

MANAGING CHANGE IN MISSION FAMILIES

by **Marion Knell**

Marion and Bryan Knell were well known to AWM company members for many years. Bryan was the UK national director (until 1999) and Marion served as a consultant to families. Marion has written two books to help missionary kids and their parents (see references below) and serves in a number of international bodies as a specialist in TCK care. She also works as a consultant for a secular international relocation company.

‘A bend in the road is not the end of the road – unless you fail to make the turn.’ So goes one definition of change. One word that Third Culture kids associate with change is ‘constant’. Change is a regular feature of their lives. The average TCK makes at least eight major moves before the age of 18 – a major move occurs each time you go in and out of a culture. With more frequent home assignments, that figure is increasing. Small wonder that among the ways of recognising that you’re a TCK (you flew before you could walk, you keep dreaming of a green Christmas, you have a time-zone map next to the phone) is that ‘You’d rather never say hello than have to say goodbye’.

Change is always stressful, and stress is intensified by two things – the period of time involved (the shorter the time, the more painful it is), and the degree of difference between the beginning and end – so cultural change is very stressful.

We want our mission families to not just survive but to thrive in their extremely mobile environments. Ted Ward in the article ‘The MK’s Advantage – 3 Cultural Contexts’ says this: ‘Every time you hear the word ‘survive’ replace it with the word thrive. Because growing up overseas gives the flexibility of intercultural experience, the concrete awareness of what the world is really like and the multilingual and international experience, TCKs are well-equipped to cope in today’s global marketplace’.¹

1. Why should we focus on the families of missionaries?

1.1. Because people go with families, marry on the field and have families, and return home with families.

Many mission organisations these days take more care for their youngest, most innocent members, but there still exists within the church this overall lack of regard. When I try to explain the need to take care of missionaries children to ‘the folks back home’ their eyes glaze over and they soon tire of the subject. Tales of emotional adjustment are not nearly as exciting as those

1. A presentation given at ICMK Quito, January, 1987.

about angels protecting missionaries in the jungle or heathen converts burning idols. Lost MK souls don't seem to 'count' as much as lost souls in faraway lands.

(A quotation from the article 'Anger's story' by Deborah Kartheiser published in *Among Worlds*, Summer 2001)

1.2. Because how we treat them reflects well/badly on the agency, and that impacts support and people-raising.

A study was carried out in 1994 by MK CART/CORE (Consultant and Research Team/Committee on Research and Endowment) among 10,000 Adult MKs (AMKs). The 'climate' of a mission organisation impacts an AMK's life positively when they perceive it as:

- Rewarding good work rather than simply criticising wrong-doing
- Projecting a feeling of friendliness, mutual trust and good relations as the norm at work
- Reflecting a membership that accepts direction from qualified leaders
- Being organisationally well run
- Allowing members the freedom to make decisions and solve problems within their range of responsibility without checking with superiors each step of the way

Bad news travels fast and so does a bad reputation.

1.3. Because of the attrition figures.

In a world survey, when the main reasons were given for missionaries leaving the field prematurely, marriage and family came third, but children came *second*.

Within the UK, the proportion was even higher. Obviously, the reasons presented and the real reasons are not always the same – it's more acceptable to say you're coming home because of the children than because you're not getting on with your colleagues or the local church (See: *Too Valuable to Lose*, Taylor, 92). The sad thing is that many families come home for the wrong reasons and because they have been misinformed. It takes a lot to get a family on the field; how much better, would be to put in place supports which prevent them leaving early. Some of that support has to come in the form of information.

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1.4. Because of current family values and their implication for selection.

Sacrifice is not a popular word – nor should it be in some senses. People are not willing to sacrifice their families to their work as did William Carey, pioneer

missionary to India. They do not come to us with a 'what can we do for you' attitude, but rather, 'what can you do for us?' If you want to recruit people from the under 30s age group, then member care, and in particular care for the family, has to be at the top of your priority. One Bible College-trained man said, 'Jesus never said we should leave our wives and children.' No? What about Jesus' words 'Whoever has left home and brothers or sisters...' ? (Admittedly, Jesus' teaching there is about what is most important.)

Yet, many people today come into missions with a 'family first' attitude and everything else has to fit in around that. That can actually stifle missionary enterprise. This represents a swing of the pendulum away from the extreme of previous generations, in which sacrificing the well-being of one's family was expected by everyone. Of course, one of the reasons for this new 'family first' attitude is that many people of their generation come from broken homes and are determined not to make the same mistakes as their parents. Rather than disqualify them for missionary service we need to ask how we can equip them to cope well with their families and thus help allay their fears.

Mission agencies need to show that they are sensitive to family issues. It's no good giving the impression that candidates who take their families seriously are not fully surrendered to Christ or suitable for world missions. If you are serious about recruiting the next generation of missionaries, then you have to take family considerations seriously.

In this article we will be looking at ways we can assist and empower families to manage change. How do we give geographically rootless TCKs a sense of belonging? How do we equip parents to provide stability and confidence in change? Dr Marjory Foyle has said: 'If the family foundation is healthy, that gives children a handle by which they can cope with the stresses and changes in life' (Personal conversation).

What do we want to do?

- Look at the big picture. Often, concern for the family focuses on education or spiritual issues, but there's a lot more involved. There has been a considerable shift in the attitude of young missionary families, sometimes called 'family-firsters'. If you look at the history of world missions there are some dreadful tales of how families, particularly children, were treated. People are now much more protective of their families.
- Consider the process of going overseas. We will look at what happens to a family, the dynamics of change, and what they can reasonably expect in the light of previous studies on the subject.
- Explore the implications for kids: being a TCK is a lifetime experience, it is rich, it makes you someone different, it has its own challenges and benefits.

- Explore the implications for parents: the impact of the choices they make for themselves and their children, their responsibilities, the priority of their relationship.
- Explore the implications for the whole family: the extended family and their involvement, the concerns for those left behind, and factors in decision-making.
- Review the possibilities: knowledge empowers, so the greater the level of information the more informed are the choices. Several MKs speak of the 'delusion of choice' – having decisions made for them over which they had no control and in which they had no voice.
- Ensure preparation – of kids, parents, family, sending church and agency.
- Develop long-term planning – assignments may be shorter, but still the effects of decisions made can be far-reaching.
- Encourage the maximum benefit to be achieved.

I've subtitled my book *Growing up Overseas and Loving it*. Sometimes the experience of growing up overseas gets negative press, but overwhelmingly my studies showed that people valued the experience – even while acknowledging the pain. The following quotes come from research for the book:

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'I count it a real privilege to have been brought up overseas and loved in another culture.'

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'I count it a real privilege to have been brought up overseas and loved in another culture. It has been a major influence on my character, making me more broad-minded than my contemporaries and giving me a certain amount of empathy and understanding in supporting missionaries through our church.'

'I am very glad that I am an MK. I would not change it for anything. I want to go overseas myself.'

'Living overseas was an invaluable experience which I am lucky to have enjoyed.'

'I love living like this!'

2. Understanding Third Culture Kids

In order to look at managing change, we have to start with understanding what it means to be a Third Culture Kid. Many are familiar with Dave Pollock's definition of a TCK:

A TCK is an individual who, having spent a significant part of the developmental years growing up in a culture other than the parents' culture, develops a sense of relationship to all of the cultures whilst not having full ownership of any. Elements from each culture are incorporated into the life experience, but the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar experience. (*Third Culture Kids*, 19)

The writer Ruth van Reken has broadened the study to encompass a larger group – CCKs – Cross-Cultural Kids. Her definition is: ‘A cross-cultural kid is a person who has lived in – or meaningfully interacted with – two or more cultural environments for a significant period during the developmental years.’ This larger group of CCKs includes: (See: www.crossculturalkid.org):

- Traditional TCKs: children who move into another culture with the parents due to parents’ career choice.
- Bi-multicultural and/or bi/multi-racial children.
- Children of immigrants: children who have made a permanent move to new country where they were not originally citizens.
- Children of minorities: children whose parents are from a racial or ethnic group which is not part of the majority race or ethnicity of the country in which they live.
- International adoptees: children adopted by parents from another country other than the one of that child’s birth.
- ‘Domestic’ TCKs: children whose parents have moved in or among various subcultures within that child’s home country.

It is helpful to note that children are often in more than one of these circles at the same time (e.g. a traditional TCK who is also from a minority group; a child of immigrants whose parents are from two different cultures, etc). This helps us to understand the growing complexity of issues we face in our changing world.

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Questions:

1. Mobility gives confidence in change, but how do you give TCKs roots in a sea of change?
2. Adaptability means you learn to cope and become flexible, but when does the strain become too much and the elastic snap?
3. Having extensive relationship banks means you have friends everywhere, but how do you learn to make commitments that will last?
4. Knowing the importance of ‘now’ means you make the most of the present, but how do you plan long-term decisions, like college courses and careers?
5. Having world perspective means you understand the breadth of cultures and tastes, but how do you evaluate your own culture without becoming judgmental?
6. Speaking more than one language is a tremendous asset, but how do you ensure mastery of the mother tongue or adequate proficiency in either language?

It is as we learn to answer those questions that we learn how to help equip families to manage the changes they face. We do this by helping them to: (1) think biblically – about parenting, marriage and mission, and (2) think strategically – what skills do we need? What resources can we use? Who can or should help us? What was your experience the last time you moved?

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Helping missionary families handle change well will keep many of them in ministry much longer. As Marjory Foyle has noted, 'Expatriate breakdown tends not to be a phenomenon of expatriate employees themselves but rather of their spouse and children' (Anon 1998 study quoted by Marjory Foyle in her thesis for *Honourably Wounded* 2nd edition).

I want to look at the subject under three area headings: preparing for change, continuity in change and integrating change. Essentially, this covers three stages in the missionary family/missionary kid's career – (1) what you can do pre-field, (2) what you can do on-field, and (3) what you can do on re-entry.

3. Preparing for change

Marjory Foyle says that two things are necessary for the well-being of a missionary family: an assurance of God's will and a firm foundation for family life. Not family *or* ministry, but family in ministry. This has implications for us at the stage of selection. Is the call shared jointly by both husband and wife? It is very dangerous to send a couple when the wife is merely 'following her husband'. Both need to know that this is God's will for them as a family.

A firm foundation for family life means having the necessary skills and confidence to build your family.

3.1 Prepare the parents

3.1.1. Relationship skills

As has been remarked, Gen Xers often have very poor role models in this area, so it is good to put some strategies in place before they go. Parents need help in relationship skills. For an MK, home is to be found in their parents' relationship, the place where they find their security and well being. Because of this, it is of paramount importance that couples put their own relationship at the top of their list of priorities and nourish it. What resources do personnel officers have at their disposal to help people develop their relationships before they go overseas? Many will be living in societies where it is very difficult to find time together or to relax in the way they have back home. In a people-oriented culture, you're in a fish bowl – people drop in at all hours, everyone knows what's going on. It may not be the norm for couples to go out together – how much do you help people to

think these issues through before they go, and to develop appropriate coping strategies?

The CART study concluded: ‘The research confirmed that parents play an all-important role in shaping the lives of the adults their children become. Their life-model, the training they give and the relationship they foster with their children during the formative years contribute significantly to the overall well-being of the adult MK’. (*Interact*, May 1994, 6)

3.1.2. Parenting skills

Many couples come from broken homes or single-parent families and have not had the examples of conflict resolution, unconditional love and good discipline to follow. Before they go, we need to think through with candidates what skills they may need to develop in this area and what tools and resources are open to them. What were the childhood messages they received? These are likely to be passed on now that the couple are adults, unless critiqued. Increasingly, cross-cultural marriages are the norm in missions. When children come along your own culture comes most to the fore – we parent according to our cultural norms, and it can be a source of some tension in cross-cultural marriage.

Similarly, cross-cultural marriages may need special help when the husband and wife are coping with the differences between each other’s cultures. Both parties may cope whilst in a neutral country, but they may come under severe strain when trying to live in either of their home cultures. The child can suffer from enhanced identity problems when the parents are not really sure where they belong.

Marjory Foyle suggests that the healthy family platform consists of balance, affirmation, understanding, communication, constant discipline, caring and love. (*Families on the Move*, 33-40)

Very often it is in the area of parenting that conflicts arise within teams. Our parenting is cultural and we can tend to measure the success of our ministry by how well our children are doing. It is important that as Christians we do not allow our children to become ego-supportive. If they are going on with the Lord, we recognise the grace of God. If they decide to choose a different path, that is their choice – Proverbs 22:6 is a general observation, not a promise.

Again, the CART study concluded:

Parenting styles with positive correlation included:

- Involving children in decision-making
- Encouraging children to hold their own viewpoints and explore new ideas
- Spending time with children and making them feel that what they do is important

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- Supporting children even when they make poor decisions
 - Communicating openly within the family
- Poor parenting styles included:
- Parents acting distant when the child has disappointed them
 - Using guilt or shame as punishment
 - Setting few rules and letting children act as they please
 - Using force to make children conform
 - Being too busy to answer questions
 - Acting as though the children were an annoyance or making them feel foolish

Adults need to understand parenting skills with respect to the fact that they are parenting overseas, and they need to take in all the dimensions that this cross-cultural reality includes. Do you have a book like my *Families on the Move* on your recommended reading list for parents? Forewarned is forearmed. A number of parents who've come home after a term overseas read the book and then say, 'I only wish I'd known this 4 years ago.'

3.1.3. Child Development

The CART study concluded:

Supplying parents with information about appropriate expectations and different needs of the child at various stages of his development and how parenting style needs to adjust accordingly is pertinent information. Clearly articulating mission expectations and policies regarding MK and family issues is essential to understanding what is acceptable, normal and right in mission culture. (*Interact*, May 1994)

It is important for parents to know the 'normal' stages of child development. When your child is undergoing changes, stressful ones at that, it's important to be able to distinguish between normal stress and cultural stress. There are the terrible twos no matter where you are, along with adolescence. It's easy to get paranoid in an isolated situation when you have no benchmarks and no supportive community (such as mums and toddlers or your church community). What is more, experience tells us that Christians back home are not averse to criticising parents for taking children overseas.

Paranoid parents have got to be helped. They think they've hurt their kids. They think God goofed. They think somehow God has to separately call everybody at every minute at every hour to every altitude, latitude, longitude and attitude. That has got to be a lot of bunk. Our God has called ALL of us into this world

to be ministering persons in cultures. Whether I'm locked into some gosh awful subcultural context in North America or some other in the world, what's the difference?

(Ted Ward, 'The MK's Advantage: Three Cultural Contexts' in *The Family in Mission*)

Part of change and cross-cultural transition is helping people to critique their own culture as well as the next. TCKs are often critical of their own culture and need help to adjust to the changes it brings.

3.2 Prepare the child

I notice that many missions have an orientation course for parents during which the kids are looked after but not given their own orientation. I think this is a big mistake and a golden opportunity missed. These children are going through a massive change. Whether or not their parents make it and how long they stay will depend on how well the kids did.

The most important thing is to communicate – tell them how it is, what it will be like out there; allow them to ask questions; counteract any wrong impressions they may have gathered; investigate, using the web, libraries and pre-field visits.

Secondly, children need permission and ways to express emotions, to say how they feel. Children should be interviewed on their own. *Harold and Stanley Say Goodbye*, by Jill Dyer, is an excellent book for small children. Using hand puppets or stories helps too.

Thirdly, children need to be given a voice. Many MKs say they feel like victims – decisions were made which profoundly affected them but over which they had no choice or voice. The older the child gets the more important it is to involve them in decision-making. It is wise to think twice before taking adolescents overseas for the first time. Consider moving times and assignments in relation to the whole family life-cycle. What mechanism exists in your mission for children to have a voice?

3.3 Prepare the extended family

Grandparents in particular want to be involved and to understand what is happening. The biological family, church family and mission agency all have a part to play; they are going to be some of the stable influences in the midst of all this change. This means educating them on what it means to be a TCK, discussing how they can participate actively, investigating pastoral care of those left behind and inclusion at significant events.

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The total missions community has to gather considerable resources to do everything possible to build good marriages and satisfying family life among missionaries. Some field leaders may have to revise demands. Some may have to move family development higher up on the priority ladder. If they do, isn't Christ strong enough to keep families on the missionary firing line, while at the same time giving them a wonderfully satisfying family life? (The CART study, *Interact*, May 1994)

4. Continuity in Change

One of the big challenges for missionary families is continuity. These changes are made once every two to four years – these days people come 'home' more often. Bridges need to be built during the time families are away that will sustain relationships, ease transition and sustain them during their time overseas.

Let's take it one step back. Everyone has to decide when they go overseas how closely they are going to identify with the local culture – the closer you identify the harder it is to re-enter. The more rigid the culture the harder it is. The following considerations should be borne in mind when making the decision on integration:

1. Educational considerations: the culture of school, ethos of school, the degree of continuity with system back home, time commitment for parents, social interaction of child
2. Life-style considerations: what will aid integration to the community, what is fair to the children, language acquisition, living privately or living in the community
3. Faith issues: what opportunity is there to worship, how is family life expressed, job demands and ministry possibilities and resulting conflicts

When those decisions have been made, a strategy for bridge-building back into the passport culture can begin. Many missionaries have identified so closely with their host culture that their children have considerable difficulty when it comes to going 'home'. This is much harder for cross-cultural marriages where the couple cannot decide where home is.

Building Bridges can be built by:

- Communication – letter, Skype, email
- Feasts and festivals – celebrating national days, family days
- Rituals and routines – maintaining routines that transcend culture
- Sacred objects – keeping things that are precious
- Visits – from home, church, family

- Educational link – a professional update on education
- Link Family – close links with a family with kids of similar ages
- Family time – prioritising time together
- Extended family – involving the extended family
- Life story books – compiling a personal history
- Tapes, videos, scrapbooks – receiving up-to-date, age-appropriate literature

This can be reinforced when planning for home assignments, another major source of change for mission families. Most families I know hate HMA. It's stressful, tiring and full of unrealistic expectations.

5. Home assignments

It is vital to have clear objectives – personally, professionally, as a family, for the children – and to plan with them in mind. Bear in mind that this is not home; not only will the children find the home country strange, people will find them strange. Even parents have lost contact through time and distance.

Lastly, to think positively, a home assignment is an opportunity to connect. Here are some helpful hints:

- Have a base – don't live out of a suitcase
- Do the 'national trail' – explore your country
- Forge educational links
- Take advantage of spiritual opportunities
- Minimise travelling – have central venues to meet people so they can come to you
- Participate in secular activities – films, clubs, sports, and drama
- Teach skills not needed in host culture
- Book health check-ups and educational testing.

6. Preparation for re-entry

The biggest change of all is on the final return. When I was in the process of writing a book on re-entry, reading the questionnaires was a painful exercise. It is alarming how many people come back with no preparation, no idea of what reverse culture shock is, no tools to help them get back into their home culture. Because they look as though they belong, everyone assumes they know what the score is. There are tragic tales of MKs who got into trouble, were injured because they didn't know how to handle stuff, and didn't like to appear dumb and ask questions. The first thing to tell a returning MK is that there is no question too dumb to ask.

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We help TCKs deal with anger, grief, bitterness, loss and separation by giving them permission to feel pain and permission to express their feelings. We help them find helpful ways to say goodbye and people with whom they can share their experiences. One TCK wrote:

Our parents experience an incredible amount of stress... particularly in the midst of transitions. We find ourselves questioning if they really care or love us. All we know is that we are confused, feeling alone and perhaps hurting over the last goodbye, but no one around seems to take notice... let alone care. And those who should be closest to us – our parents – are dealing with the same issues and may not be able to give the care we would assume. Unfortunately parents often don't realise what is going on. I don't hear too many parents say, 'Son, I'm sorry but we're in the midst of transition and can't give to you like we should.' Instead there is that eerie silence and we assume we are not loved and shove it all down inside. ('Bitterness – the hidden time bomb' by Matthew Neigh in *Among Worlds*, Summer 2001, 8)

Another expressed it this way:

'We all have to deal with grief sometime in our lives. Friendships are broken, relationships destroyed, because of situations beyond our control. Love is something to be cherished, to be held deep within our hearts. Sometimes it is almost unbearable to say goodbye, when I hold that person for what may be the very last time in my life. The grief I'm feeling comes out in the form of tears cascading from my eyes.' (Bitterness, *ibid*, 6)

Concluding Thought

In the following excerpts from her poem, Ruth Goring sums it up well (MTI/Children Intercultural Programme):

'I am Green'

I. I wish

Growing up between two cultures

Is a tense

Liberating, frustrating,

Bruising, hilarious, exciting

Experience

.....

IV. I am Green

One life is navy blue

One life is sunshine yellow

I am green

Is there a place

Where

I can be green?

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Online Magazine for TCKs: <http://www.denizen-mag.com>

Among Worlds: magazine for adult TCKs, <http://www.interactionintl.org/amongworlds.asp>

A very active TCK online community: <http://www.tckid.com/group/about>

Dedicated to support and understanding of TCKs:

<http://www.crossculturalkid.org> and <http://www.interactionintl.org/home.asp>