Notes from ‘Loving Missionary Families from Home’, Ruth Bauman

I have three words to focus our time here: In caring for the whole family we need to -

UNDERSTAND, CONNECT, and ADVOCATE

**Understand**

MAIN IDEA: Become students of your missionaries – try to get inside their experience of life – be interested in them as people

Here are some categories to think about:

• Who are these people? Who is the family made up of? Children? If single who are they connected to – extended family here? Who do they leave behind? Elderly parents, adult children, close friends? What health issues do they have? How supportive is their family? Do the children have any special needs or medical issues? What experience do they have living abroad? In what cultures? Some of our people go out leaving behind parents who are angry that they have taken away their grandchildren….ALL our people go having had significant cross cultural experience, some have grown up on the mission field, but some go to live in areas of the world they have never been to…..These are all unique descriptors for the person or family, and impact their lives. You will need to understand them to some extent.

• What is the context of their work? What country, people group or language are they going to? High context culture? Or low? Shame based? Or not so much? Which religions will they come face to face with – how much do you know about them? How much language learning will they have to do, which languages? How many languages…..Language learning is hard work and people do it at different rates….some members of a family may have much more difficulty than others in acquiring language – and what is the situation for the children? Do they need to go to school in local language? How is everyone doing with it?

• What work are they doing? Bible translation, church planting, refugee work, community development, theological education……what do their days look like?

• Learn about the agency! What is culture of that agency? Pioneering? Teams, or individuals – what is governance like in the org? Who supervises your missionary? How much contact will they have with member care, what conferences can or will they attend for the org? What does the agency require from them?

• What is security like on the field? What dangers do they face? Terror, bugs, illness, urban violence, ethnic/racial tensions, fear of sexual assault? A significant part of holding the rope for these ones is asking and understanding, praying and listening to their stories.

• Housing….where do they live – apartment, house? Shared or not? Next to a mosque, or a busy street, or a beach or a market place. Do they have househelp, and if so how is that going?

• Education – many missionaries homeschool, many send their kids to local schools for a time, or American schools….boarding schools. How is everyone doing with this? Both parents and children.

• Often feel they are responsible to many bosses – 5 bosses: supporters, sending church (you), agency, teammates (team leader) and God – so when decisions have to be made or reports given, when crisis hits or difficulties of another kind they find they want to try and please a lot of people. Encourage them to live in God’s sight and not others!

• Transitions – pay attention to them – how many international transitions have they had in the past 24 months? What were they? How many other moves,How many goodbyes? And Hellos? Schooling transitions for the children? New babies added? Moving to a new home or area within country? Did they spend a lot of time travelling on their last home assignment? Did they have any visitor?

• Emotion: how is everyone doing? Depression is a common response to change. Look for themes of LOSS and IDENTITY in missionaries lives – what have they lost? [a sense of purpose, family and church identity, friendship group, local small group or ministry, family connectedness, culture – familiarity – food, climate, clothing, how to get around – directions in a new place - ] How are they feeling about who they are ? Do they place their identity in the role of ‘missionary’ and must they prove their worth by fruitfulness - ? Or can they rest in knowing that the work is God’s and that they are his children?] How are the children doing with loss and identity? Their experience will be very different…….they will identify with the overseas culture increasingly – ‘home’ will be ‘over there’ and the US will become anything from a place resembling Disney land (full of treats and entertainment) to a place where you always have to say goodbye – or maybe a place they don’t feel connected to at all, except perhaps to grandparents and a few other special people… - this may be hard for the parents to grasp – their children no longer self- identify primarily as American’s….. Resources to learn about what it means to be a TCK <http://denizenmag.com/> , <http://www.tckworld.com/>,

• Seasons of a missionaries life: help (and be sensitive to) missionaries who have been gone for 8 or 15 or 25 years. What experiences both good and hard are piling up? What has changed for that family or person? Has their sense of belonging in both home culture and field of work changed ? They may struggle with jealousy – friends or family at home have nice houses and cars and lives that look attractive….they may struggle with pride – I’m serving the Lord in a more important way over here….or fear \_ what will I do when my children go to college? They will be thousands of miles away.

Resources for learning about what it means to live a life ‘between worlds’ :

An excellent blog - <http://www.djiboutijones.com/> , about living life and raising children overseas.

Important reading: Third Culture Kids: Growing up Among Worlds, by David Pollock and Ruth Van Reken – available at Amazon, also on Kindle

**CONNECT:**

MAIN IDEA: you won’t know how they are unless you ask, they will feel increasingly alone unless you connect.

• encourage their connection with the home church, encourage them to connect with family and friends . Missionary work and living can be isolating – they can feel very far away. Recently one of our global partners said to me that the most useful thing we have done the last couple of years is help them stay closely informed about what’s going on at church. – it’s easy to forget or to feel that they don’t care about the gathering of the anti sex trafficking group that got started last month, or that so and so got married or had a baby…but these are the details that help people feel they belong. They also want to know about big policy things, theological debates, how the youth group is doing and what they are up to……

• do all you can to encourage their connection with God. Send resources and make things available – give them kindles and an Amazon gift certificate. Send packages of books. Make sure they have sermons and other ministry resources available. Encourage them to go on their sending agencys’ retreat, Eg. VELVET ASHES is a ministry that connects global women with each other, runs virtual small groups and has a great blog. <http://velvetashes.com/> – THRIVE is a ministry to American women living overseas. They run retreats, publish a helpful magazine and help women survive the ex pat world. Send your missionary woman on a retreat with Thrive where she will connect with other overseas women, have a chance to relax and share her stories and frustrations with others who are in the same boat. <http://thriveministry.org/>

• READ: read their updates or prayer emails….read and respond !!! One missionary women who has been out on the field for over 20 years recently told me that after their last update they had only one response. The longer people are away the less connected they feel at church – people have moved on while they have been gone. Write even one line responses to the updates – and don’t expect the missionary to write huge long letters in reply. BE willing to be the one communicating even if you don’t get much in response – many missionaries are very busy and don’t have time to respond at length but I know they all really appreciate your care.

• WORDS: Write, pray, text, postcards, emails, whatsapp, share photos……. Keep the lines of communication open. Get the Sunday school class those missionary kids were in to write to them and send photos every once in a while – it says ‘we haven’t forgotten you. We love you. You are part of us’. Make special connections with each of their children

• Pray for them…and if they request it, ask them to pray for you….many missionaries want this – they don’t always like being on the receiving end of prayer and giving – they want to give back, to pray and to offer what they have. Take this seriously. Many churches have a group that meets regularly just to pray for their missionaries. They love to be asked for prayer requests -

• REST: a huge area of concern for our overseas workers. Life in many places in the world is far more stressful in general than it is here – besides just the issues of familiarity in general – there is difficulty in just buying food, cleaning it, doing laundry, ironing everything to get the bugs eggs out of it….getting from place to place – roads that are full of pot holes and have no street signs, on and on. Life is more tiring. So where and when do our people get rest? Daily rest, weekly rest, monthly rest and bi-yearly rest. They need more breaks if security is dangerous in their country, They need more breaks if the weather is harsh or they live in remote locations where they have little contact with the world at large. They need breaks if they have intense or large responsibility.

o Missionaries often feel guilty about vacations = they are using supporters money, they may live in fairly urbanized or westernized places – when it’s cheap to fly to the Red Sea for a week it may sound like a waste of support money on a frivolous luxury……

o Sometime they don’t have enough money for breaks – raise an extra gift for them, surprise them with vacation money.

o Single missionaries can often feel that vacation is not fun without someone else – offer to go with them. Invite them to do things with your family. Encourage them to rest too.

 Encourage them to rest in whatever way they can and is appropriate. Rested missionaries are far more able to deal with emergencies and stresses of team dynamics, the constant crush of people asking for their help, or the pressure of illness

VISIT – this can be wonderful or it can be a burden that they don’t want or need depending on their circumstances.. Be sensitive. They may not want YOU to visit but may be thrilled at the visit of a best friend or sister. They all appreciate the pastoral visits when done sensitively. – that’s a whole other topic– be there to encourage, listen and to learn. Don’t make your agenda about what YOU want to do (the nearest beach or attraction) but about loving them, learning about their life and ministry, and maybe even taking them on vacation with you. Bring gifts, by all means, but ask ahead what they want or need. Don’t bring things they can easily get, or do not want – moving around can make extra possessions just a burden. Offer to stay in a nearby guesthouse or hotel = don’t assume they have room to have you stay with them….offer to pay for all in country expenses – take them out for meals, and pay for transportation. Pay attention to their children – bring books, or clothes they might desperately need (ask them). Learn the ages and names of the children and spend intentional time with them getting to know them. Love them ! Most of all encourage their relationship with God

Connect when they come home: invite them over, invite them to stay, ask to hear their stories, good and hard, learn from them about their first term, 5th term, the latest on the ebola epidemic and how its affecting them, or the car bombing that just happened in the next town. Ask the children about school and friends, their church, their neighborhood, any pets they have, their favorite activities. Once you know them a bit better ask them about goodbyes – was it hard to say goodbye to anyone this time as you came on home assignment? (they have other MK friends who might be Australian or local friends – they might not see these special people for months or even years….) How do they feel about being in America? (don’t call it ‘home’ because they probably don’t think of it as home anymore… What do they want to do while they are here… Ask the parents if they have any concerns about particular children. What goals do they have for this home assignment? How do they feel about going back.

**ADVOCATE:**

MAIN IDEA: they need you to come alongside and help in many ways. They have been away immersed in another culture and don’t have the same resources you have.

Gather others to pray and help in practical ways – we have Barnabus Suppoprt teams – 6 to 12 people. Formed by the GP before they leave – this is a team that meets to pray once a month, helps with practical needs on home furloughs,( finding housing and transportation, warm clothes, a cabin to vacation in….) They skype with them as often as possible but usually once a month or every two months They might help raise some extra funds for school needs, a new vehicle or help send a homeschool helper to stay for a few months and relieve time crunch with daily life while language is studied etc

Pay attention to the college age MKs who are returning to your area….are they connected with the church/ Do they need anything? Take an interest in their lives and ask if they have places to stay over breaks. Teach them to drive, talk to them.

Encourage the missionary endeavor at your church – pass around good books and learn about missions.

Stay aware of what’s happening in the world = politics, local and international – whatever will affect them. Respond with emails saying you are aware that whatever is going on may be affecting them and that you are wondering how they are doing – you are praying ……

When your families come on home assignment remind Sunday school teachers that the children will be back. Do all you can to help the children feel at home. It will feel very awkward for them – they will have changed a great deal and others might not even recognize them…they will be shy and self -conscious – make sure that if there are any other children they know, they can be in the same groups with them. Invite them over.

Welcome them back. RE-introduce them to the church if possible – get them up front, or standing so that people don’t just think ‘oh yeah…I know those people but I can’t remember their names…’ Aren’t they missionaries in Japan or somewhere like that?

Help them organize open houses, or help them make arrangements to speak in Sunday school classes or at events at church. Listen to them, Learn from them. Ask them about their experiences and their opinions.

Missionaries need an advocate when things fall apart.

 **CRISIS advocacy:**

When a missionary family experiences some kind of crisis the sending church needs to respond. Its tempting to feel that the sending agency has it covered and should take care of the family, but we’ve found that agencies have widely varied levels of competency in crises of all kinds, and even when they are doing a good job with the family, they really appreciate the help and interest and support of the home church.

 If we do a decent job at connecting with and understanding our families, we will be better able to help when trouble descends.

Note, I didn’t say ‘we will KNOW when trouble descends…..’ One of the things we find is that often we DON”T know when things are getting bad, just how bad they are, until the circumstance becomes a crisis.

Let me explain:

There are medical crises – a serious illness, even an evacuation to the US or another country closer that has better medical care. A child dies, a pregnancy ends. What can we do from home? Pray, connect, send financial help, inquire how the whole family is doing. Visit. Make sure the family takes a break, and has the resources to do so. Ask if the agency is helping with debriefing or counseling. Can you help?

Political crisis- families are evacuated from their city or country suddenly, or find themselves in the middle of fighting. What can we do? Keep in touch, pray, ask them what we can do. Get help for them when they are in a safe place – communicate with the sending agency, ask what they are doing, fill in the blanks if at all possible – send someone to their location to help them process and think and make plans for what to do next. Send finances. In the aftermath make sure the children are receiving the counsel and help they need. They have had to leave their home, friends, stuff….traumatic. The recovery will be long, the effects will stick for a life time. They need their home church to encourage and help them find counseling for the whole family for quite a while. We assist missionary families with the cost of counseling not covered by their agency or insurance.

 This can also happen more slowly when visas are denied and the family finds itself suddenly facing major decisions – to come home. Or go elsewhere. The outcome is similar to the above situation, but its all happening in slower motion – the effects can be just as devastating – a family who thought they were going to live and minister in rural Uganda for 25 years now has to pack up and leave in 2 weeks, and finds themselves back in cold MN wondering what God is up to, and how they will cope find jobs, housing, education , deal with all the sudden goodbyes and all the loss, shaken identity, and questions.

Marital crisis happens but this one you often don’t know about in the beginning stages. Fred Gingrich showed us how this can happen, but as the sending church what can you do? Start by asking the hard questions, HOW is your marriage? When our missionaries come on home assignment we get them in front of a part of our Global Outreach team – a sensitive group of people all with missions experience and long years of caring for missionaries. They interview them and hear the story of their ministry and last term. They also ask penetrating questions about the children, the team, the marriage, their walk with the Lord. Of course you might not get the truth, but more often than not people will be very honest, even in a debriefing situation with people they don’t know well, in front of their spouse. They are glad to be asked. No one else is asking…..though the Barnabus Teams should also be, and close friends hopefully….but in our churches we can have this aura of ‘these are the missionaries and they are so great and so everything must be great and holy and awesome’…..but they are ordinary people who live under varying degrees of stress and it takes a toll.

Loving our missionaries will be asking them the hard questions. Check up on the state of their marriages.

Sexual sin taking a toll on our missionary families – and can produce crisis in the marriage and family. If a spouse is using pornography or visiting prostitutes we might not know about it for years (although hopefully we asked at a pre-field assessment – but even if we did, and the person got help, he or she may have relapsed)…..when we are told, usually by the wife, the family needs to come home for help. How can we help? By coming alongside a broken family, coordinating with the agency and making counseling available, by not shaming, not gossiping, making sure they have housing, etc. Also pay attention to the children – their whole lives have been turned upside down. The ripples of this will continue for years.

Mental health crisis with one or more members of the family. These usually creep up and are not straightforward to deal with. Is a missionary depressed? At what point do you encourage or insist he comes back for help? Is a child ADHD? Does someone have an eating disorder? What’s the care like on the field? Can help be got there? What’s contributing from circumstances to the depression or anxiety? This takes treading carefully, but again, asking the question; How are you doing? It affects the whole family – if one member is struggling its going to either be a symptom of what’s going on in other family members or will affect other members. Care for everyone and not just the one with the symptoms – they all need some help. Where is the best place to get it> Don’t be heavy handed – but keep asking and loving and praying and offering help. Work with the agency.

Team crisis: A family is having conflict with other team or agency members and its reached crisis proportions – they need help , people to listen and ask good questions, people to work with the agency and advocate for them in the crisis. Help with decision making – they may end up moving or leaving, or changing agencies. All disruptive and life altering for the family.

Other crisis can involve family at home – elderly parents, children at college or boarding school, all these need the church to ask and know and care and offer help. If a family has been on the field for years they will be out of touch with resources. Always have a good resource list for missionaries – counselors, residential care centers, retreat centers, church members who are willing to offer housing, those who are counselors or doctors or will consult with you on legal matters, or educational questions.

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<https://redemptiontwincities.org/>