

# What Missionaries Ought to Know about “Taboo” Topics

E. Stanley Jones, Methodist missionary to India, had a difficult year. He had a ruptured appendix, lockjaw started ten days later, World War I broke out, several other missionaries died, and he was assigned their work. Yet he wrote to his agency in October 1915, “We are all well and happy in the work.” Soon Stanley had “nervous collapses” during important times, such as preaching. His mind would go blank, and he would have to sit down. Stanley seldom said anything about difficult events and how he felt about them.

However, his wife, Mabel, quite freely said what she thought. For example, Mable wrote this in her January 1929 newsletter, “Eunice (daughter) and I were not happy to have the other member of our trio still absent in America. We feel that as a family, we are paying rather a big price....We are missing Stanley and feel like ‘saying things’ to the Mission Board!”

Although there are very few missionaries that are as radical as E. Stanley Jones about not mentioning difficulties, there seem to be many more missionaries who are “Stanleys” than who are “Mabels.” A few missionaries are “Stanleys” to their supporters, but “Mabels” to their colleagues.

This silence about such “taboo” topics may make other missionaries believe that something is wrong with them. Those missionaries may think that they are not spiritual enough or that they are too weak to be good missionaries. They may become discouraged and suffer in their own silence.

They may even give up and become “attrition statistics.”

It is time to break the silence about these taboo topics and be transparent about difficulties missionaries face. No one can list all these topics, but here are some common ones.

## **Living in another culture is really hard.**

Most missionaries talk openly about the joy they have of “going into all the world,” but they seldom tell anyone that it is not fun most of the time. Even if they are fluent in the language, have a great ministry, are accepted by the people, and love what they do, they are not really “one of them.” Even after living in their host culture for decades, many missionaries do not feel at “home.” They are always the “foreigner” that children stare at and the white man or woman at gatherings. It is no fun being the stranger who is always noticed but is not really an integral part of the group.

Missionaries serving for only a few years often quit for “personal reasons,” and they become attrition statistics. Even missionaries who have served for a decade or two still feel culture stress, and they are relieved when they can return “home” to stay for their children’s education in high school or college. Others find a place to serve at agency headquarters. Still others become agency representatives in regions of their passport countries.

## **Missionaries often feel like friends and family have forgotten them.**

When missionaries leave to serve in another culture, they usually believe that their relationships with friends and family will

continue much like they have been at home. After all, they have email, blogs, Skype, Facebook, and other social media. They send prayer letters with pictures of their family and post happy videos online. However, they seldom post anything about friends and family increasingly ignoring them as the months go by.

After the first year, people back home seem to have forgotten them. Missionaries usually say nothing about this taboo topic. A few may complain to colleagues on the field but certainly not to supporters, friends, and family. What hurts the most is that it seems like the people back home do not really miss them. Missionaries understand that people back home are busy and have moved on, but understanding does not make it hurt any less. Missionaries do not feel at “home” where they are, and people in their passport countries seem to have forgotten them.

## **Money is such a difficult issue.**

- Asking for money. Missionaries often do not have enough money, and they usually feel uneasy asking for money. However, they do not talk about this taboo topic. Probably supporters do not really want them to ask for it anyway, so missionaries use different terms. They say they are looking for “partners” or “champions” who want the “opportunity” to be part of the “blessing.” What they really need is money, but they do not want to come right out and say, “Please give me some.”
- Appearing above money. Missionaries think they have to appear more spiritual, so they “walk by faith” and “trust God to provide.” They really do need money for their families and ministries, but they

often feel like it is taboo to just out and say so.

- Being judgmental about money. Missionaries raising funds to provide medicine to treat contagious illnesses in their host country find it hard not to be critical at times. If a supporting church cannot give any funds for inoculations because it has just spent several thousand dollars to change the color of a special room in their church, it is hard for missionaries not to be judgmental.
- Hiding their spending. Pastors can go on cruises with their families and church members, but if missionaries acknowledge taking a Disney cruise with their children, some donors may quit supporting them.

## **Missionaries don’t like “always” saying goodbye, and it never gets easier.**

New missionaries knew that they would have to say goodbye when they left, but they did not expect it to happen constantly. Most missionaries did not realize how different it would be saying goodbye as a missionary from what it was saying goodbye when they were at home. Here are some examples.

- To parents or grandparents (who may not live until they come again)
- To children going to college (for a year)
- Getting the call that a parent is in the final stages of life (and not getting home to say goodbye)
- Not being there on school breaks or vacations (seeing their children only every few years for a few days)
- To the field when going home, and to home when returning to the field (every few years)
- To other missionaries leaving for “home” (when they cannot go to theirs)

## **Missionaries often feel judged by people who don't live up to their own standards.**

Missionaries have no problem with being asked specific questions by churches, by mission committees, or by individual donors. However, they do have a major problem when those asking the questions expect them to do something that the churches, committees or donors do not do themselves. Here are some examples.

- The questioners are critical when missionaries say they have had only three converts during the last year (their assignment is to teach TCKs in elementary school). Missionaries would like to ask the questioners how many converts they have had during the last year.
- The questioners want to know how many people the missionaries have discipled (when the questioners have discipled none).
- Questioners criticize how the missionaries have been helping the poor (when all the questioners have ever done is help serve the poor Thanksgiving dinner at a food bank).

## **Going back “home” is hard.**

Most missionaries look forward to going “home” where they can see friends and family. They think of it often during the year before they leave. However, not everything is positive.

Most people understand about the logistical problems. Many missionaries do not have a place to live, a vehicle to drive, and many of the necessities of life such as dishes, bedding, towels, pots and pans to cook with, and so forth. They probably do not like to

borrow things—what if they lose or break a loved dish? Likewise, missionaries may have donors and churches all over the country, but they cannot afford all that travel, and some supporters may drop them if not visited.

In addition, missionaries know that they have been changed by living in another country and that their friends and relatives have been changed by changes in their own culture. Those missionaries may feel ostracized by people who feel uneasy about their own materialism when they are with someone who has given up so much.

## **What can missionaries do?**

The best thing missionaries can do is to break the silence and start talking with others about these taboo topics. Ideally, many of them would talk about the topics with each other, but that is not likely to happen.

Fortunately, there are things individuals or couples can do. Everyone needs someone to talk with. Of course, some missionaries may want to talk with a counselor; however, this issue does not require a professional. All that is needed is someone who is willing to be transparent about their own experiences and keep confidences. Here are some possibilities.

- Talk with a friend in the same agency or even better with another agency.
- Ask someone to be a mentor.
- Talk with someone in your international church or a parent you have met in your children's school.
- Talk with a friend anywhere on Skype.
- Correspond with a friend through email.

All of the taboo topics mentioned here are commonly found among missionaries, so those experiencing the issues probably do not need professional help.

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