Dysfunctional Families

By Drs. Timothy Boyd and Brent Lindquist

Andrea is an articulate and intelligent 25-year-old aspiring missionary. Andrea feels that she had a relatively good upbringing, although she can't remember much before the age of eight. After the age of eight her father began drinking more heavily than he had in the past, and her home life was typified by short periods of calmness with explosive outbursts of fighting in between. This continued up to her mid-teens when her parents finally separated and divorced.

While a college sophomore, a Christian group on campus explained to Andrea the pathway to salvation and she became a Christian. She comments that since that time her life has been quite positive and the Lord has done great things to help her grow in Him. At 25, she's a college graduate and has worked in the business world for three years, having developed numerous skills. Evaluations from her supervisors and pastors are glowing, indicating that she is capable of working long and hard at many tasks and always gets her work done.

The ideal missionary candidate? Possibly. Yet if Andrea applies to a mission agency, what would happen? Perhaps Andrea (a fictitious, though typical potential missionary) will be the type of person whose inner conflicts become increasingly manifest under the stresses of a cross-cultural ministry. These conflicts often disrupt the effectiveness and satisfaction of a missionary's work. Furthermore, too many missionaries return home as casualties because of inner weaknesses.

A disproportionate number of those going into missions come from wounded backgrounds and often have a strong desire to rescue or help others. These young adults from "dysfunctional" families can be as able a servant on the mission field as anyone else. However, they first need to allow our Lord Jesus to heal the wounds remaining from their upbringing. Only then will they be pure vessels, freed to fully glorify our Lord by taking His love to the unreached.

Four Wounded Areas

What are the usual scars of growing up in dysfunctional families?

First, these families produce a sense of alienation. As a consequence, children from these families typically have a strong desire to belong. To a person from a wounded past, a missionary team –created for the purposes of furthering the gospel among the unreached – may become primarily a place to meet his need for personal belonging. This inward focus can potentially destroy the team.

Likewise, the sense of alienation this person feels from his upbringing can cause him to feel like he doesn't belong in his own culture. It's not unusual to begin looking for acceptance in another culture.

Secondly, dysfunctional families typically provide little validation to their members. The children, as a consequence, often seek to validate themselves through effort or achievement. They frequently become care-givers of the adults, as the system of conditional love says, "If you behave and take care of us, we will love you." This internalized message can produce a strong sense of needing to care for others later in life. Missions offers an outlet for this drive.

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Third, wounded survivors lack self-esteem (although this is frequently covered and disguised). Going into missions is often seen as a "high calling" and one that will earn the respect of others. Fourth, feelings of being out of control and a desire to take control often become manifested in control struggles on the field. A frequent issue involved in the breakdown of a ministry relates to power struggles with co-workers and anger at those in charge.

The Healing Begins

All of us have some woundedness in our past, and thus we can't clearly state at what point a family becomes "dysfunctional." But we can recognize problems and begin to deal with them. How should the person who comes from a dysfunctional family work to avoid repeating the mistakes or the behaviors that have caused problems in the past?

First of all, the wounded person should understand that he is involved in a process of healing. Developing insight into the struggles that he is experiencing will enable him to make real strides in growth. This is not an easy process and frequently requires the input of those who have experience working with wounded people. It may take years to work through all the vulnerabilities.

Secondly, the wounded person needs to know his own vulnerabilities. It is very important to avoid making comparisons with other people (many of whom may not be wounded) and to try to be like them.

Finally, it is important to have accountability relationships – that is, to have people both at home and on the field who can come alongside and help to identify negative patterns of behavior. These patterns may have their roots in the past but they become activated in the stressful context. These people can be wonderfully helpful in promoting positive change, by holding the person accountable to practice new, godly patterns and by praying daily for this growth.

Stepping into Fullness

Andrea is serving the Lord now as a "tent-making" engineer with a church-planting team in Asia. Reaching the mission field took longer than she anticipated, and included the strong help of several others. But she says it has all been more than worth the effort.

Andrea applied to several mission agencies several years before. During this process she was asked to share in some detail about her upbringing. This began to reveal some of the hurts which she was carrying and which needed to be dealt with before she could serve effectively as a missionary. At this point some of the mission agencies she was applying with put her application on hold and encouraged Andrea to seek professional counseling. They promised to keep in touch with her, and to progress with the application process once noticeable signs of emotional healing were seen.

Andrea struggled with this turn of events. She had seen herself as an achiever, and now had to face some real short-comings. Her home church provided much-needed support at this point. Friends in the church listened to her and affirmed her commitment to serving as a missionary, but also encouraged her to go for counseling. She did, and found it both a lot less scary and a lot more helpful than she anticipated.

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After nine months of counseling both Andrea's church and her most desired mission agency were encouraged by her growth. She was being more honest about on-going areas of hurt, had more relaxed relationships with others, and was becoming more patient with both herself and others. They encouraged her to do a short-term cross-cultural mission project that summer with her prospective agency. What a summer! Though God was doing an exciting work in bringing people to Himself, Andrea was sobered by the great need of a poverty-stricken area, by the humanness of fellow missionaries, and more than anything by new vulnerabilities she saw in herself. She came home very grateful for the work God had done inside her over the last year, and grateful for the de-briefing provided by her mission agency! Yet she was also keenly aware of further preparation God had for her before she returned for a career.

And now, two years later, Andrea has returned as a career missionary. Through her time of preparation Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 4 have become increasingly special: "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."

Action Ideas

Family problems can be a very sensitive issue, and must be dealt with in an atmosphere of love and trust. Most *mission agencies* have personnel staff ready to help potential missionaries prepare for service with them. Don't try to wait until you're perfect before beginning application! *Pastoral care* from your church and/or campus fellowship are other means of getting help. Professional counseling is not the only way to recovery. Seek out counsel, understanding and accountability from believers – a pastor, lay people at church, friends, campus staff workers – who are older, more mature and emotionally healthy.

Timothy Boyd, Psy.D., and Brent Lindquist, Ph.D., were serving with the California-based ministry, LinkCare, at the time this article was written.

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