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Sonny Guild
sguild@acu.edu

Andy Johnson

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Journeying Together: A Model for Missionary Care

SONNY GUILD AND ANDY JOHNSON

This account of life with the Dagara mission team in Burkina Faso, West Africa, is told from the perspectives of both mentor and missionary. Sonny Guild, former missionary to Kenya and Director of the Halbert Institute for Missions (HIM) at Abilene Christian University (ACU), and Andy Johnson, Dagara team member, offer their reflections on making the missions journey together.

Sonny:

My wife Eunice and I were on our way to Burkina Faso. Relief swept over us as the plane touched down. Passing through customs, our eyes began to scan the crowd in the terminal for familiar faces until, with great joy, we saw Andy and Melissa. Their countenances displayed a mix of emotions. In the press of the crowd it took a moment for us to notice the baby carrier. Inside was their new son, Elijah! They had come to Ouagadougou to pick us up at the airport not knowing that they would also be collecting their newly adopted son. What joy, wonder, and shock! More than most, missionaries learn to roll with the punches and cope with the changing landscape of daily living.

We were there to walk with the team working with the Dagara people, to continue our mentoring as they face the challenges of life on the mission field. The Dagara team is made up of four families: Aaron and Andrea Burk, Chad and Amy Carter, Archie and Mandy Chankin, and Andy and Melissa Johnson. Of the eight individuals on the team, only one has a Bible related undergraduate degree. Six of the team finished master's degrees in missions at ACU. There, missionary preparation is characterized as a journey taken by mentors alongside the missionary or mission team. We intend for the journey to cover the whole life cycle of a missionary, from preparation to on-the-field life to repatriation once missionary service is completed. Missionary preparation and care contribute significantly to missionary vitality, longevity, and ministry success

Our journey began in 1998 when ACU students, interested in French-speaking West Africa, began meeting together. Those meetings marked the beginning of a long-term relationship. In the initial mentoring process several important understandings of team life were learned and practiced: a working definition of "team," communication skills, conflict management, leadership, decision making, elements of diversity, and trust/openness. Those seven elements form an essential part of the core of an effective team experience.¹ Initially there was no "Dagara team," but simply students interested in missions and seeking God's guidance. Eunice and I met regularly with this group, from which the Dagara team emerged, for over a year. Without using the word "team" the process of formation had begun.

1. Glenn Parker, *Team Players and Teamwork: The New Competitive Business Strategy* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), 33. My D.Min. dissertation applied Parker's work to missions, see Sonny Guild, "A Model for Enhancing Interpersonal Relationships Within Mission Teams" (Doctor of Ministry project/thesis, Abilene Christian University, 1996), 22-34.

Andy:

Our team on the field today resembles very little the “team” that originally formed during mentoring at ACU. Both singles and families came and went in the process of determining who would actually head to West Africa. Rather than specifically forming our team as it stands today, the mentoring we received as students enabled us to begin thinking as members of a team. Even beyond missions work, that mentoring has equipped us to work cooperatively in whatever environment we might find ourselves. The fact that not everyone who experienced these mentoring sessions as a group now works together on the field does not detract from their value; rather, the lessons learned are now applied in such varied places as Burkina Faso, Tanzania, the United States, and Brazil.

Sonny:

As the team was close to finishing their academic work and the process of team development concluded, a question arose: “Are they ready to be launched?” Those who equip missionaries must seriously ask that question and not simply assume that academic classes and a team development process adequately prepare missionaries and their teams. A great deal of objectivity is needed when asking this question; the answer may indicate that more preparation is needed, or even that they ought not go to the field. We invite an outside observer to join in these assessment times. The outside observer provides “new eyes” to notice subtleties that we do not see or to which we have become accustomed. HIM schedules a Church Planters Assessment Center (CPAC) for missionaries and teams as they approach their final months of preparation with us. CPAC is a three- to four-day event comprehensive in its assessment of ministry readiness. Assessment is made of the individual missionary, couples (if married), and the team. Various techniques and resources are used to assess readiness, including written inventories and essays, observation, simulations of ministry experiences, and personal interviews.

Andy:

A major milestone in our team’s formation came about as a free service rendered to us by HIM staff: CPAC, a top-level team formation experience. In addition to driving home for me once again how different my wife and I are, our team learned in exquisite detail what a disparate bunch of people we were! For literally every category, our responses were strewn all along the spectrum. Seeing how this revelation troubled us, our counselors spent much time clarifying for us what a blessing diversity in a team can be. Just as not every member of Christ’s body can be a hand, not every team member needs (or even ought) to think alike. Over our five years on the mission field, I believe our team’s diversity has become one of our greatest strengths, rather than the obstacle I originally feared it to be.

In addition to analyzing our written responses and assessments, our CPAC counselors observed us reacting to different situations. They were silent (for the most part) observers as we handled various physical tasks and even games as a team. In an effort to create a frustrating, tense situation in which to observe us, we tackled an impossible task: With too little time, outdated materials, and mounting stress, we developed and presented a missions proposal to a mock missions committee. Since most members of this “missions committee” were ex-missionaries who had already been through the wringer numerous times, their questions were extra-barbed and probing. Aware that the exercise’s objective was failure, we put forth our best efforts and failed spectacularly! Despite that, the lessons learned from how we interacted with each other in this protected environment have served us numerous times as we have dealt with disappointment on the mission field, both personally and in our ministry.

Sonny:

Even though we assessed the Dagara team as “ready for cross-cultural ministry,” I presented them with a request, one that was informed by both my own experience and the history of many mission teams on the

field. My research and that of numerous sending agencies and authors has shown that having poor interpersonal relationships is the greatest difficulty that missionaries face.²

This challenge is often one of the reasons for a missionary's early departure from the field. Team life has two major dimensions: task and maintenance. While teams may be clear on the task to fulfill, they often neglect team maintenance. The stress of cross-cultural living intensifies and magnifies team relationship difficulties. On a spiritual level, Satan attacks those invading his kingdom of darkness and, thus, seeks to thwart God's purposes. I have known teams who went to the field full of hope only to find those hopes broken on the rocks of rough team relationships. Therefore, nurturing missionaries and teams once they are on the field is an essential, though often neglected, element of missionary care.

This issue is further complicated when each family is supported by a different congregation. Which of those congregations is responsible when difficulties arise? How are churches to know that significant problems exist? Can one supporting congregation come to help and ignore their bias toward their own missionary? With these and other questions in mind I asked the Dagara team, "Will you allow Eunice and me to serve as team mentors and even give us permission to 'step in' if and when there are difficulties?" The team took time to discuss and pray about this suggestion and within a week gave us their permission for a long-term mentoring relationship. We were thrilled. Since the team arrived in Burkina Faso we have made two visits at two-year intervals.

In preparation for the first visit the team answered e-mail questions and completed two web-based inventories; one related to personalities and the other measured cross-cultural stress. Once we arrived in Dano, the village where they live, we met with team members individually, as couples, and as a group. They completed two additional inventories on site that helped measure team maturity. Their responses to all these inventories, questions, and the personal interviews became the basis for our conversations. Several topics needed to be discussed, but one topic was on everyone's heart—the impact of the presence of only one child on the mission team—and no one had dared broach the subject.

Andy:

Sonny and Eunice's two-week visit in 2004 came at a perfect time because our team was in a major period of transition. We had recently changed from full-time language learners to church planters, and grown from three families on the field to four. To begin with, we each completed the same personality profiles we had done for CPAC. This enabled us to see areas in which we had changed, grown, and, in some cases, weakened. The Guilds were also instrumental in drawing out and facilitating difficult conversations that we neglected for fear of hurt feelings. At this time, our team was an anomaly on the missions field, as we were four families with but one child among us. Out of a fear of forcing childless couples to act like families with children, the family with a son often let their needs go unannounced. Meanwhile, the three couples without children were often afraid to address issues related to team life and children for fear of being seen as meddlers. Sonny and Eunice were instrumental in facilitating an open and honest discussion about children, a conversation that had had the potential to turn ugly.

Additionally, the Guilds drew out from our recently arrived teammates some serious struggles they were having with culture stress. The three families initially on the field had often commented amongst ourselves at the amazing ease with which our new teammates had adapted to life in Burkina. As it turned out, they were hiding their struggles because they felt they had no right to complain or vent, given that their arrival was significantly smoother logistically. The Guilds wisely made us aware that everyone will experience culture stress cyclically, that it is not an event that can be avoided even when someone else prepares your house for you ahead of time. In a way, this freed all four families to continue to grapple with culture stress

2. Leslie Anne Moore, "A Study of Reverse Culture Shock in North American Church of Christ Missionaries" (M.A. thesis, Abilene Christian University, 1981), 77, and Guild, 7-9.

without feeling like inadequate missionaries.

Finally, Sonny and Eunice spent significant time in each of our homes, simply being with us and ministering to us through their presence. Times of worship and evenings of prayer went just as far (perhaps farther) toward contributing to overall team health as did their intentional counseling sessions.

Sonny:

The time we spent with the team and with each family was a blessing to us as well. We were amazed at how well they were doing, living in a remote, difficult place. Nevertheless, the team did have several challenges before them. Our intention was not to mentor the team without keeping their supporting churches informed (they are, after all, the ones overseeing the missionaries). Therefore, after the visit a summary was sent to each supporting church. We made a commitment to be pro-active in mentoring via e-mail once we returned to the States, but were not very successful.

Andy:

Based on what our mentors discovered during their two weeks in Burkina, we mapped out a strategy for improving team dynamics. Much of what we discussed focused on communication, particularly dealing with sensitive topics openly rather than hiding them. We committed to regularly scheduled checks of team process, particularly at our semi-annual team business retreats. While we feel like our team did change for the better following their visit, we were honestly not very faithful about following up on specifics from this first visit. To at least a small extent, we allowed the busyness of life to move our focus from intentionally monitoring team health to putting out the fires of everyday life.

Sonny:

After two more years the team invited us to make a second visit. On this occasion the supporting churches were so committed to the process that they even helped fund the trip. This level of commitment to team maintenance on the part of the sending congregations is truly remarkable. Churches serve their missionaries well when they proactively provide growth experiences and times of refreshment for their missionaries. Before the visit the team answered questions via e-mail and completed assessments. They also filled out the team maturity inventory again. Not only did these assessments provide a real-time snapshot of the team, but they also gave us perspective on how the team had changed since our last visit. We were pleased that maturing had taken place. While we focused primarily on team relationships, we were careful not to neglect the spiritual dimension of life—specific Bible study and worship provided rich times together.

Andy:

The Guilds graciously agreed to return to Burkina Faso in the summer of 2006 for a team health check-up. Our team had grown numerically in the interim; with the arrival of our adopted son the day before the Guilds arrived, every family now had at least one child. This fact impacted every aspect of team life, from social events to worship to weekly business meetings. With a blend of both tenderness and challenge, the Guilds helped us reflect on both the problems and the opportunities that this new stage of life presented.

Prior to their visit, our team had been reflecting upon where we'd been and where we hoped to be by the end of our time in Burkina Faso. Although we still felt like we were only beginning our work, we were aware that two team families would soon complete their minimal initial commitment to the work. Emotions can ride high when it comes to discussing leaving or staying on the field. We used tools provided in the past by the Guilds to facilitate this ticklish discussion, secure in the knowledge that Sonny and Eunice would be coming soon to pick up the pieces if need be!

Although we felt like our team was running smoothly overall, after observation and interviews with us, the Guilds were able to offer an informed critique of our interaction. For example, they highlighted for us

some inappropriate remarks we men regularly made. We sometimes salted our conversations with jokes at the expense of each other and the Burkinabe with whom we lived. Although never easy to hear, we needed to address this sin in our lives. Because they have maintained such a close relationship with us, Sonny and Eunice were well equipped to fulfill this sensitive role. Not only did they offer a critique, but they also offered a better way. They patiently led our team through a study of the fruits of the Spirit and generously left us with the resources to continue this study on our own.

In the middle of the Guild's visit, tragedy struck the missionary community through the death of a fellow worker, Cyndi Chowning. This godly woman had influenced everyone on our team in one way or another. The Guilds, while in the throes of their own grieving, managed even during this time to minister to our team, helping us deal with our grief. We wept, worshipped, and reminisced together, all the while taking comfort from being in the presence of our mentors. Although of course unplanned, Sonny and Eunice showed us how a team acting as a community can do far more than simply work well together.

Sonny:

We were pleased that the team managed a difficult conversation among themselves before our arrival. This fact was in itself evidence of growth. When this second visit was over we made several suggestions to the team and again sent a report to all the supporting churches. We and the team made more concrete plans to follow up on our suggestions than we had after our first visit. We have seen greater success this time because our suggestions were more tangible and included a time frame for implementation.

Andy:

Having somewhat dropped the ball after their first visit, both the team and the Guilds committed to being intentional about following up after this second visit. We chose to focus on three areas. First, we have sought solutions to improve the ways we can meet each other's social needs. Second, we are working on our communication, particularly with furloughing families. Finally, the Guilds encouraged us to be intentional about praying for each other. Thanks to their prompting, we have scheduled times of intercession for each other into our team meetings, and we have been grateful for the ways God is answering those prayers.

Our team is in no way an ideal mission team. Owing to the tight quarters in which we exist, we are often painfully aware of our own inadequacies (and those of our teammates!). We see God working through us all the same, using both our strengths and our weaknesses to reach the lost around us. While all glory and credit are due the Lord (and all mistakes are claimed as our own), we gladly recognize and acknowledge the efforts many godly people have made to form our team into one that seeks to glorify the Lord in all our interactions.

Sonny:

Our relationship with the Dagara team has been a blessing. It serves as an example of how HIM wishes to journey with other missionaries and teams. We are proud of what the Dagara team is doing. I believe three things have contributed to their healthy team life: proactive preparation, a strong commitment to continual growth and development as a team, and continued missionary care.

A healthy team is not an end in itself. God works through these lives for kingdom purposes. The goal is ultimately to be effective in cross-cultural ministry. When we visited in 2006, the Lord had already worked through the Dagara team and national Christians to plant nine churches; the Christian community numbered over 450. The team will say that their time in Burkina Faso has not been easy, but, with the Lord's provision and the ongoing mentoring by those who love them, their time has been fruitful and blessed. You can view a fifteen minute-documentary of their work at the HIM website, http://www.acu.edu/ministry/centers_institutes/missions/index.html.

While this model is not perfect, the Lord has used it to help sustain young families committed to missions. The value of such a long-term mentoring relationship is that trust levels are high and the mentor can help provide a safe environment to discuss even the most difficult topics. Ultimately, the team learns how to deal with team issues on its own in a productive way. Lord willing, we plan to maintain our relationship as long as the team is on the field. May God be glorified as mission trainers and supporting churches mentor and care for those they train and send into the field.

SONNY GUILD IS DIRECTOR OF THE HALBERT INSTITUTE FOR MISSIONS AT ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY IN ABILENE, TEXAS. **ANDY JOHNSON** IS A CHURCH-PLANTING MISSIONARY WORKING AMONG THE DAGARA PEOPLE IN DANO, BURKINA FASO.

