

Cross-Cultural Worker Singles Issues: The Ticking Clock

The following conversation could take place between two unmarried cross-cultural workers who are not contented with their singleness and know each other very well.

Pat: "I'm beginning to wonder if I'll ever get married. I'm already 39 and even if I got married today, I'd be over 60 when my oldest child finishes college."

Chris: "That's nothing. I'm 39 too, and within a few years I may not even be able to have a child at all, even if I did get married."

Both Pat and Chris are keenly aware of their ticking biological clocks.

Male and/or Female Issue?

Both men and women get older, so these clocks are issues for both; however, they tend to be a greater issue for women than for men for three reasons.

- Menopause. Usually somewhere between 40 and 60 years of age women gradually stop menstruating and are unable to bear children. This is why Abraham and Sarah both laughed when God said she would bear a child (Genesis 17:17 and 18:12). Drastic hormonal changes also occur at this same time. Although some people talk about male menopause, men may father children into their 80s, and hormonal changes slowly decline all during adulthood with no drastic changes at any particular age.
- Ratio of single women to single men. Among long-term cross-cultural workers today there are far more single women than single men. These ratios vary widely by

agency, field, and team, but they often range from 3:1 to 7:1. With so many more women than men, it is less likely that women will find spouses while serving in a host culture.

- Genetic birth defects. Nearly everyone has met someone with Down Syndrome. The incidence of this defect increases with the age of the mother. At age 30 the chance is one in 1000, at age 35 the chance is one in 400, at age 40 the chance is one in 100, and at age 45 the chance is one in 30. Although the incidence also increases slightly each year with the father's age, the increase is trivial compared with the mother's age.

What is a woman to do if she wants to marry and have children? Likewise, what is a man to do? Here are several options with some of the major advantages and disadvantages of each.

Meet someone in the agency

This is often an excellent way to meet a spouse. People serving in the same agency are likely to have much in common. They usually have a similar call to service, similar values, similar beliefs, and both want to serve cross-culturally. All of these similarities, along with many others, are likely to lead to a strong marriage where both spouses are very happy in their marriage. Since there are so many more single women than single men, it is a great advantage for men.

Conversely, this fact is a great disadvantage to single women who want to marry and have children. For example, suppose an agency has three single women for every single man. If every single man marries one of the single women, then two thirds of

the single women will remain unmarried. Those are not very good odds.

Meet a national in the host country

Some single cross-cultural workers marry nationals living in the country where they are serving. The major advantages of this kind of marriage are that both have a common concern for the culture in which they are living, and often both are interested in serving God in that country as well. It is especially good for third culture kids (TCKs) who have grown up in that country or one with a similar culture.

The disadvantages include the deep cultural differences individuals often have on some important issues, such as male vs. female roles or honesty vs. saving-face. These differences may be very difficult to live with. The single woman may be attracted to the macho male in her host culture but may not like the way he dominates her after marriage. The single man may be attracted to the way the woman in his host culture avoids hurting anyone but may not like her lying to him to save face after marriage.

When children come along, more differences occur.

- Your children may not really know your parents, their grandparents.
- Family members, such as grandparents and cousins, may not be able to communicate well with your children.
- You may not celebrate your culture's holidays and observe its traditions.
- You may have to explain jokes and/or ask for them to be explained.
- Your children may grow up with a different set of cultural assumptions than you have.

- You may experience discrimination because of the ethnicity of your spouse.
- Your children may grow up with gender roles you do not approve of.

Meet someone in the passport country

When single cross-cultural workers marry someone from their passport country, they both bring the same cultural values they hold on important issues, such as male vs. female roles or honesty vs. saving-face. When they have children, their children will then internalize some of these same deeply held values themselves and have strong ties to their relatives in their passport culture. Of course they will become TCKs, so they will also internalize some values from the host culture.

The major disadvantage to marrying someone from back "home" is that person may not be willing to serve in another culture. Individuals may say that they are willing to go wherever the single cross-cultural worker is called, but they may not want to do so after the marriage takes place. Single cross-cultural workers need to consider how strong their call to serve in another culture is.

Meet someone on E-harmony.com

After many years of teaching psychology, counseling, administration, research and writing at Fuller Theological Seminary, Neil Clark Warren founded e-harmony.com. He uses his "29 dimensions of compatibility" to match singles on the basis of common interests and deeply held values. Millions of singles fill out the survey, and then they are matched with others who score as being compatible with them.

The advantage to this is that if the test is correct and everyone tells the truth about themselves, single cross-cultural workers meet people who have many important things in common with them. Of course, it only matches singles with others likely to be compatible, and then the couple must spend much time with their match and with each other's families. E-harmony is just an introduction.

The disadvantage is that not everyone is honest in what they say when taking any such instrument. Although many may answer the survey with complete honesty, some others may bias their answers toward what they would like to be, toward what they would like in a mate, or just tell outright lies. There is no way to screen people filling out surveys on-line or even be sure that they did not have a "friend" fill it out for them. Caution is the best advice.

Remain Single

Both Jesus and Paul advocated remaining single. Jesus gave three reasons people did not marry and ended by saying that those who could accept it should do so (Matthew 19: 10-12). In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul made eight positive statements about remaining single (verses 1, 8, 26-27, 32, 34, 38, and 39-40). Remaining single and contented in your singleness is pleasing to God, and it is far better than marrying the wrong person.

Likewise, both Jesus and Paul realized that not everyone could live the single life. When his disciples suggested that it would be better not to marry, Jesus said that not everyone could accept this (Matthew 19:11). Paul said that marriage would help people avoid immorality, that people who could not control themselves and burned with passion, and that a man acting improperly toward his fiancé should marry (1 Corinthians 7: 2, 9, and 36).

Paul advised Timothy specifically about widows who should and should not remain single. He said that only widows over 60, faithful to their husbands and known for their good deeds should be put on the list of widows cared for by the church (1 Timothy 5:9-10). However, he said that widows under 60 should not be on the list because their sensual desires would make them want to marry. Paul said that he counseled these younger widows to marry, to have children, and to manage their homes (1 Timothy 5:11-15).

There is hope!

Among cross-cultural workers who are not contented in singleness, some individuals who believe their time is running out on the ticking clock may think that marriage and parenthood is hopeless. However, marriage is always possible, and parenthood by adoption is always possible. Furthermore, both marriage and biological parenthood is possible later than many think, though the risks may be greater.

I know one woman who spent nearly two decades in cross-cultural service unmarried. She had never been married, but when she said, "I do," she instantly became wife, mother, mother-in-law, and grandmother. Most women gradually move into those roles one at a time over two or three decades. She spent the first year of her married life back in her passport country adjusting to these new roles, thankful for the blessings God had given her. There is hope!

I know another couple who met while serving with two different agencies in a host culture. Though neither had ever married, they dated and married in their late forties and had twin boys (their own) in their early fifties!

They continue to serve in their host culture as they rear their sons and seek God's blessing on their family. There is hope for people who want to marry and are not contended in their singleness!

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