

### A3

## **Adjusting To Change: When One's Homeland Becomes The Foreign Land**

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How do missionary women/families adjust to life in their homeland after having successfully made an adjustment to living in an adopted nation and people? What elements help to make that adjustment possible or easier? What elements make it more difficult?

My husband Chuck and I went to Chiapas, Mexico, in 1973 on a one year mission assignment with the Reformed Church in America (RCA) when Chuck finished his seminary training. We were 24 years old with no children, and three years of married life behind us. We had already made one transition in moving from Michigan to California for seminary. Going to Chiapas was like going home for Chuck because he had grown up there as a missionary kid, although now we were going to another part of the state and as adults to lead a seminary program. The RCA partnered with the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico in Chiapas. Other RCA missionary colleagues were there, but in other parts of the state and most of them working amongst Mayan people groups who had their own non-Spanish language, culture, and clothing. We were to work with the more mainstream Spanish-speaking churches, living at a coffee-ranch-turned-conference center near Tapachula, a large city in the southwesternmost corner of Mexico near the Pacific Ocean and Guatemala. The only other missionaries working among the Spanish speaking churches were Chuck's parents, who lived in the city of San Cristobal de Las Casas, a 9-hour drive up into the mountains.

Since our assignment was to be only one year due to budget constraints, we were not given time for a full-fledged language learning experience. Chuck was as fluent as a 14 year old, which was his age when he left Mexico to go to a boarding high school in the US. My Spanish was the result of 4 semesters of college Spanish, the last of which had been completed 5 years earlier. We were grateful for the opportunity of two months of language study in a concentrated program in Cuernavaca, outside of Mexico City. The classes were small and grouped by ability, so Chuck was in an advanced class and worked hard to increase his vocabulary and improve his grammar so that he could be an effective teacher in the seminary program. I was with the almost beginners, and I tried to gain some fluency in everyday conversation. The two months flew by and then we went to live at the conference center outside Tapachula.

The weeks and months passed quickly with lots of activity. I spent hours with the students and with the women in the kitchen to learn Spanish as quickly as I could. I began teaching music and 4-part harmony immediately to our students in the evenings, and they became my best language teachers. Chuck became the administrator and a professor in the seminary program and also worked with the coffee administrator of the conference center. We started building relationships with the other professors who were also pastors of local churches in the area. We began visiting different local churches, and Chuck was invited to preach. We never lacked for meaningful work to do, and it was rewarding.

A year later, after our first child was born in the US, we were given the opportunity to return to Chiapas when the RCA was able to budget funding for a longer-term assignment. We both returned willingly. The years passed by as we were actively involved with a myriad of activities. Chuck was administering the conference center, overseeing the coffee growing process, adding more sturdily built dormitories to the center, teaching in the seminary program, and providing educational/evangelistic seminars upon invitation from churches in many parts of the state. I taught music in the seminary, became involved with women's ministries both locally and across the state, assisted and taught in a Bible institute for young women evangelists, and taught music to church choirs for special events. A really fun and rewarding experience for us both was helping the Statewide women's ministries plan and run summer camps at the center for large groups of junior high and high school students. They were busy and fulfilling years. Our second and third children were born in Mexico, since I was by then fluent and at ease enough in Spanish to go to the Spanish-speaking medical facilities available there. In my mind, I thought we could and probably would spend our entire lives in Chiapas or another part of Mexico or a Spanish-speaking country in ministry.

Then a strange thing happened. While in the US for Chuck to have knee surgery in 1983, he was offered an opportunity to return to the US to teach missions at one of the RCA seminaries. During our many experiences of speaking in RCA churches to promote enthusiasm and continued support for our work, we discovered that a good number of pastors were not informed nor interested in missionary activity. Many times Chuck would be invited to be at a church when the pastor was on vacation, or we would be asked to speak for only 5 minutes in a service, after having driven or traveled many hours. The people in the pews seemed to be much more excited and supportive of missionary endeavors than did the pastors. So an opportunity to

teach in a seminary to help seminary students understand the mission of the church early in their ministry career was very inviting. We both knew that teaching was one of Chuck's special gifts, and by that time he had earned his PhD in missiology at the Free University of Amsterdam. In addition, our oldest daughter was reaching middle school age. She was tall and in Mexico was already being viewed as a "señorita", a young woman eligible for dating. We felt that it was time for us to make the move to the US. After much prayer and soul-searching, Chuck accepted the offer.

### **Moving and Change is a Grief Experience**

However, this decision was not made easily. Since we had left Chiapas abruptly for Chuck to have his knee surgery, we asked to have one more year in Chiapas to finish some special projects and turn things over to national leaders. Even though I felt that God was saying to us, "It's time for you to leave Chiapas," my heart was very heavy and inwardly resistant. There were many things that I did not want to leave behind. I cherished our opportunity as a family to have the wonderful bilingual, cross-cultural experience. The Mexican way of life included children in so many ways that was not true in the US. We had never had a babysitter in Mexico - it wasn't considered safe there for a young girl to stay alone in a home with children. Wherever we went, we all went or one of us stayed home with the children. If we went to meetings to plan events, the children went with us and played with the other children who were also there. Our children were bilingual and had learned to make the adjustment from "this world" to "the other world", as they would say. I valued that very highly.

It was a pattern of the RCA missionaries in Chiapas to home-school their children since there were no English-speaking schools available. Sometimes the missionary wife would be the teachers and sometimes a volunteer teacher from the US would spend a year or two with the children. I had a wonderful time home-schooling our daughters through third and fifth grades, and, though we could have continued that in the US, we both felt it was important for them to have more social interaction and other opportunities that were available to them in the local schools in Holland, Michigan. However, this became another loss for me because half of my day (mornings) had been spent with them in the classroom.

My music skills in piano and singing were used in many ways in Mexico. I taught music to the seminary students in the evenings. Churches had invited me to teach new music to their

choirs for Christmas programs or for special large church events. I was also involved as a board member and teacher at the Mable and Ruth Girl's Bible School, named after Mable Kempers and Ruth Van Engen (Chuck's mother) who were the pioneer missionary women in the Presbyterian churches in Chiapas. Coming back to a college town where many professional musicians and music majors were available to take leadership in church music programs meant that I no longer had these kinds of opportunities. Another loss. Even though returning to the States would mean that we could be closer to my parents and extended family, it felt to me that we were leaving behind so much that was meaningful to me when we left Chiapas.

I did not return to the US with the same enthusiasm, anticipation, and belief in God's calling with which I had gone to Mexico 12 years earlier. I felt that we were leaving behind or losing so many wonderful, valuable opportunities that had come to be part of who we were. In addition to those already mentioned, there was the loss of the respected role we had played in our denomination as missionaries for twelve years and the loss of the team working relationship that Chuck and I had developed and valued so highly on the mission field. Either by virtue of the new situation in the US or by our decision to leave the mission field, none of these would be replicated or built into our new experience. Unknowingly, over the 12 years in Mexico, these elements had come to be the definers of who I was, and suddenly they were gone.

I soon realized, even before we returned to Mexico for the last year of turning things over to the nationals, that I had gone into a period of grieving. It was extremely helpful when I made the realization that what I was feeling had a name: grief. I had lost my elderly grandparents as I was growing up, and had other grief experiences, but none that affected me the way this did. I decided to learn as much as I could about grief. I started reading books and articles about grief and how it affects the person involved. I learned that grief is experienced not only when one's loved one has died. We experience grief when we have any kind of loss. It is a little known fact that one of the most grief-producing experiences is moving, whether from job to job, town to town, or from country to country, as we were doing. When one moves to a new location, one loses everything about the former life - home, neighborhood, friends, church, physicians, dry cleaners, grocery store. All of these things will need to be replaced. When the move provides many positive new elements for one's life, the excitement and happiness about the move overshadows the losses. But they still exist. That is why for many a move is bittersweet, there

are new, exciting things to look forward to, but there are also the losses that need to be dealt with.

I also learned that we can begin to experience grief before the loss actually occurs. As soon as we learn of a family member or friend being diagnosed with a serious disease, we begin to grieve. The sadness, concern, and feelings of loss begin to take space in one's being. So I realized I had begun grieving as soon as we made the decision to leave Mexico. I finally had a name for the deep sadness that had come over me, a sadness that did not leave for years, unfortunately.

Another helpful thing to know about grief is that it comes in waves. It has an undulating effect on one's psyche so that sometimes you can feel like you're doing all right, and then suddenly a wave comes and causes you to stumble and lose your footing. There were times during that last year in Chiapas when we were busily involved in the ministry and activities there that I forgot about my grief. Suddenly some thought would return about the forthcoming move, and I would be back under water again. With time I learned that one knows that progress is being made when the waves of grief start coming farther and farther apart. They don't necessarily soften in intensity right away, but the times of normalcy between the waves might be longer as time goes by. After our return to the US, I did more reading about grief and prepared some presentations about grief to present to women's groups. In retrospect, I will have to say that even that was a disappointment to me. I felt like it was a "downer" topic compared to the previous speaking I had done about our work in Chiapas, so it did not give me as much personal satisfaction as sharing as a missionary had done.

So, how does one find a meaningful life in a new place, even if it is one's native land? How is it that one's native land becomes the foreign land? "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Ps. 137:4, NKJV).

### **Adjusting to a New Land is a Matter of the Will**

After our move back to the US, emotionally and personally I was struggling. I performed the duties needed to set up a new house, help our daughters adjust to a new school situation, trying to understand people's viewpoints in an environment from which I had been absent for the previous twelve years. I didn't feel like I fit into the local scene. Internally I continued to harbor resentment that we weren't still in Mexico. I didn't want to do anything special to put down

roots in the community. Wherever Chuck and I were invited or in activities related to the seminary faculty, children were not welcome. It was easy for me to think negatively and judgmentally of the people involved in those activities. Chuck seemed to be doing well because he had a new job into which to immerse himself. His special teaching gift was being utilized and appreciated. He had lots of work as a new teacher preparing new classes, which meant that he was spending more than 8 hours a day at work. There may have been things I could have done to make a quicker adjustment, but frankly, I didn't want to. I didn't like a lot of the materialistic attitudes I saw around me, and it was easy to be judgmental. So the weeks and months went by.

At some point during our second year in the States, a sermon in the church we were attending really hit home with me. The sermon was based on the story of Jesus coming to an invalid person by the pool of Bethesda (John 5) and asking, "Do you want to get well?" As I listened to the Scripture reading and then to the sermon, God's Spirit began softening my heart. I realized that Jesus was asking me this question too. Did I want to be healed from my grief, from my losses, from my bitterness, from my dissatisfaction with our new life, from my lack of willingness to become a part of this new place, from my negativity about the excesses of US life and people's insensitivity to persons of other cultures? I knew I needed to think carefully about my answer. Did I really want to get well? Was I willing to have the Holy Spirit give me a new mission in this land? Was I willing to give up my own pity party? Did I want to be this bitter isolated person for years to come?

I realized that up to that point, it was my own implacability to God's leading in a new direction that was keeping me from integrating back into the US culture. It didn't have anything to do with the fact that life in the US was so different from life in Mexico. It didn't have anything to do with my not really knowing where I fit in. It didn't have anything to do with how or what other people did or thought. Twelve years before I had been willing to adjust to life in Mexico, with all of its difficulties and strangeness. My lack of adjustment to the US didn't have anything to do with what it was like in the US, it had to do with my own will. I decided I did want to get well. I decided I needed to start taking steps to adjust to this new life, place and people.

In the weeks and months that passed after hearing this sermon, my will gradually gave way. I began to realize that it was not healthy for me or for my family if I continued being bitter and morose. Our children needed a mother who could help them make the transition to new

things instead of one who was living in the past. Chuck needed a partner who could support him in this new path. God needed a woman who was willing to conform to His will. I knew that I had to make decisions that were for the future, not trying to relive the past. This change in my heart and my spirit with a forward-looking view was the beginning of healing the grief that had kept me stymied in the past.

### **Retooling for a New Location Takes Time**

When we came back to the US, we knew it would be a financial challenge. We had housing and a vehicle provided for us on the mission field. In the States, we had to purchase our own vehicle and home. We had been saving money for the move, and we knew how to be frugal. I bought vegetables and fruits by the bushel the first summer and froze corn, cauliflower, applesauce, blueberries, green beans, etc. to use throughout the winter. We decided that going out to MacDonald's was too expensive for our 5-person family. Once in awhile we treated ourselves to a take-out pizza. The girls took brown bag lunches to school. Since Andrew our youngest was 4 when we returned, we decided that I would stay at home with him that last year before he went to kindergarten; and we thought we could do that financially. But even in our frugality, 3 months into the school year, we saw that we were having to use several hundred dollars of our savings each month to make it. We couldn't do that on a long-term basis, so we made the decision that I needed to find a job.

I had excellent clerical skills, and was able to get a long-term part-time placement through a temp agency, working mornings. That allowed me to be at home in the afternoons with our son, Andrew. A neighbor kept him one morning a week when she went to a Bible study that also had a children's program. Chuck was home with him one morning a week when he didn't have to be at the seminary. Andrew attended preschool two mornings a week, and we found a young mother with two children at home who was willing to keep Andrew at a very reasonable price for the other morning. I couldn't believe that our goal of my spending this year at home with our son had already been modified before Christmas.

I began to consider and pray about what I should do long-term. I had been trained as a teacher at the secondary level, and had taught in a middle school for several years before going to Mexico. I felt that it was most appropriate for me to do what was needed to revalidate my teaching credential. Over time I took a Spanish literature class at Hope College to acquire a

Spanish minor and some other courses that were being required for the teachers' credential. In the meantime, my first temp assignment ended and I was sent to others, one of which ended in a regular part-time job at Hope College.

Once I had my credential renewed, I began submitting applications for teaching positions in the area. I could teach at either middle- or high-school level, teaching English, Spanish, Music, or English as a Second Language. I quickly learned that a college town is a tough place to find a teaching position. Many professor spouses are teachers. College students who fill student teaching assignments in the area schools become known quantities and have a special opportunity to be chosen to fill open positions. None of my applications resulted in even one interview. It was discouraging. Fortunately, my part-time position at the college provided positive personal relationship opportunities and a sense of fulfillment, in addition to enough financial assistance for our family's needs.

During Chuck's third year of seminary teaching, he was provided an opportunity to move to California to teach in the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary. We also had the possibility of returning to the mission field, this time to Venezuela. Our oldest daughter, Amy, was finishing middle school, and she would probably stay in the US for high school if we went to Venezuela. Our second daughter, Anita, had two more years of middle school, and then she would probably come back to the US for high school as well. Latin America called to our hearts, but the schooling realities were not positive. After praying about it, we decided to share with our daughters about the possibilities before us of going to California or going to Venezuela to see how they would respond to these options. We expected them not to want to move at all, and, of course, that was their first choice. But, if we were going to move, their next choice would be to go where the family could stay together long term. Our hearts resonated with that as well, so after three years in Michigan, we moved to California. Now that my heart was right, the move to California did not cause any of the overwhelming grief and bitterness of our earlier move.

Being aware of the realities of the cost of living in California, we knew that I would need to get a full-time job. I was able to get a position teaching English as a Second Language (ESL, now better known as TESOL) in a middle school. It was an unusual position, I was hired by the Adult Education program to teach full-time in the middle school. The salary came out to be about half of a normal teacher's salary. But at that time, I felt it was a great opportunity. I



would need to work on getting my California teacher's credential, and take multiple exams in different areas for certification. I was able to do this, and, though challenging, the teaching situation was enjoyable. I appreciated the multi-ethnic situation among the students where English became the common denominator in our classes. I developed a program of having the beginning students for two hours a day, and then having other classes for students with intermediate and advanced skills. I could see progress being made, and received support from the local school and district officials. After teaching in that setting for two years, I decided that I could look into positions at other districts that paid a regular salary to ESL teachers. I was quickly hired by another school nearby for our third year in California. Our children were adjusting and doing well in their respective schools (elementary, middle school and high school). There was a sense that we were making progress.

The assignment in this new school turned out to be impossible. I had 5 classes a day with 40 middle school students in each class. I was part of a 4-teacher team that was teaching the ESL students. One taught math, one taught social studies, one taught reading and I was to teach English. I had always taught English and reading together in an integrated way, and suddenly they were to be separated, which didn't make sense whatsoever to me. The school had no chosen curriculum for the classes I was teaching, so I had to invent it as I went along. Every week new students with no English speaking skills were enrolled in the school, which meant moving the most advanced students up and out of each level in order to make space for the newest students. This resulted in new class lists every week. There was no instructional aide available to help provide individualized assistance.

As days and weeks went by, I was spending 12 hours a day in work related activities: preparing, grading papers, driving to work, and actually being in the classroom. I had little time for my family, even our own children's school-related meetings. I was not happy with the policing role I had to take on with such large classrooms. I worked hard to plan lots of varied activities to keep the students engaged in language learning. But I soon began to have dreams and even nightmares about my work. As time went by I was getting more and more stressed and began to worry about getting sick. Chuck and I decided that the additional pay was not worth the loss in quality of life, both for me and the family. So, I did what I thought I would never do - I resigned at Thanksgiving time, breaking my contract with the district, and thereby shutting the door on any future teaching contract.

After one offer to work as the Secretary to the President of a nonprofit organization backfired, I decided to enjoy the month of December and make it a great Christmas with my family. It was a month of healing for me as well. Then in January I started looking for a job with my clerical/office management skills. By February I was working for a small company as their one-person girl Friday/secretary/accountant. I was able to work closely with their accountant as he taught me the computer system to keep books for the company, invoice, do payroll and pay taxes. It was a low-key non-threatening position, which was the best thing I could have had at that time. After a year, the business was purchased by a larger company located in Oregon. The man I worked for moved to Oregon with his family to be incorporated into the larger company, and I was again without work.

Within a month, I was invited to work with Peter and Doris Wagner in their new ministry of Global Harvest Ministries (GHM), directing the AD2000 and Beyond global prayer ministry. My Spanish skills were a plus, and I took on the role of Executive Secretary, also performing the accounting role. As the ministry grew, I gained more skills in the accounting area, working with outside auditors and learning about the special requirements for nonprofit organizations. The four and a half years I worked with GHM were fulfilling for me as I felt that my skills were being utilized for a ministry-related purposes, and God was giving me opportunities to learn more things that prepared me for things to come. When the Wagners and GHM decided to move to Colorado Springs, I again found myself unemployed. I was looking for my fifth job in a span of eight years!

One of my goals in looking for the next job was to again find a position in an institution or ministry whose mission I could personally endorse. I wanted to feel good about the organization that I worked for, and didn't want to settle for a business whose only purpose was to make money. A friend recommended City of Hope, a medical center/cancer research institute near my home, that had a wonderful reputation for providing wonderful care and cutting edge treatments. I was offered a position as a Secretary for a Department Director. As the years went by God blessed me with promotions to the positions of Business Analyst, Business Manager, and now Business Director for the same department. The department has grown through the 15 plus years that I have worked there from a department of 45 to a department of 120 individuals. All of the things that I learned at the small business and then in the prayer ministry were utilized and expanded upon. I was again working with a nonprofit organization, so much of what I had

learned was applicable. Opportunities to assist in writing grants and managing them became part of my responsibility. Budget preparation and management of ~\$10 million budgets became commonplace.

Through all of this, my guiding principle has been faithfulness. Jesus said to the faithful servant, “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!” (Matthew 25:21, NIV) I have always felt this was a challenge to me to be faithful in all things - even the smallest things - and in due time more will be given. I assure you that during some of those years of teaching or working at a less than optimal position, there were many times when I didn’t know if I was being led into anything helpful or meaningful. But at each step I decided to receive what God had given, learn as much from the experience as possible, and be faithful to what was being asked of me and to God.

The most exciting part of all of this is that with the new skills and the development of God-given abilities, an opportunity to again work as a team with Chuck has taken form. In the past 10 years we have been working together as tent-makers on a leadership development program in Latin America at the PhD level. The experience and network that Chuck had built up in Latin America and academia through the years and the accounting/management skills / knowledge that I learned about nonprofit organizations in my multiple work positions have joined together for us to set up a nonprofit organization to train church and mission leaders and professors in Latin America. When I was teaching ESL 20+ years ago, I would never have imagined that I would feel comfortable being the Chief Financial Officer of an international ministry. But that is where God has taken us. It wasn’t a fast track process. It took walking into each opportunity that God opened up and being faithful. Now we are seeing men and women trained to be leaders and professors in seminaries and Bible schools in their own countries in Latin America.

Through the years of transition, three lessons helped me be able to sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land, even when that foreign land had been my native land:

1. Moving and Change is a Grief Experience - we need to be aware of this and not expect that changes that God brings to us will always be a time of great joy and celebration.

2. Adjusting to a New Land is a Matter of the Will - we need to humble ourselves to allow God's Spirit to heal all of us - our biases, our bitterness, our feelings - and to give us the will to adjust to the new land.

3. Retooling for a New Location Takes Time - God may have plans for us that cannot be realized in a short time. We need to trust in His plan to reach the goal that He has in mind.



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