

Supporting the extended family of those serving overseas

Introduction

Whenever single people, couples or families leave their passport cultures to serve overseas, there is a ripple effect in all directions. While the focus and attention are on those departing, there is an effect on all of their relationships, and usually the deepest impact is felt by the members of the extended family. Mission agencies have been slow to recognise that they may have a role in connecting with and relating to family members. It is impossible to measure the extent of informal contact between mission agency home end personnel and extended families, but it is likely to be variable and dependent on the personalities and circumstances of each case. However in recent years, some agencies have seen the need for more consistent and formal contact, and have begun to hold events for the relatives of their workers (particularly parents and grandparents).

At a recent TCK day conference in the UK, the focus was on the subject of supporting the extended family of overseas workers. This article draws on the resources and presentations from this conference.

What is already being done?

In the UK, WEC International has been organising an annual Parents' Day (later called Relatives' Day) since 2003. The vision of the day includes bringing parents together to meet each other and share their experiences; giving an opportunity to ask questions and find out more about WEC; providing information on culture shock and re-entry to the passport culture; allowing people to share their personal stories.

In Germany, New Tribes Mission holds a Parents' Day every two years. The main focus of the day is to thank the parents for their part in supporting their family overseas, build relationships with them and provide good food and a relaxing environment for them to meet with others.

In Hong Kong, WEC incorporates meetings with parents into the 8-10 week training course for new missionaries. They seek to 'build relationships with the Hong Kong staff, learn about WEC history in Hong Kong and deepen relationships with candidates' families and churches. [They] invite the parents of candidates to come and attend CO [candidate orientation] at any time and show appreciation to them in other ways.'

What should agencies be doing?

The agency needs to bear in mind that their workers are supported by a combination of three main factors: the extended family (and/or very close friends), the sending church and the mission agency. These three groups need to work together, and so it is helpful if the mission agency not

only identifies ways of connecting with the families of their workers, but also seeks to find appropriate ways of encouraging the sending church to reach out to family members. This may not be straightforward for various reasons: parents may not share the worldview or faith of their sons or daughters or they may not wish to be contacted by a church. In some cases they could be actively involved in another religion, or in a sect that has broken away from Biblical Christianity. Where the parents are Christians, they may attend a different church or live many hours away from the location of the sending church. Where possible though, the more that agency staff are able to do in the way of building meaningful relationships both with immediate family members and with sending churches, the more effective connecting the two is likely to be.

At the conference it was acknowledged that many of the smaller agencies do not currently have the personnel or resources to commit to this, but it was recognised that it is a crucial area of development.

Relating to the extended family: do's and don'ts

Do

- Have a designated link person for extended family members to contact.
- Provide plenty of opportunities for feelings to be expressed and questions to be asked. Some of the attitudes may be negative and the agency staff need to be prepared to listen. This could be done in one-to-one situations, in small groups or with questions from the floor in a larger meeting. In a larger group it may be helpful to gather questions before the session starts, so that adequate consideration can be given before answering. However, staff should be prepared to tackle unexpected or difficult questions.
- Train the link person in listening skills and handling conflict; brief him or her thoroughly on the organisation's member care practices and crisis management policy, both overseas and at home.
- For small agencies without education consultants, have someone available who can give advice on educational matters.
- Recognise the emotional cost of overseas service for the extended family. Tell the parents and grandparents that this is deeply appreciated by the agency.
- Communicate and work with the sending church. Appoint a representative from the agency to relate to the church.
- Help the sending church to find appropriate ways of relating to the extended families of their workers. There is an opportunity here for the sending church to demonstrate their Christian faith by the way in which they care for their missionaries and communicate with the rest of the family.

Don't

- Don't assume that extended family members are all Christians. Remember that even if they are, they may not have a global worldview or be familiar with the world of missions.

- If a special day is being planned, be sensitive. If relatives who aren't active Christians are expected, avoid building in compulsory times of prayer and worship. These could be offered as an option alongside several other activities. These family members may cope better with a prayer led from the front and a short musical performance than with something for which participation is required.
- Don't ask the parents of workers to undertake tasks which are unquestionably the responsibility of the agency, such as organising visas.
- Don't despair if some parents or relatives seem entrenched in their negative views. Continue to be available to them and maintain a positive and prayerful attitude.

Some illustrative examples

Agencies which have held events for parents and relatives have experienced a wide range of questions, comments and reservations. There are many positives, but examples of some more challenging responses are given below. It is helpful to bear in mind that seemingly negative reactions are often indicative of the love and concern that parents have for their children, and grandparents for their grandchildren. They are facing a huge loss and grappling with fears of the unknown. They may say any of the following:

- I have been a Christian for most of my life, and I even run a prayer group for missionaries, but I don't want **my** son or daughter to go.
- I am a Christian but I am not particularly interested in missions. There is no longer a need to send missionaries, surely, as the churches in Africa and parts of Asia are so big now.
- I am a successful (Christian) company director and we have worked hard to give our children the best of everything. Why are they throwing all of this away to join your organisation?
- I am not a Christian and I am frankly bewildered by my son/daughter's fanatical desire to give everything up and go overseas in order to spread his/her religion.
- I am angry, confused and heartbroken that my grandchildren will be so far away.
- I am very proud of them.... but it hurts! (Do you care.....?)

They may ask practical questions such as these...

- What are they going to live on?
- Will they get a pension?
- What happens if they need a doctor?
- Where will the children go to school?
- What will your organisation do if there is a crisis out there?
- How can we best keep in touch with them?
- Can we visit?

Stories from workers and their families

First example: Worker A

Worker A grew up overseas herself, as her father worked for a secular company which posted him to another part of the world. When A and her husband decided to go overseas with their children, A's mother's attitude was shaped by this and by her experience as a teacher. She was not a Christian and had no experience of mission agencies, therefore did not expect the organisation to provide member care or contact her or her husband. The secular company had not done this for them, so it was not in her thinking. Later when the family returned to the UK, she saw them struggle to adjust, but assumed that any problems were caused by the fact that they were Christians. However, A's brother (a non believer) also went overseas with his family for several years and they experienced similar problems on their return. Suddenly A's mother grasped that her grandchildren were 'hidden immigrants' going through re-entry. Although she had seen her daughter's family go through the same thing, she had assumed that the re-entry issues were because of their Christian faith rather than applicable to any similar family. While her daughter and family were still overseas, she became increasingly anxious about her grandchildren's education, and frequently expressed her opinion that they should return to the UK before any of the children reached secondary school age.

Second example: Worker B

B's parents were not Christians, although her mother was a churchgoer. She suffered chronically with depression and found B's impending departure overseas very difficult. Shortly before the family left, she commented that she and her husband would probably be dead when B returned to the UK. She was in good physical health at the time that the comment was made, but sadly contracted cancer just after B's first term of service. B was able to see her again before she died. B's father became ill just before the family were due to leave for their second term of service. He too was not a Christian and had initially been bewildered by B and her husband's desire to serve overseas. However he kept the serious nature of the illness from his daughter until she had returned to the field, and only revealed that he had terminal cancer (mesothelioma) a few weeks later. He insisted that B should remain overseas and not come back to look after him, as she was 'doing vital work'. When B returned briefly to the UK for her father's funeral, she learned that one of the leaders of her agency at the home end had been in regular touch with her father. They had talked on the phone and discussed the Christian faith. B's father very much appreciated these phone calls expressing care and concern on behalf of the agency. The impact of simple acts of kindness like this should never be underestimated.

When it is the parents who are going.....

It is increasingly true that in developed countries such as the UK, people are living longer and healthier lives, and this has an effect on the profile of those applying to serve overseas. Those in their 50's and 60's can offer several years' service at least, and are often able to fund themselves

if they are receiving pensions. This brings a new and reverse challenge for the extended family, in that instead of leaving their parents at home, they are often leaving their adult children. Agencies now need to find ways of helping new workers to address this situation and teach practical strategies that will help them to maintain these crucial relationships with their children.

One contributor to the conference shared ten action points which are listed below. (Thanks to H).

Explore as much as you can with your adult children about the impact on them of your moving abroad for an extended period.

Plan how you will stay in touch – how often, best times and days, by what method. Manage expectations, and be prepared to be flexible and make changes. Keep them up-to-date, but avoid managing things for them from long distance unless specifically asked to do so. Watch for non-verbal cues.

Give reassurance about how you will aim to deal with personal and more general crises, both at home and where you will be serving.

Work with your children on identifying trusted older adults, family or friends who can support you in their absence. [Addition from Gill Bryant: do not expect that each of your children will want to relate to the same person].

Give indications of when you expect to return home, for example on holiday or home assignment. Discuss where you will stay – with them, or in your own space, or a mixture. Consider arranging joint holidays, either back home or elsewhere.

Discuss appropriate arrangements for them to visit you – timing, cost, location, your likely availability.

Ask them whether they would like to assist you in practical ways, e.g. providing a home address for you, dealing with post, sending out correspondence on your behalf, etc.

Discuss expectations about how they will keep in touch with other family members, such as their grandparents.

Arrange some fun times with them, creating happy memories and showing them that they are still just as important to you even when you are busy with the many things that you have to do.

Tell them that you will pray for them daily (and do so!) Find out how to pray for them specifically, both now and while you are away.

Gill Bryant

New Books

Third Culture Kids: Growing up among worlds, 3rd Edition 2017, by Michael Pollock and Ruth Van Reken

The 3rd Edition of the standard work on TCKs is already available in North America and due out in Europe mid-October this year. It is available from online booksellers such as Amazon.

The book continues to build on the classic 1st Edition by Dave Pollock and Ruth van Reken, and the updated 2nd Edition from 2009. The significant updates are

- Expanded explanations of identity formation and why cross-cultural mobility in childhood matters
- Looking at increased cultural complexity for today's TCKs and others with cross-cultural childhoods
- Updated explanations and practical tips for the transitional experience and for re-entry
- Expanded chapter of practical tips for parents
- Updated practical information for organisations

40 Days 40 More Bites: A family guide to pray for the world, 2017, Trudi Parkes

The original 40 Days 40 Bites from 2014 now has a brand new companion edition. The book has the same approach which gives 40 more 'tasty, easily digestible bites in which a family can travel round God's amazing world and pray! This second book in the 40 Days 40 Bites series covers another twenty different countries along with a variety of issues such as orphans, hunger, and homelessness. This family guide to praying for the world is designed to open eyes to its needs and challenges and to encourage prayer as a family.' [Amazon]

'Serving at the ends of the earth; Family life and TCKs' by Steve and Gill Bryant; WEC International/Lightning Source publishers (2017) ISBN 9780900828942

The book was launched at recent TCK and education conferences in Germany and the UK. This is the first new English-language book of its type for several years since Ruth van Reken's 2009 revised edition of 'Third Culture Kids' and the first one from the UK since Marion Knell's 'Families on the Move' in 2001.

There are sections on

- The TCK lifestyle and characteristic features
- Transitions from first departure to longer-term 're-entry' and everything in between Family life; including issues such as nationality, cross-cultural marriage, healthy Christian families and multilingualism
- Safety in a dangerous world covering growing up in restrictive and/or dangerous societies, child protection including internet safety, and safeguarding from cults
- Special concerns for Asian, European and Latin American families
- Educational issues such as long-term planning, comparisons of different education options, and how different high school qualifications prepare for university entrance around the world
- A thorough resource list in the appendices

Two resources in the book – a long-term planning questionnaire and a family review guide for organisation member care staff – are copyright free.

Price £7, €8 or US\$9, plus postage by mail order from mk_tck@yahoo.co.uk

The postage price per unit is lower if multiple copies are ordered. We aim to make the book available via on-line bookstores, but do not expect the overall cost to be lower.

For readers in The Netherlands we would like to promote the Dutch translation of a previous edition of this book called

‘Overal en Nergens Thuis’ by Jean Barnicoat and Steve and Gill Bryant, (translated by Kezia Schoonveld 2016); WEC Nederland Publications ISBN 9789463188449

This book can be obtained from www.jongboek.nl or www.bol.com

The previous edition was only available in English as an electronic file, but was translated and printed in The Netherlands last year.

MK Summit Conference, South Korea

Following the first MK Summit Conference last year in Korea, there will be another large-scale TCK conference from the 1st – 4th November in Korea. The conference explores issues relevant to agencies and families coming from various mission sending countries in Asia and Latin America, including those that have been established for some time and have developed family support infrastructures, and others where sending has grown more recently. Website <http://www.mksummit.org/en/>

Location Pilgrim House Retreat Center <http://www.pilgrimhouse.co.kr/> near Gapyeong in South Korea (about 70-80km east of Seoul)

Speakers include Janet Blomberg, Keith Eitel, Ulirike Ernvik, Stephen Kim, Steve Moon, and Sky Siu in plenary and workshop sessions plus Alicia Macedo, John Barclay (former principal at Hebron School in India), Polly Ho and several others in panel sessions.

Cost – The event is free. Global Mission Church is sponsoring this event and will provide the following free of charge to registered participants: lodging, food, leisure time and transportation (airport pickup/drop off). Participants are responsible for all other expenses such as travel expenses to/from the Summit (e.g. flights, mass transit, rental car, car fuel, travel insurance) and any other personal expenses not mentioned above.

Bookings <http://www.mksummit.org/en/online-registration>

Educare is a free e-magazine for TCKs, their families, the agencies that send and support them, and anyone else interested in their education and welfare. It can be forwarded freely to anyone who would benefit from it.

For free subscription e-mail mk_tck@yahoo.co.uk

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