

## Supporting Expatriate Women In Difficult Settings

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*Overview: Going through the marketplace in a male-dominated country, being single in a family-centered society, working in the context of very different and sometimes hostile cultural and religious settings, educating children without proper school systems, trying to show the love of Christ through hospitality and compassion to people in need, serving together in a multicultural team--these are some of the challenges expatriate women are confronted with overseas. This article addresses these issues, and takes a closer look at their causes, implications, and remedies.*

As a psychologist and a Christian, I have been privileged to minister over the last 18 years to both local women and expatriate women, supporting them with counseling, debriefing, and crisis intervention. Living and working in restricted countries in East-Africa and Central Asia, I have experienced and witnessed the stresses of living in the Developing World. It can be a hard and dark environment, even if one enters it prepared and with ongoing emotional and relational support. My experience and struggles are not unique. Yet I felt it important to write them down concisely so that other Christian women can be better equipped to not only survive, but to run the race in such a way as to get the prize (1 Corinthians 9:24).

In this paper I will specifically focus on the coping challenges and strategies of expatriate Christian women who live in Muslim countries. I will focus on five areas:

**Islam:** The role of women in Islam and the West; looking at the difference in expectations for personal rights; and issues such as submission, fulfillment, and job satisfaction--a frequent cause of stress and psychological problems.

**Past Personal Issues:** Emotional struggles from one's past; especially important as the spiritual realities and cultural restrictions in Islam seem to trigger stronger, more dramatic reactions to unresolved problems than would be experienced back home.

**Spiritual Dimensions:** Spiritual preparation for service and ongoing walk with God in a difficult environment; the quality of one's own maturity, call, and familiarity with spiritual resources.

**Team Viability:** The need for a supportive and caring team, in which the members look out for each other, and especially for the female coworkers; some obstacles and potential for international teams.

**New Roles, Identity, and Lifestyle:** Transitions and cross-cultural living test our stability, beliefs, and sense of who we are; different people are affected in different ways--singles, couples, and families.

### Islam

One-fourth of the world's three billion women are Muslim. While holding key positions of influence within their own families, these women usually have only limited access to education, health care facilities, and basic human rights. Due to the cultural and religious separation between men and women in many Muslim countries, the gospel is primarily communicated to Muslim women by other women. What a challenge--and opportunity--this presents for female Christian workers to spend time with Muslim women and to model Christ through their lives.

Muslim countries embrace "one faith", but the way it is practiced varies from country to country. For example, there are many factors contributing to the determination of the role and rights of women in Muslim communities, including level of education, economic status, urban or rural setting, impact of Western influence, and degree of fundamentalism. Consequently there is no unified concept of women's rights or their role in society. In some countries women are in political leadership positions while others might never see the outside of their own home.

Teachings in the Quran give a basic understanding of the expressed (though often not literally adhered to) position of women in Islam. For example, in Surah 4,34:

Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded. As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them. (Pickthall, Holy Quran, 1988).

Mohammed, however, in his time, instituted new laws for women and children which protected them--especially the widows and orphans. In general though, men's superiority over women is taught in Islam. (An extensive discourse on this subject would exceed the content and purpose of this article, see bibliography for further study.)

The result of Islamic teaching is that Muslim women, in comparison to non-Muslim women, are generally more restricted, less visible publicly, and live in submission to males. Men are clearly the superior gender in the created order, which affects their attitudes towards women with the tendency to take a lot of liberties. This results in both local and expatriate women often feeling abused just from the way they are looked at or when they are treated condescendingly. On the other hand men generally feel very protective of women, specially those of their own family. It must be kept in mind, however, that many of the restrictions for women that we in the West hear about, which affect our attitudes causing fear and criticism, are exacerbated by cultural habits quite apart from Islamic teaching per se. In contrast women in most non-Muslim nations have more equal opportunities to work and study; they are equal partners in society, and expect to reach a certain level of fulfillment and job-satisfaction. When going overseas, they often underestimate the potential effect of religious and cultural restrictions and limited job opportunities.

There are many areas where women can serve with their expertise and gifts such as physical and mental health care, administration, teaching, hospitality, caring and prayer. Although compared with what they left back home, or with initial expectations, their current job may seem to lack prestige, but at the same time it can be intensely fulfilling and satisfying to see their impact on local women's lives.

Women going into Muslim settings must understand and expect a certain amount of gender discrimination. The battle is not primarily a gender one--but spiritual! The reality is often very painful for expatriate women, when you are inappropriately touched or a person passing by shouts obscenities to you. These are not exceptions! When you experience that you get hurt deep down, you feel abused, unworthy, even "undressed". As expatriate women we are viewed as unbelievers and therefore even more vulnerable, so to say equal to prostitutes. And of course the Western films portraying sexual freedom support their thinking. As women we therefore need to be aware of these issues, guard ourselves and deal with them constructively. Condemnation and anger not only inhibit our witness, but also affect our own peace of mind.

### **Past Personal Issues**

"If I had known this 50 years ago my life could have been so different!" These words were spoken to me by an elderly man, after a service in which I spoke on inner healing, wholeness, and dealing with our past "baggage." Although much has been written about these topics, the need to address them in our own lives is often not recognized or dealt with until we face a crisis or other major challenge--an almost inevitable occurrence when serving overseas.

Inner healing deals with our deep past hurts--those memories of actions, abuse, sin (things/events that were imposed on us, that we imposed on others, or that just happened to us) which had a crippling effect on our development, health, ability to cope and work, or to accept and love ourselves and others. These can manifest themselves in many ways, including low self-esteem, insecurity, authority problems, addictions, self-rejection, anger, negative attitudes, depression, and psychosomatic disorders.

Often we are not aware of this baggage. When we find ourselves struggling with such issues as trust toward God and others, interpersonal relationships, guilt, authority, etc. we tend to blame our parents,

circumstances, and other people, failing to see where the roots really lie. Inner healing helps us to untie the knots of the past and requires a willingness to:

recognize and accept (vs. denial)  
confess, forgive, and let go  
allow God to heal and restore  
be delivered of any occult roots or bondage.

We are all special and precious--unique in our upbringing, world view, attitudes, values, feelings, and memories. Our own uniqueness is our greatest gift, but it is also our biggest challenge. What we model in our lives and ministries depends, in part, on our willingness to look at our own past and to allow God to deal with our hurts and pains.

The roots of many of our struggles can be found in four major areas: pre-birth, childhood, adolescence/adulthood, and spiritual bondage. I will just touch on them, giving key words of problematic conditions and adding a few illustrations. There are many good books dealing with these issues for further study (see bibliography).

*Pre-birth:* being unwanted, attempted abortion, illegitimate, parents with deep needs, difficult pregnancy, illness of the mother, instability through major conflicts or war.

In my counseling I encountered a woman who vividly illustrates this pre-birth struggle. After serving on the field for many years, she felt an increasing heaviness, both in her spiritual life and in raising her family. As we talked, she admitted having an ongoing, difficult relationship with her mother, which made her feel guilty. We asked the Holy Spirit to reveal the roots of this conflict, and she began to remember some of her mother's remarks about her unwanted pregnancy and the possibility of abortion. God's Spirit also revealed how the enemy had taken advantage of this rejection, keeping her from being joyful or feeling secure. Taking authority over these crippling messages, she experienced a tremendous freedom and was able to forgive her mother and accept her with a new love. This in return enabled her to love the Lord and her family with a new joy.

While she may have experienced the same crippling feelings in her home country, it is a fact that, when we are out of our comfort and security zone (home), we are more vulnerable. And those who live in spiritually hostile environments, especially those with unhealed wounds, are an easier target for enemy attacks.

*Childhood:* being unwanted, sibling relationships, parental conflicts/divorce, feelings of being a failure or unworthy, personal appearance (lack of self-acceptance), handicapped, adopted, orphaned, under-achievement, struggles in school, belittled by teachers and friends, fears and feelings of rejection and resentment, emotional and physical abuse, sexual abuse.

I counseled a lady struggling with a depression that was affecting her marriage and seriously impacting the team. In one session she poured out her anger and bitterness at having grown up with a very outgoing and gifted twin. She had felt second best all her life, never having been able to measure up. She needed healing, forgiveness, deliverance, and a fresh understanding that she is fearfully and wonderfully made by her Creator God (Psalm 139, a wonderful psalm for inner healing and reassurance). As she was able to unravel her past and to accept herself the way she was, her depression improved as well as her working relationships.

An area of crucial importance in our ministry as women serving in a Muslim context is that of our relationship to our fathers. If a girl has been physically, emotionally, or sexually abused, raised in an atmosphere of orders and punishments rather than one of love, acceptance and affection, she will find it difficult to trust anyone, including our heavenly Father. This deep wounding can produce a generalized mistrust, fear, and hatred of men which is exacerbated by living in a male-dominated society. And it may take years of counseling and healing before her ability to trust God is restored and she is able to relate to men without resentment.

I have often prayed with women serving in Muslim societies who found themselves emotionally reliving a childhood trauma that they thought they had already completely resolved. But when they

experienced disrespect from Muslim men--being stared at or impurely touched in the bazaar--the wounds opened again, filling them with great anger and bitterness. Life in a "macho" culture is difficult for any woman, even more so for one who is scarred. I have observed this to be one of the major stress points for women. If it is not healed from the roots, it may lead to deep resentment and even attrition.

*Adolescence/adulthood:* relationship problems with family/friends/colleagues, peer pressures, sexual problems, marriage, in-laws, singleness, job pressures, guilt and anxiety, loss of belongings, war, injuries and death of loved ones.

Life of course, is a mixture of ups and downs, of joys and sorrows. When areas of pain and anger are bottled up and denied, they can cause great insecurity and instability in our personality. Our development (physical, spiritual, emotional, relational) may be hindered and our relationship with others and the Lord deeply affected.

I counseled a young woman, who served with her husband in a restricted area. When she became pregnant, she got quite ill. Although she wanted the baby, she was quite apprehensive in looking forward to motherhood. Her lack of wellness had, apart from normal pregnancy sickness, deeper psychological roots. Becoming a mother made her face her anger and hate towards her own mother, who, in her memory, lacked so much in love and care. Her rejection went so far that she did not want her mother to ever be involved with her baby. Asking the Lord to heal her wounds of neglect enabled her to see her mother's inability in a new light. Releasing bitterness and grudges, and setting people free from being indebted to us by forgiving them, is a very important process into emotional freedom and spiritual maturity.

A beautiful example of inner healing is found in Luke 7, where a sinful woman pours out her shame and pain through tears while anointing Jesus with perfume and kissing His feet. Jesus restores her, forgiving her sins and releasing her from her past. She leaves joyfully--healed, forgiven, and restored.

*Spiritual bondage:* Satan is the father of all lies (John 8:44). His goal is to destroy God's creation, seeking entry points to make us and our ministry ineffective. It is therefore of utmost importance to maintain our relationship with the Lord and other believers and to be on our guard (1 Peter 5:8).

Bondage can come into our lives in many ways, including ancestral involvement in the occult (eastern religions, cults, freemasonry, new age), the tragedy of a family suicide, sins such as murder or sexual abuse or involvement with/interest in the demonic through pornography, "party" games that invoke spirits, reading horoscopes or other superstitious beliefs. These provide footholds to demonic forces, allowing them to harass and oppress not only the person involved, but also their families.

It is perhaps not surprising that the effect of freemasonry on people's lives is not as widely known as it should be, because it is a secret society and people often don't know of their ancestors' involvement in it. One young couple was disturbed by night noises in their home. A ministry team came together and after prayer the Holy Spirit revealed that both sets of parents had been involved in freemasonry. The astonishing thing was that both spouses had known of this but had forgotten, and neither were aware of its oppressive effects. We took authority over the spirit of freemasonry in their lives and cleansed their home through prayer. They were never bothered again. We are serving a God of power who wants us to be alert and to use the authority He has delegated to us.

In the Islamic world, as in others, we have to deal with the effects of magical practices. Curses, amulets, shrines of deceased "holy" men and so on, play a dominant part in folk-Islam and have a spiritual effect on the Christian community as well. These practices, often overlooked or underestimated, can cause responses like lethargy, depression, marital conflict, and team disunity. As Christians serving in cultures where oppressive spirits operate, we must be alert and do what we can to deal with our own past. We need to be honest and willing to let the Lord heal and restore us. How else can we be a light in the darkness?

### **Spiritual Dimensions**

In the ReMAP Research Report on attrition (Taylor, 1997), healthy spirituality was ranked third among the factors impacting our survival and effectiveness on the field. It was preceded in importance by a clear call and the backing of a supportive family. Christian workers must ask themselves time and again, “Am I centered in Christ? Who is in control of my life--myself, others, the work itself, the Lord?” I encourage every missionary to honestly examine their current lives and past areas of struggle, preferably with a faithful friend, and to anchor themselves as securely as possible in Christ. This is a process that needs regular attention both on the field and at home.

### **Spiritual Health**

There is a wealth of good books available on the subject of spiritual growth, and many of us read them. What we often lack is the application of the information gained. A healthy spiritual diet consists of a daily time with the Lord, Scripture reading, worship (in song or listening to music), and an open heart ready to be a vessel for the Lord--for your own family, your team, anyone who needs a listening ear, hospitality, sharing your faith, and attending to the needs of others. I still remember how much I struggled with my quiet time when our children were small (and even since they are bigger!). When there was time, I was too tired and I often struggled with feelings of guilt. Then I realized that I could enjoy God’s presence and pray while I was nursing, or listening to teaching and worship tapes, or while walking with a friend, or on a shopping trip. We need to learn to be creative about how we feed ourselves our daily spiritual food. An accountability/prayer partner can be of great support through encouragement and by asking honest questions.

### **Our Call**

Spiritual growth is a lifelong process. Elizabeth Elliot, a pioneer missionary to South America, knows of the cost, saying: “I think it takes a deep, spiritual encounter with the cross before we’re really qualified to call ourselves missionaries”(1999, p.21). We need to accept our own need for forgiveness and salvation, and our need for growth through discipleship. Missionaries are not made, but rather grow out of a deep relationship with the Lord and the desire to serve Him, whatever the cost. Therefore it is of utmost importance to be sure of our calling. Other motives, such as adventure, improvement of our resume and professional skills, employment, or running away from difficult circumstances and relationships can lead to frustration and defeat, because the focus and force of the spiritual battle is misunderstood.

It cannot be stressed enough that the husband and the wife must each have a calling to ministry abroad. A wife who follows her husband purely out of support or obedience into the Muslim world is at high risk. Missionary life in itself is a huge challenge involving much loss and change. With the added strain of separation from family and friends, adjusting to a new culture and possibly difficult climate, language learning, coping with previously unknown illnesses, schooling, loneliness, etc. it would be unwise to venture out without a personal call on the part of each person. If the wife has not chosen this step out of her own conviction and calling, and unless she is extremely adaptable and easy-going, she will struggle with resentment towards the people and culture, as well as toward her husband. She may subconsciously blame him for her ill-feelings. Women struggling in this area tend to either internalize their conflict and suffer from various psychosomatic disorders or depression, or get very angry and confrontational. It is to everyone’s advantage for sending agencies to be sure that each partner has a calling.

### **Spiritual Warfare**

“Mission work is not a game but a war. The spiritual battle is a reality, while at the same time all sorts of tensions occur in daily life. A missionary needs perseverance and the ability to cope with stressful situations, sometimes without external help” (Ekström, 1997, p. 188). Added to the challenge of loss and change is spiritual warfare on the field--a battleground for which many workers are unprepared. In the international workshop on attrition held at All Nations Christian College (ANCC), UK, in April 1996, a discussion group on pre-field training formulated a statement concerning the spiritual qualities of perspective missionaries. It reads, in part: “We also believe that candidates should be prepared and trained for spiritual warfare with regard to demonic oppression in all its manifestations” (Adiwardana, 1997, p. 210).

An example of demonic oppression was reported to me by two single women on their return from a survey trip in a neighboring war-torn country. Spending the night in a local home in a remote village, they were awakened, sensing a strange presence. Looking up they saw the spirit of a woman crouching in a corner. As she moved, her spirit passed through solid items in the room. She was obviously busy with something, taking no notice of the women. The workers knew enough about spiritual realities to understand that this was the spirit of the lady who had lived there before. The next night, having just begun to work through the first shock, there was an explosion beneath the wooden house (a possible attack on their lives) which shook the foundation. On their return I took them through the helpful steps of debriefing. We prayed for deliverance as well, not just from the recent experience, but also from spirits of fear and death which can take hold of a person that has made vulnerable through exposure to traumatic experiences. The workers came through this trauma extremely well and continued their ministry.

Many workers are confronted with the cruelties of war, either in the lives of their local friends, or in personal experiences of intimidation, evacuation, robbery, assault, and rape. Because we are invading enemy territory, one of our most important pre-field tasks is to set up an extensive prayer shield at home--committed friends who pray for us daily and with discernment. Likewise it is essential for workers to listen to each other, pray together, and support one another on the field.

When my family first came to East Africa in 1982, we knew little about spiritual warfare or deliverance ministry. But spiritual battles constantly confronted us--local people being tormented by demonic forces, and people involved in magic and occult practices based on folk-Islam. Motivated by our desire to help those living under oppression while avoiding defeat ourselves, we learned the importance of understanding the powers of Islam/folk-Islam, of getting training in spiritual warfare, and of having a balanced understanding of power encounters when ministering in the Muslim world.

The best teacher in spiritual warfare is the Word of God. Ephesians 6 states:

‘finally (from now on) be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.’ First of all we need to know who we are in Christ, and that on the cross He won the victory over Satan. He has all power and authority, and has delegated this to us.

‘Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.’

Secondly we need to know our weapons, which are for attack and defense.

‘For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.’

Thirdly we should not be ignorant about the enemy, who and where he is. We need to know how to battle effectively.

We are all involved in three major areas of warfare, whether we realize it or not. How we deal with this can greatly impact our ministry.

*Battle within ourselves:* The enemy knows our weaknesses and vulnerable places (entry points). He attacks those at times when we have let down our guard because of exhaustion, sickness or sin, challenging our spiritual disciplines and our commitment to walk in holiness. Often when difficulties arise, our time with the Lord gets lost; and we struggle with self-pity, criticism, resentment, and bitterness as well as anger against culture, people, and leadership.

*Battle within the Christian community:* Satan’s goal is to destroy unity, whether in marriage, family, team or fellowship. He uses criticism, egotism, negative thoughts and words, lack of supportive attitudes toward each other, envy, sexual temptation, nationalism, unforgiveness, colonial attitudes, and struggles with authority and accountability. The result is damage to our spiritual wholeness as a community, which makes our personal and corporate ministry ineffective (Romans 15:5,6; Colossians 3:12-14). Strained relationships are often an indication that the enemy is at work. We begin to feel joyless and heavy, tired and depressed. This leads to a lack of interest in prayer and outreach,

resulting in a withdrawal from our cross-cultural ministry and retreat to selected friends in the expatriate community.

*Battle against strongholds (sin) in the unreached:* There are many good books on folk-Islam, which help us understand its spiritual implications (see bibliography). For example, many fear the *evil eye*, or receiving a curse in form of a *Jadu*, a small wrapped-up paper containing Koranic and magic verses written by so-called holy men or religious leaders, which are thought to bring sickness, disaster, and mental illness upon the intended victim. Jealousy, a very dominant spirit in these cultures, is a common motive for wishing others evil. Many young women, struggling with barrenness, try to undo a suspected curse by paying religious men to destroy the power of the *Jadu*. They also pray at the graves of deceased holy men (shrines) for fertility.

It is very important that we are aware of these practices, both to pray effectively for those who are struggling with the effects of curses, as well as for our own protection. I have seen many instances of God's powerful intervention in these cases. One example from my personal experience occurred when after our first years abroad, I reached a point of total emotional, spiritual, and physical exhaustion. I developed a suicidal depression. After a year of struggle, with lots of prayer and support by others, I finally sought deliverance ministry. A pastor, experienced in this field, identified many areas of demonic intimidation and prayed for deliverance, which I received. I was completely set free from my heaviness.

Our best spiritual safeguard is to cultivate our relationship with God. This means we focus on prayer, learn more about the power of the Holy Spirit, be accountable and transparent, live in a spirit of forgiveness, embrace challenges and make them into opportunities for our own growth.

### Ministry Tools

I now discuss four major areas to develop for ministry among Muslims. They are personal spiritual maturity; language and friendships; host culture and religion; and God-given authority.

*Personal spiritual maturity.* Christ-likeness, God's character and conduct reflected through us, is our most powerful ministry tool. As His ambassadors and servants, the more we are willing to live out of the Word of God and be molded by it, the more it shows in our lives and actions. As commendable as professional training and language skills are, it is our character that counts.

Spiritual maturity is also displayed in the ability to "live in the opposite spirit". Jesus is our best teacher in this lifestyle: He stayed calm when there was turmoil (Luke 8:22f), He showed compassion when there was condemnation (John 8:1f), and He exercised authority when there was demonic confrontation (Luke 4:31f).

When we live in a negative atmosphere we are easily drawn into if we are not on our guard. The best weapon and testimony is to live in the opposite spirit to negative attitudes which we encounter, e.g., to give and be hospitable where there is greed, to be humble where there is pride, to live out of God's peace where there is fear, to convey confidence where there is insecurity. But we can only display God's character if we know who our Lord is.

*Language and friendships.* For cross-cultural workers, facility in the target language and culture is a very important requirement for ministry. Language acquisition serves as a pathway to the heart, enabling us to build friendships, a crucial foundation for sharing the Good News, and the interest evidenced by our effort in language learning is greatly appreciated. I have witnessed the excited response of local women when I was able to listen to and understand their worries. It builds trust, something that women living in countries of strife and war seldom experience. And it opens opportunities to pray with these religious and devout people about sickness and the worries of daily life, introducing them to the Healer and Prince of Peace.

As we seek to relate to the local people, a subtle danger may arise. Because we inevitably compare their painful lives with the blessings that we have, we may find ourselves overwhelmed with guilt and unnecessarily deny ourselves and our families. An expatriate mother of two, living in a war-torn

country, shared with me about her increasing lack of joy. Her neighbors' constant struggle to feed their many children and keep their houses warm, their pleas for help and her efforts to respond, affected her enjoyment of her own little home. She began to question her family's right to eat well in the face of poverty. We talked about God's perfect plan of creation, that His desire is for peace and well-being, not war and poverty. It helped to discuss with her some basic issues about suffering and spiritual warfare. If Satan gets a foothold in a country through evil, such as shedding of innocent blood, it can result in consequences like poverty and starvation. The enemy tries to replace God's blessings with calamities. We must resist the spirit of guilt and condemnation, not allowing Satan to rob us of the peace and energy we need to face the challenges of suffering and poverty around us. If, through neglect of our own basic needs, we allow ourselves to get sick and drained, we are of little use in God's kingdom.

*Host culture and religion.* In the Islamic world, culture and religion are intertwined. A good understanding of cultural practices and beliefs can save us from many embarrassing encounters and help us "make the most of every opportunity" (Ephesians 5:16).

Befriending women when they were pregnant and being with them during/after childbirth has given me many opportunities to share God's love and compassion. However, in Muslim society, superstition and fear of the "evil eye" are an integral part of this natural process. One must know what is permissible to say and do, and when. For example, I once visited a friend from a very religious background, who had just had her second child. After congratulating her I went over to admire the sweet little girl, wanting to pick her up. This caused great distress to my friend and the other women in the room. A grim-faced lady immediately entered the room with strong smelling incense, waving it around the baby, clearly indicating I should stay away. The child had to be cleansed and protected from the evil eye, which I, as an unbeliever in their religion, had evoked through my behavior. Cultural understanding is a must. A reference from the online magazine *Women of the Harvest* (September, 2000) sums it up concisely, "Cultural sensitivity means understanding why people behave the way they do and actually embracing their lifestyles. Cultural sensitivity means loosening our staunch grip on the social landscape that defines us and embracing instead the territory of a people without Christ, for the sake of the Gospel."

*God-given authority.* It is easy to feel overwhelmed and intimidated by all the challenges that surround us overseas--dust and dirt, noisy, crowded streets, male domination, poverty, sickness, presence of weapons and violence, and so on. The flooding images of injustice stir up feelings of helplessness, distress, and even aggression. The force of these impressions relegates us to a "grasshopper" perspective of powerlessness and spiritual defeat. Jesus, Himself living in a similar atmosphere, overcame evil with good as He appropriated His Father's delegated authority. This high calling is ours as well. We too have this power and authority delegated to us for our own protection and for the healing and deliverance of others (Luke 10:19; Ephesians 3:14-21).

A Muslim mother once brought me her five-year old daughter, who had been suffering from nightly suffocation attacks for weeks. Many doctors had checked the child thoroughly, pumping her full of antibiotics and painkillers, but without any improvement. She related to me the sad story of her life and her pregnancy, and the little girl's childhood. When she was three months pregnant, her husband was killed by a missile while he was waiting for the bus. She lost all hope and considered terminating the pregnancy, but her mother prevented the abortion. When the baby was born it was well-received and loved by all.

While it was not difficult to convince her of demonic interference, as Muslims are well aware of them in their daily lives, it did take some time for her to understand that Satan tries to impoverish life even before birth. After some hesitation, reaffirming that she was a practicing Muslim, she accepted my offer to pray for the girl in the name of Jesus. I bound the forces of death and fear over the child's life, which had already taken roots in the womb and apparently expressed themselves in the current suffocation attacks. We prayed for healing of her past and for the Lord's touch on her life. She never suffered under these attacks again.

Jesus came to set the captives free. This is not just some cliché that makes us feel good. He wants us to boldly step out in faith and in His authority. We can learn from others by sitting in when they minister to the oppressed and we can pray for more courage and anointing to do God's will. It is important to pray for our own and our loved ones' protection before we minister, and to pray for cleansing afterwards to avoid unnecessary backlashes from the enemy. This is also advisable, when we visit or have visitors of other convictions in our home. No one but the Holy Spirit should reign in our lives and homes.

### Team Viability

"The essence of a team is common commitment to a mutually agreed goal for which it holds itself responsible," (Jones, 1995, p.18). Clearly defined goals stemming from a clear purpose statement provide direction and motivation for ministry overseas. However, they do not lessen the challenges of living and working with Christians from different cultures and denominations, as illustrated by the following frequently heard statement, "culture shock is nothing in comparison with the challenge of working together in an international Christian team." Or even a mono-national team! From my experience there are three main reasons for this interpersonal tension.

*Expectations.* We are prepared to encounter a new culture that will be different. However, we often do not anticipate the need to adjust to our Christian teammates and find ourselves surprised, if not annoyed, by the way they live and work. Working relationships need to be developed and require both grace and tolerance in their formation. Pre-field training to develop cross-cultural awareness among team members as well as regular team building exercises on the field, can ease the friction.

*Past experience.* "Team life, at both the conscious and unconscious levels, stirs up many associations with one's family of origin" (O'Donnell, 1992, p.188). Unresolved traumas and hurts from the past (see above) can cause us to transfer bad feelings toward individuals in our pasts to our current co-workers who resemble them in some way. This can greatly affect our ability to build relationships and be gracious to those who think and act differently, leading to unpleasant conflicts.

*Disunity.* Satan is the main opponent of any Christian work. He defends his territory by any means he can, preventing those in darkness from hearing the Good News. What better way than by disarming the Lord's spiritual messengers through the sowing of disunity, which destroys their testimony and makes their witness ineffective. His divisive work finds expression in pride, conflict, slander, cultural intolerance, and dissatisfaction with team and leadership. He also finds his way into team life through competition and disagreement concerning forms of worship and strategies for evangelism. Unfortunately our humanity falls prey again and again to this deception. We forget that our battle is not against people, whether Christians or Muslims, but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Non-believers watch us, wondering just how real and how powerful this new life is about which we talk. We must remember how the Lord, Himself, urged us to love one another and to live in unity, so that the world will know that we are His disciples (John 13:35; 17:23).

A vital aspect of team work is preventive member care. Those who are gifted listeners, empathetic and hospitable, have an important ministry role within the team. Corporate worship and prayer are also crucial parts of preventive member care in which all can participate. These are powerful weapons against friction, discouragement and culture shock, putting the Lord and the issues around us into proper perspective. Praying as a group focuses us heavenwards, not on our problems. It releases a special anointing from which new strength, direction, unity, and equipping flow.

Our team began each working day as a group with an hour of worship, which included prayer, music, a short devotional thought; and ample time for intercession for our staff and projects, local friends, team, and personal issues and current world affairs. This helped us stay focused on our purpose, and to be sensitive to one another. We prayed for urgent needs and formed a prayer cover for those who were struggling with issues like fatigue, illness, culture, family problems, etc. This very effective tool for team unity provides both preventive and practical type of member care.

There is a particular team responsibility to cover female coworkers in prayer. In the Muslim world women, more often than men, are a target in terms of isolation, loneliness, abuse and spiritual heaviness. In the same way that Christ is the head of the church and the husband is the head of the wife (Ephesians 5:23), we felt an obligation for the men in the team to be a shield for the women (married and single). Occasionally the men would symbolically form a circle around the women and cover them with prayer and blessings. At other times, when one of the women had been sexually offended by touch or word, provided she was willing, I would both debrief her and pray for cleansing and deliverance, to prevent roots of bitterness from growing.

Single women, without a spouse to share joys and frustrations, need special support from the team. It is helpful if singles live together, but there is also a deep need to be part of a family, especially in the Muslim culture, which is totally family defined. A vivid example of team support occurred when one of our single teachers was struggling with a difficult situation at an international school. Strained relationships between parents and teachers added to an already tense atmosphere due to incidences of student injury and parental complaint. Some of our team went one evening and worshipped in every classroom of the school building, praying for each child and teacher by name, and binding every force that was not of God. The subsequent change of atmosphere was obvious, inspiring unsolicited comment on the positive and joyful spirit around school. There is a tremendous potential in team ministry, but unfortunately it is often under-utilized. When we are unaware of reasons for tensions in our teams, we tend to invest our energies in the wrong places, thus missing out on the blessings the Lord has for our team and its ministry.

#### **New Roles, Identity, and Lifestyle**

The Muslim world generally is focused on *people and events*, not time or work. People visit whenever they have time and are very hospitable. Even the very poor share from the little they have, sometimes running into debt in order to entertain their guests. Things happen when they happen--not according to a planned schedule. This may require a significant adjustment in one's attitude toward work. It took me some time to learn to accept this cultural way of being. At the end of the day nothing was done from my to-do list, but I had served many cups of tea, fed beggars, given medicine to the sick, listened to painful life-stories, and been able to pray for those without hope. I needed to adjust my cultural value system to accommodate that of the country in which I served, in order to grow into a new role and identity.

Whereas men tend to continue work in their professional fields overseas, women often do not, which affects their sense of worth and value. Women, married or unmarried, with or without children, all need to adapt to a new set of expectations, which have their own challenges and pressures. Feelings of loneliness and isolation are often the result of the restricted lifestyle women have to lead. It needs courage and energy to leave the safe home, to overcome language barriers, and to cope with intimidation.

One common problem for all female workers is the lack of *physical exercise*. Both the culture and the pollution in the cities restrict outside sports, even going for walks. Because exercise plays a vital part for our psychological well-being as well as helping us to stay in shape, we need to be creative in finding avenues for rest and exercise, such as aerobics at home. Other options for exercise can be very limited, such as tennis or swimming, except where there is an international hotel close by.

*Mothers with small children* are even more confined to their homes, yet children can be great bridge-builders in reaching out to neighbors. For one, children are very prestigious and loved in Muslim cultures, and they generally have less inhibitions in adapting to a new surrounding and language.

An area of great concern for parents can be the *schooling* of their children. If local schooling is not possible, home schooling or boarding-school are the only alternatives. Separation can be very difficult for both parents and children, necessitating lots of support from the field and the home base.

*Married couples* need to know how to maintain a healthy and loving partnership in a culture where the sexes are separated, and where showing of affection is unacceptable. It is therefore of great

importance to have a comfortable home where they can feel secure and enjoy total privacy, and to schedule regular dates with each other away from guests and work.

There is a tendency for some *expatriate men* to begin to unconsciously identify with the Muslim cultural idea of manhood, exhibiting more macho behavior, such as walking in front of their wives, helping less around the house or with the children, and being predominantly in male company. This can be quite annoying, especially for wives, and needs to be addressed and brought to their awareness, before it causes conflict.

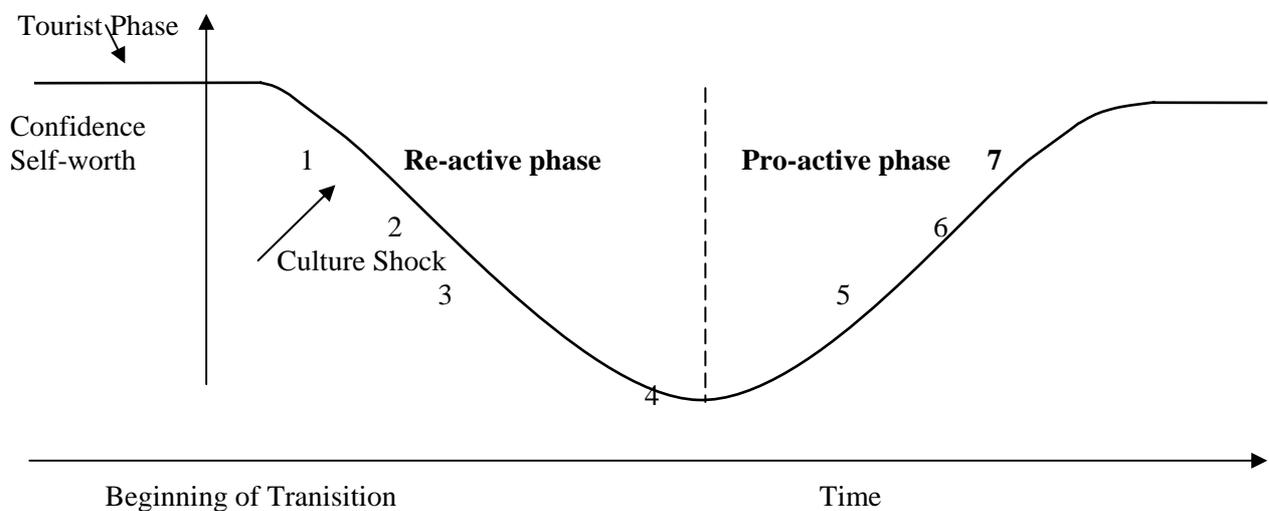
*Single women* feel the restrictions of the culture even more. Additionally they are under constant pressure from well-meaning local friends questioning their singleness, which makes them feel incomplete. (Married women without children are under the same type of scrutiny.) On the other hand if singles are sure of their calling and have a resilient personality, their ministry can be very rewarding as they are independent and enjoy more freedom in sharing their lives with local families. A developing courtship can be difficult to handle because of the cultural restrictions. Families need to open their homes to courting couples, so that couples can date without harming their reputation.

*Women who work* outside the home may not battle with loneliness so much as with frustrations and limitations due to culture, bureaucracy, or corruption. For example, a doctor or a nurse will find it difficult when treating a local newborn, to persuade the mother to refrain from applying charcoal to the baby's eyelids (the traditional way to protect the child from the evil eye) for the duration of the treatment. It can be difficult to persuade the parent of a child with diarrhea to give her lots of fluids rather than high doses of antibiotics. Or the office work might suffer, because the manager left without notice to attend to family matters.

**Adjusting to Transitions**

In our new place of ministry we are exposed to many cultural differences--changes in professional roles, tasks, and social networks. The cycle of reactions and feelings triggered by change have the potential to undermine our sense of identity and security. A diagram that helps us understand this is the *Transition Curve*, developed by Adams, Hayes, and Hopsen (1977). The curve is divided into two phases, a *re-active phase*, where we grieve the past, and a *pro-active phase*, where we create the future. The following is my adaptation and application of this diagram to the situation of missionaries going abroad for ministry.

**Figure 1. Transition Curve**



Initially we go through a time of fascination (tourist-type experience), where we are excited about the new challenges, until we enter culture shock, when the transition really begins. A move out of the known into the unknown means leaving home, family, friends and job, and entering into a new country, culture, and responsibility. Culture shock can stretch us to the point of immobilization as we struggle with language acquisition, dress-code, isolation and loneliness for family and friends, and coping with negative aspects of culture. It can shake our confidence and cause us to question our self-worth. In this re-active phase we move from a sense of being overwhelmed (1), to denial (2), where we minimize the change, a kind of temporary retreat. The next step is marked by the feeling of frustration and being out of control (3), where we question everything, feel trapped and angry, until we hit the bottom, where we start to let go and accept reality (4). This step involves the process of disengaging from what we left behind. People in this re-active phase are intensely affected by their physical and social environment; and are driven by feelings.

Then begins the slow process of pro-active adaptation, where we become more involved and try out new things (5): progress in language, building of friendships, putting some roots down, cutting ourselves loose from home ties. At the next step we start to conceptualize, reflect, and evaluate the change (6). Finally we internalize and more freely accept the process of change, and stability returns (7). During this process we take more initiative and regain our ability to respond as a result of values rather than feelings/reactions.

A typical example is a mother with young children: she doesn't only leave her own family and friends behind, but also the friends of the children, which she has to replace in the beginning. The many new challenges of learning the language, adjusting to new diet and climate, sicknesses, and trying to make new friends can totally overwhelm her and immobilize her. If not helped she will withdraw to focus on her own home, repressing feelings of anger and frustration. Everything seems to be threatening, too much, too difficult. After a good look at the situation, encouraging letters from friends and support from team members on the field, and some time of adaptation and routine, things start to improve: little successes in using the language, recognizing the positive sides of the host culture, making friends and engaging more and more in responsibilities outside the home and in the spiritual battle. Once she is able to engage herself and call this new place "home", she has gone a big step in the adjustment process. Unfortunately some people return home prematurely, without pressing on and experiencing the rewarding break-through, when we exit the dark valley and start putting roots down.

In our individual uniqueness and complexity, we seldom move neatly from phase to phase, but it helps to understand that what we experience is not uncommon, and that it can take a year and often longer to really adjust. It is important to stress that any change has the potential for growth. By embracing the challenges and making them into our opportunities, we are strengthened rather than defeated.

### Conclusion

Women missionaries play a vital role in bringing the Good News to the female population in Muslim nations. Exercising that ambassadorship poses formidable challenges that require careful preparation and circumspect living. Half the battle is won when we are willing to examine ourselves thoroughly and with absolute honesty, scrutinizing our motives; acquire training in field-related subjects such as Islam, local culture, and spiritual warfare; and submit to any needed counseling before departing from the home-country. A good support system, a personal desire for spiritual growth, team-mindedness and servant-heartedness, alertness to specific cultural and spiritual realities, and a committed walk in the Lord's authority and love determine effectiveness and long-term survival in a challenging ministry situation. Understanding that transition is not easy but manageable and enriching for our identity and growth, helps to make ministry overseas a rewarding experience and a wonderful testimony to others.

### Reflection and Discussion

1. What are the main stress areas that affect female Christian workers in the Muslim world? How can you relate to them from your own experience?

2. How can a team work together to become more resilient? Why do women need special “covering” and support?
3. What can sending organizations do to better prepare and care for their female personnel who are working in Muslim settings? List at least three practical suggestions.
4. How have you worked through past unresolved areas in your own life? How could you get help for any areas that continue to bother you?
5. What role do you see for spiritual warfare and using the authority of Christ in your ministry? What are your experiences?

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