

From One Generation to the Next: Lessons and Advice for Staying the Course

By V. Phillips

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We will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, His power, and the wonders He has done. Ps. 78:4

“Wow, got any advice you can give me?!” asked a surprised young colleague recently when I said my career as a missionary to Africa started in 1989. Perhaps he saw my life experience as a source of inspiring practical information but, in that moment, my answer was neither profound nor helpful. While over thirty years in missions probably sounds like a long time to someone in their twenties, I still feel I am on a journey, full of faith-growing learning experiences. In fact, after two decades of overseas ministry, I decided to pursue graduate studies in intercultural adult education with the desire to take my learning to a deeper level and become more “effective” in my ministry with Muslim women. Academic studies, combined with embracing my age a bit more positively perhaps, have contributed in this moment to a motivation to pass on practical information and relevant experience to help the next generation of field workers.

To be clear, longevity on the field is not necessarily an indicator of success. Indeed, most career missionaries would readily admit their weaknesses, challenges, mistakes, and failures. Still, lessons learned from personal experiences over time provide useful teaching value. Missiological research addresses attrition and the reasons why workers leave the field early. However, solving issues of attrition is not a guarantee of long-term retention. Keeping workers on the field is equally important and can help sending organizations understand factors contributing to resilience as well as fruitfulness.¹ My goal for this article is simply to share lessons learned and advice from a generation of senior fieldworkers that hopefully motivate and encourage perseverance for a younger generation serving the Lord.

My “research” was very informal. I wrote to several contacts with about 30 years of overseas service and asked the question, “If you could go back and speak to your twentysomething-year-old self about preparing for overseas missionary work, what would you say?” The reasoning for this open-ended question was to emphasize personal thoughts and applications while preventing any interpretation of the responses that may sound like a critique of present practices or practitioners. As a follow-up, I asked the question, “What helped you in times of struggle, slowness, or a lack of results?”

The response to my informal survey was surprisingly high and very encouraging. Out of 30+ emails sent out, there were 25 replies. Answers were at times short and simple, while others offered specific and detailed observations. Responses came from men and women representing five ethnic backgrounds and ten different agencies serving in places all over the world. Some missionaries are parents who raised their children on the field, while others have served as singles. Some work in a particular professional capacity, while others are in full-time ministerial roles. Although there was a wide variety of people, the

1 From the ReMap I (1997) and ReMap II (2003) studies which are basis for the books by Taylor (1997) and Hay et al. (2007).

answers were quite similar on many points, and I accumulated several pages of their collective wisdom.

Despite the anecdotal nature of my survey “data,” I broke down the responses into categories of *lessons learned* and *advice on staying the course* in line with the two questions asked. Quotation marks indicate the participants’ words, and I use pseudonyms to protect their privacy.² A long time worker in West Africa, for example, started his response with, “To be blessed with long-term field fruit, be faithful to long-term preparation.” The connection between long-term preparation and long-term blessing and fruit was key to understanding the mindset of each of the 25 senior workers. Intentional long-term preparation with a desire to see fruit that remains for God’s glory is truly the blessing.

Whatever ministry hardships you are facing at this stage of your mission’s career – language study, cultural adjustments, or the ups-and-downs of church planting endeavors – the prayer is our responses will be a blessing and an encouragement for you to press on for God’s glory.

Lessons Learned: Being Teachable

“Learn to be a learner” is a phrase we hear often in mission circles, and one the survey participants echoed when speaking to their younger selves. Another way of saying this is simply to be teachable. Having an attitude of a learner begins at God’s call, impacts preparation, grows significantly over the first term on the field, and continues throughout the length of a missionary’s career. You will not just learn about other cultures and people, but also learn about yourself and God. Be prepared, therefore, to have a teachable attitude and a learner’s heart, and as Alan would add, “A humble posture.”

2 Many quotes were a re-wording of similar ideas.

Learning Starts Pre-Field and Continues On-Field

Mission agencies generally provide good training in cross-cultural living and church planting, but most workers go to the field without a lot of hands-on, practical experience. Scott wishes he “knew a bit more before going,” even though he had tried starting a church in his home country. He also realized a need to learn “how to resolve conflict” in a culturally appropriate way. Kelly found she needed to understand and apply church discipline because she had never had exposure to a biblical practice of it in her home church. Before going to the field, the respondents strongly suggested learning more about the culture of your field of service by studying their history, reading books, meeting people from there, and making a survey trip when possible. Gwen stressed to get “as much information as possible on the culture and beliefs of the people you want to reach” such as Islam. My own observation in learning to contextualize the gospel would include worldview influences such as honor/shame as well. The more cross-cultural exposure you have before going, the easier the adjustment to your new life overseas. Lucy felt strongly that being “ill-prepared” with “very culturally bound ideas of faith” had the potential to be damaging to her work in a remote area of Africa. Her lessons learned involved finding ways to express her faith in different settings to break free from her “cultural baggage.”

Learning increases significantly when reaching the field, no matter how well prepared you feel you may be. In fact, you may need to remind yourself you do not know everything you need to know. Try “to slow down,” Rose advises, and “go in first as a learner.” Learning about a new culture involves immersing yourself, listening, observing before acting, and accepting you will make mistakes. Bev’s advice is to “learn from mistakes and failures rather than be paralyzed by them.” She would tell her perfectionist twenty-something self she does not “have to get everything right.” Sam, a fellow perfectionist, echoed this sentiment, “Forget about trying to be perfect and pretending you can’t and don’t make mistakes.” His advice as a worker in his fourth decade of mission

work is to “be quick to admit [mistakes] and learn from them, asking others for input on ways to improve or avoid them.” Emma offers her summary thoughts on this stage of the learning process:

Go as a learner, you don’t have to know everything, nor do you have all the answers. Learn to ask questions, learn to listen, learn to reflect with others so that you make the most of the opportunities for learning ... listen to yourself as part of learning because then you can ask why you feel/react in certain ways.

Beth would add to “learn from those who have gone before” who are “happy to share their lives and experiences they need to be asked.”

Learning Language & Culture

Cross-cultural adjustments include learning to “appreciate the uniqueness of the culture and people,” Sara tells us, and “find beauty in their life” — no matter what stage of culture shock you are experiencing. Learning culture has a strong tie to the critical hard work of language study. Of the 25 responses received, half emphasized the importance of spending extra time really learning the heart language and understanding the culture. Looking toward retirement in the next year, Lynn shares that her “linguistic ability is very poor” but learning the language is “such a better way to understand the culture and nuances involved,” and if she had focused on study of “one of the languages in the places I worked, perhaps I would have had some success.” Beth adds, you “need to log a lot of time with people to learn language and culture.” In 32 years overseas, I can honestly say I have never heard anyone express regret for spending too much time in language study. Fran “tried to move to new things” in her language when she “hadn’t yet internalized the vocabulary,” and felt her push to rush learning hurt her progress. Ed started his own language school business, adding the unique observation that “language learning time is not lost. It teaches not only the language but teaches on how to learn from locals. It teaches the position of a learner and gives

locals the status of teachers.” Ed and several of my senior friends would encourage their younger selves to not “go too fast” nor “cut language learning short considering it a bothersome duty before ministry; count it as an important phase of ministry.”

Growing as a Person

In addition to learning language and culture skills, long-termers expressed a need to develop personal practices – to wait, be patient ... follow God’s leading, to slow-down, to sit still, and to recognize when you need physical, emotional, or spiritual rest. Resting and getting enough sleep, Joan wrote, was a memorable piece of advice she received at her first mission conference, impressing on her God’s gift of Sabbath in ways she had not experienced before. Learn to give yourself grace and be gentle on yourself in times of struggle and discouragement. Journaling is “a good way of capturing your questions and reflections,” Emma adds. Ruth notes certain areas of learning can feel “arduous ... new skills will take many hours of time,” which includes “building relationships, government and company paperwork, living life.” Her reminder is to think of “Mary sitting at Jesus’ feet ... keep your focus on him.” This learning process develops character and, for Fran, helps you “to mature” and “grow in your faith.”

Learning to be a learner in personal practices also may require a shift in attitudes and expectations, adjusting life and ministry into a more realistic perspective. Learning to be flexible is a lesson stressed by the long termers, or as Jill says, “Learn to develop a taste for change.” Adapt an attitude of openness in new situations that are uncomfortable. Kay describes this type of flexibility as a willingness to “try to fit with the culture and not fight it,” while reminding yourself that the new culture’s way of doing something is “not wrong, just different.” Stepping out of your comfort zone can be challenging for some, while others enjoy the adventure. There were occasions when I experienced both extremes in my mission’s career, especially when I chose to live for a year with a large Muslim family. I had many moments of discomfort and,

admittedly, the adventure of it wore off quickly. On the other hand, the experience of that adventure was invaluable to my cultural understanding. Introverts may struggle to initiate relationships, perfectionists may balk at attempting conversations with messy grammar, and the occasional cultural faux pas may lead to moments of awkwardness, but all are a part of entering into the culture. Having high expectations of yourself and wanting to see results are not bad, but we need to keep a perspective that allows the Spirit to work. The adage “God is just as interested in what he is doing in you as through you” has been a constant reassurance in my own journey.

When Ministry Progress is Slow: Advice for “Staying the Course”

Managing Expectations

The impact of our expectations touch on overseas life at many levels, including ministry. Disappointments in mission work and frustrations with daily functioning and living can be a cause of stress and discouragement. Being realistic in expectations is important when there is a lack of results.

Gwen stresses that patience is necessary and not to “expect great fruit in a short time.” Muslim countries, she notes, are “hard ground, and people will take time to get to know and to trust you before even considering accepting your faith for themselves.” Her experiences over the years included being taken advantage of financially and seeing multiple workers trying to disciple the same new believer. Gwen would encourage her younger self to “take time to discern the situation” and talk with others. Even a confession of faith may be questionable when a seeker appears to want to “please us or receive something in return.” Discernment and building trust, therefore, are wise. Despite discouragements and misunderstandings, Gwen graciously encourages an attitude that is “ready to forgive” and continues to show love; “Love is the greatest weapon we have and will have an impact on people even many years later.”

Learning to adjust expectations happens even when we are eager to see measurable results. Questions of being good stewards of financial support, external pressure by those who rate our success on numbers of converts (or establishing an on-going church), and our own internal pressures and doubts of being effective can manifest in many ways:

In the first 16 years of service, the 'lack of results' constantly plagued me. I did it all... compare myself with others, work harder, give up more of myself, want to quit, look for 'power.' But, like so many things my eyes were focused on the wrong place.... When I keep my eyes on Jesus, trusting and obeying, that walk of faith is the right focus. (Ruth)

Faithful Obedience

Trust and obedience are essentials in understanding the stay-the-course success of missionary work. All the respondents (myself included) describe these evidences of a walk of faith in their ministries. Emma shared, "for me, I have to ask constantly – am I being faithful? As I grow in that, then the question of results is less fraught." When troubled by a lack of numbers, Max reminds himself, "God keeps track of results based on faithfulness and obedience." The lyrics to the hymn "Trust and Obey" have come to me often over the years, which speak to the promise of joyful fellowship with the Lord as we walk with him. The words remind me to look past my fears and doubts, to lay all on the altar, and to trust there is ultimately, "not a burden we bear, not a sorrow we share, but our toil He doth richly repay."

Being faithfully obedient, despite a lack of visible results, is a spiritual discipline field workers grow in as they learn to trust God in their ministries. Three of the respondents are career staff with Cru³, which has the organizational evangelism principle of "sharing Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit and leaving the results to God." Scott aims at

3 Cru is the name of Campus Crusade for Christ International in the U.S. <https://www.cru.org/>.

“cultivating faithful obedience and trusting God to bear fruit” in times of discouragement, “focusing on faithfulness to him, abiding in him, and loving others.” Bev reminds herself, “I am not the Savior. Jesus is.” The value each worker places on grounding their identity in his or her spiritual calling is significant in motivating them to press on. John’s “bottom line” is being able to answer yes to the questions – “did I hear the voice of the Lord in guiding me into his ministry ... did I remain faithful, loving, and holy as I served in that ministry for the time that he wanted me in it? Visible or invisible results are just icing on the cake!” Focusing on Jesus, witnessing in the power of the Holy Spirit, using our spiritual gifts, and waiting for God to work in his time and way, all help a struggling worker to stay the course of their calling with trust in the Lord for results.

‘Results’ belong to God. He owns and foreordains them. Preparing the soil, sowing, and weeding constitute most ‘groundbreaking’ mission labors – and that can take decades. God decides when the brief glory of spiritual harvest happens, and which usually follows intensive persecution, national upheaval, great suffering, setbacks, and repentance. (Bob)

A missionary’s identity is not found in results, though we rejoice when we see them. Both Bob and John tell us, however, that lasting results often are accompanied by trials and persecution. Jesus tells us that the farmer in the parable sows the seed of the gospel broadly. In my first years of life in North Africa, I remember hearing a senior worker say that the hard soil is more like concrete – you need a pickaxe to break through, then remove many rocks and deal with a lot of weeds – all part of preparing for God’s harvest. I have learned to appreciate the proverbial “slow plod” in mission work among Muslims: time intensive work done with determination, faith, and prayer. “Be diligent” Alan exhorts, and remember, “the results of the harvest belong to God.” Dean adds his perspective on obedience and trusting God: “so long as I fulfill his calling to the best of my limited ability, the results are in his hands.”

Ministry Methodologies

Trusting God and not worrying about results, even when we long for them, leads to some important insight into the question of missionary methodologies. Few of the 25 respondents mentioned specific ministry strategies or methods as essential elements of “success.” Field workers may talk enthusiastically of doing a new training or discovering a new tool that is “effective” or “quicker” in getting results. These methodologies may emphasize an evangelism technique, Bible study materials, or an adapted discipleship program. Who decides the effectiveness of these tools? The responses from these senior workers show that sustainable growth in depth of faith and in numbers of converts will be evident with time, investment in relationships, and testing through trial. Translating new materials into the local language may be a vital step, but local context is important to consider. I learned not to assume that a method that works well with Muslims in Bangladesh would work the same way with Arab Muslims.

One methodology specifically mentioned by three of the long-termers that appears to be effective is the use of stories. Ruth advises to “learn to naturally tell stories about Jesus ... what he did which is recorded in the Bible, what he has done in your life, his teachings, his favorite words.” My studies in intercultural education have convinced me that storying methods are significant in teaching not only those with low levels of literacy but also in much of the non-Western world where the preferred learning style is oral.

Beth shared her opinion on how to see methods and strategies in general:

There is no magic wand. There is no method that will be the key that will unlock the door to ministry effectiveness ... all methods need to be adapted to the context. A better approach is to have a toolbox full of helpful tools to effectively share truth with someone according to their need ... the Spirit doesn’t want us trusting our methods but trusting in him, which is one reason I think he does things in surprising ways. (Beth)

Her comment on methods goes back to the importance of learning and understanding the people and culture and adapting your tools to fit their context. Long-termers highlight relationships as a key to success. "Put in time to develop relationships and gain trust," Fran says, because "relationship is the bedrock of our work." Scott looks back and tells his younger self to "start with families rather than individuals" and focus on training new believers in both skills and vision to "reach others ... in discipleship." Another "key to successful interactions [is] humility," Lucy reminds us. Dean would add, the "key is to love people and get close to them. That will involve hurt, pain, and misunderstandings as well as the glory of seeing lives changed."

Over the years, I have seen that methods and strategies play a helpful role in giving focus for team vision and providing accountability to reach shared goals. The general principle with any method is intentionality. Be intentional in learning to share the gospel in ways that lead to understanding as you trust the outcomes to God. His Spirit works through relationships. Amy summarized by saying that "nothing in God's economy is wasted ... no word, action, connection, kindness, sacrifice, etc. is unseen and unused by God. [The] work will be very slow ... and requires intensity in relationships, but will be worth it."

Persevering in the Spiritual Struggle

In times of trials and struggle – and there will be many – stay the course. Overseas life and ministry are not always easy but are very rewarding. Be aware that the spiritual battle is more intense when the Spirit is at work. Understanding your identity and position in Christ will help in recognizing and coping during periods of spiritual warfare. Bob shared of the need to "learn to suffer," "suffer well," and "spend lots of time praying over your relationships." The number one defense in spiritual battle and our most important ministry strategy/tool is prayer. "Don't give up – pray for change," Sara exhorts, emphasizing the value of "a strong support team" to keep your contacts lifted. Sara and her husband do regular evaluations as a family and with their team, not wanting to "gloss over deep discouragements," but "be honest and

assess” as you share prayer requests about “hard and discouraging times.” In hard times, “we were driven to our knees,” Dawn shared, acknowledging a need to “stay close to God.” Joan emphasized that perseverance is coupled with staying close to God “through the reading of the word and prayer so that we can hear his leading.” Emma’s prayer strategy is to develop a personal “spirit of gratitude,” to become “a daily celebrator of what God is doing” looking for “glimpses of where I see God at work.” Prayer support on the home front is essential, and “praying and fasting together” as a team on the field is invaluable. Ed advises having a field “prayer partner.” Pray always when facing “a lot of complicated emotions”—as Lucy shared—or when frustrated by a lack of fruit, knowing that your walk of faith pleases our Heavenly Father.

Sources and Examples of Encouragement

Encouraged by Scripture

Prayer and abiding in Christ are both means and methods of seeing God work in us personally as well as in our ministries. A few senior workers accompanied their comments with Scriptural promises and/or examples of personal heroes who inspire faithful obedience. Max referred to Romans 9 as a passage that helps him see that salvation is not dependent on “human desire or effort, but on God’s mercy” (v. 16) and our “need to be faithful and obedient.” Chapter 8 of Romans is significant to Bev.

Rom. 8:28 [says] “In all things God works for the good of those who love him ...” [and in verse 31] “if God is for us, who can be against us?” So, once I stand on the truth that God is good, then I have to believe that what he does is good ... that was a huge leap forward in trusting God with the results. (Bev)

Bev highlighted other passages that speak to her when she feels a “temptation to worry that God won’t come through” (2 Cor. 9:8, Phil. 4:19), trusting that “God is accomplishing his purpose, not mine” (Prov.

19:21), or struggling with seeing God's goodness (Psalm 100:5). Psalm 37 "was very impactful" for getting Scott through "discouraging times." For Ruth, Luke 10:38-42 helps her to hold onto "only one thing is necessary" as she remembers Mary sitting at Jesus' feet. Bob sees the book of 2 Corinthians as a "prerequisite to every eventual breakthrough" in understanding how to "suffer well" and persevere. John recalled "praying often that if I could disciple just 12 men, I would consider it a tremendous success!" The twelve men who walked with Jesus and his prayer for them in John 17 certainly represent a significant example of effectiveness in discipleship and transformed lives.

God uses his Word in many ways to provide the encouragement and strength needed for us to stay the course. A personal favorite is Philippians 3-4 and the Apostle Paul's determination to "press on" in pursuit of his goals. In the Psalms, David shared lessons learned as he trusted the Lord – in remaining obedient in trials, in waiting on God's timing, and in humble seeking in moments of doubt. In one particularly eventful time of my life, the story of Elijah was helpful (1 Kings 18), after a period of "being zealous for God" was followed by serious disappointments. The Lord's "still small voice" came like a whisper of his amazing grace and love in that moment of need. Long-termers can relate to the challenges of church planting that Paul and the apostles experienced (Allen 2017). The book of Acts accounts of the early church and Paul's missionary travels are special reminders of how God's Spirit works in surprising and unexpected ways.

Examples from the New Testament church and the history of first century Christians are also humbling and awe-inspiring. The classic, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, tells of the boldness, obedience, and faith of first century Christians that "will forever stand, as a beacon to courageous action for the generations who follow" (Foxe 2019). The Hebrews 11 account of Old Testament heroes of faith is a Scriptural lesson on God's measure of success, listing men and women who trusted in his promises through unknowns and trials.

Encouraged by Modern Day Heroes

Several contemporary examples of faith inspired and encouraged my fellow cross-cultural senior workers as well; a few missionary heroes with well-known names and volumes of literature written about them, such as Hudson Taylor, William Carey, and Amy Carmichael, while others are not so famous. Ed remembers one senior worker telling him in his early days, “If something you want to do appears easy, beware! If it seems impossible, try it anyway!” Claire had “high hopes of seeing great things” when she first went to the field “though the reality didn’t quite match my imagination of what ‘fruit’ looks like.” She remembers the story of Cuthbert Nairn’s “40 years of faithful preaching ... and still no ‘satisfactory convert’” in the city where she serves. Nairn’s story helped Claire “in the midst of slow and sometimes discouraging results” (M. 2022). Liliás Trotter, a personal hero, gave up a promising career as an artist in 1887; devoting her gifts to church planting in Algeria and using her art to illustrate her writings and ministry teaching tools. She died in Algiers, not seeing her goal of a “visible church” fulfilled; on the contrary, the few converts suffered greatly. Still, Trotter’s creativity, intrepid witness, and the tenacity of her strong faith and character left a legacy that inspires many workers in North Africa and had a great influence on the growing church of Algeria today. Sara told me how she “followed James O. Fraser’s model” of developing a team of pray-ers, which she calls her “Mountain Rain Group,” based on the title of the book of his life (Crossman 2001).⁴

Missionary biographies are a great resource in learning to appreciate the highs and lows of serving cross-culturally. We learn through their example of trials, mistakes, and struggle, and hear testimony of the outcomes of persistent and faithful ministry. Fraser, Trotter, Nairn, and Ed’s friend (who is still alive today), have left their marks by staying the course and following God’s call to prepare untouched hard soil for the blessings of harvest and to inspire future generations of mission workers.

4 Fraser is perhaps a lesser-known hero but an amazing example of staying the course in hardship and trusting God to work in surprising and often unseen ways.

Conclusion

Is longevity in missions a sign of success? Not necessarily. Still, the collective wisdom represented by the nearly 700 combined years of experience of these 25 long-termers speaks volumes. I found myself saying, “Yes!” over and over as I read the responses from the surveys and considered the similarities of our lessons learned, advice to stay the course, examples of mission heroes, and valued Bible passages. One generation shares with the next “the wonders the Lord has done” (Psalm 78:4).

We are all on a journey of learning in our mission experience. Each generation struggles with slow results and carries the weight of feeling ineffective, constantly and earnestly praying to see fruit for God’s kingdom. Whatever goal you desire in your overseas endeavors, stay the course in pursuing the calling the Lord has given you. With trusting obedience in him, walk in faith and persevere in his plan. Keep your eyes on Jesus. Whether anyone recognizes the significances of the small successes that come or not, look forward to the fullness of the eternal harvest we will see in heaven, when multitudes are gathered from every tribe, tongue, and nation in worship of our Lord. What a privilege to be a part of the preparations he is making for his glorious kingdom.

Questions for Conversation

1. Reflect back on your time as a cross-cultural worker (even if it has only been 3 months). What advice would you give to yourself on your first day?
2. Phillips says, “Being faithfully obedient in spite of a lack of visible results is a spiritual discipline field workers grow in as they learn to trust God in their ministries.” What about this statement resonates with you? What about this statement is a challenge for you?
3. Who has been an encouraging hero for you in your journey as a cross-cultural worker? What have they said or done to spur you on in your faithful obedience?

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