



Options for Overseas Service in World Evangelism¹

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The lights were dim and the roar was muffled, but I couldn't sleep. It was my first nonstop flight directly into the heart of Africa and we were high over the mid-Atlantic. I needed a stretch. Coach seats can get pretty stiff after a while. I shuffled down the aisle to the front of the cabin, turned and started slowly back. Then it suddenly hit me. These hundred or more huddled sleepers were largely unknown to me, I only knew the name of one other; but suddenly these travelers took on a specific meaning. It wasn't the tourist season and, anyway, we were headed for destinations that are not very popular with the tourist trade. No, these travelers were a small sample of the international set, the employed jet-set, if you prefer: professional and technical workers of the world; families, businesspersons, young couples who had looked so matter-of-fact as we had awaited departure at New York's Kennedy. A few were Africans headed home, but most were major metropolitan labor center such as Atlanta or Dallas—much larger, for example, than the tri-state metropolitan region around Cincinnati. In fact, it is a quantity of workers greater than all the fire and police personnel of every city of the United States all put together. To personalize these data we can look more closely at your age brackets and educational categories.

You are soon to enter your prime years of employability. During these years from 25 to 44, nearly 1.4 percent of the male American population is involved in long-term overseas experience. For these same years of prime employability the college-educated subgroup is employed overseas at a much higher rate: 2.1 percent. If we were to assume that you here at Urbana 70 are a random sample of American college students, we could predict that more than one of each fifty of you will spend a substantial amount of your career outside the U. S. But you are *not* a random group; you are much more attuned to international opportunities than is typical. That is why you are here. Your awareness and sensitivity to the overseas opportunities and needs places you in a group apart. This factor will have the effect, conservatively, of doubling the probability that you will go overseas to work. Add the fact that many of you are committed to the Christian proposition for worldwide evangelism, and it follows that you, or one of the people at no more than easy arm's reach from where you sit, will be an internationalist.

Opportunities for women and the demand for trained husband-and-wife teams are increasing. Thus we have reason to include the women here as well as the men. Just for fun, try to predict which of the people near you will be an internationalist. Reach out and touch his or her shoulder. Go ahead! The reactions likely vary from "Who, me?" to "Are you kidding?" But were we all to re-gather here ten years from now, your experiences would have very likely fulfilled these informal predictions.

Many of you will become missionaries in the classical sense; certainly the day of organized missions is far from over. But not all of you who become internationalists will be full-time missionaries. The number of Americans going overseas in non-missionary roles is increasing at a higher rate than the missionary force. In the twenty years from 1949 to 1969, the number of Protestant, that is,

¹ Ted Ward. Options for Overseas Service in World Evangelism. Address at Urbana 1970. Subsequently adapted for publication: See Ted Ward. Options for Overseas Service in World Evangelism. *Common Ground Journal*. Vol. 10 (2) Spring 2013, pp. 94-99

denominational and independent, American missionaries rose from 16,000 to 33,289. A bit more than double. The total number of American civilians overseas during the same period went from 491,000 to 1,399,000—almost triple.² Unless our nation reverts to an isolationist stance, these trends are likely to continue. And you are likely to be part of the action, whether as missionary or as “American worker, expatriate.”

What is the “American worker, expatriate”? First, they are Americans; then they become a member of that growing community of internationalists, sharing their skills and abilities with the world community of man. Their skills are particularly needed in the developing nations, where their emotional bias and aspirations must be committed to “working oneself out of a job”—training and helping workers to take their rightful places in their own emerging nations. But the beauty of all this is that an exciting career can be built around a series of “dig-in, help-others, get-out” experiences. There is only one sort of person who will be miserable in the role of the new internationalist—the person who wants to settle down into one steady role to protect status quo for life. If you are this sort of person, turn off your hearing aid; I am not on your wavelength.

What does a career overseas look like? Although there are occasionally some wild and fascinating variations, ordinarily the American family overseas continues to be involved in an American-style community; far too often it is a ghetto of the elite, complete with chain-link fence and armed guards. Of course, there can be plenty of involvement with the foreign nationals, but there are also the American-type schools and even American-style friendship patterns. As a witness for Christ within this community, the opportunities are rather as they are at home in the States, neither distinctly better nor worse. Starry-eyed visions of becoming a part-time missionary are often unfulfilled.

Was it Shakespeare or Hezekiah who first said it? “Airplane riding doth not a missionary make.” Isolation and loneliness can hit you pretty hard when you discover how much you need support and encouragement from fellow Christians, especially when you begin to sense the long and difficult task of establishing satisfying interaction with the national community.

It is difficult to find reliable data on the number of years spent in foreign service by the Americans overseas. My observations suggest that the average falls somewhere from eight to twelve. There seem to be three patterns: the *limited assignment*, from one to five years; the *career experience*, from eight to twenty years overseas; and the *lifetime* people—those who really cut their ties to America, taking satisfaction in the thought of being buried in the soil of their adopted and beloved country. These “lifetime” people are a minority, though their number is growing in such countries as Israel and, for a while at least, in Sweden and Canada.

Very few Americans, even those who are altruistic and highly motivated, are able to change their life styles enough to step down to the economic realities of “going on the local economy”—that is, learning to live on the salary that a local national person would be paid for doing the job that you are paid three to twenty times as much to do in the U.S.

You may prefer to think of yourself as a “career” or “limited-assignment” person. Most of the American community overseas are temporary residents. Most do not renounce their American citizenship; most return to the U.S. for a month or more of furlough or vacation at one- to four-year intervals. Most live at salary standards far above the local population. (In fact, many live like kings and are hated for it.) Most can save enough of their so-called “hardship allowance” while overseas to allow an improvement of their standard of living even after they return to the U.S. Many is the swimming pool that has been built on a hardship allowance!

Indeed, the American communities in Paris, in London, in Buenos Aires, in Berlin, Rome, Nairobi,

² U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 193, Mobility of the Population of the United States: March 1968 to March 1969, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C., 1969.

Manila, Melbourne, Singapore, and New Delhi constitute large unevangelized fields in themselves—and these spiritually needy Americans are upper middle class and above in our terms, and upper class in local terms. There is a message here! Missions have tended to leave the rest of the American community alone. Although the primary justification of foreign missions is, of course, reaching the citizens of the host nation, the witness to and among overseas Americans should not be neglected. Careful reading of Acts 16 indicates that Paul, the first missionary to Europe, went first to relate to a person of his own religious and cultural background. Christian businesspersons, engineers, teachers and government agents are needed to infiltrate this overseas community. Is this where God wants you? If so, there is a price to pay. You will have to be a missionary on an overtime basis. It is harder, and in some respects less productive, to be a self-supported missionary than to be a church-supported missionary.

Following are a few specific comments on overseas employment as it could affect you.

Business and industry constitute the largest category of employment overseas for Americans. Opportunities in this private sector typically involve considerable freedom and, in fact, free time to engage in outside activities of the sort that can make your “other career” as a missionary as extensive as you wish. There are some restrictive exceptions, particularly in the Arab countries.

Government service positions are a bit more strictly defined. Since the representative of the government is more or less “on display” most of the time, whether the occasions are formal or informal, there is some restriction on involvement in “sectarian ventures.” But the occasions and the context for personal influence and private conversations about Christ can be both numerous and consequential. Think of the importance of sharing Christ with strategically placed people in other nations. There are people to be reached by laypersons whom missionaries cannot even get to. Ambassador John Gordin Mean, for one, found it possible to be both ambassador for the United States and ambassador for Christ at the same time. His assignment in Guatemala was shortened by an assassin’s bullet but not before he had established in one more country that Americans can live and speak for the transforming power of the gospel of Christ.

And while on the subject of Guatemala, you should know that our current ambassador is an active member of a Spanish-language Protestant congregation of believers in the capital, a church that began as a mission church.

A wide array of positions is available in government service, from career posts in the diplomatic service to limited-term positions in civilian support system roles related to the armed forces. There are positions requiring various levels of education and various degrees of career commitment.

And rather than neglect them altogether, the Peace Corps and other quasi-governmental operations should be mentioned as one of the ways young Americans can give substantially of themselves for the sake of humanity. Like most experiences in life, a term in the Peace Corps can be as valuable or as trite as you make it. A really dedicated young man or woman can make a most worthy start toward a career as an internationalist through an assignment as a Peace Corps volunteer. A short-term mission assignment or even a summer overseas can serve the same purpose, though in general, the longer, the better.

The demand for professional workers overseas is very real. Since my own experiences are more in research and development than in industry or government, I am particularly aware of the huge American stake in overseas research and research on international affairs. Just one example: The Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies recently counted a roster of 416 U.S. professors who are scholarly experts on Japan; they are located on 135 different campuses in the United States. These specialists were primarily responsible for the \$15,000,000 spent on Japanese studies last year. This illustration deals with Japan alone, not even one of the so-called underdeveloped nations where an immense American involvement still continues despite war-economy cutbacks. These millions for research and training were spent by and through projects in

which overseas Americans were involved.

Consider: Thousands of Americans are choosing international research as a career; is this for you?

Many of you intend to be teachers when you graduate. You have likely heard about the thousands of teachers engaged in the education of the dependents of overseas Americans, but there is an even more exciting job to do. Especially in the rapidly developing nations, education in the national schools and in the nonformal educational programs promises to continue to be a major employment field for overseas Americans. One major difficulty with this category of service is that teacher salaries in the local economies are often incredibly low. But many teaching positions are subsidized through USAID or American foundations. Several of my friends have taught in literacy programs, small-farm management, family nutrition and family planning. Not the typical subjects of the American curriculum, but American-trained teaching skills can be useful in a variety of subjects!

Yes, there are even opportunities for productive relationships between internationalists and traditional missionaries. Missionaries and Christian internationalists must learn to help each other. This sort of cooperation can be extremely important in strengthening, enriching and deepening the right sort of impact of missions on the local scene. There is a rub in all of this: Regardless of the way you go, the length of time you are there or the roles you play, you should plan to learn the language! Many Americans overseas fail to take the local languages seriously. Without a doubt our mono-lingual culture tends to make us linguistically handicapped. So when you add a bit of laziness to ineptness, it is not surprising that avoiding language learning is common.

English *is* a marvelously handy language and, in most cities of the world, it is possible to make your way rather well with nothing but English. Nevertheless, if you intend to double in missions you will need the local language. Knowing the language of the people is part of what it takes to be a beautiful American. And you have to want to get close to the people. You need to take a real interest in their condition: their needs, their hopes, their past and their beauty as people.

Why should we encourage American Christians to go overseas? We live in the reality of the one-world era. The involvement of *all* nations in the problems that affect any *one* nation is a matter both of atomic energy and of total ecology. From a pragmatic viewpoint, there is no feasibility in isolation. From a Christian viewpoint there is no feasibility in separateness. We are in the world. Christ is building his church in this world. We are partners in this singular venture. As American Christians the inordinate and imbalanced riches of our land and of ourselves, in the light of the impoverished majority of the world, make us even more profoundly debtors to all people. We have obligations. Christians must not be counted among the more selfish people of our nation. We should seek out many ways to share. Sharing is not just a matter of monetary wealth, but involves our *selves*, our *lives*, our *careers*. Americans are sharing—and they are sharing in all sorts of capacities and roles. Should you as *Christian* Americans not be aware of your potential as internationalists even as you are aware of your opportunities in church-financed mission possibilities?

Another reason for Christians to be involved as members of the general American community overseas is the need to get a balance in the American image. If the only American Christians non-Americans see are church-supported missionaries, they can get the impression that all Christians drop out of everything else to be full-time employees of the church. They can also assume that the more prosperous Americans (likely envied for their worldly goods) are rarely Christians—thus it seems that God doesn't prosper the very people who are called by his name.

Further, going overseas as a secular worker is one way to help enlighten the church of Jesus Christ in the U.S. Of all the supposedly sophisticated Christian groups of this world, the church in America is one of the most distinctly culture-bound. Overseas experience of American church members might do much to reduce the parochial and narrow views of how God works and what God wants in a life. Mission board members, pastors, deacons, as well as parishioners in general, need a high degree of cross-cultural sensitivity and profound Christian love for human variations. As we work together to

reduce the American-ness of our Christianity and rely more on the scriptural models of faith and love, we have better claim on the orthodoxy of community and the orthodoxy of compassion that Francis Schaeffer talks about.

Cross-cultural communication and the methods of anthropology can make a constructive difference in the church at home. We can all work toward the day when a majority of church members have had some firsthand experience in productively relating to others whose cultural backgrounds are different. That will be a great day!

The gospel of Jesus Christ has a cross-cultural appeal; but most American Christianity does not. I am eager for the day when alumni of the Peace Corps and short-term missionary programs become deacons! And even better, what a great thing it would be for a local church to deliberately take on an overseas experience through the eyes of three or four families of internationalists.

In summary, here are several suggestions.

1. For those who are trying to select a major field of study: Select a field that will prepare you for a versatile career in the U.S. and the *world*!
2. For those who are planning on graduate school: Consider a graduate program that includes overseas learning experiences.
3. For those who are going to be college and university faculty members: Give special consideration to institutions that are involved in overseas contracts and will give you a chance to participate as part of your assignment now or later.
4. For all of you: Take some studies in cross-cultural understanding, area studies in geography, sociology and history of specific world regions, and also some basic anthropology courses.
5. One further suggestion: Get some cross-cultural experiences now by learning to work in an American subcultural setting somewhere where you live or go to school.

Americans are going overseas to carry on the business, research, training and cooperative development which is part of the world obligations of a profoundly indebted nation. Should Christians be among them? *Yes*.