

Small agencies lose many missionaries - a call for partnership in missions Lessons from ReMAP II

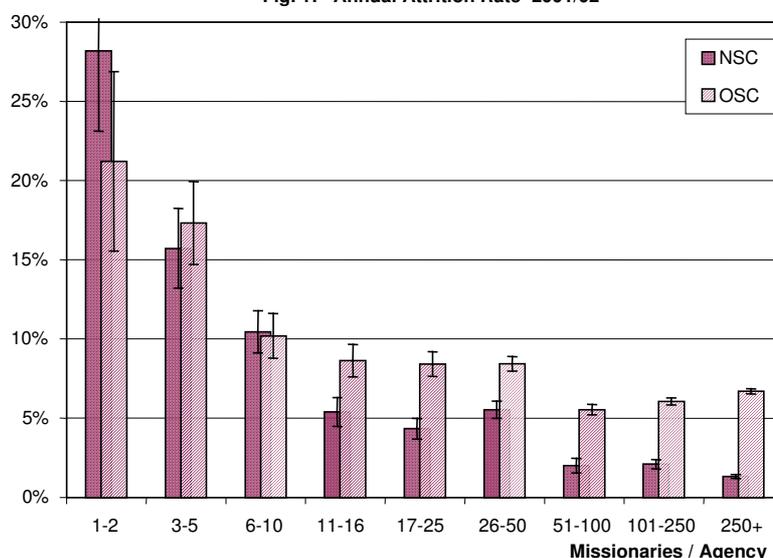
Detlef Bloecher

Small mission agencies lose many workers. This is one of the striking findings of WEA-MC's recent ReMAP II study carried out in 22 countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America (called New Sending Countries, NSC)¹ as well as Europe, North America and the Pacific (called Older Sending Countries, OSC)². Executives from evangelical mission agencies, denominational missions, and churches sending their missionaries independently were asked to provide information about their organisational ethos and practices³, as well as their attrition numbers and retention record. 598 sending institutions with some 39200 long-term⁴ cross-cultural missionaries participated⁵. The methodology of the study and some results have already been published elsewhere⁶. Here we compare the results of small and large mission agencies.

Figure 1 gives the annual percentage⁷ of returnees of the years 2001/02 and reveals a very high return rate for small agencies: they lose up to one third of their workforce per year (!) which is a tremendous loss of human resources, particularly in the relational societies of many countries of service. These high return rates were found in NSC and OSC alike⁸. Large agencies of NSC, on the other hand, lose only 1.3% of their workforce per year.

This is an extremely low percentage and much lower than that of the ReMAP I study some 10 years ago ($5.34 \pm 0.26\%$)⁹ proving the tremendous maturing of the NSC mission movement¹⁰. OSC agencies are also affected by end of contract, completion of projects, retirement of missionaries etc. so that the minimal return rate is $6.34 \pm 0.20\%$ per year, a value similar to that found in ReMAP I ($6.51 \pm 0.23\%$). It is evident that the minimal return rate is reached at an organisational size of 50 field missionaries. Apparently this agency size is required to fa-

Fig. 1: Annual Attrition Rate 2001/02



¹ Participating nations were Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Ghana, Guatemala, Hong Kong, India, South Korea, Malaysia, Nigeria, Philippines and Singapore.

² Australia, Canada, Germany, Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, South Africa, United Kingdom and USA

³ as evidenced by their time, effort and effectiveness rated on a 1 (= not well done) to 6 (= very well done) scale.

⁴ career missionaries expected to serve for at least 3 years. Missionary couples were counted as 2 persons.

⁵ The response rate was 50 – 90% of the total Nt. mission force.

⁶ Detlef Bloecher, ReMAP II Affirms the Maturation of the Younger Mission Movement of the South. Connections October 2003, p.48-53. Further results in: www.wearesources.org

⁷ Average and Standard Error (σ/\sqrt{n} , due to the limited number of returnees). σ/\sqrt{n} gives the 68% confidence interval and its doubled value 95% confidence. Two numbers are statistically different if their error bars do not overlap.

⁸ with considerable national differences which will be discussed elsewhere

⁹ Detlef Bloecher and Jonathan Lewis, Further Findings in Research Data, Page 105-125, Too valuable to lose, William D. Taylor (Ed.), William Carey Library 1997, D. Bloecher, Evangelikale Missiologie 14 (1998), 93-100.

¹⁰ Detlef Bloecher, ReMAP II Affirms the Maturation of the Younger Mission Movement of the South. Connections October 2003, p.48-53.

cilitate meaningful specialisation and complementation gifting in the home office and in the ministry teams in the country of service¹¹.

The retention rate RRT¹² shows a similar dependency on agency size (figure 2) increasing from 90.8 ± 0.9 % to 98.04 ± 0.09 % in NSC. These retention rates look impressive and the differences between them small, yet after 10 years of service only $0.9081^{10} = 38$ % are still in service compared to $0.9804^{10} = 82$ % in large NSC agencies while 62 % of missionaries of small agencies left the field compared to 18 % of large agencies, which makes a factor of 3.5¹³. In OSC a retention rate of 87.5 ± 1.6 % was found for small agencies and 94.85 ± 0.06 % for large agencies. This means that after 10 years of service only $0.875^{10} = 26.4$ % are still in active service respectively $0.9485^{10} = 58.9$ % for large OSC agencies.

Figure 3 gives the retention rate for unpreventable attrition RRU¹⁴. For NSC it increases from 95.76 ± 0.56 % (very small agencies) to 98.67 ± 0.11 % so that after 10 years of service 35 %, respectively 12.5 %, have left for unpreventable causes, again a factor of 3! In OSC, RRU increased with agency size from 92.04 ± 1.0 % to 97.46 ± 0.04 % so that after 10 years of service 56 %, respectively 23 %

Fig. 2: Retention Rate

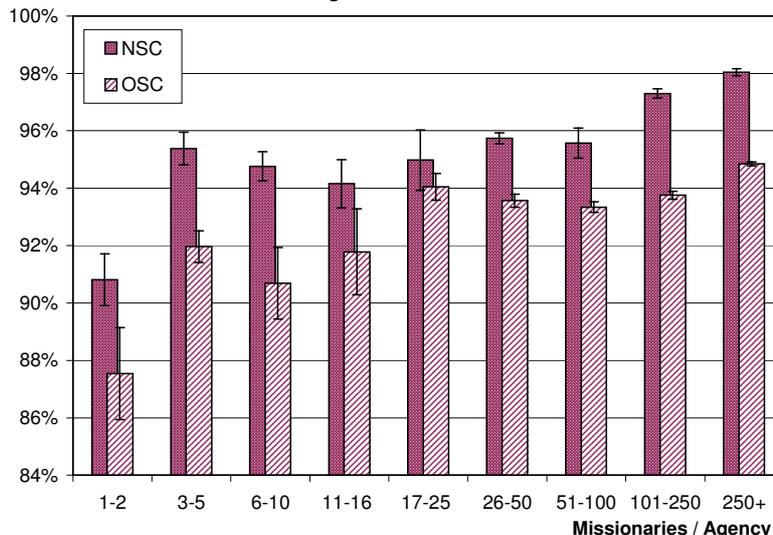
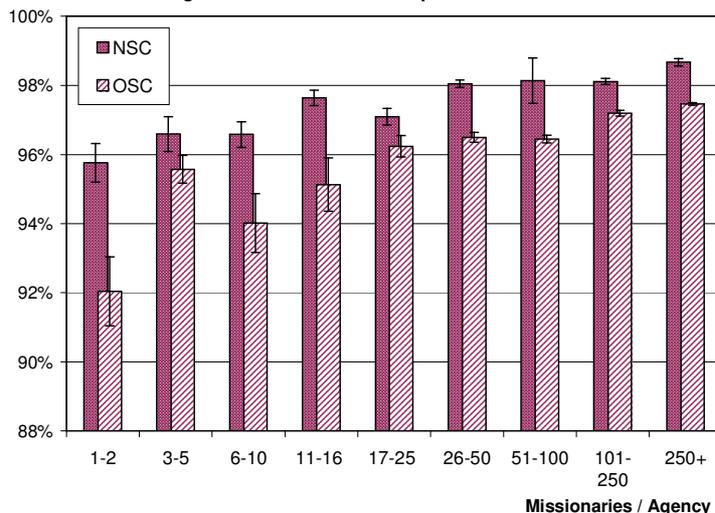


Fig. 3: Retention Rate for Unpreventable Attrition



¹¹ Although ReMAP II did not look into the team size on the field which is usually smaller as agencies normally have several ministry teams.

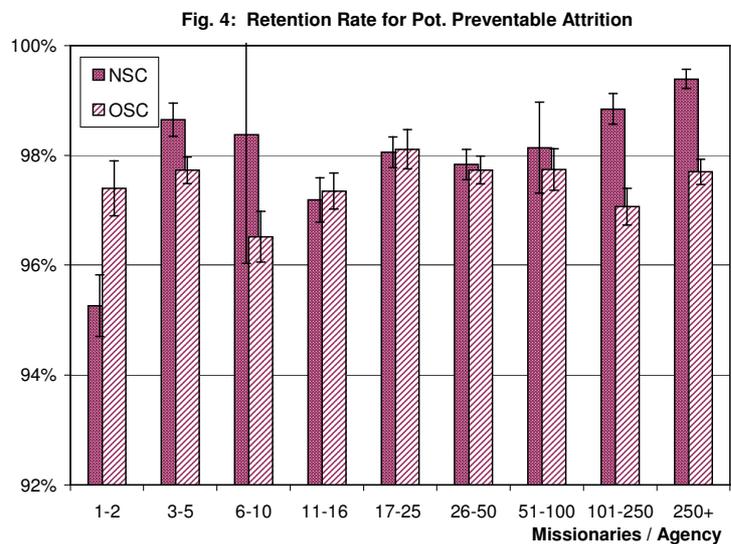
¹² Agencies reported on the number of new missionaries of the years 1981 – 2001 and their fate since then, whether they were (a) still in active service with their agency on 31 Dec 2002, (b) have in meantime transferred to another organisation (i.e. harmonious move to another agency or a Nt. church, merger of agencies or outsourcing of projects etc.) but are still in active service in the same country/people group, (c) returned to home country for unpreventable reasons (i.e. completion of predetermined contract, end of project, retirement, illness, visa withdrawal, appointment to leadership position in home office or agency's Int. Office, death in service) or (d) returned for Potentially Preventable Reasons (i.e. all personal, family, work, agency related reasons or dismissal by agency). The annual Retention Rate RRT was calculated from the percentage R of still active missionaries (a and b) after t years of service: $RRT = 10^{(\log R) / t}$ (assuming a uniform risk of return irrespective of the length of service – extensive studies of the author showed that this is a reasonable assumption).

¹³ The numerical differences between fig. 1 and 2 stem from the different concepts of attrition (returnees of a given year irrespective of their length of service) and Retention (Percentage of missionaries still in service after 5 or 10 years of service) as well as the different time period considered (returnees of 2001/2002 versus Retention of new missionaries of the years 1981-2001).

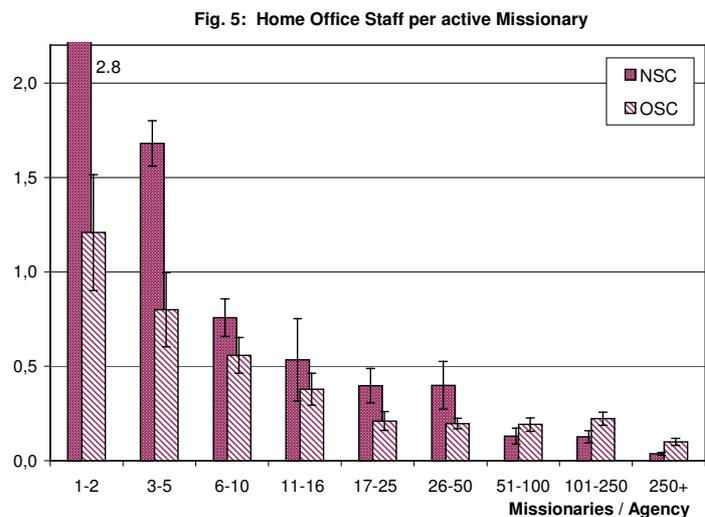
¹⁴ Definition in Footnote 12 (c)

had left the field for unpreventable reasons. This steep increase of RRU with agency size is even more surprising as small agencies are considerably younger (NSC 11 y, OSC 27 y) than larger agencies (NSC 31 y; OSC 96 y), so that missionary retirement and phase-out of projects have less significance. Apparently small agencies operate more on limited projects and/or work contracts and cannot (or do not want to) offer new opportunities for service after the completion of a project. This is an indication for the structural limitations of small agencies in personnel deployment and long-term retention.

The retention rate for potentially preventable attrition RRP¹⁵ (figure 4) also increases with agency size from 95.26 ± 0.56 % to impressive 99.39 ± 0.18 % (NSC), so that after 10 years of service 38.5 % of the workforce of small agencies and 5.9 % of the missionaries from large agencies had left the field for potentially preventable reasons, resulting in a ratio of 6-7! (In OSC, RRT was less dependent on agency size, hovering around 97.7 ± 0.2 % so that the difference between NSC and OSC is most pronounced in large agencies). Thus preventable as well as unpreventable causes decrease with agency size.



The high return rates for small agencies are even more unexpected as they have up to 30 times more staff (per active missionary, figure 5) serving in their home office than large agencies (0.1 staff per active missionary) and thus provide very personal care for the sent missionaries.



The ReMAP II data also proved, that small agencies have very high annual recruitment rates: in the years 1999/2000 it amounted to 40 ± 6 % (NSC) new missionaries per year, respectively 21 ± 6 % (OSC) – however, every second of these new missionaries left the agency within 3 years! Large agencies (250+ missionaries), on the other hand, had much smaller recruitment rates of merely 7.1 ± 0.3 % per year (NSC), respectively 6.5 ± 0.2 % (OSC), of which only every seventh missionary left the agency again within 3 years. Small agencies appear to be like a “revolving door” with many new missionaries coming in and leaving again. Considering the financial costs of preparation and personal costs for the missionary (redirection of professional career and personal life), his supporters (when ministry comes to a sudden end believed to be God’s calling this may raise spiritual doubts) and the project (personnel fluctuation before the missionary really became effective), this appears to be a tremendous waste of human and financial resources.

¹⁵ Definition in Footnote 12 (d)

At the same time mission leaders from small agencies gave significantly lower average rating of their agency's performance (than large agencies) regarding their Organisation¹⁶, Leadership¹⁷, and Minimal Pre-field Training requirements¹⁸, Field orientation¹⁹, Personal care on the field²⁰, Educational standard²¹, Staff development²², Finances²³ and Home office²⁴, whereas Candidate selection²⁵, Missionaries' ministry²⁶ showed little difference. A few examples are given in Figure 6-9 for NSC. Major dependencies were found in the areas of Missiological pre-field training, Orientation, Team support, Member Care and home office operations drawing our attention to structural limitations of small agencies. These lower ratings are the more compelling as they were not assessments of critical mission strategists applying idealistic criteria but by their mission leaders themselves.

These dependencies on agency size are significant, but do not appear to be so critical to explain the vast gulf between their attrition rates so that we need to look for other explanations. It appears that mission agencies resemble a wood fire where burning pieces mutually heat each other and thus keep the fire burning. Set aside, a burning log will soon die out as it will now lose more heat than produced and received. In a similar way mission agencies need a "critical mass" of workers to secure a mix of gifts and experience, generate a stimulating, inspiring atmosphere, cover the various ministries and roles, provide

¹⁶ NSC -8%; OSC -10%; individual factors were: *Vision & purpose* (NSC -12%; OSC -8%), *Plans & job description* (NSC -13%; OSC -6%), *Documented policies* (NSC -15%; OSC -8%), *Annual performance review* (NSC -1%; OSC -20%), *Handling complaints* (NSC -26%; OSC -30%), *Continuous training of missionaries* (NSC -10%; OSC -14%), *Appropriate amount of work* (NSC -9%; OSC -6%), *Ministry opportunity for spouse* (NSC -13%; OSC -13%), *Mutual support in missionary team* (NSC -15%; OSC -23%).

¹⁷ NSC -9%; OSC -11%; in particular: *Example of leaders* (NSC -3%; OSC -10%), *Leaders identify problems and take actions* (NSC -12%; OSC -5%), *On-field Supervision of missionaries* (NSC -20%; OSC -25%), *Risk assessment* (NSC -29%; OSC -33%), but *Communication with leadership* (NSC +6%; OSC +2%) and *Missionaries included in major decisions on the field* (NSC +11%; OSC +5%)

¹⁸ NSC -16%; OSC -16%; in particular: Length of Theological training (NSC -10%; OSC -30%), Missiological training (NSC -41%; OSC -71%), Practical Pre-field Missionary training (NSC +20%; OSC +56%), Agency's own orientation program (NSC -19%; OSC 300%).

¹⁹ NSC -21%; OSC -32%; in particular: *On-field orientation* (NSC -25%; OSC -20%), *Language learning of new missionaries* (NSC -15%; OSC -41%) and *Ongoing culture and language training* (NSC -15%; OSC -30%)

²⁰ NSC -18%; OSC -14%; especially: *Member Care* (NSC -38%; OSC -21%) and *Preventive Member Care* (NSC -52%; OSC -73%), *Administrative and practical support on the field* (NSC -19%; OSC -16%), *Mutual support in the missionary team* (NSC -15%; OSC -23%), *Pastoral care on the field level* (NSC -19%; OSC -9%), *Interpersonal conflicts resolution* (NSC -15%; OSC -9%), *Growth of missionary's spiritual life* (NSC -21%; OSC -16%), *MK education* (NSC -45%; OSC -28%), *Health care provided* (NSC -23%; OSC -0%), *Annual vacation* (NSC -19%; OSC -8%), *Risk assessment & Contingency Planning* (NSC -29%; OSC -33%), *Missionaries' continuous training* (NSC -10%; OSC -14%), *Re-entry program* (NSC -20%; OSC -30%)

²¹ maximum educational standard: BA (NSC +25%; OSC +160%); MA (NSC -42%; OSC -50%); Doctorate (NSC +100%; OSC -50%)

²² NSC -9%; OSC -11%; especially: *Ongoing language & cultural studies* (NSC -15%; OSC -31%), *Development of new gifts & skills* (NSC -10%; OSC -14%),

²³ NSC -5%; OSC -10%; *Sustained financial support* (NSC -4%; OSC -9%), *Back-up for low financial support* (NSC -10%; OSC -44%), *Project finances used effectively* (NSC -13%; OSC -9%) and *Transparency of agency finances* (NSC -14%; OSC +3%).

²⁴ NSC -14%; OSC -17%; in particular: *Pre-field screening* (NSC -14%; OSC -20%), *Pre-field training* (NSC -22%; OSC -34%), *Staff prays for missionaries* (NSC -17%; OSC -22%), *Re-entry arrangements* (NSC -21%; OSC -30%), *Debriefing during Home assignment* (NSC -22%; OSC -10%).

²⁵ (-2%) with the following significant factors: *Character references* (NSC +5%; OSC -10%), *Family blessing* (NSC -10%; OSC +12%), *Ministry experience in local church* (NSC +25%; OSC -15%), *Physical examination* (NSC -12%; OSC -10%), *Psychological assessment* (NSC -11%; OSC -11%), *Contentment with present marital status* (NSC -5%; OSC -11%), but *Previous cross-cultural experience* (NSC +27%; OSC +12%), *Potential for financial support* (NSC 3%; OSC +45%) and *Potential for prayer support* (NSC +11%; OSC +15%).

²⁶ NSC -5%; OSC -4%; with significant changes in: *Missionary not overworked* (NSC -9%; OSC -6%), *Ministry role for spouse* (-21%) and *Administrative and practical support on the field* (NSC -19%; OSC -16%) having significant effects.

mutual support and overcome indispensable crises. This minimal size appears to be critical for the care and spiritual survival of the missionary. Therefore we recommend that small agencies enter into partnerships with others in the country of service: cooperation with Nt. churches or organisations and/or other mission agencies already on the ground, which have already gained experience, set up an effective leadership and support structure and built trusted relationships with individuals in authority – this holds true particularly in the early phase of a project till they have gained experience and grown in number.

Likewise agencies need a balanced team in their sending base, a complementation of personalities, gifting and experience in order to cover all services of candidate selection and preparation, leadership, Public relations and donor relationships, care on the workers on the field etc. In our modern world mission services have become highly complex, e.g. labour laws, legal regulations, international bank transfer, Public relations, professional standards and missiological issues all require a high level of expertise. For this reason it requires a certain number of workers to cover the various tasks in a competent and efficient way and to create synergies. In many cases this is beyond the reach of small agencies as requires very high financial and personnel investment to keep up-to-date and cover the various tasks with competence and efficiency. We therefore encourage small agencies to share office facilities, i.e. use a joint accountancy and personal office, counselling staff or to out-source these services. As in global economy there is also a world-wide trend towards merger of organisations – not just of small mission agencies but also of large enterprises with hundreds of missionaries – in order to work effectively and efficiently and utilise synergies. Together we can achieve much more than alone. In addition there is a global trend towards cooperation in the country of service, the formation of large consortiums of even hundreds of churches and agencies with joint clearly stated goals²⁷. This process has been pioneered by the international agency INTERDEV which has been instrumental in building and facilitating many regional partnerships. Cooperation and partnership is the key concept of the day, the sacrifice of own aims, plans and pet ideas, the willingness to submit and be accountable to each other without loss of your identity. This is good stewardship and faithful service – anything else is likely to be a waste of precious human and financial resources, a duplication of existing projects and carelessness towards sent missionaries. It's HIS kingdom not ours!

Yet the need for cooperation not only results not the convincing statistical evidence presented, financial limitations and pragmatic concepts of mission strategists. It mainly flows from a fundamental theological and missiological principle: Jesus sent his disciples always in pairs (Mk 6,7). Apostle Paul usually worked in team on his mission journeys (Acts 13,13) and in the New Testament more than 50 of his co-workers are mentioned by name. In addition he cooperated with churches in Antioch, Philippi, Jerusalem and Rome. Jesus promised much blessings for cooperate prayer (Mt 18,18) and unity among believers (Mt 18,19), in fact this was Jesus' prayer focus (Jo 17,11-23). The New Testament is filled with words like: „together“, „each other“, „one with another“ „for each other“ etc. (Jo 13,14+34f; Ro 12,5+10; Ro 15,5-14; 1Co 1,10; Col 3,13; 1Thess 3,12; 1Thess 5,11; 1Petr 4,10; 1Petr 5,5). This is the Lord's calling for the church and missions. This is our calling and it is especially relevant in the complexity of the 21st century with its rapid political changes and diverse network of relationships between various churches and agencies. This fundamental concept of cooperation in missions finds its clear statistical and theological evidence. It's a call for real partnership to the honour of God.

²⁷ William D. Taylor (Ed.) Kingdom Partnerships for Synergy in Missions. William Carey Library, Pasadena, USA 1994