

The Unexpected Sacrifices of the Mission Field

Guest blogger: Jason Carter

Jason Carter (Ph.D., University of Edinburgh) is a missionary professor at Instituto Bíblico “Casa de la Palabra” (IBCP Seminary) in Equatorial Guinea, the only country in Africa where Spanish is the official language (<http://ibcp.wecinternational.org/index.php/en/>). Jason is married with three children. He blogs occasionally at <http://thecarterteam.wordpress.com/>.

My wife and I have been overseas since 2006. All our three children were born outside the U.S.. We have experienced unbelievable joys, life-long friendships, soul-transforming ministries and enjoyed worshiping with brothers and sisters in Christ in Central Africa who know the true meaning of sacrifice for the Gospel. And there have also been challenges.

We have missed our extended family – grandparents, aunt & uncles and cousins. We have experienced attempted break-ins to our house at night. Our car has been vandalized. Malaria has visited our family multiple times. While the joys abound, the challenges are manifold. Yet it has often been the unexpected challenges of the mission field that surprise me the most.

First, my kids are third-culture kids. This means, among other things, that my oldest child is really good at making new friendships. Everywhere, with everybody. Yet it also means that I can’t judge childhood success or failure by the American parameters which informed my own childhood. This is unexpectedly hard. I grew up an avid basketball fan, playing the game multiple times a week through high school and college. It bugs me, perhaps more than it should, that basketball leagues are non-existent where we live. That March isn’t full of Madness.

In many ways, I still want my kids to experience all the joys of an American childhood. I want to give them the same joys that I had as a child. This is feels natural, since my own childhood is the only childhood I know. Yet missionary parents must learn to distrust this feeling, however natural it might be to view your own kids through the lens of your own childhood experiences. It might seem obvious: “I shouldn’t shackle my kids with expectations of ‘the American childhood experience’ since, after all, they aren’t growing up in America.” But it’s surprisingly hard.

Second, furloughs are hard. I was ready for the challenges of adjusting to a new culture. New culture, new people, new food, new ways of being the church – all of this, more or less, I was prepared to find in our new adopted country. The unexpected challenge was finding our furlough experience a challenging time.

After setting up a small apartment from scratch (no small task!), our family recently embarked upon 3 months of traveling with three small children on a budget that doesn’t easily support such a lifestyle. Though some days are filled with rich times of fellowship, other days leave me feeling more like Clark Griswold than the Apostle Paul.

Third, downward mobility becomes more, not less, of a challenge. I left the States for the mission field in my



late 20s – married but carefree with no kids. Our earthly belongings in the States mostly include my theological books and my wife’s pictures and memory boxes. For the most part, this doesn’t bother me. I’d gladly do it all over again.

Yet as children are added to the family, making ½ of the salary we earned 12 years ago becomes more of a challenge. As I get older, I wrestle with the fact that my wife never gets to “nest” in a home we’ve purchased. As one friend puts it, missionaries are “global nomads”. Like many things connected to the missionary movement, there is a tinge of romanticism in being labeled a “global nomad”. Yet living a nomadic existence with children, at times, is more like a dark comedy than a romantic fun-filled adventure. Especially on long plane rides.

I once thought, perhaps naively, that after selling our stuff and moving overseas, that I would view the challenge of downward mobility in my rear-view mirror. Maybe that’s the case for some missionaries. Yet for me, counting the cost of missionary service ([Lk 14:28](#)) has gone up, rather than down, over the years. I find that I daily need Christ’s radical call of discipleship ([Lk 9:23](#)) in my life — not only to go to the mission field but to stay on it.

Fourth, serving others is really about others. Sadly, the days of churches and denominations “planting their flag” in an exotic locale simply because “our brand isn’t there yet” is still a reality in the 21st century. I see it all the time in the country where I serve.

I’m involved in a ministry, however, where training and empowering indigenous leaders is at the core of what I do. My ministry is more about teaching others to fish, rather than bringing back my own prize-winning catch.

I have found this unexpectedly hard, especially as I grew up in a culture of performance. All my life, I was taught to compete. Life was about my accomplishments, my resume, my accolades – and later, sadly enough, this morphed into my effectiveness in ministry.

What I’m learning is that missionary service is...well, service. It’s others-centered. It’s not glamorous. It’s about finding joy in the trenches. Most of the time, I’m not called to direct (from up front) but support (from behind or alongside). I’m not called to plant the church but to equip biblically and theologically the church planter. This is a kind of “vocational sacrifice” which I did not expect. I’m not called to be the “lead pastor” but serve, love and empower indigenous servant leaders.

It’s unsettling that the ministry ambitions which initially drove me to the mission field have to be tamed and completely re-worked. In my context, to put the work of the Gospel first essentially means that I must learn to prize and place the ministry of others above my own ministry. If I really believe that these indigenous leaders, rather than missionaries, are at the heart of the advance of the Gospel in my adopted country (which I do), then I must put their ministries ahead of my own. To paraphrase John the Baptist: “Their ministries must increase, my ministry must decrease.”

I pray it may be so for me. And I pray it may be so for many of my fellow missionaries who have the absolute joy and privilege of serving Christ overseas.

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