

# 1. FIVE PERMISSIONS MISSIONARIES NEED

Michelle Phoenix

<https://michelephoenix.com/2015/05/20/five-permissions-missionaries-need/>

You may have read my most recent article, “[Six Permissions Most MKs Need](#).” This is a companion piece, one that recognizes the different needs of adults in ministry.

Extending these permissions might reduce the pressure that becomes toxic to missionaries. Sometimes that pressure is self-inflicted—derived from the unachievable standards they levy on themselves. And sometimes it’s imposed by supporters and churches who mean well, but fail to measure the human toll of a life in ministry.

So the onus of responsibility is twofold: on the *missionaries* who self-blame and self-shame and on the *networks* that back them, sometimes piling unreasonable expectations on people who work in circumstances they can’t fully fathom.



## Permission To Be Confused:

*We’ve sent out five hundred letters and our support still isn’t there. We’ve been praying for a coworker for years and no one has come forward to join us. We’ve thrown everything we have at it and the ministry still isn’t growing.*

**The truth is seldom stated so bluntly.** Missionaries will often couch it in more palatable statements like “We’re trusting God’s timing” and “His ways are higher than our ways.” We want missionaries to display unflagging faith and confidence in difficult situations, and they try to live up to that standard.

But here’s the truth: *it’s okay (it’s healthy!) for missionaries to get frustrated*. It’s okay for them to question. It’s okay for them to wonder if they got the “memo” wrong. It’s okay for them to feel let down by the One who called them and not understand what his purpose is in the challenges they’re facing.

It’s okay for missionaries to be confused. But it requires *that their doubts be accepted and that their vulnerability be honored*. Because they’re in ministry, there’s a tendency to expect hyper-spirituality from them—the ability to reframe let-downs and failures as positives in God’s Kingdom. That’s not always possible when they’ve invested everything—funds, families, futures—in an endeavor that seems doomed.

If you want to support your missionaries, be affirming. Pray for miracles and have faith when theirs wanes. But also acknowledge the emotional toll of disappointment and the spiritual confusion it can cause. **Give missionaries permission to question and feel defeated**, if only for a time. It isn’t weakness—*it’s a natural response to unmet expectations and to what feels like broken promises*.

And if it doesn’t work out? If their prayers go unanswered and they’ve done all they can? Read

Permission #5: Permission to Quit.



## Permission To Be Flawed

Here's a newsflash: **missionaries aren't perfect**. Some of us struggle to get organized. Some of us battle temptation, carry the burden of depression, have trouble setting boundaries or suffer from anxiety. Some of us lie, gossip, overeat, misrepresent or exaggerate.

The missionaries you see standing at that mic on Sunday mornings have chosen a life that may differ from yours, but they're just as human, just as frail and just as fallible as anyone else.

Unfortunately, there have generally been only two options available to missionaries facing challenges: to be released from service by their sending agency or to keep their struggles private. No middle ground. This simplistic response has either caused shame (for those who leave) or hypocrisy (for those who remain silent).

**In order for missionaries to feel safe revealing their flaws, we need to institute systems that will help them to work through their challenges without the all-or-nothing threat that has inhibited disclosure.**

It's a messy proposal, one that would require time and personnel many missions don't have—following overseas workers personally and intimately, allowing for honest, bared-soul reporting in a safe context. It would also require intervention specific to the nature and severity of the struggle, not the “*buck up and be quiet*” or “*buckle and leave*” that has been the unspoken mandate for flawed missionaries until now.

The result has been ministries severed by premature departures or ministries stunted by the toll of non-disclosure. Imagine how Permission To Be Flawed (from friends, churches, mission boards and colleagues) and strategies/personnel in place to address the problems when they occur might change the experience and reporting of struggling missionaries.



## Permission To Rest

For some missionaries, the 24/7 nature of ministry can take a personal and relational toll. In some cases, it becomes physical too—when the body can no longer sustain the strain of an all-encompassing, all-demanding work.

I need to add a caveat here: *not all missionaries are engaged in such a strenuous lifestyle*. Some have

clearly delineated work hours in the day and periods of rest woven into their calendar year. It's for the others that I make this point—those who are “on call” days, nights and weekends, trying to keep their heads above water in a whirlpool of things to do, goals to accomplish, needs to meet and people to save. The pace can be relentless.

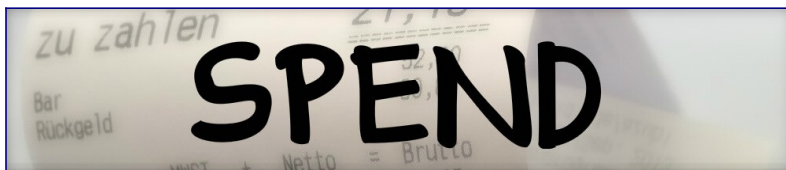
The problem, when missionaries report periods of rest, is that it often comes without context. Because they try so hard to sound positive about the work they're doing, you won't hear the fatigue, discouragement or urgency in their communication. Yet for families like one I met in Kathmandu, traveling out of town for one weekend a month is the only way for the doctor-husband to get beyond the reach of constant medical emergencies, for the children to breathe unpolluted air and for the wife to have uninterrupted time to meaningfully connect with her husband.

To Western eyes, that family heading off to a resort every few weeks seems a bit extravagant—though I assure you that Nepali resorts are not Club Med! But the days away are life-giving, allowing the family to stay several years in a place others leave after just months.

Taking a Sunday afternoon nap, doing coffee with a friend or snuggling in with the family for a movie night shouldn't be guilt-inducing, yet too often it is.

Missionaries may be doing God's work, but they're doing it in human bodies. If Jesus needed to get away during his time on earth (and he was God), surely we can grant permission to those who work in his name today to find appropriate respite from the rigors of their ministry.

Rest isn't a luxury. *It's a God-mandated necessity.*



## Permission To Spend

In an article titled [Guiltitude](#), I made the following statement: “*We like our missionaries to look deprived and to live without. It adds a certain nobility to the minister's status and to the giver's sacrifice.*”

We honor self-sacrifice and deem it a cornerstone of missionary endeavors. And indeed it is. Leaving loved ones. Choosing a non-traditional life in another culture. Abandoning dreams of financial prosperity for the rewards of evangelization.

Missionaries sacrifice willingly. And sometimes, out of a misplaced effort to be good stewards of donations, they sacrifice too much. The single girl whose furniture is stacked apple crates—because she doesn't think churches are giving so she can buy a dresser. The family that spends two hours just getting to and from the grocery store on public transportation—because supporters are contributing to ministry, not to the purchase of a car. The couple that refuses the outrageously low offer of a home they can *buy* (cutting expenses by hundreds of dollars per month) because they fear the reaction of donors who can't afford to do the same.

I call it “*misallocation of emotional energy.*” Living precariously, making life more complicated than it needs to be, forces missionaries to invest their finite supply of emotional energy in coping with unnecessary duress.

Attrition numbers on the mission field are rising. In many of the interactions I've had with singles and families who have left their work, there's been a common thread of just not being "able to handle it anymore"—people who have given it all up, even small material comforts, in an effort to prove full devotion through extreme deprivation. And they can't sustain the effort long-term.

I'm not advocating for reckless spending or luxurious living. I'm advocating for supporters who understand that they're funding *the whole person*, and that his/her quality of life will be a crucial factor in the longevity of the ministry.

For some, quality of life is hampered by intolerable heat and will be enhanced by an air-conditioner (horrors!). Others will be fine with the heat, but need to have WiFi at home to communicate with family and help their kids with schooling. Others will benefit hugely from investing in a generator so life doesn't stop when the brown-out rolls through.

*If there is a way to remedy a debilitating "lack," however trivial it may seem, so the missionary can focus on more important things, isn't it healthy for him/her to do so?*

Even when given permission to spend, missionaries will need to grant themselves the license to identify what is causing a *misallocation of emotional energy* and find ways to reduce the stress it's causing.



## Permission To Quit

Guess what? *"The Call" can be seasonal*. When the strong impulse to enter full-time ministry propels singles and couples through the tedious steps of vision-sharing, fundraising, pre-field training, packing, goodbyeing and transitioning, we'd like to think that it's a lifelong commissioning. Surely they didn't go through all that for just a short time overseas!

In some cases it is indeed a lifelong thing. In others, it's a temporary Call. For those who head overseas with a short-term perspective, returning permanently to their passport culture is a predictable and acceptable end.

But for those who set out for what they think will be a long-term investment in Kingdom Work, an unexpected end feels like defeat. It's all the more egregious if the end comes because of conflict or personal issues. Or loss of funding, which can feel like *donor abandonment*.

There is an acute feeling of shame that accompanies such departures—and often a lack of full reporting in order to protect one's dignity or self-respect. Missionaries who leave because of painful circumstances feel they'll be judged as uncommitted or too weak to sustain the demands of ministry. So they seldom describe the grievous details, making it difficult for those who care to truly support them.

There are departures from the field that happen for more "honorable" reasons: elderly parents who require assistance, educational needs of children, health challenges. All valid. All noble. But for the missionary who entered ministry feeling a life-long vocation and for the partners who sent him/her off with decades of service in mind, it can feel like an aborted Call.

*Missionaries need to be given “permission to quit” when their goal has been reached, when their relatives need help, when interpersonal rifts inhibit ministry and when the health of the missionary family would be better served elsewhere. Or just when they sense the time has come to leave. The same God who directed them into ministry might not have intended for them to stay with it forever.*

If you’ve known missionaries who have overstayed their appointment, you know that a timely departure is often better (for all involved) than a protracted lingering.

*Churches need to see God as big enough to use even a shortened, altered or unachieved Call. And they need to respect the fact that the One who called missionaries out is just as capable of calling them back. Missionaries whose abbreviated terms feel like failures or broken promises will benefit from a theology of calling that acknowledges roadblocks, trials and changes as a means for God to redirect them into something equally as valid, even if it has nothing to do with traditional ministry.*



## **The Permissioning Challenge**

If churches and supporters want to encourage missionaries to live in these permissions, they’ll need to exhibit a culture of personal interest, non-judgmental inquisitiveness and generous understanding. Ask questions that show sincere concern and caring, acknowledging the flaws of humanness and the stresses of ministry. Validate the person, exercise compassionate discernment and help him/her to find a way forward.

For missionaries to give *themselves* permission to be confused and flawed, to rest, to spend and to quit, a shift in priorities will have to occur, one in which their health—physical, spiritual, emotional and relational—is just as valued as the work they do, regardless of the pressure to put themselves (and their families) last.