

TEN COMMON CHALLENGES

Jacky Lau

International workers (IWs) encounter many challenges in responding to the missionary call. One out of eighteen (or 5.5 percent) of IWs from new sending countries¹ left their posts due to preventable reasons² each year, according to a study by 455 mission agencies with 23,000 workers in 1992-94 (Hay et al. 2007, 12). For the past twenty years, IWs from the A4 regions³ have become a significant force in frontier missions. Missionary movements in challenging areas will run out of steam if the workers do not have sufficient support strategies to address their challenges. Therefore, improving missionary retention and resiliency is a crucial member care goal for mission agencies and sending churches.

This chapter aims to present ten common challenges faced by IWs and offer practical strategies to overcome potential difficulties. International worker refers to all vocational missionaries and tentmakers⁴ serving in mission fields with considerable or no support from their mission agencies or sending churches.

International workers serving in Creative Access Countries⁵ in the 10/40 Window⁶ frequently encounter significant difficulties. New IWs who are not connected with or not supported by agencies are more vulnerable to struggles in the field. Researchers have conducted studies on field challenges in the past two decades (Carter 1999, Hay et al. 2007, Lau 2017, Narita 2018). Based on these studies and field observations, the following ten common challenges are identified in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Ten Common Challenges (Lau 2017)

1. Cultural Adjustments
2. Spiritual Loneliness
3. Family Issues
4. Language Skill
5. Fatigue, Sickness and Stress
6. Financial Shortage
7. Lack of Support and Training
8. Children's Education
9. Role Changes and Calling
10. Conflict and Disunity

1. Countries other than from Europe or North America

2. Preventable reasons include personal, family and team problems; Unpreventable reasons include retirement, death in service and project completion.

3. A4 regions include Africa, Asia, Arabic-Turkic, and America-Latina (O'Donnell 2011).

4. Marketplace worker (e.g. a professional employed globally and living as salt and light in that global context)

5. Countries that do not allow open mission work and require creative means to gain entry.

6. The 10/40 Window is the rectangular area of North Africa, the Middle East and Asia approximately between 10 degrees north and 40 degrees north latitude. (Joshua Project)

Throughout this chapter, we will briefly discuss these ten common challenges and offer practical strategies to overcome them.

CULTURAL ADJUSTMENTS

The term *culture* in this section includes “the beliefs, customs, arts, etc., of a particular society.” Cultural adjustments are the most common challenges identified by IWs serving in a cross-cultural environment. Asian IWs serving in the Middle East point out how the host Islamic culture differs significantly from their home culture. They must adjust to the local ways of living (e.g., hot summer, fasting during Ramadan, driving, relating to local officials, etc.). They also must learn the diverse sub-cultures of the local and diaspora people they serve.

Long-term IWs often experience uncertainty, confusion, or anxiety in this culture shock and require more time to adjust to a new environment. There are five common cultural adjustment stages (Attitude 2018): 1) Honeymoon/Tourist, 2) Distress/Crisis, 3) Re-integration, 4) Autonomy, and 5) Independence. We recommend the following strategies for a better transition:

- Mission leaders and potential IWs should develop a good knowledge of the culture of the people group they are called to work with. Whenever possible, they should take an exploratory trip to the new field and experience the host culture and sub-cultures before moving into the region.
- Mission leaders should visit new IWs as soon as they relocate into the new country. Invite IWs to join a like-minded Christian community (church or mission team) where they can communicate with their mother tongue as they worship God, meet new friends, and learn about local cultures. Network new IWs with veteran IWs willing to offer practical ways to help them and their families transition well to a new living and ministry environment.
- Encourage new IWs to adopt a learner posture of new cultures. Help them to view culture in four levels: behaviour, values, beliefs, and worldview (Kwast 2009, 397-399). During the Honeymoon/Tourist stage, new IWs are encouraged to take public transportation, visit museums, dine at local restaurants, attend wedding celebrations, and visit homes of local families. They should take photos to capture interesting moments or scenery with their fresh pair of eyes. New IWs should be discouraged from travelling outside their fields during the first year (or first term) of ministry in order to focus on their initial cultural adjustment.

- Help new IWs become familiar with their host countries' conservative values, such as gender issues, social and religious practices, and implications relating to proselytization.
- The goal of cultural adjustment is to help new IWs be mindful of the effects of culture shock, have a smooth transition as they enter a new culture, and learn culturally appropriate ways to share God's love and Jesus Christ.

SPIRITUAL LONELINESS

International workers experience spiritual dryness and loneliness, especially when they live in isolated places and serve alone in unfamiliar, and sometimes hostile, locations. "Spiritual dryness can lead us to wander...without direction, hope, vision, and, most importantly, without the sustaining relationship of the Father" (Hicks 2002, 199). Single and younger IWs earnestly look forward to receiving spiritually mature visitors who are willing to share their life and ministry experiences. Tentmaking IWs who are married and have children often struggle to have quiet time and personal devotions. Most IWs desire to deepen their walk with Christ and long for God's presence and encouragement through fellowship, Bible study, and prayer meetings with other like-minded IWs. Many miss biblical teaching and revival meetings offered by their home churches.

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We recommend the following strategies to encourage IWs to revitalize their spiritual being:

1. Encourage IWs to build a close relationship with God and to seek the filling of the Holy Spirit through consistent spiritual disciplines such as Bible reading, prayer, fasting, evangelism, retreat, etc.
2. New IWs should connect with a local church or fellowship to worship God. If no Christian community is near their location, encourage IWs to worship God at home and invite other IWs to join. Married IWs should also establish private worship with their children.
3. Team leaders should meet with new IWs periodically and encourage them to conduct

weekly small group or team meetings to worship God and encourage each other. Network new IWs with other like-minded IWs with similar family backgrounds so they can build friendships, organize joint family activities, discuss ministries, and pray for each other.

4. Encourage IWs to attend in-country or regional networking meetings and conferences so they can celebrate what God has been doing in their region, building courage and rapport with like-minded IWs and Christian communities.
5. IWs should establish accountability prayer partners and set up prayer support networks inside and outside their countries. Join global prayer movements and participate in regional prayer events hosted by Christian communities in the field.

FAMILY ISSUES

Having a strong family relationship is a core value held by many cultures. IWs, especially those from the A4 regions, value and desire loving relationships with their families. Common family issues include:

1. single IWs experiencing parental pressure to get married
2. married IWs in an unhealthy spousal relationship
3. married IWs facing parental pressure to have children
4. IWs contending with challenges in raising children and teenagers
5. IWs' responsibilities in caring for their elderly or sick parents in their home countries.

Young IWs need mature IWs to serve as role models and walk alongside with them when facing difficult family issues relating to their marriage, parents, in-laws, children, celibacy, sexual orientation, etc. They can invite trusted IWs and Christian leaders to counsel and pray for them when they face family crises.

We recommend the following strategies to encourage IWs to address their potential family issues:

- Encourage single IWs to live a Christ-centered life with contentment and purity while seeking God's guidance on the possibility and timing of getting married. Develop opportunities and assist single IWs to meet with other like-minded Christian singles.
- Assist married IWs in learning how the emotional, physical, and sexual union of a husband and a wife reflects the complete unity of the Triune God. Encourage them to place a high priority on building a healthy married relationship centered on God's love. If their spousal relationship is not healthy, all other relationships will eventually be at risk.
- Encourage married IW couples to set aside quality time to date their spouse and attend special training/retreats on marriage enrichment (e.g., Family Life retreats) and how to raise their third culture kids (TCKs) in the field.

- Encourage IWs to love and honour their parents while maintaining a sense of independence from them (Genesis 2:24; Ephesians 6:2). Consider asking their sending church to visit and care for their aging parents in their home countries.

LANGUAGE SKILLS

English is the common trade language used in many countries inside the 10/40 Window. IWs understand the importance of learning fluent English to live and minister in the field. IWs should acquire a certain level of fluency in conversational English before or shortly after they come to the field. Besides learning English, IWs participating in frontier missions will also need to learn the heart language of the people group they serve. At least one IW in a mission team should be fluent in the local language (Allen et al. 2009, 75). Proficient language and communication skills are valuable assets that enable IWs to function well in a culturally diverse and globalized mission field.

All potential IWs should acquire a good command of English before being sent to the field. They should follow the principle of “learn a little and use a lot” to improve their language abilities. International workers whose mother tongue is not English should be encouraged to connect with English-speaking Christians in the field so they can improve their English, build friendships, and pray for each other. Cross-cultural IWs should focus on learning the local language full-time for at least one year through cultural centres, private tutors, or a language school located in their mission field. Mission leaders should prioritize visiting and caring for IWs and their families when they study the local language full-time.

FATIGUE, SICKNESS AND STRESS

Life inside the 10/40 Window can be very demanding. Foreign workers and tentmaking IWs typically have heavy workloads and work long hours. IWs from the A4 regions, newlywed couples, and IWs with children face more significant challenges in balancing ministries and healthy living. Many of them have a high view of work but fail to observe Sabbath. As a result, they often develop fatigue and sickness. Tentmaking IWs face stresses both in their ministry and at their workplace. They can also experience the challenge of living a life of integrity at work and, at the same time, demonstrating Christ’s love to their friends and adversaries.

Health professionals identify seven types of missionary stresses: cultural, people, agency, physical, psychological, support, and spiritual (O’Donnell & O’Donnell 1992). If these stresses are not reduced or adequately managed, IWs will experience burnout, leading to impatience, loss of joy, reduced ministry effectiveness, depression, sickness, and premature departure from the field.

We recommend the following strategies to assist IWs to improve their physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being:

- Encourage and keep IWs accountable to faithfully observe Sabbath weekly and enjoy being with the Lord through spiritual disciplines including prayer, fasting, Scripture reading, etc. Help IWs to be joyful in Christ and maintain a positive outlook in life.
- Encourage them to exercise regularly and celebrate small successes and significant occasions with other IWs. Assist IWs with obtaining proper medical insurance coverage for their families. Accompany them to doctor’s appointments or visit them when they are sick. Counsel them if they return to their home countries to treat significant illnesses.
- Assist IWs to establish clear and healthy margins in life and ministry. Margin is defined as “a sufficient reserve of time, energy (spiritual, emotional, interpersonal, and physical), and money to provide for [one’s own] needs and the needs of others.” (Williams 2000, 196). Help IWs to recognize early signs of burnout⁷, acknowledge they may have a problem, encourage them to give others permission to speak into their lives (Ephesians 4:25), and be willing to adjust their life schedule and ministry loads to maintain emotional, physical, and spiritual health.
- Maintain regular contact with IWs who have signs of fatigue and stress. Be an active listener and an avid encourager helping IWs confront any unhealthy addiction they may have. Visit them as often as possible.
- Provide opportunities for IWs to get away from their everyday living and ministry environments, to have a personal retreat (like Christ did) and/or spend time with their family and friends. Refer them to more experienced IWs or health professionals to receive essential care and support when necessary.

FINANCIAL SHORTAGE

The living standard in certain regions inside the 10/40 Window can be quite high. Urban areas are more expensive to live in compared to rural living. Vocational IWs from the A4 regions, in general, do not have strong financial support from their sending churches or mission agencies. Most IWs serving in the frontier environment are tentmakers. They must work very hard to earn their living and maintain their work visas. IW couples who have children face additional financial burdens. Both husband and wife may have to work full-time to provide adequate financial resources for their extended families and their children. Therefore, many tentmaking IWs face financial shortages if one or both breadwinners lose their jobs.

IWs serving in the 10/40 Window must raise adequate financial support through creative means. First and foremost, they are encouraged to depend on and

⁷ For a “burnout” self-test, see MindTools website: http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTCS_08.htm

seek guidance from God when they face financial difficulties. Hudson Taylor encourages, "Depend on it. God's work done in God's way will never lack God's supply."⁸ IWs should learn how to raise funds effectively, use their financial resources wisely, and live a simple lifestyle. Before going out to the field, vocational IWs should raise enough funds, usually at least eighty percent of the total yearly budget. Mission leaders should guide IWs on raising funds, advocating for them, and encouraging their sending churches to pray for and send financial resources to the field/mission agencies on a timely basis.

New IWs should actively connect with established churches/fellowships in the field, seek internship or partnership opportunities, and request financial support to supplement their ministry expenses. Encourage IWs to develop accountability in life, ministry, and finances with prayer partners and supporters. IWs should maintain a lifestyle of integrity and return all money they may have borrowed from other IWs during crisis situations. Finally, encourage tentmaking IWs and Business-As-Mission operators to partner with each other and provide employment advice and opportunities while sharing their experiences and resources.

LACK OF SUPPORT AND TRAINING

IWs from A4 regions serving in the 10/40 Window do not have the same training and/or on-field support as those of vocational IWs sent out by established Western mission agencies. While IWs expect their sending churches or mission agencies to pray and provide on-field support for them, emerging mission agencies from the A4 regions often lack experienced field staff to care for their workers as a result many IWs seek development and training opportunities to improve their biblical knowledge and ministry skills. Young IWs also desire to be mentored by spiritually mature IWs.

All IWs need to rely solely on God for the ultimate support, knowledge, and wisdom to address their challenges. As a practical approach, IWs should be encouraged to adopt a lifelong learning attitude and develop a Personal Development Plan (PDP). A PDP should include setting realistic goals and actionable items to improve their physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being, as well as their knowledge of God and ministry competence. IWs should evaluate, review, and adjust the PDP at least once a year.

Team leaders should periodically visit their IWs to provide pastoral care and offer appropriate ministry training. International workers in the field should connect with leaders of mission agencies, regional networks, and local churches to develop a good relationship with them and receive support and training through them. Mature IWs should provide internship opportunities, on-the-job ministry training, and theological education to less mature IWs.

8. <https://gracequotes.org/quote/depend-on-it-gods-work-done-in-gods-way-will-never-lack-gods-supply/>

CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

Children are a heritage and a special reward from God (Psalm 127:3). They are natural bridge-builders, allowing families and neighbours to connect regardless of their social backgrounds or religious beliefs. They are valuable mission team members in God's Kingdom and bring much joy to IW families. Nevertheless, IW couples and their children encounter additional hurdles, including financial burdens, parental issues, children's education, undue expectations from grandparents, etc.

We recommend the following strategies to address the challenges relating to children's education:

- Advise IW couples to keep their children in the field whenever possible so they will live, grow, and serve the Lord as a family unit.
- Encourage IWs to train up their children in three main areas: teaching and living out the Scripture at home, worshipping God and experiencing.

His love at church, and acquiring knowledge and social skills at school. In addition, IWs may help their children to learn their mother tongue and the culture of their home country.

- Mission leaders should help IWs to evaluate the pros and cons of different school options for their children, including financial and human costs. These options may include homeschool (least costly, but parents will be the headteachers), local school (children will be immersed in the host culture and local religions), Christian school (set up by Protestants or the Catholic church), English international school (more expensive and children are exposed to liberalism and materialism, including the prosperity gospel), or boarding school in their home countries or elsewhere, etc.
- Encourage churches or fellowships in the field to give financially to cover part of IWs' children's educational expenses.
- IWs are counselled to arrange the best educational option, being both affordable and appropriate for the developmental stage of their children. Some IWs may send their children to their home country to receive their high school and/or university education. Leaders should help IWs understand the characteristics of and unique challenges of raising TCKs. They should also pray and help IWs care for their children who are not living in the field.

ROLE CHANGES AND CALLING

The 10/40 Window is a spiritually dark and challenging place to serve. New IWs coming to the field will undergo considerable culture shock and significant role changes in a new living and ministry environment. Many may feel they are not up to fulfilling this calling on their lives and question if God really did call them to serve in hard places. IWs who had successful ministries in their home countries will have a more difficult transition period. They are

regarded as an unknown IW struggling to survive in an unfamiliar environment rather than a well-respected Christian worker in their home church network. Only those who have clear and strong calls from God can endure these difficult transitions. New IWs often go through momentous psychological changes and frank spiritual reflections as they discern their true identities in Christ and new ministry roles in the Kingdom of God.

One of the most important goals of field support is to walk alongside IWs and help them to affirm their divine calling to serve in the mission field, discern their precious identity in Christ, see God as their ultimate supporter, and confirm their unique role in the Kingdom of God. Mission leaders should assist IWs in seeking God’s guidance and explore the most strategic and suitable ministry God has prepared for them. Counsel IWs and their sending churches to partner with like-minded IWs and serve in strategic ministries for the long haul, so they will see the unreached peoples come to Christ. Help IWs to redefine success as Christ-likeness, faithfulness, and gratitude to God.

CONFLICT AND DISUNITY

Many IWs experience the pain of facing conflicts or disunity with their mission agencies or other IWs in the field. IWs often tend to have tough personalities and steel-like determination, which helps them survive in challenging environments. Therefore, new and immature IWs often experience challenges in building good interpersonal relationships with others and are more likely to cause disputes, mistrust, gossip, divisions, and cliques in the field. Conflict and disunity among IWs reflect negatively on the Gospel they preach and portray an awful testimony of the Lord they serve.

We recommend the following strategies to minimize potential conflicts and disunity in the field:

- Challenge IWs to live a Christ-centred life filled with His acceptance, forgiveness, grace, humility, and love. Encourage IWs to prioritize praying and playing with their team members and their families as the best preventative measure to avoid conflict and disunity in the mission team.
- Encourage IWs and their team members to develop a team covenant that will strengthen their commitments to love one another and spell out clearly how to handle future conflicts and disagreements in biblical ways.
- Help IWs to be careful with their tongues, especially when they are in conflict situations. The Scripture teaches, “By patience and a calm spirit a ruler may be persuaded, And a soft and gentle tongue breaks the bone [of resistance]” (Proverbs 25:15 AMP⁹). Encourage IWs to actively take “time outs” and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit regarding how, what, and when they

should respond.

- Encourage IWs to resolve their personal conflicts and assist them to be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit and to serve as agents of transformation.

Help IWs to put on the whole armour of God to stand against the Enemy’s schemes and to know, “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Ephesians 6:11-13).

CLOSING REMARKS

This chapter presents ten common challenges international workers may face in the mission field. It also recommends caring strategies to overcome potential difficulties and to increase the IWs’ resiliency as they live out the missionary call. These proposed caring strategies are based on the Seven Guiding Principles shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Seven Guiding Principles (Wan and Lau 2019)

Guiding Principles	Specific	Relational Elements	Dimension
Depending on the Triune God to fulfill the mission of God	The Trinity	Being	Vertical
Living a Christ-centered life for the Kingdom of God			
Seeking the Holy Spirit for transformation and guidance			
Affirming scriptural authority and continual learning	The Scripture	Knowing	
Modelling life and ministry	Personal (individual)	Doing	Vertical and Horizontal
Adopting a relational approach for field support ministries	Collective (institutional)		
Partnering with Kingdom communities for the glory of God			

O’Donnell rightly warns, “Without adequate member care strategies, there is little hope for the ongoing maintenance of the frontier missionary movement” (O’Donnell 1992). We believe the retention rate of IWs serving in the field can be significantly improved if they and their mission leaders follow the recommended caring strategies provided in this chapter.

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