

What Missionaries Ought to Know about being Unwelcome “Guests”

An article about the work of the cross-cultural workers appeared on the front page of the popular local newspaper where they serve. The article portrayed the Westerners as frauds using religion as a tool to subdue people. A nationwide newspaper picked it up.

- Trying to renew their annual visas, the workers were told a new law required foreign companies to get an operational license before applying for a visa.
- Paperwork for the license was huge.
- They took the documents to the capital city.
- Officials accepted the documents and promised to issue the license “tomorrow.”
- The next morning the visa director handed them a copy of the article and said he would need time to reconsider.
- The local visa office gave them a one-month extension.
- Then they received notice that they had ten days to get out of the host country.

Here is a quote from a prayer letter: “One family was given 3 days’ notice after over 15 years in the country – their children were due to be in a play at school the next week and had to miss it. This is not like a vacation being canceled, but this is being told to leave your home, community, school, and friends at a moment’s notice. Usually no reason is given, and sometimes there even are false rumors spread about the situation.”

People serving in a host country are there as “guests” of the country, and they are there only with permission of local governments. They may be asked to leave the

country at any time, or they may be refused reentry even to say “goodbye” or pack their things.

Is this new? What does the Bible say?

This is not new, and it goes back thousands of years. The first term of missionary service in the book of Acts included missionaries being expelled.

- From Antioch. People from their “passport” country stirred up some nationals in Antioch to expel Paul and Barnabas, so they left the region because they were asked to leave (Acts 13:50-51).
- From Iconium. Again people from their passport country and nationals from Iconium were plotting to harm Paul and Barnabas, so they fled from the potential danger (Acts 14:5-6).
- From Lystra. The same two groups actually stoned Paul and left him for dead. Paul survived. He and Barnabas left Lystra the next day in the face of proven danger (Acts 14:19-20).

Cross-cultural workers have probably always had to leave their host countries from time to time. They are not citizens there, so they know their time may be limited.

One way they could get in trouble was by what they said or did, such as preaching the gospel or doing signs and wonders. Another way they could get in trouble was by what others said or did to stir up persecution.

Is this fear changing?

We see examples of the fear of strangers or other cultures in the Bible, and we see that same fear in the world today. We do not have data on how much this fear has changed; however, we do know that our

language (English) did not have a word for this fear of others until shortly before 1900 when we created “xenophobia” to talk about it. We do have data about the number of people looking up the meaning of that word in the 21st century. Online dictionaries have made it the word of the day or the word of the year during the last decade.

One cause of the fear in the USA may be that the attacks on New York City and Washington DC on 9/11/01 increased xenophobia in the USA. A similar cause may be the attacks in some European cities by some refugees from the Middle East and North Africa during the first two decades of this century.

Another cause may be the rise of nationalism in countries all over the world. Part of that is resentment of past colonialism. People in Africa, Asia and Latin America may resent others who over-ran their countries imposing their cultures on the indigenous cultures.

The Internet

Before the Internet became available around the world in the 21st century, cross-cultural workers basically had to be careful about what they carried into their host countries. They also had to be very careful what they and others said in conversations face to face, over the telephone, or when they thought no one else was listening, but they were in a “bugged” room. However, since the Internet appeared on the scene, cross-cultural workers have to consider what they say or do at all times.

First. When the Internet and email first appeared, cross-cultural workers had to be concerned about what churches posted on

their websites and about what people wrote to them in letters or email. These were causes for concern, but they were relatively easy to deal with by contacting supporting churches and asking them not to post certain items (and having a good friend in each church to keep an eye on their own church’s website). Likewise, they could give their friends and supporters lists of things to avoid when communicating with them by email or when talking with them on Skype or a similar means.

Second. When social media became available to everyone free of charge on systems such as Facebook and Instagram, controlling what appears on-line became much more difficult. Using social media, anyone can take pictures and record audio or video with their smart phones and post any of them on social media in minutes without cross-cultural workers even knowing about it. Even if people do not post recordings, they may post only text including the cross-cultural workers’ names and what they talked about.

If the cross-cultural workers are “friends” on social media where they communicate with each other, such communications may result in several “friends” being expelled all at one time. Sometimes 15 or 20 workers in the same agency may be expelled at the same time.

What can we do now?

The old saying, “An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure” seems to be the best advice. It is best to be primarily interested in prevention because a “cure” may be impossible. If something gets posted on the internet and is downloaded by the host country, there may be no way to “erase” that from the evidence against a cross-cultural worker.

Prevention. Here are some suggestions for prevention. Ask supporting churches to avoid all of the following:

- Posting your name or information online
- Printing your name or information in the weekly bulletin for the Sunday service
- Putting your name or picture on bulletin boards in the church
- Recording anything you said in a service

When speaking before any general group, such as a morning service, be very careful what you say or hand out. If you want to present specific information that must not be passed on, invite those interested to a presentation in a smaller safer room. In that room, emphasize again that any information posted could end your ministry.

Regardless of what you do, you will probably live with uncertainty and anxiety. If you choose to continue serving in that place, you may have chosen to live with harassment and/or persecution as well.

Plan B. No matter what one does, someone may still post something on the Internet that will result in cross-cultural workers being sent back to their passport countries. This does not completely end the ministry because that person may still be able to represent the ministry with information or raising funds for the ministry. In addition, national believers can continue the ministry in their own country.

If expelled, one thing you are sure to experience is grief. This period of grief is likely to last a long time because you are grieving the loss of so many things. One comforting thing to remember is that we know how things will end. It seems like Satan and the rulers of the world are winning, but we know how the story ends. Revelation 21-22 assures us of that.

It is wise to have a contingency plan in the event of unexpected expulsion. Essentials, such as toiletries, some clothing, passports and vital documents can be always packed and ready. Arrangements for temporary housing can be made in another country in advance.

If the household is kept organized and a simple lifestyle adopted, that reduces the need for a spouse or teammate to become responsible for selling a large amount of “stuff.” All vital telephone numbers and contact information should be in the hands of members of the family.

Even in “closed” countries, many people have open access to social media, making it possible for displaced workers to maintain friendships with nationals even if they are forced to physically leave the country. This helps the coping process of grief and loss from an unplanned relocation. Friendly and light conversation on social media with national friends should not necessarily pose a risk for either party. Of course, a person may be super vigilant about protecting their online identity but still may get expelled because of ministry activities locally.

A solid confidence in God’s sovereignty greatly eases feelings of failure or anxiety. If the time comes that a family must relocate, even under stressful and painful circumstances, cross-cultural workers have an opportunity to consider how God is closing one chapter of their lives but opening a new one. They can build on past experiences with a view to future fruitfulness. It may be an opportune moment for God to move workers to a new place that needs them more than the field that expelled them.

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