

# Cross-Cultural Worker Marriage Issues: I wish your parents would leave us alone

Pat and Chris felt called into cross-cultural work, but they ran into difficulty when they responded to that call and were raising funds to go. Pat's father, not a believer, was quite upset with them for going. He calculated how much money he had invested in Pat's education and was very disappointed that Pat is going to "drop into oblivion" and not realize his potential. His father did not raise the issue when Pat went on a short-term trip because he thought that would "get it out of Pat's system," and then he would get on with life here at home. Pat and Chris had gone to the field anyway and his father did not say much about it anymore, but they knew he did not approve.

Now that Chris is expecting a baby, her mother is disappointed in them. Though her mother is a believer and understands why they are serving overseas, she talks constantly about the heartache she feels when she realizes that she will not be there as her only grandchild grows up. She had always thought she would be like Joseph when his grandchildren and great-grandchildren "were placed at birth on Joseph's knees" (Genesis 50:23). Instead, she will not even get to see them until long after they are born.

When parents place implied "demands" on their "children" who are cross-cultural workers, it may bring tension in a marriage relationship. With a parent pulling one way and the spouse pulling the other, people may feel caught in the middle. These situations may arise at any time during a marriage, but let us consider some of the most common times and some solutions to the problems that may arise.

The suggestions that follow are listed under particular situations, but they may be useful at any time.

## Leaving

One common time for parents to be hesitant about their children being gone is as they are leaving. The parents fully realize that their expectations about family relationships after their children leave home are not going to be met. Not only are the children leaving home, or leaving town, or even leaving the state. They are leaving the country! Visiting will be much more complicated than driving to the next city or even the next state. It will mean traveling internationally involving much more time, money, visas, and so forth.

Here are some suggestions to soften the blow to your parents.

- Let your parents know what you are considering as soon as possible. No one likes surprises, and letting your parents know early gives them time to process your leaving.
- Invite your parents to give their input—then take it seriously. Remember that your parents are likely to have your best interests in mind, as well as their own wishes.
- Ask your parents to help you prepare to go. They can be a real help as you leave.
- Grieve with them. Both you and your parents are losing something—family time and the strong ties this time nurtures. Let them know that you will miss them too.
- Say goodbye well. Tell them that you will miss them too. Express your appreciation for their contributions to your life up to this time.

- Invite them to come visit you on the field soon so that they will see what you are doing and get a better understanding why you are doing it.

## Grandparenting

Another common time for parents to be hesitant is when the next generation comes. Many parents look forward to playing the role of grandparents and being able to "spoil" their grandchildren. They now have more time and more money to spend with the kids. Their expectations about grandparenting are probably not going to be met if their grandchildren are going to be in a different country.

Here are some suggestions to soften the blow to the prospective grandparents.

- Let them know that you can see their point of view and are sorry that your obedience to God's call means that their expectations will not be met.
- Take responsibility for maintaining a close relationship, and give it a high priority.
- Communicate! Today's technology makes communication more personal than it has ever been, and this communication costs very little.

Following are some of the ways you can communicate.

1. Telephone. If your parents do not have a computer, you can call them using VOiP services such as skype or vonage. For a dollar a day or less you can set up a virtual phone number at their exchange so they can call you at a local number with no charge to themselves.
2. Air mail cards and pictures their grandchildren have made for them.

3. Email them. If they have a computer, you can email them with news daily at no charge.
  4. Send digital photos. You can send pictures of the grandchildren as attachments to email, posted online so that the grandparents can download them, or uploaded to be developed and mailed to them via the postal service.
  5. Use instant messaging. If you set up mutually acceptable times, you can "chat" with each other using widely-available instant messaging.
  6. Computer to computer to hear each others voices. VOiP providers let you talk through your computers so that you can talk with each other in real time.
  7. Purchase a webcam. For a one-time investment of a few dollars you can see each other as you talk using webcams which now often come as part of your computer.
- Encourage them to become surrogate grandparents to children near them who do not have grandparents.
  - When on home ministry assignment make it a point to spend time with them soon after you return.

## Aging

A third common time for parents to be hesitant is when they begin to have difficulty in caring for themselves. Believing that there is a "contract" that each generation will care for the one before, they may feel abandoned when you are not there. Of course, you may want to follow many of the suggestions above for grandparents. In

addition, you may want to consider the following.

- Make more frequent trips to see them since you can do so by air relatively easily.
- Repeatedly express appreciation and affection both orally and in writing.
- Resolve any lingering issues or conflicts you may have with them.
- Visit them in person at critical times such as when they sell their home to move into an apartment, when they move into assisted living, or when they enter a nursing home.
- Bring them to your field of service where you can hire good, low-cost help to give them adequate care near you.
- Return to your passport country for a period of time to care for them personally.

## Blessing

The Biblical concept of the blessing originated in the very first book of the Old Testament. Many cross-cultural workers find it helpful to ask for and receive the blessing of their parents just as was the case with Jacob, Joseph, and Joseph's children while living in their host culture. A study of Genesis 27-28 and 48-49 reveals the importance of the blessing.

- Isaac called his sons to give his blessing, Esau first (Genesis 27:1-4) and later Jacob (Genesis 28:1).
- Both Jacob and Esau asked for Isaac's blessing, Jacob first (Genesis 27:19) and then Esau (Genesis 27:34, 38).
- The blessing was so important that Jacob deceived to get it, and Esau was ready to kill his brother because he did.

- Jacob then passed the blessing on to each of his sons (Genesis 49). The author of Genesis ends by saying, "This is what their father said to them when he blessed them, giving each the blessing appropriate to him" (Genesis 49:28).
- Jacob (Israel) also asked to bless his grandchildren (Genesis 48:9).
- Jacob blessed Joseph and his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, giving the greater blessing to the younger grandchild.

Parents may find it easier to let their children and grandchildren go if they have given their blessing. If your parents are believers, you may want to suggest that they prepare a blessing modeled after the ones Jacob gave in Genesis 48—not necessarily using animal analogies, but "giving each the appropriate blessing."

A more general book about blessings is *The Blessing* by Gary Smalley and John Trent. It gives more detail and additional suggestions not possible to list here. This blessing may be given in a number of settings.

- Family setting. You may want it to be a family event with only rather close family members being present.
- Church setting. You may want it to be a church family event at a special meeting in your church.
- Commissioning service. If a relatively small number of people are involved, this may even be part of your commissioning as you leave.

If your parents will grant their blessing, it will make it easier on all involved. Even unbelieving parents who do not understand the Biblical basis of it are often helped by giving their blessing and "permission" to go.

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