



The Anxious Climate of Concern for Missionary Children¹

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During the past decade missionary kids (MKs) have come into their own. The missionary kid is now assumed to be one of the significant though rarely understood factors in the success or failure of many a missionary. Formerly among the best-kept secrets of the mission establishment, the trials and tribulations of some children of missionary parents are now widely published and discussed. Closely related to the post-1970 resurgence of anxious interest in the vitality and welfare of Christian families, the concern for MKs includes both pathos and promise, a sure-fire combination for popularity as an issue for the contemporary church.

The issue of proper care for missionaries' children is now a dominant factor in the calling of the missionary and in mission career planning. After a long period of virtual neglect—taking for granted that somehow God takes care of the children of missionaries no matter what the privations and traumas—today we see an almost paranoid preoccupation. Providing a carbon copy of North American upbringing for their children has replaced the sense of joy and adventure that gave optimism to missionaries of yore. Perhaps the optimism was unfounded in some cases—evidenced by some of the current literature and judging by the discussions at the first and second International Conferences on Missionary Kids—but one must wonder at the reversal of bias and hope.

Missionary families, no less than any other families, are dear to the heart of God. God does not require a dichotomizing or prioritizing of responsibilities along the axis of ministry versus family. One's family is part of one's ministry. Neglect of family is not part of a bargain one strikes with God.

Today's world makes parenthood difficult. Bringing up children can bring anxieties to anyone anywhere. For the missionary community, and especially for those who are inclined to emphasize the hardships and hazards of missionary life, it is easy enough to focus attention on the problems of missionary children. Every childhood tantrum, every adolescent pain, every perplexing dilemma of educational choices becomes transformed into an "MK problem."

In the current discussions of the conditions and choices that confront missionaries, one has the uneasy feeling that God is assumed to be either whimsical or senile: calling husbands but not wives—and worse, forgetting altogether that those he has called may also have some responsibilities to their children. Surely the difficult sociopolitical climate within which today's missionaries must function should not be minimized, but perhaps faulty theology lies behind some part of the contemporary anxiety about the missionary's family.

At the risk of minimizing the importance of the practical decisions, a plea must be made for looking closely at theological and institutional roots of the anxieties. Failure to do so condemns us to a perpetual treating of symptoms. Missionary couples, especially those with young children, are especially vulnerable to anxiety. The missionary vocation may have been described to them in terms of one among several career alternatives. The spiritual concern for the calling of God sometimes takes second place behind a reasoned argument about why it would be good to at least put a few years into overseas ministry. "Try it, you may like it" can sometimes be heard as the recruiter's message. The

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shifts in missionary recruitment appeals are traceable to several matters within the mission establishment: compulsion to keep up with quotas, the need to replace missionaries who are renouncing their earlier commitments to long-term service, the corporate quest to keep the mission competitively large, and the need for slices of support funds to keep the home offices adequately funded.

For today's missionary, the career, tenure, specific assignments, and periods between furloughs and home-country furloughs are all generally becoming shorter. In many cases shorter assignments are wise for personal and family reasons; in other cases they are necessary because of the vagaries of the modern political world. Few missionaries today need to think in terms of being buried with members of their family in foreign soil. Being a missionary has become a more transient sort of vocation, requiring periodic retraining and major moves during the course of a career. This is hardly the stuff of clear images and specific goals. Few questions have satisfactory answers. The frustrations that newcomers feel are inevitable. Ultimately, the new missionary must settle for a few really firm commitments. So the family issues dominate, as perhaps they should. Where will my children go to school? What sort of school is that? Who is in charge?

These questions are being asked insistently. Candidates or prospective candidates who encounter any of the answers that they have been predisposed to consider wrong tend to react sharply. For many, the ultimate no-no is the boarding school. Lonely-child stories about mission dormitories and hostels have been popularized in autobiographical books. Any schooling arrangement that might lead a child to believe that he or she has been forsaken or mistreated is now feared like the plague. Even home-schooling seems like a better alternative—never mind that it will demand the lion's share of the time and energy of at least one of the parents. The concerns and fears, real and imagined, add up to an almost irrational rejection of any mode of education or family lifestyle that is outside the experiences of the parents. Willingness to accept the privations of pioneering is becoming rare.

In this climate, all matters must be discussed; all working conditions must be probed from the beginning. One hears it in concerns about retirement plans, guarantees about level of support and, loudly, all sorts of demands on behalf of the presumed welfare of the candidate's children. Nothing is left to chance, much less to faith.

The symptoms of anxiety have become familiar. Although the evidence is anecdotal rather than systematic, the syndrome has taken shape. New missionaries and candidates are insisting on assurances that their children will be able to live their lives overseas in much the same manner as their mono-cultural cousins back home. Missionaries already on the field are pushing harder than ever before to ensure that the schools for their children conform to their images of what they think suburban schools in North America are like.

Hardly anyone doubts that there is something amiss; but there are sharply contrasting views of what the problems are and what to do about them. Missionary families and missionary children have been given more and more attention in recent years.

One must ask which is cause and which is effect. Does the increased attention follow from increasing difficulties confronting missionary families? Or is there more awareness of problems because of the increased attention?

The underlying assumption among today's younger missionaries seems to be that being overseas during the years of childhood and adolescence will hurt their children. The major concern arises from another popular delusion: that the quality of education overseas is apt to be inferior. For this reason and for dozens of others even less valid, the repatriated youngster is expected to encounter great difficulties while "catching up" upon return to the home country. These threatening images are built on the dubious assumptions that things are inherently better in America and that irreparable damage will result from bicultural child-rearing and schooling.

Much of the misunderstanding derives from a negative view of the intercultural experience. Americans, in general, are inexperienced and thus unpracticed in the human arts of intercultural relations. This handicap, which affects adults far more than children, derives from the fact that the communities in which most American Protestants were reared were, and continue to be monocultural. The background of the rank-and-file missionary is thus culturally and linguistically narrow. There is little in the American suburban and rural culture that attracts people outward into relationships with people who are substantially different from themselves. What little language learning the missionary parents may have encountered in their own school years likely consisted of unpleasant and unproductive experiences. What few intercultural experiences these small-town and suburban North Americans would have had probably included overtones of prejudice and fear. In short, the typical American missionary finds that there is much to learn and much to overcome because of this limited background.

In the providence of God many missionaries do overcome their cultural and linguistic handicaps rather well. But in the minds of the newcomers to missionary experience, negative images loom large, especially in regard to their “helpless” children who are assumed to be harmed in some way by the parents’ decision to follow Christ. The resultant self-criticism and emergent doubts can easily turn pathological. Missionaries whose motivations must compete aggressively with fears and self-doubts tend to become negative about one aspect or another of the missionary call. All they can imagine for their children is on the dark side of the moon.

The positive side of the story about growing up overseas is far more substantial than the negative. Unfortunately, as in journalism’s maxim about only the unusual being newsworthy, the positive side rarely gets told. If the family is strong, and the members committed to each other and not overly protective or compulsively dominating, the children will make the best of whatever schooling is available and will gain far more in social adaptability, creative and improvisational skills, interpersonal sensitivity, and self-acceptance than their cousins back in North America.

Oddly, only a few people writing about the missionary experience are calling attention to the fact that the world today is crying out for young leaders who have been reared in bicultural communities and who have overcome their fears of language and culture early in life. An impressive proportion of the veterans of the early Peace Corps, with its emphasis on cultural immersion, have been eagerly snapped up for substantial careers by international agencies of government, business, communications, and education. Offspring of missionary parents have also done well in such careers. But the fact that there is substantial demand for interculturally and linguistically experienced young people should surely be more than enough to offset the missionaries’ parental concerns about ultimate educability and employability of their children.

Misguided and exaggerated misunderstandings do not account for all of the increased concern about the welfare of the missionary’s family. Some real problems are on the increase. Since the days of the explorers and colonists, health has been a major personal anxiety among overseas Westerners. Today a newly dominant concern for kidnapping and other acts of terrorism has become well established in many regions. The resultant defensive measures and especially the tendency to limit one’s exposures to the “outside” environment has added yet another strain to the emotional well-being of the overseas family.

The fear of being stranded at the far ends of the earth with a crucial health problem lessened with the advent of the Boeing 707. The world’s health systems now at least communicate with one another, and medical evacuation by air is feasible almost anywhere (after a preliminary canoe or litter ride).

Even if the anxiety about missionary children largely derives from a theological flaw, there are surely important contributing factors in the contemporary Western societies and world climate. The investigation should not be limited to the theological sector. A substantial agenda of matters needs

attention; the problems are complex, and they deserve the best reasoning that can be brought to bear.

The best of outcomes would be to re-center the theological foundations of the missionary vocation, propagate a more balanced view of the overseas experience, and thus reduce the fears that are distorting the missionary enterprise. But in order that the missionary's sociological perspective can be brought into touch with reality, several matters should be set straight:

1. The cultural enrichment available in the bicultural or multicultural experiences of missionary families is a positive feature for most normal children. There is little persuasive evidence of the negative effects of the rumored threats: cultural confusion, linguistic confusion, or rootlessness.

2. The tendency to attribute any and every difficulty of raising children to being overseas or being a missionary is simply unrealistic. To the extent that it is a bad habit of faulty reasoning, it must be corrected by a more informed awareness that many of the problems encountered would occur no matter where the family might be located.

3. So that the tensions and mysteries of child-rearing do not become overwhelming, missionary parents need well-formed support networks. The missionary organization can play a limited role—at least by providing access to appropriate counseling resources when needed; but the major emphasis needs to be on the sorts of interpersonal supports and encouragements that each family can uniquely develop around itself.

4. Appropriate literature and parent-skills workshops can and should be made available to missionary families. Ironically, in a society that has lost many of the values of intergenerational support and extended family relationship, not even the Christians have done much about the need for teaching and learning family skills. We are still operating on the assumption that parenting skills merely come along in the biological package of reproduction. Here is where the major problem lies. Being overseas simply provides a diverting alibi.