

A Witnessed Life: Being Seen and Cared for as a Single Overseas Worker

By **ELIZABETH GEORGE**

Elizabeth George has served as a teacher in a creative-access country. She greatly values the relationship she has with her sending church, and views it as one of the reasons she has been sustained on the field.

When I returned to the U.S. for my first furlough after more than two years on the field, one of the biggest treasures I experienced within my sending church was having a witness to my life. A retired couple from my church came to visit me abroad, and they spent almost two weeks with me. This couple had been mentors to me as I prepared to move overseas, and we were very close. They traveled the bumpy, sandy, not-really-a-road journey from the airport to my city. They stayed in my home and met my housemate and my language helper. They ate local food and bought things in the market, walking through the winding and narrow alleys. They toured the place where I worked, and my friends joined me during teaching sessions. These friends knew the sound of the muezzin, the smell of the market and the sight of the armed guards following us around. This couple experienced the community found in my team and the darkness felt in the neighborhood. They witnessed my life, and it was a gift when I returned to the U.S. to have someone who could verify what I had seen and known and who could understand the stories I tried to tell.

I think their visit was important for so many reasons, and it was especially valuable to me as a single overseas worker. First, when I came back to the U.S. to share my experiences, they are mine alone—there



is no spouse nor children to complement my stories or to fill in gaps in my memory. Having this couple as visitors for even a few weeks allowed them to see things I could not and to even tell stories about my life that validated my experience. It became a shared experience. Their visit also strengthened my connection to the church, as I felt valued and seen, worthy of the trouble and logistics of sending visitors. This is missionary care done well.

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But it could have gone differently—making my singleness feel like a burden to the church or making me feel less valued as a single worker. There are special considerations in the care of single workers by the church. As a single woman who has spent nearly 10 years overseas, here are some observations and suggestions for churches in caring for their singles serving abroad.

1. **Consider how to visit.** Planning a visit to a single female overseas worker requires some special considerations. The “Missions Pastor” cannot just be deployed for a site visit—where would he stay? How would I explain this man’s appearance at my workplace or neighborhood? So would the missions pastor just bring his wife? And what if I did not know her well and we were expected to bond simply because of her husband’s position in the church? Realize that singles may relish the opportunity to travel with visitors from church. Especially as a single woman, solo travel may be problematic in certain parts of the world. Think about meeting your single missionary at a vacation site. Enjoying a time of rest together could be relaxing and more meaningful. Do not underestimate the pressures of hosting visitors, so ask your missionary what would be more helpful.
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2. **Watch your words.** I am a woman in my forties with a doctorate. I am not a “girl” just because I am unmarried. Don’t say, “Our church has a couple of girls serving as ESL teachers in Asia.” Ask about terminology when grouping missionaries together. Some use “family” or “unit.” Will your church say, “We have sent out seven families and two single women” or “nine families” or “nine units”? Our words matter.
- Decide how your church will hear from its sent ones—maybe in Sunday school classes or small groups or a special time at the beginning of the worship time—and be consistent.
3. **Be intentional at holidays.** Holidays and birthdays can exacerbate loneliness on the field. Families have their traditions, and singles can sometimes feel left out. One of my single friends finds it very meaningful to have gifts to unwrap *on the day*. That might mean sending a package *months* in advance to ensure it arrives in time for Christmas or a birthday. Construction paper drawings from the church’s children ministry can be delightful, as can Amazon gift cards or video well-wishes.
 4. **Assume nothing about desire for marriage.** Not everyone in the church needs to be included in this conversation, but someone should have an understanding of the single missionary’s heart when it comes to dating and marriage. Some may feel called, like Paul, to a life of singlehood, while others may be intentionally seeking out a mate. Many would consider themselves in various stages along this spectrum (and often moving back and forth!). Be sensitive and supportive; ask questions. Realize marriage is neither the goal nor is it a hindrance for a single missionary.
 5. **Invite sharing in a consistent manner.** Extend the same invitation to all missionaries speaking with the church body. If your church only allows men to preach, then think twice about asking a missionary to fill the preaching slot. Imagine how it feels for a single woman to be sent out by a church to proclaim the gospel in a foreign land, but not allowed the same forum to share with her own fellowship. Decide how your church will hear from its sent ones—maybe in Sunday school classes or small groups or a special time at the beginning of the worship time—and be consistent.
 6. **Provide advocacy and wisdom.** Every missionary should have an advocate within the church—the one acting as a liaison and primary point of contact between the sent one and the church. I also think every family or single sent out should develop an “inner circle” of partners with whom the missionary can be completely transparent, can rely on for advice and can count on for prayer and wisdom. My inner circle has permission to ask hard questions, give

unsolicited advice and intervene before I make an unwise decision. Some of the members of the inner circle should be from the sending church in a way that gives the church a “seat at the table” when making big decisions. For instance, if a missionary wants to change organizations or move to a different country or embark on a new type of work or evacuate during a time of crisis, their community—the inner circle and members of the church—are invited to consider and pray alongside the missionary. This type of interaction can be even more valuable for a single missionary, who does not have the automatic sounding board of a spouse. It is empowering to know there is a community that is behind you, with you and alongside you.

Caring for single missionaries, and especially single women, is something the church should take seriously. Estimates suggest almost 30% of the missionary workforce is comprised of single women, with little more than 5% single men (Piper, 2016). And our churches do not necessarily feel comfortable with this, as a recent Barna study showed that 80%

of churchgoers believe it is “particularly dangerous for a single woman to be a career missionary in a foreign country” (Barna Future Missions). Maybe this explains some of the reticence to care well for single workers overseas? We’re not quite sure they should be there in the first place out in this dangerous world. And the irony is that should call us to care even more deeply for the women who are called to serve God in this way. These suggestions are by no means an exhaustive list of dos and don’ts for caring for single missionaries, but rather a few ideas to spark conversation. Invest in relationships with the singles sent from your church. Know them well and maintain connections across the miles. ❏

References

- The future of missions—10 Questions about global ministry the church must answer with the next generation.* A Barna Report produced in partnership with the International Mission Board.
- Piper, J. (2016). Why are women more eager missionaries? *Desiring God*. Retrieved 4 April 2022 from <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/why-are-women-more-eager-missionaries>

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