

Good agency practices – lessons from ReMAP II

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What makes missionaries resilient, spiritually vibrant and strong to overcome crises? What helps them to grow into a fruitful ministry and constantly adjusting to the changing circumstances and needs? Which organisational structures and practices provide effective support? What builds missionaries up and makes them effective in ministry? These were some of the questions which led the WEA-Missions Commission to launch the comprehensive ReMAP II study¹ on missionary retention² and agency practices. Here we present the correlation with the total retention rate (RRT)³. RRT served as independent variable⁴ to which all organisational factors and practices were related. Mission executives, in general, gave relatively high ratings of organisational values as they are convinced of the effectiveness of their agency's ethos and actual performance. Therefore the agencies were grouped in three equal subgroups⁵ according to their retention rate: high (H), medium (M) and low (L). For clarity only the subgroups (H) and (L) are depicted. Separate analyses were run for old sending countries (OSC)⁶ and new sending countries (NSC) of Africa, Asia and Latin America⁷ to acknowledge the differences in their mission movements.

Candidate Selection

The analysis according to RRT shows that agencies from old (OSC) and new sending countries (NSC) gave very high rating to a number of factors on candidate selection ([figure 1](#)), in particular *Clear calling to missionary service*⁸, *Agrees with the agency's doctrinal statement*, *Knows and is committed to the agency's principles and practices*, *Demonstrates mature Christian character and discipline, i.e. prayer and devotional life*, *Has good character references*, *Has committed endorsement from his/her pastor/local church for missionary service*, *Meets health criteria determined by a physical examination* (OSC), *Exhibits contentment with present marital status (single, married)* (OSC) and *Has firm prayer support* (OSC). The rating of high retaining agencies was some 10% higher, but even low retaining agencies apparently cover these essential areas reasonably well, so that there is little room for differentiation. Yet some other issues like *Mature Christian character*, *Has the blessing of their family for mission service* (NSC), *Has ministry experience in a local church* (OSC), *Health examination*, *Meets health criteria*

¹ ReMAP II was limited to long-term (expected to serve for at least 3 years), cross-cultural missionaries serving within or outside their National borders. In early 2003 a questionnaire was sent out to all known evangelical sending agencies in 22 countries around the globe asking for sociological and statistical data on their missionaries as well as for a self-assessment of their organisational practices (measured on a scale 1=very poorly done to 6=very well done). 600 agencies with some 39,600 long-term missionaries participated in the study. In general, the questionnaire was filled out by a sending base director (response rate 30 – 100%). The agency's response was multiplied by their number of active missionaries as so many missionaries are serving under these organisational and working conditions and under a leadership with these values and convictions.

² Retention R is the percentage of missionaries still in active ministry after i.e. 5 y or 10 y of service and the annual retention rate is defined as $RR = 10^{(\log R) / t}$, presuming a uniform probability of coming home. Extensive studies of the author have proved that this is a reasonable assumption. ReMAP II covered missionaries newly sent out in the years 1981-2000.

³ Harmonious transfer to another agency (while continuing with the ministry in the same culture) was not considered, as the global Kingdom of God was in focus and not the success of an individual agency.

⁴ 228 OSC agencies with 23675 missionaries and 156 NSC agencies with 11556 missionaries provided sufficient retention records (at least 16 missionaries sent) to permit the calculation of RRT with reasonable accuracy and a reliable assignment to one of the subgroups: OSC H (RRT > 95.3 %; 82 agencies with 7995 missionaries); OSC L (RRT < 94.0 %; 120 agencies with 7645 missionaries); NSC H (RRT > 98.75 %; 27 agencies with 4587 missionaries); NSC L (RRT < 96.6 %; 92 agencies with 3841 missionaries).

⁵ 33% of the total number of missionaries each.

⁶ 323 agencies with 26200 long-term missionaries from Australia, Canada, Germany, Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, South Africa, United Kingdom and USA.

⁷ 275 agencies with 13065 missionaries from Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Ghana, Guatemala, Hong Kong, India, South Korea, Malaysia, Nigeria, Philippines and Singapore.

⁸ Literal wording of questions from the ReMAP II questionnaire is given in italic.

determined through a psychological assessment (NSC), Contentment with present marital status and Firm prayer support (OSC) received high attention in high retaining agencies only. These issues are expected to reduce attrition and thus need careful consideration. *Blessing by the family* is very important in NSC reflecting their cultural background and less in the individualistic societies of OSC. Yet the low rating of *Has ministry experience in a local church*, *Previous cross-cultural experience*, *Good potential for financial support*, *Demonstrated ability to cope well with stress and negative events* and *Firm prayer support* (NSC) is unexpected as cross-cultural experience is considered as an excellent preparation for mission service. Likewise prayer support proved to be central to missionaries' effectiveness in other sections of the survey. And do NSC churches give few opportunities for ministry in the church to young people as leadership and authority belongs to the elders? Are NSC churches more mono-ethnic and separated from others by language barriers? Is prayer support not considered as a prerequisite at the beginning of the application process as support raising often comes at a later stage of the pre-field preparation? These are some of the open questions, but in general, careful candidate selection proved to be one of the most decisive areas for mission longevity.

Figure 1: Candidate Selection

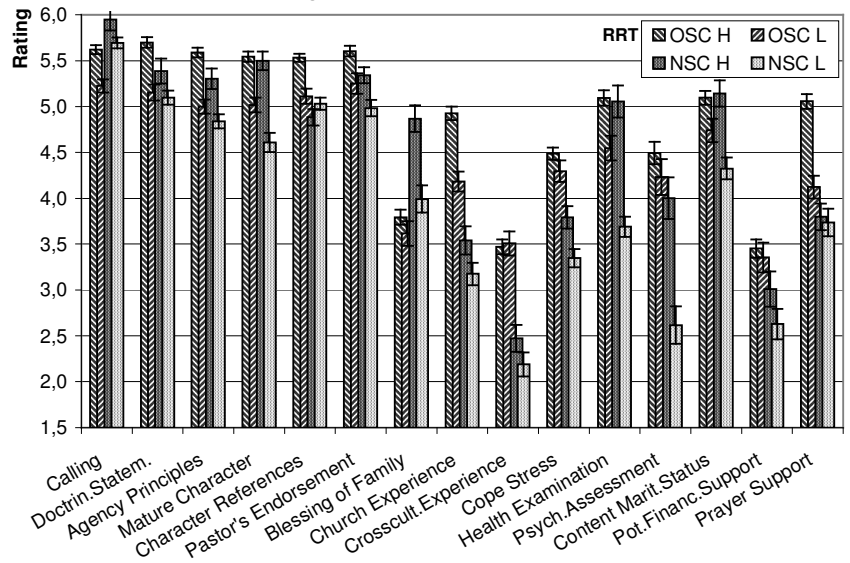
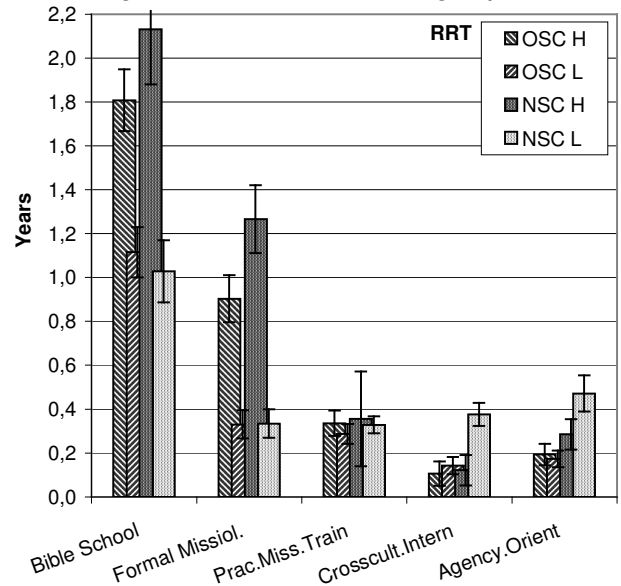


Figure 2: Minimal Pre-field Training Requirements



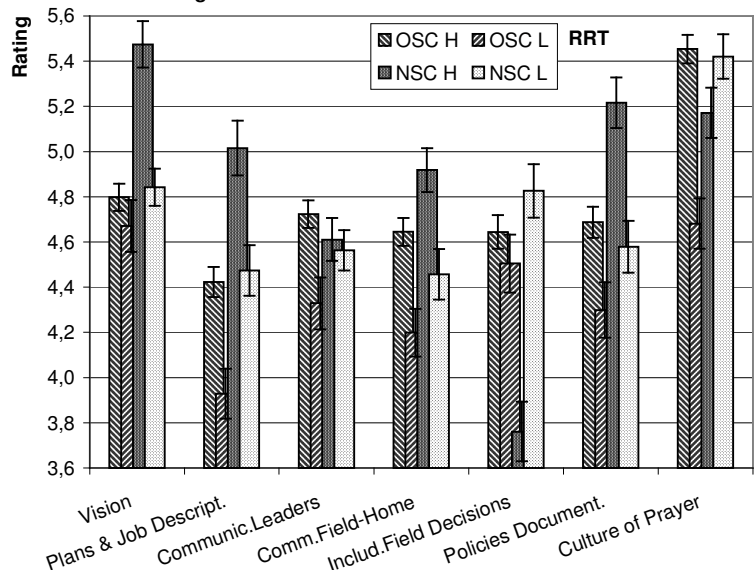
Pre-field Training Requirements

High retaining agencies expect twice as much theological training from their mission candidates, on average, and three times as much formal missiological training as low retaining agencies (figure 2). This holds true for OSC and NSC underlining the significance of training for missionary retention. Unfortunately, new concepts of informal pre-field training are still too little in use that their effectiveness could be verified.

Vision and Communication

In this section (figure 3) A culture of prayer is actively promoted within the agency and Vision and purpose are shared and understood throughout the

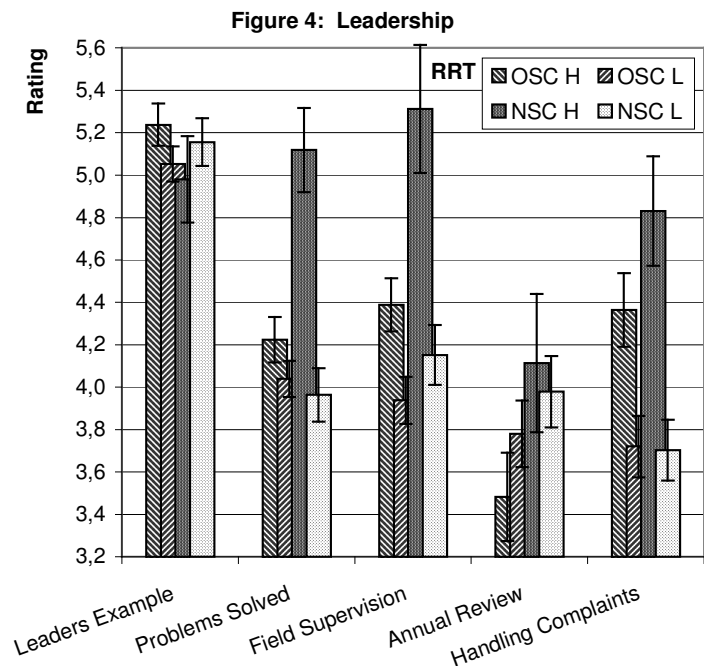
Figure 3: Vision and Communication



agency (NSC) received very high rating. The spiritual foundation and a clear sense of purpose, indeed, mark the two foci for successful ministry and are of great significance. Many of these issues were rated higher by NSC agencies than by OSC, in contrast to general opinion considering vision, procedures and organisational structures as typical Western concepts. High retaining agencies gave higher rating to *Vision and purpose*, *Communicate plans and job descriptions clearly*, *Free flow of communication to and from the leadership* (OSC), *Effective communication between sending base and field*, *Policies are well understood and documented* and *Culture of prayer* (OSC), thus confirming the significance of effective communication on all levels for missionary longevity. The low rating of *Missionaries are included in major decisions related to the field* by high retaining NSC agencies is unexpected (considered as a felt need as mission leaders see a considerable number of their missionaries leaving or as a strange concept in their organisational culture?) and requires further investigation.

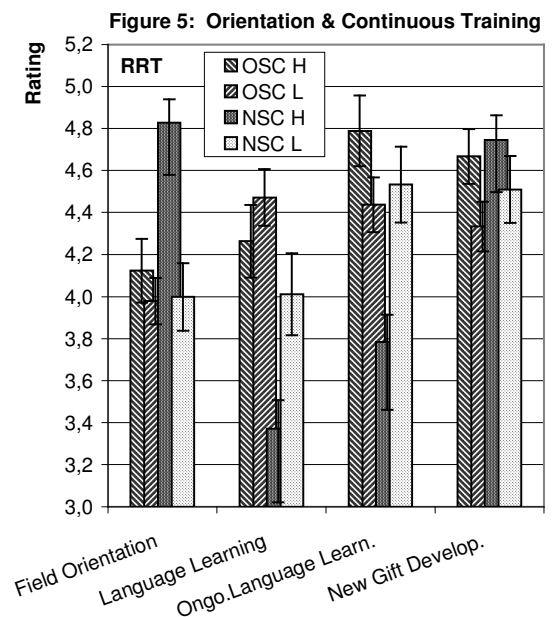
Leadership

The section on leadership issues (figure 4) is characterised by the high rating of *Most leaders are good examples of the agency’s beliefs and values* in all agencies. The person and integrity of the leader appears to be of great importance and can even offset organisational deficits. High retaining agencies gave much higher rating to *Most leaders identify problems early and take appropriate action* (NSC), *Good on-field supervision in quantity and quality* and *There are documented procedures for handling complaints from missionaries* than low retaining agencies. These three issues will make a big difference and need careful consideration. In general, we see the significance of quality leadership for the success of the ministry, which is apparently even more important in NSC agencies.



Orientation and Continuous Training

In this section (figure 5) *Effective on-field orientation for new missionaries* (NSC), *Language learning arrangements for new missionaries to learn the local language* (OSC), *Ongoing language and culture training are actively encouraged* (OSC) and *Missionaries are provided with opportunities for continuous training of gifts and skills* were rated high and significantly higher in high retaining agencies and thus need careful attention in OSC and NSC. In NSC agencies we find a negative correlation for *Language learning arrangements for new missionaries* and *Ongoing language and culture training*, possibly because this subgroup contained a number of NSC agencies predominantly working a near culture so that cultural adjustment and language learning is not as critical and they experience less attrition than ministry in a very different culture so that they were assigned to the high retention subgroup. Yet in general, the significance of careful orientation of new missionaries and in particular continuous training of missionaries is demonstrated.

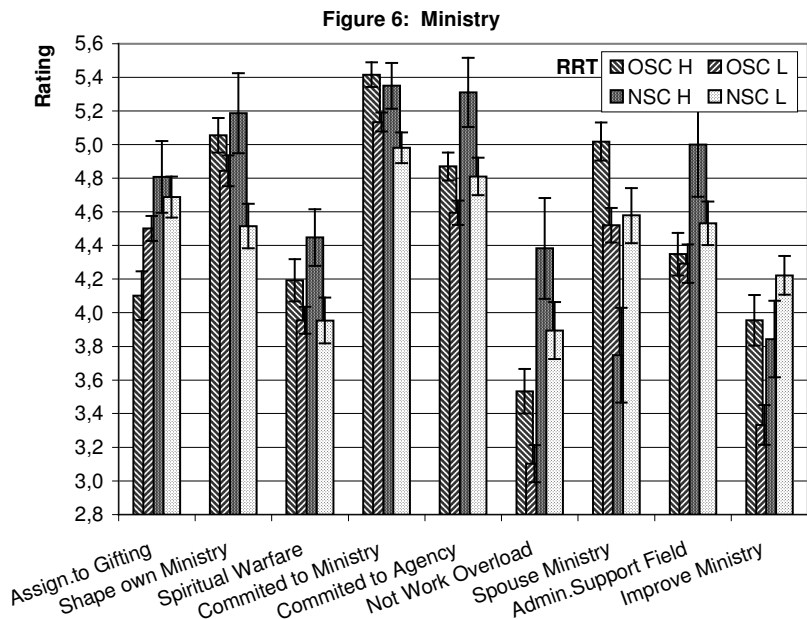


Ministry

Among the ministry related issues (figure 6) very high rating was given to *Missionaries are committed to their ministry* in all subgroups. This is most decisive to keep missionaries going. High retaining agencies also gave high rating to *Missionaries are committed to the agency* (NSC) and *Missionaries are given room to shape and develop their own ministry* but low rating to *Missionaries are generally not overworked in the amount of work they do* and *Missionaries regularly evaluate and seek to improve the agency's ministry*. The latter two issues apparently mark neglected areas.

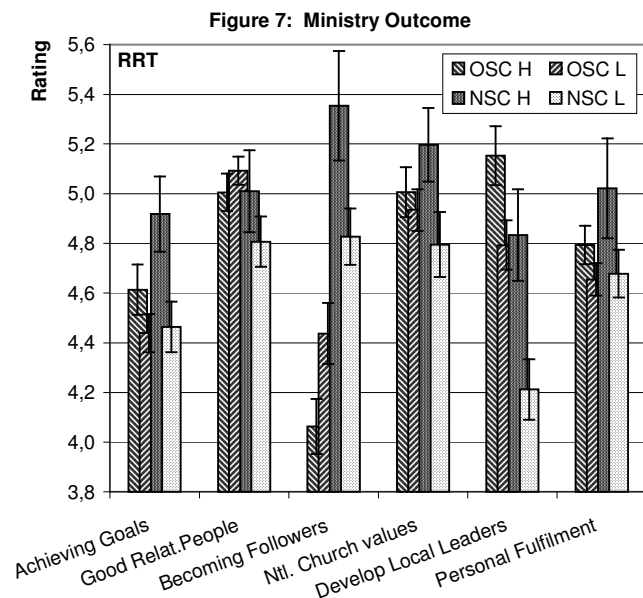
Significant differences between high and low retaining agencies were found in respect to *Room to shape own ministry* (NSC), *Missionaries know to handle spiritual warfare*, *Committed to ministry*, *Committed to agency* (NSC and OSC), *Not overloaded with work*, *Opportunities are provided for a ministry/role of the spouse* (important to OSC!) and *Missionaries have adequate administrative and practical support on the field* (NSC) so that it is certainly beneficial to invest in these areas.

Negative correlations were found for *Missionaries are assigned roles according to their gifting and experience* (OSC) and *Missionaries regularly evaluate and seek to improve the agency's ministry* (NSC). While the latter could be understood as alien to their organisational culture, an assignment to gifting is normally considered as a fundamental principle in modern missions and we do not have a satisfactory explanation for this unexpected result. Are OSC missionaries more flexible than their reputation and willing to adjust as long as they understand the need and receive support? The overall organisational culture may be more decisive than this specific factor, enabling workers to accept new challenges.



Ministry Outcomes

Ministry outcomes in general were rated very high (Figure 7) indicating that the agencies have clear goals and expectations. Very high rating was given to *Missionaries are developing good relationships with the people they serve*, *The people our missionaries serve are becoming followers of Christ* (NSC) and *Church on the field values the ministry of our missionaries*, proving the importance of personal relationships in NSC. In OSC agencies, highest rating was given to *Develop local leadership* and *Missionaries experience a sense of fulfilment in their ministry*, two Western concepts, while low rating was given to *People becoming followers of Christ*, especially in high retaining OSC agencies. Do OSC missionaries serve in resistant regions or have they lost their passion to see people meeting Christ? In NSC all mentioned ministry outcomes, including



Missionaries are actually achieving the agency's goals and expectation, are correlated with high retention, but in OSC only for Development of local leaders and Missionaries' personal sense of fulfilment. Still the generally high rating of ministry outcomes shows the significance of clear ministry outcomes.

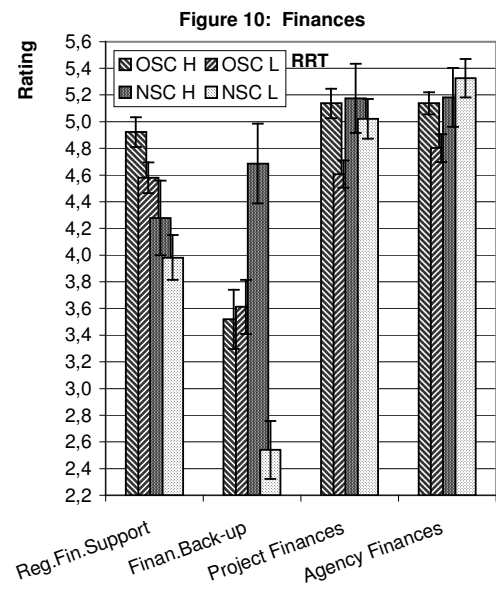
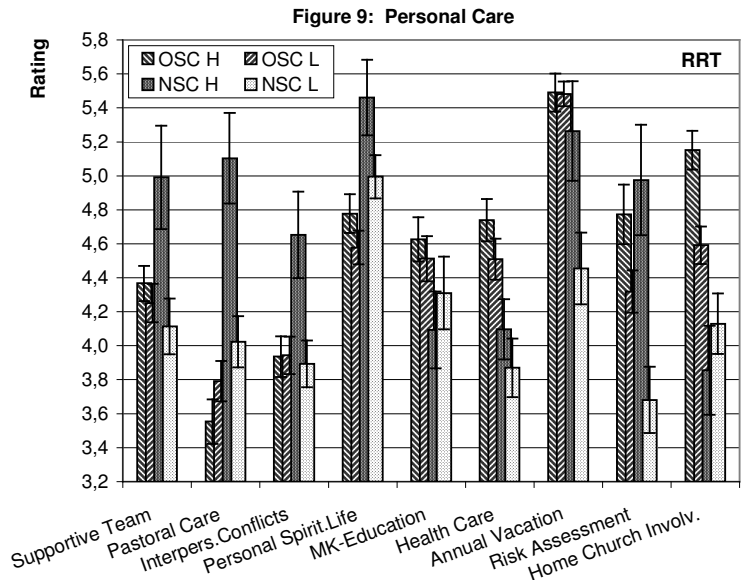
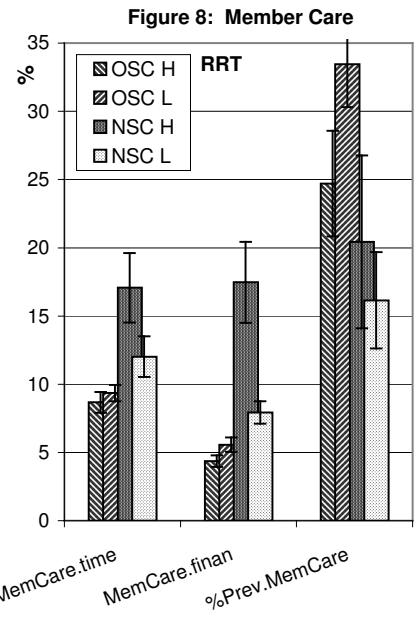
Personal Care and Family Support

NSC agencies invest twice as much of their total staff time and finances on member care as OSC agencies (figure 8) and high retaining NSC agencies twice as much as low retaining NSC agencies. High retaining OSC agencies also invest more in member care than low retaining yet predominantly in reactive crisis intervention. Yet the study could only assess its quantity but not its quality.

This difference is clearly seen in the assessment of various factors of personal care (figure 9) where highest priority was given to Time for annual vacation or holiday is provided and Emphasis is placed on the maintenance and growth of personal spiritual life. The balance between work and rest, ministry and personal walk with the Lord and the growth of the personal spiritual life are central to the missionary's life – both factors are correlated with retention. In NSC agencies retention is also correlated with Missionary teams are effective in providing each other with mutual support, Effective pastoral care exists at the field level preventative and in crises, Interpersonal conflicts are solved in a timely and appropriate manner and Risk assessment and contingency planning is in place for all fields, and in OSC Home churches are encouraged to be involved in the life of their missionaries, a current missiological paradigm in Western countries. These issues appear to be critical and require careful consideration. The correlation is much stronger in NSC than in OSC, in line with their higher investment on member care (figure 8).

Finances

Among the financial issues (figure 10) top rating was given to Agency finances are transparent to the missionaries and donors and Project finances are used effectively and Missionaries receive sustained financial support that is adequate for their needs (OSC). These three factors are correlated with high retention in OSC. In NSC, Financial back-up for missionaries with low or irregular support proved to be a decisive issue, reminding of painful experience of broken promises of sustained support. These results demonstrate the significance of financial issues for missionary longevity - indeed, it is difficult to concentrate on your ministry when you do not know how to feed your family.



Home office

The home office operations also received very high rating (figure 11) from the mission executives, in particular *Home office staff prays regularly for their missionaries, Pre-field screening prevents unsuitable persons proceeding to the field (OSC) and Formal debriefing during home leave (OSC). Pre-field screening and Home office prays (OSC) were correlated with high retention, while Re-entry arrangements are provided for missionaries commencing home leave and Debriefing during Home assignment appear to be still underdeveloped in many (young) NSC agencies.*

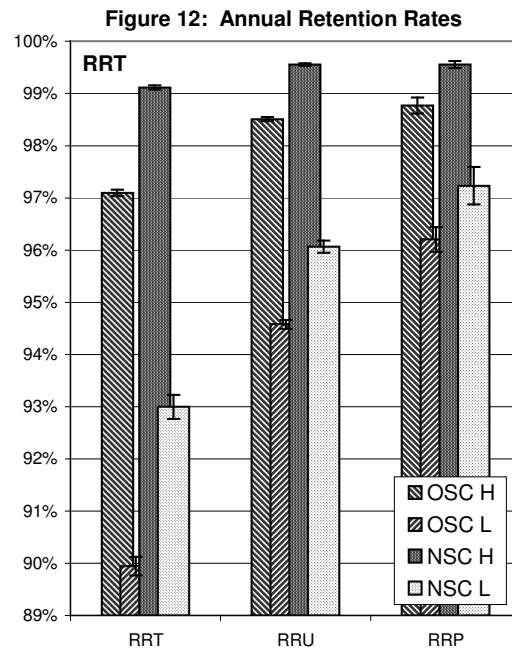
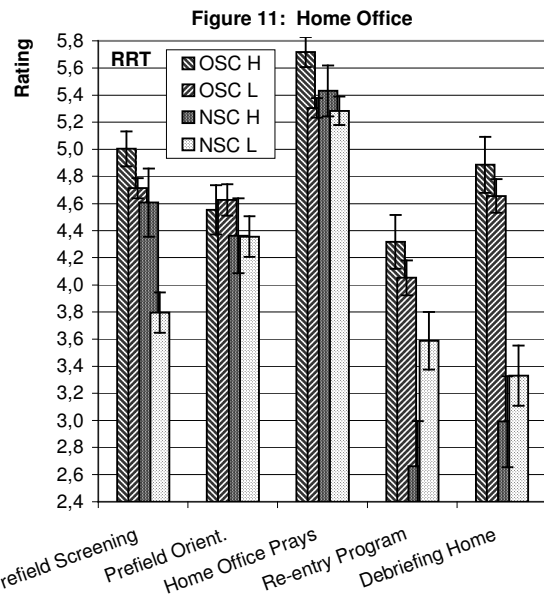
Retention Rates

Figure 12 shows the retention rates of the four subgroups of agencies. The total retention rates are very different between the high and low retention subgroups by definition. While high retaining OSC agencies retain $97.10 \pm 0.06 \%$ of their missionaries per year (corresponding to $2.90 \pm 0.06 \%$ total attrition) low retaining agencies keep only $89.95 \pm 0.18 \%$. When the actual performance of the high retaining subgroup (comprising of a massive one third of all the missionaries) is taken as a standard then 52% of all attrition could have been avoided. In high retaining NSC agencies the total retention rate is $99.12 \pm 0.04\%$ (2% higher than in OSC H as retirement does not yet play a major role), while low retaining NSC agencies preserve only $93.00 \pm 0.23 \%$ (corresponding to 7 % loss per year). On the basis of the actual performance of the high retaining subgroup 72 % of all NSC attrition could have been avoided.

An annual retention rate of 97% (OSC H) looks impressive but we need to keep in mind that after 10 years of service only $0.9710^{10} = 74 \%$ of the missionaries are still in active service and every fourth missionary has left the field; yet in OSC L only $0.8995^{10} = 35 \%$ are still in service. In high retaining NSC $0.9912^{10} = 91 \%$ are still in service after 10 years compared to $0.9300^{10} = 48 \%$ in low retaining NSC agencies. Thus a considerable fraction of workers have left the field for various reasons.

Considering only unpreventable attrition⁹ we obtain the retention rate for unpreventable attrition (RRU) of $98.51 \pm 0.04 \%$ (OSC H) and $94.58 \pm 0.09 \%$ (OSC L) for high and low retaining OSC agencies. On the basis of the actual performance of the high retaining subgroup (OSC H) even 55% of the unpreventable attrition could have been avoided, possibly by reassignment of missionaries. In NSC agencies, RRU amounted to $99.56 \pm 0.03 \%$ (NSC H), respectively $96.07 \pm 0.12 \%$ (NSC L), so that 75 % of unpreventable attrition could have been avoided. High retaining OSC agencies lose three times more workers through unpreventable attrition than NSC agencies which are not yet facing regular retirement and completion of projects to the same extent as OSC.

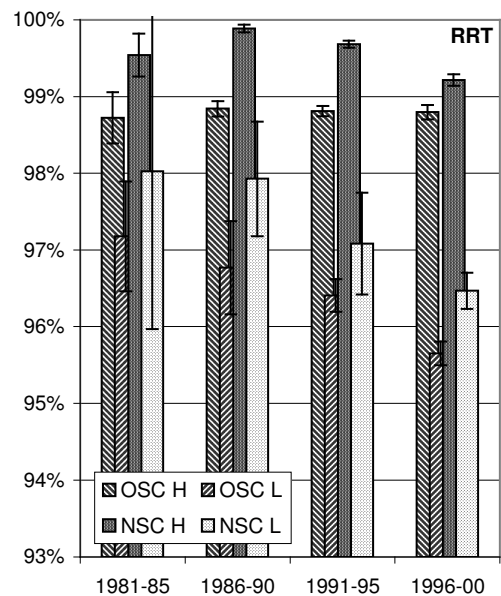
⁹ E.g. normal retirement, illness, loss of visa, expulsion, appointment to leadership in agency's home office, end of project, completion of a pre-determined limited length of assignment, death in service.



When only potentially preventable reasons for attrition¹⁰ are considered, we obtain the annual retention rate for preventable attrition (RRP) of $98.77 \pm 0.15\%$ (OSC H) respectively $96.20 \pm 0.23\%$ (OSC L)¹¹. When the actual performance of the high retaining subgroup (OSC H – one third of the total sample) is taken as standard then 45% of the potentially preventable attrition could have been avoided. In NSC we obtain a retention rate $RRP = 99.56 \pm 0.07\%$ (NSC H), respectively $97.23 \pm 0.36\%$ (NSC L)¹², so that 65% of the preventable attrition could have actually been avoided. High retaining OSC agencies lose 1.2 % of their work force per year for potentially preventable reasons, compared to 0.4 % in high retaining NSC agencies. Family responsibilities, educational needs of the children, personal reasons or the growing conviction that God is leading them into a new ministry is much more prevalent in OSC (reduced organisational loyalty) than in NSC. These facts clearly demonstrate the huge potential for organisational development in OSC and NSC.

Figure 13 shows the development of RRP over the past twenty years. Low retaining agencies in OSC and NSC are severely hit by the current trend for frequent job changes in modern society and leading to a continuous decline in RRP; the corresponding preventable attrition rate (100%-RRP) increased by 54% (OSC L) respectively 80 % (NSC L) during this period. High retaining OSC agencies, however, have been able to withstand this global trend and maintained their missionaries' commitment and organisational loyalty. They are rewarded by very high retention rates RRP of 98.8 %. High retaining NSC agencies have experienced a decline of their (unnaturally high) RRP from 99.54 % (1981-85) to 99.2 % (1996-2000), as the founding years with the initial passion, commitment and extraordinary sacrifices are coming to an end. Their corresponding preventable attrition rate increased from 0.46 % to 0.79 %. It is now approaching that of OSC H of 1.2 % per year (plus 1.5 % for unpreventable attrition, OSC H), which appears to be the optimal value for mission agencies.

Figure 13: Retention Rate for Pot.Prevent.Attrition



Discussion

While earlier studies like ReMAP I¹³ mainly concentrated on personal reasons for a premature return of missionaries, ReMAP II focused on missionary retention – what keeps them in ministry and which organisational factors contribute to this. ReMAP II proves a clear positive correlation between missionary retention and agency practices and some forty specific factors have been identified, especially in the areas of candidate selection, vision and purpose, leadership, communication, personal support, member care, ministry, ministry outcomes, continuous training, finances and home office operations. Retention is not dependent on one decisive factor but a complex web of factors. It is the organisational triad of ethos, values and purpose that determines to a large extent, the agency's practices and procedures and shapes all agency operations. This web of factors for both old and new sending countries reflects their history, culture and ecclesiastic tradition, and the expectations of their supporting churches.

The actual performance of the high retaining subgroup (of one third of the agencies - which is a formidable size not just a few exceptional agencies) reduced the overall potentially preventable attrition by 45 % in OSC and 65% in NSC. In addition it reduced the unpreventable attrition (RRU) by even 55% (OSC) to 75% (NSC). At the first glance a reduction of unpreventable attrition appears a contradiction in

¹⁰ I.e. all personal, family, work, team, agency related reasons or dismissal by the agency.

¹¹ corresponding to 88% respectively 68% of missionaries still in ministry after 10 years of service

¹² corresponding to 96% and 76% of missionaries still in ministry after 10 years of service

¹³ William Taylor, Too valuable to lose. William Carey Library, Pasadena, 1997.

terms, but RRU includes by definition return for health reasons, loss of visa, end of pre-determined period of service and completion of project – and these factors are not inflexible per se. Thus the return of the majority of missionaries appears to be avoidable based not on our idealistic theories but on the demonstrated performance of the best third of mission agencies.

Good practice agencies expect well-trained mission candidates and apply careful candidate selection. They have effective leadership with good interaction with their missionaries, a lean quality-administration with a servant attitude and flexible structures. They provide their missionaries opportunities for continuous training and development of new gifts. They encourage their missionaries to actively work towards the continuous improvement of their ministries and their agency's operations and structures. This is even more important as many mission agencies are presently undergoing extensive structural changes to adjust to current needs.

Good practice agencies do not impose these changes from the top, driven by external advice. They utilise the expertise and insight of their missionaries. These agencies understand and value synergy and work in partnership with other agencies to maximise resources. They do not look at their own success but for the global kingdom of God. These factors are even more important in our modern, rapidly changing world. The missionary's role and agency's way of operation is constantly changing in response to needs in the country of service as the National church develops. Pressure from the home front also demand change as expectations of home churches are changing at an ever increasing pace¹⁴.

While missionary retention has in general dropped over the past twenty years, it has not decreased in the subgroup of high retaining agencies: they have been able to maintain their missionaries' commitment, loyalty and vision, granting them new challenges within their own agency, and are blessed with experienced staff.

Yet we do not consider missionary longevity as an end in itself, unless missionaries are really productive in a vital ministry¹⁵. Work among unreached peoples and other hard assignments will only be achieved through dedicated, committed missionaries enabled and supported by dynamic, effective mission structures that create a stimulating environment and empower their missionaries to a strategic and productive ministry. The core of the Great Commission calls us "to make disciples of all nations", not just to visit and proclaim the Gospel at random. The central focus is on making followers of Christ, not only young converts, and this requires a human life model, godly character lived out in humility and grace over an extended period of time.

This biblical concept is opposite to the current trend for short assignments and quick solutions. Attitudes and fundamental values change slowly. It requires perseverance and humility of an ambassador for Christ – learning the language, understanding the culture and walking alongside the new believers, as our Lord Jesus Christ did. He didn't visit earth just for a short-term assignment, but he walked and lived with us for over 30 years – and his whole life, not just his last three years of ministry, changed the lives of his disciples. Likewise it requires this long-term commitment and sacrifice that Christ will not only be Saviour but also Lord in the lives of Christians, gathered in culturally relevant, mature fellowships that are a blessing to their community and in their turn, to the nations.

¹⁴ James F. Engel and William A. Dyrness, *Changing the mind of missions. Where have we gone wrong?* Interservice Press, 2000.

¹⁵ Missionaries can also stay for too long and then hinder the development of local leadership instead of moving on to a new ministry possibly within the same people group. Mission agencies need to develop specific criteria for completion of a project and a clear exit-strategy before even starting with a project in the first place. Yet wounded or ineffective missionaries need restoration and/or be brought home with grace and compassion.