

# **Stressed from Core to Cosmos: Issues and Needs Arising from Cross-Cultural Ministry**

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The Dodds have three children and seven grandchildren. Their daughter and her husband are missionaries in Peru.

**Heartstream Resources** is a non-profit organization serving the needs of cross-cultural workers around the world. The four purposes are to provide programs of restoration and renewal for cross-cultural workers wounded or depleted in service, to provide education/prevention programs, to assist mission agency leaders through education and consultation, and to research matters related to cross-cultural ministry.

Heartstream Resources was incorporated in 1992 by a group of missionaries from several countries. Planning is underway for the development of a residential center in central rural Pennsylvania.

# Stressed from Core to Cosmos: Issues and Needs Arising from Cross-Cultural Ministry

## Introduction

Ministry is a hazardous occupation! It exposes one to the deepest needs of humanity, many of which seemingly can never be met. Along with sharing in many life joys, a person in ministry also gains the dubious privilege of dealing with all the “uglies” of human nature, the muck of erring and sinning disciples, the heartbreaking consequences and crises of God's law broken. The values inherent in ministry are for self-giving, sacrifice, working for change in the self, others, and the social context. In a sense, these are dangerous values, “setting up” the opportunities for failure and burnout. One's work in ministry is never done; there is no end to the possibilities to influence persons and the nature of life in one's context. There is no handy cut-off time to show when you have done enough. It is often difficult, if not impossible, to measure one's success in bringing about change.

To be in ministry is a “high calling” and a grave responsibility--and therein lie much of the stress and struggle which makes it so hazardous.

Anyone who chooses a role in ministry **across** cultures compounds the hazards almost geometrically. In addition to the hazards of ministry itself, going cross-cultural means adding layer upon layer of complexity. One steps out of one's own context, exchanging it for a whole new set of struggles and challenges. Change of culture brings with it changes of language, value systems, climate, geography, social systems, role definitions and a host of other life elements. Usually a life of ministry across cultures places one in a position to experience perpetually high levels of stress, as almost everything in one's self and one's life must adapt to new realities.

One way to visualize the magnitude or scope of change required in moving into cross-cultural ministry is to see the self as a central or core entity embedded in the cosmos, or spiritual world. Everything from the inside core of the self to the outermost edge of the circle is challenged by the radical life change which cross-cultural work brings about. Interplay between the self and the spiritual world is full of pressure, requiring change in conceptualizing both. Both one's identity and self-esteem and one's understanding of the nature of God and the universe are affected. Between these two lie all manner of external factors and influences which also force change. There is, of course, constant interaction in the three, with the spiritual being the underlying or over-arching world, and thus the atmosphere through which all is experienced.

We can categorize the predominant needs and issues arising from cross-cultural work by relating them to these three areas, as rings of adaptation: 1) the self, 2) the external stress factors lying between the self and the cosmos, and 3) the spiritual world, including the nature of God and relationship to Him. Because people usually enter ministry for deeply spiritual reasons, and spirituality and the spiritual world represent the largest context for our life and work, the spiritual world is the “real world,” the very foundation of and the widest context of

ministry. This is a biblical perspective. As Paul wrote of Christ: “for in Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28), and in Ephesians, “We wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Eph. 6:12).

One's **self** is challenged to change. One must re-work identity. Because of this, feelings about the self fluctuate. The **external material world** creates pressing needs and issues involving: personal safety/security, severe losses, the “ugliness factor,” financial strains, and the perpetually high levels of stress. In the **spiritual arena** three issues stand out: challenges to faith and trust (“Is God in charge?”), superhuman expectations resulting from spiritual motivation and orientation (“What is my role as God's person in the world?”), and issues of authority and organizational structure (“Does this person represent the voice of God?”).

## Challenges to The Self

1. **Identity issues:** Inherent in going across cultures is the need to adapt the self. Both deep and superficial aspects of the self must change in order to become effective in the new context. Changing most everything in one's life simultaneously demands an overwhelming amount of adaptation, and adapting successfully means forging a new identity. This process is an exhausting one, requiring enormous energy.

One's whole life pattern needs re-working because of simultaneously changing multiple life elements. Overnight the person entering cross-cultural ministry changes his or her cultural context, the actual job or role, the place/standing in society. He or she leaves behind all of family, friends, acquaintances. These are profound losses. Even the seemingly superficial things such as climate, clothing and foods, are real and costly in terms of energy. They too press the self to change.

A central factor in the change in identity is the loss of one's reference group or groups. Those familiar people who provide both subtle and overt feedback about who we are and how we are perceived suddenly disappear. The people who become new sources of feedback, especially those not from our own culture and language, may give us very different messages about the self. In the early stages of our adaptation, they will likely let us know that we are inadequate in our new cultural setting, our new role, etc. Our first day of linguistic training, Dr. Cal Rensch of SIL told us, “Starting today you will never really belong to the people you are going to work with or belong fully to the people you are leaving.”

For example, when we were in the process of becoming missionaries, people in our home context idealized us; they saw us as models of commitment and inspiration. They told us this in many ways, and even though we didn't take it much to heart, it was a shock once we lost that affirmation and instead received feedback from some Peruvians maligning us as “imperialists, paternalists, full of self interest” and other derogatory terms. No one thanked us for coming or thought it admirable that we had uprooted our whole lives in order to help them change! They perceived such a move as stupid, or at best suspicious. We suffered some loss of self esteem with every loss of skill in language and relating, with every misunderstanding about our motives and character.

Without anyone around who actually knew us over time, or with whom we had a shared history, we had to start fresh in being known to a degree that we could again receive positive feedback about ourselves. This took time. In the meantime, we starved for the kind of affirmation which keeps one emotionally nurtured.

Over time, if one is successfully adapting to the new, one achieves an altered sense of self, a new identity, incorporating some of the old and some of new. This is not easy or quick, as it means letting go of parts of the former self. This is in fact a painful process as we seek to determine which aspects of the self are negotiable and which aspects we cannot change if we are to keep our sense of integrity. I had the goal of becoming “really Peruvian” when we first went to Peru. Soon, however, I discovered that this meant accepting certain attitudes and habits which were in conflict with who I perceived my self to be--notably attitudes towards others and issues such as honesty. To fit the new I would have to change to a degree that I would no longer fit myself or my own Christian sub-culture. To stay the same meant I would be miserable as well as ineffective in the new. I had to find a middle ground of change so that I would in fact never again fit my own culture, and would never be fully a member of the other culture--I had to forge a new self, to become a “marginal person” in the anthropological sense of being a person between, living successfully on the boundary. In a sense, I had to become a bridge between two worlds, connecting what could never be fused. I had to give up my goal of total assimilation and acculturation and settle for a functional level of adaptation.

At home in the U.S., I had created an orderly and satisfying life, as a wife, a mother, a creative person serving the church, a nurturer of the extended family. With our move to the Amazon, it seemed like my carefully constructed life was suddenly thrown in the air, coming down like a jig-saw puzzle unable to hang together. Re-building and re-ordering life in the new culture meant I had to re-form myself as well.

2. **Self-esteem:** Most all the changes resulting from cross-cultural work, of context, of language and so on, are assaults to self-esteem in some way, at least initially. The culture cues about our adequacy (or likely inadequacy) will often be radically different, perhaps even unrecognizable. It becomes hard to answer “How am I doing?” Because the means of feedback, as well as the actual messages differ due to the loss of familiar reference groups, it is difficult to measure our appropriateness or progress in the new. Expectations for us likely vary in significant ways, most often unknown to us. We have to ferret out what is expected and what will gain approval.

An extreme example of this loss of moorings is a single missionary who went to South America, met a national on the bus, and within two weeks of landing in the country was wooed into landing in bed with him.

Even when one goes away to do the same job, such as pastoring or teaching, it is not likely practiced in the same way, with the same values and attitudes, the same resources. One may have to let go of exercising important gifts or areas of training which contribute to a sense of competency. Loss of resources and compromise to our internal standards of practice can undermine self-esteem, leading to doubt about our own integrity and adequacy. Our usual tools, standards and criteria for performance may be absent. The new peer group may conceptualize the profession or job in a radically different way. The new culture may place our profession or role in a different place in the social hierarchy. All these require adaptation and sorting out: what is most essential, what can we give up or compromise, what must we cling to in order to remain ourselves? It becomes hard to see one's self as coping and adaptable given the multiplicity and rapid rate of change.

One area of special difficulty relates to language acquisition. As educated people

prepared for ministry in our own culture, we usually are articulate and skilled in communication. When the educated and articulate person enters the new context, where even toddlers surpass him or her in speech for the first couple of years, it is not only humbling but also destructive of self esteem. Most professionals are reluctant to make mistakes. Depending on temperament this may be a severe problem in adjustment, since language acquisition consists of multiple mistakes and constant correction. In our experience of 25 years in missions, the most educated and articulate suffer the most loss of self through the process of language development. Once gained, of course, mastery can again enhance self esteem.

Another critical area relating to self esteem is success. It is hard to see and measure achievements in ministry where long-term and often intangible goals guide us. It is hard to maintain vision without visible gains. Uncertain or imperceptible progress creates self doubts. How do we measure our effectiveness and whether our sacrifices are worth it? The perpetual unfinished work can lead to lack of self-confidence and sense of achievement.

Most missionaries do eventually reach a state of equilibrium, with enough sense of success to keep them in ministry. However, faced with the prospect of return to the homeland, the self is once again assaulted. Long-term cross-cultural workers may have lost their sense of ability to fit in or to cope when returning to their homeland or “regular” life and work. This can create a feeling of panic or despair. Having changed to fit the new, they no longer see themselves as able to readjust to the old.

A typical pattern in the fluctuations of self esteem seems to be a sharp decrease in self esteem in the first years during the period of culture shock, a gain or increase with adaptation to the new culture and field situation, and another drop with the stress of furlough or re-entry. Return to the field setting may bring another boost in self esteem as one experiences success, or lead to chronic culture fatigue because adaptation remains a constant struggle. There seems to be a cyclical pattern provoked by the constant change which cross-cultural ministry requires. Especially in the early years of ministry there is seldom a phase long enough to reach equilibrium, to relax and get back to normal.

Another important factor relating to self esteem is that many Christians, especially those from fundamentalist backgrounds, are predisposed to feelings of guilt, shame, and worthlessness even before entering cross-cultural ministries. Some individuals may have temperamental, genetic, or familial predisposition towards depression or self doubt. These create additional vulnerability, as all the challenges to self compound through events in the new culture.

The nature of ministry, especially cross-cultural, provides continual opportunity for self doubt, as expectations for living “the examined life” and “making the most of every opportunity” present continual choices. One young missionary put it this way, “**Every** moment has to be given to a **necessary** responsibility — things which do in fact have very real consequences if you do or do not do them.”

Counselor strategy/offering: The counselor to the cross-cultural worker can assist the person in significant ways. Toward the end of this paper we discuss some over-all strategies and approaches which are helpful. At this point we want to suggest some specific ways to address needs relating to identity and self esteem.

1. Affirm the uniqueness and inherent worth of the person, especially from a Biblical perspective of our identity being in Christ, being His workmanship, being His beloved children, being His chosen. Nurture the wounded person, because experiencing God's love and acceptance through the counselor becomes a key source of energy and motivation for regaining equilibrium.

2. Help the person identify key aspects of the self, to sort out what is negotiable for change and what must remain relatively stable in order to maintain integrity of the self. This involves traits, qualities, values, habits, ways of relating.

3. Affirm the adaptive ability the person already manifests, as evidenced by the levels of stress already endured and the amount of change already achieved.

4. Educate regarding the energy demanded for adaptation and affirm the reality and difficulty of maintaining a good sense of self given all the layers of change required by cross-cultural ministry.

5. Normalize the stress experienced. Anyone having to adapt to so much would experience a shaking of their foundations.

**Helpful Biblical perspective:** Ephesians 1 and other passages which describe our place in God's family are valuable resources for focusing on central and unchanging aspects of identity and re-experiencing positive feelings towards the self, based on God's love for us. A helpful resource is *How Do I Look From Up There?*, a Biblical study on self-esteem (Dodds, 1980).

## Issues and Needs Relating to External Demands for Change

The second area or arena which demands adaptation, and thus creates needs and issues in cross-cultural ministry is the external world between the self and the cosmos. Each of these issues and needs identified here (and many more) requires adaptation of the self and a re-working of the spiritual, as they are experienced by the self and take place within the context of the spiritual world. We will discuss five issues, though many more could be considered.

1. **Personal safety/security:** Especially when people minister in the inner city or the third world, they live with constant threats to safety and well-being, for themselves, their families, and their co-workers. Regular crime is usually more prevalent in such a setting than in our home neighborhoods. Additional threats of terrorism, gang warfare, war and other forms of organized violence are factors of daily life for many missionaries. A third real threat to safety and security is the presence of dishonest police and military forces. Civil authority “helpers” may in fact be more dangerous than local criminals. The killings of innocents by the police in Rio De Janeiro exemplify this. In many countries it is common practice for police to rob, harass, and practice injustice with impunity.

Safety and security are further jeopardized by different values relating to the definition and practice of honesty, blame and fault, and temptation. It can be jolting to discover that you are accused of being attacked or robbed because you “put temptation in their way” by not living more defensively or locking up everything. This is akin to “blame the victim” attitudes in our own culture.

Our daughter Kathryn experienced firsthand the devastation of violence. Because of her husband's role as the most visible representative of the mission in a country filled with terrorism against foreigners, she lived with the daily threat of kidnapping or killing. Walking home with her two year old she was robbed by a man wielding a gun. He claimed to be a terrorist, to have eight people watching her. He instructed her on what to give up, and on what he would do if she didn't cooperate. Fortunately her training for such a possible event kicked in and she handled the encounter well, even though her primary terror was the kidnapping of little Andrew. When he finally let her go she ran past friends in the street and two homes of colleagues so that she would not inadvertently lead the terrorists to identify them. It turned out that the robbery was most likely “regular crime,” but the thief took advantage of the prevalence of terrorism to enlarge his hold on Kathryn.

For the Benson family, working in the highlands of Peru, the nightmare came true. They were captured by Sendero Luminoso terrorists, who planned to kill them at dawn. Through their dialogue in Quechua with the terrorists, and their son playing with the village children while they were held for execution, the terrorists finally decided to release them as good people rather than imperialists. Another missionary in the highlands witnessed terrorists killings in the street. For months she suffered post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) because she did not receive the assistance she needed in processing the event. Fortunately for Kathryn and the Bensons, they received immediate help in dealing with their traumas.

In both Uganda and Peru we experienced the shaking exposure to trigger-happy and ill-trained troops. Sent to “help” they actually represented threats just as great as the “terrorists.”

Perhaps you can imagine the enormous threats experienced by cross-cultural workers in Rwanda in recent times. We found similar circumstances in Ghana, where tribal warfare broke out but was overshadowed by events in Rwanda. Most missionaries had to flee for their lives under the most traumatic circumstances.

2. **Severe losses, even catastrophes:** Forces far beyond our control often threaten and even sometimes destroy one's ministry, perhaps a whole lifetime of work. Though we all face the threats of natural disasters, our first and second world nations have enormous resources to assist in such devastating events. In most mission settings the social and governmental resources are totally inadequate to the enormity of loss or catastrophe. Again using Rwanda as an example: missionaries and other cross-cultural workers fled the wholesale killings, often escaping with only their lives. One couple we know of barely escaped, leaving home, work, school, friends, pets — literally everything they had worked for years to achieve. Added to these losses was the horrendous knowledge that some of their own disciples participated in the killing, and others were killed. They didn't know the outcome for some of their colleagues. In one night, literally, their whole world and ministry was dashed to bits. In one case Christian nuns in the same compound were caught up in the killing of each other because they were from rival tribes. How does one live with such knowledge, the apparent failure of the Gospel message of peace?

Displacement represents another threat of multiple severe losses. A couple we know were evacuated instantly, for the second time, from their home and ministry in South America. When a colleague was kidnapped, the mission withdrew everyone else within hours. They were suddenly catapulted back to suburban USA, with no support to work through the enormous losses involved. Many cross-cultural workers, including military and embassy personnel, live with the threat of sudden displacement.

Other, seemingly lesser, losses can still have grave impact on ministry and faith. Friends who labored for years to produce a translation of the New Testament lost their treasured indigenous co-translator in a freak accident. Another translator was killed, with a hatchet blow to the head, by a translation helper — violence so senseless it can best be seen as the work of our spiritual Enemy. Another missionary in Africa, who complained to his drunken neighbor to stop stoning his dog, eventually left his ministry because that seemingly innocent incident escalated beyond belief. His neighbor was a policeman who dragged him into court, had the case entangled and embellished for years through his corrupt influence, until the missionary finally gave up.

3. **“Ugliness factor”:** Certain factors which accompany cross-cultural ministry contribute to perpetual stress and take a huge toll, even though they may not be obvious. We call these the “ugliness factor.” They eat away at well-being and diminish or cancel out one's sense of accomplishment. They represent such enormous human need that all ministry efforts combined may seem only a drop in a sea of dross. These include such factors as the noise and crowding of city life. In Taiwan, for example, the streets are narrow and buildings are skyscrapers of concrete. There is almost nothing to muffle the noise of loudspeakers, sirens, the roar of trucks. Or Mexico City or Sao Paulo, where 25 or 30 million people crowd into infrastructures built for a fraction of that number. Pollution, traffic snarls or standstills, and noise, can exhaust the person who seeks to carry out ministry in those contexts. Add to those stresses the human over-crowding, accompanied by filth, ugliness, repugnant and lamentable conditions. Add to that the continual and unforgettable hopelessness of dreary lives, of people struggling against all odds for some scrap of betterment. Of cardboard lean-to “homes” pressed and propped against walled luxury. Being in the midst of extreme poverty and all that accompanies it is overwhelming to the sensitive and caring person. To have beggars at one's

door, on the street, at the store, in the parking lot — seemingly everywhere — means no respite from confronting human need, and the perpetual engagement of deciding who to help. These constant demands for giving are exhausting. If one becomes self-protective in order to survive, one has to do more adjustment in the self and the cosmos, to be “tough” in a way we don't respect in ourselves. To remain sensitive to all needs is like living with a bleeding, open wound which never heals.

Such urban over-crowding will only increase in the next few decades. *Atlantic Monthly* (Feb. 94) powerfully portrays the instability in Africa, backed up with chilling statistics. For instance, just a few years ago only five cities in Africa contained a million or more. In just a few more years, they predict, more than 90 cities will have grown to over a million. Such urban growth, not accompanied by growth in infrastructures such as housing, roads, schools and medical care, will compound the already overwhelming levels of human need. We have heard first hand from many reliable sources in Africa that in several countries the infrastructure has been demolished or has slid backwards by decades.

Urbanization is a growing world trend, representing both a tragedy and an unprecedented opportunity for missions. As we have taught in many countries, we have heard over and over, “I remember...when I came here five (or ten or twenty) years ago, this was all fields. Now, a half million (or more) people have made this home.” One slum in Nairobi is so dense that the tin and cardboard roofs touch, allowing little daylight to penetrate. Friends who ministered there eventually left because their children became too afraid to venture out of their shelter. They moved to a real house on the perimeter, only to have government troops kill people in the street and rioters flee into their yard for refuge.

Another terrible “ugly” in much of the world is the injustice and corruption in government and the very agencies which ostensibly promote life. How do you handle it, as a missionary in Somalia, to know that it is the government, not lack of food, which has caused the starvation of millions?

How do you cope when your ministry is to the people who make their living in the refuse of Manila's huge dumps? What answers do you find? What resources for your own renewal? The Japanese film maker Kurasawa illustrates the maddening nature of such a setting in his film, “Dodes-ke-den.” Watch it for a glimpse into that dark world so in need of the good news, yet so overwhelmingly difficult to influence for change.

**4. Living on the edge financially:** For many cross-cultural workers, another perpetual stress in the external or material environment is the strain of inadequate finances. Glaring discrepancies between home and national culture — either up or down — create real stresses. So, too, discrepancies between the income of workers in the same context or agency, and the instability of national currencies which often inflate by thousands of percent. Most life-style issues relate to money. One has to balance the need to identify with the target group without alienating one's home groups, other Christian groups in the same context, or national Christians. Whether one chooses to scale down one's life style and forego things we consider “normal” in the developed world, or whether one must live in more upscale conditions to gain an audience with those more well off, the decisions may be agonizing. One has to find a balance between personal and family care and the needs of others. Even a simple purchase has many implications: Can one enjoy an ice cream cone with one's children knowing it costs a day's wage for a national — or, perhaps in a different context, costs an hour's U.S. wage donated to one's support by a poor widow? Every dollar spent represents crucial choices. Can you not help a neighbor when an egg a day can mean the difference between mental retardation and normal development for his children?

Making decisions about long term needs such as college and retirement can be equally disconcerting. Is it right to save when surrounded by such overwhelming current needs? Such issues are, of course, linked to challenges of faith and our concepts of God. How is the life of faith to be lived out? Do you buy groceries on credit to feed the ten guests who come to you for Christian hospitality, or do you send them away because at the moment you have no cash? What is most honoring to God? To feed them and trust God to send money for the bill? We chose this path when confronted with that very dilemma. We could not bring ourselves to not feed people in need, money or no money. Though our usual principle is to not borrow, we saw our good credit as an asset in that circumstance.

Another stressor in the “life of faith” is relating to one's constituency with pure motives. Separating one's friendships and church relationships from the aspect or prospect of financial support is taxing. Asking friends or family for support money can be very awkward. Finding the balance between “trusting God” and action towards support raising is difficult.

**5. Perpetual and unrelenting high levels of stress:** In some ways, this fifth factor includes all of the previous ones, but we want to consider it separately to underscore its importance as an issue and need in cross-cultural ministry. Our informal research over 20 years on the levels of stress experienced by people in cross-cultural work reveals some remarkable facts. First of all, the amazing fact is that most missionaries DO adapt and work effectively in spite of killing levels of stress. Other researchers have found this too (Chester, 1983). Secondly, most cross-cultural workers adapt and cope, becoming used to and remaining effective under loads of stress that would land more “regular” people in the hospital.

In addition to stressors we have mentioned, others contribute to the cumulative load: poor health systems (water, sewage treatment, food supply, medical services) contribute to frequent illness, putting strain on the physical self as well as the emotional/social self. Getting inadequate care for one's children or self may be a huge stressor. Hassle factors of the daily things going wrong produce a string of circumstances which demand adaptation. Getting repairs done, finding resources, keeping schedules and other daily matters can eat up huge amounts of time and energy. I recall a young missionary relating how it took a whole day to find a stopper for the kitchen sink — an errand he expected to do in 10 minutes on the way to work. In sufficient quantity and rate, such perpetual stress can result in culture shock or fatigue (Mueller, 1977).

We have used a modified version of the Holmes-Rahe stress scale to illustrate the amount of stress usually experienced in cross-cultural work. We have found that on the average, using this scale which is not comprehensive, cross-cultural workers experience about 600 points of stress per year. The level may peak as high as 1500 points in some circumstances, and drop to merely “normal” for people who are in long-term, stable situations.<sup>1</sup> The graph included illustrates the trends.

We visited a refugee project in Central America various times, and found that the young workers were running about 900 points of stress a year, as measured by the modified Holmes-

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<sup>1</sup> The original studied revealed that 200 points of stressful life events caused 50 percent of people to become seriously ill (cancer, heart attack) within the subsequent two years. With 300 points, 90 percent became ill.

Rahe scale. Their amazing capacity to cope and remain effective at that level was a reflection of their resiliency and prior experience in cross-cultural adaptation. Most were MK's with a solid sense of self and a lifetime of exposure to the complexities of cross-cultural life and were already fluent in Spanish and the Latin culture.

Counselor strategy/offering: In this arena of external stress, the counselor can assist the cross-cultural worker who is struggling by using a number of strategies, including affirmation and education.

1. Affirm the resiliency and coping capacity of the client. The fact that the person has already weathered so much change is laudable. The fact that they may need some help in adapting further is honorable and not a sign of weakness.

2. Allow the person to talk out experiences, especially those that are traumatic or are troublesome to the client. Talking out relieves emotional distress as well as bringing about insight. It can alleviate or prevent PTSD.

3. Educate regarding the grief process in dealing with losses.

4. Normalize stress responses and educate regarding symptoms, responses, syndromes, etc. Most people don't know what "normal" is, especially when removed from home culture for long periods. Affirm that normal reactions to stress, grief, loss, and threats to well-being are not weaknesses or signals that the person is "going crazy." It is not lack of "faith" or spiritual weakness to be devastated, or frightened, or experience a loss of equilibrium. Teach about coping strategies and help the client identify his or her own responses and to formulate a plan for better coping.

5. Comfort, encourage, restore HOPE.

6. In relation to the stress of financial life, affirm the difficulty of the path of faith chosen. Help the client identify genuine needs and develop strategies to meet them. Show the client how to enlist supports and resources available in the community (when home), such as WIC, community programs, medical assistance and other programs.

7. In relation to the "ugliness factor" affirm the reality of the toll of such conditions. Help the client identify coping and balancing strategies. Affirm the genuine needs for time out, time away, restoration such as beauty, music, and so on. These may seem like selfish luxuries to a person surrounded by unrelenting human need. You can give professional "permission" to engage in such renewing activities on a regular basis.

8. Treat mal-adaptive behaviors as inappropriate attempts to cope with overwhelming stress. Often substance abuse, violence within the family, suicide, and other maladaptive attempts to gain release from pressure or pain are rooted in early life experience. The person in ministry who is overwhelmed and unable to mobilize sufficient coping strategies or resources may succumb to these as a "default" mechanism. Cracks in personality or key relationships become chasms once the person surpasses the threshold for what is bearable. The counselor can help the client identify the early forces and experience which predispose him or her to the maladaptive cycle. The counselor can help the person process those experiences and develop a network of support to fortify him or her in learning new, more appropriate responses to stress.

**Helpful Biblical perspective** for handling losses, threats, dangers, and other stresses: God promises to bring some ultimate good out of all the loss and suffering, so our pain is not wasted (Romans 8:28). Suffering produces growth in us if we seek God in the midst of it. Our

suffering will not go on for ever (I Peter 5:10). God is with us in all our suffering, and He too is distressed **with** us (Isaiah 63:9).

## **Issues and Needs Relating to The Cosmos**

The third area requiring adaptation when we enter cross-cultural ministry has to do with God, and ourselves and the world in relation to God. Because the spiritual world is the “real” world (II Cor. 4:18), and our motivation and rationale for changing and coping are based in the spiritual, we must of necessity re-work certain questions. This especially involves a challenge to our concepts of God, a re-examination of our role as God's child and agent, and a scrutiny of others who (we may have been taught) are authority persons, representing the voice of God for us. Our experience shows us that this happens across the spectrum of theological persuasions and denominations. No matter what we were taught, it is likely to be challenged by the new reality we encounter.

**1. Challenges to faith and trust:** Who is God, really? Major challenges to faith and trust arise when we engage in ministry, and especially in cross-cultural ministry. Scripture teaches that God is engaged in a cosmic war with Satan, and that the earth is one realm in which that war is fought. We are soldiers in the war, engaged in ministry in order to defeat God's enemy, who seeks to devour and destroy (I Peter 5:8). As soon as we go “front line” in battle, that is into active and full time ministry, we become more visible targets for attacks of our enemy. These attacks may come through circumstances, in which we battle evil practices and conditions. They also come within us, especially in the form of doubt about God's power in the world and His intentions for us and others. The central core of our spiritual self and motivation comes under attack and must be re-worked because we face hard questions:

Why doesn't God act in X? Does God care?

Where was God when X happened? How can God let it happen?

If God called me here, why this? Why doesn't God answer prayer even though I claim all His promises?

Where is God's power when I need it?

We have seen that U.S. Christians seem to not have a working theology of suffering. If we are obedient, we will be “blessed” and won't have to suffer. If I suffer, I must have done something wrong, or am disobedient, so I must try harder. One of the difficulties is dealing with the question, “Why didn't God prevent .....?”

Additional spiritual stresses sometimes include being isolated from spiritual peers, from a body of believers who share our perspectives and beliefs. One may be deprived of the nurture of the body of Christ or Christian observances because of working in isolation or anti-Christian cultures. One may lack accountability and thus drift away from the anchors of faith, gradually slipping into habits or practices counterproductive to ministry.

Another significant stressor in the spiritual arena is finding differences in the values, practices, and life styles of national Christian leaders. Being brothers in Christ, part of the same universal body, lends to the expectation that we will be alike in working out Christian values. But real and deep differences compound the difficulties of working together in harmony across

the cultural barrier. Those in ministry may become cynical, bitter, or judgmental: How can local Christians be so dishonest, or immoral, or undisciplined? Finding that other Christians do not measure up to our expectations erodes respect and causes a loss of confidence. We wonder why God allows such discrepancies.

A child of missionaries who grew up in one Latin American country chose to remain there as an adult in order to be a positive influence on the political scene, to hopefully facilitate change in society. Imagine his disillusionment when the Christian party he helped to found, which was running on the basis of making a "Christian difference," chose to lie to the government about the date of its origin as a party. In Africa, some missionaries tear their hair out over the "easy forgiveness" which expects a person can be placed immediately back in a position of trust even after violating trust, and without having engaged in true reform. How can they (they ask) in good conscience reinstate (as Africans demand) a teacher who seduced the wives of his Bible school students, even after he "repented." Isn't it right to expect some kind of actual change or dealing with the underlying issues?

In South America a missionary laments the outcomes of a century of mission efforts due to attitudes in those converted (low level of moral development, dependency, lack of initiative), and the seeming inability of the gospel to overrule cultural forces. He wonders if the whole mission effort should be abandoned, with the hope that somehow the immature believers might find a way to grow up on their own.

All of these questions and issues center around the nature of God. They strike at the heart of who we perceive Him to be. When He has all power, yet does not evidence it in the world, even when we implore Him, what are we to make of it? How can we reconcile what we believe of God with the realities we face?

**2. Superhuman expectations:** In addition to the challenge of re-working one's concept of God, faith and trust, a person in ministry may carry inordinately high expectations for him or her self, for others, and for achievement possibilities. This is even more true of the cross-cultural worker, who adds to the usual expectations of ministry high hopes of becoming acculturated and effective in a foreign setting. One young pastor in rural, tribal Africa said to me, "Why do they insist on teaching us in our mission training that we can bond totally with the people we go to serve? We find that impossible because the cultural gulf is too great, and so we feel guilty all the time. Can't they be more realistic?" It does indeed seem rare for people to bond or identify like Hudson Taylor did with the Chinese. He is held up as exemplary, yet our experience is that most cross-cultural workers must settle for a comfortable accommodation or adaptation to the other culture, rather than total assimilation. Bonding does occur, but may take a long time. A very effective experienced missionary in Africa laments that even after decades it is difficult to become intimate friends because certain cultural connections are illusive.

Besides what may be superhuman expectations for cultural adaptation, the person may expect for the self a level of maturity or even perfection which is not easily achieved when living under high stress. He or she may truly believe that "with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26, Mark 10:27) or "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13) and thus push the self relentlessly, not accepting normal human limits. Such an expectation makes it difficult to deal with weakness, with vulnerability, with real and perceived failures and limitations. Elizabeth Elliott illustrated this well in *No Graven Image*: the missionary heroically attempts to save an infected man from death, but the patient dies of a reaction to penicillin. Sometimes we inadvertently harm or fail the very people we go to love. Our unrealistic expectations make that all the more difficult to accept. Most of us go out expecting to change our selves to a degree which proves unattainable. The self is not as flexible as we imagine. Ingmar Bergman's touching film based on his parents' lives, "The Best of Intentions," illustrates

this conundrum.

High expectation for others, whom we may idealize because of their spiritual calling and service, leads to disappointment, disillusionment. We may experience the failures of others as devastating; such things aren't "supposed to happen." An especially gifted young missionary in Nepal was overtly persecuted by an older missionary, jealous for her husband's position. How does one reconcile such an experience with the pedestal ideal which fills the literature and training programs?

Expectation for achievement and success may also be superhuman. A couple we know was sent out, in their twenties, "to evangelize Indonesia." Like most young and inexperienced cross-cultural workers they accepted this assignment in good faith, believing it must be possible if their experienced leaders deemed it so. Ten years later they were in deep spiritual and emotional trouble, having been unable to achieve the goal. Like most of us, they believed they could influence a whole culture and society, but their actual influence on entrenched systems proved woefully inadequate. Christine Maslach, in her seminal work on burnout (*Burnout, The Cost of Caring*), identifies the ten top characteristics for burnout. Youth and idealism are near the top.

David Martin Lloyd-Jones, in his book *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure* points out the idealistic nature and high motivation of people in ministry which set them up for depression. We think that if we only work hard enough and manifest enough commitment, we will get results. That is seldom reality, however. Considering that it takes a whole generation to convince people that microbes are real, and that therefore it pays to wash one's hands and boil one's water, it should be no surprise that bringing about deep-seated change in cultural beliefs, attitudes, and practices is a slow process. Yet, we persist in expecting visible change to happen quickly. Perhaps we should teach more history in our cross-cultural training programs, to illustrate that it took industrialization, two World Wars, and mass media such as radio and television to set our own social changes in motion.

Of course, spiritual growth IS possible. Conversion of non-believers does take place. Mission efforts around the globe attest to the fact that some change is possible. Whole nations are now different because the gospel and the scriptures were once introduced. But at a personal level most of us must give up our expectations for the self as being a "strong Christian" or one through whom whole societies will change. We must discover the Biblical perspective that even Jesus suffered human limitations and was dependent on the Holy Spirit and His Father for the strength to face the throngs of needy people. Even He survived and ministered out of dependency on the Father rather than high expectations for Himself (John 5:30; 10:25). "I do only what the Father tells me," He said.

**3. Authority structures/relationships:** Besides having to re-work the self and one's concepts of God, the person in ministry has to also sort out lines of authority. Who does, in fact, speak for God? Organizational issues related to cross-cultural work may be complex. Who is the authority? The sending church, the mission headquarters, the field leader, the Word of God? What if these appear to conflict?

Attitudes and values about leadership and authority are often heavily "spiritualized," involving issues of obedience, submission, "having a sweet spirit" (being non-assertive,

compliant). Those who question may be perceived as unspiritual or uncooperative, thus cutting off a normal flow of dialogue between leaders and followers. Such “spiritual” views of leadership also means it is laden with expectations beyond the ordinary, as persons may expect shepherding, pastoring, or spiritual guidance as well as managing. Because of attributed spiritual power or authority, leaders may be perceived as unapproachable, not to be questioned. To question authority would be perceived as challenging God! Unfortunately, some leaders, as well as followers, perceive this to be true!

Most missions or cross-cultural agencies consist of “volunteers” — that is, motivated and committed persons willing to work without a set salary. Leaders are seldom actually hired for competency or job experience. They are usually promoted through the ranks and may lack training and experience as managers and people nurturers, even though proficient in other areas of work. Under such limitations, both leader and those led may suffer. The leader may feel incompetent and unprepared, or worse, fancy himself or herself as the new authority appointed by God. Followers may not have their needs met. At best people patiently endure, at worst, they may be victimized by terrible mistakes. In one field situation, a new and inexperienced leader was brought in. He attempted to apply some principles he knew of, and set about “getting rid of the dead wood,” as he perceived it, in the mission. Overnight he dismissed a couple with 40 years' investment in the work, and sent them home with no appeal. Needless to say, they were plunged into despair, multiple losses, and severe depression. In another case, a leader heard rumors of a family having trouble with a teenage child, because the family had risked asking for help. He decided to send them home immediately, “for their own good” and in so doing precipitously displaced a whole family and halted a ministry. Fortunately most mission leaders do a respectable job and avoid such flagrant errors.

Young and idealistic workers may be particularly hurt by viewing authority as unapproachable, as always knowing best. We met a young couple just out of college who went to the field with a toddler and an infant at breast. They were placed as dorm parents for 23 children, first through twelfth grades. The wife was expected to manage six domestic helpers as well as mother 25 children. In her spare time she was to monitor the airplanes in flight in the interior. The husband also served as the buyer for members in the interior. After a number of months attempting to fulfill all these expectations, they came to me in tears, wondering what was wrong with them for not being able to do it all.

Organizational and leadership issues are usually exacerbated by the lack of resources, both people and money. Not knowing how to set clear objectives and goals, or arrive at adequate job descriptions, may also hinder effective leadership. Lack of adequate communication and conflict resolution skills may be additional setbacks. Because of the nature of ministry, any failures or errors result in greater distress than in usual settings. Once again, in authority-related distress the cross-cultural worker must re-work his or her own attitudes and understanding about the leader as representing the voice of God.

Counselor strategy/offering: In the spiritual arena too the counselor can assist the struggler in several ways:

1. Affirm the maddening nature of “crazy making” realities, pointing out the nature of spiritual warfare and the casualties it produces. Hebrews 11 is a sobering reminder that not all the heroes of faith survived the earthly battles! Romans 8 tells us we can never be separated from the love of God — but includes hell as one place we may experience it! Truth does not always win and the righteous sometimes do lose out at this stage of the war. Our challenge is to mourn our losses, and yet somehow adopt God's eternal perspective as we fight on.

The counselor can also teach about spiritual resources. For example we can claim this

promise for our growth: “God has given us everything we need for life and godliness” (II Peter 1:3). The counselor can help the client to accept ambiguities; though we “see through a glass darkly” we will one day understand clearly. He or she can remind the client that God can ultimately bring something good out of tragedy and loss (Romans 8:28). The counselor can practice prayer and use the sustaining power of the Word of God as assets in the healing and growth process.

2. Teach the difference between faith (a *cognitive matter*) and trust (an *affective matter*). Faith or belief may be adequate due to sound teaching and mental assent to truth, yet trust may be faulty. Trust is based in our early life experiences, and may be underdeveloped due to faulty parenting. We may suffer lapses in trust, the emotional feeling of God's care and presence, even though our minds believe. Our observation is that the two are often confused, and we lack understanding about the origin and difficulty of trust. Lapses in trust create guilt and doubt about what “kind of missionary” one is. Fortunately, we can learn to trust “Abba, Father” even if we experienced deprivation, neglect or abuse. (See Romans 8:15, Gal. 4:6, Psalm 103:14.)

3. Affirm the rightness of ideals while educating the client regarding the naturalness of human limits. Even Jesus was subject to hunger, weakness, the need for sleep and solitude. You can point out the ways that God ministered to Elijah after his triumphant battle with Baal and the depression which exhaustion brought: a touch, water, food, sleep, a gentle voice — the simplest human comforts.

4. Help a client discover and identify his or her own unstated expectations for rewards. For example, a physician recovering from burnout after prolonged service on the field came to realize that he had always expected some “pay back” from the practice of medicine — some elusive reward which never came. Thus he felt let down, disappointed, waiting for what he never experienced.

5. Assist the client to identify his or her attitudes and experience towards authority, leadership, following. He or she may discover that seeing authority as unapproachable is rooted in a family pattern of abuse of authority, which allowed no questioning. Teach appropriate attitudes, and assertiveness skills if needed. Appropriate assertiveness helps the person express desires, limits, wants and needs in a way that the authority has more information upon which to make decisions.

6. Explore attitudes about self-efficacy, vulnerability, fallibility, owning appropriate levels of responsibility, honesty. These all interact in relating the self and the cosmos, of sorting out who God is, what He expects of us, and the role of others in His direction for us.

**Helpful Biblical perspectives:** See Ephesians 6; Colossians; I Cor. 15:53 & 54; I Tim. 6:16; Psalm 120; Psalm 121; Isaiah 63:9; II Tim. 1:10.

### **THESE OVERLAY THE NORMAL ISSUES OF LIFE:**

The needs and issues we have addressed overlay the normal issues and stages of life. The counselor can assist the person in sorting out what aspects of his or her distress are due to these ordinary life stresses and which result from cross-cultural ministry. The normal growth challenges include:

1. life stage, developmental issues

2. "old business" of the family of origin
3. the effects of personal traumas, such as abuse, old events, experiences, and environments (such as parental style)
4. communication and conflict styles
5. personality styles which influence resiliency, coping styles, sources of stress.

All of these "usual" or ordinary issues may be exacerbated by the stresses of cross-cultural ministry, and vice versa. The crack becomes a chasm under the weight of all the rest: in self, family life, couples relationships, on-field relationships. For example, a mid-life person may suddenly be forced to deal with childhood issues of incest, abuse, and so on. Events which have been "buried," or "forgotten" may suddenly re-appear due to intersection of a life stage and the high levels of stress in ministry. (See the stages of missionary career chart and stress chart appended.)

### **Stage in Mission Career: ANOTHER OVERLAY**

The stage of cross-cultural ministry also influences the needs and issues examined. (See graph and chart.) Certain critical intersections predispose the person to problems by creating higher than usual vulnerability and by decreasing resiliency. For a discussion of this, see Dodds, Dodds, and Kuitems presentation to the Mental Health and Missions Conference (1993).

### **Suggestions in Counseling**

1. Listen more than usual, to gain awareness and understanding of the person's radically different experience.
2. Seek to understand how the particular cultural context, stressors, and field experience interact with the personality type and the past experience of the client. In the light of this help, the client gain insight about the self and idiosyncratic responses to environment.
3. Be prepared to act as an interface between the client and faith issues, as God's resource (of love, acceptance, forgiveness, Biblical knowledge, wisdom), such as sorting out the client's sense of responsibility and what is God's responsibility in the world.
4. Help the client sort out the self — how does she/he feel and perceive self now compared to before cross-cultural ministry? Promote re-building of sense of self as worthy, adequate, coping.
5. The approach of solution-oriented therapy is useful for helping the client to identify, create and practice strategies for change (in self, attitudes, behaviors; not change in actual cross-cultural setting, which is generally unrealistic).
6. The cognitive therapy approach is useful for helping the client examine assumptions, expectations, "shoulds and oughts," substituting new attitudes, and re-framing experience.
7. Therapeutic exercises designed to re-play problematic experiences and relationships are useful for gaining insight and emotional expression.
8. Keep in mind that difficulties may be "spiritualized," but often because that is the only framework or vocabulary a client may have to describe problems, causes and solutions.

### **Summary**

The needs and issues arising from cross-cultural ministry are multiple and complex, involving all aspects of life, work and worldview. The scope of the changes demanded can be illustrated by placing the self at the center of a sphere representing the cosmos as the

environment in which we live. In this spiritual context or cosmos the person relates to God, to self, and to the external world. The nature of cross-cultural ministry demands change at all levels, stressing everything from the core to the cosmos (perceptions of God). Ten needs and issues arising from the cumulative and perpetual stresses of cross-cultural ministry are discussed here. Suggestions for counseling interventions include generally helpful approaches and specific strategies for the issues and needs identified.

## Stages of Missionary Career

Stages of mission career	Time duration	Issue
1. Pre-candidacy, seeking	1 to 10 years	What mission? Where?
2. Candidacy, orientation	1 to 3 months	Am I acceptable?
3. Intermediate training	0 to 5 years	Let's get going!
4. First field term & furlough	2 to 5 years	They never told me... Can I survive? Where <u>is</u> home now?
5. Middle career (usually field) Time varies according to age at commencement of career; may be subdivided	5 to 30 years	Now I'm getting comfortable and useful. This is old hat...is there a new challenge?
6. Late career (often home)	5 to 10 years	Our job is about done... Where will I go? Will there be a job for me?
7. Retirement (usually home)	1 to 15 years	Am I still useful? Can I fit at home after 40 years abroad?

## Recommended Readings for Counseling Persons in Cross-cultural Ministry

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