

What Cross-cultural Workers Ought to Know about “Taboo” Topics

E. Stanley Jones, Methodist cross-cultural worker in India, had a difficult year. He had a ruptured appendix, lockjaw started ten days later, World War I broke out, several other cross-cultural workers died, and he was assigned their work. Yet he wrote to his agency in October 1915, “We are all well and happy in the work.” Soon Stanley had “nervous collapses” during important times, such as preaching. His mind would go blank, and he would have to sit down. Stanley seldom said anything about difficult events and how he felt about them.

However, his wife, Mabel, quite freely said what she thought. For example, Mable wrote this in her January 1929 newsletter, “Eunice (daughter) and I were not happy to have the other member of our trio still absent in America. We feel that as a family, we are paying rather a big price....We are missing Stanley and feel like ‘saying things’ to the Mission Board!”

Although there are very few cross-cultural workers that are as radical as E. Stanley Jones about not mentioning difficulties, there seem to be many more cross-cultural workers who are “Stanleys” than who are “Mabels.” A few cross-cultural workers are “Stanleys” to their supporters, but “Mabels” to their colleagues.

This silence about such “taboo” topics may make other cross-cultural workers believe that something is wrong with them. Those cross-cultural workers may think that they are not spiritual enough or that they are too weak to be good cross-cultural workers.

They may become discouraged and suffer in their own silence. They may even give up and become “attrition statistics.”

It is time to break the silence about these taboo topics and be transparent about difficulties cross-cultural workers face. No one can list all these topics, but here are some common ones.

Living in another culture is really hard.

Most cross-cultural workers talk openly about the joy they have of “going into all the world,” but they seldom tell anyone that it is not fun most of the time. Even if they are fluent in the language, have a great ministry, are accepted by the people, and love what they do, they are not really “one of them.” Even after living in their host culture for decades, many cross-cultural workers do not feel at “home.” They are always the “foreigner” that children stare at and the white man or woman at gatherings. It is no fun being the stranger who is always noticed but is not really an integral part of the group.

Cross-cultural workers serving for only a few years often quit for “personal reasons,” and they become attrition statistics. Even cross-cultural workers who have served for a decade or two still feel culture stress, and they are relieved when they can return “home” to stay for their children’s education in high school or college. Others find a place to serve at agency headquarters. Still others become agency representatives in regions of their passport countries.

Cross-cultural workers often feel like friends and family have forgotten them.

When cross-cultural workers leave to serve in another culture, they usually believe

that their relationships with friends and family will continue much like they have been at home. After all, they have email, blogs, Skype, Facebook, and other social media. They send prayer letters with pictures of their family and post happy videos online. However, they seldom post anything about friends and family increasingly ignoring them as the months go by.

After the first year, people back home seem to have forgotten them. Cross-cultural workers usually say nothing about this taboo topic. A few may complain to colleagues on the field but certainly not to supporters, friends, and family. What hurts the most is that it seems like the people back home do not really miss them. Cross-cultural workers understand that people back home are busy and have moved on, but understanding does not make it hurt any less. Cross-cultural workers do not feel at “home” where they are, and people in their passport countries seem to have forgotten them.

Money is such a difficult issue.

- Asking for money. Cross-cultural workers often do not have enough money, and they usually feel uneasy asking for money. However, they do not talk about this taboo topic. Probably supporters do not really want them to ask for it anyway, so cross-cultural workers use different terms. They say they are looking for “partners” or “champions” who want the “opportunity” to be part of the “blessing.” What they really need is money, but they do not want to come right out and say, “Please give me some.”
- Appearing above money. Cross-cultural workers think they have to appear more spiritual, so they “walk by faith” and

“trust God to provide.” They really do need money for their families and ministries, but they often feel like it is taboo to just out and say so.

- Being judgmental about money. Cross-cultural workers raising funds to provide medicine to treat contagious illnesses in their host country find it hard not to be critical at times. If a supporting church cannot give any funds for inoculations because it has just spent several thousand dollars to change the color of a special room in their church, it is hard for cross-cultural workers not to be judgmental.
- Hiding their spending. Pastors can go on cruises with their families and church members, but if cross-cultural workers acknowledge taking a Disney cruise with their children, some donors may quit supporting them.

Cross-cultural workers don’t like “always” saying goodbye, and it never gets easier.

New cross-cultural workers knew that they would have to say goodbye when they left, but they did not expect it to happen constantly. Most cross-cultural workers did not realize how different it would be saying goodbye as a cross-cultural worker from what it was saying goodbye when they were at home. Here are some examples.

- To parents or grandparents (who may not live until they come again)
- To children going to college (for a year)
- Getting the call that a parent is in the final stages of life (and not getting home to say goodbye)
- Not being there on school breaks or vacations (seeing their children only every few years for a few days)

- To the field when going home, and to home when returning to the field (every few years)
- To other cross-cultural workers leaving for “home” (when they cannot go to theirs)

Cross-cultural workers often feel judged by people who don’t live up to their own standards.

Cross-cultural workers have no problem with being asked specific questions by churches, by mission committees, or by individual donors. However, they do have a major problem when those asking the questions expect them to do something that the churches, committees or donors do not do themselves. Here are some examples.

- The questioners are critical when cross-cultural workers say they have had only three converts during the last year (their assignment is to teach TCKs in elementary school). Cross-cultural workers would like to ask the questioners how many converts they have had during the last year.
- The questioners want to know how many people the cross-cultural workers have disciplined (when the questioners have disciplined none).
- Questioners criticize how the cross-cultural workers have been helping the poor (when all the questioners have ever done is help serve the poor Thanksgiving dinner at a food bank).

Going back “home” is hard.

Most cross-cultural workers look forward to going “home” where they can see friends and family. They think of it often

during the year before they leave. However, not everything is positive.

Most people understand about the logistical problems. Many cross-cultural workers do not have a place to live, a vehicle to drive, and many of the necessities of life such as dishes, bedding, towels, pots and pans to cook with, and so forth. They probably do not like to borrow things—what if they lose or break a loved dish? Likewise, cross-cultural workers may have donors and churches all over the country, but they cannot afford all that travel, and some supporters may drop them if not visited.

In addition, cross-cultural workers know that they have been changed by living in another country and that their friends and relatives have been changed by changes in their own culture. Those cross-cultural workers may feel ostracized by people who feel uneasy about their own materialism when they are with someone who has given up so much.

What can cross-cultural workers do?

The best thing cross-cultural workers can do is to break the silence and start talking with others about these taboo topics. Ideally, many of them would talk about the topics with each other, but that is not likely to happen.

Fortunately, there are things individuals or couples can do. Everyone needs someone to talk with. Of course, some cross-cultural workers may want to talk with a counselor; however, this issue does not require a professional. All that is needed is someone who is willing to be transparent about their own experiences and keep confidences. Here are some possibilities.

- Talk with a friend in the same agency or even better with another agency.

- Ask someone to be a mentor.
- Talk with someone in your international church or a parent you have met in your children’s school.
- Talk with a friend anywhere on Skype.
- Correspond with a friend through email.

All of the taboo topics mentioned here are commonly found among cross-cultural workers, so those experiencing the issues probably do not need professional help.

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