

The author (name withheld) has just completed a BA(hons) degree in Applied Theology in Intercultural Contexts at Redcliffe and is continuing at the college on the MA in Bible and Mission programme.

## Introduction and Background

The following is a summary of my undergraduate dissertation, which sought to understand the missional implications of the Psalms of Lament, exploring their significance in relation to the phenomenon of missionary attrition.

Lament can be seen clearly in the 'secular' world through songs, poems, literature and theatre but there is little evidence they are of any significance within the Church and more specifically within mission organisations in the 21st Century. Laments are found throughout Scripture and other Ancient Near Eastern writings, highlighting their importance as a means of communicating with God. The book of Psalms is full of laments and have much to offer mission organisations and the Church as a way of expressing our deepest emotions to God. Bullock (2001, p138) notes, 'while the boldness and naked honesty of the psalmist may shock us, this attitude is nevertheless instructive for our own spiritual lives. We sometimes hold back too much from God'.

## Attrition

The focus of the study primarily emphasised attrition within mission organisations. However it must be understood that this phenomenon is not limited to mission, but can also be observed in secular organisations (Taylor, 1997, p6). Guthrie (2000, p36) backs this up by noting, 'Businesses sending workers overseas in today's global economy are finding increasing reluctance on the part of their employees to work in other countries'.

In response to this Taylor (1997, p20) questions whether attrition is problematic within mission, or whether it is a natural part of life, a process of 'normal learning and maturation'. Nevertheless, research such as ReMAP [1] and ReMAPII [2] expound the parameters of attrition, correlating statistical evidence and identifying reasons why people leave the mission field.

## Traversing the contextual terrain

It is imperative to establish how something as ancient as a Psalm of Lament can have an impact on life in the 21st century. This is not to say that the Psalms of Lament are suitable in every situation. However, establishing and using the tools associated in lament may display the potential to alleviate the sense of despondency related to attrition. This is visible by acknowledging that throughout history songs, hymns, poems and psalms have played a significant role in developing spirituality and worship (Westermann, 1981, p36-51). On the one hand, it is widely recognised that laments have lost their place within Western Christian worship (Gillingham, 2008, p2). On the other hand, they have remained in many forms within Western secular society, through the media of song lyrics, poetry, theatre and the arts. An ever changing commentary on the emotional psyche of our society. Watts (1997, p252) commenting on the psychological function of human emotions writes that, 'emotions are functional in that they allow people to appraise situations very rapidly and to switch into a different and more adaptive mode of responding'.

The Psalms of Lament speak into, and out of, the darker side of life's emotions, inviting us to 'enter the pain of our hurt without apology or compromise' (Allender and Longman III, 1994,

p36), therefore enabling the reader to respond appropriately. This is what the ancients established by integrating the Psalms of Lament into the worship of YHWH.

### **Psalms of Lament**

Laments are interwoven throughout the book of Psalms, as well as the rest of Scripture. The Psalms of Lament follow a general form or pattern; they **Address God, Lament, Turn towards God, Petition God** and, finally, establish a **Vow of Praise and Thanksgiving**. That said, they do not always strictly adhere to the above pattern, as has been observed by Gunkel, Westermann and others. Nevertheless, not abiding by strict patterns seems to reflect the unevenness of our lives and relationships, or as Peterson (cited in Goldingay, 2006, p67) writes, “‘Since life does not come to us in neat categories, neither does prayer’”. Psalmic language has been described as ‘open and metaphorical’, therefore it remains alive in addressing new challenges (Anderson, 2000, p73). This interpretive perspective enables greater freedom in applying the psalms to contemporary situations.

The exegesis in my dissertation established and explained how Psalm 13 is a paradigm of lament, demonstrating how it encompasses the majority of the above pattern. This Psalm explicitly exudes **pain, anguish** and **torment** within the quartet of rhetorical questions to YHWH. Goldingay (2006, p205) notes that it is the cry of the desperate, those who feel YHWH is withholding or hiding His face. However, the ‘intimate’ relationship that Broyles (1999, p85) illustrates, between the worshippers and YHWH, supports and gives licence to the Psalmist’s approach of boldness and frankness towards a Holy God. The exegesis further establishes the role of **petition** within the prayer. This is the Psalmist’s use of direct engagement, trying to apply pressure on YHWH, reminding Him of His covenant, commitment and obligation to those who call upon His name.

Finally this section wrestled with the paradox of **Praise** within **Lament**, establishing how Anderson (2000, p60) can write, ‘Laments are really expressions of praise, offered in a minor key in the confidence that Yahweh is faithful’. Concluding that this ‘minor key’ represents only one configuration in the multi-faceted arrangement of the orchestral movement called the Psalms.

### **Evaluating a mission organisation**

This dissertation established an understanding of the phenomenon of missionary attrition and the presence of lament within the psyche of secular Western society, which means that lament is certainly not alien to Western Christians. Having then set out a deeper comprehension of lament, I was then able to examine and evaluate a specific Mission Organisation, discerning whether an understanding of lament was present within its member care literature.

In researching this organisation’s literature, it was acknowledged that it promotes ‘preventative member care’, and in doing so it has established a high member retention rate. However, it still suffers from attrition. In linking certain types of attrition with despondency, their literature shows no significant attempt to incorporate the tools of biblical lament in stopping this haemorrhage of people. Therefore, establishing the tools of Psalmic Lament within a member care package is a plausible issue to consider. Nevertheless, I would also recommend that further research be carried out on a missional reading of the Psalms of Praise, Psalms of Thanksgiving or even the Book of Lamentations, to establish if they could have a significant impact on Missionary attrition.

## Notes

[1] 'Reducing Missionary Attrition Project' - a study undertaken by the World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission establishing how many missionaries return home, their reasons for returning and to explore possible solutions. This survey was carried out in fourteen different countries, each have a sizable overseas mission force (Blöecher cited in Hay et al., 2007, p9-22).

[2] 'Retaining Missionary Agencies Practice' - a further study undertaken by the World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission to establish "Best agency Practices" to contribute to missionary retention', 'promote these "good practices" in the global missions community', and provide tools for mission agencies to strengthen missionary retention'. The survey was carried out in twenty-two different countries who each have a sizable missions force. (Lim, cited in Hay et al. 2007, p24-25).

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