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Pastoral Care for the Mission Field: Taking Care of the Beautiful Feet

DOTTIE SCHULZ

It's a joy to encounter capable, well-adjusted, responsible missionaries. A visitor to West Africa described a successful missionary team this way:

We have been in Accra, Ghana, driven almost the full length of Togo, and the northern part of Benin. We have walked the dirt roads of town and through the country, experiencing West Africa. We have heard the sounds of the bustling market, the chickens and goats of town, the whizzing of scooters, the clap of sandals, the grinding of the grain mills, the clanging of the metal shops, the laughter of the children and even the cry of "Yovo" (white people) daily. No restaurants. Want corn meal? Buy corn and take it to the grinder and wait two days. Need a board to build with? Buy a hand cut board and hand plane it and cut to size needed. Lauren took Barb and me to "Home Depot" of Tabligbo. They have wheelbarrows, nails, paint, tin, wire, cement, and many other staple items for construction. The whole store is the size of the check out area of our stores. When we had mechanical problems with the car, we had to figure it out because there is no help for miles. And yes, they have computers, printers and phones but they are not very useful when there is no power. *They live daily in ways of life and death* beyond my comfort zone. The list of needs is long, but they make do with what they have without complaining. We feel very blessed to be able to share time here in Africa with this team.¹

Missionaries experience more stress than most people. Stress begins when the decision is made to become foreign missionaries because they are not following a standard career path. Their friends and colleagues are studying for their CPA or Bar exams, or settling into management positions. They are acquiring homes and possessions instead of giving them up. Missionaries are quitting their jobs and preparing to say good-bye to all they know as "normal."

Missionaries leave what is "normal" to go to a different culture where they can experience extreme emotional frustration, otherwise known as culture shock. They manage to get through culture shock so that they can experience "normal" but ongoing culture stress. "It didn't take me long to figure out that being a missionary is stressful. A different country, different language, and different ways of thinking are just the beginning. There's miscommunication, frustrations in getting almost anything done, and the constant burden of seeing so much pain and suffering around us."²

Once on the field, missionaries experience different kinds of stress. Mary had to learn how to barter for produce at the open market. She brought home a live chicken. She killed it, plucked it, cleaned out its insides, cut it up and fried it. The rice she purchased was filled with bugs. It took Mary a whole day to fix one meal. She was exhausted and still had a kitchen to clean.

First-term missionaries miss home. They miss Starbucks, the diner, Friday night football games, and baseball diamonds. They miss the doctor they knew and who knew them. They miss being able to do things

1. Bill Shafer in <http://www.watchiharvest.com/html/enews/tt/2007/tt03132007.htm>

2. <http://www.myblogintheheartofafrica.blogspot.com/>

automatically. They have to think about every move they make because they are unsure of what to do in this new culture in which they now live. They miss being articulate adults. One missionary wife said that the first sentence she learned in her new language was “Baba la nake la me,” which means: “The termite is in the firewood.” With humor she adds, “Now that was practical.”³ Another new missionary recently wrote: “Language school is draining and everything here just takes a little more time than usual. We all really appreciate your prayers and e-mails. It is nice to know that you are remembering us.”⁴

Missionary families and mission teams may take on a “we/us” feeling during this time. It is “we/us” and “they/them.” On the positive side, this can create family intimacy and team closeness. On the negative side, it can slow down cross-cultural adjustment.

Constant exposure to this new culture, plus dealing with a different value system the missionary does not yet understand, plus some everyday frustrations can equal a lot of stress. Patty writes, “I grew to love Togo and its people, but I never got over the feeling that people were watching me because of the color of my skin or because I was doing things differently or because I was doing things the same.”⁵

What if running water is only available between 3:00 a.m. and 4:00 a.m. and electricity is erratic? After some brief rest and relaxation, Julie writes: “I returned from Brazil to Bolivia to find us in the midst of gas shortages. This is a little more of an inconvenience than in the States, because so many things here depend on gas. We have a gas dryer, a gas stove, a gas water heater, and a little gas heater that helps heat the house. Because of where we live now, we don’t have a gas hook up to the city-wide system, so we have to depend on the gas ‘garafas’ or cans, that we get replaced every couple weeks. Josh ran all over town trying to find where we could replace our cans, and every place was out.”⁶

To decrease this level of stress the missionary needs to accept the culture as it is. This begins to occur in the third stage of culture shock. Learning to accept the culture and learning the language decreases stress, although wrestling with another language all day, every day is physically and mentally tiring. It is crucial to be emotionally stable and to have the spiritual resources needed for daily living, including being there for your children. “It’s often a challenge for us personally as well. For example, it’s hard to see our son struggling to learn another language. Hard to not be able to let our kids grow up around grandparents, cousins, and friends. Hard to find the spiritual renewal we crave.”⁷

Add to this stress mix some catastrophic stress. Joe and Mary⁸ returned home after a couple of days of rest and relaxation, only to find their house in shambles. They had been robbed. In the end the culprit was the guard they had hired to protect them. Would it be possible for them to trust the next person they hired? Would they ever feel safe again? This is when the sending church needs to provide its missionaries with some loving care.

Missionary care can help with avoidable attrition of missionaries. Protestant mission agencies report that 29 percent of the reasons given for leaving the mission field were unpreventable;⁹ 71 percent of missionary attrition was preventable.

Preventable attrition included six major categories: 1) marriage and family reasons; 2) agency reasons, which would translate to home church reasons for Churches of Christ; 3) personal reasons; 4) team reasons; 5) cultural reasons; and 6) work-related reasons. Early intervention, even before departure, would have made some difference in these attrition rates. For example, one missionary wife, mother of two, woke up one morning to find a note on the kitchen table. Her husband had left for the States with a woman who had

3. <http://clayinkpot.blogspot.com/2006/02/my-life-as-fish.html>

4. Personal communication.

5. <http://clayinkpot.blogspot.com/2006/02/my-life-as-fish.html>

6. http://jjmarcum22.blogspot.com/2007_03_01_archive.html

7. <http://www.myblogintheheartofafrica.blogspot.com/>

8. Not their real names.

9. Phil Elkins, “Attrition in the U.S.A. and Canada,” in *Too Valuable to Lose: Exploring the Causes and Cures of Missionary Attrition*, ed. William D. Taylor (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1997).

been studying the Bible with him. The marriage had not been good for quite a while, but they had reasoned that if they committed themselves to mission work, the problems would go away. Even business personnel have found that “international assignments are never viable solutions to family problems—invariably they only cause greater turmoil.”¹⁰ Pre-field screening by the local church would have been helpful in discovering marital problems. It would have been so much better for everyone if those marital problems could have been taken care of before this family went to the field. This family returned to the States at great financial cost to the church and at great cost to the mission team. A needless stumbling block was placed in the midst of a fledgling mission church.

Recently a missionary expressed these thoughts after his wife, who was four months pregnant, was air-evacuated from their village to the nearest hospital because of dangerously low blood pressure and bleeding:¹¹

After spending some time with Andrea and ensuring her care, we decided it would be best for me to fly back to Kara with Randy and drive back to the hospital so we would have a way back home. Our teammates had graciously taken care of our children, and I was able to see them for a few moments and explain to them what had happened... The five-hour drive back was a time for me to deal with the reality of what had happened to us. Up until that time, we had been in crisis mode.

Somewhere between Sotoboua and Blitta the song *Blessed Be Your Name* came up on my iPod, and as I sang along I realized that this song was speaking directly to me. The poignancy of the words hit me so suddenly I was almost shocked. When the song ended, I played it through again, and began praying that God would help me to be able to sing it and truly mean what I sang. Through the words of the song, I was led to reflect on the way we rejoiced and blessed the name of the Lord at the births of Abigail, Aidan, and Asher. But how to bless his name at the death of our fourth child seemed very difficult. So I continued to pray that God would help me to sing the words with integrity. Then I heard the last line of the bridge, “My heart will choose to say, Lord blessed be your name,” and I realized that it was a choice I had to make to bless God’s name in all things. His Spirit reminded me that death, sickness, and pain was never a part of his plan for this world, and that the death of our child was not a part of his will, but a result of the fallen-ness of the world. And in that context, a fallen world still under his control, he knew what was best for our child and for us. I was finally able to sing “Blessed be your name” with all my heart. At this moment, it was like a well burst within me, and I cried cleansing tears that almost required me to pull the truck over. I don’t remember the details of the rest of the trip, but I know it was spent joyfully in praise of our God and in his presence.

Missionaries have the same losses and stresses as the rest of us, but they also have culture stress. For that reason churches need to send men and women who are spiritually mature. People who, among other things:¹²

- Are emotionally healthy and mature
- Are able to create mature relationships
- Are able to cope
- Desire to be servants
- Have a sound theology of suffering

10. Lennie Copeland and Lewis Griggs, *Going International: How to Make Friends and Deal Effectively in the Global Marketplace* (New York: Random House, 1985).

11. <http://togoventures.blogspot.com/>

12. Lois Dodd and Larry Dodd, “Selection, Training, Member Care and Professional Ethics: Choosing the Right People and Caring for Them with Integrity” (Paper presented at the IFMA/EFMA Personnel Conference, Orlando, FL, December 4-7, 1997).

Fielden Allison stated it best: "In order to know the problems of people you have to live with them. In order to solve the problems of people you have to live with God."¹³

Sending prepared, godly missionaries is imperative for a successful mission. Elkins¹⁴ discovered that generally there was a lack of appreciation for pre-departure training on many issues. Some churches do not require either formal or informal training in missions, cross-cultural studies, or orientation to the field before departure. "This lack of training and preparation is sometimes rationalized on the basis of:

1. It costs too much in dollars and energy (to give the right tools and training).
2. The need over there is so urgent you must go at once.
3. We don't have enough time to train you.
4. Anyone can do the job that has a subjective sense of God's will.
5. You can 'do all things through Christ.'"¹⁵

Increased attrition is the result. Unnecessary human pain is the result. Screened and trained missionaries do better on the field.

Once a reasonable adjustment has taken place, and the missionary and his/her team are working effectively, missionary care is still needed. Rosik, Richards, and Fannon¹⁶ found that missionaries who utilized missionary care services in East Africa sought out pastoral care, family enrichment services and personal enrichment services. It seems that the deepest felt need of missionaries on the field is spiritual. Missionaries need nourishment that will sustain them. Maintaining strong marriages and families remains a high priority as well. Since attrition is often related to these two issues, special care should be taken to see that marriage enrichment and parenting seminars be made available to missionaries. Missionaries also stated that trauma debriefings were helpful.

Missionary parents often become bi-cultural. Many bi-cultural people adjust so well that they are able to switch easily, becoming adept at using whatever language or behavior is needed in whatever culture they find themselves. Missionary children on the other hand become third culture kids (TCKs). They develop a sense of belonging to both the culture(s) of their parents, and to the culture in which they live, yet they seem to have no real ownership in either. They live in a blended cultural mix known as third culture. One TCK said, "I'm two people. The one who uses English is quiet and precise; the Portuguese one gestures and is poetic and free."¹⁷

Missionary Kids (MKs) have many positive experiences that will help them in their future lives. I have never met an MK who would trade places with their mono-cultural peers. Research studies show that MKs/TCKs tend to:¹⁸

- Experience a more lasting adjustment if they are committed to the overall mission of their families
- Think independently
- Be non-conformists

13. <http://www.clintdavis.blogspot.com/>

14. Elkins, "Attrition in the U.S.A. and Canada."

15. Dodd and Dodd, "Selection, Training, Member Care and Professional Ethics: Choosing the Right People and Caring for Them with Integrity."

16. Christopher Rosik, Alicia Richards and Ty Ann Fannon, "Member Care Experiences and Needs: Findings from a Study of East African Missionaries," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 24, 1 (Spring 2005): 38-45.

17. S. J. Werkman, "A Heritage of Transience: Psychological Effects of Growing Up Overseas," in *The Child in His Family: Children and Their Parents in a Changing World*, eds. E.J. Anthony and C. Chiland (New York: Wiley, 1978).

18. Dorris Schulz, *A Study of Third Culture Experience in Relation to the Psycho-Social Adjustment of Returned Church of Christ Missionary Families* (Unpublished manuscript, University of Nebraska, 1986).

- Choose occupations that will keep them in touch with their third culture experiences
- Be more world minded (cross cultural enrichment)
- Be two years ahead of their American peers academically
- Have increased tolerance for difference
- Be group-oriented and communally cohesive
- Be more sensitive to outsider's needs (minority empathy)
- Have a 3-D view of the world (a clear awareness of what is going on in the world and what it is like for them)
- Be very human-service oriented

Van Reken and Pollock¹⁹ describe benefits faced by TCKs as double-edged swords, or challenges. An expanded worldview tends to keep them confused about their loyalties, as there is more than one way to look at philosophical and political issues. They have a painful view of reality. They know that behind the scenes they read about in newspapers or view on the local news, there are real flesh and blood people, who are affected by political and military decisions. TCK/MK world mindedness and cultural enrichment (knowing a lot about a lot of cultures and speaking other languages) is accompanied by ignorance about their "home culture." Many MKs are ignorant about local and even their own family history. American humor may be hard to understand and slang is constantly changing, making parts of the English language almost like a foreign language to the MK.

Reentry adjustment is far more difficult than original adjustment to the mission field. A missionary, who feels called of God to tell others about Jesus, and whose family is happy in their chosen home, tends to make a good missionary. Living day in and day out in another country requires tolerance, flexibility and open-mindedness. The missionary family learns to live with the attitude of Jesus toward humankind. They become all things to all men that they might save some (1 Cor 9.22; 10.33). However, the more comfortable the family becomes in the host culture, the more difficulties they may encounter upon their return to their home culture.

What helped the family adjust initially to culture shock will help the family successfully traverse reentry shock:

- Family adaptability
- Family integration
- Affectionate relations among family members
- Good marital adjustment between husband and wife
- Companionable parent-child relationships
- Authoritative family structure

One returned missionary family explained their good adjustment by praising the home church for their care:

I feel U.S. churches do a terrific job of communicating care and interest in missionary families and their work by letter,²⁰ bulletins, and gifts at appropriate times and myriad expressions of affection and prayer. We may be in the "dark ages" still in terms of grasping in depth the power of the Good News, and in "technique and mechanics," but deep, genuine concern by churches for the mission families and vice versa is still the life blood of a long and fruitful effort.²¹

19. David C. Pollock and Ruth E. Van Reken, *Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing Up Among Worlds* (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press).

20. Today we also have e-mail, cell phones, SKYPE and other forms of VoIP.

21. Dorris Schulz, *A Study of Third Culture Experience in Relation to the Psycho-Social Adjustment of Returned Church of Christ Missionary Families*, Appendix B (notes from missionaries in answer to the question: Is there something you would like to express about reentry and adaptation to the United States that was not covered in this questionnaire?)

“How beautiful are the feet on the mountain of those who bring good news” (Isa 52.7). Feet can be hurt in many ways. They can be cut, bruised, and scraped. Blisters can form, toes can be stubbed, bones can be broken, and sometimes feet can cramp. Feet can become calloused. These things can happen to the beautiful feet of those on the mountain who bring good news, our missionaries.

If the church wants to keep the feet of those who bring good news in good working order, they need to learn a bit about the art of taking care of feet. This means the church needs to understand missionary needs and to the best of their ability see that those needs are met. It’s hard to keep walking when your feet are in bad shape.²²

DOTTIE SCHULZ IS DIRECTOR FOR MISSIONARY CARE AT MISSIONS RESOURCE NETWORK IN BEDFORD, TEXAS.



22. <http://missionarysmisionary.blogspot.com>