

What Missionaries Ought to Know about Ministry Separation

Whenever people in ministry are separated, disagreements are likely to occur. The most famous case is probably when Thomas refused to believe what the other disciples told him about Jesus' resurrection (John 20). Of course, the same was true of other disciples as well (Mark 16, Luke 24).

This has especially been true relative to missions. Even after Peter became convinced about the Gospel being for the Gentiles and witnessed them receiving the Holy Spirit (Acts 10), the other early Christians not there at the time were critical of his actions (Acts 11). A major crisis arose in the early church after Paul and Barnabas returned from their first term of missionary service and had not required the Gentile Christians to be circumcised (Acts 15).

These disagreements and misunderstandings still occur today among missionaries in general but may be especially difficult for husbands and wives experiencing separations related to their missionary ministry. In these days of air travel, absences of a few days or a few weeks are very common, as are even longer absences. This is true not only on the field but perhaps even more so when on home assignment. One spouse or the other may be gone nearly every weekend or several weeks at a time raising support. Although these absences may be more frequent today, the reactions of individuals to them have not changed. What are some of the difficulties that may occur? What can be done to minimize these difficulties?

It always happens when you are gone.

For the spouse left at home, it seems like that is the time crises are most likely to occur. A pipe breaks. The car will not start. The computer locks up and will not reboot. The kids get sick. The teacher wants to talk to a parent about a problem at school. The list goes on and on. Whether such things happen more frequently when a spouse is gone or not, they at least seem to. Here are a few steps one can take to cope with this situation.

- Develop a "practical" support group. Make a list of people you can call on to help with the car, the computer, illness, and other problems.
- Use whatever means of communication you have available to contact your spouse. E-mail can usually bring a response in a few hours. A cell phone can often get an immediate response.
- Ask older missionaries who have lived in the same area for suggestions on how they coped with such situations.
- Lower your expectations. Rather than trying to fix everything, let something go.
- See the brochure on anxiety.

I need your stability.

Marriage is about sharing life, and today that is more possible than ever before. When one spouse feels the need to discuss a situation with the other, the sooner they can do that, the better. When both spouses share in the decision, both have responsibility for the outcome. With our varied means of communication one can contact a spouse virtually anywhere within a few hours, and the

traveling spouse should make that possible. Do not hesitate to spend whatever money is necessary to communicate. Here are a few ways that can be done.

- Cell phones. Do not turn them off unless absolutely necessary for an agreed on length of time. When you do, return the call as soon as possible.
- E-mail. Check your e-mail on an agreed-on schedule and reply immediately.
- Fax. Leave word with whoever receives your fax messages to get them to you as soon as possible and reply immediately.
- Even if there is no "emergency," communicate on an agreed schedule.

What about the children?

Children, like spouses, have various reactions to a parent being gone. They may become angry, lonely, moody, disobedient, withdrawn, and so forth. Here are some ways you can cope with these.

- Communicate I. The traveling parent can talk by phone personally, e-mail a message to each child, or add a special message to a fax.
- Communicate II. The parent at home can encourage communication with the children by asking, sharing, and being vulnerable.
- Discipline must be administered immediately, not when the absent parent returns. If possible, spouses should communicate before it is given.
- See the brochure on adolescence.

I get so angry.

The spouse left at home may become angry at the traveling spouse or angry at God.

One may feel abandoned, that the absent spouse is gone because she or he really wants to be. Even if agreed to beforehand, one may feel anger at God for calling the spouse away. Such feelings must be faced, and so must thoughts about the absent spouse. Talk with others about them, beginning with the object of your anger. If necessary, with permission, talk with selected others.

- With the spouse
- With God
- With a support group
- With a counselor
- See the brochure on anger

We seem to have less and less in common.

Of course, you do. People involved in different activities become concerned about different issues and develop different interests. A strong marriage requires common interests, and that will require intentionally maintaining these.

- Openly discuss with each other what is happening and what interests you want to nurture together.
- Choose interests that you value in your marriage.
- Choose friends that you each value, people with whom you are both comfortable and have similar interests.

I get so lonely.

Of course you do. You are alone. Both of you are alone, so both of you are likely to be lonely. To combat this, you need to intentionally plan how you will combat the loneliness.

- Tell each other about your loneliness.

- Find activities that help decrease the loneliness. For some it may be watching a video, for others having friends in, and for still others, reading a book.
- Both journal about your feelings of loneliness while apart, and then share your journals with each other when together.
- Communicate frequently via e-mail and telephone.
- See the brochure on loneliness.

I can't believe I'm attracted to _____.

Although being attracted to someone other than your spouse takes many people by surprise the first time it happens, it is very common. This attraction may be either sexual or emotional. As one song put it, "When I'm not near the girl (guy) I love, I love the girl (guy) I'm near." Typically we come to like the people we interact with most, which is usually our spouse. If you feel vulnerable in this area, you are. If you do not feel vulnerable, you may be even more vulnerable than those who do feel it. Such attraction must not be tolerated in any way.

- Be honest with yourself about it.
- Be honest with God about it.
- Find an accountability partner (or group) of the same gender to call you regularly to ask for a report.
- See the brochure on sexual stress.

It's so good to have you home, so why are we arguing now?

You have been looking forward to being together for several days or weeks, and now you find yourselves in an argument. What is the problem? Remember that both of you are probably physically and emotionally

exhausted from all the things we have discussed. The spouse who stayed at home has been carrying the load usually carried by two people. The spouse who traveled is tired from work, travel, and perhaps jet lag and intestinal disturbances from getting some of the flora and/or fauna from the local water.

- Both of you need to realize what the situation is.
- Both of you need to be especially patient with each other.
- If disagreements begin, it is best to shelve discussion until you both have time to get rested, perhaps taking turns covering for each other while the other rests.
- Celebrate your reunion (when you are rested) in some special way.
- See the brochure on conflict.

We need to talk.

Missionaries, of all people, should know the importance of debriefing. You consider it routine when you reenter your passport country, and it is the same for any transition. Coming home from a few days or weeks is also a reentry, and you both need the chance to debrief this minor transition. Again, communication is of greatest importance, so debrief each other.

- Look at your journals, and tell each other everything about your separation.
- Consider how this fits in to your life story together.
- Decide what changes this may imply for your lives together in the future
- Make specific plans for how you will cope with separation next time.
- See the brochure on reentry.

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