



RETENTION SCHEMES FOR CROSS-CULTURAL MISSIONARIES: ENHANCING LONG-TERM COMMITMENT AND EFFECTIVENESS

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ABSTRACT: *This paper aims to provide a comprehensive review and analysis of academic journal publications relevant to retention schemes for cross-cultural missionaries. Retention refers to the ability to sustain missionaries' commitment and engagement in the field. It encompasses strategies aimed at reducing attrition rates and fostering missionaries' long-term effectiveness. Several studies have delved into this topic and provided valuable insights regarding strategies that can positively influence retention. However, this paper seeks to uncover the retention schemes that might serve as a panacea for cross-cultural missionary attrition. The study investigates and identifies effective strategies and interventions that can contribute to the long-term engagement and effectiveness of cross-cultural missionaries in their various places of assignment. By examining a range of scholarly articles, this paper has provided an overview of various retention schemes, including pre-deployment training and cultural orientation; continuous learning and professional development opportunities; personal, spiritual, emotional, and psychological support; adequate financial support and benefits; family care and support; mentorship and supervision; and regular field evaluations and feedback. This paper sheds light on key retention schemes for cross-cultural missionaries and offers evidence-based approaches to address them. Thereafter, it states the importance of the retention of cross-cultural missionaries.*

KEYWORDS: Missionary, Cross-cultural Missionary, Missionary Attrition, Retention Schemes, Long-time Commitment, Effectiveness.



INTRODUCTION

A missionary is a person sent on a religious mission, especially one sent to promote Christianity in a foreign country with a different cultural background. Cross-cultural missionary work is a challenging and rewarding endeavor that aims to spread religious beliefs, provide aid, and foster community development across diverse cultures. Koteskey (2015) gave insight that cross-cultural missionary attrition is the rate at which cross-cultural missionaries suddenly leave their mission fields and go back to their various homes. This usually results in significant loss of resources, creating sustainability issues for missionary work. David Selvey (2021) added that cross-cultural missionary attrition not only has a negative impact on the individual missionaries and their families but also on the effectiveness of mission work as a whole. It has been a complex issue, with many factors contributing to the challenges faced by missionaries who are working in a culture different from their own or from different cultural backgrounds.

Cross-cultural missionaries play a vital and critical role in spreading religious and humanitarian messages across borders, encountering diverse cultures and linguistic challenges. However, the nature of their work often presents unique difficulties that can lead to low retention rates. Therefore, retention refers to the ability to sustain missionaries' commitment and engagement in the field. It encompasses strategies aimed at reducing attrition rates and fostering missionaries' long-term effectiveness. Several studies have delved into this topic and provided valuable insights regarding strategies that can positively influence retention. However, this paper seeks to uncover the retention schemes that might serve as a panacea for cross-cultural missionary attrition.

THE EFFECT OF ATTRITION ON CROSS-CULTURAL MISSIONARY WORK

Missionary attrition refers to the phenomenon of missionaries leaving their field of service prematurely. The effects of this attrition on cross-cultural missionary work are significant and far-reaching:

Loss of Expertise and Experience

When missionaries leave the field prematurely, there is a loss of valuable expertise and experience that missionaries acquire during their time in the field. This expertise includes cross-cultural communication skills, language proficiency, and cultural adaptation skills. Roozen and Kirkpatrick (1993) wrote that “experienced missionaries are more effective at communicating with local communities and understanding their cultural context. The loss of this expertise due to attrition can hinder the effectiveness of future missionary efforts.”

Disruption of Community Relationships

Building relationships and trust within a community takes time and effort. When missionaries prematurely depart, these relationships are disrupted, and the perception of the missionary presence may be negatively impacted. Haynes and Gitlin (2015) shed more light that “the departure of a missionary can create a sense of loss and abandonment within the community, making it harder for future missionaries to gain the trust of the community.” This disruption in relationships hampers the effectiveness and sustainability of cross-cultural missionary work.



Undermined Sustainability Efforts

Many cross-cultural missionary initiatives aim to empower and equip local communities to lead and sustain their own development efforts. However, when there is high rate of attrition among missionaries, the continuity of these efforts is compromised. Kang and Kang (2019) stated that “the departure of missionaries can create a leadership void and disrupt the progress made towards building self-sufficiency within the community.” This undermines sustainability efforts and can lead to setbacks in long-term development.

Reduced Impact and Effectiveness

High attrition rates among missionaries can significantly reduce the impact and effectiveness of cross-cultural missionary work. Consistency and continuity are crucial for establishing credibility, fostering trust, and facilitating meaningful engagement with communities. The frequent turnover of missionary personnel makes it difficult to achieve these goals. Dorman and Johnson (2020) highlighted that “communities may view the work as transient or insincere, resulting in limited receptiveness to the messages and activities promoted by missionaries.” This reduced impact hampers the desired transformational change and limits the mission's long-term influence.

Diminished Organizational Reputation

High attrition rates among cross-cultural missionaries can negatively impact the reputation and credibility of missionary organizations. This is because consistent turnover suggests organizational instability, lack of support, or inadequate training and preparation for missionaries. Miclea et al. (2011) wrote that “such perceptions can deter potential donors, volunteers, and even future missionaries from getting involved.” This further hampers the overall effectiveness of the mission.

RETENTION SCHEMES AND STRATEGIES FOR CROSS-CULTURAL MISSIONARY

A well-designed retention scheme not only helps to ensure the well-being and satisfaction of missionaries but also contributes to long-term impact in the communities they serve. Retaining cross-cultural missionaries is crucial for the sustainability and effectiveness of missionary organizations. However, the retention of cross-cultural missionaries has been an ongoing challenge due to a range of factors, including cultural adjustment issues, personal struggles, and lack of support systems. To address this issue, various retention schemes have been developed to support and enhance the engagement, satisfaction, and longevity of cross-cultural missionaries. This paper explores various retention schemes and strategies that have been suggested in the literature to enhance the longevity and effectiveness of cross-cultural missionaries. They are as follows:



Pre-Deployment Training and Cultural Orientation

Cross-cultural missionaries often face challenges related to cultural adaptation and adjustment. Before sending missionaries to the field, comprehensive pre-deployment training and orientation programs are vital. Pratt and Gilliland (2016) emphasized that orientation and training programs encompass pre-departure and in-service activities that equip missionaries with necessary skills, like language acquisition, cultural competency, communication skills, and cross-cultural adaptation strategies. Cultural awareness and language proficiency can significantly contribute to enhancing their resilience and reducing attrition rates.

McCurry (2015) commented, “These programs facilitate better adaptation and effective communication with host communities, ultimately improving retention rates.” Bell (2017) highlighted the importance of effective pre-field training in preparing missionaries for the complexities they may encounter and assisting them in navigating various cultural challenges. Pratt and Gilliland (2016) emphasized the importance of pre-deployment training in reducing attrition and increasing the effectiveness of missionary work.

Continuous Learning and Professional Development Opportunities

Continued professional development opportunities contribute to the growth and job satisfaction of cross-cultural missionaries. Providing access to training programs, workshops, and conferences allows missionaries to acquire new skills, learn new approaches, and stay updated with current trends in missions; this will enhance their effectiveness, and broaden their impact. Wilson, Jensen and Miller (2016) emphasized the positive relationship between professional development opportunities and long-term commitment among cross-cultural missionaries. Walker (2019) wrote that “Organizations that allocate resources to provide language courses, cultural training, and opportunities for skill development demonstrate a commitment to their missionaries’ growth and overall job satisfaction.”

Loughlan and Lawson (2015) emphasized that organizations should invest in language acquisition programs and cross-cultural communication workshops to bridge the gap between missionaries and local communities, fostering positive relationships and minimizing misunderstandings. Baumert et al., (2019) emphasized that opportunities for acquiring new skills, participating in leadership development programs, and engaging in cultural and contextual studies enable missionaries to remain motivated and enhance their effectiveness. According to Ryman (2014), investing in continued learning and development positively impacts the satisfaction and retention of missionaries.

Personal, Spiritual, Emotional, and Psychological Support

Missionary work can be emotionally and psychologically challenging (especially in cross-cultural contexts) due to stress, isolation, and cultural adjustment. Missionary retention can be significantly influenced by the availability of personal, emotional, and spiritual support systems. Establishing strong support systems, such as mentorship programs, peer-to-peer networks, and regular debriefing sessions can be instrumental in addressing feelings of isolation, burnout, and stress. Lidstone et al. (2017) shed light that organizing regular gatherings, retreats, and debriefing sessions fosters a sense of belonging and community within the mission network, enabling missionaries to share experiences and receive encouragement from peers.



These networks foster a sense of belonging, provide a safe space for sharing experiences, and create opportunities for debriefing and counseling. Herbst (2018) wrote that, "Providing psychological counseling and resilience training equips them to cope with the emotional and psychological stresses inherent in cross-cultural missionary work." Jones and Francis (2016) highlighted the significance of emotional support networks in reducing burnout and ensuring missionary retention. Davis and Davis (2019) emphasized the role of community support and debriefing in improving missionaries' overall well-being and reducing attrition rates. Ward (2018) wrote that, "Providing access to professional counseling services and peer support networks has been found to positively impact retention rates." These support systems offer valuable guidance and a safe space to discuss personal struggles and concerns.

Adequate Financial Support and Benefits

Financial stability is essential for cross-cultural missionaries to meet their basic needs and carry out their work effectively. Vargas and Rundle (2016) commented that "financial stability positively impacts missionary retention rates." Ensuring missionaries receive adequate financial support and benefits is crucial for their retention. Mission organizations should strive to provide competitive salaries that take into account the economic contexts of the countries in which missionaries are serving. Additionally, benefits like healthcare coverage, retirement planning, and support for children's education contribute significantly to the well-being and long-term commitment of missionaries. Van Engen et al. (2009) stated that, "Research demonstrates that providing adequate financial support serves as a significant motivational factor among missionaries, leading to increased job satisfaction and retention."

Family Care and Support

Recognizing and addressing the challenges faced by missionary families is essential for their overall well-being and retention. Strong family support systems and adequate care arrangements for missionaries' families can greatly contribute to their well-being and long-term commitment. Johnson and Smith (2018) highlighted the importance of family-focused strategies in reducing attrition rates and improving overall job satisfaction among missionaries. Klein et al. (2020) wrote that, "By attending to the needs of the whole family, organizations can enhance the well-being and commitment of missionaries, reducing the likelihood of attrition due to family-related challenges." Hiebert (2014) shed more light that, "Providing support to missionary children's education, spouse networking, and family-oriented activities can significantly contribute to missionaries' feelings of stability and belonging."

Mentorship and Supervision

Establishing mentorship programs and offering regular supervisory support are critical components of retention schemes. Lester (2017) wrote, "Mentorship fosters personal and professional growth, provides guidance during challenging times, and strengthens the relationship between missionaries and their sending organizations."

Regular Field Evaluations and Feedback

To improve retention rates, organizations must establish systems for assessing the well-being and satisfaction of cross-cultural missionaries. Regular surveys, interviews, and feedback mechanisms allow missionaries to express concerns, suggestions, and recommendations for improvement. Dunn (2019) gave insight that, "Organizations should actively respond to



feedback, demonstrate an earnest commitment to address concerns, and adapt retention schemes to better meet the evolving needs of missionaries.” Conducting regular field evaluations and providing constructive feedback are essential components of a successful retention scheme.

These evaluations can help identify strengths, areas for growth, and potential challenges for missionaries. Constructive feedback allows missionaries to reflect on their work and make necessary improvements. Furthermore, regular evaluations provide an opportunity for discussing potential adjustments to the missionary’s role or location, taking into account their skills, passions, and personal circumstances. Renner and Murray (2013) suggested that missionaries who receive regular evaluations and feedback demonstrate higher job satisfaction and retention rates.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RETENTION OF CROSS-CULTURAL MISSIONARIES

Cross-cultural missionaries play a vital role in bridging the gaps between diverse cultures and religions, spreading their faith, and positively impacting local communities around the world. However, successfully retaining these missionaries is a challenge that needs to be addressed. The retention of cross-cultural missionaries is of utmost importance due to the significant benefits they bring, both to the individuals themselves and the communities they serve. The importance is as follows:

Cultural Understanding and Respect

Retaining cross-cultural missionaries allows for the cultivation of cultural understanding and respect. Missionaries who stay with a community for an extended period have the opportunity to immerse themselves in the local culture, effectively communicating with and learning from the people they serve. This understanding enables missionaries to connect with locals on a deeper level, navigate cultural nuances, and foster meaningful relationships. Retention facilitates the building of trust, breaks down barriers, and paves the way for more effective mission work.

Continuity and Long-term Impact

Long-term retention of cross-cultural missionaries ensures continuity and sustainability in terms of the positive impact they can have on communities. When missionaries stay for an extended duration, they are better equipped to identify the specific needs and challenges of the community. By gaining a comprehensive understanding of local dynamics, missionaries can develop more tailored and impactful strategies to address these issues, leading to lasting solutions. Through consistent engagement, cross-cultural missionaries can empower locals to become self-sufficient and self-reliant agents of change within their own communities.

Language Proficiency and Effective Communication

One of the primary challenges that cross-cultural missionaries face is language barrier. Retaining missionaries enables them to invest time and effort in learning and mastering the local language. Proficiency in the local language facilitates effective communication, enhances understanding, and fosters greater trust and acceptance among the local population. Improved



communication lays the foundations for more fruitful relationships and better dissemination of their message, resulting in a more significant impact on the community and the broader society.

Building Sustainable Relationships

Retention of cross-cultural missionaries strengthens the bonds between different cultures and religions. Over time, missionaries become familiar faces within the community, earning the trust and respect of the locals. This trust allows them to engage in open and honest conversations, leading to greater acceptance and a more profound impact on the spiritual and social well-being of the community. As relationships grow and deepen, cross-cultural missionaries become conduits for building interfaith relationships, fostering harmony and understanding between different religious groups.

Leadership Development

Long-term retention of cross-cultural missionaries promotes personal growth and leadership development. By staying in a community for an extended period, missionaries have the opportunity to nurture and develop their leadership skills. They learn to adapt to different cultural contexts, become more resourceful, and improve their problem-solving abilities. These acquired skills are not only beneficial for the missionaries themselves but also for the sustainable development and growth of the community they serve.

CONCLUSION

When the sending organizations understand the cultural context, providing pre-deployment training and cultural orientation; establishing continuous learning and professional development opportunities; fostering personal, spiritual, emotional and psychological support; promoting adequate financial support and benefits; fostering family care and support; establishing mentorship and supervision; and seeking regular field evaluations and feedback; organizations can enhance retention rates and the long-term effectiveness of missionaries in diverse contexts. Fostering an environment of cultural sensitivity, support, and growth, organizations can contribute to the positive impact that cross-cultural missionaries have on local communities and the world. By implementing these retention schemes, sending organizations can cultivate a supportive environment that encourages the longevity and effectiveness of their cross-cultural missionaries' service.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and discussions in this paper, the following recommendations are proposed to develop effective retention schemes for cross-cultural missionaries:

Cultural Sensitivity Training: Provide comprehensive cultural sensitivity training to missionaries before and during their service to enhance their understanding and appreciation of the diverse cultures they will encounter. This will prepare them to adapt effectively, minimize culture shock, and build better relationships with the local communities.



Adequate Pre-Deployment Preparation: Develop thorough pre-deployment programs that address practical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of missionary work. This includes comprehensive training on language acquisition, cross-cultural communication, conflict resolution, self-care, and psychological coping mechanisms. Early intervention and support are crucial to prevent burnout and attrition.

Comprehensive Support Systems: Establish robust support systems for missionaries, including regular communication channels, mentoring programs, and counseling services. This will enable missionaries to address challenges, share experiences, and seek guidance when needed. Promote a sense of belonging and community within the missionary network through regular gatherings, retreats, and debriefing sessions.

Fostering Family Support: Recognize the role of the family in the missionary endeavor. Provide support for families, including educational options for their children, opportunities for spousal employment, and access to healthcare services. Ensuring that the entire family is well-adjusted and supported will contribute to the overall retention of missionaries.

Ongoing Professional Development: Encourage continuous professional and personal growth by providing access to relevant training, conferences, and resources. This will enable missionaries to develop new skills, remain motivated, and feel valued in their roles. Regular performance evaluations and career development opportunities will further enhance their sense of purpose and long-term engagement.

Regular Assessment and Feedback: Regularly assess the satisfaction, well-being, and performance of missionaries through surveys, interviews, and feedback mechanisms. Actively respond to their concerns, suggestions, and recommendations to continuously improve the retention schemes and adapt them to the changing needs of cross-cultural missionaries.

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