

## MEMBER CARE

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Avant Ministries was founded in 1892 by a group of Christian leaders from Kansas City, Missouri, in the US who had a deep desire to reach the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Over the last 130 years, Avant missionaries have worked in more than 50 nations, planted hundreds of churches, and reached tens of thousands of people with the gospel. Presently, Avant has more than 500 missionaries stationed on the field, and keeping these missionaries physically, emotionally, and spiritually healthy is a top priority.

A few decades ago, Avant and many other mission agencies realized that one of the main reasons missionaries leave the field and return home is because of emotional and spiritual difficulties and burnout. Life in the mission field is a daily challenge. There are physical stresses like primitive living conditions, dangerous traffic, unfamiliar food, and a lack of adequate health services. For some missionaries, violent persecution and physical safety are ever-present dangers. Usually, though, after a few years, the physical challenges of living in the mission field become normal and routine. The real challenges for most missionaries are emotional and spiritual.

It is difficult for regular people to understand the persistent emotional trials which missionaries face on the field. For some missionaries, there is that constant anxiety about the safety and well-being of their children. For others, there is the daily challenge of

thinking and speaking in a different language. Some missionaries work for years without seeing a single convert, and they face continual doubt about their purpose and effectiveness as ministers of the gospel. Perhaps the greatest challenge that some missionaries face is deep hurt or betrayal caused by other Christians in the field. These feelings of anxiety, worry, doubt, purposelessness, and pain can build up over months and years until a missionary decides it is time to give up and go home.

The other great challenge is spiritual. Every day, missionaries are locked in a spiritual battle with the forces of darkness in the world. Some places in the world are so spiritually dark that there is a palpable sense of spiritual heaviness and oppression when a Christian enters that place. This spiritual darkness can become stifling for missionaries, and it can smother the joy and peace of God's presence in their lives. It can lead to feelings of anger and hopelessness, and it can open a door to ungodly behaviors. Many missionaries have become overwhelmed by the spiritual darkness of their environments, and they have fallen into patterns of domestic abuse, sexual immorality, and violence.

As mission agencies and supporting churches, we cannot change the difficult physical, emotional, and spiritual environments which missionaries must live in. But, we can do a better job of supporting them and caring for them in their respective environments. It is for this reason

that many churches and mission agencies, like Avant Ministries, have developed member care support staff and programs. Member care is specifically designed to care for the emotional and spiritual needs of missionaries on the field.

Each member care program is slightly different, but in general, these programs are operated by dedicated people who take a proactive and intentional role in caring for missionaries in the field. Usually, each member care person or team is assigned to a group of missionaries for whom they are responsible. The member care personnel will then meet regularly with their missionaries, often online, but occasionally, in person. The member care personnel are responsible for encouraging their missionaries and building them up, but they also need to ask probing questions about their emotional and spiritual health. They need to listen carefully to their missionaries and discern where emotional or spiritual "cracks" might be starting to form in a person or family.

Member care can be hard work, but it is highly rewarding. There is a great satisfaction in helping our missionaries to live healthier emotional and spiritual lives. Member care is directly responsible for helping missionary families stay together, missionary children to feel well-adjusted, and, ultimately, member care is responsible for helping missionaries stay on the field longer so that all the world might hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. ✝