

Missionary Resilience in a World in Constant Movement

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We are humbled by the way God has blessed us and our family over several generations of missionaries serving through the FMB/IMB for over 100 years. We both have a rich missions heritage—Elena is a third-generation missionary, and Guy is a second-generation missionary.

Elena's grandparents graduated from seminary in Fort Worth in the class of 1919. They were appointed with the FMB in 1920. They stayed on the field, having a full and meaningful ministry until their retirement in 1960. Our parents' generation (post World War II) went to the mission field planning on staying their whole careers with the mission agency. God honored their commitment, and they served faithfully until retirement.

We, too, have had the joy of serving in many years on the mission field. We were appointed to Brazil in 1984 and served there for 40 years. In this article, we reflect on our experiences about resilience and persistence on the mission field. We have seen the IMB's commitment to TCKs, healthy missionary life, healthy relationships, mentoring, and discipling. We have also seen a commitment on the part of the local church which contributes to staying long-term on the mission field.

Commitment to TCKs

The first thing that comes to mind is a commitment on the part of each missionary to invest in Missionary Kids (MKs)/Third Culture Kids (TCKs). Thankfully, IMB culture values this highly as well. We are grateful for the variety of schooling options IMB offers to parents. We are also helped by their focus on our teenagers through various spiritual and college preparation retreats. We do not know of any other organization in the world that values missionary children like the IMB. We as ATCKs (Adult Third Culture Kids) can attest to the fact that part of the persistence evidenced in our lives is a result of the positive experiences we had as children and adolescents on the mission field.

This commitment is not just for missionaries who have children in their families. Not everyone on the mission field have children, but all of us have the privilege of interacting with TCKs. We have many fond memories of missionary “aunts” and “uncles” who influenced our lives, spent time with us, and continue to do so until this day. We can recall at least half a dozen single missionary “aunts” that influenced us as well as single journeymen, both men and women. We have “adopted” many TCKs through the years, and many as adults today still call us “Aunt” and “Uncle.” As a missionary, making it a priority to adopt and influence at least one TCK will help their family stay on the field and may influence that TCK toward future missionary service.

Healthy Missionary Family Life

Having a healthy missionary family is another key element to “staying the course” on the mission field. We have noticed that many Christian workers have a hard time finding balance in their lives. Our first ministry is to our family. Through stories we have read in missionary biographies and even through personal observation of other TCKs, we have seen that many of these parents tried to “bargain” with God—expecting him to take care of their families while they did mission work. This is always a recipe for disaster.

We learned the importance of prioritizing family from our parents, and we intentionally stressed this priority to our family, to other missionary families, and to our national partners as well.

Missionaries need to spend time with their families: playing together, praying together, talking together, playing table games, watching TV, sharing movie nights, picnics in the parks, family outings to the beach, taking hikes, etc. We tried to create an atmosphere where our TCKs felt comfortable enough to talk about anything with us. We were not perfect, but we made spending time and communicating with our children a priority.

Many task-driven missionaries put ministry before family responsibilities. Most missionaries are self-starters, and their worst nightmare is for somebody to think they are lazy and do not pull their weight in the missionary task. We tried to balance ministry and family time. We also involved our kids in our ministry, by taking them with us when appropriate. They had opportunities to be translators when we had volunteer teams as well.

Healthy Relationships

With IMB colleagues and leaders

One of the values of working with our company is the spirit of family and belonging. Probably one of the hardest things to deal with is to say “goodbye” to missionaries who leave the field. Some of those relationships continue. With one missionary couple who resigned after their first term, we have continued our friendship and see them every time we are on stateside assignment.

To stay the course, we always would get to know our supervisors and drink coffee together. We tried to hear and understand their hearts. We never expected that we would agree 100% on everything, but we worked on what we had in common. In 40 years, we never had a bad supervisor, and we have always tried to get along well with everybody. We had the practice of praying for a good supervisor – everything in your mission life hinges on

this relationship. Pray that your supervisor will be more of a leader than a manager.

We have also made it a goal to spend time with younger workers, such as millennials and Generation Z. We try to listen to them and learn from them and try to speak into their lives. As a couple, we have adopted missionaries all through our careers, older ones at first and then younger ones later on.

With other Great Commission missionaries

In addition, it is important to have friends (at least one) among other missionaries. These may not necessarily be from the same mission-sending agency. We are stronger and more resilient when we have others with whom we can exchange ideas and experiences. We have found that the isolated “lone wolf” missionary will probably not stay many years on the field. Depression can set in, and before you know it, that person has left, and loneliness was often the critical factor.

With nationals

Another contributor to resilience is strong relationships with nationals. Through our years of service, we have been in many homes of nationals, both believers and non-believers. This requires intentionality, but it is important to resilience. We have also hosted many people in our own home, including those who were friends of our children. We loved learning from them, and we believe they also learned from us. These friendships have helped us develop a deep love for our people and their culture.

As a family, we planted three churches in our home. The couches in our living room and our dining room table and chairs were all resources used in our ministry as a family. We planted one church when our children were small, attracting families with small children. We planted another church when we had teens and ended up attracting families with teenagers and college students. They participated in everything and saw some of their

friends come to faith in Christ. Then, we planted a church after the children were grown. God used our relationships with Brazilians to advance the missionary task. We have planted other churches since then, but these that were planted with the family are very special in our memory bank. The furnishings in our home provided a tangible reminder to us that all our resources are God's to be used in ministry.

Because we served our years in a legacy field, we had strong national leadership and a national Baptist convention. We always tried to represent our company in convention meetings as well as national seminaries. We built strong relationships with national leaders of the convention as well as with GCCs by inviting them to coffee. We always tried to care for them and their families. We developed relationships of trust with pastors of small churches and large churches. We have learned to coexist with Baptists of different stripes by always developing relationships of trust. Part of resilience is being present; however, we have observed that some of our colleagues have little interest in the relationships with their national partners and thus are forgotten by them.

Mentoring and Discipling

Through the years, we have also had mentors who helped us stay faithful. Some have been from our company, and others from other walks of life. We have had also Brazilian mentors throughout our years of service. These men and women have poured their lives into ours and have helped shape us into the people we are today. We are forever grateful for their influence. We often tell people, "We are rich people not because of money, but because of the friends we have."

Actually, being a mentor is another element of resilience. In our 40s, suddenly we were no longer the "young missionaries." People around us began to think we were seasoned workers and began to listen to us. What an honor, to be heard! The longer one stays the course on the mission field,

the greater the possibility of their influence. We have always tried to model discipleship and mentoring to new believers.

Commitment to Local Church

Not only is involvement in a local church important on the field, but being a fully participating member was essential for our resilience. In every move we made, we prioritized becoming members of a local Baptist church as soon as possible. We were always involved in a larger ministry than in just one local church, so we had to set some parameters with the local pastor and leaders because they had many expectations for us to help lead the local church. When our kids were younger and still at home, our family would choose one local church where Elena and the kids were very involved. Our ministry often required that I (Guy) traveled to other churches, but I would try to be there at my local church with my family at least one Sunday a month.

Final Considerations

Here, then, are a few final considerations on resilience as cross-cultural workers. First, to stay the course, be faithful daily in your spiritual habits like Bible reading and study, prayer, intentional witnessing, tithing, participating in a local church and cell group (if possible), and in being accountable to others. For those who are considering missionary service: faithfulness in the basic spiritual disciplines is critical to resilience in any type of ministry. For those who are equipping others to “go and serve,” make it a matter of prayer that those who embrace this calling will focus on these priorities.

Second, where possible, join your IMB mission strategy with the national partners’ strategy. Be an advocate for your national partners. Help them gain the vision of their part in the fulfillment of the Great Commission. Help send them to go to the hard places of their own countries and to the nations. We have been involved in global engagement for many years and have seen many Brazilians going to the nations. We have invested not just in training

them, but more personally in the lives of the next generations of those who continue to invest in others and expand the Kingdom.

Third, do your best to learn the language. Listen to local TV, read your Bible in the local language out loud, and write out your prayers. Your national partners appreciate a foreigner who is constantly trying to improve communication by learning more of the local language. We also have continued to study culture and language, valuing the region where we have served. In fact, we have tried to continually be learners.

Fourth, make accountability a priority in your life as a missionary. Both of us have willingly chosen to have accountability partners of the same sex. It has strengthened us, encouraged us, and helped us to be resilient.

Finally, a passage that has been especially meaningful to us over the years is 1 Corinthians 9:22-23: “To the weak I became weak, that I might gain the weak; I have become all things to all people, so that I may by all means save some. I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.” Remember this verse, and never forget your calling. During difficult times (which we experienced many times), we always went back to our calling. We encourage you to do the same.

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