

## Perspectives

# Let's Be Honest about Missionary Marriages

By Scott Hicks

John and Shirley (pseudonyms) had been happily married for several years before coming to the field. As they struggled through transition into a new culture, a new job, a new language and a new lifestyle, their marital relationship began to suffer. Unable to put their finger on what was wrong, they continued to live and minister in the hope that their problems would somehow resolve themselves. On occasion, when the tensions were unbearable, they hesitantly mentioned their struggles to colleagues—but too often they were given pat answers or left feeling unheard. After three years on the field, their marriage was in trouble and there were serious concerns as to whether they should stay.

I wish this was an isolated case, but it is becoming much too common in missions today. New missionary couples often go through extensive language and cross-cultural studies. They receive principles for adapting to their new culture, but are they helped to understand the stress that cultural adjustment and culture shock will play on their marriage and how to keep their marriage alive in the midst

of this adjustment? For example, in many West African countries, just dropping by to visit others and being visited in turn is a major part of the culture. These visits can happen any day at just about any time. How should couples who are used to a culture in which privacy and appointments are valued respond to this? Do they give up their time together for the sake of ministry? Dare they risk offending for the sake of their own marital relationship? Where is the line drawn between marriage and ministry? Situations like this require skills and understanding that are rare in new missionaries.

What compounds this problem on the mission field is that we are living in an age when going it alone is being confused with spirituality. Why? The most common answer I hear in my counseling sessions is that true missionaries should be able to handle anything that comes their way.

Dealing with their own problems leaves missionaries feeling guilty. After all, they are sent to evangelize others, not sort out their own struggles. Having counseled for a decade in the States before moving to West Africa, I was amazed that missionaries generally see it as unnatural to go for help during times of personal struggle.

When cars break, faucets quit working and houses need repair, missionaries don't hesitate to call on someone to help. These problems have been normalized. But when the problems are personal or relational, missionaries either do not feel the freedom to seek help or feel that they should have the skills to fix the problem themselves. This area hasn't been normalized. Or, they look around and don't see or hear of others struggling, therefore concluding that they need to simply "press on" and become cultural chameleons, able to blend in but not growing in the acculturation process. The desire to belong and fit in, to succeed at becoming a missionary, cannot be overstated. Couples are often not ready, therefore, to adequately deal with these problems, too often ignoring important questions that need to be answered if new missionary couples are going to successfully navigate their first term.

In light of this issue, just how do acculturation and marriage maintenance or growth go together? I contend that sending agencies and veteran missionaries must stand in the gap for new missionary couples in a combination of pre- and on-field orientation programs. Mission leaders must speak with intentionality to these realities. They are seen by new missionaries as having the knowledge and expertise to deal with these types of issues. They need to specifically address beliefs like "the marriage we've had at home will

be different here" and "I can't handle this." The "Perspectives" column exists to provide a platform for guest editorials. We welcome submissions that reflect personal conviction, insight, and passion on mission-related issues. Conveying your thoughts with clarity and grace in approximately 800 words is the only requirement. —The editors.

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