

ABSTRACT

International Missionaries' Sensemaking During Organizational Exit

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This research explored the sensemaking processes of former international missionaries during organizational exit to expand upon research and exit models in volunteer membership. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain data from former members of one sponsoring organization, and data was coded and interpreted using qualitative methods. Results revealed two distinct exit pathways based on members' identity constructions. Additionally, membership in a total institution shaped missionary service and the exit phase. This study highlights future research opportunities for volunteer memberships involving fixed-terms and ambiguous membership contracts.

Keywords: Missionaries, sensemaking, organizational exit, total institution, international volunteers, communication, ambiguous membership contracts

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A Thesis

Approved by the Department of Communication

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Baylor University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Arts

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August 2015

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Foremost, this thesis would not be possible without my thesis advisor and professional role model, Dr. Lacy G. McNamee, who mentored, guided, and prodded me throughout this year-long process. Dr. McNamee's own research and interests in volunteering and nonprofit organizations inspired me to select my thesis topic on international volunteers. I am forever grateful for her creativity and extensive knowledge of organizational theory and literature as well as the countless hours she spent revising and editing my thesis along the way. Along with my advisor, I thank my committee members, Dr. Mark Morman and Dr. Steven Sloan, for communicating my potential and offering their insightful questions and comments. My sincere appreciation goes to Dr. Morman for imparting his passion for communication research.

This thesis was born out of my desire to bring awareness to international missionaries and their unique service and membership experiences. I am thankful to all the missionaries who partnered with this research by sharing their valuable experiences with me. Additionally, I appreciate all the words of encouragement offered by my family members and close friends as they supported me and believed in me through every stage of the process. Last, but not least, I want to thank all my fellow classmates for their dear friendship and support during stretching times.

DEDICATION

To Jared, thank you for all your love and support throughout this process. I hope you realize the impact of your words and encouragement in my life. You coached me to run my race and successfully cross the finish line. Knowing we survived this process, I'm confident we will accomplish anything together in our future. Thank you for helping me fix my eyes on the prize. *Hebrews 12:1-2*

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Communication scholarship investigating the experiences of international volunteers is an emerging area of research and is growing in significance (Sherraden, Stringham, Sow, & McBride, 2006). The study of international workers and volunteers is also an intercultural and interdisciplinary field of study, merging fields of research in international human resources management, international business, intercultural studies, and psychology, just to name a few. While other fields have contributed valuable knowledge in the international volunteer context, a communication perspective is necessary since meaning and experiences are based in human interaction. Understanding how communication shapes international volunteer work, relationships, and organizational membership will add to an overall understanding of the international volunteer experience.

This study examines a particular type of international volunteer, long-term missionaries, who are often excluded or understudied in international volunteer literature. Notable exceptions to this gap involve a few recent studies focused on missionary acculturation and adjustment (Navara & James, 2002, 2005; Selby, Braunack-Mayer, Jones, Clark, Moulding, & Beilby, 2011). For the most part, missionaries are a hidden population in the larger context of international volunteer service (IVS) scholarship. Their lack of visibility is in part due to the missionary experience typically being contained within private organizations and faith communities such as churches, whose

members may rarely share with outsiders and non-Christians. Knowledge related to missionaries is also fragmented among thousands of organizations and faith communities many of which differ in their approach and ideology related to international missions as well as available resources and the number of missionaries in the field. Overall, there is a lack of synthesized knowledge regarding missionaries and their sending organizations, which keeps the missionary experience hidden and neglected from international volunteer research.

Understanding the missionary exit experience is important, since individual sensemaking has implications for both the individual and the organization. Many missionaries may exit the foreign mission field but remain involved with the organization, whether through new roles or volunteer opportunities. Individuals may also continue to financially support other missionaries or continue to serve by training and mentoring new missionaries. Whether individuals remain active or not, they have the ability to influence the perception of the organization and views on missionary life. The way in which individuals frame their experiences can influence the organization's future recruitment efforts and available resources, as well as an individual's commitment to future volunteering and mission service.

In order to study sensemaking in organizational exit, in-depth interviews were conducted with former international missionaries from the same sponsoring organization. Using one organization strengthened the research in that all the members had similar organizational experiences. Stemming from the ambiguity surrounding the exit phase, sensemaking theory offered an appropriate lens to better understand identity construction and meaning-making.

Moreover, this research highlights the implications for missionary sponsoring organizations and faith-based communities, as well as international volunteers and paid workers who experience membership in total institutions. Exiting a total institution is difficult since identity is closely tied to the roles individuals hold (Ebaugh, 1988). International volunteers or employees of military institutions, universities, corporations, and various nonprofit organizations (e.g., Doctors Without Borders, gap year) may face similar challenges when exiting an organization, especially if their role held significant meaning and value within an institutional experience. Thus, this research will contribute to other volunteer contexts and faith based communities whose members experience exits in which membership took on more than simply a job. In the next section, international missionaries are conceptually grounded within the greater international volunteer context, as well as organizational exit literature. Findings are discussed in terms of organization implications for how missionaries make sense of organizational exit.

Key Concepts

International volunteers are defined as those living outside their home country and are typically involved with roles in cross-cultural awareness, education, healthcare, or humanitarian aid (McBride & Lough, 2010; Sherraden et al., 2006). The international volunteer context presents unique challenges, not only because of intercultural factors, such as language acquisition and cultural adjustment, but also because international volunteers face uncertainty in their roles (Glanz, Williams, & Hoeksema, 2001; Kramer, 2011b).

International voluntary service (IVS) is an umbrella term describing “an organized period of engagement and contribution to society sponsored by public or

private organizations, and recognized and valued by society, with no or minimal monetary contribution to the participant” (Sherraden et al., 2006, p. 165), and it is a growing trend among many Americans, with the majority of programs existing among nonprofit organizations (Ganesh & McAllum, 2011; Lough, 2011; McBride & Lough, 2010). Duration of service is another dimension of IVS, which includes short-term (1 to 8 weeks), medium (3 to 6 months), and long-term placements (6 months or more). The study of long-term volunteers is an underdeveloped area of IVS research.

International volunteering has historical roots in the nineteenth century colonial period when many Christian missionaries traveled to foreign countries to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Lewis, 2005). Many types of international service emerged in twentieth century post-war efforts for peace and reconstruction as new governmental organizations were formed after World War II, such as the United Nations and Peace Corps (Lewis, 2005; Sherraden et al., 2006). In addition to governmental organizations, many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were created in the 1940s in increase humanitarian efforts abroad.

IVS is generally divided into two main categories: promotion of international understanding and development aid and humanitarian relief. These two areas of IVS include social networks and social movements that promote issues such as poverty, peace, and women’s rights. This work is done by churches and educational institutions abroad, as well as missions and global organizations like Amnesty International (Sherraden et al., 2006). Even though IVS is growing in significance (McBride, Lough, & Sherraden, 2012), knowledge about this service is limited (Sherraden et al., 2006) due to the sheer lack of research regarding the different forms and types of IVS (e.g., short-

term and long-term), and its impact and outcomes. For example, little is known about the impact and outcomes for volunteers, their sending organizations, or the communities and countries in which they serve.

Missionaries are individuals who travel abroad from their home country to live in a host country with the goal of making disciples for Jesus Christ. Many missionaries choose to live in underprivileged areas of the world known as the global south. These locations are economically disadvantaged, and may be hostile or war-torn. Missionaries have lived in foreign countries to spread the Christian Gospel and plant churches since Biblical times.

Contemporary missionaries go abroad for many reasons, including church-planting, social justice initiatives (e.g., human trafficking), medical service, natural disaster response teams (e.g., Haiti), and the provision of social services (e.g., support for orphanages). Missionaries often cite “a call” to go abroad in response to their faith in God and the Biblical command in Matthew 28:19 to “Go and make disciples of all the nations. . . .” Making the commitment to live in a foreign country is much more accessible than over a century ago when missionaries bought one-way tickets by ship to travel to a distant land, sometimes never seen or heard from again. In contemporary times, becoming a missionary seems a much easier decision considering increases in globalization, access to international travel, and improvements in technology and communication.

Understanding the significance of missionaries and their service abroad is important since the United States sends more Christian missionaries overseas than any other country in the world. According to Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (2013),

in 2010, there were approximately 127,000 American foreign missionaries out of the world's estimated 400,000, with Brazil coming in second place with 34,000 missionaries. The evidence of missionary service is often hidden or undervalued because service outcomes are difficult to track and measure. There may not be an agreed upon standard for what is considered successful in terms of outcomes. For example, some missionaries may view success by the number of people converted, churches planted, or clinics built, while others may view success based on unquantifiable measures such as relationships formed. Missionaries may have different goals and outcomes depending on their sponsoring organization, the people and communities they serve, and their service roles. Tracking outcomes of international service may be tedious and time consuming since the service may be grounded in value and faith-based interpretations. Even with these obstacles, the influence of Christian missionaries around the globe is undeniable. Since 2000, about two-thirds of the world's Christians come from countries where Western missionaries settled over a century ago (Lovering, 2012). This shows that the spread of Christian faith has greatly increased because of Western missionaries living abroad.

There has also been an explosion in short-term mission trips with over one million Americans going abroad annually, and many churches, nonprofit groups, and spiritual leaders encourage Christians to participate in short-term mission trips (Culbertson, 2012). The economic impact of these short-term trips is significant. Americans spend millions of dollars each year to raise money for mission trips, and many long-term missionaries decide to go on a short-term trip before deciding to commit to a long-term missionary assignment. Short-term contexts of IVS, while valuable, do not hold the same challenges as those of the long-term context. Short-term missionaries do not experience prolonged

stress of living in another country, leaving friends and family behind, or learning the intricacies of new languages. Long-term missionary life is also distinctive from that of other expatriates. Missionaries tend to live in the global south, which implies lower income and socioeconomic status, decreased social support, and increased proximity to nationals in comparison to other expatriates, such as governmental workers, corporate employees, and military personnel (Navara & James, 2002).

Where most academic literature has focused on newcomer and anticipatory stages of international employment and volunteering (Glanz et al., 2001), the exit phase is often marked with even more ambiguity. In returning home, missionaries end a significant overseas experience while also changing their organizational memberships. Further, returning home has often been cited as more difficult than the initial entry into a foreign country because of experiences such as reverse culture shock (Adler, 1981; Austin, 1983; Black, Gregersen, & Mendenhall, 1992; Hyder & Lovblad, 2007; Martin, 1984).

Literature on organizational disengagement/exit is sparse, but there are a few studies that have shown the exit phase is a difficult time regardless of the nature of the exit (Hamel, 2009; Lafarge & Nurick, 1993). In elaborating on the difficulties involved even in planned organizational exits, Davis and Myers (2012) mention that long-term religious missionaries may know they are exiting but still feel loss and a reluctance to return home due to anticipated change or termination in their organizational membership. This being noted, organizations need to understand the difficulties encountered in the exit phase, since most organizations focus their money and resources on the pre-entry and entry phase of membership (Navara & James, 2002).

This study explores exit in one organization in an effort to better understand the fluidity of organizational membership changes as they pertain to missionaries. In this way, the present study contributes to scholarly literature that examines long-term international volunteers as they make sense and assign meaning to their transitions out of active missionary roles. Whereas most studies of international employees and volunteers have taken intercultural or psychological perspectives, this study applies a communication perspective using sensemaking theory to illuminate how these individuals understand, communicate, and enact their experiences during the exit phase (Weick, 1995, 2005). Qualitative methods are employed to facilitate a deeper understanding of the ways that missionaries find meaning in their international service and their organizational membership. The sensemaking process has potential implications for the organization in terms of a member's turnover, return to the mission field, or fulfillment of other volunteer roles in the organization.

Organizations spend their time and resources training and preparing individuals to live overseas; however, very few resources are allocated for repatriation. Investing time and resources in exit-bound foreign missionaries may not seem like a worthwhile investment since they are no longer on the mission field. However, the economic benefit of investing in former missionaries during their exit is important considering the fluidity of volunteer roles and how the organization may benefit in the long run. Missionaries may eventually return to the mission field, change roles within the organization, financially support other missionaries within the organization, or communicate stories that bring awareness to the value and work of the organization.

This chapter has introduced a rationale for why it is important to understand missionaries in the greater context of IVS and their transition during organizational exit. Chapter two addresses the extant literature in missionary service, organizational socialization, and sensemaking theory, as well as the research questions. Chapter three outlines the proposed methodology for this case study and participant recruitment, data collection, and analysis. Next, chapter four addresses the research question with findings and data clips from this study. Lastly, chapter five closes with a discussion of international volunteer memberships and exit, along with suggestions for volunteer organizations, this study's limitations, and future research in IVS scholarship.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

This chapter outlines extant literature and important findings that shape our understanding of missionary experiences. First, the chapter begins by defining how the long-term missionary experience is distinct from other forms of volunteering. Second, an in-depth analysis of missionaries discusses how missionary life is considered a type of total institution. Third, organizational exit literature is reviewed in order to better understand how missionaries experience their disengagement from the mission field and the changing nature of their organizational roles. Lastly, sensemaking theory facilitates understanding for how missionaries draw upon their past experiences and identities to enact their organizational memberships during the exit phase.

Trends and Gaps in Missionary Research

Differing perspectives and conflated or conflicting terms and methodologies in international missionary experiences makes synthesizing the findings difficult. Many studies incorporate missionaries by mentioning them as a sub-category of international volunteering (e.g., Szkudlarek, 2009), which gives a limited scope in understanding missionary life. All-encompassing terms such as sojourner and expatriate have been used to label individuals who commonly experience cultural transitions and adjustments, such as military personnel, government workers, college students studying abroad, corporate employees, and Peace Corp volunteers (Navara & James, 2002, 2005; Sussman, 2000). Therefore, explaining these labels and definitions is necessary to show

how they can be used in understanding empirical research based on the international experiences of missionaries.

Missionaries have largely been subsumed within the literature on sojourners and expatriates, making it difficult to distinguish their experiences from other volunteers and expatriates living abroad. Sojourners are described as individuals who have “voluntarily traveled to, and stayed in, a place foreign to them for a period of at least 6 months and who are not immigrants because they do not intend to settle abroad” (Peterson, Milstein, Chen, & Nakazawa, 2011, p. 291). This description is consistent with long-term IVS listed as 6 months or more (Sherraden et al., 2006). Studies exploring sojourners and expatriates tend to focus on four main phases of cultural transitions: pre-entry, entry (expatriation) into a host country, adjustment (acculturation) to host country and culture, and return (reentry, reacclimation, and repatriation) to one’s home country and culture.

Expatriate and sojourner studies have prominently focused on outcomes of international service (e. g., Brewster, Bonache, Cerdin, & Suutari, 2014) and international placement (e. g., Fee & Gray, 2011). Reentry and repatriation studies have primarily focused on cross-cultural transitions, adjustment, and expectations as expatriates and sojourners return home (e.g., Black, Gergersen & Mendenhall, 1992; Brabant, Palmer, & Gramblin, 1990; Martin, 1984; Zapf, 1991); cultural identity and outcomes of adaptation involving culture shock and repatriation distress (e.g., Sussman, 2000, 2002); and reverse culture shock (e.g., Gaw, 2000; Zapf, 1991).

Reentry is a dominant term used throughout literature to represent the often tumultuous experience as individuals reenter their home country. The term reentry was first introduced by the space program to describe the dangerous and unpredictable reentry

of spacecraft into the Earth's atmosphere (Sussman, 2002). Reentry studies have focused on corporate repatriates, students, missionaries, Peace Corps volunteers, third culture kids, returning migrants, and even soldiers and diplomats returning home (Szkudlarek, 2009). Reentry is also referenced in lay literature in discussions of teaching missionaries how to cope and respond to psychological reverse culture shock, emotions, grief, loss, depression, and loneliness.

Empirical studies exclusively focused on missionaries have examined cultural identity and reentry (Selby et al., 2011; Walling, Eriksson, Meese, Ciovica, & Gorton, 2006) cross-cultural adjustment in missionary assignments (Diekhoff, Holder, Colee, Wigginton, & Rees, 1991), and acculturative stress of missionaries residing in foreign countries (Navara & James, 2002, 2005). A critical review by Hawley (2004) mentioned a lack of empirical studies on missionaries. In his review of extant literature, most studies focused on the practical and clinical areas of missionary life involving missionary kids, acculturation stress and coping, reentry, family dynamics, and psychological explorations of grief and loss. In summary, the majority of missionary studies are cultural studies, which take a psychological, cognitive, or behavioral approach. Missionaries need to understand cultural and psychological elements of reentry, but they must also understand how communication shapes their experiences. A communication perspective takes into account how missionaries are able to communicatively make sense of past experiences as well as their changing role in the organization.

The Distinct Experience of Long-Term Missionaries

Long-term missionaries are distinct from other forms of domestic volunteering, short-term international mission teams, and expatriates. Most domestic volunteers

average about four to five hours per week as members of various nonprofit organizations, whether these are community-based or religious activities (Hooghe, 2003), and most short-term mission teams only spend one to three weeks in a foreign country.

International missionaries, on the other hand, move their entire lives overseas for six months to twenty years or more to immerse themselves in another language and culture. Most of the IVS research explores short-term experiences such as Christian mission trips (e.g., Frederick, 2013; Walling et al., 2006), relief work, and students studying abroad. Other studies focused on the long-term context have found missionary life to be distinct from other expatriate and voluntary service.

In a comparative study between missionaries and other expatriates in Nepal, Navara & James (2002) found several distinctives in the missionary context. For example, missionaries were often more immersed in the host-culture because of the nature of their humanitarian work, which usually led to more stress in terms of daily life and cultural adjustments. Missionaries also tended to have a lower standard of living and income among other expatriates, as well as less social support and lower satisfaction in their roles. In many ways, this and other studies have suggested that the missionary experience is one of total institution, which is discussed further in turn.

Missionary Life as Total Institution

Foreign long-term missionaries rarely live alone in other countries. Many missionaries are members of teams sponsored by their local church or a sponsoring nonprofit organization. These teams are often made up of individuals, couples, and families who meet regularly for team meetings, church services, and local evangelism outreach while on the field. Teams can often take on the role of a family for social and

emotional support. This type of integration with team life, spiritual life, and the regular day-to-day activities of living in a foreign country together can create blurred boundaries between organization and personal life.

Such integration of team life and domestic life may be considered a type of total institution (Goffman, 1961; see also, Davies, 1989; Hinderaker, 2015; Tracy, 2000). Goffman (1961) first conceptualized total institutions as a circumstance of involuntary membership where all aspects of life are incorporated in the same place under a single authority, and members are required to do all the same things together, also known as batch living (e.g., prisons, asylums). Thus, total institutions are distinct from Western society's basic understanding of work-life separation (Goffman, 1961) – that is, whereas non-Western countries like India do not separate work and home life prominently, Western cultures often position these as binaries or separate spheres.

While making the comparison of missionary life to a total institution may seem ill-fitting at first glance, Davies (1989) argued for a more expansive conception of total institutions that goes beyond prisons and asylums. Davies' model proposed categories and levels of total institution such as the degree of closure of each institution, the official explicit purpose of the institution, and the modes of eliciting compliance by the staff. Thus, this model extends to other contexts such as sororities, boarding schools, and monasteries. These types of more voluntary total institutions are still handled by various levels of bureaucracy but hold similarities to family structures and kinship ties. In the communication field, Tracy (2000) also expanded upon Goffman's seminal definition by including cruise ship employees.

In Davies' (1989) expanded definition, she determined that the extent of an institution being "total" is based on the institution's level of openness and bureaucracy (e.g., formal or informal). Ultimately, open institutions will be less batch-like and will allow members the freedom to come and go as they please. Missionaries who live abroad may inhabit a type of open total institution since they have the freedom to come and go in their membership with organizations. However, it is their team life which may determine the degree of total institution. Team life experiences may vary based on different levels of involvement and different organizational structures. For example, some teams may function like a family and offer strong social support, or even insulate the individual from the surrounding culture. The informal or formal structure of the sponsoring organization, as well as the specific team, would be factors to consider. For example, the organization and/or the team leader may dictate various structures and routines for daily missionary life and activities.

In terms of social support, missionaries often rely on their teams more so in a foreign culture where even going to the market to buy food may be a challenge. With the barriers in culture, social norms, and language, team life may take on more importance for not only social needs but also meeting daily needs (Navara & James, 2002, 2005). Team life, if central to the long-term international missionary experience exemplifies a type of open total institution. With a better understanding of how international volunteer service is enacted and the uniqueness of the long-term missionary experience abroad, a further discussion will follow on the ways that organizations shape the missionary experience, particularly in the disengagement/exit phase.

Organizational Socialization

Organizations can be a significant part of the missionary experience. Some sponsoring organizations operate in partnership with faith communities. Sponsoring organizations such as the International Mission Board (IMB) require membership in a Baptist church in order to be eligible to become an IMB missionary, whereas organizations like Youth With A Mission (YWAM) operate independently from church affiliation. Sponsoring organizations often provide missionaries with ongoing training, financial and administrative support, and pastoral care/counseling. Some organizations require missionaries to go through extensive training schools before they are allowed to become missionaries. Thus, missionaries are often socialized into the beliefs and culture of specific organizations prior to service.

Socialization is described as “the process by which an individual acquires the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organizational role” (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979, p. 211), and the process of joining, participating, and eventually leaving organizations (Kramer, 2010). The terms assimilation and socialization are used in different ways by scholars. For example, Jablin (1987, 2001) preferred assimilation as an overarching term to describe the process of joining, participating, and exiting organizations – where socialization and identification were considered a subset within the process of assimilation. Other scholars such as Kramer (2011b) and Moreland and Levine (2002) referred to socialization as the overarching umbrella term in which the assimilation process occurs. For the purpose of this research, the process of joining, participating, and exiting organizations will be referred to simply as socialization.

Socialization is typically studied in three main phases: anticipatory, encounter, and metamorphosis. Jablin (1987, 2001) added a fourth phase called disengagement/exit. A large amount of previous research has focused on the first three phases to determine how organizations socialize its members. Organizational disengagement/exit is the inevitable transition when individuals end their organizational membership, often to begin the cycle through socialization stages again in another organization. To date, member exit is an understudied area of the socialization process (Jablin, 2001). The exit deserves attention not only because it is understudied in both employment and volunteer literature, but also because individuals often experience grief and loss in their changing relationships and organizational memberships (Ebaugh, 1988; Lafarge & Nurick, 1993).

Employee Versus Volunteer Socialization

Employees and volunteers alike leave organizations and make transitions, although the literature historically excluded volunteers until recent years (Kramer, 2011a). Jablin (2001) focused on paid employees and revealed that exiting an organization (e.g., turnover, transfers, and retirement) involves voluntarily or involuntarily giving up a role and its related identity. This period of time can be stressful and marked with uncertainty, regardless of the type of exit experienced (Kramer, 2011a; Kramer, Meisenbach, & Hansen, 2013). In addition to ambiguity, the exit may entail grief and loss (Lafarge & Nurick, 1993). Becoming an ex-member is often a difficult experience.

In understanding organizational exit, Jablin (2001) referred to exit not as a single event but rather as a transition or process. There are three important transitions in the

voluntary exit process: preannouncement, announcement and actual exit, and postexit. The exit phase is said to begin when the individual is officially a former employee, although this can be hard to determine with volunteers whose transition into exit may last for several months. Postexit begins when the individual is no longer a member and those who remain in the organization often experience uncertainty with the absence of the individual. The leaver is also likely to reflect on his/her time and relationships within the organization. Aside from socialization at large, scholars have recently addressed the dynamics of volunteer socialization as a potentially unique process given its distinctiveness from employment-based membership contracts.

In terms of understanding the unique way that volunteers experience organizational membership, both Kramer (2011b) and Haski-Leventhal and Bargal (2008) proposed new models from case studies to help better articulate the fluidity and uncertainty in volunteer membership. Both of these models consider how volunteers move back and forth between different statuses, rather than being understood in terms of linear, rigid boundaries like the traditional socialization model used for employees. The model proposed by Haski-Leventhal and Bargal (2008) offered a social work and psychology perspective on voluntary membership. This model proposed five phases for volunteer socialization (nominee, newcomer, emotional involvement, established volunteering and retiring) and how possible transitions occur for these volunteers. For example, volunteers can take up new roles in the organization for self-renewal and recovery from burnout while other members may choose ultimately to exit.

Unlike Haski-Leventhal and Bargal's model (2008), Kramer's model (2011b) emphasized how communication shaped volunteer membership in the context of a

community choir with five different statuses of membership (prospective, new member, established, transitory, and former member). Kramer's volunteer model revealed that choir volunteers communicated their exit intentions by decreasing their participation, by communicating the completion of their role, or by not showing up. However, former volunteers knew they could return to volunteer again in the future. Members of the community choir, even though inactive continued to receive emails from the organization as if they were active members, thus perpetuating the ambiguity of their membership status (Kramer, 2011b).

These models add value in understanding missionaries as they return from international service since their roles are fluid and complex. However, missionary life is distinct from domestic volunteer models like those of Haski-Leventhal and Bargal's (2008) and Kramer's (2011b) models since missionaries may exit a type of total institution where their commitment and service may rival paid work. Since membership in the exit phase is not as concrete as leaving a job, missionaries may have a stronger need to understand their role in the organization during the exit transition. Through communication, returning missionaries and organizations shape meaning and enact sensemaking during organizational exit transitions.

Sensemaking

Haski-Leventhal and Bargal (2008) described volunteer work as a value-based activity that can be harder to leave than a paid job. As missionaries exit value-based roles that are central to their identity, they may experience sadness in ending their volunteer service, confusion with their changing membership, and loss in their identity as

they realize they are no longer missionaries. Sensemaking is the process of making meaning in new and unknown environments, such as organizational exit.

Many theoretical perspectives have guided organizational socialization literature in the past, but sensemaking theory in particular attunes scholars to focus on the meanings that members assign to their experiences through communication (Kramer, 2011b; Louis 1980; Weick 2005). In fact, the socialization process has been called the process of “sense making” in a new environment (Louis, 1980; Weick, 2005). Karl Weick’s sensemaking theory has been used in many disciplines, but it is a particularly central theory in communication studies for understanding organizations through language and symbols. Sensemaking involves the patterned ways that individuals make sense of their world, to “structure the unknown” and to account for uncertainty (Waterman, 1990, p. 41; see also, Weick, 2005). Efforts in sensemaking also tend to occur when expectations do not match the lived reality. In response to disruptions and expectancy violations, people look for ways to interpret the world around them through making sense of the unknown or of chaotic situations (Weick, 2005). The quintessential question from a sensemaking perspective is, “How can I know what I think until I see what I say?” (Weick, 2005, p. 189). Thus, through communication and talk humans interpret their world and create meaning.

In situating communication as central to sensemaking, Taylor and Van Every (2000) viewed sensemaking as a collective experience centered around events and situated in language, symbols, and interaction. Sensemaking is an interactive process and is described as “meaning making” (Schwandt, 2005, p. 182; Weick, 2005). Through an ongoing retrospective process meaning emerges as past experiences are literally talked

into existence. When individuals are surprised or shocked by unfamiliar situations they need to ask the question, “What’s the story here?” (Weick, 2005, p. 410). Sensemaking is not about the truth per se but about plausible interpretations of reality that individuals assign to situations.

The Process of Sensemaking

Weick’s sensemaking theory is made up of three interrelated phases: enactment, selection, and retention. Through enactment individuals draw attention to some issues and interpretation over others. Enactment can best be described in terms of the actual words that someone uses in answering the question, “What’s the story here?” (Weick, 2005, p. 410). The selection phase is when interpretations are noticed and bracketed. In the retention phase individuals select the various interpretations which are then retained and drawn upon for future situations. This phase has implications for the individual and the organization and can prompt the individual to ask, “Now what?” (Weick, 2005).

Sensemaking is linked with ambiguity – that is, it is often triggered around events that are unknown and unfamiliar. Consequently, the sensemaking process helps individuals reduce stress and cope with surprises, new environments, ambiguity, and unknown social cues and information (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008). In terms of identity, as individuals assign meaning to their past, they also shape their identity through interpretations made about their experiences. Social identities are also formed through discourse, which is an ongoing process in which individuals “make sense of the self through communication” (Meisenbach & Kramer, 2014, p. 4).

Missionary Sensemaking During Exit

When international missionaries return home, they often are confronted with many unknowns and perhaps unexpected situations while simultaneously trying to make sense of their international service. In the days and months following their return home, missionaries may benefit from reflection upon their international experiences to impart meaning not only to their service but also their relationships, lived experiences, relationships they have left behind, and perhaps stories that they wish to share. Missionaries may be asked to share their stories with friends and family, or they may wish to take time to reminisce about their time abroad. Over time, as individuals share their experiences with other people, the sensemaking process evolves.

Missionaries who are able to, as Waterman (1990) stated, “structure the unknown” during an often turbulent time of transition and change, will have a better understanding of their membership and past missionary experiences. The way in which experiences are communicatively labeled and understood ultimately has consequences for how experiences are explained and retained for future situations. Once an experience is labeled, it acts as a framework that is difficult to change once enacted (Weick, 2005). For example, missionaries may come home with many questions regarding what they just experienced. If these missionaries have little to no interaction with the sponsoring organization and do not have a way to make sense of their experiences, this lack of sensemaking may result in confusion or feeling overlooked and devalued. If missionaries experience the exit as one in which the organization has abandoned them, they may choose to distance themselves and disassociate with the organization altogether. This type of labeling would be detrimental to an organization.

Thus, organizations should rightly concern themselves with the way that volunteers make sense of their experiences. Volunteers who are not able to engage in sensemaking may struggle with identity formation regarding their experiences in another country. Reflecting and talking about their experiences is often the best way that volunteers can process what they went through during their time in another country. Friends and family are often a big part of how volunteers can process their stories and lived experiences, and organizations have the potential to help volunteers navigate and process their experiences with these people upon returning home. Missionaries who assign positive meaning to their membership may stay active in the organization in new roles or even choose to go back to the mission field. Also, engaging in sensemaking may help missionaries better adjust back to their home country. The way in which missionaries frame their past experiences can also influence future decisions to return to the mission field. The importance of sensemaking both for individuals and for the sponsoring organizations leads to the following research question:

How do international missionaries communicatively make sense of organizational exit?

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

This research explored the sensemaking processes of international missionaries during the organization exit phase of membership. A qualitative, inductive design is appropriate in this context since there is little extant research that focuses exclusively on the experiences of long-term international missionaries. Tracy (2013) highlighted several strengths and benefits associated with qualitative research, including allowing a researcher to provide tacit understandings of a culture and rich interpretations of participants' experiences through the development of close, trusting relationships.

In this section, I describe my data context, participant selection, and methods for data collection and analysis. First, I briefly describe the organization in this study and the rationale for why it was selected. Second, I describe my own position as a researcher and how my position fits into my methods. Third, I focus on how former members were recruited and the qualitative research methods that were used in both data collection and data analysis. Finally, I highlight the steps that were taken to ensure both rigorous interpretation and thick description of the data and other criteria used for excellent qualitative data (Tracy, 2010).

Research Context

This study employed a case study methodology with former international missionaries who served with one organization, All People's Global Outreach (APGO). APGO, a pseudonym, represents a nonprofit, faith-based church-planting organization

located in the southern U.S. that sponsors and sends over 200 full-time missionaries to numerous international and national locations. A case study methodology is appropriate since it allows for investigation of similar membership experiences within one organization concerning its policies and practices, preparation and training, and pastoral support of former missionaries who served with APGO. Researching international missionaries from one organization as opposed to many organizations narrowed the research focus to participants who had the same organization in common which allowed for greater understanding of communicated sensemaking processes. Using the APGO site in this research was also beneficial due to the accessibility of the organization and the understanding that what takes place in the organization is critical to understanding the sensemaking processes of APGO's former international missionaries during organizational exit.

Founded 25 years ago by a local nondenominational cell church, APGO is an organization dedicated to sending missionaries all over the world. The cell church and APGO are highly integrated in that both offices and staff are located within the church's office building. All church and APGO staff members interact daily and attend the same weekly staff meeting. In fact, the church and APGO are often considered as one entity, making it difficult to define the boundaries between them.

To understand the background and culture of APGO, one must also understand the local church from which it was founded. This local church has grown to include more than three thousand members with a strong emphasis on missions and evangelism. Church members are encouraged to join weekly small groups that meet throughout the city and to participate in local evangelism or national and international short-term

mission trips. Church members regularly hear stories from the mission field and are encouraged to pray for missionaries and countries around the world, as well as to consider financially supporting missionaries. Church members are also encouraged to consider attending APGO's discipleship and/or church-planting training school to grow in their Christian faith or to receive training in church-planting strategy to become a missionary. In addition to training programs, APGO holds an annual missions conference which encourages church members to not only consider participating in missions but also to support missions abroad.

The goal of APGO is to plant churches all over the world that will become full-fledged, church-planting movements in order to see those nations and people groups transformed into disciples for Jesus Christ. APGO's church planting movement has spurred thousands of converts, and each international church plant desires to empower national converts to reach their own people and lead their own church-planting movements. APGO church-planting teams are sent out from churches in the APGO network, with most teams being sent out from the headquarter church. Each team is required to use the APGO church-planting strategy while on the field, which means that teams actively engage in evangelism and discipleship in the various nations they serve.

Before being sent out as a missionary, APGO requires all potential staff members to go through training designed to teach students evangelism and discipleship, as well as spiritual and practical elements of church planting. Once a student has completed the training, they are eligible to become a staff member by starting the process of funding their missionary assignments overseas. All APGO international missionaries are required to raise 100 percent of their monthly budget needs through donations (support-raising

efforts) to become full-time international missionaries. For example, a single missionary going to Germany may need to raise about \$2,500 per month in living expenses, while a family of four living in Cambodia might only need to raise \$2000 per month. When teams are sent overseas, they operate as independent churches with their own directors and leadership. Each team is supported by APGO in various ways, whether through ongoing guidance and pastoral support or through training and development, such as local or international conferences.

When individuals or teams transition out of their roles as international missionaries, they are required to do a formal exit interview with the organization. Individuals are debriefed and sometimes encouraged to seek additional counseling when appropriate. At times, the organization is able to offer transitional housing to returned missionaries. Within a few months of returning home and after the exit interview, missionaries transition “off-staff” and are no longer eligible to receive financial support unless they are transitioning into another staff role.

APGO also features somewhat of a “*revolving door culture*” where missionaries are constantly departing from and returning back to the APGO home base throughout missionary service. So, in a sense, the organization operates as the headquarters for missionaries and their families. Even after missionary service is completed, many former missionaries remain involved with APGO through church membership.

Author Positionality

My personal experience as a former member of APGO serving as an international missionary to China substantively influenced the formation of this project and my interest in the sensemaking process of organizational exit. While I had a positive experience as a

member of the organization, my return to the U.S. was marked with ambiguity, confusion, and despair as I struggled to make sense of my experiences in China and my changing organizational role. Along these lines, I often questioned, “If I am not a missionary, then who am I?” Even though the initial exit phase lasted only a few months, the long-term residual effects were far greater than I realized at the time. Thus, in a way, this research concomitantly serves as a sensemaking experience for myself.

Several scholars have advocated for the richness and appropriateness that comes from a researcher position like mine. For example, Tracy’s (2000) experiences as a cruise ship employee enabled her to intimately understand the unique experiences of emotional labor in the daily lives of employees. By becoming a participant, Tracy gained access to hidden information and behaviors that were not visible to the public. Ebaugh (1988) and Hinderaker (2015) both experienced exits from two religious institutions and proceeded to draw on their own experiences from an insider perspective. Hinderaker (2015) explored Mormon church members’ exits from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons), while Ebaugh (1988) described the process of becoming an ex, drawing on her own experiences as a former Catholic nun. Having been a member of APGO, I have shared in similar experiences with other APGO members and have experienced firsthand the role of an international missionary. While the organization has evolved and changed since I was an active member, there are still ways in which I feel I am similar to and understand membership in the unique culture of APGO. I believe that my previous membership in APGO allowed me to craft meaningful questions that engaged participants since I have experienced the life of a missionary. Nonetheless, my

familiarity with the organization and its members meant guarding against bias and perceptions of other members whose experiences may differ from my own experiences.

My unique positionality also afforded access to an extensive network of relationships through APGO for both referrals and in-person interviews. My own former membership and experience in the organization allowed me to gain permission by gatekeepers in the APGO leadership to recruit former members for research interviews. My aim was to build upon existing knowledge of missionary experiences, instilling confidence in APGO leadership that my research will ultimately support the missionaries that the organization sponsors.

Data Collection

Process and Participants

Human subject approval was received and approved for data collection to commence over a six-week period. In order to participate, the inclusion criteria for participants required volunteer service as an unpaid or stipended APGO missionary outside their country of origin for more than 6 consecutive months. Purposive sampling of former APGO international missionaries yielded a sample of 20 Caucasian participants, ranging in ages from 27 to 55 years old, with an average age of 35 years old. Twelve of the participants were female and six were male. Participants lived overseas an average of 2.5 years, with the shortest term as 6 months and the longest term as 20 years in countries within North America, Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. The average participant had had been back in the U.S. for five years at the time of his/her interview. Also, 17 of the 20 former missionaries attended the same university while

attending the APGO headquarters church and remained active with APGO even after they graduated from college.

Permission to recruit former international missionaries for interviews was gained from gatekeepers within APGO. By utilizing my own social network I was able to contact and recruit former international missionaries from my former APGO membership. Snowball sampling was used for remaining participants by receiving referrals from interviewed participants in the APGO network. Sampling continued until the data reached saturation, with no new emerging data or categories (Tracy, 2013).

Procedures for Obtaining Consent

All recruited participants were emailed a recruitment message with information on the purpose of the research, their role should they choose to volunteer, and a consent form. Once prospective participants agreed to an interview, they were contacted about the details of time and place for face-to face interviews. Interviews took place in a public setting such as a coffee shop or library, and preference was given to participants according to their schedule. All interviews were recorded with participant consent. Phone interviews were conducted with 9 out the 20 participants who lived farther than 20 miles away.

Interviews

Data was collected in the form of semi-structured interviews. The research engaged participants with narrative-style interview questions which are described by Tracy (2013) as “open-ended, relatively unstructured interviews that encourage the participant to tell stories rather than just answer questions. Stories might relate to the

participants, their experiences, or the events they have witnessed” (p. 141). Interview questions allowed the ability to take the stance of “...facilitating, not controlling or managing, the flow of talk” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 182). Participants were asked questions regarding their decision-making process to return home, their experiences during the exit phase, as well as their reflections of their missionary experience. Some examples of interview questions included, “Tell me some stories about what it was like being an international missionary,” “Can you describe some of your experiences with APGO once you returned home?”, “What are some lessons learned that you would share with the organization and other missionaries?”, and “What was your proudest moment?” Audio-recorded interviews yielded 20 hours and 55 minutes of data. The average interview lasted about 63 minutes, with the shortest at 28 minutes and the longest at 89 minutes, which resulted in 339 pages of single-spaced typed interviews.

Data Analysis

Twenty-one hours of audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and stored on Dropbox, a secure storage cloud. All participants were assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. As interviews were conducted, field notes and memos were written to ensure accuracy in making sense of the data and to interpret any observations and notations made during interviews. Field note writing, also labeled as raw records, (Tracy, 2013), was completed during participant interviews. Hand-written raw field notes resulted in 37 pages of single-spaced text for later reflection since many contained detailed observations that allowed the research to reenter the context of the interview. In order to account for self-reflexivity and transparency in the data collection and analysis process, 26 pages of hand-written journal entries recorded my own retrospective

reflections, to describe any reactions, fears, insecurities, or specific reflections made during the research process (Tracy, 2013).

All transcribed data was analyzed qualitatively, using an iterative approach which:

...alternates between both emic, or emergent reading of data, and an etic use of existing models, explanations, and theories. Rather than grounding the meaning solely in the emergent data, the iterative approach encourages reflection upon the active interests, current literature, granted priorities, and various theories the researcher brings to the data. (Tracy, 2013, p. 184)

The iterative approach allows for existing theoretical knowledge while still giving attention to emerging data from the data site.

During data analysis, I immersed myself in the data by reviewing and thoughtfully reflecting over transcribed interviews, which is a reflexive process of “marinating in the data, jotting down reflections and hunches, but reserving judgment” (Tracy, 2013, p. 188). Next, I engaged in first cycle coding (Saldaña, 2012) to break down the data into discrete parts which has also been referred to as primary-cycle coding (Tracy, 2013). Primary first-round coding yielded 153 primary codes, which were collapsed into 143 codes after further examination. A master list of codes, which contained definitions and inclusion criteria for each code, was kept throughout the coding process.

Throughout the data analysis process, the constant comparative method outlined in grounded theory was used to switch back and forth between the data and emerging codes and themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; see also, Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Codes were compared and modified in a spreadsheet to ensure they fit into existing code definitions or that codes were fractured into newer codes. I also engaged in

25 pages of single-spaced analytical memo writing, which Saldaña (2012) stressed is a technique to discover better codes that “are embedded *within* analytic memos” (p., 51).

First-level codes which described the “what” in the scene progressed from simple description to more complex interpretive and analytical second-level coding (Tracy, 2013). Next, second-cycle coding helped identify patterns and codes that were once fractured to be reassembled and grouped together (Saldaña, 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This process is also referred to as axial coding (Charmaz, 2006) and involves “grouping together various codes under one hierarchical ‘umbrella’ category that makes sense” (Tracy, 2013, p. 195). During the axial coding process, three main categories emerged from the data in which the 143 codes were evaluated for fit within the overarching themes. Throughout initial and axial coding, I sought to find exemplars and the “aha” moments that emerged throughout the data collection process. Finally, any discrepancies or outliers in the data were examined to make sure that all data fit within the themes. Exemplars and data clips that best fit the themes were then chosen to present in the findings and interpretation. Multiple rounds of coding were completed until there were no longer any emerging data or new categories that would add value to the data set (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Lastly, throughout the methods section, in-depth descriptions of data collection and analysis processes were outlined in order to establish credibility as a researcher engaging in qualitative inquiry. Undergoing rigorous methods ensures credibility and accuracy in regards to the interpretation of the data and its context. While qualitative research is interpretive and therefore more subjective, measures were taken to ensure that the researcher position was not swayed by excessive bias by implementing member

checks and negative case analysis. That is, three participants confirmed my interpretations to verify that the findings were in fact an accurate portrayal of the international missionary experiences. The richness and rigor in this study gives evidence of my effort toward due diligence.

My aim was to achieve sincerity and transparency in both writing and interpretation of the data in a way that allows readers to acknowledge any potential biases or position that I brought into the research setting. In striving toward transparency, I engaged in self-reflexivity by journaling my thoughts and observations throughout data collection and analysis in order to show any impacts upon the examined research scene. Lastly, credibility was further enhanced by using thick descriptions, which are in-depth illustrated meanings that give details about culturally situation meanings (Geertz, 1973). These types of interpretations and details pertained to tacit knowledge, which are taken for granted meanings within a particular context (Tracy, 2010).

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

Introduction

This chapter offers an interpretation of the research question and participant data. Rather than one type of exit, this study revealed two distinct exit pathways (McAllum, 2014). The pathway metaphor was used to describe the two routes missionaries chose based on the meanings they assigned to their exit. The *finisher pathway* included participants who relinquished their staff membership to pursue paid work and other interests outside of APGO. The *bypasser pathway* included participants who remained staff members in APGO by transitioning into new staff roles. In addition, analysis revealed that a participant's membership experiences and chosen pathway were shaped by four aspects of total institution. The following section begins with a brief overview of identity and sensemaking during socialization processes, followed by a description of all four aspects of total institution. Lastly, a description and analysis of both pathways, supported with data clips, addresses the research question to conclude this chapter.

The uncertainty in reentry for the 20 former international missionaries who participated in this study was intensified by the ambiguity of organizational exit, triggering sensemaking for missionaries who exited the organization. The disparate ways in which participants experienced the institution of missionary life and the subsequent exit are grounded in their distinct identifications and sensemaking processes which are presented in turn.

Identity and Identification Targets

Participants differed in how they made sense of their exit based on their identity constructed in the midst of exit. Throughout missionary service, participants embraced various faith, relational, family, professional, organizational, and cultural identities depending upon their context and social interactions. Structuration theory emphasizes how identity contains rules and resources that anchor individuals in certain beliefs and assumptions by allowing individuals to act on their identity when interacting with others (Scott, Corman, & Cheney, 1998). APGO instilled faith and organizational values and beliefs in its members during socialization processes in such a way that missionaries' identities were tied to APGO. Thus, when missionaries left their staff membership, they essentially left behind a part of their identity with APGO.

Missionaries developed identifications throughout various identities formed before and during missionary service. Identifying with APGO occurred when a participant's identity was integrated into their organizational membership. Highly identified members experienced much more difficulty in leaving their memberships with APGO because their identities were tied to the organization (Ashforth, 2001). Regardless of having identifications with outside targets, leaving staff membership resulted in identity shifts since one's identity had been formed through socialization and membership in a total institution.

Missionaries who remained in an APGO staff role continued to immerse themselves in the APGO total institutional experience, keeping their identities largely intact after missionary service. APGO staff membership reinforced participants' organizational and faith identities, maintained their close-knit network of organizational

relationships, and focused on spiritual values and vocational ministry. On the contrary, participants who forfeited staff membership usually transitioned into roles that no longer centralized faith and vocational ministry as part of their daily work life. Additionally, participants who left their staff membership experienced changes or losses in access to organizational relationships, information, and spiritual experiences. The total institution continued to impact missionaries' identities during and after the exit phase.

Total Institutions

The emergence of two exit routes or pathways, revealed how aspects of membership in a total institution influenced missionary experiences and the post-exit phase. Four institutions – faith, church, team, and organization – defined the total institutional membership experiences of APGO missionaries. Missionary team life was a 24/7 experience, incorporating personal and corporate faith such as prayer, worship, community meals, outreach, ministry, and at times living together. Thus, the institutional experience of APGO missionaries was a totalistic experience, strengthened by identification targets with APGO and their teams. Each of the four institutions reached into a missionary's choices, values, and faith identity in ways that represented the deeply totalistic nature of previously examined contexts such as the Church of Latter Day Saints and high reliability organizations like police and fire departments (Hinderaker, 2015). All four institutional areas were significant in shaping the missionary experience in APGO. For example, the institution of church built upon the institution of faith in the same way that the institutional experience of team built upon the membership experience in APGO. Overall, APGO was central to other institutional experiences and so entwined with church, faith, and team that to exit the organization was

to experience significant loss and/or to change one's identity. Each sub-category of total institution is now discussed in turn.

Faith as Total Institution

Faith served as a foundation for missionary service. Christian faith has many denominations and traditions, meaning that an individual's faith community can influence how totalistic the membership experience is for its members. APGO was considered more totalistic than other faith communities since faith and spiritual practices were embedded within organizational relationships and membership, creating a tight-knit religious community.

Faith continued to impact the lives of all missionaries during and after they exited missionary service. Faith evolved on the mission field as missionaries encountered new cultures and faiths different from their own, which in turn influenced their identity and faith perceptions as they returned to America. For example, Emma and Patrick, after making sense of their faith experiences as missionaries overseas, joined a new faith community that better aligned with their changing spiritual beliefs.

Church as Total Institution

In America, Christian faith is often formed through the tradition of attending church. Church for many American Christians involves gathering for worship, fellowship, and teaching. In 2005, The Barna Research Group reported that, "47% of American adults [said they] attend church in a given weekend, not including a special event such as a wedding or a funeral." Churches socialize members into Christian faith practices through Biblical teaching and observations of Christian holidays and traditions.

For missionaries in this study, the institution of church served to socialize APGO church members into the organization's culture and beliefs. Membership experiences often preceded the decision to undergo missionary training. By the time participants became missionaries, most of them had already been involved with the APGO church for about 5 years and were experienced in short-term mission trips or leading weekly small groups in addition to regular church attendance. APGO church membership socialized members into missionary service through participation in the church community and through instilling a value for missions in its members. Experiencing church community through small groups and faith activities further prepared potential missionaries for team life abroad.

Team as Total Institution

Team life was one of the most impacting aspects in the APGO total institution. Some team life experiences were more totalistic than others depending on the country, culture, and language encountered, as well as leadership and structures in place for ministry and daily life. APGO's Sprint (pseudonym) teams, consisted of an 8-9 month term and were usually highly structured and tended to operate on the "8-5" work day in which team members followed a regimented schedule. More traditional long-term teams in countries within Africa, the Middle East, and Asia were less structured and operated on non-western aspects of time, spending significant time developing relationships with locals where the pace of life determined ministry opportunities.

Overwhelmingly, most missionaries described their team life as a type of 24/7 experience where team members had little privacy, autonomy, or individualization in their missionary service. Team life was infused with daily or weekly team meetings,

worship, prayer, evangelism, and discipleship, all of which fostered a strong sense of community and close relational bonds. As a result of the intensity of relationships and team life experiences, many missionaries described their teams as their family.

Teammates living in close quarters were required to work through conflict since they depended on each another and had few other relationship options outside of their team.

Teammates usually shared similar values and goals and usually had high levels of trust.

Not every participant had a positive team experience, but every participant did have at least one close relationship with another teammate.

Team life created a strong sense of community, so much so that returning missionaries struggled to find or recreate the same type of community they experienced on the mission field. Shifting from communal aspects of team life back to individualistic American culture was a difficult adjustment since teams created highly cohesive environments in which members depended on each other for daily needs. Once back in the U.S., many missionaries missed the deep fellowship and intentionality they experienced with people on their teams.

Organization as Total Institution

To understand the nature of exit, one must understand the institutional experience of APGO missionaries. Understanding the previous three institutional experiences is important since APGO socialized members into faith, church, and team through worship, prayer, discipleship, and community with other Christians. By socializing and recruiting church members into missions through training programs, short-term mission trips, U.S. church-planting teams, and even an annual missions-focused conference, the organization

deeply impacted participants' identities, which were formed around these experiences and beliefs about the importance of becoming a missionary.

The socialization process ultimately encouraged church members to get involved in missions, to support missions financially, or to become a missionary either domestically or internationally. Regardless of previous skills or background, participants were able to take part in missions at various commitment levels, such as short-term trips. In fact, all 20 missionaries went on short-term mission trips prior to committing to their long-term teams. Missionaries were not required to have particular skills or professional degrees to enter the mission field, although some participants did have backgrounds in law, education, medicine, and social work. APGO recruited members based on their willingness to serve and their demonstrated Christian character, rather than their professional experience or skill sets.

Missionary membership in APGO brought together previously discussed aspects of faith, church, and team into one organizational experience. These four institutions created highly identified organizational members who internalized APGO's values and beliefs in all aspects of life. This total institutional experience in APGO had implications for missionaries depending on their chosen exit pathway.

Organizational Exit

All returning missionaries, regardless of their identity construction or chosen exit pathway underwent similar reentry processes, including reverse culture shock, adjustment and transition, and shifting friendship networks, which supports reentry literature (Adler, 1981). Even though all participants underwent similar socialization and organizational experiences, multiple identities and identification targets shaped how meanings and

identity were interpreted. In other words, how a missionary constructed their identity influenced their chosen exit pathway.

Socialization processes throughout the institutional experiences of faith, church, team, and APGO influenced the exit pathways of APGO missionaries and how they made sense of their exit and their organizational identity. While all missionaries physically exited the mission field, some participants remained active with APGO through staff membership and/or church membership, while other participants completely disengaged from APGO. In this next section, both exit pathways serve to answer the research question for how international missionaries communicatively made sense of their organizational exit. Finishers either did not significantly identify with or were nonidentified with vocational ministry and constructed their organizational identities as outsiders. Bypassers identified with vocational ministry and constructed their membership identities as insiders. Both pathways are explored in further detail in the next section, beginning with the finisher pathway.

Finisher Pathway

Missionaries who left APGO staff membership, referred to as finishers, pursued outside interests like paid work. Finishers removed themselves from the APGO institutional experience, which served to reinforce their organizational identity, so departing the missionary role and relinquishing one's staff membership resulted in identity loss. Finishers had to make sense of their changing identities as they transitioned out of APGO into new interests and occupations that no longer included vocational ministry. Many finishers described these transitions as difficult, for instance, Shelley

lived overseas only 15 months but said she has spent the last 10 years trying to make sense of unresolved exit experiences.

Finishers who remained involved with APGO as church members struggled to find their place once they were no longer staff members. Some finishers eventually disengaged from church membership by moving away or becoming members of other churches. Finishers who disengaged from APGO church membership said the process of entering a new church community was challenging since they missed the membership experiences they had in APGO.

Nonidentification with vocational ministry. Thirteen of 20 participants discontinued their APGO staff membership. Six of the 13 finishers disengaged from their staff roles but remained active in their APGO church membership, while the remaining 7 finishers disengaged from both their staff roles and their church membership. Additionally, of the 6 finishers who disengaged from staff membership, two of these members reentered domestic church-planting roles within a year of exiting the mission field but then disengaged again from staff membership within two years.

All finishers constructed their identities around targets other than vocational ministry and primarily left staff membership to pursue interests in education, paid work, marriage, and family roles. Whether returning to a previous career or taking on new roles such as motherhood, participant's identities were constructed around interests outside of vocational ministry. Participants representing the finisher pathway did not cease to value faith and service once they were no longer missionaries. Rather, finishers' transitions from vocational ministry into new interests such as paid work triggered sensemaking to develop new meanings around faith and service.

Several finishers struggled with shifts from full-time ministry into interests in paid work and motherhood. APGO socialized members into the value of ministry as a vocation, emphasizing spiritual values and practices such as time devoted to Bible reading, prayer and worship, evangelism, and discipleship. Since the APGO staff role largely emphasized one's faith identity as central to APGO membership, leaving the staff role for paid work meant learning how to translate one's faith identity from vocational ministry into another role or career that did not include full-time ministry. Faith and ministry were central to APGO staff roles, but careers outside of APGO typically did not emphasize religious values and practices as central to one's job. Thus, many finishers who transitioned into paid jobs mentioned that they were not accustomed to work environments where other employees did not share their same values and faith beliefs and where spirituality was not the central focus of their work.

Shifting the meaning of the faith identity from vocational ministry into new roles like motherhood was challenging for finishers like Hannah, who described a time of crisis as she wrestled with feeling like a failure in her relationship with God. As a single woman on the mission field, Hannah spent an average of two to three hours daily in prayer, worship, and Bible study. Once back in the U.S. as a married, stay-at-home mom, Hannah struggled to feel valuable to God when she lacked the same amount of time focused on these spiritual disciplines. Hannah described the time it took her to make sense of the change in her faith identity:

I think it took me almost five years after coming back from the Middle East to maybe get in a place where I felt good again about my relationship with God and not because it was two to three hours again with God, I mean I did have a kid, but just okay with the fact that things change. I think that if someone could have pastored me, it would have been in that shift and change. So, my relationship with God was probably the biggest transition and the hard thing.

Similarly, Shelley, now a married stay-at-home mother, described how much time vocational ministry gave her to spend with God, “I just had hours of nothing to do in North Africa, and those were some of the sweetest times that I had with the Lord and I’ll never have that kind of time again.” Transitioning from vocational ministry into other roles and interests outside of vocational ministry significantly decreased the amount of time finishers could devote to personal faith practices, which resulted in participants shaping new meanings around faith practices.

Despite the departure from vocational ministry, participants continued to make sense of their purpose and identities in spiritual terms, using the term *calling* to illustrate that their careers and jobs were just as valuable as their former roles in vocational ministry. Participants felt called to enter paid work or other roles in the same way they felt called to become missionaries. However, a calling away from vocational ministry did not detract from their value for faith and service. Ben’s calling to the business field was a vehicle for him to make a positive difference in other people’s lives while pursuing something he loved. Ben’s wife, Claire, described Ben’s work as a calling to serve people, “We are still very open to short-term trips or supporting people overseas and stuff like that, but I will say that in this season, we feel called to where we are right now, to work and to cultivate faithfulness in Ben’s work.”

Likewise, Jenny felt called to serve people through a career in medicine. When Jenny’s service term ended, she knew she would immediately disengage from her APGO staff membership, saying, “I don’t think I’ve ever wanted to be on staff here because I feel called to work in my field, so that was never even something I considered. I knew as soon as I got back that I would start working in medicine somewhere.” Finishers viewed

their jobs and careers as new opportunities for service even if not in vocational ministry. Participants who forfeited their staff roles still strongly identified with APGO, but because they constructed their identities around interests such as a career, they were able to disengage from their staff roles. Mariah considered remaining in a staff role at one time, but she ultimately felt called to work in her former occupation as a social worker. Now a stay-at-home mother, Mariah described how her life has changed, stating, “God has us on such a different track right now. He’s definitely given us a new perspective of what ministry looks like and has called us to minister in a different field.” As Mariah articulated, a “different field” meant that former staff members were able to make sense of their careers and new roles as ways to engage their faith in meaningful and valuable ways, even if their new roles were not in vocational ministry.

Finishers needed time to make sense of the changes and shifts in their identity as they transitioned into new roles and environments. Shifting the meanings of faith and service was more difficult since these meanings were anchored in vocational ministry values and beliefs with APGO. As members left their staff roles, they felt uncertain about how to enact their faith and identity in new roles and environments apart from APGO and vocational ministry. APGO’s central focus and value for vocational ministry left some missionaries feeling they were no longer valuable if they were not engaged in vocational service. Hannah referred to other finishers like herself who felt less valuable once they were no longer in vocational ministry:

They are trying to do this thing that God has called them to do now, and it definitely doesn’t feel as important or as valued. I know people that went as missionaries in their 20’s and are now confused in their 30’s when they are at home and working and trying to pay the bills and raise kids cause how does that relate?

Hannah who felt valuable to APGO as a missionary struggled to feel the same value when she became a wife, mother, and entrepreneur, saying, “It probably took us a couple of years to finally kind of be fine with being here and just feeling like we really have purpose here and this is God’s best – you know?”

Several finishers became more aware of their identifications with a previous career or educational background while living overseas, prompting them to exit the mission field for another role. The awareness of interests outside of APGO sometimes grew out of finishers’ growing dissatisfaction with APGO’s church planting movement (CPM) strategy. Patrick and Emma, a married couple, realized they were misfits for the CPM strategy, and their desire for more meaningful work led them to consider roles that felt more authentic. Patrick recounted, “I think I was confronted with the fact that I didn’t really want to be doing what I was expected to do, which was face-to-face, kind of full gospel, street evangelism.” Prior to mission service, Patrick had given up an education in fine arts to pursue being a missionary, but his lack of enthusiasm for the CPM strategy rekindled his desire to finish his education. Patrick and Emma’s need for more meaningful work ultimately led them to leave their staff memberships for what they felt was more authentic work.

Interests also developed while living overseas, which were not always realized prior to missionary service. After more than five years of living in the Middle East, Ben discovered a growing passion in business, declaring, “I fell in love with numbers, and I love companies, and I’m really excited about great businesses and saw the opportunity to take care of a lot of different people in the process.” Ben’s interests had shifted because of his missionary experiences. Likewise, Becky also discovered her passion for a career

in social work while working with the poor in Asia. Becky felt that CPM strategy only addressed the spiritual needs of people, while ignoring their physical, social, and emotional needs. By realizing her passion to empower families and children, she realized she needed to acquire more practical skills, so she returned to the U.S. to pursue a career in social work:

I think the major way I changed the views of myself was realizing what I was passionate about. I became really interested in how trauma affects children and families. I went with an anti-sex trafficking passion and then left with a ‘kids are best raised in families and what can we do to keep kids in families?’ So, I think that was a major shift for me and what I was passionate about and what I’m now in my job. I found out what I’m passionate about and the skills that I wanted to build.”

For finishers who transitioned out of their APGO staff roles and into other interests, missionary service was transformed to mean much more than vocational ministry. Finishers shifted the meaning of mission work to fit within their own unique areas of interest. For example, when finishers were asked if they would consider becoming international missionaries in the future, all of them emphasized their calling to work within their current career or role. Finishers who said they would consider going back overseas said they would consider going again if they were able to use their current profession or educational interest, such as Tamara who said, “I think I want to pursue my masters in marriage and family therapy and use my expertise in child development to work with children overseas.”

Becky said she and her husband would consider missions again but specified, “I can see us using the different skills that we have in an international capacity, but I see us going through an international organization, like an NGO.” Jenny also believed that she and her husband would live overseas again but clarified that she would want to work

within her medical profession. Thus, finishers constructed the meaning of missionary service around their own particular occupation or role as a way to serve others and make a difference.

Overall, finishers identified with targets that no longer included vocational ministry. Finishers said they would not return to the mission field unless they could use their passions and skills. Rather than compartmentalize faith and service to vocational ministry, finishers transformed the meaning of faith to fit into their callings and identifications outside of vocational ministry. Finishers' occupations and interests became vehicles for impacting people through faith and service in ways that felt authentic to each participant.

Outsiders. Finishers left their staff membership because they identified with targets that no longer included vocational ministry. Employees who quit a paid job usually end their involvement with their former employer; however, finishers who left their APGO staff role did not necessarily disengage from other types of APGO membership and service. Finishers communicatively made sense of their identities as outsiders even though many of them were still involved in APGO through their church membership. Relinquishing staff membership created ambiguity and uncertainty as finishers tried to make sense of their perceived value and changing roles within APGO.

The outsider experience was constructed through changes in membership status from staff member to church member. As members transitioned out of their staff roles, they remained involved in APGO through attending church and perhaps other forms of volunteer service such as leading a small group. Even after the initial reentry phase, finishers felt disconnected, forgotten, and isolated from APGO and other staff members

even though they were still APGO church members. Participants like Mariah remembered this transition, saying, “I think it took about four years before I started to feel somewhat normal. I still felt kind of just forgotten about by the organization and that was difficult, and felt very isolating.”

Staff members in APGO were perceived as invested organizational members who were committed to APGO goals and values much more than the average church member. For many finishers, transitioning out of a highly committed staff role to a less committed church membership role was dissatisfying. For the most part, APGO did not invest as many resources into church members as they did into training and equipping missionaries and other staff members. Hannah felt that APGO did not invest in her spiritual needs as a church member in comparison to what APGO provided spiritually for staff members:

This group that helps take you really deep with God all the time, to like having to do it on your own because all the sudden you don't have that. Sunday morning worship is great, but the teaching isn't taking you so deep, and you aren't getting the personal experiences you want. I was like, ‘Oh, what's my relationship with God outside of having all these things?’ So, it was definitely way different, and it was not always great.

Hannah's comments reveal the differences that staff and non-staff experienced in their membership experiences. Hannah's staff membership once provided her with opportunities to meet social, spiritual, and emotional needs, but once she transitioned into church membership, she struggled to meet those same needs.

Another aspect of the outsider identity was created because of finishers' changing access to the organization. Receiving ongoing updates and communication was normal for staff members. In fact, a highlight of many missionaries' reentry phase was being able to attend APGO staff meetings in the headquarters office. Once finishers forfeited their staff role, they lost access to staff meetings or ongoing updates regarding

organizational news. Several finishers mentioned they wished they could have continued to attend staff meetings, not only to receive updates but also to connect with other staff members. Weekly staff meetings enabled staff to connect with each other, to receive news about the organization, and to receive spiritual and emotional support through extensive worship and prayer ministry. As Hannah described, “Staff meetings were these amazing times of worship where everyone is encouraging you. I also think it definitely forms this thing with the staff and then this thing that you don’t have.” The inability to attend staff meetings emphasized the clear boundary between staff members and finishers as Hannah further articulated:

They allowed you to come to staff meetings for like a few months. But it was like, you are at church and you aren’t on staff. Staff people are on staff and non-staff people aren’t on staff, and all the sudden the people that I thought had been really good relationships and were a really good support weren’t. They were all on staff and I had to just go get a job. So, it’s like the second you are off staff, you are off!

Alicia also expressed how staff meetings helped her feel more a part of APGO, saying, “I loved being a part of the APGO family and team, and I think that being in staff meetings was a really cool part of the experience, just seeing people coming back from places and sharing what was going on.” Alicia, Kim, and Jenny all admitted that they still struggled with feeling like they were missing out, even though they felt called to their careers, as Alicia reflected:

I feel like God has really led me to this job and it’s hard, but I don’t question, ‘Is this where I’m supposed to be?’ I just feel like he brought me back for this job and to be involved with APGO. I want to still be involved, and I feel a little sad that I’m on the fringe, that I’m playing a different role, but it is okay.

The change in commitment level from staff member to church member left many finishers feeling uncertain. For Jenny, the immediate change in involvement was a drastic shift. Jenny reflected on her first couple of years outside of APGO:

I think for me, having been a part of the organization and having come back, it feels like, I miss knowing what's all going on, or feeling like I'm a part. I wasn't really involved with anything at APGO. I felt very disconnected; I didn't know what was going on, what they were doing. You go from being really connected and getting all the updates and knowing what's happening around the world and then you are like, I don't have a clue, I don't know what anyone is doing anywhere in the world.

Overall, the lack of access to APGO through staff meetings and organizational information, compounded by finishers' own diminished involvement, further shaped the outsider identity. Working in jobs and roles outside of APGO significantly decreased the amount of availability finishers had in their schedules to be involved with APGO, relegating involvement to church service and small group attendance in most cases. In comparison, staff members not only attended church services, but also worked in the APGO office, interacting with the organization on a daily basis.

Finishers also felt less a part of the organization because of changes in relationships with other APGO staff members. Finishers still interacted with APGO staff, but felt these relationships grew distant over time, perhaps because finishers and staff members spent less time together and had less in common. Hannah recalled an awkward encounter with an APGO staff member while at church:

There was a staff member who I'm somewhat close to and she's super super super involved. I saw her in the hall and she came up to me and like gave me this huge hug, 'Hannah, it's so good to see you!' But it was so unusual. The truth is that I see her in passing at least every other week, for the past *seven* years. I mean, you know what I'm saying. She doesn't ever act like that. I mean she'll say hi, but so much of it reminded me of like, this is actually what it was like when I was on staff or in this circle.

Hannah's interactions with staff members communicated to her organizational relationships with other staff had changed. Karen also reminisced about losing close friendships as she transitioned out of her staff role to be a stay-at-home mother:

We had been gone four years and all of our friends were kind of like in upper-level leadership in APGO so they didn't have much space in their lives. I mean honestly, it was lonely. It's like the people that you think will be around for life. They were dear to my heart, but we never picked up the friendship again.

The focus and pace of life differed between staff members and non-staff members which slowly distanced the two groups, making finishers feel more like outsiders as they felt their relationships with staff members change over time. Like Karen, Emma expressed sadness in her attempt to maintain friendships with APGO staff members, saying, "It's been hard and sad, but at the same time, I'm not like breaking my back to do anything different about it. They are not a part of our everyday lives anymore and that is part sad but it's partly okay." As finishers became more involved with their jobs and other roles, they were less involved with APGO, and therefore less visible. Over time, finishers felt more and more like outsiders because they spent less time with the organization and had less in common to other staff members than they had prior to leaving their staff roles.

Lastly, physically moving away and disengaging from APGO church membership amplified the outsider identity. Physically living outside of the APGO "bubble" felt hard at times for finishers like Ben and Claire who moved to a new city for Ben to pursue a career in business. Ben recognized that choosing to move away created a natural distance between him and APGO:

I think we still wish that we were insiders and that we could offer something. I think we've tried to stay in touch, perhaps we could have done a little bit more. I

feel that physically we are pretty separated since we are here, but in this season, we are kind of pursuing slightly different goals.

Finishers who disengaged from APGO church membership found it difficult to establish themselves in a new church community once they realized how much they missed the close relationships they built in APGO. Finishers wanted to start fresh in new communities but mentioned inevitably comparing their new communities to APGO. Ben and Claire acknowledged their search to find another church like APGO was impossible, as Ben recalled:

The hardest thing about leaving APGO or coming back to the states and not being in the headquarters city and being in a different location is trying to find another place where we are members and where we do have community. I try to tell people here no matter how hard we try, we can't find what we are looking for. You know we are trying to find another church here that we can fit in with and we have that same sense of community and living life together and purpose and mission and that's hard to find, quite frankly.

One of the hardest parts of leaving the headquarters church was leaving behind deep relationships formed throughout APGO membership. Alicia, who moved to a new city to be closer to her family, ended up moving back to the APGO headquarters church because she realized how much she missed APGO's faith community:

I was just floundering, I moved to another city to be near my family but I didn't have community there. I hadn't lived there since right after college, so it was a couple of years later and I still didn't have community, so I ended up moving back.

Alicia's situation shows the power of the institution to continue to influence identity and sensemaking even after the initial exit from membership. Alicia felt she could not find a replacement for APGO and so returned, demonstrating that she was still dependent on the organization. Patrick also described the difficult experience of uprooting his family from the APGO community to pursue his education:

It was incredibly hard, it was unbelievable. I feel a little ridiculous with how hard it was. I mean literally I hyperventilated, I mean I did, I had a panic attack trying to make the decision and we were under so much other stress too, and I really did not want to leave, but we did. We just relied on our community at APGO for our identity, and I think we really identified with people there, and we had for over a decade you know.

Patrick and his wife, Claire, eventually joined a new faith community, but they still missed the types of relationships they formed at APGO. They tried to maintain contact with friends and former teammates but acknowledged how difficult this was once they were no longer church members.

To review, forfeiting the APGO staff role was difficult because finishers lacked the same level of access they once had as staff members to organizational relationships, information, and resources. The transition from staff member to church member was dissatisfying and difficult because of the absence of the APGO total institutional experience. Ultimately, finishers constructed their identities as outsiders through their changing organizational status and identities. On the contrary, participants who bypassed their exit continued to experience aspects of the APGO institution that were embedded within the staff membership, which is now discussed below.

Bypass Pathway

The second group of missionaries, referred to as bypassers, exited the mission field, but did not exit staff membership. Bypassers were highly identified with APGO and/or vocational ministry. Bypassers also constructed their membership identities as *insiders*, describing APGO as a family of close-knit relationships. Since bypassers remained in a familiar environment, they did not experience significant changes in their identities in the exit phase. Overall, the staff role gave bypassers the opportunity to

continue their committed service to APGO in vocational ministry, which further strengthened their identification with APGO.

Vocational ministry. Participants who followed the bypasser pathway identified with APGO and vocational ministry rather than outside targets such as an occupation. During membership in APGO, a member's faith and organizational identities were largely shaped through socialization into vocational ministry. Essentially, identifying with APGO meant identifying with vocational ministry. Remaining in an APGO staff role ensured bypassers the opportunity to continue vocational ministry service to APGO and to fulfill God's calling on their lives.

Some bypassers realized more about their interests and passions because they struggled with the meaning of work through CPM strategy. Andrew, Robin, and Olivia, who served on Sprint teams, did not feel suited to street evangelism and the church-planting methodology used by the organization. These bypassers actively pursued vocational ministry roles that were a better fit. For instance, Andrew's experiences with CPM strategy alerted him to the fact that his strengths were in administration and task-related roles as he mentioned, "I'm not the kind of person who is super prone to go out and talk to strangers about Jesus, that's not really my thing to be honest." Andrew transitioned into an APGO administrative staff role that he said used his skill set and was more satisfying. Robin described CPM as a "one size fits all" strategy that did not allow her or other missionaries to pursue their individual interests and talents:

There wasn't a whole lot of room to be like, 'Well this person is interested in working with orphans, is there an orphanage around here?', or 'This person is really gifted in discipleship, does she really need to go out and share the gospel today or can she just get involved in that women's group?'

Robin eventually joined another international mission team that incorporated her passion for social justice into its church-planting strategy.

Much like finishers, bypassers developed interests and passions during their missionary service. However, the difference in the two pathways is that bypassers looked for ways to pursue their interests and passions within APGO organizational roles. For example, Martin served as a team leader in Asia and said that during his 20 years of missionary service, he realized more about his unique interests and found a new APGO staff role that allowed him to exit the mission field. Martin described his new role as a better fit:

It was just a perfect fit. It just seemed to fit me. Actually it seemed to fit me better than being a church planter. I just think that with my gift set, it probably wasn't the best fit for me to be the bottom line church planting leader trying to do church planting.

Martin felt his missionary experiences helped them realize he should focus on other vocational ministry roles that better utilized his strengths and skill set. Likewise, Owen said he discovered that he enjoyed training missionaries better than being one, "I've mentioned that my giftings are definitely more for mobilizing people in the states. I mean I think that we were good missionaries, but I wasn't always that effective as far as strategy in the overseas context."

Bypassers described how missionary membership increased their commitment and appreciation for APGO. Dan recounted how God affirmed his organizational commitment to APGO, "I felt God on my life back in 2010 that I was going to be with the APGO movement for the rest of my life, so I knew that was a guiding word." In addition, Owen, an organizational leader since the 1990's, felt highly identified with APGO after years of membership experiences and expressed his loyalty to APGO:

APGO is our family, it's our tribe, and we are just with APGO for the rest of our lives. The relationships, our philosophy on work and job is to do it with our relationships and people of the same values, and we love it. We've been with APGO all these years, and I think we always will be. It's in our heart to see churches planted again and again and again, all over the world.

Overall, bypassers made sense of their organizational exit as a chance to take up roles that better suited their individual interests and strengths. Bypassers highly identified with APGO, but since vocational ministry was central to their socialization and membership experiences, bypassers identities were constructed around vocational ministry roles in the absence of outside identification targets.

Insider. Organizational and faith identities were reinforced daily in APGO membership, which contrasted with finishers' experiences in paid work environments. To some extent, bypassers experienced a "soft landing" in returning from the mission field because they were surrounded by many other APGO staff who had either previously lived overseas or had participated in short-term missions and therefore understood the challenges bypassers faced in adjusting back to life in the U.S. Insider membership included a vast network of like-minded people with similar values and beliefs who provided a safe haven for reentry, where Christian beliefs and faith were integrated into the daily work environment. With primary relationships embedded within the organization, bypassers described the organization as their family.

The APGO staff culture infused Christian values and practices into work roles so that faith was incorporated into all aspects of organizational membership. Bypassers experienced close relationships with other staff members and felt that APGO as an organization felt like their family. Staff meetings were not only used for work purposes, but also to facilitate corporate worship and prayer ministry. Staff meetings served to

further socialize members into organization membership, communicating updates and stories from within APGO.

In returning from the mission field, several bypassers described the buy-in they felt with APGO because they had served as an international missionary. Bypass missionaries made sense of the increased respect and trust they felt from APGO as communication of their insider status. Olivia felt she was a more respected and legitimate organizational member by proving herself as a missionary:

It's like being a part of something bigger than you and there a ton of people connected to the network. It's definitely changed because I'm now a part of it, like I've now 'laid my life down' like other people have. There is a sense of respect for people who go overseas and do something like that because it's hard and you are knitted in with a family.

Bypassers also noticed clear differences in how they were received by other organizational members after coming home from missionary service. The organization communicated to bypass members that they were valuable and important, arguably more than the average church member. Dan who took on a leadership staff role when he returned home said:

I wouldn't say that anybody was like, 'you've been on the field, so now you have more respect or whatever.' But, I think that I probably matured on the field, so I was received as more mature, because I was more mature."

Dan acknowledged that the mission field did serve to change him in positive ways, which then were noticed by other members of the organization, allowing him to take on more responsibility in a leadership role. Like Dan, Andrew also felt his missionary service increased his status in the organization:

I think honestly because I did the Sprint program and served there, I think it gave me a lot of trust with people. APGO is a pretty relational organization and so they look a lot for character, not so much skills and pedigree, but 'can you stick it out? Can you do what you are supposed to do and have a good attitude?' I stuck it

out and was willing to do it. I sensed an added level of trust that took me beyond the normal level. I really felt people trusted me more.

Along with having more trust and respect, Olivia felt that her commitment to mission service gave her greater buy-in and stronger identification with the APGO family as she described:

I was engrained into this family on a deeper level, because you go through a lot of challenges that a lot of people are going through and you are like, I've been there, I've felt like, and you also get to be a part of the joys. Its deeper family, I came back feeling like I was a family. You get the heart of the "this is why we do what we do". I do feel more of an ownership with what I'm partnering with, a buy-in with APGO, they are legit.

While all missionaries to some extent proved themselves on the mission field, bypassers were the ones who remained in the organization, communicating to APGO that they were committed members. Also, bypassers did not express the same difficulty and loss in their membership identities as finishers. One explanation for this difference is that bypassers' organizational identities were preserved within their new staff roles, resulting in few changes in their membership status, along with less uncertainty and need for sensemaking.

Chapter Summary

In closing, participants made sense of their exit by following two exit pathways during the APGO organizational exit. The first pathway included finishers who identified with targets such as an occupation, therefore leaving their staff roles to pursue these unique interests. Finishers constructed their changing organizational identities as outsiders, struggling to make sense of their new role as church members or former members of APGO. Over time, finishers shifted the meaning of faith from vocational ministry into new contexts that no longer included vocational ministry. Finishers further

communicatively made sense of their exit identity as outsiders. Overall, finishers experienced ongoing sensemaking as they tried to move on in the absence of the APGO total institution.

Participants who followed the bypasser pathway made sense of their organizational exit as a chance to remain with APGO in vocational ministry. Since bypassers lacked identifications outside of APGO, they considered ways to invest their interests and talents into new vocational ministry roles. Bypassers communicatively made sense of their identities as insiders, describing an increase in trust and respect from APGO. Lastly, bypassers remained immersed in the APGO total institution which reinforced their organizational and faith identities.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

This study offers insight into the unique experiences of international missionary service and volunteer memberships, as well as new areas of exploration within IVS research. The research question sought to explore how missionaries communicatively made sense of organizational exit. Results indicated that while missionaries had similar organizational experiences, two pathways emerged for how missionaries experienced the exit phase based in identity construction and sensemaking. This study draws attention to the implications for sensemaking and identity in aspects of missionary membership during organizational exit. Specifically, organizations with ambiguous membership contracts create further uncertainty for members who exit a limited or fixed-term membership. Further, exiting membership in a total institution is difficult since members' identities are closely tied to their memberships. Considering these types of membership complexities, this study attempts to connect missionaries to the greater context of IVS scholarship by suggesting new exit models that consider the fluidity and complexity in missionary membership. In addition, findings from this study offer suggestions for organizations that support and manage long-term international volunteers. Lastly, this chapter concludes with this study's limitations and future research possibilities.

Missionary Memberships and Exit

This study revealed two distinct pathways for how missionaries communicatively made sense of their identities. Beyond the two pathways, this study highlights that the missionary exit may be a series of exits. Missionaries exited the international missionary role, but they did not completely exit the missionary identity. Also, transitioning out of the missionary role was a series of exits for some participants, who may have initially disengaged from vocational ministry and staff membership, but after time, they also disengaged from their APGO church membership. Additionally, some participants disengaged from APGO membership but did not fully exit their Christian faith or their value for church membership in a new faith community.

Exiting the missionary role did not prohibit participants from enacting faith identities and values formed in missionary service. Both bypassers and finishers remained active in church membership and in new roles in domestic volunteer service. Participants also enacted the missionary identity through participation in short-term mission trips, U.S. church-planting teams, and in financially supporting other missionaries. Overall, former missionaries continued to internalize the values and beliefs formed during missionary service, even if these values took on new meanings in other roles or paid work.

In addition to the complexities of exit, the missionary role itself was complex. Missionaries could end their international service at any time regardless of their agreed-upon term. Some missionaries planned to serve many years or even their entire lives as an international missionary but returned home early due to unforeseen circumstances, such as a family crisis or health issue that prevented them from remaining on the mission

field. Other missionaries renegotiated their terms of service for reasons they had not originally planned, such as engagement, marriage, or an educational opportunity. The various scenarios surrounding international missionary service highlight the unknowns of being a missionary. Missionaries tried to plan ahead, but they had no guarantees that they would stay on the mission field for the entirety of their service terms. Inevitably, unexpected situations led many missionaries to return home before their terms ended, creating fluidity in the missionary role and their organizational membership. The uncertainty in missionary service undoubtedly had implications on organizational exit, since missionaries often entered the exit phase prematurely.

Ambiguity in the missionary role and in the missionary exit implies the need for missionaries to engage in sensemaking when exiting the mission field. While paid employees experience clear exits (Jablin, 2001), missionaries' exits were not always a clear point in time, with some exits lasting many months or longer depending on the circumstances of a missionary's return home. This study shows that while missionaries do exit the mission field, they may not fully exit aspects of the missionary identity. Former missionaries continued to enact the missionary identity whether they remained in APGO staff memberships or transitioned out of them. Regardless of the exit pathway, organizational exit was a time of uncertainty, marked by fluidity and sensemaking as former missionaries made sense of their identities apart from the missionary role.

Identification and Sensemaking in Limited-Term Memberships

This study supports findings in socialization literature on identification and disidentification. Scholars such as Davis and Myers (2012), Ashforth (2001), and Ebaugh (1988) all found that the more members identified with an organization, the more

difficult it was for them to exit their roles. Identification can be a positive socialization process to align members with organizational beliefs and values. Benefits of identification for members can be seen in the trust and respect that APGO demonstrated toward bypassers who retained their staff memberships. On the other hand, identification can be costly for individuals like finishers who experienced identity loss after exiting their organizational staff memberships (Ashforth, 2001).

In planned exits, individuals may struggle to disidentify with organizations in which they are highly identified. Davis and Myer's (2012) research on planned exits demonstrated that some exits are the direct result of limited or fixed-term memberships, in which members exit at the completion of a term that includes a start and end date. APGO missionaries agreed to a fixed-term that included a planned departure to and from the mission field. As missionaries approached their exit date to return home, they often felt reluctant in anticipating transitions out of their member role (Davis & Myers, 2012; Lafarge & Nurick, 1993).

Whether knowingly or unknowingly, APGO created mixed messages around missionary service through the establishment of fixed terms. These fixed terms of service included short-term (1-3 weeks), Sprint (8-9 months), and long-term (3 years or more) options based on the varying commitment level of potential missionaries. The Sprint program was introduced as a type of bridge program between the short-term and long-term options, giving potential missionaries more of a "gap year" experience before starting a career or family. In a sense, the Sprint program offered members a chance to "get their feet wet" without having to make a significant commitment to missionary service.

The implementation and expectation of term membership began with the long-term missionary application and training process. Asking potential missionaries, “Are you willing to commit to three years on the mission field?” created an expectation that long-term service was considered three years. For APGO, the term policy was a retention strategy, but this policy actually undermined the organization’s mission to construct missionary service as a vocation or type of career rather than temporary service. Over time, missionaries constructed missionary service around the expectation of the fixed-term commitment, which made missionary service temporary. Many missionaries returned home after only serving one mission term but did not choose to continue in missionary service. The one-time missionary service term indicated many members considered missionary service as temporary. Even though term membership ultimately created a mixed message from the organization, fixed terms greatly reduced uncertainty for expectations in missionary service both for individuals and APGO. Of course, missionaries still continued to return home prematurely, but with the expectation of serving a three-year commitment, missionaries were more likely to remain overseas past the one-to-two year mark. Term membership also benefited individuals who were less likely to commit to vocational or career missionary service but were willing to commit to temporary missionary service.

Overall, missionaries constructed the meaning of missionary service around temporary or fixed-term memberships. APGO’s retention efforts to keep missionaries on the field as career missionaries were limited when they introduced term memberships, even though fixed terms may actually have increased the number of new missionaries who were willing to commit to temporary service over a more permanent option.

Additionally, the fixed term did not prevent missionaries from leaving the mission field prematurely since unforeseen circumstances continued to interrupt or end international service. Ironically, while term membership created more certainty for the organization and individual missionaries in the planning stages of international service, fixed terms actually created more uncertainty during the exit phase when missionaries had to interpret an ambiguous membership contract.

Competing Discourses in Missionary Membership

APGO also created competing discourses for missionary service. On one hand, APGO constructed the missionary role as a type of spiritual service involving vocational ministry where members responded to God's call to go to the mission field. However, through organizational language and structure, APGO also constructed the missionary role as pseudo-employment. APGO's structure and policies closely resembled a paid work environment. By referring to its missionaries as staff members and to their stipends as payroll, APGO professionalized the missionary role, making it resemble paid work commitments (see Ganesh & McAllum, 2011). Missionaries were held highly accountable to the organization and missionary team leaders through compliance with policies and procedures, completion of mandatory training schools, and attendance of international conferences, to name a few. In many ways, APGO and its missionaries constructed missionary service as a professional career. Other scholars have discussed the implications of the professionalization or marketization of volunteer membership. Ganesh and McAllum (2011) drew attention to problematic outcomes of positioning volunteering and professionalism as binaries. This positioning indicated that volunteering was an unprofessional, low-status alternative to professional work. In

addition, McNamee and Peterson's (2014) research on volunteers indicated dialectical tensions in volunteer-manager communication, which led volunteers to assign different meanings around volunteer membership. Previous research suggests that volunteer managers play an important role in helping individuals assign meaning to their volunteer memberships through organizational discourse.

Even though APGO constructed the missionary role as pseudo-employment, missionaries still lacked the clear membership contract that employees have in paid work. APGO's ambiguous membership contract compounded the uncertainty and confusion that some missionaries felt as they tried to make sense of their exit experiences. In light of fixed-term memberships mentioned previously, the next section expands upon how members made sense of an ambiguous membership contract.

Sensemaking in Ambiguous Membership Contracts

This study contributes to the understanding that membership contracts are not limited to paid work but can extend to long-term international volunteer contexts. The APGO membership contract was ambiguous, creating the need for returning missionaries to interpret the terms of their membership contracts. In paid work, employees either voluntarily exit by terminating their work contract (i.e., leaving for another job), or they involuntarily exit (i.e., get fired) when the organization ends the work contract (Jablin, 2001). In other words, employment-based membership contracts are considered unending unless either the employee or the organization breaks the employment contract.

In the midst of uncertainty, missionaries were left to make sense of their memberships since the organization did not communicate the terms. Much like the development of two exit pathways, uncertainty in membership led bypassers and finishers

to make sense of the membership contract differently. Even though bypassers agreed to fixed-term membership service, their strong identification with APGO led them to interpret their membership contract as unending. Since finishers constructed missionary membership as a limited-term, the end of missionary service signaled the opportunity for finishers to move into other roles.

Davis & Myers' (2012) study indicated that in limited or fixed-term memberships, members were expected to exit when their terms expired. Technically, finishers complied with the concept of a fixed term when they forfeited their memberships at the end of missionary service. Along these lines, bypassers violated the concept of fixed-term membership when they retained their staff memberships and remained in the organization. Neither approval nor disapproval for retaining or forfeiting membership was directly communicated by APGO, yet APGO's actions favored and affirmed bypassers who chose to remain in their staff roles.

Ironically, even though finishers complied with the expectations of limited-term memberships, finishers perceived they were less valuable after missionary service. In comparison, bypassers noticed increases in respect and trust as they took on new staff roles in the organization. Finishers complied with the concept of fixed-term membership and forfeited their staff memberships. However, because APGO demonstrated more value and affirmation for bypassers who chose to continue as staff members, finishers could have interpreted APGO's lack of communication as a lack of approval for their choice to leave staff membership.

Beyond ambiguous membership contracts, this study contributes to Weick's (2005) previous study, which found that sensemaking has implications for an individual's

identity. Sensemaking processes highlight the consequentiality of identity, especially when individuals exit roles that are central to their identity. The way in which individuals assigned meanings to the uncertainty during the APGO exit phase had future consequences for the construction of their identity. Most finishers continued to experience confusion regarding their exit experiences years after their initial exits, struggling to bring closure to unresolved experiences. Without the ability to reframe or assign positive meanings around former memberships, finishers continued to experience confusion in their perceived organizational value. In these cases, confusion in the exit actually overshadowed the value of their former missionary service.

APGO played a role in how missionaries constructed their membership contracts based on their organizational structure and expectations of missionary service as a vocation or as a fixed-term commitment. The actions of APGO contributed to missionaries constructing different views of the membership contract. This may have been intentional by some leaders and unintentional by others; either way, ambiguous membership contracts led to more confusion during the exit phase.

Exiting Membership in a Total Institution

The APGO total institution surpassed most paid work memberships in that the missionary role resembled a vocation, imparting a set of values and beliefs to missionaries rather than a set of job-related skills (Hinderaker, 2015). Missionaries incorporated and internalized APGO's values and faith practices into all aspects of their lives. Thus, missionaries became highly identified members of APGO as they aligned themselves with organizational beliefs and values regarding faith and missionary service.

As previously stated, missionaries exited the mission field but did not exit aspects of the missionary identity developed during their APGO membership. Since APGO missionary life operated as a total institution, exiting the mission field essentially meant exiting an institutional experience. Bypassers avoided exiting the APGO total institution, preserving aspects of faith, church, team, and organization by continuing their staff membership in new APGO roles. Staff membership operated within the APGO total institution, creating opportunities for bypassers to daily reinforce their organizational identity. Staff membership also engaged staff members in vocational ministry, offering spiritual and faith experiences similar to missionary service. On the other hand, finishers experienced significant shifts in all aspects of faith, church, team, and APGO after forfeiting their staff memberships. Removing the institution created a hole or vacuum in former missionaries' identities that many participants tried to fill with new meanings.

The APGO total institution operated like a guiding framework, which anchored missionaries' lives and identities in APGO. When finishers relinquished their staff memberships, they essentially removed this guiding identity framework, resulting in loss and confusion for many individuals. Even though finishers retained their beliefs and values after exiting the mission field, they lacked a guiding framework in which to integrate these values into their daily lives. Thus, without the APGO total institution, finishers lost an essential anchor for their identities. Hinderaker (2015) addressed implications for membership roles that are tied to organizations and have no replacement for membership outside of the organization. In the same way, APGO membership provided members with a total institutional experience that participants could not replace

with other faith communities and arguably even in other missionary-sending organizations.

Leaving behind one's identity can be consequential. The vacuum created in the absence of the institutional experience left many finishers struggling to satisfy needs created through membership. As finishers took up new roles outside of APGO, they experienced ongoing sensemaking to understand their identities separate from the institution. New meanings for faith beliefs and practices took time to develop. Ebaugh's (1988) research on ex-Catholic nuns described a similar vacuum experience during the exit stage. In Ebaugh's study (1988) of Catholic nuns, removing the total institution that once guided daily life and beliefs removed a point of reference in a nun's identity, creating confusion and uncertainty.

Overall, exiting a total institution had long-lasting consequences on sensemaking processes and identity. Many finishers continued to struggle making sense of their exit experiences and their lives outside of the APGO total institution, taking the values and beliefs of the organization with them even when leaving behind their memberships. This study shows the consequentiality of organizations that give members a total institutional experience but then do not prepare them to disengage and disidentify. Beyond identity consequences for membership in a total institution, this study also calls for a new model that takes into account the fluidity and complexities of international volunteer membership and total institutional memberships.

Additionally, this study confirms findings from Hinderaker's (2015) study of exit, which found that members internalized organizational beliefs and values into their personal life and established primary relationships through their membership in a tight-

knit religious organization. However, unlike Hinderaker's study, APGO missionaries had the option to reenter APGO member roles at a later time, indicating there was an option for future service. In other words, exiting missionary membership was not as consequential as some total institutional memberships where exiting members may risk being shunned or cut off from primary relationships formed during organizational membership.

Implications for Volunteer Exit Models

The missionary exit phase demonstrated implications for fluid volunteer roles involving fixed-term memberships and ambiguous membership contracts. In addition, exiting a total institution had consequences for sensemaking and identity. This study calls for a more nuanced view of organizational exit considering the demonstrated complexities in missionary membership (see Hinderaker, 2015). Traditional employment exit models have not taken into account the complexities of the missionary role and exit. Volunteer memberships are more uncertain, fluid, and complex than those of paid work (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008; Kramer, 2011a, 2011b), but volunteer models do not take into account volunteers who exit high-stakes memberships, such as total institutions. This study, like Hinderaker's (2015), calls for an expansion of existing volunteer exit models in order to include missionaries and other similar types of international volunteers whose identities may be closely linked to membership or whose service commitments may surpass those of paid work.

While missionaries were considered volunteers, their membership and service commitments were distinct from domestic volunteers. Missionary service was not a temporary volunteer role in addition to one's permanent employment, but rather entailed

full-time commitment to roles that resembled or surpassed commitments in full-time employment (Maugh, 2013). APGO missionaries were highly identified and committed volunteers who sacrificed time, energy, possessions, and personal comfort in ways that far exceeded the average volunteer. In addition, missionaries were financially dependent on the generosity of donors, making the stakes higher in forfeiting membership. In comparison, volunteers in Kramer's (2011a) community choir were not financially dependent on their volunteer roles and could leave at any time with little impact to their identities.

Likewise, several other types of international volunteers demonstrate the complexities of fluid member roles and memberships in high-stakes volunteering like those found in missionary service. Examples of these contexts include volunteers in international health care (e.g., Doctors Without Borders), humanitarian and disaster relief (e.g., earthquakes, tsunamis), and governmental roles (e.g., Peace Corps), to name a few. These types of international volunteer memberships are considered high-stakes because assignments are often in countries with high levels of poverty, disease, and war. For example, the recent Ebola crisis in West Africa was deadly for many international healthcare volunteers.

In addition to awareness for international volunteers and the exit/departure process, findings in this study reveal that ambiguous membership contracts have implications for the exit phase. In addition, international volunteers may experience term memberships with a pre-determined end date or an opportunity to renew their memberships. In other cases, international health care workers may respond to an emergency without knowing how long they will be gone or when they will return from

service. These types of complexities in IVS reveal that the exit is more ambiguous for international volunteers who may not always know what to expect during or after service.

The membership contract has implications for all types of international volunteers, not just missionaries. In conclusion, new models are needed that depict membership complexities like those found in missionary exit. An expansion of volunteer exit models should include international volunteers whose service commitments are more demanding than those of domestic volunteers. Domestic volunteers may commit to a few hours a week in comparison to the all-encompassing service roles of many international volunteers. In addition, future models should include international volunteers who make significant sacrifices in personal comfort to serve abroad, whether by selling their possessions, leaving their families behind, or living in difficult conditions. In order to further support the complexities of international volunteer membership and exit, the next section offers several communication strategies for organizations supporting international volunteers.

Exit Implications for International Volunteer Management

Retention is often a primary concern for many international volunteer organizations, leading managers to focus time and resources on anticipatory stages of membership, such as training, rather than the exit phase. This study highlights the importance of the exit phase, since members did not have predictable international service terms or follow predictable exit pathways. In light of the findings in this study, organizational managers should seek to understand the complexities of membership and identity construction so that they can enlist strategies that prepare volunteers to exit roles that may be central to their identity.

Organizations must communicate membership terms during all stages of membership, but during the exit stage, members need to know the terms of their service since the exit phase is already rife with uncertainty. When exiting members are able to make sense of their memberships and identities, they are more equipped to assign positive meanings to former membership experiences and will have greater success entering other roles. Organizations should focus on improving communication to volunteers so that membership is less uncertain and ambiguous during exit. In order to improve upon organizational policies and practices, the following section addresses ways that international volunteer organizations can better support volunteer membership through communication.

Communicate the Terms of Membership

Knowing the terms of one's membership reduces ambiguity and uncertainty. Organizations that do not communicate terms of membership do not adequately prepare volunteers for success during exit. Members who experience clear expectations in their memberships are able to face their exit with more assurance. In preparation for a planned exit, departing members may face uncertainty about whether to disengage from the organization or to renew their service in new roles. In these types of situations, organizations can alleviate the uncertainty members feel by communicating expectations for various member roles and options that exiting members have if they wish to stay in the organization. Organizations may also consider giving members a way to disengage from membership in a way that alleviates potential guilt of individuals who may want to leave the organization for other roles or paid work after their service terms expire.

Individuals who feel supported in the exit phase will be more likely to consider future service and to assign positive meanings to membership.

There are implications for how international volunteer organizations communicate the terms of membership to volunteers. Depending on the goals of the organization, evaluating potential mixed messages sent through the recruitment, application, and training processes is an important first step to reconcile any disparities between the organizational and member expectations. Further, organizations with fixed-term memberships should consider communicating options to volunteers who complete these terms but who still want to be involved in the organization. In organizations with several volunteer options, volunteer managers should communicate how members obtain organizational roles, as well as how they enter into more committed roles. Exiting members may want to stay involved with the organization but may not always know what future service options may be available. Organizations that offer several types of volunteer memberships should establish a clear process for how potential volunteers are considered so that transitioning volunteers can more easily enter into new roles.

Communicate Support for the Exit Phase

In addition, volunteer roles are fluid and at times unpredictable. International volunteer organizations should consider ways to support volunteers in anticipation of both unplanned and planned exits. International volunteers cannot always control the circumstances of their service, since service may end abruptly, such as evacuation for political turmoil. Other times, volunteers may choose to leave service prematurely for circumstances that arise during their service, such as the development of a romantic relationship. Due to the uncertainty of international service, organizations should

consider multiple circumstances that may arise and lead international volunteers to end service prematurely.

Hyder and Lovblad (2007) suggested that organizations centralize the individual's experience during exit rather than focus on repatriate adjustment. Their study found that repatriates readjusted to their home country but still felt dissatisfied with how their organization treated them in the return. Focusing on individuals' exit experiences attunes the organization to the different needs of former members and encourages more positive sensemaking and feedback that favors the organization. Members who experience positive exit experiences are more likely to consider future volunteer opportunities and to share positive messages regarding their organizational membership.

Organizations can also prepare volunteers in advance for practical needs and circumstances that will inevitably arise during exit. For example, training or requiring volunteers to plan ahead for future reentry will save organizations and volunteers unnecessary stress. Budgeting for reentry housing expenses, transportation costs, and counseling may alleviate financial stress and dependence on the organization during exit. In addition, organizations who know members are transitioning into paid work may consider educating volunteers on consequential identity shifts as they exit the mission field and enter into new roles. Organizations can also find ways to address negative exit experiences in order to improve organizational practice and individual sensemaking. Overall, organizations play a significant role in how volunteers experience exit and should work to reduce uncertainty for members through policy and preparation.

Communicate Value for Recognition and Engagement

International volunteers need to know the value of their service, especially since many times their service goes unrecognized back in their home country (see McNamee, Peterson, & Gould, 2015). International volunteers may feel forgotten and overlooked by their sponsoring organizations. Keeping track of returning volunteers may be more difficult without a system or plan to recognize service, especially in larger organizations. Organizations should consider ways to celebrate international volunteers upon their return. For example, establishing a ceremony or rite of separation helps to signal the completion of service while also acknowledging a member's valuable service. Such ceremonies trigger sensemaking, allowing members to reflect on their service and membership and to enter new roles. Just like retirements marks the end of employment, honoring former members' commitment through a ceremony expresses gratitude and value for the member's service to the organization.

International volunteer organizations should recognize the willingness of former volunteers to invest their wealth of knowledge into new volunteer members. Maugh's (2013) study found that former Peace Corps volunteers' blogs created a realistic job preview for recruiting new members. Bloggers shared both positive and negative stories and experiences from their Peace Corps service, offering valuable information that enabled potential members to make informed decisions about joining Peace Corps. Maugh suggested that organizations partner with former volunteers who are willing to share their stories with potential members, since former members' experiences can help support retention strategies. Former members can offer support for organizations by giving a realistic job preview, which would help potential recruits set realistic

expectations for service that may inoculate volunteers and reduce turnover (McNamee & Peterson, 2014). Further, McNamee et al., (2015) suggested that organizations establish mentoring programs that pair experienced volunteers with newer members. Mentorship programs like these can further promote giving new members a realistic job preview of life as a missionary.

New volunteers may benefit from opportunities to interact with former volunteers, if available in the organization. Through mentoring and training, former international volunteers are able to offer valuable insights and experiences. Sharing their experiences and stories could give former members a special role to play in the organization as well as to engage in their own sensemaking processes regarding former service. Former volunteers may gain positive benefits in story-telling by reconnecting with their former experiences and service that shaped their identity in significant ways. These types of opportunities allow organizations to include former volunteers in supporting roles that can further strengthen socialization and training programs for new or potential volunteers.

Organizations may also communicate value to former members by including them in emails, monthly newsletters, or in-person events. Organizations may consider offering an “open-house” day for former volunteers who want to reconnect with organizational members and activities. In addition, organizations may want to create a type of “homecoming” event where alumni are invited to reconnect with other alumni and are honored for their previous or ongoing service to the organization. Alumni events provide further sensemaking opportunities for former members.

Overall, international volunteer organizations should consider opportunities to engage interested former members in organizational activities, drawing attention to

former members' valuable service and contributions. By providing opportunities for former members to give back to the organization and other volunteers through continued service opportunities, members are more likely to assign positive meanings to their organizational experiences, as well as more likely to also engage in future volunteer service.

Communicate Value for Ongoing Sensemaking

Organizations who sponsor returning international volunteers must realize that sensemaking is ongoing and occurs over time. Initial exit interviews or debriefing may not be adequate for individuals who need time to retrospectively make sense of their experiences. In fact, the timing of the exit interview does not always provide individuals adequate time to form meaning around their former experiences. International volunteer organizations should consider the ongoing nature of sensemaking by communicating opportunities for how former members can initiate further debriefing and support if situations arise later. If members know they can initiate with the organization or give feedback, they may be more likely to do so. The postexit phase creates an opportunity for former missionaries to express their voice and valuable insights which may help to improve membership experiences and practices of volunteer organizations.

Limitations

As mentioned previously, this research focused on one organization to better understand the socialization and exit experiences of 20 former missionaries. Thus, the greatest limitation was using a small sample size that was not entirely representative. Participants also represented one mission organization, which limited ethnic, cultural, and

religious diversity. APGO highly socializes members through church membership in a network of APGO churches, creating highly identified members prior to missionary service. Other sending organizations may not offer or require church affiliation, thus limiting their ability to socialize members prior to missionary service. In addition, sending organizations have different policies for missionary service and may not require members to raise funds, serve on teams, or to engage in church planting.

This research focused on the retrospective accounts of former missionaries. Sensemaking is about plausible explanations that are not always accurate portrayals of reality but rather about the meanings that individuals assign during surprising or confusing situations. Some participants in this study were more than 10 years removed from the mission field, making it more difficult to recall their exit experiences. Potential biases by the researcher have been acknowledged beforehand, but are further stated as a possible limitation. As a former member of APGO, I personally knew many of the participants I interviewed, which may have created social desirability in interviews. Further, my former membership in APGO gave me extensive knowledge about current members and processes in the organization which may have limited the information participants were willing to share. Lastly, the qualitative methods and research design used in this study, while rich and insightful, are not generalizable to other contexts.

Future Research

This study illuminates the importance for the exit phase in socialization literature. Whereas few studies have focused on international volunteer memberships and organizational exit, this study draws attention to implications in identity and sensemaking for members who exit roles that are fluid, complex, and tied to identity. Future research

should aim to develop new models that consider a variety of international volunteers and their exit experiences. While this research utilized participants in one organization, other studies should compare volunteer memberships and service across several sponsoring organizations. Other researchers may consider using longitudinal studies to examine sensemaking and identity through exit and postexit phases. Additionally, future research should build on findings from Davis and Myers' (2012) study on planned exits showing how various member terms and contracts influence the exit phase. Several scholars have also studied the meaning of work and pathways for volunteer service (see McAllum, 2014; McNamee et al., 2015). McAllum (2014) found that volunteers on the giving-obligation pathway were more likely to re-volunteer for the organization at a later time because their identities were comprised after their initial exit. The giving-obligation pathway included volunteers whose service resembled a vocation and who were highly involved in the organization. Future studies may consider the meanings that volunteers assign to their work and how these meanings have implications for organizational exit. In addition to IVS contexts, this study draws attention to the value of understanding identity and sensemaking in members who exit a total institution. More research is also needed that focuses on memberships in total institutions, especially in situations where members are not able to disidentify.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study employed qualitative methods to explore communicated sensemaking process of missionaries during their organizational exit phase. Missionaries communicatively made sense of their exits based on their identity construction, such as identifying with an outside target or identifying with vocational ministry, as well as

constructing their organizational identity as outsiders or insiders. In addition, a significant finding from this study is that organizations can further complicate the uncertainty of exit by keeping the terms of membership ambiguous. Lastly, there were identity implications for members who exited a total institutional membership but who were unable to fully disidentify and make sense of their lives outside of the institution.

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