

What Cross-Cultural Workers Ought to Know about Saying Goodbye

One cross-cultural worker said, “I am tired of making friendships and then moving all over; to me it is not worth the effort. On furlough I know I know I am leaving, so why try?”

Another said, “I don’t know how to deal with the changes that surround the arrival and departure of staff members on the field. Especially with short-termers coming and going, it seems like we are always expanding and contracting to include so many different people on our team.... How do we love deeply yet hold lightly?”

Still another said, “I find it hard to have to say goodbye all the time. People I become friends with leave our part of the field, and I have to stay behind. How do I cope with that other than to quit building relationships?”

When you became a cross-cultural worker you probably thought about saying goodbye to your family and friends in your passport country and then leaving. However, you may have never considered how difficult other goodbyes would be. Is this a new problem? Is it getting worse? How can you cope with it? Let us consider these issues.

Is this a new problem?

No, this problem has been around as long as cross-cultural workers have. A look at Paul and his relationships with the people of Ephesus shows us some of the problems with saying goodbye.

Paul was apparently in Ephesus only a short time near the end of this second term. After speaking in the synagogue, Paul left a couple in Ephesus to continue the work. People asked him to spend more time there, but he declined, saying he could come back if it was God’s will (Acts 18:19-21). He and his co-workers there had to say goodbye.

Near the beginning of his third term, Paul again went to Ephesus. After more than two years of evangelism, discipleship, spiritual warfare, and encouragement Paul again said goodbye and left. He traveled to Macedonia with a multinational team of seven others (Acts 19:1-20:1). Again he and the disciples he left there had to say goodbye.

Near the end of his third term, Paul decided not to stop at Ephesus even though he was passing close by, because he was in a hurry. However, he did stop a few miles south of Ephesus and sent for the elders of the Ephesian church so that he could meet with them briefly. Then they again had to say goodbye. In this instance we are told more about the nature of the goodbye: They wept, embraced, kissed, grieved, and finally tore themselves away (Acts 20:16-21:1). Saying multiple goodbyes to coworkers is nothing new for cross-cultural workers.

Is it getting worse?

It is probably no more difficult to for each individual, but it may well be that people have to say goodbye more often than they did in Paul’s day. Changes in the last half of the twentieth century have made short-term cross-cultural work to any part of the world a reality. Before the advent of reasonably priced air travel since 1950, just reaching many places to work cross-culturally often took several weeks crossing the ocean by ship.

Today people can be in any country in the world in a matter of hours, a couple days at the most.

One type of short-term work very popular now is one where a group spends a week or two in another culture to teach a Bible school, help construct a building, or do routine maintenance work. Though this has helped expose millions of people to cross-cultural work first-hand, it means many hellos followed by many goodbyes a week or two later. Thus the long-term cross-cultural workers never have a chance to develop relationships with them. Relationships take time.

Another type of short-term work increasing in recent years is one where a person goes to another culture for several months or a year or two to help out generally, or to complete a particular project. These people have no intention of staying long-term and are most common among people born since the mid 1960s. In this case there is time to develop a relationship, but the cross-cultural workers on the field may be reluctant to do so knowing that the short-term person will soon be gone. Saying goodbye to someone you know only superficially is easier.

Does this affect everyone?

Yes, it affects everyone, but it affects people differently. Some people seem to have little need for deep relationships and are content to keep relationships at more of a surface level, so saying goodbye has relatively little effect on them. Other people have a greater desire to share intimately with a larger group of friends, and saying goodbye affects them, very deeply.

Women tend to be more relationship oriented than are men. Therefore, they may be more affected by leaving their friends or having their friends move away. Unfortunately, their husbands are sometimes not sensitive to this difference between themselves and their wives.

Of course, such mobility is common in developed countries. In the United States about one person in six moves every year, so even the person who does not move says goodbye often. When our oldest son was in first grade, there were five boys in first grade on our street. By the time he was in sixth grade, he was the only one left. Of course, a move within a country may be within the same area, rather than half way around the world, but it still affects relationships.

Do we just quit building deep relationships?

Some people try to cope by simply becoming detached or “hardened.” By not getting deeply involved with their fellow cross-cultural workers they decrease the pain of having to say goodbye. This coping mechanism may reduce the pain of goodbyes; but the person becoming detached, the person who is “rejected,” and the gospel message are all harmed by this.

Jesus commanded us to love each other as he loved us. Loving and being loved are important to both our mental and physical health. When deep relationships are avoided, both parties lose a part of their potential support system. In addition, Jesus pointed out that this was how others would know that we are his disciples. Thus, by not developing these relationships, we make it less likely that people will see Jesus in us (John 13:34-35).

How do we love deeply yet hold lightly?

Since saying goodbye is a normal part of life, especially cross-cultural worker life, we can take steps to minimize the pain.

- Change your perspective. Rather than concentrating on the negative aspects of anticipating parting, it is better to concentrate on the positive aspects of the current relationship. As someone said, it is better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all.
- Look for people who “click.” When you find people with the same values, same aspirations, same commitment, etc., become close friends even if it seems there is no “future” in the friendship. One couple we met more than a decade ago when visiting a field are still good friends. We have become one of their supporters, visited them on the field again, made contact at conferences, had them in our home while on home assignment. We have spent hours talking and sharing deeply.
- Become intimate sooner. Third culture kids of all types (cross-cultural worker, military, etc.) become experts at this. When they meet each other and realize their common background, they begin to share at a deeper level much sooner than those raised in a single culture. With practice, anyone can develop this capacity.
- Communicate while apart. This has always been possible, but is much easier with the invention on e-mail in recent years. However, e-mail is a mixed blessing.

- On the positive side, friendships can be continued at virtually no financial cost even when people are far apart. (In fact, relationships can be initiated without ever meeting personally, and that may become a problem.)
- On the negative side, some people become so busy keeping old friendships alive that they fail to make new ones. Some cross-cultural workers communicate via e-mail daily with old friends, but spend little time with the people living near them currently. Thus, they fail to continue to make new friends.
- Grieve your losses. It is all right (even necessary) to do all the things Paul and the elders from Ephesus did:
 - Wept
 - Embraced
 - Kissed
 - Tore away
- Pick up where you leave off. After you become good friends, you can pick up your friendship where it was when you parted. You still have the same values, aspirations, concerns, etc., so all you need to do is get an update on what you have been doing, and your relationship continues from there.
- Remember that relationships give hope. At creation God built parting into the family. When a young man and young woman grow up, they leave their father and mother and cleave to each other (Genesis 2). Most people do not refuse to have children because their children mature and leave, they look forward to reuniting with their children both here on earth and in heaven. We also look forward to reuniting with other loved ones in heaven.

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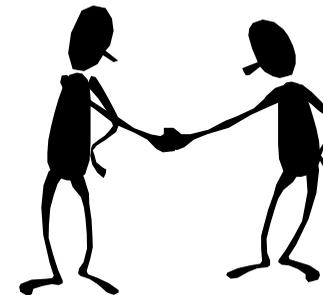
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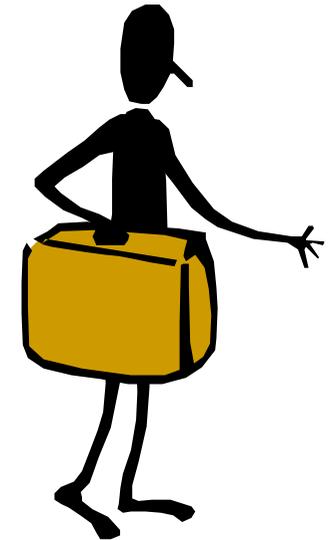
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