



Sending Church Crisis Protocol for Missionary Moral Failure

By Dr. Becky Holton

The experience of failure in a missionary's life, whether it is sexual, ethical, financial, or some other type, not only affects the fallen missionary, but the family, the mission team, the church, and everyone in that person's sphere of influence. The impact of moral failure (e.g. adultery, pornography addiction, homosexual relationship) in mission contexts has particularly devastating consequences. Like a tsunami crashing onto the shore, the waves of hurt, shame, and disbelief pummel the unsuspecting and can lead to lifelong damage.

In order to respond to a spiritual crisis such as moral failure, it is appropriate to have a response protocol prepared to serve as a guide for navigating such difficult situations. Without such guidelines, it is easy for mission teams to simply turn away and hope things will "blow over," to hold such damaging information in secrecy, or to respond to the fallen comrade in ways that are spiritually immature, thereby contributing to family, team, and church trauma.

A spiritual and mature response to missionary moral failure assumes the following:

- Because ministers/teachers/missionaries are often held to a higher standard, a prayerful, mature, and strong response is required for missionary moral failure.
- A response to missionary moral failure is never intended to come from a spirit of pride, arrogance, anger, or self-righteousness, but rather from a spirit of humility that gently seeks the truth and reconciliation for all concerned.
- At the heart of any moral failure is deceit. Consequently, the outcome of lying to God and others regarding moral failure results in the loss of credibility, trust, and the ability to lead others to discipleship.
- Cover-up of moral failure destroys missionary intimacy with God which makes ministry difficult, if not impossible, before reconciliation.

With these points in mind, and with the understanding that all moral failures are unique, varied, and person-specific, the following general steps are recommended for a spiritual and mature response to the crisis created by missionary moral failure:

1. DISCOVERY: What is the Truth?

- Because of the emotional, shocking, and confusing nature of moral failure suspicion and/or discovery, it is recommended that the mission team involve their sending church elders and/or mission committee chairperson. It is further recommended that the sending church leaders appoint a response team consisting of three or four spiritually mature individuals to work with the mission team in determining an appropriate response. Whether the missionary in question confesses to an indiscretion or was "found out" or accused, the

missionaries and newly formed sending church response team will work together to investigate and discover what actually occurred and if the allegations are true.

- NOTE: If the allegations are determined to be false and the missionary is exonerated, then the response team will facilitate mission team, family, and church reconciliation and healing.
- If the allegations are true, it is recommended that appropriate notification of all sponsoring churches be made, within a framework of confidentiality, humility, and with the goal of care and restoration.
- The response team will keep a written record of all discussions, decisions, and actions taken. A written record protects the family, team, and church and provides a framework of consistent details for appropriate individuals who are seeking answers for purposes of providing a helpful and godly response to the fallen missionary.
- It is urgent to immediately determine if a criminal report must be filed with local authorities. Many cities/countries require the reporting of incidents involving minors. Failure to do so may result in legal action. If the allegation is criminal in nature, the accused should be advised to seek legal counsel and submit to local law authorities.

Procedure without missionary disclosure:

- After initial interviews and gathering of accurate information, the truth should become clearer. Based on acquired information, the mission team, sending church response team, and other sponsoring church representatives can construct a plan that will hopefully result in missionary, missionary family, team, and church healing and restoration.

Procedure with missionary disclosure:

- If the fallen missionary confesses to moral failure, it will more than likely not be necessary to thoroughly gather additional information but rather begin to focus on care, recovery, and restoration for all involved and/or affected.

2. COMMUNICATION: To Whom and What Should Be Told?

It is important to determine as early as possible what and with whom to share with the mission church. If there is the possibility of a lawsuit, legal counsel will help the team determine when and what can be shared. (Should legal counsel be necessary, the sending church response team will collaborate with the missionary team and all sponsoring churches to find appropriate legal counsel.) This may take the form of a special meeting with members. A prepared written statement or letter also keeps communication lines open, letting members know appropriate information. It is essential for the team to remember that all communication should be as honest and open as possible without jeopardizing legal principles and without engaging in gossip. There always exists the strong potential for gossip, rumors, and even church division if communication is not handled well.

3. CARE: For Missionary Family, Missionary, Team, and Church

- **FAMILY:** Of paramount importance is care and protection for the fallen missionary's spouse and children. In consultation with the spouse, sending church response team, and other sponsoring church leaders, it should be determined if the family should return to the States for counseling and care, thereby allowing them time to heal and recover without attending to the added responsibilities associated with their missionary work. However, the spouse may believe a return to the States would be too disruptive for the family and may prefer to find emotional and spiritual support in their current location. If this seems to be a viable and appropriate response, then the response team should provide mental health professional referral information and resources and also help facilitate an on-going loving and helpful support system.

- **MISSIONARY:** The authors of *The Healing of a Warrior* suggest a step-by-step process of restoration following a leader's moral failure. As an indication of true repentance, it is recommended that all of the following steps be present for missionary moral failure recovery:
 1. **Confession.** Sincere regret and an acknowledgment of the magnitude of the sin and why it was wrong.
 2. **Change of attitude and behavior.** A shift from blaming others to a willingness to bear the blame.
 3. **Following a plan.** A willingness to follow a **written contract*** detailing steps for restoration.
 4. **Accountability.** A willingness to meet with one biblically-grounded mature believer each week who will prepare a report of the missionary's progress for the sending church response team. It will be important for the mentor to have access to all e-mail and Internet accounts of the fallen missionary. *(It is assumed that accountability meetings will occur with a mature Christian face-to-face in the missionary's country of origin and with a non-missionary team member. See "Time Out" below.)*

***Written Contract** recommendations:

1. Time Out – Whenever a missionary is involved in moral failure, he/she needs to be away from his/her ministry responsibilities and out of the "spotlight." An administrative "leave of absence" is essential since it is extremely difficult to minister to others while trying to rebuild one's life and marriage. A fallen missionary needs all of his/her energy in restoring fellowship with God and restoring relationships with his/her family members and those who have been hurt. Most likely the missionary and the missionary family will need to return to the States and the missionary will need to find a secular job while working on recovery.
 - NOTE: Missionary moral failure involving inappropriate contact with a minor constitute grounds for *immediate* removal of the missionary and missionary family from the field – IF local law officials do not require detainment.
2. Professional Counseling should be provided for the fallen leader as well as the family members. A Christian professional will be able to help sort out, from an

- objective viewpoint, what has led to the failure and what steps may need to be taken for personal wholeness. Counseling can be an invaluable resource in the healing process.
- It is important to note that often marital restoration can take a *minimum* of 6-18 months to rebuild.
 - The fallen missionary and his/her sponsoring church leaders will need to discuss the financial responsibilities related with professional counseling.
3. A Period of Proving. Following a moral failure, it is possible for missionary restoration to occur. However, it should not be assumed. Restoration requires a long-time track record of proving in several areas: proving accountability, proving responsibility, proving repentance, and proving humility. *It is strongly recommended that the missionary identify a mature and spiritual accountability partner that agrees to provide on-going, long-term accountability for purposes of missionary restoration.*

- **MISSIONARY TEAM:** Upon suspicion, discovery and/or disclosure of missionary moral failure, and after the team contacts their sending church leaders, it is recommended that two trained crisis team professionals, preferably a male and female, travel to the mission site to provide care, support, hope, and guidance in dealing with the trauma of a missionary's moral indiscretion. Each team member will be interviewed individually and prayed for and will be a part of designing a plan to care for the missionary, the missionary family, mission team, and the church.

After the crisis, the remaining missionary team members will be provided debriefing and grief counseling, as needed. Time will be spent in determining what needs they have and, in collaboration with their sending churches, great effort will be made to provide for the mission team's physical, emotional, and spiritual needs.

In addition, the mission team will be encouraged to provide accountability for each other and to be aware of the warning signs of impending moral failure:

- Ignoring signs of burnout and stress.
- Behavioral changes, such as a lack of Bible reading or prayer, which are often signs of inner turmoil.
- Notable personality changes, such as mood swings, lethargy, withdrawing/isolating from others, and anger.
- If preaching or teaching, significant changes in sermons and lessons which become less about scripture and more about the speaker.
- Increases in rude behavior, sarcasm, and defensiveness.
- Unusual absences or unavailability.
- Difficulty staying within a budget (e.g. spending sprees).
- Secrecy in communication and behavior, especially as it relates to the spouse.
- Inappropriate touching of the opposite sex.
- Closed-door, one-on-one counseling sessions with the opposite sex.

- Visiting the home of opposite sex individual(s) without spousal accompaniment.
- **MISSION CHURCH:** Any crisis is disorienting and painful but crises also provide an opportunity for growth. Every church that is prayerfully guided to responsibly address the pain and devastation of moral failure of one of their ministers/missionaries will usually find a better path and a healthier way to function.

It is recommended that the following ideas be considered by the mission team, sending church response team, and other sponsoring church leaders in considering how best to care for the missional church during this spiritual crisis:

- If the fallen missionary has been the pulpit minister, consider who can now best lead in this public role and provide care for the congregation during this difficult time. Whoever is chosen to fill this important role may want to consider facilitating *Restoring the Fallen* recommended characteristics of a healing and restoring church. A restoring church is:
 - A safe place for people to be real and process the painful situation.
 - A place where godly judgment is gently administered.
 - A place where grace is extended.
 - A place for discipline.
 - A place for accountability.
 - A place where truth-telling is practiced.
- Other ideas to be considered:
 - Congregational meetings for the purpose of communication and healing.
 - Small group meetings to help work through specific issues.
 - Bible classes on forgiveness, recovery, and restoration.

Hill, M. L., & Hill, S. P. (2000). *The Healing of a Warrior: A Protocol for the Prevention and Restoration of Minister Engaging in Destructive Behavior*. Cyberbook. (As cited in Fabry, C., [2007]. *Pastoral Restoration: The Path to Recovery*. Retrieved January 2013, Focus on the Family Pastor's Advocate Series.)

Wilson, E., Wilson, S., Freisen, P., Freisen, V., Paulson, L., & Paulson, N. (1997). *Restoring the Fallen*. Madison, WI: InterVarsity Press.