

Thriving in Hard Places by Ah Kie Lim, PhD 2022

Story:

Sally (name changed) was sent to a remote village in India with her teammate to do church planting. They were highly recommended by their sending base as quality pioneers with the strength of character necessary to withstand the inevitable hardships. They spent two years learning the local language, living in very challenging circumstances. They were the only foreigners in the village and had no contact with their immediate leader for months on end. Being their first term in a cross-cultural setting, they wanted to “tough it out.” They were surviving in this remote village just living their daily lives. Their living conditions were very basic and difficult for 2 young white ladies who did not speak the local dialect. Within two years, Sally had a mental breakdown and was sent home to get professional help.

What and who do we look for when searching for missionary candidates? There is no guarantee the person we have chosen is the perfect one. We may have thought they were until they arrive. “Coping with hardship and discomfort is an essential ability for anyone who wants to survive and thrive in extreme environments (Barrett, Martin 2014:26).” Working in hard places, at times can put strain on relationships, but it can also foster strong, lasting ones.

Member care began with the goal of seeing people thrive on the mission field; to help them be fruitful and fulfilled in what they do. Are we thriving or surviving in the field? In my experience, if someone does not enjoy what they are called to do; if they are not bearing fruit or feeling fulfilled, they are simply surviving. Studies have shown missionaries who have integrated a well-defined theology of pain and suffering are more resilient than missionaries who have not.

I want to talk about some qualities to look for as we search for missionary candidates to work in tough places. This is not a complete list or in any way perfect, but a good guide as we consider potential missionary candidates.

Hardy Personality

Definition of Hardy: A hardy person is one who is capable of enduring demanding conditions or one who is like a bamboo in the midst of strong storms.

Lack of any of these traits is an indicator that growth is needed, not a cause for guilt or shame. The greatest missionary of all acknowledged his weakness (II Cor. 12:9-10), and his sinfulness (I Tim. 1:15-16), but endured crushing experiences (II Cor. 4:7-10; II Cor. 11:23-28) and drew his strength from Christ (Phil. 4:12-13). So may we.

Here are some of the character traits of a hardy person adapted from “The Hardy Personality” by Laura Mae Gardner.

1. Perseverance and endurance: Pain, Pleasure and Deprivation

Pain is not something to be shunned at all cost, nor is pleasure something to be sought at any cost. Both are simply part of life, not its main focus. (John 10:10; 16:33; II Tim. 3:12; Phil. 1:29). The hardy person does not insist on having all his needs met. He is able to forego gratification and willing to be content in all circumstances. This person is non-demanding, not necessarily choosing to do without, but able to accept what is available (Phil 4:11-12, 19).

2. Wholeness: Balance

This individual shows balance in his emotional, spiritual, physical, relational and professional life. He does not habitually overindulge in one area to the detriment of another, not needing “highs” or shots of adrenaline in order to survive and enjoy life. He is not easily addicted to anything. The hardy person knows both how to do without for the short haul and how to be creative in meeting his legitimate needs over the long haul (I Tim. 4:11-13).

3. Leadership

The hardy person does not need to be in charge nor does he abdicate responsibility when others are in control. He is a team player. Leadership is neither something to be sought nor something to be feared. He is willing to lead or to follow (to submit to those whom God has placed in authority), believing that “God delights to work through the leaders he places over us” (Rom. 13:1; Heb. 13:17). No matter who is in charge, he maintains his commitment to the task. This person is not passive, controlling, or helpless. Barnabas illustrates this attitude beautifully (Acts 9:26-28; 11:22-26; 12:25; 13:1-15). The sermon Paul preached in Acts 13:16-41 seems to have established Paul as the leader from that time onward, but before that, Barnabas was in charge.

4. Perspective

The hardy person is not narcissistic, knowing “the plot doesn’t revolve around me; the story doesn’t begin or end with me--it’s His story. I am part of something bigger than I, and even if I don’t see the logic or the resolution of this situation, I will keep on trusting God, who is sovereign in all situations” (Dan. 3:16-18). This person can handle defeat because he is assured of ultimate victory, realizing his approval comes from God, not from people (II Tim. 2:15).

5. Self-Knowledge

Non-defensive, the hardy personality displays an extraordinarily high level of self-awareness. He knows his strengths and weaknesses and is comfortable with these. This frees him from self-absorption and allows him to practice the agape love of I Cor. 13:4-7. He is not blind or in denial, nor is he compelled to compare himself with others (II Cor. 10:12). He is aware of his own level of need for rest and relaxation and addresses these and other needs as they arise.

6. Prioritize relationship with God and keeping close accountability to God

A hardy person does not tolerate known sin in himself. He invites God’s searchlight and lives in the presence of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30), dealing courageously with his own sin (1 John 1:8-9) and carefully and compassionately with the sin of other people (John 8:7; II Cor. 6:14; Eph. 5:11; I Thess. 3:13). He “keeps short accounts”, forgiving offenses as they occur, asking for forgiveness when appropriate.

7. Responsible

Able to accept responsibility, the hardy person sees himself as having an impact on life, an effect on those around him. He is comfortable taking credit for the good he does, and willing to take blame for the bad that he does. He is not a blamer of others. He understands that wherever he is, he is making something better or worse. While he does not deny or rationalize his mistakes or avoid responsibility, neither does he assume total responsibility.

8. Generosity

A hardy person lives life richly--giving love, energy, resources, time. He is generous, open, trusting, working, giving. He does not hoard. He sees himself as one living in community, and shares in order that his brother should not be in need (Ruth 2:14-18; Luke 6:38; II Cor. 8). He also realizes that receiving from others, allowing them to be part of God's provision, can be an act of generosity and is necessary for his own well-being.

9. Gratitude

The hardy person walks in gratitude. He believes that "we are...mutually dependent on one another" (Rom. 12:5). He does not consider himself 'entitled' to what he is given but, realizing that every thing he receives has cost someone else, lets people know their gifts of time and substance are valued. He accepts his own weaknesses, helplessness and need of 'one another' care without shame, graciously allowing others to minister to him. He values the synergy of reciprocal ministry. "Cultivate thankfulness" (Col. 3:15b, The MESSAGE).

10. Hopeful: positive outlook

This person has a wonderful sense of hope which anchors him (Heb. 6:10), giving him stability in time of storm (Heb. 10:23). This confidence in God makes a daily, positive difference in his life (I Jn. 3:3). The hardy person is not habitually pessimistic, critical, or easily discouraged when situations look black. His hope frees him to experience joy in his daily life (Rom. 12:12).

11. Resourcefulness

The hardy person is innovative and creative. This refers to the way he conceptualizes and utilizes options and resources. He is not easily defeated, waiting for someone else to do something, nor does he demand the ideal. This person is inventive, looking actively for options, not helplessly waiting to be bailed out. His approach to problem solving is "Let's see what I can do".

12. Flexibility

A hardy person is able to enjoy second choice. "I really wanted to do that, but it's raining and I can't. I'll do this instead." This person can enjoy what is, rather than pout about what he cannot have. Disappointment does not send this person into a tailspin.

13. Sense Of Humor

Hardiness is reflected in the individual's use of humor, i.e. he can laugh at himself, does not take himself too seriously, is not easily offended if someone laughs at him. He teases others gently. He manifests spontaneity and flexibility, enjoys the richness and variety of God's creation. Humor is a major contributing factor to being resilient.

14. Rejection

The hardy person is not so fragile that failure defines or defeats him. He learns from his mistakes. He has the ability to pick up the pieces and restart after a failure, a rebuff, or a rejection. This makes him easy to supervise.

15. Courtesy

A hardy person knows that the lubricant of life is good manners, a respectful awareness of others and an easing of their way by attention to cultural niceties. "I am not an island. I cannot do as I please or act out negative feelings. I am aware of my impact on others."

16. Use Of Time

A hardy person is a self-motivated starter when necessary. He can reframe boredom into some semblance of productivity, making an unexpected 'loss' of time into something useful. He is able to benefit from reflective and/or interactive times and balance personal and social time for his own well being. (Col. 3:23 The MESSAGE; Eph. 5:16; Col. 4:5)

17. Support

The hardy person identifies and maintains a personal support system. He can develop healthy relationships in a group (family, church, mission, neighborhood, etc.), setting appropriate boundaries and realizing the mutual impact people have on each other.

(I Cor. 12:7-26; Eph. 4:15-16)

Key points to remember for one to thrive in hard places

1. Maintain good and healthy relationships: God and others

Good relationships are a source of meaning and purpose for most people. Social support enhances physical health, emotional positivity, life satisfaction and even life expectancy. You could conclude, if you want to have a good life, work on your relationships! Value relationships.

People can only remain healthy and optimal in their relationships through good communication and intimacy. The ability to get on with others is critical for people who work in difficult or extreme environments. To survive and thrive in demanding situations one must learn to be tolerant and tolerable (Barrett, Martin 2014:105).

David from the Bible knew how to run to the Lord when faced with many challenges. When his men spoke of stoning him after the Amalekites took their sons and daughters as captives, he encouraged himself in the Lord and found strength in Him (I Sam 30:6). Frontline workers will face many challenging situations. How one responds to these challenges will determine how well he or she will thrive in hard places.

2. Conflict resolution

Good conflict resolution involves paying attention to the relationship as well as to solving the conflict. People vary in the degree to which they focus on one dimension or the other.

Successful resolution pays attention to both and looks for a cooperative or win/win outcome. In positive conflict resolution both partners will:

- Clearly articulate their own position
- Listen carefully to the position of the other
- Invite other views & welcome differences
- Participate non-defensively in evaluating strengths & weaknesses of all positions
- Seek additional information & look for alternative creative solutions
- At times agree to “split the difference”
- Inhibit destructive tendencies to nag, complain, lash out or be hurt in order to engage in healthy problem solving and conflict resolution

3. Promote life-long learning

Pursue life-long learning that benefits you as a person, as well as growth of the organization. Develop personal growth plans and talk to your leaders/mentors about how to implement the plans.

A leader who finishes well is one who:

1. Maintains a personal vibrant relationship with God right up to the end. All leaders should expectantly look for and make space for repeated times of renewal. Most leaders who have been effective over a lifetime have needed and welcomed renewal experiences from time to time in their lives.

2. Maintains a learning posture and learns from various kinds of sources--life especially. The single most important antidote to plateauing is a well-developed learning posture. Pursue ongoing education, plan a study leave, and read widely.
3. Gives evidence of Christ-likeness in character as seen by the fruit of the Spirit in his or her life.
4. Lives out truth in his or her life so that convictions and promises of God are seen to be real.
5. Leaves behind one or more ultimate contributions; that is, a lasting legacy.
6. Walks with a growing awareness of a sense of destiny and sees some or all of it fulfilled.

4. Have a healthy theology of suffering

What does the potential candidate understand about suffering as a missionary?

Peace, love, and joy to those who are in Christ. We have all received this message but is this the full gospel? "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for Him (Phil 1:29). If anyone would come to me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Matt 16:24-25

Myths about suffering:

1. Christians should not suffer in this life as it will rob us of our joy.
2. Suffering means something is wrong. It must be the punishment of God.
3. Suffering has no redeeming or positive results.
4. If God really loves us He won't let us suffer very much. He will protect us from persecution.

God's view on Suffering

1. We are called to suffer for Jesus. Phil 1:29, I Pet 2:20-21.
2. Suffering is normal and inevitable in the Christian life. 2 Tim 3:12.
3. God uses suffering for our good and to conform us to the likeness of His Son. Rom 8:28-29.

Results of suffering

1. Causes us to rely on God, not ourselves. 2 Cor 1:9.
2. So that our faith may be proved genuine and result in praise. I Peter 1:7.
3. It builds perseverance, character, hope and maturity. Rom 5:3,4, Jam 1:3-4.

The Promises of God in the Midst of Suffering

1. His faithfulness will be our shield and rampart. Ps 91:4.
2. His grace is sufficient for us. 2 Cor 12:9.
3. In the midst of pain nothing can separate us from His love for us. Rom 8:28

How can we respond to suffering and where does member care come in?

First of all, it is normal for us to be fearful; be deeply distressed; or troubled; or feeling overwhelmed at times. Jesus went through that experience. (Mark 14:33, Matt 26:38).

The apostle Paul experienced anxiety (Phil 2:28) in great distress (2Cor 2:3) and was fearful for his life (2 Cor 11: 3,7). There were times he longed to be absent in the body and present in the Spirit.

God never intended for us to suffer alone. He designed the body of Christ to minister to one another. I Cor 12: 24-26. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it.

Besides all the “spiritual” response in the midst of persecution, one thing that stood out to me through the years of being persecuted myself as a young believer, is the fact that there were friends who stood with me.

1. Members caring for one another. Count it worthy to suffer for Him. Acts. 5:41. The disciples were together when they went through persecution. They met to pray and encourage each other. Daily they broke bread.
 - They prayed together 2 Cor 1:10-11
 - They were united
 - They encouraged each other Heb 3:13, 12: 25, I Thes 5:14
 - They shared in one another’s burdens/suffering
2. We can carry other’s burdens and allow them to carry ours. Gal 6:2
3. We can comfort and be comforted 2 Cor 1:3-4
4. We can help in practical ways and let them help us 2 Tim 1:18

Conclusion

Serving God in cross-cultural situation increases the probability that we will face tough circumstances and at times may have to suffer. This means we need to be “experts” in understanding God’s view of suffering, and in knowing how to suffer according to biblical principles.

Despite working in difficult places, studies have showed those working in these environments reap psychological effects. They are more resilient. They have a better understanding of their own strength and have a sense they have lived their life to the fullest. They have learned the value of little things in life and friendships. Working in difficult places helps people to stay focused on their calling and this enables them to endure pain and hardship.

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