

Experiences and Lessons from Ten Years in Mission

Asia Couple

Overview: Even when workers serve in cultures that are similar to their home culture, the initial entry into the host culture posts many challenges. The attrition rate for first-term workers on the field can be high, and has been the source of much study. In our third story, a Chinese couple lost one of their children during their first term on the field. This event could potentially lead to attrition, returning home early. With proper member care and strength from the Lord, the couple persevered and went to experience ten challenging yet wonderful years of fruitful service.

We are from another part of Asia. Before going to the field, we spent three years in a missionary training college overseas. Our training included bible studies as well as missionary preparation subjects. Our mission experiences took place in two different locations. Firstly, we spent about 3½ years serving in the country, targeting Muslim minority group. That was in the early 1990s. The second period was about 5-6 years leading a growing house church in part of the country until the house church became more independent. Following are some struggles and lessons that we learned as a family from these two periods of time.

Location One: Experiences in the New Region

Travel Nightmare.

We had no idea at all of what to expect going deep into this region of the country. After an overnight ferry ride, my wife had our daughter strapped in a baby carrier in front of her, and a backpack filled to its limits of the baby powder milks at her back. With her left hand holding to another big plastic bag, which was also filled to its limit with baby diapers, and with her right hand she struggled to hold to another big bag. My hands were also full, mostly baby stuff as well. In fact, about ¾ of our traveling bags were for our baby. Such a small person, and yet she took up ¾ of our luggage space.

The walk to the immigration office on the shore was like a marathon run. Like all good citizens, taught by our good government, we form a queue in order to get our immigration papers done. The result, was that we remained at the end of the queue all the time. We were shocked that there was “no mercy for folks with a baby” as well. We learnt fast that queues are not part of the culture here. With a plane to catch that morning we quickly learned to be like the locals and had to jump queue. Are we bad workers? Not really. We analyzed the situation, and how the locals elbowed each other hard, and we followed suit. We decided that we simply had to get our papers done. “Welcome to the country!” Or was it really a welcome?

The next thing that hit us was at the custom inspection hall. When our turn came, the officer ordered us to empty our luggage on the smooth and shining table top for inspection. Two of our books might really catch his attention—Islamic books that we did not want them to see. Adrenaline started to flow wildly in me. I hesitated a little, but felt that an order is an order. So, I proceeded to empty the bag in a normal manner. I could sense my wife sending a quick “Emergency SMS” to God. The thought that went through my mind was, “after many years of preparation and this first time is likely to be my last time in the country.” It was strange that when I was about to place the two books on the table for inspection; suddenly the lights in the hall went out. The officer about to inspect us appeared angry and shouted something towards his colleague at the corner of the hall. When the light was turned on again his attention shifted towards the next person beside me. In a rude manner he pointed me towards the exit sign. Later we learnt that his colleague accidentally switched off the hall light thinking that the inspection was done for that morning. Quick prayer works. Welcome to the country!

Leaving the customs office we were swamped by drivers wanting to take us to our destination. By that time we were already dead tired from lugging our belongings through the custom office. So we readily accepted any driver who appeared reasonable. The trip to the airport was smooth and peaceful, at least for a while. We thank God that we traveled as a [small] group, and so were able to help each

other and lend a watchful eye on each others' belongings. We can't imagine how a first time worker with a small baby could travel alone in this country! Some drivers, in order to secure a customer will try to grab our belongings from our hand. We had been warned about belongings getting lost in that way, so we were rather adamant to keep our belongings safe with us.

The airport was a noisy place, with arrival and departure announcements broadcasting non-stop. But we soon got used to it. Our flight was delayed due to technical problems, so we were told. The flight was postponed a few times as the day went by. So we had instant noodles in the morning, afternoon and night. We eventually learnt that our plane did not make its way to the airport that day. "Face saving", you know. They put us up at their airport hotel that night. Welcome to the country!

In the New Region

From the plane we saw a long stretch of brown and lifeless mountain ranges. After about three hours our plane touched down at the target city airport in the afternoon. Clearing customs, we then took our belongings outside to the taxi stand. We tried to bargain down the fare, only to learn that they speak a different dialect none of us knew. We got to our destination anyway, the local University.

The weather was cold, but bearable. Once the sun went behind the mountain the temperature dropped quickly too. The altitude of that place is about 3000 meters above sea level. Water boiled at about 83 degrees Celsius, and so meat and nuts remained hard after being cooked. The only way is to use a pressure cooker, and sometimes these cookers exploded due to poor quality. The ethnic composition of the city consists of mainly Muslims with a minority of Tibetans and Chinese. Their average annual income was about \$30-40 US dollars per family.

The University guest-house we stayed in did not provide refrigerator. As the temperature remains cold throughout most of the year we just placed a basket outside our window as an alternative fridge. We placed meat into it and cooked them when we needed them. At times, the weather warmed up and the meats turned bad. That explained how we got constant diarrhea.

Language Learning Struggle

"To acquire good local language, go to the country", many of our friends told us. In fact, it is not that simple. There are few places in this country where the pure national language was spoken in the market places. In the new region we were in, the local speakers spoke a local dialect that sounds like the hissing of a snake. I mean they use lots of "Ss" in a sentence. Once, a western friend of mine went to a local supermarket to purchase peanut butter, and was instead led to the toilet. The phrase "please could I get peanut butter" also sounds like the phrase for going to the rest room. For a westerner learning the national language, the locals were usually very helpful. But not so for me since I looked Asian like them. As an overseas Chinese I faced different struggles in language learning. They could not understand why I did not know the language, when I looked just like them. In fact, often they were a little angry when I politely asked them to repeat a certain phrase they had just spoken. They thought I was trying to be funny, or worse to be sarcastic. Although they were more open to me than to the westerners, they also expected me to know and function within their worldview. We found that their worldview was influenced by their cultural, linguistic and regional dialect and experiences.

Our Ten Month-Old Baby Stops Breathing

It was a very cold evening, and we were in our room preparing to have dinner with a friend. "Look, at your baby—why is she trembling uncontrollably?" My friend was a nurse from England. She then shouted, she is not breathing!!" She turned our daughter upside down and gave a few short slaps on her back. Nothing happened. On closer observation she realized that our daughter was having convulsions. After a few more attempts to do something my nurse friend handed a lifeless baby back to my arms.

Fear filled the room, my wife went hysterical and shouted for help. Another friend staying in the next room heard her and ran out of the guest house looking for my daughter. He thought my wife shouted

that someone took our baby, because human trade is not uncommon in this part of the world. “Where to bury her?” haunted my mind. Again, I cried out a quick prayer towards God within me, and without any “theological format”. I could not hold back my tears, and for a short moment I then realized how painful it must be for God to see his Son, Jesus Christ, suffering on the cruel cross, only mine was a very small pain in comparison to God’s.

Just when despair was about to overtake us, I heard a very soft and yet clear voice, “resuscitation”. Without delayed I put the lifeless body down on the floor and started to give my daughter mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. I heard sounds like a clearing of her “windpipe” or something, and within a few minutes she started to breath on her own again. “She is alive!” an expression of silent joy shined from each of us in the room. What did we learn from this experience? I believe it was a form of spiritual warfare, in order to overwhelm us with discouragement and fear.

Security Issues

Just what is secure enough, was an issue our team struggles until this day. How to function with trust for each other and yet without endangering the whole work is a balancing act in the workers’ lives. For security reasons, we try not to know what our teammates are doing, so that we could honestly say “I don’t know” if ever questioned by those in authority. As a result, we don’t readily talk to each other. Because of the fear of betraying our team members *we* stopped our prayer meeting. A few of our friends had the misconception that giving away prayer items was a form of revealing their ministry activities. Without prayer, the enemy easily won daily battles as we became isolated and less effective.

God’s Sovereignty, Our Comfort

This isolation resulted in our feeling much alone in the work. We have no one to share our struggles with. So we carried our load and burden alone. It was during this dark period that we experienced the small ray of light from God and it became our light of hope. We learned to enjoy the sweet things of God in the midst of some very bitter times.

We started to target individual university students for friendship and language practice. My wife started to befriend a bright Tibetan lady to help her learn the Tibetan language. As a result she came to put her trust in Him, and today she led a few house churches in her village and was also instrumented to put the “J” film into her local Tibetan dialect.

Location Two

We moved down to another city in late 1998 and spent about four years in the city. Initially we were given two cells to look after as a way to gain some cell church experiences. It took quite a while for the local leaders and members to accept us because we were new and inexperienced. At one point the Chinese government tried to clamp down the Fa Lung Kong movement, and house church meetings were under tight surveillance. Many cell members were too afraid to meet—so much so that only the cell leaders were left in the meeting. Also cell members were too afraid to open their home for meetings. We then decided to take a step of faith to open our home for meetings, hoping to get the cell running again. In retrospect we are actually taking a very high risk but God protected us during that period of time.

After a year in this city we were asked to be the team leaders for our team and also to pastor a local cell church. When we took over the leadership there were only 10 cells. The week when we took over the leadership the husband fainted strangely one night in our room and the wife had an emotional breakdown on the same evening. She sobbed non-stop for over two hours. It was like a heaviness on her spirit. We never had such an experience before. Within the week a couple of our cell leaders were attacked in strange ways. Immediately we recognized it was spiritual warfare. We thank God that our worker friends rallied to our aid and held a prayer meeting time for us.

At the same time one of our church brothers reported our activity to the national security bureau, the Three-Self government church. This brother wanted 700,000 RMB from us that we cannot give to him. The police did check on us and because of that we had to lay low for about four months. It was hard for us because any time we could have been asked to leave the country. In God's sovereignty the police did not find out anything from us and we could still remain in the city. Then we understood that the Devil did not want us to lead the church and this was part of his way to discourage and put fear into us. It was a very lonely four months, especially because of our sensitive situation some of our co-workers did not want to associate with us. They were afraid that they might be negatively affected.

After four months we managed to "come out of the ground". We continued to open our house for meetings and training programs. My wife also started a weekly Sunday School for an average of 15-20 kids. It is illegal to reach out to children under the age of 18 in China. Again we were taking a very high risk as we saw the importance of bringing the children to the knowledge of His Word. Most of the children came from single parent families and in reaching out to the children we were able to reach out to the parents. At the same time my wife also conducted training for local Sunday school teachers, praying that more locals can be trained to teach their own children.

Our time in this city was busy but fulfilling. When we took over the leadership we had many pieces to pick up. Firstly, there was the need to set up a proper administration office as materials and resources were scattered everywhere. Also 70% of the offering to support local staff came from outside the country and we felt that it should come directly from the members. Thus we had to teach the members to give and tithe for the Lord's workers. At the same time we had to straighten the accounts and to have an open book so that members can know where the tithe and expenses goes to. We also felt a great need to feed the hungry sheep and continuous training of cell leaders. With the Lord's help and grace the cells multiplied to about 17 groups.

The work in the church kept us busy but on top of it we also had to run projects and raise funds for an NGO office set up as a visa platform. At one point we were quite close to burn out. We requested a two-months break for a rest outside of the country. However after our trip when we returned back to the city, we seemed to have a strange feeling on the plane that we would not be back long. We believed that the Holy Spirit was preparing us for a big shock to come. Then later we realized that the local leadership felt that it was time for them to go fully independent. Though we felt that in certain areas the church was still not ready for independence, we were happy that the locals were willing to take up the challenge to govern their own church. The church still has its ups and downs but is still running at this time. They now have their own pastor and are also supporting a couple for working among the Hui people in another city, where we lived here several years ago). It seemed like the Lord was reminding us that He still had the Hui people in His heart. Although we are no longer reaching out to the Hui people, in His sovereign will He raised up more locals for this task of reaching out to their own people. What a beautiful picture to see when we look back the Lord's will in our lives.

When the church went fully independent we decided it was time to leave so that the local staff can fully exercise their gifts to serve their own flock. Thus we left the city in May 2003 and returned to our passport country in Asia for our next phase of work/journey with Him. Prior to our leaving, the Sars outbreak was another opportunity to experience God's protection for our family. In fact one of our company leader's died of Sars in Hong Kong during that period of time. Psalms 91:1 has sustained us during that period of time "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty".

Lessons Learnt

In conclusion, there are many precious lessons we have learnt during our time in this city.

1. Be willing to take necessary risks for God's work
2. Know that God is sovereign, He is greater than our enemy
3. Understand that the best place to be is the centre of His will and it is also the safest place to be.
4. Be willing to let go our goals/desires to see His Kingdom built; it's not our own little kingdom.
5. Pray, because prayer is the only way to defeat the enemy.
6. Do not function alone, different gifts compliment one another and have better effect.