

TIPS FOR SURVIVAL

The top ten factors enhancing missionary resiliency in today's high security alert nations.

INTRODUCTION:

While our Lord's commission to disciple all nations has not changed, and the message of good news has not changed, the context is changing. Many nations have moved to what some call "high security alert nations." This is the new frontier for bringing the good news. These nations in crisis need a message of hope now more than ever. Unlike the past, today's international worker will move into risky situations and will very likely experience personal trauma during his/her time as God's messenger.

In a recent study¹ thirty-five missionaries who had experienced the traumas of political evacuations, rape, car-jacking, armed home invasions and robbery were asked to reflect on factors that contributed to their resiliency and longevity on the front lines. Here are the top ten factors they cited.

1. HEAR GOD'S CALL. You need to know that you are supposed to be in Africa. One said, "Don't step on an airplane till you know that you know this is right—it is God's call." The reason this needs to be strong is for the days and times when questioning

¹Brown, Ronald. 2005. Self-identified retention factors by western missionaries in Africa who have experienced traumatic events. D.Min. project. Trinity International University.

comes and things go terribly wrong and you need something to go back to which serves as an anchor for your soul.

2. **SETTLE FAMILY ISSUES.** They said one must settle the issue of bringing children to Africa. One remarks that God did not just call us but he calls our children also. Another said, “Give children back to God and dedicate them.” Another said, “Did God give me these children, am I prepared to sacrifice them, can I trust Him with them, do I choose to trust Him on this missionary pathway?” A mother said she was glad she brought her family to Africa to grow up as TCKs, learning other cultures and languages; for them to learn that the American way is not the only way. She spoke of the many advantages of growing up on the field.
3. **SEE GOD AT WORK.** They continue in Africa because they see God working in amazing ways. It is a thrill to see people coming from darkness to light in the midst of chaotic conditions.
4. **HAVE A DEVELOPED THEOLOGY OF RISK AND SUFFERING.** Those who came to Africa with a western cultural worldview of suffering were shocked into reality when their first trauma happened. For those who had at home already developed a Biblical theology of suffering, they rebounded better from trauma. Those foundations were solidified as they experienced various traumas. Candidates must be willing to suffer and to sacrifice. There also needs to be a willingness to die, said one man, who had just buried a colleague. Having experienced the trauma of rape, a young woman said, “Do you know that He won’t let anything happen to you that you can’t handle?” During her horrible ordeal, she spoke of an “incredible sense of God’s presence.” This woman says she has a sense

of identity with women of war as she continues to minister effectively in a war torn country.

5. **BE PREPARED TO LEARN.** “God will be with you, you will go through fire, you will experience God in ways you never will in the homeland; it is a privilege” said one person. Trauma victims speak of spiritual growth spurts as they find God in the midst of trauma. Their desire is to grow close to God and in living out life in Africa those opportunities have often come through periods of suffering.
6. **HAVE AN OPEN HAND.** A twenty-five year veteran who has seen his share of traumas says, “Hold things lightly in an open hand including possessions, spouse and children.” He suggests that all that we have is really a gift from God. We have the privilege of stewarding His gifts for a time.
7. **HAVE FIELD MENTORS.** God has promised in Matthew 28:20b to be with us. For many that promise came true through experienced missionaries who walked with new recruits during periods of adjustments as well as through times of comfort following their first traumas. Good onsite mentors contribute to longevity.
8. **HAVE GOOD SUPPORT STRUCTURES.** Those that were resilient after trauma had three things: a good prayer support base, good team support and good logistical support. One person advised, “Join an organization that can provide these three.”
9. **SETTLE THE FEAR FACTOR.** One survivor said people need to understand the underlying issue of fear. Is it a safety issue or a theological issue? Safety is not so much geography, but knowing you are where God wants you to be. One person was more straight forward in saying that part of the missionary calling is that bad things will

happen, you will get robbed, you will get sick. The consensus is you will experience trauma. The advice seems to be, face the fear, count the cost before coming.

10. FIND THE COMMITMENT FACTOR. One referred to Luke 9:23 “Then he said to them all: ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me’” (NIV). Those surviving trauma had huge commitments: to God, to the ministry, to their projects, to the relationships that had been established locally. They refused to be driven out of town by difficult things that came into their lives. Like soldiers in an army, they had a sense of duty to stick with the program, and they were obedient to their orders until new orders were given. Their love of God and a sense of duty were high.

CONCLUSION

New recruits who find themselves in possession of these ten factors are likely to survive in the high security alert nations of today. While the media often portrays Africa in a troublesome way, those on the ground valued wonderful friendships and good relationships with Africans. They are attracted to the easy, relaxed way of life and the richness this adds to the life of their family; they are happy for the huge opportunities for fulfilling ministry; they are joyful and content in serving God, the God who keeps them.

“I’ll be with you as you do this, day after day after day right up to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20b, The Message).