

## **Caring for the Elderly by Ah Kie Lim, PhD**

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### **Introduction**

Respect, honor, and filial piety towards one's parents, and grandparents is a very important aspect in the Asian and majority world cultures. Family obligations are not easily broken and each member of the family is compelled to follow the family tradition. They are duty-bound to care for their aged parents. "It is common for the older Asian/majority world parents to continue maintaining the hierarchical posture in relating to their adult children (Garcia 2002:55)." Therefore, adult children would often not go against the wishes of those who are elder to them. Family commitment especially towards caring for the aged parents of the missionary's parents is a major concern and struggles for these missionaries. It is an obligation for them to care for their aged parents because their culture values filial piety. It is also a shame and disgrace to the family if they do not care for their aged parents or if they neglect their family responsibilities and obligations.

The tradition of filial piety still holds sway and has an impact on the thinking and behavior of people. However, due to rapid demographic, economic, and social structural changes, it has become increasingly more difficult for young people — that is, children of aging parents — to care for the elderly. If children can no longer afford to provide appropriate and proper care, it then becomes the responsibility of society as a whole to provide this care, specifically through other means such as long-term institutional care.

One of the struggles the missionaries face with their extended family is the issue of financial support for their family, this is more so when their parents get older and require care. Some families of the missionaries back home "pressure" the missionary to provide monthly monetary support. This has created a great amount of stress and tension as they decide if they should return home to fulfill their obligation or continue to answer the call of God in their life.

Families are likely to expect the missionaries to continue to do their part to fulfill family obligations. The need and pressure to care for the elderly parents of the missionaries has been a real concern for missionaries and their mission organizations. Some of these organizations have encountered a rise in attrition rate among their senior and experienced field workers. This is a huge loss to the ministries in their organizations as well as to the people they are ministering to.

Being an Asian I will address the need for caring of the elderly from an Asian perspective. I am aware that most of the majority world cultures will share this common concern of their missionaries towards their elderly parents. However, it must be highlighted that caring for their elderly will vary depending on the economic, cultural, religious, and educational background of the families.

### **Responsibilities of Caring for the Elders**

In the Asian context, children are viewed as “insurance” or “hope” for the parents when they are old. Of course, this is changing rapidly with modernization. However, filial piety is a strong cultural value and one that is taken seriously and sometimes to a point where it becomes a burden especially for the missionaries who feel obligated and have to leave the field to care for their parents. What does it mean to “take care of one’s parents?” The traditional idea of ‘taking care’ is both about being physically present to care for one’s parents and financially providing for them.

In the Asian context often caring for elderly parents is viewed as the responsibilities of firstly the unmarried daughters. Because they are single and thought of as more available to care for her parents. This adds pressure to the single missionaries having to leave the field early. If there is no unmarried daughter than the care of elderly parents is the responsibility of the oldest son in the family. Pressure is added more on the missionary if they are the sole child or only son in the family.

### **Areas of Care**

There are different aspects of care that are expected by parents towards their children and it can be very difficult as the missionaries are sometimes foreigners in their own country being away from their homeland for most of their adult life.

One of the main concerns of the missionaries is in financial need for their parents. Depending on the age of the missionaries and their parents' demography, financial dependency will be deferred. Parents who are from the rural area will not have the financial stability to care for themselves and thus they depend more on their children to provide for them financially. Parents from the city often are more financially independent and are able to care for themselves having work till they retire. Often they are more independent and like to live on their own with a weekly visit from their children. There is an expectancy of wanting their children to be accessible to them.

Dealing with the physical needs of the parents is an important issue. Unlike the West, in Asia, there is still a social stigma around sending the elderly to an aged care facility, according to Dr. Jeyaindran (Yap 2015). Communities need to be confident that healthcare facilities can alleviate some strain of caring for the elderly. "It has become an acceptable norm for people to send their children to nurseries and daycare, but it is not an acceptable norm yet to send an elderly person to daycare. That is looked upon as cultural taboo, especially in a conservative society.

One aspect of care is being available for their parents whenever help is needed. This is an expected norm in the majority world culture. A shift in public perception of the elderly can remove some social stigmas surrounding aged care, even if it is just semantics.

### **How can senders help the missionaries?**

If there are people in the church or member care support senders that is able to help the missionary's parents with financial planning and making wise decisions that would reduce the burden of the missionary who often may not be familiar in financial matters in their own country. One recommendation would be for senders to visit the parents of the missionary on a regular basis. This would help to relieve the pressure of

the missionary having to return home to care for their parents as they are expected to be present or available for their parents. It is a way for the sending church can show their support for their missionary.

### **What does the Bible say about caring for elderly parents?**

Leviticus 19:32 said, “Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly.” I find this text very much in line with the majority cultural approach to honor and respect for elders. This is not just an Asian or majority cultural worldview. To honor one’s parents is Biblical.

Jesus understood family obligations and the need to care for one’s parents. In John 19: 26-27, while Jesus was hanging on the cross He instructed His mother to follow the disciple whom He loved and asked His disciple to look after His mother. Jesus understood the call to service and family commitment. He did not neglect either of His callings. He had the support of His disciples.

### **Conclusion**

There are different understandings as to how one can care, respect, and honor their parents. I believe each individual needs to wrestle and to come to terms with how they need to care for their parents in modern Asia/majority world culture that is changing rapidly. Mission organizations and sending church need to give room and support their missionaries should they decide to return home to look for their parents.

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