
- 5- Parents, siblings, friends with history
- 6- Mentor: one spiritually, one professionally

Local List possibilities:

- 1- teammates, colleagues
- 2- prayer/accountability partner, same-gender
- 3- other ministry workers not on your team
- 4- church fellowship, and/or small group
- 5- socializing, non-work friends
- 6- Mentor: couple or single at next stage of life

IV. IMPLEMENTATION

Set aside time and energy to make your above lists a reality. Pray earnestly for the "gaps" in your network.

- Do you need to clarify or share expectations/desires with any of the names above?
- What will be your frequency of contact with the above names... daily? weekly? monthly? bi-annually? annually? How will you contact them... email? Skype? phone call? visit?
- As you travel, what are three things you could do (before you leave, on the road, or after you return) that would probably act to strengthen friendships that are important to you?