

Is the Mission Field Right for Adult Missionary Kids?

by Larry Sharp

“My parents did it, so shouldn’t I?”

In this day and age, what our parents did for a living doesn’t necessarily mean it’s what we ought to do. It would be like saying that children of airline captains should be pilots as well. Or that professors must beget professors. No one in North America really assumes their professions are determined by their parents’ professions.

Yet adult missionary kids (AMKs) are unique. So when an AMK is thinking of going to the mission field, what his parents did often plays an important role.

The reason AMKs are unique has to do with their broader social designation: Third Culture Kids (TCKs). TCKs grow up in a culture not their parents’, and in the process develop a broader sense of relationship to all cultures. At the same time, they don’t necessarily feel full ownership of any culture. Rather, each culture has elements that become incorporated into the TCK’s life experience. The sense of belonging a TCK feels is in relationship to others of similar experience. (Adapted from *The Third Culture Kid Experience: Growing Up Among Worlds*. Pollock and Van Reken, 1999, Yarmouth, ME.)

This Third Culture experience is atypical of average North Americans. Most of us are socialized into the mores, beliefs, and structures of our own society. But AMKs have assimilated into two or more cultures. What is it about this experience that suggests an AMK become a missionary?

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The AMK Cross-Cultural Experience

In “God’s Foreign Policy,” Miriam Adeney suggests nine “skill packages” important to missionary service. The first three relate to being a growing Christian. You must have a growing relationship with God, basic knowledge of Scripture, and growth in Christian character and discipline. The second three packages relate to skills necessary in any occupation. You must have relational skills, professional skills for the work place, and life maintenance skills. The last set of skills contains the cross-cultural component: cultural know-

ledge, language acquisition skills, and field experience in cross-cultural living. Though there are other models for missionary selection criteria, Adeney's highlights the need to be adept cross-culturally in order to fulfill the qualifications for becoming a missionary. It is the ability to cope with the ambiguity of cultures and language that play a large part in missionary work. Most AMKs have met these last three skill requirements. But does that them automatically qualify them to become good missionaries?

Many studies have demonstrated the advantages and disadvantages of the MK experience. Wise parents, churches and colleges use this understanding to help raise children to be responsible world citizens and endeavor to maximize the advantages of the TCK experience—but what about the mission agency? Do agencies work hard to maximize the potential of MKs to be world Christians and even missionaries themselves? Should they? If they did, how would they go about it?

The Ins and Outs of being an AMK

In my 34 years of serving with a mid-sized IFMA agency, I've watched MKs grow up and make choices about their lives, careers, and families. And I've worked with them (and other missionaries) as they have entered and left missionary service.

Currently, approximately ten percent of our missionaries (serving in over 20 countries) are AMKs. They've come to us with numerous positives that make them well-suited for the job. But their MK background doesn't automatically qualify them for service. There are both pros and cons that must be understood when considering an AMK for the field.

The Upside of being an AMK

Adult missionary kids should have to join the mission agency just like any other candidate for service in that they must qualify in all areas considered important by the agency. Anything

less would be nepotism, favoritism and likely counterproductive. So what are these wonderful assets they bring to the missionary enterprise?

They're Culturally Adept

Missionary kids experience life in a way that expands their world view and enhances cross-cultural skills. They move around the world easily and cope with the ambiguities of cultural idiosyncrasies well. For example, they know how to act when it is World Cup time in Brazil or World Series time in America. Their cross-cultural experience prepares them to enter and



leave cultures readily and comfortably. People of other lands are among their best friends. They tend to be tolerant and refuse to yield to insular thinking or behavior.

They're Relationally Adept

AMKs are well-developed in relational skills because, since they've grown up having adult friends, they've assimilated communication skills early (especially earlier than their peers in North America). They move to deep levels of conversation quickly and easily. Real-life issues dominate their thinking. It is common for a teenage MK while on Home Ministry (furlough) in America to engage in adult conversations on topics such as world affairs, social issues or values. Furthermore, many MKs marry nationals or internationals from a country other than their parents' home country.

They're Not Easily Intimidated

Most MKs are venturesome, fearless, and tend to "seize the day." They don't

necessarily gravitate to what is known and secure, but they're willing to try new things and aren't intimidated. For example, my second son was on summer break from college and could have come home to Philadelphia to a well-paying summer job. But instead, he decided to go live and work that summer in St. Louis where he had an MK friend. He simply wanted to try something different. Not only that, but he learned to make do with his resources. He lived on public transportation and his bike. Most North Americans don't give up the comforts of a car so easily. Not to mention venturing out into the unknown so willingly!

Because they're not easily intimidated, MKs also tend to handle themselves well in crisis situations.

They Can Talk the Talk

Linguistic skills often enable AMKs to communicate in three or even more languages. These skills also prepare them for communication challenges; they lack fear and willingly try new languages. The unknown world is less likely to feel daunting to an AMK.

They Know the Walk

AMKs have a keen understanding of the call of missions—what it's all about. They've watched their mom hold a dying child in her arms, have taught children to read, and traveled far and wide with their dad to listen to him teach and preach. They've watched lives be completely transformed by the power of the Gospel. They've seen their parents and colleagues love people into the Kingdom of God. They've experienced God to be trustworthy and giving.

The Downside of being an AMK

While we might want to let the positives outweigh the negatives of being an AMK, wisdom dictates we assess and address the downside, too. The AMK's experience is not without its challenges. Unless they have addressed these with God's strength, there are several negative characteristics often evident into adulthood.

A Restless Spirit

Rootlessness often plagues MKs all their lives. They hate hearing the questions “Where are you from?” and “Where is home for you?” Being rootless can lead to a restless spirit, which can result in migratory instincts. MKs may switch jobs, schools, not want to live close to family, or be generally transient in their thinking. They might find it difficult to make significant friendships, invest deeply in anything, or even decorate their dwelling space and feel “at home.”

A Crisis of Identity

Many MKs may never have answered the question “Who am I?” Their identity may have been tied to their parents’ or to the missionary experience. This identity crisis can manifest itself in loneliness or feeling like an outsider. It may produce anger and resentment, since the MK must keep wondering where he or she belongs.

Shallow Social Adaptation

Adult MKs may end up becoming “social chameleons,” where they adapt to social situations but never fully engage in or take ownership of them. They may be permissive in their tolerance of others’ immoral behaviors. MKs with this negative characteristic often put off making decisions and suffer from a “delusion of choice,” whereby they think that even if they decide to do something good, something adverse will happen. This fear leads them to superficially adapt to situations as they come and go.

Intolerance of the Intolerant

AMKs may have difficulty connecting with others who think in black and white terms. Such people may appear intolerant of different people groups or cultures or ways of thinking, and this can frustrate the AMK, who may lack patience and demonstrate an arrogant attitude towards those who seem ignorant of the rest of the world.

Emotional Disconnection

An emotional flattening can occur in MKs who experience a lot of loss during their socialization years. This can turn into a fear of loss, which might lead to difficulties with intimacy.

What are the foundational issues concerning an AMK’s potential for returning to the field as a missionary?

At the same time, the same emotional strain might occur because of the value dissonance between the poverty they have seen around them and the affluence they know from growing up with North American parents. The unresolved tension might create a confusion of loyalties. Sometimes MKs in transition gravitate to an extreme assimilation of the new culture. Others reject the new and retreat to the former cultural comfort zones.

Things to Consider for the AMK Entering Missions

One mission executive I know once indicated his expectation that AMKs from his agency would return to the mission field. It is true, at least 20 per cent of them do return (“How MK Ministry can Enhance Your Mission Agency,” Interaction International, 2003). In light of the upsides and downsides of growing up as an MK, what are some foundational issues concerning an AMK’s potential for returning to the field as a missionary?

Personal Spiritual Vitality

Some might say “nature” and “nurture” determine physical characteristics, familial and group socialization. But in the spiritual domain, DNA and parental influence cannot be one’s excuse for faith or lack thereof. Each AMK *must* have his or her own relationship with God. Faith is not learned or acquired through the same “nature/nurture” process that determines other characteristics. An individual must own his faith and claim it as such.

A mission agency might too easily assess an AMK as having great qualifications in linguistics, cross-cultural experience, and professional qualifications. But fundamentally, the agency must look at the AMK’s faith as the main qualification for going to the field. Agencies must also maintain the same rigor for Bible training and

spiritual disciplines for adult MKs as they do for any other missionary.

Personal Calling

Christian thought suggests that deciding one’s vocation is closely linked to spiritual giftedness, God-given abilities and personal choice. God delights in His people living in obedience to His Word, and in making vocational choices which maximize their potential for the Kingdom of God. This certainly does not imply that those whose parents were missionaries must themselves become missionaries.

My wife and I have never pressured our children to become missionaries. Our oldest did choose a missionary career, but we are just as proud of our other three. One chose a career with a well-known aid agency and serves the poor and disenfranchised in a far off Muslim country. One is a businessman with a strong involvement in the church and community. One is making a difference as a Christian in the difficult financial services industry. All of our children have a healthy understanding that what they do is for the glory of God. They all have the goal of living out their faith in the twenty-first century with a Kingdom purpose. I am equally proud of each of them and I am convinced that God is also.

God gives His full blessing to all vocational choices, which allow for AMKs to experience the Lordship of Christ in all that they do. It would be criminal to create a load of guilt for the AMK who chooses to serve “by the will of God,” yet not through traditional missions.

AMKs must also think through whether their calling is really more of a motivation to return overseas to the home of their upbringing. Do they really want to serve, or just escape the North American scene where they’ve never felt they fit? Do they want to feel like they’re “home again” or do

they have a unique personal and definite calling to serve? AMKs seeking simply to escape do no justice to the young family they bring with them, those with whom they will interact, or the greater purposes of the missionary endeavor abroad.

AMKs must be careful to avoid the opposite extreme with the attitude that they have “paid their dues” with overseas service and can now enjoy the good life in North America. AMKs can serve God and mankind in myriads of ways through the work place in North America, building on their unique experience and profile. For example, many AMKs enter the helping professions, most likely because they have had that modeled their entire lives. The international work place is another wide open opportunity for MKs, many of whom find their niche in the foreign service, overseas teaching and international business. Deciding to settle in North America can be a good thing when they keep in mind their heritage and potential.

The Spouse’s Calling and Missionary Vision

A generation or more ago, you might have heard a wife say, “missions is my husband’s calling and my calling is to be by his side wherever God leads us.” This no doubt sounded spiritually motivated, and likely was—in most cases. But today, this would be a red flag to the missions agency. The “trailing spouse” syndrome is a common malady for all overseas occupations and missionaries are not exempt. It is important for the AMK considering missionary service to go as a team with his or her spouse and children.

The history of missions is replete with stories of God at work through missionary heroes. However, less often told is the price the wife and children paid because they were considered a “costly appendage” to the calling of the husband. Thankfully, most agencies today take concrete steps to avoid such disasters. Any spouse of an AMK called to consider missionary service must also be called. And

the spouse must be given adequate opportunity for preparation. I have personally observed far too many adult missionary kids reenter missions assuming that their non-TCK spouses will absorb the TCK experience through some sort of “marital osmosis.” Perhaps the AMK doesn’t realize the fundamental issue at stake, but the mission board must be more objective in realizing that the non-TCK spouse has a different set of needs. He or she will still need to take the long process of full membership through standard training, assimilation of values, personal calling, and learned love for the adopted country.



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The Danger of Missional Incest

It is easy to assume that, because an MK grew up in a foreign land, was loved by all the “aunts and uncles,” spoke the language (better than the parents), and wants to return as a missionary, the decision is a “no-brainer.”

Missions agency beware! You must consider a host of issues first.

There is a reason some mission agencies have policies to prohibit AMKs from returning to work in the same country as the parents, or being on the same team with the parents: there is great potential for family dissension. The children may struggle for their own identity in the ministry; the parents may be strong and dominant and still view themselves as the ones in control of the ministry. The problem is exacerbated in the case of a son- or daughter-in-law who may be struggling

not only for his or her place in the family, but on the team.

Also, missionary peers may be intimidated by a “family operation.” Even when family relationships are good, they can marginalize others, create division, or inhibit growth on the team. Nepotism is very damaging to team relationships.

When parents and adult children are on the same team, there may also be a problem with newcomers to the team. AMKs tend to harken back to “the good old days” when they were young and life was barrels of fun with aunts and uncles and ways of ministry typical a generation or two ago. They are TCKs and never had to struggle to learn the culture or the language as an adult. Thus they tend to be unsympathetic to the newcomers’ struggles and needs. And when AMKs team up with their parents, it can be a formidable hurdle to new missionaries if the family team is “old school” and not open to innovation or understanding of today’s new generation of missionaries.

How not to Reap what was Sown

How the AMK has processed the negative impact of living overseas must be thoroughly evaluated by both mission agencies and the AMKs. Missionary kids can feel guilty about many things—e.g., their North American heritage, family relationships, or not fitting in—and these experiences sown in childhood can be reaped in damaging ways in their own missionary experience. Some AMKs may experience low self esteem well into adulthood. Negative emotional and behavioral patterns can be repressed and ignored. Heed the warning: if they’re not brought to the Cross, worked out through God’s strength and the help of a community of faith, and ultimately accepted and overcome, AMKs will not achieve their full functional potential. If traumas—such as wars, evacuations, abuse, lengthy separations, and poverty—are not worked out through a healing process, AMKs might maintain the illusion

that wholeness will only be achieved by returning overseas.

Because many AMKs suppress their emotions, they are unable to objectively consider the effects of their decision to enter missionary service. It is this very suppression that often affects their ability even to make effective decisions.

Mission agencies must have in place a mechanism to evaluate those with emotional and behavioral patterns that will be counterproductive, even destructive, to the missionary endeavor. Look for well-balanced MKs whose loyalties are not confused, whose identity crisis issues are being resolved, and who can view their personal grief in light of the Cross. Make sure the negative childhood experiences are viewed from God's perspective, that values are understood and balanced between the cultures an AMK knows.

The AMK Impact on Today's Missions Agency

Here are some real-life examples of AMKs impacting the mission frontier from my own experience.

Dan grew up in Brazil, and because of his language abilities, has devoted his entire career to radio broadcasting on stations TWR and HCJB. Dan's voice is well-known on Brazil's airwaves. Thousands have come to Christ through his clear articulation of the Gospel in the people's language, without foreign accent. Another AMK, Bob, who married a foreign national, has language abilities that enable him to translate materials for Bible studies abroad.

Ken's caring heart was deeply impacted by the abuses of power, the ravages of war and strife, and the debilitating diseases which wreak havoc on many nations. That's why he went to medical school and returned to Africa as a missionary surgeon. Others like Krista in Eastern Europe, or like Julie in Asia, serve as missionary nurses and physi-

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cal therapists sharing the Gospel in war-torn areas. Mark is a tentmaker who uses his role as a physician to teach his skills and share the Gospel through friendships where he lives in a Muslim country.

Mark is a strong advocate for the national church and culture, giving leadership to and facilitating understanding within missionary teams. In an era where divisions are made between "we/them," he strongly emphasizes, "No. It is 'us.'" Dave in the mission home office also uses his role as director to facilitate understanding of the importance of culture in missionary life. And Laura's language skills, Ivy League education in international politics, and work with the state department have also served her well as an advocate. She has made a significant impact on the former Soviet republics for issues related to religious persecution.

Elisabeth speaks three languages fluently, which propelled her into a PhD in theology and a cross cultural teaching career. John uses his intelligence as a theology professor in a Latin American seminary. He's making a major impact through his teaching and writing, which includes a Grisham-like novel of what life is like growing up in the Amazon. David, on the other hand, uses his physical agility to survive in the jungles of Africa while he searches for unreached people groups, preparing the way for the Gospel.

Paul's strong relational skills help him to easily engage in conversation anytime, anywhere. You can stop him on the street and he'll give you the feeling that you're the most important person in the world to him. He can so easily engage in conversation that he once had to be reminded that his wife and children were waiting for him to return home with the BBQ chicken!

Paula married an Asian national and today serves in a closed country, operating an orphanage for street children. Who else better equipped than South American-experienced MK Paula?

True servant leadership is a coveted qualification for missionary teams. Whereas 10 percent of our missionaries are MKs, about 18 percent of the team leaders are MKs. Since this was not by design, perhaps it does surface a characteristic in AMKs who, when Holy Spirit led, have the depth of experience and capacity for leadership in the mission milieu.

Keep in mind, not every mission agency is the same. Some specialize in ways the home agency might not. Sometimes it is good to encourage your agency's AMKs to serve elsewhere. We've seen a few of our own take these steps, and we rejoice in this. Tim became a pilot serving with MAF in Africa. Daniel joined New Tribes because of their vision for a specific people group in Asia. Joe joined Wycliffe Bible Translators for specialized ministries with that organization.

Where to from Here?

So, should more adult MKs be missionaries?

Yes. But only if the costs—personally, to their families, to the teams, to the field they're hoping to reach—are fully known and addressed. Intentional preparation and diligent understanding are a must in light of the perils before the AMK. This unique, special group is light years ahead in the three cultural components of Adeney's nine skill packages. But like all missionaries, their work and livelihood can only survive and be successful by the grace of God, the power of the Holy Spirit to control their lives, and the "brotherhood of the saints"—the church

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and agency communities meant to encourage and mentor.

To maximize the AMK's potential, there are a few things agencies and churches can do. Pray for wisdom when considering the AMK for the field. Allow them to find their unique niche in the Kingdom. Be there for them in their time of need.

Appoint an MK coordinator. This is something our agency recently did, and we found it was great to have another AMK in that role. Tammy has successfully opened up the lines of communication like never before with hundreds of our adult MKs. It has provided many opportunities to send them the message that we care.

Also analyze your agency's history and see what might have been destructive to your own adult MKs. Is there anything that was done to hurt them, either through neglect or intentionally? One agency recently apologized after such an analysis, and

it had an enormous positive impact on their AMK community.

Agency administrative personnel should have an intentional MK strategy, one that considers MKs as important as their parents. Bring the MKs into decision-making opportunities when appropriate, and treat them as important contributors to Kingdom business. Our agency recently invited several AMKs (not yet missionaries themselves) to help us design a new cross-cultural operational initiative. This sensitivity, when sincere and positive, can reap incredible Kingdom benefits, regardless of whether these same AMKs become missionaries themselves.

Above all, MKs young and old need to be part of the prayer efforts of the mission. There are costs, real hurdles and challenges. But there are incredible opportunities and positives as well. There is plenty to pray about. This prayer and interaction will no doubt have profound impact on the

number of MKs returning as missionaries, and will help secure all of them for significant Kingdom business, at home or abroad. **IJFM**

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