

What contributes most to missionaries' effectiveness? - Insights of mission executives

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What makes missionaries resilient, spiritually vibrant and strong to overcome crises? What keeps them in service, growing and developing, constantly adjusting to the changing circumstances and needs? Which organisational structures provide effective support without strangling the missionaries' initiative or patronising the national church in the country of service? Which agency practices build missionaries up and make their ministry fruitful? These were some of the questions which led the WEA-Missions Commission to launch the comprehensive ReMAP II study on missionary retention and agency practices.

Method

Some 600 mission agencies with 39,200 long-term cross-cultural missionaries from 22 countries participated in the study and provided a self assessment of their procedures and practices as well as statistical data on their missionary assignment and retention¹. The ReMAP II-questionnaire included a section in which mission executives were asked for their personal opinion as to what they considered as the four most important issues that contribute most to their missionaries' present effectiveness and what they considered as the greatest hindrances, and thus drawing on the mission leaders' insights and wisdom. As these were open questions, various words were entered. Some were synonyms and covered the same issue, so that they were gathered in one group. In addition, we did not consider the order of the four items, whether a factor was named at the first, second, third or fourth place (which can be a hard choice and may lead to an arbitrary order) but merely whether or not a certain topic was named as one of the four top issues.

The directors' responses were also multiplied with the number of active missionaries of the agency as these are the number of missionaries who serve under such working conditions and a leader with these opinions. The following diagrams give the 18 most often named issues as a percentage of missionaries whose directors named the respective issue as one of the four top items. The diagrams also give the responses of the subgroups of agencies (33% of missionaries) with very high or very low total retention.

As sending countries differ considerably in their social, cultural, economic context and church history, we distinguished between old sending countries (OSC)² of North America and Europe and the new sending countries (NSC)³ of Latin America, Africa and Asia, so that both groups were analysed separately.

OSC Agencies

Fig. 1 gives the response of OSC mission executives as to what they consider that contributes most to their missionaries' present effectiveness in OSC agencies. Top issue was *Prayer* named by the leaders of 37 % of all OSC missionaries: Worship and praise, giving thanks for his wonderful protection and provision, pleading for his intervention and interceding for the needs of our world – these indeed make the heart of a missionary's identity and sets the basis of his/her life and work.

This prime factor is followed by the *Missionaries' commitment to their own ministry*, which pinpoints to the workers' passion for and dedication to their ministry. They are convinced of what they do and find it meaningful. This subject is followed by clear *Goals and plans* and *Vision and purpose*, two organisational issues that identify the missionary's direction and thrust. Clear, specific goals and plans appear to be as important as the overall vision in the achievement driven culture of the West.

These four top factors require high attention by all Western mission leaders, especially as they received even higher recognition in the subgroup of agencies with very high missionary retention

¹ Detlef Bloecher Good Agency Practices: Lessons from ReMAP II. Connections 3 (2004), 12-25

² 308 OSC agencies with 25580 missionaries answered this section of the questionnaire

³ 261 NSC agencies with 12579 missionaries answered this section of the questionnaire

OSCH (with *Vision and purpose* actually found as number two and followed by clear *Goals and plans*) further highlighting the significance of the factors.

This top group is then followed by *Commitment* in general (which includes the agency's commitment to their workers), *Missionary teams*, *Supervision and mentoring*, *Training of missionaries*, *Language and culture training* and *Finances* (providing the material basis for their life and ministry). These six issues are related to the agency's organisational ethos and structure and direct the way for the agency's organisational development.

Next comes *Missionary teams provide mutual support*, *Relationships with Nationals* (the sense of belonging and being appreciated), *Personal calling to mission service*, *On-field orientation for new missionaries*, *Missionaries are given room to shape their own ministry* (and thus giving them ownership and active participation), *Member Care*, *Personal spiritual life* and *National church values the missionaries ministry* (sense of being appreciated). This set of topics is mainly dealing with the missionary's relationships to his/her colleagues and the host culture.

High and low retaining OSC agencies

In the subgroup of high retaining agencies *Prayer*, *Vision and purpose*, *Language & Culture learning* and *Pre-field training* received higher recognition than in overall OSC, while *Commitment in general*, *Supervision & mentoring*, and *Church on the field values the missionaries ministry* were named less often. Apparently these issues has been dealt with so effectively that they lost in significance.

In the subgroup of low-retaining agencies (OSC L), on the other hand, the missionary's sense of *Calling* was named as the most important factor (29%), while *Prayer*, *Vision and purpose* and *Training* were mentioned less frequently. Are their organisational deficits⁴ offset by their expectation of a very strong sense of personal calling?

OSC Hindrances

When asked for the greatest hindrances to their missionaries' effectiveness, OSC mission executives named most often (Figure 2): *Lack of finances* (32%), *Interpersonal conflicts*, *Lack of an effective Missionary team* and *Limited MK education*. We see that finances do not necessarily yield in an effective ministry but lack of finances can strangle its thrust.

This top group is followed by *Lack of clear goals & plans*, *Sense of calling to mission service*, *Family issues*, *Lack of member care*, *Cultural adaptation*, strained *Relationships with Nationals*, *Work overload*, *Leadership issues* (i.e. lack of or rigid leadership), *Health problems*, *Government restriction to missionaries' ministry*, *Unbalanced or immature character of the missionary*, *Lack of Supervision & mentoring*, *Prayer* and *Staff shortage*. These are the 18 most frequently mentioned factors – and there are dozens more of lower prevalence.

In the subgroup of agencies with very high retention (OSC H) *MK education* was named as the top hindrance, followed by *Team problems*, *defective sense of Calling*, while *Interpersonal conflicts* and lack of *finances* follow only on the fourth and fifth place. *Interpersonal conflicts*, *Missionary team*, *MK-education*, *Calling* and *Staff shortage* were named more often than in the total OSC group. Apparently these five factors are more resistant to improvement and thus require special attention. Other issues like *Finances*, *Member care*, *Work overload*, *Character of missionary* (candidate selection) and *Prayer* were mentioned less often, so that it is believed that they are addressed well in high retaining agencies, that they are no longer considered as a bottleneck to the missionaries' effectiveness.

In the subgroup of agencies with low retention (OSC L), on the other hand, *Missionaries' health* was named most often (does this reason serve as socially acceptable excuse for other issues?) followed by *Lack of finances* and *Missionary team*. *Work overload* and *Prayer* were named more often than in overall OSC, while *Interpersonal conflicts*, *MK-schooling*, *Calling*, *Relationships with Nationals*, *Supervision and Staff shortage* had lost significance.

⁴ Detlef Bloecher 2004. Good Agency Practices: Lessons from ReMAP II. Connections 3(2), 12-25

OSC Effectiveness plus hindrances

When factors for effectiveness and hindrances are combined, then we find the following ranking order: *Prayer* (45 %), *Finances* (44 %), *Goals & Plans* (42 %), *Missionary Team* (40 %), *Commitment of missionary* (28 %), *Calling to Missionary Service* (28 %), *Interpersonal conflicts* (27 %), *MK Education* (26 %), *Supervision & Mentoring* (25 %), *Vision & Purpose* (24 %), *Member Care* (23 %), *Relationship Nationals* (23 %), *Language Acquisition* (23 %), *Leadership* (19 %), *Commitment to/of agency* (19 %), *Training* (19 %) and *Family issues* (18 %).

In the subgroup of high retaining agencies *Missionary Calling* had increased in significance compared with overall OSC (+15%) as well as *Vision & purpose* (+13%), *Language learning* (+12 %), *Missionary Teams* (+8%), *MK Education* (+7%) *Missionary Training* (+7 %), *Goals & Plans* (+6 %) and *Missionaries is given room to shape their own ministry* (+6%), while *Leadership* (-6 %), *Home church included* (-6%), *Supervision* (-6%), *Church on the field values missionaries* (-7%), *Assignment of missionaries to their gifting* (-7%), *On-field orientation* (-7%), *Work overload* (-7%) and *Commitment* (-15%) lost in significance.

In the subgroup of low retaining agencies, on the other hand, *Supervision & Mentoring* (+26%), *Finances* (+22%), *Member Care* (+18%), *On-field orientation* (+17%), *Candidate Screening* (+10%), *Leadership* (+9%), *Work overload* (+8%), *Church on the field values* (+8%) and *Personal Spiritual life* (+7%) and *Sustained financial Support* (+7%) had increased in significance, while *Language learning* (-6%), *Commitment of missionaries to ministry* (-6%), *Cultural adaptation* (-7%), *Prayer* (-7%), *Goals & Plans* (-8%), *Missionary Calling* (-8%), *MK Education* (-17%), and *Commitment to/of agency* (-17%) lost in significance. The former group characterises the essentials which need to be met.

NSC Effectiveness

Mission leaders from new sending countries (NSC) considered *Vision & purpose* as their most important factor for their missionaries effectiveness (Figure 3) underlining the clear sense of direction and passion of the new emerging mission movement. This top factor was followed by *Member Care*, and significantly lower: *Assignment of missionaries according to their gifting*, *Missionaries are committed to their ministry*, *Continuous training*, *Conviction of God's Calling to missionary service*, *Personal spiritual life of the missionary* and *Prayer* (throughout the agency).

This top group is followed by the more organisational factors: *Supervision & Mentoring of missionaries*, *Finances*, *Home churches are included in the missionaries life and ministry*, *Clear goals and plans*, *Leadership*, *Language and Culture learning*, *Missionary teams*, *Communication between field and home*, *Training of missionaries* and *Missionaries are given room to shape their own ministry*.

In NSC agencies some factors were named more often than in OSC namely, namely: *Member Care* (+28 %), *Missionary's Assignment to gifting* (+17%), *Vision & Purpose* (+17%), *Continuous training* (+17%), *Communication field home* (9%), *Missionary Calling* (8%), *Personal Spiritual life* (+8%), *Leaders as examples* (+7%) and *Home church is included in the missionary's life and ministry* (+6%), while *Teams provide mutual support* (-7%), *Missionary training* (-9%), *Goals & Plans* (-11%), *Commitment in general* (-14%) and *Prayer* (-21%) were named less often than in OSC agencies. The high rating of *Member Care* and *Continuous Training* confirm the agencies' commitment to their missionaries while that of *Vision and purpose* and *Assignment of missionaries according to their gifting* are unexpected and often considered as typical Western values. Do they highlight their deep sense of passion for mission or more an adoption from their parental (Western) agency models?

In the subgroup of high retaining NSC agencies (figure 3, NSC H), *Member care* is the dominating factor (52%), followed by *Vision & purpose*, *Missionaries' commitment to their ministry*, *Assignment of missionaries to their gifting*, *Calling to missionary service* and *Supervision*. *Member Care*, *Missionaries' commitment to ministry*, *Calling*, *Supervision* and *Communication field-home* were named more often than in overall NSC, while *Personal spiritual life*, *Continuous training*, *Home*

church is included in the missionary's life, and Training received less attention. Thus, Member Care, Calling to mission service and Supervision appear to be three decisive factors that need special attention by NSC leaders to order to increase their missionary retention. Continuous training, Personal spiritual life of the missionary, Home church is included and Pre-field training, on the other hand, were stressed more by low retaining agencies. They emphasise the missionary as a person (or their home church) – do they serve as an excuse for underdeveloped organisational structure?

Hindrances to Missionary effectiveness

Regarding hindrances of missionary effectiveness (Figure 4), NSC leaders named most often: Finances, Missionaries' health, Resistance of people group to the Gospel, Limited MK-education, Interpersonal conflicts and Lack of personal spiritual life. These big six focus mainly on personal and external issues. They are followed by Limited language acquisition, Character of the missionary (candidate selection), Spiritual warfare, lack of sustained financial support, Member care, Relationships with Nationals, Discouragement, lack of Vision & Purpose, Lack of Equipment, Training, Social conditions in the host culture like poverty and social injustice and Lack in communication which address some structural issues of mission agencies.

In the subgroup of high retaining agencies (Figure 4, NSC H), Missionary health was considered as the greatest challenge (45%), followed by Finances, MK education and poor Personal Spiritual life and more often than in overall OSC.

Low retaining NSC agencies, on the other hand, named Resistance of the people group (61%) as their greatest challenge followed by: Finances, lack of equipment, Social conditions in the people group Interpersonal conflicts, Character of missionary (Candidate selection) and Pre-field Missionary training. In this group the external and personal factors dominate while structural aspects of the agency are more in the back.

Finances, Missionary's health, MK Education, Personal Spiritual life, Language acquisition and Spiritual warfare and lack of Sustained financial support were positively correlated with missionary retention, while Resistance of people group to the Gospel, Interpersonal conflicts, Character of missionary, lack of Member Care, Equipment and Missionary training show negative correlation. Apparently the latter have been dealt with well in high retaining agencies that they are no longer considered as challenges.

Effectiveness plus Hindrances in NSC

When factors for effectiveness and hindrances are combined, then we find the following order in NSC agencies: Lack of finances (56%), Vision & Purpose (48%), Member Care (24%), Missionary's Health (35%), Missionaries assigned to gifting (32%), Personal Spiritual Life (31%), Resistance of peoples/hard places (26%), Language acquisition (25%), Missionary's commitment to ministry (23%), MK Education (22%), Missionary's continuous training (20%), Supervision & Mentoring (19%), Interpersonal conflicts (19%), Calling (19%) and Leadership (18%)

In the subgroup of high retaining NSC agencies, Member care (+12%), Health/Health care (+10%), Language acquisition (+7%), Commitment of missionary (+9%), MK Education (+5%), Missionary calling (+5%) were named more often than in overall NSC, while Missionary team (-5%), Finances (-5%), Character of missionary (-7%), Prayer (-8%), Personal spiritual life (-9%), Resistance of people group (-9%), Missionary training (-10%) and Home church included (-17%) and were named less often.

In the subgroup of low retaining NSC agencies (Figure 4, NSC L), Resistance of host culture (+35%), Lack of personal spiritual life (+23%), Equipment (+23%), Social conditions in host culture (+21%), Continued missionary training (+14%), Pre-field missionary training (+12%), Home church is included (+11%), Interpersonal conflicts (+9%), Communication (+7%), Character of missionary (+5%) are mentioned more often than in overall NSC, while lack of Goals & Plans (-7%), Leadership (-7%), Assignment to gifting (-7%), Prayer (-7%), Calling (-7%), Finances (-9%), Sustained financial support (-9%), Relationships with Nationals (-9%), Supervision & Mentoring (-11%), Finances (-9%), Language acquisition (-10%), Commitment of missionary to own ministry (-13%), MK

Education (-13%), Spiritual warfare (-14%), Member Care (-23%), Missionary health/Health Care (-26%), were named less often.

Discussion

The long lists of issues above prove that there is not one dominating factor for missionary effectiveness and not one great challenge (like interpersonal conflict, as often claimed) but there is indeed a large variety of factors.

In general, Prayer, Vision & purpose, Missionaries commitment to their ministry and Member Care are the four big contributors to effectiveness while lack of finances, missionaries health/health care, MK education and interpersonal conflicts are the four big difficulties.

Yet the challenges are specific for and new sending countries, as shown above. In addition, low retaining agencies predominantly face basic issues like member care, finances, vision & purpose and pre-field training, which can be addressed by organisational development, while high retaining agencies are wrestling with more sophisticated issues like missionary teams, missionary's health, MK education, language learning etc. which are more resistant to organisational development.

Each mission agency is serving in the context of rapid social, political, cultural and environmental changes in the country of service (e.g. powered by globalisation) as well as at the home front where expectations from sending and supporting churches change, too. Agencies need to work on their organisational structure to be effective and efficient in their services and able to adjust swiftly to emerging needs.

Likewise each missionary is stretched by the challenges of life and ministry in the host culture as well as adjusting to the continuous changes of the personal life, ministry and role in the host church. Each missionary requires specific support, appropriate and effective to the situation and personal needs, in order to grow personally and glorify God. It is more important "who we are" than "what we do". Missionaries are called to be an examples and live out God's grace in practice, brothers and sisters in Christ who live out His character, His love and compassion in humility, His willingness to sacrifice, endure injustice and pain, forgive and trust others, appreciate diversity, tolerate ambiguity and invest into people, always remaining a learner.

This calls for effective mission agencies with clear purpose and vision, specific plans yet flexible enough that the missionary can identify with, effective and interactive leadership, lean management and effective communication, good on-field orientation and emphasis on language learning, effective member care for the whole personal and family with particular attention to the educational needs of MK, effective team building and maintenance of healthy team life and serving for each other as well as working in trusting relationships with the National church, the emphasis on prayer and vibrant personal spiritual life, as well as the careful use of finances and persistent support. In many cases it is not the big defects in the agency's structure but the tiny stones in the shoe that walk the legs off. And it is the interrelationship of the various policies and practices as determined by their vision and ethos and their adjustments to a whole integrated care system that require attention so that missionaries. All these different segments and services need to fit together to a unified integrated structure for the glory of God.

Fig. 1: What contributes most to your missionaries' effectiveness

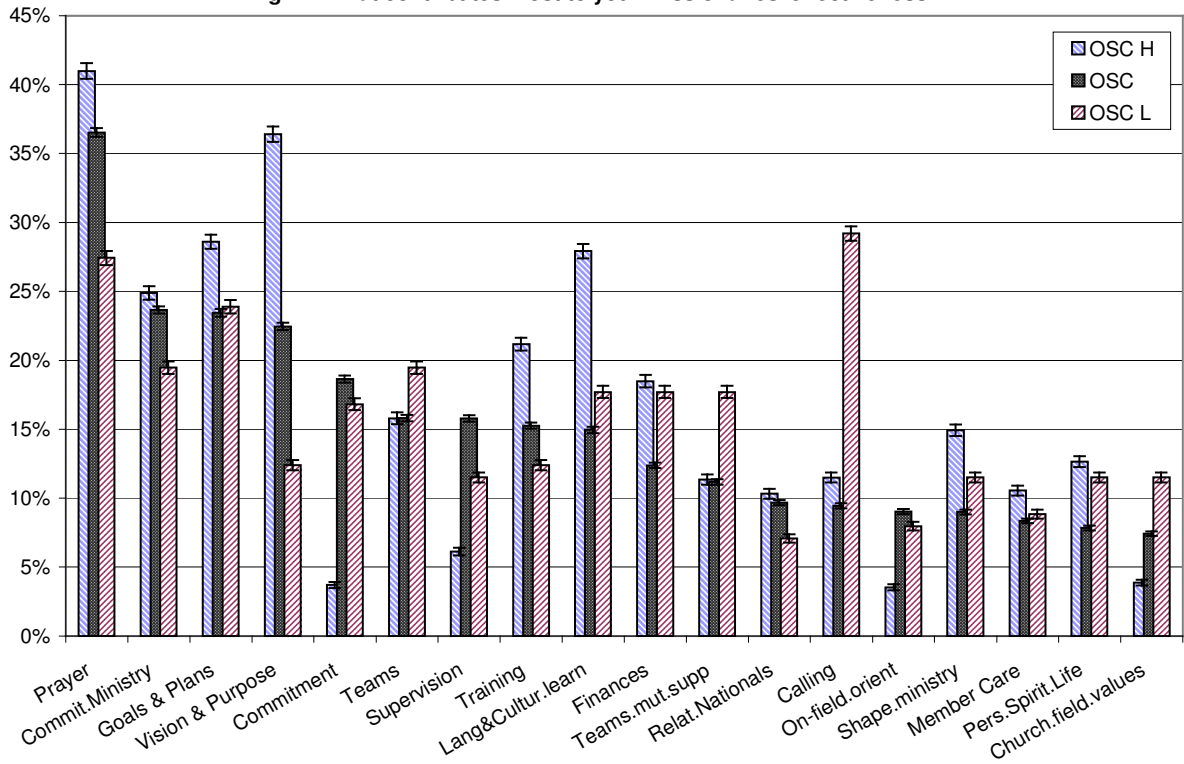


Fig. 2: What hinders most your missionaries' effectiveness

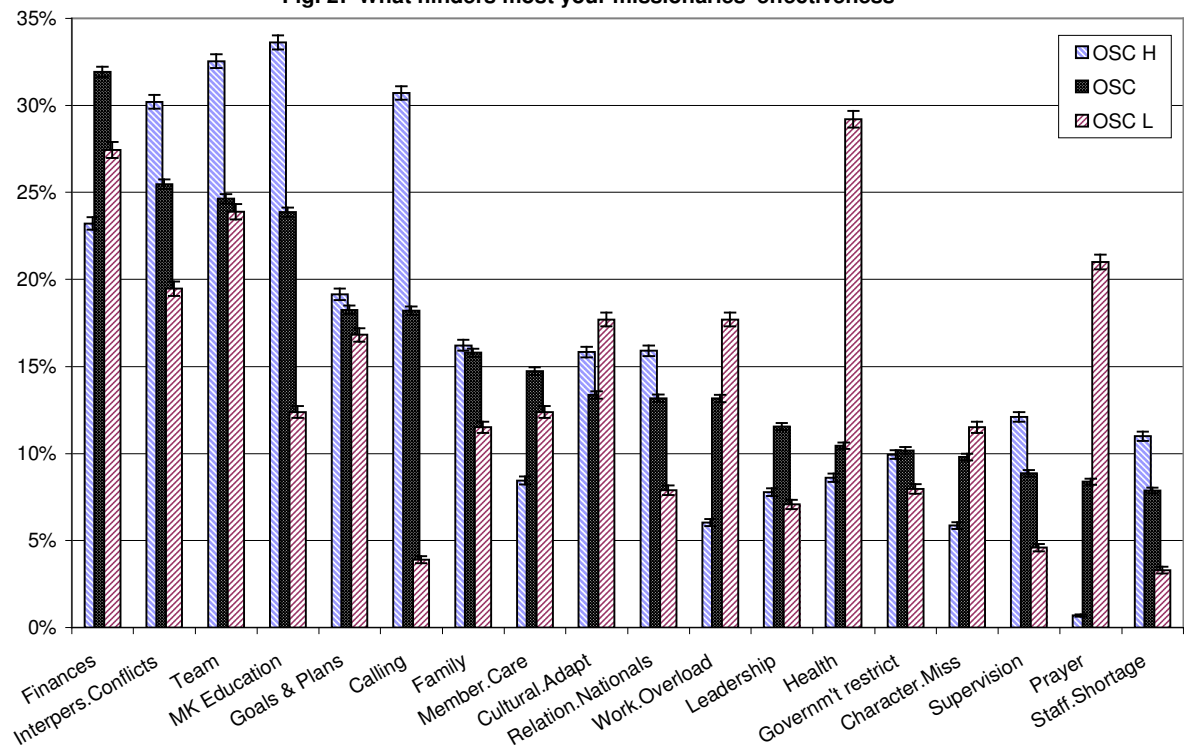


Fig. 3: What contributes most to your missionaries' effectiveness

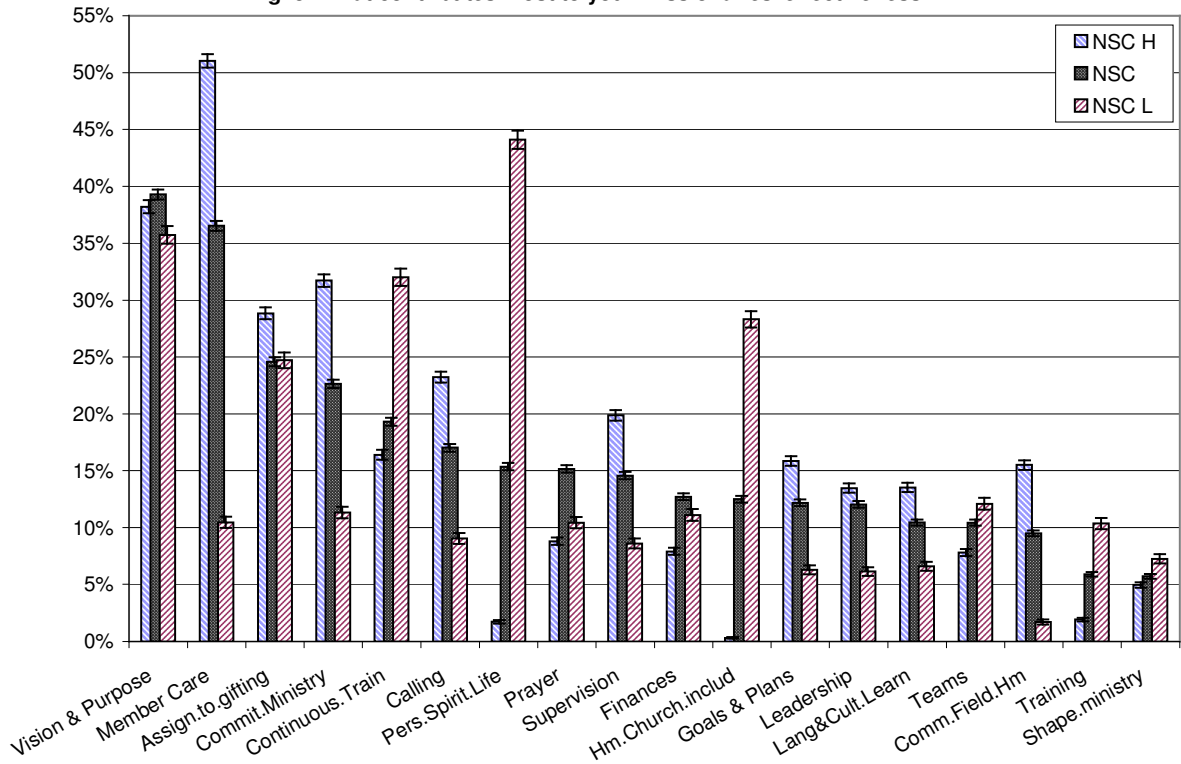


Fig. 4: What hinders most your missionaries' effectiveness

