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In the past several years, friends from western countries have asked with genuine concerns about my family and the situation in Taiwan due to recently increasing tensions between Taiwan and China. *The Economist* did not help the situation when they featured Taiwan in their cover story in 2021, entitled, “The Most Dangerous Place on Earth.”² Born and raised in Taiwan, I am not unfamiliar with threats and rumors of war. Air raid drills were routine when I was in elementary school. I still remember the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Crisis, during the first presidential election in Taiwan, bringing tensions with China to a historical high. Rumors of war were at every corner, the outcome being a large wave of emigration from Taiwan. A similar scenario repeated in 2023 before the 2024 presidential election in Taiwan but on a smaller scale. Although China claimed the election was a choice between “war and peace,” the candidate of the pro-sovereignty party won the presidency in 2024. Meanwhile, most of my friends and family in Taiwan live their daily lives as usual. After Russia invaded Ukraine, some Taiwanese started to sense there might be a possibility that China would invade Taiwan.

Last year before the election, my husband and I had a short visit to Taiwan. We connected with a Taiwanese American pastor, who came to Taiwan with his family about two decades ago and planted a vibrant church. He asked about our thoughts on the increasing China-Taiwan tension. We shared our views, then he told us he believed that China would invade Taiwan. It was just a matter of time. He continued, saying that if war broke out between China and Taiwan, he would choose to stay, though it would require leaving his sending organization since they would require all their members to leave. Most organizations have a policy of not forcing cross-cultural workers to stay but rather pulling them out in times of crisis. The pastor told us he would choose to stay because, if he left, it would be very difficult to enter Taiwan again, and he believed there would be a lot of kingdom work after the invasion.

¹ Part of this paper is adopted from my shorter article “Being a Messenger of the Christ in A Time of War and Peace” published on *Seedbed Journal*, Vol. XXXV, Spring, No.1. 2024.

² See *The Economist* website <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2021/05/01/the-most-dangerous-place-on-earth>

I was impressed by this missionary-pastor's courage and commitment to God's calling. Our conversation stimulated my thinking toward the challenges that the frontier workers face in the midst of geological conflicts, as well as two missiological questions: Should workers stay or leave in a conflict zone? Is it worth it to send workers to volatile locations in a time of instability and conflict?

Geopolitics and Frontier Mission

Missionaries who serve overseas often bear the brunt of the geopolitical tensions. The most direct effect is with visa options which provide country access. The visa limitations also affect those whom mission agencies could recruit and send, i.e. the "mission force." Furthermore, if the passport country of the missionaries is on the opposing side in a conflict, is involved in hostilities, or even was at war with the host country, the missionaries may struggle with conflicting identities or loyalties. In the long term it may even impact their mental health.

Access and Mission Force

The political relationship between the passport country and host country of the field worker influences visa options. For example, U.S. citizens used to be able to enter Turkey with visa on arrival, but when the two countries had political tensions, Turkey started to require U.S. citizens to obtain an e-visa from 2013-2024. A similar situation occurred between Canada and Egypt: between 2023 and 2024 Egypt had required Canadian travelers to apply for an e-visa before arrival. On the other hand, if two countries have close ties or are allies politically or/and economically, it is much easier for people of these countries to travel between these two countries. I will take China as an example here.

Since the 1990s, China has intentionally invested in and sought allies with the majority world including Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, collaborating in economic and political activities. Over the past ten years since China started the "One Belt, One Road Initiative" (BRI) in 2013,³ <http://english.www.gov.cn/beltAndRoad/3> there has been significant growing Chinese population in Africa and the Middle East. According to the 2022 data of Statistical Yearbook of the Overseas Community Affairs Council of Taiwan, compared with the data in 2010, the overseas Chinese⁴ population in Africa has grown from 0.24 to 1.18 million—nearly 500% in just twelve years (Overseas Community

³ c.f. Chinese State website,

⁴ 海外華人 (*Haiwai Huaren*), which includes ethnic Chinese and their descendants who emigrated from mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Affairs Council, 2010 and 2022). The massive investment and infrastructure projects that China brought into Africa have opened doors for Chinese laborers, professionals, and businessmen (Hicks, 2019). Meanwhile, there are more than half a million Chinese in the Middle East, most of whom live in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the U.A.E. (China News, 2017). BRI has opened the door for Christian Chinese contractors and businessmen to enter Africa and other BRI partnering countries in the Middle East, becoming a potential mission force through business as mission (BAM). Some countries are hostile to the Western countries due to geopolitical conflicts, and it is nearly not possible to send American citizens to live and serve there, but some Chinese missionaries have entered such countries and established ministries there.

Moreover, this open door is not only one-way. It is also easier for Africans to travel to China. In 2015 during the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation, Chinese President Xi promised to provide scholarships and visas for African students to study in China (Xinhua, 2018). Since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, Western mission agencies have tried to find ways to reenter China, but their options may be limited due to geopolitical tensions. On the other hand, some sending agencies have started to consider sending African missionaries to China since they have more visa options. Now the concept of “Creative-Access” should not only consider platforms, but also the nationalities of mission force! I once told a leader in my organization, “There are no closed countries. It depends on which nationalities you recruit and send.”

Conflicting Identities/ Loyalties

Many missionaries seek to love and identify with the people they serve for the sake of the gospel. “And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law” (1 Cor. 9:20). My mentor Dr. Robert Priest put it this way, “When you are cheering for the national team of the country that you are serving in international sports events, you are doing it right!” It is beautiful when kingdom workers learn to love, bond, and identify with a nation that they do not have any blood relation with. But when the passport country and host country of the worker are in conflict, the worker may also feel torn.

For example, kingdom workers who work in Muslim contexts usually feel the impact of the Israel-Palestine conflicts. In 2018, when the U.S. moved its embassy to Jerusalem, there were many protests in Muslim countries around the world. At that time, we were serving in a country which hosted more than four million Palestinians. On the day the news was released, the international schools asked the American parents not to send

their children to school because they could not predict what would happen on the streets. An Arabic language school director, who was an American worker, sent email to foreign students, advising them when they attended the next day, to say, “I am sorry for the government’s decision” in the beginning of the class so that the class might go well.

My husband and I recently served in a country that was invaded by the U.S. more than 20 years ago, and my husband is an American citizen. The local ministry partners that we trusted advised him not to tell the local people that he was American. Since my husband is half Hispanic, he usually told the local people he met on the streets that he was originally from a certain Hispanic country. At times he even struggled with conflicting feelings about his American identity. The more we loved the country we served, the more we felt conflicted about what the U.S. had done in this country.

In these kinds of conflictual situations, it is much easier to simply choose sides. Months ago, when we visited my husband’s seminary professor and his wife, we talked about the Israel-Gaza war. The professor’s wife said, “It is much easier to choose sides, to justify one side and dehumanize the other, so we won’t feel guilty, heartbroken or struggle.” As followers of Jesus, we learn to “weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15) instead of choosing sides. We witness the love of Jesus by showing compassion, empathy and recognizing their sufferings, instead of downplaying or justifying the perpetrators’ actions.

To Leave or to Stay?

Years ago, after my husband and I found an apartment and signed a contract in the country (that was invaded by the U.S.) where we served, we waited outside the country for our first residency visa. After the visa came, we were eager to return and get settled into our new home. On the day we were scheduled to fly back, the US embassy in that city announced the withdrawal of their staff due to high geopolitical tensions between the U.S. and Iran and the possibility of military conflict. We suddenly had a tough decision: should we fly or not? After prayers and consulting with the local partnering pastor, we decided to return as planned. We are grateful that the Lord opened the door for us to stay and served for four more years after that incident. However, our host country was a constant proxy of regional hostile entities, with the U.S. embassy in the city we lived in being a continual target of rocket attacks during the years we lived there. Eventually, almost all workers in our city had to leave due to a security crisis.

A Time to Stay

When making decision on whether to leave or stay, a rule of thumb for most field workers is to listen to the local people’s advice. If our presence will endanger them, we should leave. But many times the situation is not so clear-cut. From an organization’s standpoint, it is always hard to make the call—to allow the workers to stay or to pull them out in times of crisis and conflicts. If the organization pulls the workers out too early, they may lose opportunities for ministry, and the workers may feel they are not obeying their calling from the Lord. On the other hand, if the organization lets the workers stay (or enter), and bad things happen to the workers, the organization could possibly be blamed. My husband and I have heard stories of both scenarios, and in past years we also faced situations in which we had to make such decisions. For example, one senior leader of our organization told us that two years before civil war broke out in Yemen, some organizations pulled out their workers due to the assassination of a field worker. However, most workers who were evacuated in what was supposed to be a temporary relocation to neighboring countries did not adjust well in the new countries and lost their sense of purpose and meaning in their ministries. Many of them later left the field in discouragement. In this case, this senior leader believed their organizations pulled their workers out too early.

In 2023, one year after the Ukraine-Russia war, the Gospel Coalition interviewed Ukrainian Christians and field workers, and they reported that many churches are growing, and Ukrainian refugees have revived churches in neighboring countries (Zylstra, 2023). An American worker in Ukraine told the TGC journalist, “We know where he called us to, so that’s definitely where we want to be. We wouldn’t want to be anywhere else right now” (Zylstra, 2023).

A Korean family, fellow workers, and friends of ours, shared with us their experiences of making decisions on the edge of war. When ISIS emerged, invading, and taking over a major city not far from them in 2014, they had to make the decision to stay or leave. At that time their city had already been flooded with refugees from nearby cities, and the ISIS was just miles away. Their local friends did not believe they would stay, though this worker family had previously told their friends that they would stay with them even if the war broke out in their city. By God’s grace, ISIS could not take their city, and the military was able to defend their land. But since they chose to stay, their ministry has grown tremendously. Before the war, there was no known believer in their field, but since the war, they have planted local churches and witnessed a small movement among the people group that they serve.

Most stories so far may seem to support the option of letting missionaries stay in times of conflict. Yet I believe sometimes it takes as much faith to leave as to stay, if not more. Perhaps a little humility, too. There are definitely times that missionaries should leave, which can also be God's will. As it is written in Ecclesiastes 3:1, "there is a time for everything."

A Time to Leave

In 1949, the Communist party took over mainland China after years of civil war against the National Party. At that time, the Chinese church already had influential leaders like Ming-Dao Wang, John Sung, and Watchman Nee. Between 1951-53, the Communist regime expelled all foreign missionaries and started to persecute the local churches, putting house church leaders in jail. It might have felt like the end of Chinese Christianity at that time. Probably no one would expect that in the early 1990s, after many house church leaders were released from prison, they would gradually start the house-church movement in mainland China.⁵ We cannot overlook the way many Korean missionaries and Chinese Christians in diaspora from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and North America contributed to the development of the urban house churches later; but overall, it was a sovereign work of God.

A similar story took place in the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The monarchy was overthrown, and a Shia Islamic theocracy was established. The regime began enforcing Islamic law, and evangelism to Persian Muslims was forbidden. Though historical Christian minority groups could still practice their faith, Muslims who converted to Christian faith could face the death penalty. Since then, foreign missionaries were not allowed to enter, except for some Iranian believers in diaspora and recent workers from non-western countries. But by the power of the Holy Spirit, through dreams and visions, media ministry (e.g. SAT7 and social media), and diaspora ministry, now many reports identify Iranian house churches as the fastest growing church in the world.⁶

Revelation 3:8 is a frequently quoted scripture: "See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut." Undoubtedly, this verse is very encouraging in any kind of ministry, especially in missional contexts. But the previous verse indicates that "what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open" (a message previously communicated in Isaiah 22:22). It seems that our Lord not only opens doors, but also shuts them. However, we sometimes tend to emphasize the open-door part and

⁵ For more a brief history of house church in China, please see see <https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/faith-going-public/>.

⁶ For more stories and testimonies in Iran, please see <https://www.elam.com>

neglect the shutting-door part. When God clearly shuts the door, and it is time to leave, we should leave.

In both China and Iran, God built His church in the midst of severe persecutions and trials for the local believers. For He said, “*I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it*” (Matt 16:18). God does not need us for His kingdom work. It is humbling to be reminded that we might not be that important. There may be a time God chooses to use us, but also a time he does not. The popular saying “Let go, let God” may apply well to missionaries in the situation when they are forced to leave. A Singaporean preacher from my home church said it well: “There is a difference between boldness inspired by the Holy Spirit and pride from our flesh when facing oppositions.” In such times, it may take faith and humility to leave our work behind. Our response in such situations should be, “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised” (Job 1:21). The question of staying vs. leaving, therefore, is challenging and significant question for those called to serve in times of turmoil. Another question, however, wrestles with if it is worth it to send (or keep) workers in places of high stakes and conflict.

Is it Worth it?

Before we ask the question “is it worth it or not?”, we may need to answer a related question first: “What do we expect in our life as followers of Jesus?” Do we expect hardship or a comfortable life? An American mini-series “Band of Brothers,” which I watched twice, tells stories of the Allies from the Normandy landings during the World War II. I particularly like a quote from one episode when the soldiers report to their leader, “We are paratroopers, Lieutenant. *We are supposed to be surrounded.*” It was this kind of right expectation that made these soldiers fearless, loyal, and strong. As messengers of God engaging the world on the frontlines, we also are “supposed to be surrounded” by enemies—not enemies of “flesh and blood,” but spiritual adversaries (Eph 6:12). What prepares us for a right expectation is a sound theology of suffering.

Before the first time we took a survey trip to our recent field years ago, we visited an elderly couple of another organization who had served in the Middle East for decades and visited that country more than a decade ago when it was still turbulent and dangerous. After a warm greeting, they listened to our stories and experiences. I mentioned my previous experience of serving in a house church in China. I had to evacuate after a few months due to a police raid. Then this veteran missionary couple told us in earnest that a sound theology of suffering was necessary to enter a war-torn

country like our field, and my experience of suffering persecution would help. I was impressed by their wise words.

If we have false belief and unrealistic expectation such as “bad things will not happen to good Christians” or “as long as we are doing God’s work, he will protect us from all evil,” then when afflictions strike us, our faith in God might be shaken. We might even lose our faith. A comprehensive study of the theme of sufferings and persecutions in the Bible will be helpful and crucial.

Challenged by the Lord

Years ago, one of our leaders prayed for us on the night when we departed for our field: “Lord, we know that it will not be easy to win souls for You on this field.... We will go through many hardships and pains.... But it’s all worth it because Jesus is worthy.” I was deeply touched by the prayer of our leader, though I had no idea what was waiting in front of me at that moment. Little did I know what he prayed would come true in the following years.

It was nearly one year after arriving in the country. We bought every piece of furniture, including the kitchen cupboards and sink, and just started to feel at home. Then a geopolitical crisis happened. A high-profile military Iranian commander along with a few local officers, were assassinated in our city by the US government. We were grateful that we were outside of the country attending a conference at that moment, but suddenly people started to talk about the possibility of World War III. We were told by some we should consider not returning to our host country indefinitely. It was a stressful time for everyone who was in the region, but I was also worried and anxious about all our belongings in our home. I did not want to lose the furniture we just bought, as well as my clothes and food, etc. I could not sleep at night.

One night, I was reminded by the Lord of a story that I heard years ago when my husband and I were serving in a different country. It was a testimony of a Middle Eastern Christian-background believer. He and his family fled their hometown when ISIS invaded, and then they temporarily settled in a neighboring country. In that country, through the local Arab Christian church, he became a follower of Jesus. In his testimony he said, “When I was in my hometown, I had everything—house, car, and job. But I did not know Jesus. Now I left my home and lost everything, but I know Jesus. If this is what takes to know Jesus, *it is worth it!*” I felt the Lord was challenging me that night: “If this Middle Eastern brother believes it is worth it to lose everything to know Jesus, don’t you think it is worth it to lose everything to serve his country and help people there know

Jesus?”

Thankfully by God’s grace, World War III did not happen that year. We were able to return our home after one month. But since then, whenever we leave the country, we bring important documents and items with us as if we might not be able to return. Yet I have peace in my heart even if one day we lose most of our belongings in our beloved host country.

The Biggest Loss

From an organization’s viewpoint, if an organization allows a missionary to stay or to enter a high-risk area and they lose their lives as a result of being there, the organization might assume they have made a mistake. But it might or might not have been a mistake. Either way, this kind of thinking assumes that the worst thing that could ever happen to a missionary is death. But the Lord alone has the authority of our lives and ministries. He can use the life of a missionary as well of the death of a missionary. As our Lord says,

“Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” (John 12:24–25)

I am not trying to trivialize or water down the pain, trauma, grief of the loss of life. My husband and I personally experienced all of these when losing a fellow worker and dear friend on our field recently. The loss is real.

But after being involved in kingdom work for more than a decade, I believe the worst thing could happen to a missionary is not the loss of their lives, but loss of their faith. After our brother in Christ John Chau was martyred in late 2018, the news of his death went viral with floods of negative public criticism including those from Christian circle. Recently National Geographic even released a documentary “The Mission” based on his story. I am saddened to see in this documentary how his parents blamed the sending agency and the entire Evangelical mission movement, which focuses on Unreached People Groups (UPG), for their son’s death. I could not imagine the amount of pressure that John’s agency has endured. I met John’s parents when attending the same Chinese American church many years ago, and I wrote an article to respond the criticism against his mission right after (Wu 2020, 4-6). Then, about half a year after John Chau’s passing, another Christian-related front-page story bothered me even more. The famous Christian writer Joshua Harris announced he was not a Christian anymore. I could not

help but comparing these two cases: One person who never received fame, wealth, or any other “benefits” through his faith but lost his life for his faith; while another gained fame, wealth as well as other benefits through his faith but ended up losing his faith in this life. Yet the former was considered foolish. Similarly, the documentary “The Mission” interviewed an ex-missionary and ex-Christian, who lost his faith after many years on the mission field and gave him platform to criticize John who lost his life for faith and attack the Evangelical mission movement as if he is “the wise one.” This blunt contrast might sound like a modern-day parable. The famous quote of Jim Elliot sums it up best: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

Not in Vain

In his book, *The Messenger, the Message and the Community*, Roland Muller finds that the one common quality of fruitful missionaries is that they all have a “cross experience.” This is an experience of personal suffering that brings “death to self” and forces these missionaries to “cast themselves onto God.” Our sufferings are not meaningless or a waste. In the letter of James, he encourages us “consider it pure joy, my brothers, and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance” (1:2-3). This gives us a purpose and meaning as we go through trials. He continues in 1:12, “Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive *the crown of life* that the Lord has promised to those who love him.” In the Book of Revelation, John also mentions *the crown of life* in the context of perseverance of sufferings, and these are the only two occurrences in the New Testament on crown of life:

“I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you *the crown of life*.” (2:9–10, ESV, emphasis added)

Both James and John use the Greek word *stephanon*, which means crown, in the phrase “the crown of life” (*ton stephanon tes zoes*). It may be noteworthy that the name of the first martyr in the New Testament is Stephen, which also comes from this same Greek word “crown.” Did John and James have Stephen in their minds when they wrote these verses? I do not know. But what I do know is that Stephen was indeed *faithful unto death* and surely, he received *the crown of life*.

When almost all foreign workers had to leave our field due to the aftermath of our friend's martyrdom, I was heartbroken and devastated. But the Lord reminded me what He did in China and Iran. "Your planting and reaping are never the same. But your labor is not in vain," as goes the lyrics of the worship song *Your Labor is Not in Vain*. Our friend's sacrifice will not be in vain. After all, it is indeed worth it, because our Lord is worthy.

Concluding words

We live in a time of conflicts and turmoil. The global pandemic seems to be finally over, but the increasing geopolitical conflicts such as the Taiwan-China tension, the Ukraine-Russia war, and the war between Israel and Gaza along with the related conflicts in the Middle East cast an even greater shadow over the world. Our Lord is the lord of history, and everything happens according to his plan. The recent geopolitical developments have impacted the movement and dynamics of the global mission. It has shut doors for mission for some while opening doors for others. "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens...A time to plant and a time to uproot...a time for war and a time for peace" (Ecclesiastes 3:1,2, 8). Before we make the decision on whether to pull out workers in a conflict zone or ask the question whether we should go there or not, it is essential to have a sound theology of suffering, especially in times like this. In this way, we learn to listen to the Lord's voice, discern when He shuts or opens the door, and trust in His timing and sovereignty.

The time is evil, and the Lord is near. "*Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain*" (1 Cor. 15:58).

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