

What Cross-cultural Workers Ought to Know about Home Ministry Assignment

Andrew, a TCK, wrote, “I’m really struggling with HMA. It’s just so hard. Fish bowl. Being on. Travel. Exhaustion.... we are going for 6 months. Starting in summer. I dread these times. For me after 26 years as MK and cross-cultural worker. I struggle most with leaving my family, raising support, and keeping my family and myself healthy.”

Furlough & HMA

Until the middle of the 20th century, cross-cultural workers often returned to their passport country on a regular basis. The usual pattern was four years on the field followed by one year of “furlough,” at “home”, and this was repeated as long as they served overseas. They usually literally went “overseas” because they often traveled by cargo ship. There was no other way to get there.

When they went to the field, and when they returned home, they were in transit for several weeks, often with other cross-cultural workers on the ship. They had time to talk with the other cross-cultural workers in this small group of a dozen or so people. So they arrived home debriefed and somewhat rested.

Today cross-cultural workers can board an airplane and be “home” within 48 hours from nearly anywhere in the world, but with no opportunity to rest and debrief. It is called Home Ministry Assignment with deputation to raise funds and prayer support. They may be expected to “hit the ground

running” with meetings scheduled the weekend after they arrive.

Cross-cultural workers will probably always be asked, “How is your vacation going?” by someone at a meeting, but agencies should be understanding enough to have their cross-cultural workers take at least six weeks off (preferably three months) after they arrive home. This time allows the cross-cultural workers to get settled in, rest, and greet friends and family at home.

Family (Children) & Spouse

Raising funds and having prayer partners often mean that one parent is gone much of the time, so their family life is different from what it was on the field. If the children are in school it may mean that they have a, different school on each HMA, and they may have difficulty adjusting. In addition, if it is a short HMA, it may mean changing schools as well as cultures during the academic year.

These times of separation may put a strain on marriage relationships. If one spouse travels while the other remains at home to care for the children and the house, the one at home may feel abandoned and exhausted while imagining how easy the traveling one has it. Likewise, the one driving mile after mile may feel exhausted and think about how good the one at home has it. In addition, the TCKs often do not know their biological relatives, and they may feel odd calling these people “Aunt” and “Uncle” when they have left many aunts and uncles in their host country.

Some cross-cultural workers try to diminish these problems by home schooling and taking the whole family when traveling. Some even buy RVs so that they can take the

family everywhere, and they always sleep in the same beds. Other cross-cultural workers decrease these problems by buying a house in their passport country, and then they concentrate on raising funds in smaller areas so that they do not need to travel great distances. They spend each HMA in the same place so that the TCKs have a set of playmates and friends every time they change between host and passport countries.

Cross-cultural workers may ask their children to help them raise funds by “performing” through music or skits. People in the congregation often think it is cute when the children are small, but the children themselves may dislike performing and begin to rebel or develop bad attitudes. Parents must be very careful when doing this.

Family (Extended) & “Friends”

While families are serving overseas, cousins may have married so that cross-cultural workers do not know their new in-laws, and loved grandparents may have died so that cross-cultural workers may be grieving when other family and friends are past that. Siblings who did not want to say “No” when asked years ago may have taken a “share” in cross-cultural workers: however, they have not given the money promised, so the relationships are awkward.

Cross-cultural workers may find that they do not fit into the groups they left at home. The faces in the group look the same, but those at home as well as the cross-cultural workers themselves have changed, and they no longer have much in common. Those back “home” seem to be materialistic and superficial. They would rather talk about who won the football game last weekend than people giving their life to Christ. Cross-

cultural workers may feel marginalized, lonely, and isolated. They may have to initiate conversations rather than responding to statements from people at home.

Cross-cultural workers looking for new friends may find that deep relationships are difficult. Both they and the new “friends” they are trying to make know that they will soon be parting again and neither want to invest in short relationships. These are difficult situations, but some of these suggestions may help.

- Fellowship with other cross-cultural workers on HMA may be helpful when they meet at conferences
- Retired cross-cultural workers in the community will know what those on HMA are going through, and they may want friendship as well.

Food & Health

Eating may be a problem during HMA. Some cross-cultural workers talk about “fast food furlough fat.” Fast food is not the only cause of weight gain. Here are some additional items making food a problem for cross-cultural workers.

- People at home often offer visiting cross-cultural workers their best, richest foods.
- Cross-cultural workers do not want to offend the cooks by not eating very much.
- Many churches have potluck meals with everyone wanting the cross-cultural workers to at least taste their best food.
- Cross-cultural workers may find it hard to burn all those calories as they sit for hours while driving to their next destination. Although nothing is perfect, one good way is to explain that too much food leads to problems and then eat very small servings.

In addition to food, cross-cultural workers may find it difficult to maintain health in other ways while doing deputation.

- Getting rest. In the Ten Commandments God asked for a day of rest during each week, and most people do this on a weekend; however, Saturdays and Sundays are not good Sabbaths for cross-cultural workers on HMA since those are usually travel and speaking days. Picking another day may help. Although some on HMA specify a day, some may simply keep close records and make sure they get one Sabbath a week.
- Exercising regularly. Although not mentioned as much as food and rest, Paul wrote that physical training is of some value (not as valuable as godliness, which is valuable for both this life and the next). Cross-cultural workers on deputation may find it hard with their variable schedule, but they can keep a daily written record of times when they have walked, run, or played their favorite sports past the point of perspiration for at least a half hour several times a week.

Frustration & Surprises

Cross-cultural workers on HMA often feel frustrated about some things, and those on their first HMA may find some surprises. Here are some of the frustrations they may feel.

- Given 3-5 minutes to share what they have been doing the last four years
- Being away from the work God had called them to do
- Feeling guilty about all the responsibilities they left for someone else to do
- Grieving for all the things and people they left behind

- Visiting one of their sending churches where the leader does not recognize them
- Fearing they will do some simple thing, such as buying gasoline, incorrectly
- Funding coming in very slowly
- Not understanding what is being asked for in a form they are filling out

Cross-cultural workers who have served several terms overseas know about many things to expect, but they may find some surprises. Those on their first HMA are even more likely to be surprised.

- They are asked, “How is your vacation coming?”
- Even though they are “home,” they feel like they are living in a strange country.
- They become critical or even angry with people at home.
- One on HMA said, “My church is comatose and doesn’t even know it!”
- Another said, “I don’t feel at home. I feel different.”

Other Concerns

Cross-cultural workers on HMA may feel like they are “living in fishbowls with a different group of people staring into the bowl every week. Movie stars and popular musicians live that kind of life where everyone is watching, and they are disappointed when no one is watching because they assume that they are no longer popular.

Cross-cultural workers may not like “being on” all the time and may not enjoy living in a fish bowl. This may be true of TCKs, especially if they are asked to dress in national’s clothing. Teens may be quite sensitive to this.

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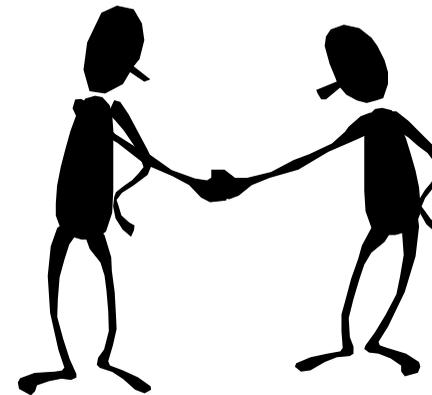
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