

What Missionaries Ought to Know about Expectations

You have been working on a project for six months, already twice as long as you thought it would take, and you are discouraged that it is going nowhere. Perhaps you expected help from your field director and you feel like all you got was criticism. Perhaps you are field director, and you are discouraged that the other missionaries did not really get behind your proposal. Perhaps after being asked to take a position in your home office, you were surprised to find that you feel like you are accomplishing little of real importance. All of these situations have unfulfilled expectations in common. Let us look at such expectations, their importance, and the possibilities for doing something about them.

What are expectations?

An expectation is something you believe will occur, any event you anticipate happening in the future. You may expect either good or bad events. Hope is expecting good, and dread is expecting bad. Paul's famous expectation in Philippians 1:20 was that Christ would be glorified in him.

Expectations are often stated as goals or objectives. We may set these for ourselves, or others may set them for us. In either case we evaluate what actually happens on the basis of the expectations. When our expectations are appropriate, we have feelings of excitement, satisfaction, accomplishment, and success when we reach the goals. If our expectations are slightly high, they may inspire us to work harder and achieve more than we would have with lower expectations.

The problem comes when our expectations are too high.

Why are expectations important?

Since we use our expectations to evaluate what happens, the same event may bring opposite reactions in different people. One church planter may be thrilled when 25 people attend because he was expecting 10. Another may be discouraged with 25 because he was expecting 250. Unfulfilled unrealistic expectations may result in many negative emotions.

- Failure. You did not live up to your own expectation.
- Hurt. Your fellow missionaries did not help you as you anticipated they would.
- Confusion. God called you, but it seems like nothing has happened to advance his kingdom as a result of your obedience.
- Frustration. You had such a vision for what could be done on your field, but that vision has not become reality.
- Anger. You have sacrificed to help the national church, but now they have rejected your help and leadership.
- Bitterness. You left a beautiful home and a fruitful ministry, but so few have come to Christ here. If you had stayed home, you probably would have won hundreds to Christ.
- Depression. You begin to think that it was not worth it. In fact, you just feel like giving up, giving up on everything!

All of these feelings, and many more, may be the result of unrealistic expectations. Others may feel excitement and satisfaction when exactly the same events occur if their expectations were more appropriate.

What if I don't have any expectations?

Impossible! Everyone has expectations. And even if you do not have them for yourself, others have them for you. Expectations come from many different sources.

- Past experience. People with successful ministries are chosen to go, and such people believe they will have good ministries as missionaries. They would not go if they expected to be failures.
- Home church. Your home church is supporting you with prayer and much money. They expect to see some return on their investment.
- Fellow missionaries. They eagerly anticipated your coming to make their load more bearable. The one who wrote your job description seemed so spiritual when he interviewed you, but now you find he is a workaholic and expects you to be one too.
- Administrators at home. They set unattainable goals for you and your field. Those people seem so different now as your bosses than they did when you were a candidate.
- God. He called you to this _____ (field, people, language, country...), and he expects you to produce _____.

Sometimes others do have such expectations; however, at other times you only believe they have them because you misunderstood what they wanted. Likewise, you may have misunderstood God's call. He will not ask more of you than you can actually

do. Many times, though not always, the same is true of others in authority over you as well.

I'm too old to have unrealistic expectations!

Impossible again! As long as you are alive, your expectations may be unrealistic. Such expectations are most obvious and most common among the idealistic first-term missionaries who have such high hopes and great visions of how God will use them. However, they may occur at any stage of a missionary's life.

- First furlough. You thought people back home would be eager to hear about the revival that is happening on your field. However, after listening politely for about five minutes, they excitedly begin telling you about the success of the local basketball team.
- Become field director. You had such great plans for the field, but both the national church and the other missionaries are much more interested in promoting their own projects. You have not been able to bring unity to the field.
- You move to the home office. You had thought the stress would be more bearable back in your own culture, but living back "home" is even worse.
- Retirement. If you are still active, you have some expectations about what retirement will be like—and you may be eagerly anticipating it, or dreading it. If you are retired, you may feel like you have been put on the shelf. Or you may feel like the mission expects too much volunteer work from you.

How can I set realistic expectations?

Goal-oriented and time-oriented people are most likely to suffer from the effects of unrealistic expectations. Remember that God molds servants, not bosses. Rather than directing others, servants trust the Leader and stay in the background, perhaps washing feet! The fruit of the Spirit, as well as the gifts of the Spirit are found in such servants.

In the 1960s the director of Missionary Internship suggested six attainable objectives for the first term. They were:

1. Learn the language.
2. Adjust to the field.
3. Learn about the mission.
4. Understand the field.
5. Find your gifts and place in the work.
6. Confirm your missionary call.

This may not seem like much to accomplish in several years, but it is plenty. Here are several suggestions to keep your expectations reasonable.

- Ask others. You are not the only person involved in missions—ask those who are in the positions you anticipate filling. When you get answers about what to expect, do not think it will necessarily be different for you.
- Develop a long-term view. Remember that we all stand somewhere between the first three chapters of Genesis and the last three chapters of Revelation. God has been working on his plan of redemption for thousands of years, and you will not accomplish the redemption of the world alone in one lifetime.
- Remember that everything takes much time. Learning a language and culture are long term projects never really completed. Relationships are important and take time. The hassles of daily living in many

cultures take time. Paper work is necessary and takes time. Contact with supporters takes time.

- Learn interdependence, not independence. Rather than trying to do things yourself, realize that you really do depend on other people, and they depend on you.
- If you must set time frames and goals, be sure to set sub-times and sub-goals as tiny steps to get to the larger ones. Estimate how long it will take you to reach the goal; then at least double the time and triple the cost; then feel successful if you achieve that.

What if I still discover I have unrealistic expectations?

That is almost sure to happen. Since we are often not consciously aware of our expectations until they are not met, we are likely to have some unrealistic ones. When you realize that you have them, taking the preventive steps mentioned above may also help eliminate those that discourage you.

You may find yourself in conflict with others about what is realistic and what is not. In such cases you will need to use some conflict management skills.

Of course, God may give you some very high expectations in your call to missions, and be careful not to dismiss God's call as a human miscalculation. Likewise, remember that you are in a spiritual battle, and Satan may give you unrealistic expectations to discourage your work for God's kingdom. Spiritual discernment is necessary to make these kinds of decisions.

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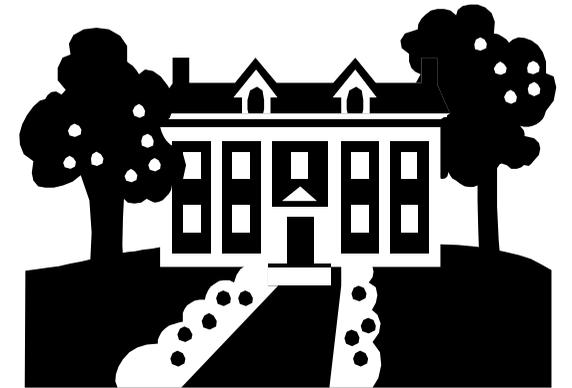
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