

Second Edition

FACING DANGER

A Guide *Through* Risk

Anna Hampton

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Chapter 1

The Enraged Beast

As a member care provider for those bringing the gospel to dangerous areas, I talk with gospel workers throughout Central Asia, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. When they learn that my husband and I spent almost a decade in Afghanistan, without fail they ask if they should be concerned about security in their volatile region. And the general answer is yes; they should be watching security in their area. However, security is not a feeling—it never is.

Our family *felt* unsafe in 2000 when we lived under Taliban rule in Kabul. In reality, however, we were very much protected by the Talib government of the time. Later, after the coalition forces liberated Kabul, everyone felt free from the tyranny and brutal living conditions of Taliban rule. We felt safe. But freedom and safety are not related.

In 2002, almost a year after the liberation of Kabul, our home was attacked during Ramadan by eleven armed Afghan men. They had killed people in the two other houses they attacked before forcing their way into our home. They held us at gunpoint, with our toddler and baby, and ransacked our home.

The physical war on the ground points to the cosmic spiritual battle waging all around us. The "enraged beast" is the enemy of our God, the one seeking to devour Christians and keep as many people as possible bound in darkness (Rev 12:17). But we need to see with spiritual eyes and hear with spiritual ears (2 Sam 5:24; 2 Kgs 6:17; 1 Chr 14:15).

The battle is intensifying for several reasons. Christ-followers are reaching previously unreached people groups. Geopolitical wars and unrest are displacing millions, making them accessible to Christ-followers. The increasing number of major natural disasters in the past decade have resulted in humanitarian aid workers being invited into formerly closed places. The gospel has gone, and it is continuing to go forth.

We primarily serve in member care and as risk consultants to people living in a variety of places hostile to the gospel—remote mountain areas, tiny villages, small cities, and dusty, dirty capitals. We have seen that God's people are faithful to answer his call. These Christ-followers are sharing the good news that Jesus has come to restore dishonorable people to our Father's house with honor (Luke 15). But spreading the good news comes at a significant price.

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At least four major global trends make a comprehensive, practical, and biblical understanding of risk an urgent priority for those serving on these remote front lines.

Four Major Trends

Increasing Danger and Persecution of Christ-Followers

First, increasing danger and persecution affects those who live and work in hostile locations. Persecution of Christ-followers witnessing in Muslim contexts has increased significantly. Many Muslim governments make daily life extremely difficult for Christ followers, even resorting to brutal persecution at times. Christ-followers are paying a heavy price to convey the message of hope to the world.

The trends point to increasingly severe risk to Christ-followers wherever they are, but especially for those purposefully moving into cultures hostile to the gospel. I wrote to our financial partners in 2010:

> This past month I had a Skype conversation with a friend working in war-torn Central Asia. She related: "We are bracing ourselves for another wave of workers to leave. Since the murders, many global workers here realize they haven't fully counted the costs of giving their lives in a high-risk environment, even though many unreached groups remain. I am constantly crying. Our boys will have to say numerous goodbyes during Christmas break and at the end of the school year."
>
> My heart was heavy as I listened to Amy[1] share. … Since extremists executed our eight friends in August and another Christian woman just one week ago, numerous workers are facing intense spiritual warfare and the personal realization of the reality of what it means to be serving him in or near war zones.

Many decide the cost is too high and return home. Amid such difficulties, those working among unreached people groups need additional member care support to sustain long-term effectiveness and resiliency.

Increasingly, Christians worldwide are targeted by suicide bombers and terrorist attacks. Paul Borthwick describes a major global trend regarding the average age of the people in the world, and he describes it as "young, restless, and uncertain." He writes:

> More than fifty percent of the world is under the age of twenty-five. There is a saying in the Middle East that poverty is the mother of terrorism. And hopelessness is the mother of a lot of violence in the world. If the choice is going to a great banquet in heaven with

1 Her name was changed to protect my friend.

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> seventy virgins versus living a life of unemployment and poverty, some will be willing to blow themselves up to escape this life.[2]

However, people still need the gospel. Up to "eighty-six percent of all Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists do not personally know a Christian."[3] Converting from Islam to Christianity is costly—converts are fired, imprisoned, or killed. It's common knowledge that "Muslim regimes do not foster religious freedom, and conversion out of Islam is prohibited."[4] This increasing trend of danger and persecution significantly impacts those working in dangerous locations.

Increasing Attrition Rate

The second trend is an increasing attrition rate among Christ-followers working cross-culturally.[5] The harsh reality of gospel-related service contributes to the significant erosion of global workers. Many begin with vision, enthusiasm, and calling, but lack realistic expectations, adequate understanding of risk and suffering, ample biblical literacy, and effective interpersonal skills.

The World Evangelical Fellowship estimates that 30,600 internationally located Christ-followers leave the field every four years. Of these, 71 percent depart for preventable reasons.[6] In one Middle Eastern country, regional leaders from five faith-based agencies report that only 10 percent of workers remain for ten years, and most leave after three to four years. Another agency reported that more than half of their workers leave for primarily preventable reasons before becoming effective.[7]

A veteran member-care leader responded to the problem of attrition:

> The problem is that there's much more lost than money. … Think of the cost to the team left on the field (lessened morale; overloaded work-loads for those still there who must pick up the task).
>
> Think of the sadness of the people groups a team was ministering to. In some of our field locations, the translation project took more than fifty years because team after team had to leave for one reason or another. The people wondered if they would ever get the Book. There's a loss to their donors who wonder if all that money they invested was wasted.[8]

2 Borthwick, *Western Christianity*, 25.

3 Johnson, "World Christian Trends," 48.

4 Adeney, quoted in Borthwick, *Western Christianity*, 48.

5 Whittle, "Missionary Attrition."

6 Taylor, *Too Valuable to Lose*, 13–14.

7 Unnamed sources in private conversations with me in 2011–2014.

8 Dr. Laura Mae Gardner, in private correspondence with me, August 1, 2011.

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Changing Sending Countries[9]

Third, is the trend of expanding sending countries. In the past thirty years, approximately 75 percent of all Christian vocational workers serving worldwide have come from outside Europe and North America. Since the twentieth century Christianity has experienced a significant shift to the Global South.

In 1970, approximately 41 percent of Christians were from Africa, Asia, or Latin America. In 2018, it was 66 percent.[10] Today, more global workers come from majority-world countries, where sending groups are often less capable of providing pastoral visits. Personnel typically cannot afford supplementary restorative resources such as annual retreats out of the region where they minister. Workers from newer sending countries receive less member care from their sending communities and must find practical and spiritual ways to remain encouraged in challenging witness risk contexts.



This trend also significantly impacts risk assessment discussed further in chapter 12. Increasingly, teams represent multiple cultures and backgrounds. This diversity requires individuals to be aware of the varying risk profiles of their teammates. Failing to do so is failing to love your neighbor, who may be in more danger than you are.

Increased Brokenness of Christian Laborers

Finally, the increased brokenness in the church results in bruised members going overseas. We are who we send, so as our sending countries have experienced more brokenness, so are the field workers. As field leaders, we often discussed how it feels like Christ-followers who are called to serve internationally from all over the world tend to go to the field "softer" and more "bruised" than previous generations due to various factors. Chief among these are the effects of dysfunction in our churches and families back home. With high rates of divorce and sexual, physical, emotional, and mental abuse in sending nations, and the accompanying trauma,[11] Christ-followers often carry a variety of personal challenges with them into full-time gospel work. As a result of past trauma, they may lack skill in conflict resolution, have dysfunctional interpersonal skills, issues related to fatherhood and

9 *Christianity in Its Global Context*, 7.

10 Center for the Study of Global Christianity. Infographic.

11 These statements are based on the research found at "Marriage and Divorce"; "WHO Study"; and "1 in 6 Male."

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motherhood, or wrong conceptions of God and how to relate to him. These factors all contribute to low resiliency and lack of endurance overseas, *especially* in high-risk and dangerous situations.

Are We Asking the Wrong Questions?

The high turnover rate has led to a proliferation of books and articles on suffering. The assumption is that Christian laborers need to understand suffering. "If people only know and accept a correct doctrinal truth about God or suffering, then they will become more hardy and resilient. We just need to give the right information, and they will be able to handle the 'dripping faucet stress'[12] of living in or near a war zone." Churches, agencies, and leaders are asking, "What do Christ's followers in high-risk not understand about suffering? What do they need to know about suffering before going?" But perhaps these are the wrong questions. Are we giving the wrong answers to a highly risk-averse generation? Is there a key factor to increasing the resiliency and reducing attrition rates of those serving in high-risk areas? If so, what is it?

One significant criticism of the current generation of gospel workers is their inability to cope with risk. Despite all the resources on suffering, there seems to be "an embarrassment of knowledge"[13] in handling risk and suffering. Abraham Heschel states, "We formulate and debate the issues while oblivious to and alienated from the experiences or the insights that account for our raising the issues."[14] Understanding the perspective of people who have lived through front-line overseas risk is essential to minimizing the "alienation from experience" that Heschel notes.

In my experience, theology of risk has primarily been characterized by listing risk stories in the Bible and encouraging people to "have faith." But as a stay-at-home mom in a dangerous situation, anecdotal risk stories with little apparent connection to each other and no guide for thinking through risk in the Bible were not helpful to me. This approach did not touch my mind or heart and did not help me work through the chaos of living in a high-risk situation for days and years. I wanted to try to find out what Scriptures may have come into Paul's mind (he only had the Old Testament) when he entered risk and apply them to my situation.

12 I was unable to locate who coined this term, but it is not original to me.

13 Heschel, *Who Is Man?*, 2.

14 Heschel, 2.

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