

When Will You Be Home?

By Beth Tebbe

"I will be back in two days" . . . "two weeks" . . . "two months." These are familiar words in the lives of many couples in ministry today. As the world shrinks, the need and expectation for travel in the context of ministry is greater than ever.

Reading biographies of missionaries of earlier eras, one is startled with the long absences they had from wives and children. Adoniram Judson went on a voyage once—and didn't come back for two years. Isobel Kuhn, in her writings, honestly describes the great pain she felt on sending her daughter away to school at six years old. Because of war, she didn't see her again for five-and-one-half years. In fact, a theology was developed that

stated that these separations were not just a necessary evil, but something that glorified God and was an intrinsic part of ministry.

Due to the enormous changes in modern travel and communications, this is the area that has changed the most, practically speaking, in missions. On the other hand, it is one of the areas that has changed the least in terms of human response. While we can't relate to the time frames of the older mission biographies, we still identify with their honest admissions of loneliness and loss—and this is one reason they are timeless for us today.

Since coming to the international office of Interserve in Cyprus several years ago, my husband, Jim, has traveled a great deal. Most of this time we've had four kids at home and I've stayed at home in Cyprus with them.

I've had the whole gauntlet of feelings and responses to this separation, from handling it about as poorly as one could to managing it as a constructive part of life. There are several areas that need to be addressed.

Coping with Household or Other Crises. "If only he were here now just when I need him!" Coping with crises is a regular experience when one spouse travels. The mother of young children is especially vulnerable. Dad's help at supper and bedtime is invaluable, and when he is gone he is missed by all. Other families may have other stressful times of the day or week, but to the extent that the father is involved with the household and family when present, he is missed when absent.

Over a period of time I learned several coping skills. I did things differently when Jim was home and when he was gone—a polite way of saying I lowered my standards. On the one hand, it is important to keep continuity for children. On the other hand, they adjust to shortcuts if they can be turned into something fun. I realized it was more important to take care of my kids' emotional needs than cope perfectly on a practical level. As they grew, I grew in my coping skills and now have a collection of what have become humorous memories.

Get practical help that is needed, without feeling guilty. In many coun-

tries of service, practical household help is relatively inexpensive and can make a huge difference to a struggling mother. Be aware of resources in the community to help with home and car maintenance. This is an area where other team members need to be especially thoughtful of families who are vulnerable and offer non-critical and understanding help as able. Older women with their own stories to tell can be very supportive as a mother moves through the childhood years.

Practical coping is an area that improves with time, though it is never completely solved. On a down-to-earth level, life is much easier for me now than it was with four children, two of them infants. An aging car and computer are now my biggest headaches, but while frustrating, they aren't as draining as when the children were younger. Eventually a mother accumulates her own wisdom which she can then pass on to others.

Emotional Ballast. In healthy marriages, spouses usually support each other and are emotional ballast in the storms of life. Objectivity, understanding, a touch of humor and shared wisdom are some of the benefits of married life and these are noticeably absent when a spouse travels. While no amount of e-mail helps feed an infant and a toddler at the same time, communication helps to fill

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much of the emotional void in both spouses when apart and can help to give perspective on the situation hours later.

We should unashamedly use whatever communication is available to us in a modern world. This is improving all the time, literally all over the world. Missions and couples need to see communication costs as an integral part of the job and encourage spouses to phone, fax, e-mail, etc., often. This is cost-effective and may make a difference in a couple continuing this job and lifestyle over a period of time. E-mail arrived on the scene just as our older boys went into high school and I found keeping in touch with Jim's understanding and wisdom enormously helpful during those years.

Developing Different Interests.

Couples differ greatly in the extent to which husband and wife need to develop different interests. For every couple who testifies of the liberation and enrichment brought to the marriage when they develop outside interests, there is another couple who testifies to improved communication when they developed more common interests. The spouse who stays at home is far more likely to forge strong ties to the community and church; the traveling spouse may feel left out, a stranger when home.

Discuss honestly what is happening and try to look at the dynamics

a celebration and special time. You can develop your own meaningful traditions, such as a special dinner or unveiling of completed artwork.

Help kids find a way to talk about their feelings. Just as a spouse needs to acknowledge any anger, it is okay for kids to be angry if a parent misses a school or sports event. The child needs to know that it is important to the traveling parent, something he or she wishes he or she could have attended. The spouse who stays with the children may need to coach the traveling parent in keeping up with busy children, as it is difficult to keep track of activities from afar.

Homecoming. Both partners are needy at the time of homecoming. The spouse who stayed home is bone-weary from responsibility, while the traveling spouse is tired from work, travel, jet lag and may often come home sick. Both spouses need to inject a large amount of goodwill into the situation and realize what is happening. Try to ensure that both spouses have an opportunity to rest, probably one at a time, or in ping-pong fashion until both are rested.

Celebrate the trip in some fashion. Our kids love to help Jim unpack his suitcases, in hopes that there will be a box of chocolates or new t-shirt tucked in there for them. The more the traveling spouse can describe the trip, the more the family can vicariously enjoy it too. The one who travels can demonstrate love by noticing things family members would enjoy and then drawing them into the experience, later in the family living room.

Unusual Conflict in the Family in Time Surrounding Travel. It is often easier for family members to separate when there is a fight or tension. And on homecoming, there are also adjustments to be made. As happy as we are to see each other, we often have some sort of irrational altercation within 36 hours. This is all backward as what we want is peace and expressions of love and tenderness on both leaving and returning. The greatest difficulty in traveling for family life is usually not in the trip itself, but in the transitions.

It helped us greatly to realize these dynamics and recognize in each situation what is happening. At first we felt sick about this, but now we often see the inherent humor in the situation relatively quickly and can laugh at ourselves; we've done it again! It is important not to take incidents personally, as tests of how the spouse really feels, but use them as learning experiences. Though difficult, try to keep other tensions and pressures at a minimum just before a spouse leaves or returns. For example, the night before a long trip may not be the ideal timing for a big party.

Loneliness. This is the most obvious problem of ministry travel, the one friends all expect us to have. Sometimes this is harder for the traveling spouse, sometimes for the one staying home. Loneliness needs to be planned for with activities and/or exercise. Jim walks a great deal when away from home on a trip. Aside from the enrichment of learning a new place, it helps him with loneliness. Each spouse needs to experiment with what is most helpful. A journal can be

a great help; some spouses deliberately journal to share with each other on homecoming. Don't be afraid to express loneliness to each other, and don't feel guilty if you don't experience feelings of loneliness. Spouses are, at times, mismatched in overt emotional responses to travel and this is okay. Missing each other comes in many different forms.

Temptation for Emotional/Sexual Attachments. To be forewarned in this area is to be prepared, at least partially. Realize that when we feel vulnerable in this area, we are. And when we feel invincible, that this area will never touch us, we are even more vulnerable. Many couples have rightly handled this area by traveling together as much as possible. For others, this option just isn't possible, at least not for every trip. Sexual and/or emotional temptation comes in many different forms, some very subtle. It is not an area to be dallied with in any way.

Be honest with yourself and with God. Temptation will not go away by denying it and pushing it down. Have a partner of the same sex, or a group of others who are in the same lifestyle, who call you to mutual accountability in this area as well as in other temptations of leadership.

Anger at God and/or Spouse. If the above areas seem unresolvable, it may possibly be due to simmering

anger at God or the spouse. I had agreed to Jim's traveling ministry, but it turned out to be much more difficult than I'd ever dreamed. There was no place, however, to express this anger because the travel was in a good cause and God's will—I felt I had no choice. I slipped into a mindset that the needs of the mission or the needs of those in Asia were more important, even to God, than I was. Said out loud, of course, this is irrational and part of me knew better. But I needed to discuss this anger with God, with Jim, and with a small group or counselor; however, in the beginning there was no one in Cyprus with whom I could share such ugly feelings. When I was finally able to work this out with accepting, caring people, I recognized the feelings for what they were and was able to resolve them.

Feelings of abandonment may be part of the anger. These are deeper than loneliness, usually unresolved issues from childhood. But if they haven't been dealt with, they will emerge in the context of ministry separation. The nagging thought comes: "He leaves me because he wants to," and ties into a negative self-concept. The smallest criticism or expression of frustration by the spouse is seized on as proof of abandonment. Again, because the feelings seem irrational, they are very hard to resolve until the root cause is dealt with. This may take work with an understanding third party or counselor.

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Couples who face painful responses squarely and honestly can find growth in areas they might have missed if it were not for the separation tensions that brought them to light. We have seen God's incredible grace worked out in our lives in the last twelve years and wouldn't change them.

Suggestions for a Ministry Separation Lifestyle. In closing, I offer these practical suggestions from the lessons Jim and I have learned over the years.

1. It is important for both spouses to have a sense of call in a traveling lifestyle. If both don't, explore why. What is happening? God will lead you both through this process. His will for each person, parent, husband, wife and child is perfect; no one is expendable in his purposes.

2. Resolve childhood and marriage issues. Whatever is unresolved will become highlighted through the tensions of travel and separation. This is an opportunity to become stronger as individuals and as a couple.

3. Develop a support group. Both partners need accountability groups and the spouse staying at home will need a support group for practical help to cope as well. There should always be those one can call on in a crisis, both practically and emotionally. I always have in the back of my mind someone I would call on locally if there were a crisis with the kids—then I mentally file it away and don't dwell on it.

4. Communicate, communicate, communicate! We need to factor for this in our travel budgets. If modern

communication is what makes it possible to stay in our jobs, it is cost-effective. Whatever is appropriate and helpful, find the money and time to support it and DO IT!

5. Both partners need to work on their own identity. The one who does not have a role that is as public is also important to God and his kingdom. Take the opportunity to develop as individuals, one in their travels, the other at home.

6. Read helpful literature. Sometimes the most helpful literature is that which deals with grief or other life transitions. It may even be novels that offer an insightful or helpful escape. Find which kind of literature is most helpful to you and use it for insight and inspiration.

The nature of cross-cultural ministry has always entailed separation from loved ones. For some today, this is a regular part of work and ministry. When it is part of God's plan for a family, it can be enriching for all. Face and embrace the tensions and develop a lifestyle that works for your family relationships. ♦

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