

What Missionaries Ought to Know about Coping with Change

Jonah faced change in his life when God told him to become the first cross-cultural missionary by going east and confronting Nineveh (Jonah 1). Jonah went west. When he finally obeyed, the people in Nineveh responded to his message and repented. However, rather than rejoicing, Jonah became disillusioned and angry because of God's grace and compassion for a despised people group. Though succeeding outwardly, he failed inwardly.

At the beginning of his second term of missionary service (Acts 15) Paul suggested to Barnabas that they go back and visit people where they had been before to see how everyone was doing. However, as recorded in the verses immediately following that, Paul wound up going with Silas (rather than Barnabas), going to Macedonia (rather than to Asia), and meeting new people (rather than visit people they had seen before). Paul adapted to the changes and became a successful missionary, both inwardly and outwardly.

Know that change happens.

Even if your life seems to be predictable and stable right now, sooner or later you will probably have to cope with such changes as Paul did in Acts 15-16. Someone has said that the only thing that does not change is change itself. This has been true of cross-cultural missionaries from the beginning. Some people thrive on change and seek it out, but others dread change and struggle through it when it comes. Most people want enough

change to keep life interesting, but not so much as to make them uneasy.

What can one do to get through those inevitable changes that happen in life? Of course, change itself is not the problem—the problem is in how we deal with it when it happens. Here are some ways to cope.

Anchor to a point of stability.

The Bible is clear that our point of stability is in God himself.

- I the Lord do not change... (Malachi 3:6).
- He will never leave you or forsake you (Deuteronomy 31:6).
- Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8).
- I am the alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End (Revelation 22:13).

To successfully adapt to change, we must keep our commitment to God up-to-date. Without this secure anchor, we may become like Jonah rather than like Paul.

Expect emotions.

When you face change and emotions of all kinds come flooding in, you may say, "I don't understand why this has affected me so much." One moment you are laughing, the next you are crying—because you are normal. Nearly every emotion occurs during change. Here are some of the most common, illustrated in Paul's life as he experienced great change at the end of his third term.

- Uncertainty about the future may result in fear, worry, anxiety, apprehension, dread, self-doubt, or panic. Paul said he was going to Jerusalem, not knowing what would happen to him there (Acts 20:22).

- Being forced to change may result in stress, anger, frustration, or hostility. Paul felt compelled by the Spirit (Acts 20:22).
- Looking at what you are losing may result in sadness, depression, despondency, or despair. Paul wept as he was about to leave (Acts 20:36).
- Considering new opportunities may result in joy, elation, or happiness. Paul said he looked forward to finishing the course and completing his task (Acts 20:24).

Note that Paul acknowledged his emotions, and this allowed him to cope and continue with his work. These emotions may overlap, or you may find yourself on a pendulum swinging back and forth between them. Acknowledge and express them as you hold on to your anchor. Trying to build a dam to hold them inside may result in the dam bursting and the emotions spilling out.

Take time to grieve.

Your losses are real. It is all right (even necessary) to do all the things Paul and the elders from Ephesus did as they departed from friends in Acts 20:37-38.

- Wept
- Embraced
- Kissed
- Grieved

Coming to terms with your losses as you adjust to change takes time. Trying to rush through without getting closure on what you are leaving will make it hard to enter your new roles. (See the brochure on grief)

Swim with the current.

When you feel like you are being swept along in a torrent of change, swim with

the current as long as it is not taking you away from the work God called you to do. If you are called to put God's word into the language of the people, you may insist on using a quill pen and parchment to make copies of it (or even a Gutenberg press or even moveable type). However, learning to use the computer will make your work more effective.

We have proverbs expressing this.

- When the wind blows, don't build windbreaks, build windmills.
- If life gives you lemons, make lemonade.
- When the river flows, don't just build a dam, put in a hydroelectric generator.

Swimming upstream may simply exhaust you while going with the flow may accomplish your purpose. Stubborn rigidity may defeat you while flexibility may get you through the torrent. The only time not to harness the energy of the current is if it is carrying you away from what God has called you to do. In this case, you may have to swim across the current and get out of the water.

Find friends.

Pride makes some people try to cope alone, a most difficult thing to do. Sharing with other people is a great help. Bravery may mean having the courage to ask for help when you need it. Here are some people who can swim with you—or throw you a life jacket.

- People who have been through the change you are facing. They may have helpful suggestions to cope or mentor you through those changes.
- Your family (missionary, church, and biological) cares, so someone in that family will listen to you and help.

- Close friends whom you trust deeply will allow you to express your fears and frustrations, and they may offer ways to cope.
- Member care people in your organization can help you function through its changes.
- Pastors or counselors with no connection to your organization can bring an outside objectivity not found within your agency. When facing new dangers in Jerusalem, Paul called on the elders of the Ephesian Church (Acts 20:17).

Focus on the good.

Every change has both good and bad in it. You may be leaving friends, but you will also make new friends. You may have to leave a task you know well, but you will also learn to do something new. Focus on good new things.

You have the choice of looking back at what you are leaving or looking ahead to where you are going. Paul wanted to finish the course, to complete the task. Keeping your attention on what God has called you to keeps you moving in the right direction. Concentrating on him and his goodness as your point of stability, you can navigate change. Remember that every glass that is half empty is also half full. Optimists may make as many mistakes as pessimists, but they have a lot more fun getting where they are going.

Take one step at a time.

When you begin to feel overwhelmed by the size of the change, break it up into smaller parts. It may seem hopeless to walk across the continent, but many people have done it—one step at a time.

Your new assignment may be to begin a school in a village that has never had one. You went to school but have never started one so the task seems hopeless. Take it step by step.

- Find a place to meet.
- Select a curriculum.
- Hire some teachers.
- Etc.

Take care of yourself.

During change some people forget to care for themselves. They need to care for themselves in every way, spiritually, socially, physically.

- Have a daily devotional time.
- Spend time daily with spouse and family.
- Schedule time with other missionaries.
- Eat good healthy meals.
- Exercise several times a week.
- Get rest—keep a Sabbath.

Remember that it will end.

Every stream or river ends at a lake, sea, or ocean sooner or later. Likewise, every torrent of change comes to an end, and you will experience feelings of stability and normalcy again. Keep this in mind as you feel like you are being helplessly swept along in the current.

When people move to a new position in a different city, they may ask how long it will be before it really feels like home. Although some people make it sooner, it takes a full year for many to adapt to the change. It may not feel like home until you have gone through every season, every holiday, etc.

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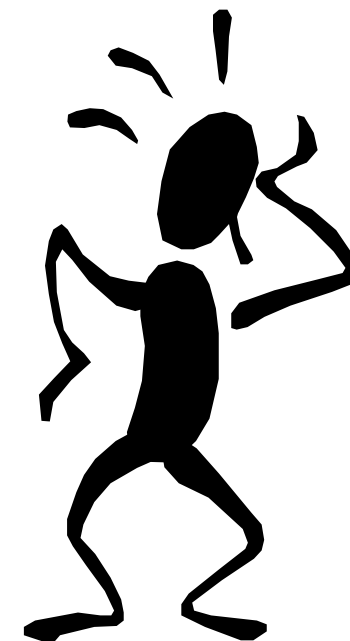
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