

Our Journey into Missions

R and R

Overview:

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Calling

Three years after I gave my life to Jesus, the Lord gave me a burden for Africa. My desire to serve the Lord grew as I spent time reading the biographies of godly people such as George Muller, Charles Spurgeon, Hudson Taylor, Charles Finney, Charles Wesley, missionaries to the Auca Indians in South America, etc. Their lives spoke to me of their love and passion for souls and 'faith' in God. They dared to trust Him for the impossible, beyond what human eyes could see and understand. Although God impressed upon my heart that He wanted me to be a missionary in Africa, preparation was necessary and it took me several years to be equipped and ready to fulfill His calling.

Trusting God

The first part of my preparation was to learn how to trust God. Learning to trust that God could use me despite my weaknesses was one thing. Trusting God for finance was entirely new to me. When the Lord called me to join the OM ship (MV Doulos) that carry the gospel to countries around the world, I had to trust Him for finance. One of the conditions was that I was not to ask or share about my needs but just to pray for the money. It was amazing when God answered prayers. Each month He provided the exact amount needed. I told no one of my need and just by asking God alone, saw him provide wonderfully for two and a half years with OM.

Early Days on Board The Ship

My first cross-cultural exposure was to 300 people of different nationalities living on board the ship. It was my first experience living among such diverse cultures and languages. It was on the ship that I saw that *people are different* and different cultures have different ways of doing things. I could not relate with other nationalities in the same way that I relate with people from my home country. The languages spoken and the expressions may seemed impolite at times compared to where I came from. But to the people concerned, it was normal. I spoke English and so did they but sometimes Westerners found it hard to understand my English.

Similarly I would also find it difficult at times to understand what they were saying. It was frustrating for me not to be able to communicate at a level of mutual understanding. Later I learned that communication is not just a spoken language but also the way it is phrased or expressed within the context of each culture. So I had *to change* the way I communicate in order to 'connect' with the person of another culture. The more I worked and fellowshiped with others, the more I discovered that there was so much to learn from people of other nationalities. I discovered that my culture may not always have the best way of doing things nor is more superior to other cultures. Each culture has its own unique way of doing things and is deemed right within their own context.

Sometimes pride hinders me from learning from others. But God has His way of dealing with us. I could not understand why some Latin Americans did not behave like Christians. I judged them by their behaviour and the way they talked but when I understood their culture more, I appreciated their love for God. This was a part of my preparation for cross-cultural ministry in the future. *Openness to learn and change* is necessary in order to effectively relate with others who are different from me.

It was in Argentina that I was very impressed with the love of the Christians. In their culture, greetings are in the form of a kiss on both cheeks. I remembered that before I entered the church, there

was a large group of young ladies that I needed to greet. I was told to kiss both sides of their cheeks. I felt embarrassed but with much trembling, I greeted all of them on their cheeks. This form of greeting was very new to me. Latin Americans are very expressive. Another 'problem' was hugging which was not done in my culture. While in the UK, I found it difficult to hug someone, something that is very normal in English culture. I had to force myself to do it a number of times and soon it became less embarrassing.

From Serving on the Ship to Serving in my Home Church

Exposure to different cultures is not the only part of the preparation for cross-cultural work. I also *served in my home church*. The pastor at that time was a very gracious man. His example of living by faith and trusting God for the impossible helped me to love and trust God more. In church I was very involved in *evangelism and mission*. Working with others within the church became one of the ways of preparing me for missions. Sharing the gospel and leading people to Christ was a great start. I spent a lot of time reaching out to people with the gospel. I was overjoyed to see how God used me to touch many lives and this gave me confidence.

From Serving to Studying

Further preparation for cross-cultural work took me to Bible College in Australia. The Bible College not only provided theological studies but also focused much on cross-cultural training. The college lifestyle was community living, studying, fellowshiping, praying and working together with different people. We had to do practical work. Laying bricks, painting, digging trenches, farming and all kinds of work that I had not done before. I learnt that dirty hands made good preparation for mission work.

Onward to Ghana, West Africa

After many years of preparation, God finally led my wife and me to Ghana, West Africa. We served among the KonKomba tribe, about 400,000 in population with a majority living in Northern Ghana and Togo. Religiously, they follow the African Traditional Religion and believe in spirit worship. Most cannot speak English. Their native language is Likpakpaln.

To understand some of our initial struggles in Ghana, let us introduce where we come from....

In my home country we have almost everything for convenient living. Good roads, many kinds of tasty food, good communication system, several huge supermarkets and shopping malls, attractive houses and cars, consistent electricity and water supply, many friends and etc. It is also a peaceful and comfortable country to live in.

Initial Cultural Shock

When we arrived in Ghana, we were faced with *a totally different lifestyle*. Ghana was not as well developed as home country. Many places in Ghana were not what we actually expected. There were no proper roads beyond the capital and towns have dirt roads with numerous potholes. One was not able to drive in a straight line for long without hitting a pothole. Many cars or trucks would break down in the middle of the road. Even in towns, huge potholes could be seen along the road. Our first impression when we landed at the airport reminded us of our home country 20 years earlier.

During the first few weeks, we stayed with different missionaries in town. They were very hospitable and loving. This helped us tremendously in our adjustment.

A lot of people on the streets sat by small tables selling just a few fruits or items. There were many kinds of languages and dialects that we could not understand. Bribery was common. The locals see foreigners as people with lots of money. The cost of daily necessities were twice as much for foreigners. We had to bargain hard to pay a reasonable price. Sometimes goods and household items were limited in supply and we had to search for it all over town. We were overwhelmed with constant interruptions in electricity and water supply even in the town. Often it took a few days for them to be restored.

It was hard not being able to understand their worldview, how they perceived things and what their values were. Even though some spoke English, a lot of words did not mean what we thought they meant. We had to learn to speak Ghanaian English to be understood and avoid misunderstanding.

Language Learning

When we moved to the North of Ghana, we stayed in the local village. We felt alone. We couldn't communicate with the people. There were a few who could speak limited English. During our first year, there were no other foreigners except one from Poland. Later a couple of American doctors served in the local clinic. It was good to have fellowship with them. As we took every effort to learn the Konkomba language daily, we made slow progress. It was good to be able to communicate to some extent. People started coming to us. In African culture, greetings are very important and not to greet is offensive. So we had to greet everyone we met and repeated the same greetings many times eg "How is your health? How is your husband/wife? How are your children? How is your house? How is your work?" And on and on it went!

In the village, as we learnt the language, we also discovered their worldview such as:

- ❑ What is important and not important to them,
- ❑ Their concept of family life and responsibilities,
- ❑ How they perceive right and wrong,
- ❑ Who holds the authority example their chief can only be approached via a middle man,
- ❑ The different kinds of festivals and their meanings,
- ❑ Their belief in spirits,
- ❑ Why they do things in certain ways,
- ❑ Their concept of integrity and sin, etc.

I remembered a pastor came to borrow petrol from me. Knowing that petrol was difficult to get in the village, I reluctantly let him have the petrol. He told me that he would return it to me but he didn't. I realized that his concept of borrowing meant that it was given to him. Since we were of the same faith, I was expected to share what I had with him.

We were also amazed by their kind of food and how it was prepared. There was a lot variety. Yam, corn and tapioca were their daily staple food throughout the year. Very little green vegetables were available.

The weather was sometimes unbearable. It didn't rain for 8 months and was very hot in the afternoon and at night. There were no electricity and piped water. So we made do with what we had. We used kerosene lamps. I used to spend at least an hour everyday collecting water from the nearby water pump and stored it in a drum for our daily use. That was quite an experience. Our years in Bible College in Australia helped us to be practical on the mission field.

Soon the people became friends with us when we could speak their language better. They were friendly and helpful when we needed help. We found that to know and speak their language was very important and it was essential for church-planting ministry. Without taking time to learn their language, we would not be able to share or teach them about Jesus. The local people needed to hear the good news in their own language.

Truly, language is the key to knowing the culture and worldview. When we had an interpreter to help us, we found that we were actually not as effective in reaching out to the people. We couldn't share the gospel effectively due to the language barrier. We came to understand why our mission agency stressed the importance of language learning in the initial two years.

One of the most effective ways to learn a language is to stay among the people. We learned most of our language by daily interactions with the people. It required discipline to spend 3 to 4 hours talking in a different language. As we went round visiting people, we took the opportunity to participate in their activities. We would sit with them, helped them to pluck groundnuts and practiced our language with them at the same time. They gladly talked with us and sometimes laughed at us because of our wrong pronunciation. It was fun and we enjoyed it very much.

Ministry

Our ability to speak their language, freed us to move around in the bush to visit other Konkomba villages. After two years of language learning we planned to start evangelism and church-planting. But our ministry was hindered by a tribal conflict. Five other tribes were fighting the Konkomba tribe in the northern region for almost a year. At one time, all missionaries had to evacuate to the south. The churches in the northern region were badly affected. We struggled at that time and thought that our calling and time in Ghana was wasted. At times we even wondered if we were in the right place. Our fellow missionaries encouraged us. We sought the Lord and He confirmed within our hearts that His calling upon our lives was definitely right.

During that period, we visited the northern region to encourage the church leaders. The leaders were glad to see us and we had good times of encouragement and fellowship. Trusting, believing God and having patience in what we were doing helped us to press on.

During our first term, church planting was slow as the result of the unfortunate events that happened in Ghana. The pace began to pick up in our second term. We learned from an experienced missionary that the key to effective church-planting ministry and church growth is not to do the work alone. We were advised to work with a local believer who has leadership potential. We found it true because a local person knows his own people well. He knows where to look for them and how to attract them to the church. The first church planted in the city grew very quickly as a result. This was again proven true later when we started a work in central Ghana. The work did not go well because we didn't have a committed local Christian to work with us.

While in the city in the south, we found three key people to work with us. We served together, did evangelism together and we learned to trust the people to do the job. We provided teaching, equipping, prayer support and trusted them with the responsibilities. We appointed someone to handle the finance and rejoiced that they all did well. The church grew even without us being around later.

One of the lessons we learned in cross-cultural ministry is *the need to give the local believers a free hand to plan* their ministry and outreach. They know the best ways to reach their own people. We released them to lead the worship services and appoint their own leaders. They looked to us when they needed advice on certain issues. We allowed them to plan their ministry and we flowed with what they felt best for the church.

In cross-cultural ministry in Africa, a large dose of patience is required. It is rude to rush people into doing what we needed them to do. To them, time is not important, relationships are. They love to spend lots of time talking and would usually stop their work in order to give full attention to the person. That was why no great the method would work out until relationship and trust are built. We were frustrated several times when we wanted certain things done but couldn't. In our early days in Ghana, we tend to criticize or judge people for not moving according to our expectations. Finally we learnt to adapt to them and appreciate their culture. We should not expect them to adapt to us for we are the foreigners!

Conclusion

My advice to those who intend to serve in cross-cultural ministries is:

- **Pray** a lot.
- Have **an open mind** to accept differences in cultures, worldview and learn to see issues from the perspective of the host country, culture and work from there.
- Be flexible and **open to change** when faced with any agenda or ministry that is different from ours. Imposing our view will not help effectiveness in reaching out cross-culturally. Rather it may cause hindrances to the work of God.
- Have a **servant heart** to learn from others even though they don't seemed to be smarter than us. In fact we may find that they may be wiser than us.
- **Be humble** to learn from those who don't know more than us. This will build a good working relationship. Learning from one another makes us good workers for our Lord Jesus.
- **Observe and learn** the best ways to work with the target people group.