



# Ferguson Report



Vol. 4 No. 3

“Go ye unto all the world”

March 2007

## Commitment in Missions (I)

One of the most exciting adventures anyone can undertake is the decision to enter the foreign mission field. It is a time of great opportunity and excitement; and also one of grave responsibility as you enter a host country not your own and try to live and work for God in an unfamiliar culture. This responsibility calls for a commitment that is in many ways unsurpassed in its ability to promote either great good in the kingdom of God or to bring in many cases irreparable harm.

### Culture Shock

In L. Robert Kohls book Survival Kit for Overseas Living, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1996, the author describes in a chapter discussing the “occupational hazard of overseas living” 4 distinct stages virtually everyone experiences who ventures to live for some length of time in a foreign country: initial euphoria; irritability and hostility; gradual adjustment; and adaptation or biculturalism (93).

What is so interesting about this process otherwise known as “culture shock” is how acutely I came to recognize these stages in my own mission experiences. The whole idea of living and doing the Lord’s work in a foreign country was intriguing and exciting. Details were not that important; problems would be worked out; we were going! Shortly after arriving, reality set in. The many differences that I took little notice of before began to loom and increase. Instead of having the familiar feelings of safety, control and responsibility—so much a part of at least the world I was familiar with, there was much that was unsafe, out of my control and without my familiar ability to respond. Loss of privacy; robberies; absence of, or poor telecommunication; etc.; all of these and more came in waves unexpectedly. The American cultural impulses that once guided me efficiently through any and every situation was rather useless in the African world. At this point a person is at the height of culture shock and may have any number of “symptoms” ranging from anxiety to “deciding to stay but permanently hating the country and its people” (Kohls 92). Finally, the crisis stage is over and you

begin to gradually adjust. The strange culture you first entered now begins to take on a “home” feel, and you begin to accept things as quite normal. Days turn into weeks, weeks into months, and months into years, and you are now able to function in two cultures confidently. What was once strange has now become normal—if not enjoyable. In fact, if you return at this point you may experience what is known as “reverse culture shock.”

### Missionary Commitments

Perhaps one of the great disservices any missionary can do to himself and to the Lord’s work is to deny that he has ever had culture shock. Not only is he likely guilty of lying, his effort at protecting his ego is not impressive. In having said that, the commitments made initially must be understood and kept even in the face of culture shock. Honestly, therefore, requires that one’s commitments must be maintained in view of the strains the missionary will face on the foreign field. What are some of these commitments?

- A commitment to stay in the field in the face of personal disappointments or tragedies. Life is filled with ups and downs at home and on the mission field. Death is often a reason a missionary returns home. Certainly, he may need to return to grieve and take care of special matters; but he exhibits positive personal and spiritual growth by returning to the field. In fact, the responsibility and activity required on the mission field is probably the very therapy he needs.
- A commitment to fulfill your time obligation in the field. I have had prospective missionaries ask me how long should a person commit to the field. My response is “don’t over-commit.” You may visit a country, but you never *really* know how it will be until you live there. Brethren are funny. If you commit to 5 years but only stay 4, you return as having “failed” to keep your commitment. But if you commit to 2 and stay 3, you come home a “hero.”
- A commitment to fulfill your objectives in the field. This may be difficult for a first-time missionary who is simply trying to “survive” in the new world. If you are working with another missionary there will likely be an over-all objective. However, as you would do in the States, make your own personal goals.

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They will make your work even more rewarding.

- A commitment to your family. One of the greatest tragedies any missionary could make is to save the world but lose his own family. The ability for your family to cope on the mission field will in many ways depend upon the ages of your children. Younger children tend to cope better with their new surroundings. Teenagers, however, may have to be dragged to the airport kicking and screaming. Cy Stafford once relayed to me the advice which the late Andrew Connally gave him. Take the family away for the week-end at least once a month and away for a vacation or furlough at least once a year. It's no different around the world than it is in the states: sometimes you just need to get away.
- A commitment to your sponsoring congregation(s). While money is not what saves the world, good brethren have invested heavily in the missionary. He must be honest in his financial dealings. And while doing business in another country is often tedious and much of it is done without a “paper trail,” he should be able to provide a general financial report when requested. Communication is also important. If you want your supporters to drop off like flies, fail to communicate with them.
- A commitment to fellow-missionaries. In all likelihood, whatever you are going through, your co-workers are or will be experiencing the same as well.

As you need the prayers and encouragement of them, they need those same prayers and encouraging words of you. In addition, they need to be able to depend upon you to help share the work load. On the mission field you are probably working with many “babes” who have constant needs and care. In many cases, growth is a slow-moving process that requires great patience and can easily lead to missionary “burn out.” Unlike the stateside preacher who can drive a few miles and get his battery recharged at the local preachers’ meeting or Bible lectureship, the missionary is often alone or with few empathizers. As you need an ear, lend one also. Let them count on you.

- A commitment to the people in whose land you minister. This cannot be overemphasized. You are a guest normally by the invitation of the host government. That is a privilege that should not be taken lightly. You may not like their bumpy roads. You may despise their poor phone service. You may think their driving is insane. You may think their sanitary conditions are deplorable. But just remember that the local people may just as well see YOU in an unfavorable light. Americans are stereotyped as rude, rich, wasteful, impatient, immoral, and naïve—just to name a few. They can become just as frustrated with us as we are at times with them. Remember, we are not there to change their culture. We are there to change the condition of their souls. Howell

(Continued next month)