“Get on the Bus”: How Do Missionaries and Other Expats Make International Transitions?

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Although I have worked with missionaries for the better part of two decades, I never lived overseas until about two years ago. As part of a sabbatical from the university where I teach, I lived in Germany for a year. During that time I visited a number of mission teams (along with my wife, Vicki) and participated in several retreats. Some of the appeal of moving overseas was learning more about what it is like to live cross-culturally. While our temporary sojourn was not the same experience missionaries have in moving to a new country lock, stock, and barrel, it did give us a taste for some of the stressors that accompany an overseas move. We wanted to learn more about this, so as part of my work for the university (yes, like home assignments, a sabbatical is not the same thing as an extended vacation) Vicki and I also conducted a number of interviews with American families who were living overseas. The focus of the interview questions dealt with how they made the transition to living overseas. But we were especially interested in learning how the experience differed for various types of expatriates including government workers, business expats and missionaries. In this article I’ll share some of what we learned about how the experience of moving overseas is unique for missionaries, especially when compared to other expats.

Who Did We Talk With?

Generally, research on overseas transitions has focused on three different types of American families. Government workers include military personnel, government contractors, members of the diplomatic corps, and a variety of others who draw incomes from the U.S. government. In many cases (especially the military) these are short term assignments but there are a number of people, such as Department of Defense teachers and State Department workers, who make a career of living in various places overseas. A second type of expatriate family is associated with private business. This often involves the transfer of an executive from a U.S. based corporation to an overseas facility. These assignments are nearly always short term (3-5 years). Finally, there are missionary and humanitarian aid workers who work for non-profit organizations. Families in this sector stay for varying lengths of time from very short term (18 months or less) to permanent status. While each of these groups has been studied independently, little research has compared their experiences. Our interviews were an initial attempt to identify ways in which the transitions associated with moving overseas were similar and/or different for people in these sectors.

We interviewed families from all three of these groups. From the government sector we talked with military families, teachers, government contractors, and people involved in international affairs. Most of our interviews with business expats were with executives in large companies while among
missionaries we interviewed church planters, teachers in Christian schools, and people with parachurch organizations. In each case we talked with a couple (except in the case of two single parent families) and, on some occasions, children were included as well. All in all, we conducted 33 interviews among a total of 88 people. Most of these families were living in Europe (with a heavy focus on Germany where we were based) but we also did interviews with families living in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific Rim. All had been living abroad for at least one year but not more than 15.

What Did They Have in Common?

Nearly everyone we talked with, regardless of sector, thought living overseas was a great experience. Only two of the 33 families we interviewed had a primarily negative experience and even those families thought it had been a productive, if not always enjoyable, experience for their family. When we asked whether they would advise a friend who was considering an overseas move to follow in their footsteps, the response was a resounding “Yes!” While each family had experienced its share of struggles and frustrations, the positive aspects of their overseas move consistently outweighed these concerns.

So what was so great about life overseas? A lot of things, but these themes kept coming up over and over:

- **More family time.** Whether it is the lack of distraction from organized activities so prevalent in the States or an increased dependence on one another, a number of people indicated they spent more time together as a family unit than when they were in the States. It just seemed to be easier to pull everyone together into a common sphere, whether it was dinner together or a family game night. As one government agency worker indicated “I think we spend a lot more time with our children here … even though I work a lot. I think we end up with a lot more time together as a family throughout the week than we would in the States.”

- **Slower pace of life.** Hand in hand with more family time, many families indicated the pace of life in the country where they were now living was considerably slower than in the U.S. Stores were not open around the clock, more time was devoted to vacation and leisure activities, and less attention was given to maintaining a strict schedule. While it typically took awhile to adjust to these changes, over time these American families began to appreciate the advantages of slowing down. In fact, many indicated that one of the most stressful elements of visits home was feeling like they were always on the run.

- **Ability to travel.** One of the great blessings of living in a foreign country is being able to see other parts of the world. Many of these families took full advantage of this perk. One missionary said “The kids have gotten chances to travel all over the world. [Our daughter] has celebrated birthdays in – I don’t know – five different countries or something.” Families who knew they were living abroad for a limited time seemed especially intent on exploring as much as they could, both in terms of seeing new places and learning how other people in the world live.
• **A wider world view.** A lot of the people we interviewed indicated their cultural eyes had been opened by living in a new country. They recognized that different cultural rules applied in other places, they saw poverty in a new light, and they wrestled with identity questions such as “What does it mean to be an American in other parts of the world?” Parents, especially, thought this was a terrific learning experience for their children, one with lifelong consequences. One executive said, “They don’t even realize it, but everyday they are becoming broader in their world view, in their sense of taking risks, of being adventurous.”

At the same time, not everything was a great experience. Life overseas is also accompanied by some unique stressors and several of these were also shared across sectors. Two that stood out in particular were:

• **Distance from family.** Universally, this was the most difficult thing people reported about living abroad. In many cases this was simply about missing loved ones - not being able to see them as often as they would like and missing special events like birthdays, holidays or weddings. Some people also said it was hard caring for aging parents from a distance. Not being available to help a parent deal with an illness or manage details of everyday life was a stressor in and of itself. And, while most people indicated extended family members were supportive of their choice to live overseas, this was not always the case. One executive said of his in-laws “[They were] bitter. They were mad at me. You’re taking my grandkids away from me and ... they are not going to get to know their grandma and grandpa. That’s a lot of weight on my shoulders.”

• **Daily hassles.** Life in a new country means learning new ways of doing things. This is a considerable challenge, especially if you don’t know the language. Shopping for groceries, understanding traffic signs, finding a place to live, and knowing how to contact a repairman were just a few of the new experiences that often turned into frustrating hassles, especially early on in the transitions of these families.

**What is Different?**

While the families we interviewed indicated they had a lot of things in common, there were also a number of differences depending on which sector they were a part of. Some were obvious – the focus of their work and their intended length of stay, for example – but others emerged as we discussed what were the biggest stressors and aids in transitioning to a new country. While there were differences among all three groups, the experiences of the government workers and business expats seemed to be more similar than between either of those groups and missionaries. Here are several key distinctions we noted between missionaries and the other families we interviewed.

• **Reason for going.** As might be expected, their job was the main reason business expats headed overseas. Most of them had sought an overseas assignment, often viewing it as an opportunity for an adventure while moving ahead in their careers. In some cases their job in the States was
in jeopardy and they needed to make an overseas move to preserve it. Either way, making an international move was closely tied to work.

For government employees, working overseas was often a lifestyle choice. Many had previous international experience and actively sought a chance to return. They liked the opportunities to travel, the wider world view, and the perks that came with having an overseas job. Living abroad represented a “cool” lifestyle; the job, while meaningful, was often a secondary consideration.

The reasons missionaries gave for going to the field were quite different than either of the other two sectors. Yes, many had had previous overseas experiences and they relished the adventure of living in another culture but as a group they indicated there was something bigger at work. They came to the field because they were called. In one way or another, most indicated God had led them to the mission field. In some cases it was a personal calling: “We’re both Christians [and] we did feel that sense that God was calling us to come work here.” In other cases it was a calling to a place. One woman, describing her mixed feelings in returning to an Eastern European country, talked about her realization that “we were not coming because it is a wonderful place to live but because of the people.” Still others cited early experiences with having missionaries in their home as children and feeling the tug toward the mission field at an early age. In every case, moving overseas was less about personal fulfillment than about being obedient to the will of God.

- The move. When we asked government workers or business expats what it was like to transition to a new country, most focused on the details of the move itself: decisions about what to ship, the flight across the ocean, and details associated with relocation. Perhaps because they anticipated a relatively short stay overseas, most did not talk about cultural adjustments. It was a different story with missionaries. They also had tales about their move, but most of what they talked about concerned experiences in transitioning to a new culture - challenges in learning a new language, figuring out ways to make friends with their new neighbors, dealing with government officials over documents, etc. One family shared with us a three stage process of adjustment that seemed to ring true for a lot of the missionary families we interviewed:

  **Stage 1:** The Honeymoon. Everything is exciting. Living in a new place means there are no inconveniences, only adventures.

  **Stage 2:** Struggle. Everything is irritating. There is a tendency to compare your current cultural experience to “back home” – and your new home usually comes up on the short end of the stick. One missionary said “There was a matter of gutting it out. And it’s a critical moment. It’s a moment where, if you go back or interchange too many options you probably won’t stay long term.”
**Stage 3: Get on the bus.** The family we talked with put it this way: “There is a certain point when crowded buses excite you, there’s a certain point in which crowded buses repulse you, and a certain point where you just get on a crowded bus and you don’t think about it.” This stage is about acceptance – recognizing that this is the place you now live and not a place you are visiting.

- **Resources.** The difference between the level of economic resources provided business expats and government employees when compared to missionaries was startling. In addition to complete moving expenses and, often, premium compensation for an overseas posting, most of the business expats we talked with received a host of resources to help with their transition to a new culture. Some of these perks included: a housing allowance, help from a relocation specialist, assistance with visas and other types of documentation, private school tuition for children, cost of living allowances, language tutoring, and regular return trips to the States for the entire family (it should be noted not everyone we interviewed received all of these benefits). Government workers received similar benefits including a housing stipend, an American based school system for their children, biannual return trips to the States, shopping privileges at the American commissary, and gasoline rations that significantly reduced their fuel costs.

Missionaries typically received a fraction of the services available to other expats. While they did receive a salary and assistance with moving expenses and most had a working fund which helped with things like purchasing a vehicle and language tutoring, the level of economic assistance was far below that of other expats. Moreover, any support they did receive, including salary and other benefits, was from funds they raised from churches and individuals. Since their funding comes from multiple sources and is dependent on donations, there is a greater likelihood that missionaries will be underfunded than other expats. In some cases they may leave for the field without adequate funding and in other cases they may lose support while on the field, resulting in a shortfall. In addition, most missionaries do not receive a cost of living adjustment that accounts for changes in the exchange rate. Lack of adequate funding can be a significant problem that has ramifications for the life and work of a missionary family. One missionary, who left for the field with full support, but lost much of it during the first year, said “We lost about 50% of our support. Then we moved to look for cheaper housing and ended up pretty isolated.”

While there are substantial differences between the levels of economic support received by missionaries and other expats, a more significant factor may be in the way that support is obtained. Government workers and business expats receive their salary and benefits from an impersonal organization, either government or a corporation. Missionaries raise their funds
from churches and individuals. The money generally comes from people they know – friends, relatives, people at their home churches. The funding has a face. We observed two consequences associated with this difference. First, missionaries often felt highly responsible for the stewardship of their support. They knew the people who were making it possible for them to be on this mission and were aware of sacrifices others were making in order for them to be there. Second, they had higher expectations about maintaining a personal relationship with their supporters. Whereas an executive with Ford Motors or a government contractor does not expect emotional support to come with his or her paycheck, many missionaries do. Because of this, dissatisfaction in their roles may be based less on economic factors than on a feeling of disconnection with supporters that arises from a lack of communication and policies that do not build trust in their mutual relationship.

- Cultural assimilation. One of the questions we asked our interviewees was about the importance of assimilating into the culture. We conceptualized assimilation on a continuum with “tourist” on one end and “native” on the other. While no one was on either extreme of the continuum, the difference between missionaries and other expats was readily apparent. Government workers and business expats tended toward the tourist end of the scale. They were usually overseas for a limited term and wanted to experience the culture. Thus, they travelled a lot, took in the local cuisine, and visited local festivals. Most did not put a great deal of effort into learning the language, indicating they knew they were there for a short time and would not be able to master it before leaving. Even among expats who spent an extended time overseas there was little emphasis on language learning. A significant reason for this was that there was not a need to learn another language. For nearly all of the government employees and business expats we interviewed, their most important relationships were with other expats who spoke English. For military families and their support systems, life tended to center around the base. For other expatriate families with children, an international school where English was the common language served as a hub. These communities seemed to serve as a lifeline for the expat families we interviewed. They might shop in local stores, use local services, and develop some friendships among locals but their primary source of support was other expats.

Missionaries, on the other hand, came to influence the culture. While they realized they would never fully integrate into their adopted culture, the success of their mission depended on being accepted by their new neighbors. From the beginning, lifestyle choices such as where to live, what kind of car to drive (or whether to have one at all), and schooling for children were made with the intention of blending into the culture in order to bring about change. While most found connecting with an expat community valuable, they did so less frequently than those in the other sectors, regarding it as a respite instead of a lifeline. However, they placed a high level of importance on learning the language, seeing it as essential to forming relationships in their new
culture. Often, their primary task during the first couple of years was becoming proficient in the language. This was frequently a difficult and frustrating process, but ultimately it was viewed as a key to their success. As one missionary said, “The language thing is just huge. You just don’t realize how much, especially at first. It just rocks your world, it’s so much a part of life.”

What Does it Mean?

One of my favorite quotes is from former Secretary of Education William Bennett who described social science research as “the exploration of the obvious by methods which are obscure.” I wouldn’t be surprised if, after reading all of this you were to say “So tell me something I don’t already know.” I suspect what we discovered simply confirms what many of you already know. At the same time, I hope what we found provides some insights or at least serves as a reminder for anyone associated with a missions endeavor including seasoned missionaries, people preparing to leave for the field, and mission partners. Here are several implications I think are worth considering based on our interviews:

• **Come prepared.** An international move is a major undertaking. While many government employees and business expats cited ways their organizations could have made their move smoother, the generous transitional resources provided generally reduced the amount of stress they experienced in their personal lives. This enabled employees to focus on the work they came to do. Missionaries come with a different goal. They are not simply doing their job in a foreign location; they are immersing themselves in the culture in order to influence it. This calls for a different level of preparation. No amount of planning fully prepares someone for moving to a mission field, but training in cross cultural missions, learning as much as possible about the specific culture to which you are moving, and, to the degree possible, language preparation are all important factors contributing to an easier transition. Finally, missionaries should come to the field fully funded. Several of the people we interviewed talked about colleagues who had an early exit from the field due to stress associated with financial concerns. As one seasoned missionary said, “I would say raise more support than they tell you to raise because you are going to need it... The last thing you need to be worried about is money. You’ve got too many other stressors. If money is a stress, you’re just killing yourself.”

• **Pay close attention to family needs.** There is an old expression “If mama ain’t happy, no one’s happy.” It illustrates the importance of taking the needs of everyone in the family into consideration in making an overseas move. There are a lot of decisions that impact the whole family in transitioning to a new country – where to live, schooling for children, language training, etc. The three stage process we identified above seems to fit a lot of families but not every member will progress through those stages at the same pace. One missionary mom indicated she held off “falling apart” until she was sure her husband and kids were past their lowest points. The good news is that most of the people we talked with indicated that living overseas helped bring their families closer together but transitioning to a new place is always hard on families and moving to a brand new culture only compounds those challenges.
• **Prioritize language learning.** Perhaps the finding that struck us the most was the emphasis placed on learning the language. Repeatedly we heard about the importance of feeling comfortable in the native language. This was not only important for the mission itself; it was also a key factor in enabling missionaries to feel confident in their new home. Nearly all of them said learning a language was difficult. It was a frustrating process, it sometimes seemed far removed from their reason for coming to this new place, and it often left them feeling stupid as they made elementary mistakes among native speakers. Even those who had been speaking their new language for many years acknowledged they would never have the proficiency of a native. It is no wonder, then (at least in my observation), that early exits from the field are often associated with difficulties in learning a new language. But it also seems that mastery of a language may not be as important as showing you are making an effort to learn it. Most missionaries indicated that nationals were usually patient with their mistakes and were encouraged they were taking the effort to communicate with them in their native tongue – unlike most expatriates who came to their country. It appears that making the effort to learn someone’s language may go as far in building a relationship with him or her as mastering it.

• **Find a balance with the expatriate community.** We found that missionaries were less linked to the expat community than people from other sectors. However, connecting with other expats also seemed to be an important point of reference that they valued. Celebrating American holidays with other U.S. citizens, having coffee occasionally with someone from “back home,” or connecting with expats who are part of their church were all important touch points for bridging the gap between the two cultures of which they were a part. As one missionary stated “It’s most restful to hang out with Americans or internationals, just to be flat out honest. But when I came my goal was that I would one day get to a place where I would feel completely at rest hanging out with a Czech – and we are more there now than we ever were.” Recognizing the importance of staying in touch with others from your home culture without allowing those relationships to dominate your time seems to be a helpful strategy in transitioning to a new culture.

• **Cultivate a transparent relationship with supporters.** In Exodus 17 as the Israelites were battling the Amalekites, they were only successful as long as Moses held his arms up. When his arms grew tired, Moses recruited Aaron and Hur to help hold them up so Israel could continue on toward victory. In the same way, missionaries can only do what they do through the help of partners to hold them up. Traditionally, this help has been primarily viewed as monetary in nature, which often contributes to what is best described as an employer-employee relationship. But we found that social and emotional support from mission partners was as important as their financial contributions. Missionaries expressed a desire for good interpersonal relationships with supporters including their sponsoring churches. Regular contact
that was focused not only on their work but also on their spiritual and emotional health, nurturing home assignment experiences, and supportive visits to the field were all seen as ways to develop healthy relationships.

- *Jump into the pool.* If you have ever been to the beach, you may have noticed there are two ways of getting into the water. Some people inch their way in, getting accustomed to the temperature a little bit at a time. Others take a running start and dive headlong into the waves. For missionaries who are seeking to immerse themselves in the culture, the latter strategy seems to be a better fit. Plunging into language learning, exploring cultural traditions, eating strange foods, reaching out to new people – all of these push comfort levels but they are part of living in a foreign country. International moves are adventures, regardless of which sector you are from. Embracing the adventure can help facilitate the transition to a new culture.

These ideas may or may not fit with your own experience and you can probably add some implications of your own. The bottom line is that transitioning to a new culture is a complex process for everyone, regardless of which sector you come from. Missionaries face some unique challenges due to their purpose for coming to the field, their intention to assimilate into the culture, and the nature of their support. In some ways these factors make the shift to a new country more difficult but as they “get on the bus” they may also discover a richness that comes from committing themselves to a new culture that few expats experience.