

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

Leadership Approaches to Service in Volatile Contexts

by Dan Taylor

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Thou mayest do in this as it is in thy heart. If it is in thy heart to fly, fly; if it be in thy heart to stand, stand. Anything but a denial of the truth. He that flies, has warrant to do so; he that stands has warrant to do so. Yea, the same man may both fly and stand, as the call and working of God with his heart may be.

– John Bunyan in response to the question ‘May We Try to Escape?’

Should I stay or should I go now? If I go there will be trouble. An’ if I stay it will be double. So come on and let me know.

– The Clash, ‘Should I Stay or Should I Go’ released 1982

The two quotes above speak effectively to the question of how to respond to security risks we are increasingly encountering as we endeavour to remain faithful to God’s missional call among the unreached. John Bunyan alludes to the fact that neither staying nor fleeing from a dangerous context is inherently more spiritual or godly. The lyrics of *The Clash* song, though written to describe a fickle romantic relationship, capture well the tension missionaries feel on these fields, ‘Staying or going both have their drawbacks, so how do I decide what to do?’ In this piece I will try to answer this question, or at the very least propose a model for finding the answer.

Foundational Presuppositions

It is important that I reveal two presuppositions as I address the question of how to discern the acceptability of worker presence in insecure contexts. My first presupposition is that neither staying in a dangerous context nor leaving it is inherently more spiritual or responsible. This keeps both the organization and the worker engaged and honestly seeking the Lord. Often, for member care or liability reasons, the organization will be tempted to believe it is more responsible to leave such a situation. Likewise, a worker will often be tempted to believe that persevering in such a context is godlier. Both voices (and I don’t mean to set up a dichotomy or propose that these voices are necessarily adversarial) need to embrace the totality of the Scriptures which show varied responses to high-risk situations. A survey of the Gospels and the Book of Acts will show that both Jesus and Paul sometimes stayed and sometimes fled these types of situations. In John 10:31-40 Jesus is about to be

stoned, but he leaves that place of persecution. Yet in Luke 22:39-53 Jesus stays, knowing that he will suffer death, yet also knowing this is his Father's will. In Acts 9:23-25 Paul escapes persecution in a basket lowered through a hole in the city wall. Yet in Acts 20:22 we see Paul with clarity and conviction moving directly into a place where he would suffer persecution and arrest. Both staying and going are potentially godly acts.

My second presupposition is that the question of staying or going cannot ultimately be answered by policy. Policy can inform us, can prepare us, can force us to do due diligence, but it cannot take into account every variable in every situation. Each context is unique. Each time is unique. Each person involved (the worker, the supervisor, the organizational leaders, the sending church, etc.) is unique. No decision-making matrix or contingency plan can honour these variables fully. Some personality types will be especially bothered by this (like mine) but the sooner this reality is embraced the better we will be able to discern what God is doing.

Don't Bail on Me Yet

Let me make a quick appeal before going on. There are some who may be reading this that already are tempted to dismiss what follows because they anticipate it being too time-intensive and therefore impractical. If we were talking about an immediate emergency crisis, I would agree with you. In an immediate and significant crisis contingency plans should lay out clear steps to be followed. The goal in such a situation is clear, decisive leadership that results in the necessary degree of security, so that a more intentional discerning process can be engaged later. This model does not address that type of situation. This model is one to be used when we find ourselves facing an increasingly dangerous and insecure context and need to discern what the Lord is asking of us in it. Crises may have occurred in the context, but they have not been 'our' crises.

The Model

The diagram below is an attempt at illustrating a healthy and godly approach to discerning the answer to the question 'Should we stay or should we go?' What I hope is evident is that the question must be addressed in a multi-faceted way, with each stakeholder having a part in the discernment process. It will be tempting at times to prioritize one approach to the question or one voice. At times this may even be warranted, but it should not be done at the total exclusion of other aspects or voices that need to be considered.



The Discerning Community

Discerning the answer to the question ‘Should we stay or should we go?’ is not simply an individual matter. Despite our western individualistic tendencies, we must acknowledge that the biblical model for discernment, and specifically in this case discernment about security matters, is communal and spiritual.

In a number of major ‘security situations’ that Paul encountered we see that the community had a role in discerning and executing his response to risk. In Damascus in Acts 9:23-25 he escapes with the help of the disciples there. In Jerusalem in Acts 9:28-29 he is sent off to Tarsus by the believers. In Berea in Acts 17, Paul is sent to the coast by the believers for his protection. Even in Acts 20, where Paul makes a choice against the desires of the community, it is evident that the community is involved—speaking, sharing grief, and sharing prophecy.

Depending on an organization’s culture and structure, the people and voices included in this community may vary. In some paradigms there is an effort to distinguish the priority voice, the voice where ‘the buck stops’ so to speak. This can be helpful in defining who has authority, but it also can be a hindrance. In some situations, defining such a voice creates a culture of distrust and a tendency to name a scapegoat, rather than the intended desire to avoid indecision. Within my organization’s structure there are multiple levels of leadership including team, area, region, and international. In nearly all our core documents this positional authority and influence is balanced by the overtly stated objective that decisions are to be made in consultation with other organizational leaders.

So, who should be part of this discerning and consultative community? Each of the following should be considered as key stakeholder voices:

- **The Worker:** They are the ones most personally affected by the context and the situation. They are likely to be the ones most knowledgeable about the context and considerations. They need to know that what they are hearing from God matters and that those they are in consultation with are listening.
- **The Supervisor:** This may be co-located field leadership or it may be a geographically removed organizational leader. Whomever the supervisor, they should be communicating with one another and the directly affected worker. The supervisor also likely has a degree of expertise and experience dealing with the context at hand, but they also have the unique vantage point of being a step removed from the intensity of the situation. They hopefully understand not only the context, but also the worker—their strengths, weaknesses, state of mind, ability to endure risk, maturity, etc.
- **The Mobilization Base and/or Employer:** This voice has the unique role of understanding not only the worker and their endeavours, but also how the risks impact those in the sending culture. If liability is a consideration they can speak to variables and questions that need to be considered. They also have professional member care people and resources who understand the health issues involved. They often bring an ability to ask the bigger picture questions that those in the thick of the context might not have the capacity to consider.
- **The Sending Church:** The sending church has heard and confirmed the calling on their worker's life and they should continue to be involved in the process of understanding and confirming how that is lived out. Their knowledge of the worker, their influences, their family, etc. are invaluable.
- **The Security Consultant:** Depending on the organization this may be a positional leader within the organization or an expert they turn to when needed. The security consultant can bring a big picture understanding of what is going on in the context and what is likely to manifest in terms of risk.
- **Local National Leadership:** In many unreached contexts this might not be possible, but when there are local leaders on the ground their voice is invaluable in understanding risk, the ability for those risks to be mitigated, and how the presence of missionaries on the ground increase or lessen the risk for local populations.

- **Other Voices:** Depending on the specifics of the situation, there may be other stakeholders to involve. These may include, but are not limited to, partner organizations, local NGOs that may be affected, and family members.

Security and Risk Assessment

The discerning community must prayerfully consider a number of facets and approaches to the question of staying or going. One of the most important is an assessment of the security situation on the ground. Each context will have different resources that inform this part of the process. In a new field some of these resources will be very limited. On a mature field they may be quite extensive.

In one of the more volatile contexts where missionaries I oversee work, the information that can be gathered to make a good assessment is quite extensive. Some of the sources we draw on in this process include:

- **The US State Department and Embassy:** There are regular advisories made available to the expatriate community in country. When there is a clearly identified threat, these are shared as well.
- **Cooperative Safety Organization:** Because of the number of both secular and faith based NGOs active in the county a safety organization has been founded whose sole purpose is to gather information about the security situation in the country, interpret it, make recommendations and disperse the information.
- **Faith-Based Security Consulting Organizations:** There are a number of faith-based organizations who endeavour to collate and interpret information regarding high-risk contexts and make recommendations. Some of the ones we use include *Crisis Consulting International* and *Concillium Incorporated*.
- **Faith-Based NGOs in the Context:** It is helpful to draw on the understanding and networks of other faith-based NGOs. Having experts on the ground who understand the context, are communicating with nationals, and who view the issues broader than a military or geo-politically oriented organization would is a valuable resource. Drawing on their own assessment process and the information they receive gives a fuller picture of what is happening on the ground.

This assessment facet of the approach to answering the question about whether we should be present in a volatile context operates in the arenas of collecting facts, interpreting trends, and projecting likely scenarios. It cannot in itself tell us whether we should remain in a context, but it can reveal well the risks and challenges being faced and inform steps that can be taken to mitigate the risks.

Some bristle against this facet of the model. It can be seen as simply concentrating on the negatives, viewing a context with worldly eyes, and focusing too much on things that will instil fear. However, it is good to remember that nowhere in scripture are we encouraged to be naïve or ignorant. Jesus himself tells the disciples ‘In this world you will have trouble, but take heart I have overcome the world’ (Jn. 16:33). He does not hide reality from them nor encourage them to put their heads in the sand. Instead he states an expectation of the presence of great difficulties and simultaneously exhorts them to hope in him. Walking in faith requires a sober understanding of our context, while recognizing that the dangerous context itself is under Jesus’ feet.

Pastoral

The pastoral facet of our approach to answering the question about staying or leaving is necessarily more subjective than the other two facets, yet it is important to engage in, both for the decision-making process itself as well decision implementation. Our decisions are not simply organizational or strategic, they impact the lives of individuals and families. Our goal in pastoring a worker or team in a volatile situation is not to keep them safe, but rather to help shepherd them along the path God has for them.

For a decision to stay or leave a context to be effective it must be owned by the missionaries who will live it out, even if the decision is not totally liked. Members want and need to know that they have been heard, considered and understood. The farther major decision-making voices are from the field, the more imperative it is to make sure the pastoral approach is exercised. If the pastoral approach is neglected we risk alienating those we endeavour to lead, sowing seeds for a culture of distrust, and potentially sabotaging the mission we are all engaged in.

By intentionally embracing our pastoral role in the process we recognize again that no two people are alike. Everyone finds themselves in a volatile situation with different personal backgrounds, different baggage, different stages of life, different susceptibilities to anxiety or tolerance for stress and potentially different understandings of their callings. By taking the time to engage missionaries pastorally we honour these realities and the work that God is doing in each of their lives.

There are a number of questions that can be explored in this approach. Some that are worth asking include:

- How are you responding and processing the present situation/context?
- How fearful are you?
- How numb are you?
- Do you sense that you might be suppressing things or are in denial?
- Do you feel able to approach the situation and decisions with sober judgment?

- What are your core reasons for staying or going? Are they biblically informed and spiritually confirmed?
- Are you actively taking counsel and living wisely in the context? Are you applying the principles and skills you learned in your security training?
- How are you feeling about the possibility of evacuation or relocation?
- How are you processing the effect of the context on your children? How might it affect their physical, emotional, spiritual, and relational well-being?
- How would an evacuation affect you? The team? Your work and ministry?
- How do you understand what faithfulness to God's calling on your life looks like right now?
- How will staying or going affect your spouse? Family and friends at home?

These questions and this facet should not simply be relegated to the organization's member care provider. Having these questions asked by supervisors and the sending church as well will have positive impact. Spiritual leadership is shepherding; it is pastoral. Multiple interactions and voices involved in the pastoral facet will increase the likelihood that a full understanding of how the worker is doing in the context will be found. It also communicates to the worker that this arena is valid and valuable. Asking these important questions will increase the chances that missionaries will not be operating in denial.

Missiological

Every choice to enter into, stay in, or leave a context should be informed missiologically. Increasingly missionaries engaged in reaching the unreached are in significant danger. The risks are high, not only for the missionaries but also for the people among whom they long to see God's kingdom manifest. How do we make informed strategic and missiological choices to stay or go?

People often fall into one of two camps. The one camp believes that the only missiological option worth considering is to stay in a volatile context. Statements such as, 'we must be willing to die,' 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church,' and 'what will locals believe about our message if we abandon them in this when things get dangerous?' are made. The other camp emphasizes that the worker is not 'needed' by God to fulfil his plans. God's kingdom is not dependent on their presence and history shows us that sometimes it is only in the absence of missionaries that the gospel takes root and begins to grow among a people (China, for example).

There is some truth in both of these approaches, but like the pastoral facet, it is important to remember that God is working uniquely to fulfil his will in each context. 'What is God doing right now in this context and how do we best cooperate with him?' is the question we need to be asking and each context will

have a different answer to that question. In order to discern the answer to this question numerous other questions must be asked prayerfully. The following is a non-exhaustive list of some helpful questions:

- Is the increased risk in this context spiritually-oriented persecution, politically-oriented, or motivated by something else?
- What message does the continued presence of the worker communicate to the community at large?
- What message does the continued presence of the worker communicate to the emerging church?
- Does the emerging church want the worker to remain in the context? Do they gain encouragement from their presence?
- Does the emerging church feel that the presence of the worker increases their level of risk and the pressures they are under?
- How can we know what the local community thinks about the presence of missionaries? Are they communicating what they think the worker wants to hear? Are the missionaries seasoned enough to interpret highly indirect communication?
- At what stage or phase of church planting and disciple making is the work presently?
- How do we weigh the tensions between increasing risk but also concurrent increasing fruitfulness in the work?

Back to the Question – Should I Stay or Should I Go?

It is my experience and belief that if we stay engaged in this process and approach the question as a discerning community, engaging it from risk assessment, pastoral, and missiological perspectives, we can indeed discern a way forward as missionaries and organizations. Participating in this process creates a healthy dynamic as questions and answers in one facet inform and challenge ones in others.

For instance, as we engage in the missiological facet we may hear a strong belief on behalf of the worker that God wants them to stay engaged on the ground. However, as we explore the pastoral dimensions we might find that of equal influence on that belief is not only their conviction of God's desire but their clear desire to avoid the stress that a transition from the field would cause them. The risk assessment facet may reveal that though they sincerely want to stay engaged in the ministry, the reality is that the nature of clashes on the ground prevent them from actually accessing the community they hope to impact. The information gathered in each of these facets can then be prayed over and discussed by the discerning community as they seek the Lord's will in the situation.

It should be noted that it is important to not see these decisions as final in nature. Temporary choices to relocate or stay are also healthy possibilities, with regular intervals planned for re-evaluation.

We should expect that God will lead us through this process to his will. We should also expect that his will may be different for each individual worker and context. This will result in complicated leadership decisions, but they can be entered into more confidently by all, knowing that this process and model has been honoured.

We go to these volatile places precisely because of our belief that it is God's plan and desire for the message of the gospel to be proclaimed to those who have not heard (Romans 10:13-15). However, we also know both from history and from the scriptures that God does not need our help to complete his mission. He invites us to partner with him but he is free to move and use us as he sees fit. The risks of these contexts present unique challenges to us but they are no challenge to him. Regardless of whether he leads us to stay or go, we can trust him fully with the mission he has invited us to partner in.