

## THE FORGOTTEN ONES; MUSINGS OF AN MK.

By Ophilia Nartey

Missions is said to be "the heartbeat of God". In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus gave His disciples the assignment we've come to know as the great commission. He told them, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen". In the bid to obey this command of taking the gospel to all the corners of the world, missionaries emerged. We see the Apostles, being the earliest missionaries, and their journeys and stories recorded in the book of Acts. As the Gospel was being taken to other countries and continents, the need for more labourers was greatly felt. Also missionaries needed their immediate families with them since they were staying on mission fields for years at a time. This led to missionaries taking their families along with them to the mission fields, to serve as labourers in God's vineyard and to reduce incidences of loneliness and depression for missionaries. Missionary kids, or MKs for short, had to move along with their parents to whichever mission field God was leading them to. They mostly have no choice in the matter.

Missionary kids (or MKs) are the children of missionary parents, and thus born and/or raised abroad (that is, on the "mission-field"). They form a subset of third culture kids (TCKs). Third Culture Kids (or TCKs), a term coined by US sociologist Ruth Hill Useem in the 1950s, is a term used for children who spend their formative years in places that are not their parents' homeland, raised in a culture other than their parents' or the culture of their country of nationality, and also live in a different environment during a significant part of their child development years. They typically are exposed to a greater volume and variety of cultural influences than those who grow up in one particular cultural setting. This includes Missionary Kids, military children, children of diplomats, among others.

Missionaries' kids (MK or third-culture kids, TCKs) are extremely important members of the missionary team although often not recognized as such. Some are born on the mission field, others not. But most spend their formative years on the mission fields. They get involved in their parents' ministry from a tender age, mostly with no choice. Due to this, most missionary kids do not remember specifically when they came to Christ. There is no dramatic "come to Jesus" moment. In recent times though, missionaries are making the effort to make their children accept Christ rather than just assuming they're Christians because of their background.

Some MKs do not know their extended family members. Most missionary kids don't go to their home countries or even towns till they're done with high school.

The problem with having to grow up in a different country is the continuing trauma of not quite belonging anywhere. When the MK is serving with his parents, he is singled out as a foreigner, but when he returns to the home country he may not feel at home and may have difficulty fitting in. A 16year old MK I spoke to said, "We're often given an extra title whenever we're introduced as the kid who grew up in that country or village" or "the child of this missionary". Sometimes, all we want is to feel normal, to feel we belong, not a specimen on show especially when we return to our sending church". Most people don't realize this and they sometimes think the MK is just not trying to fit in. The culture-shock sometimes is extremely great. The MK has to accept or at least tolerate different ways and customs and be willing to adapt. Language may also be a problem. A 26year old MK who was asked why he couldn't speak his native language said, "learning new languages every time our parents move makes it difficult to learn our native language. I can speak 5 different languages fluently, but I'm now trying to learn my native language". Most MKs are fluent in

several different languages but cannot speak a word of their mother-tongue. Being able to cope with a new environment and culture is a great challenge to the MK. "It took me two years to realize my parents had no plans of returning to our home country anytime soon and I had a bad attitude for a long time after that. I had no friends there and I didn't like the foods we were given. I remember once rejecting food I was given by a boy who was trying to be my friend and how the boy ran away crying. To my little mind, I wasn't a beggar. But in his culture, I had insulted him in a great way. The differing culture was a lot to take in, but after a while, I got used to it and didn't want to leave when my parents wanted to." This was from a 34year old MK.

When asked if we'll follow in our parents' ministry footsteps, many of MKs will awkwardly stammer our way through an answer before looking for the nearest exit. We feel pressured to say yes, and inexplicably guilty if we give an adamant 'no' but we also know that a weak maybe just doesn't cut it. Travelling a lot and experiencing different cultures make some MKs adventurous and love travelling. Some others though are just plain tired of travelling and adventures. Also, living, eating and breathing missions for most parts of our lives makes MKs either deeply interested in missions or wanting to have nothing to do with missions. For those interested in missions, most of them have no interest in serving on a mission field. Majority just want to support missionaries on the field because they believe they have a better understanding of the needs of missionaries and their families. The problem though is that when MKs interact with other missionaries or Christians, the question of whether or not they want to be a missionary almost always pops up. "I'm tired of the looks I get when I say I don't want to be a missionary. I haven't betrayed God or my parents. No, I don't have a reason for wanting to be a doctor rather than being a missionary. People find it difficult to understand that and they try to make me feel as if I'm running away from God's calling for me", said a 23year old MK. A 17years old MK said, "I have no problem with being a missionary if God wants me to be one. I just have a career I want to go into. I'm not running away from missions. Even now, professionals are needed more in missions as they can easily enter into some closed countries. God might use my career for His work". An 18years old MK said, "you have every right to ask us what career we're interested in, but, please, try to avoid making us feel like missions is the only correct answer. Every calling from God has

dignity and purpose. You don't need to add missions into the future career question. If we truly do want to go into ministry, have no doubt that we will tell you!". Some MKs have no problem with short term missions and even working administratively for a missions' organization. Most just don't want to be full time missionaries on the mission fields. In recent times though, most MKs are becoming missionaries and this is becoming a source of encouragement to the parent missionaries that their children are taking over from them.

Due to the nature of the missionary work, some MKs feel their parents' ministry is more important than them. Thankfully, this isn't an issue I've ever encountered in my own home. But I have known many MKs that do struggle with a sense that, when it comes to their parents' ministry, they take the backseat. Many MKs have seen ministry take precedence over family dinners, vacations, sporting events, even illnesses. They feel guilty asking for more time from their parents, even though that's all they really want. They feel like they're asking their parents to choose between God's calling and their own kids. Oftentimes, this guilt leads to MKs resenting their parents' ministry. A 34year old MK had this to say "If you are the parent of an MK, show us that family comes before ministry whether by simply asking us the hard questions or visibly putting your work aside for us. You may not like the honest answers we give, and it may be hard to say 'no' to ministry at times; but it will prove to us that we really do take top priority". A 13year old MK I spoke to said "I just want to know that I'm more important to my parents than their ministry. I'm not trying to make them choose between me and God, because God will surely win. I just need their time and attention. Sometimes I rebel just to get their attention, but they often times do not even notice it". A 15year old MK said, "Sometimes I struggle to remember I have a life of my own. Everyone associates me with my parent's ministry, not as a person on my own. I have my own interests, hobbies, dreams and plans, outside of my parent's missions. I just want to be treated like a regular teen, not treated in the light of my parent's work. I'm tired of having to answer questions on my parent's work when I just want to talk of other things".

On the issue of marriage, though some MKs have no qualms about marrying a missionary, a vast majority are just not interested in marrying missionaries. "I have no problem with marrying a fellow MK. In

fact, I'll prefer that since he'll understand me better due to our similar upbringings. As for marrying a missionary, it will be very difficult for me to agree to that", said a 19year old MK. Another MK said, "missionaries are the only uncles and aunties I know. Their children are my cousins. Since I can't marry my cousin, I can't marry an MK. For a missionary, I might consider it because they are very stable and are content with Christ, and that's enough for me". A 26year old MK said "Growing up, I didn't want to marry a missionary but now, I'm open to the idea". "I never wanted to marry a missionary or an MK growing up. I was running away from everything and anybody related to missions but hey, I'm married to a missionary and serving as a missionary now, and I wouldn't ask for anything different". Some MKs also said they'll like to marry missionaries, but only if things are put in place to give their children who will also be MKs, a life other than the one they had growing up.

Even though missionary kids grow up in a Christian atmosphere, it's not uncommon for them to struggle with their faith. When it comes to reaching the lost, few people think of missionary kids. After all, their parents are the ultimate Christians, right? The MK status as super Christian offspring can be exactly what hinders them from becoming devout believers themselves. They've gotten used to burying things, because it looks bad for their family if they're obviously having a problem with something. And what could look worse than an MK having doubts about God? When MKs struggle with their faith, many would rather pretend than reach out for help. "Growing up on a mission field and seeing the sufferings of some people, I had lots of questions about God. Was He real, does He really love everyone? If He did, I wasn't seeing it that well. I stopped believing in God at a point but I kept up the religiosity because I didn't want my parents to know. I just didn't know how they'll take it. God reached out to me though in my early 20's and my faith is stronger now due to that experience", said a 40year old MK. "Losing my mother on the mission field made me question the existence of God. If after all she was doing for God, He couldn't answer our prayers and keep her alive, He really didn't exist or love my family. I couldn't tell anyone how I felt, most especially not my dad. It was years later after I had rebelled and walked away from the Christian faith, proclaiming myself an atheist, that God made me see the clear picture and I realized He loved me and had my family's best interest at heart. I'm now a

missionary myself and God keeps showing me the bigger picture as I walk closely with Him each day", another MK, 34years old, said. "I know firsthand, how easy it is for MKs to fall away from the faith. I've also seen the statistics. So that's the thing I pray most, that they'll be rooted and established and be able to weather the storms that are coming without giving up their faith", an MK, now missionary said.

Due to constant changes and moves, MKs may 'lose' friends and have to cultivate new friendships much more often than their peers at home. Some grow reluctant to establish meaningful relationships and withdraw in despair. Some become self-proclaimed loners and some have commitment issues in relationships. "I realized I had no friends, not because people didn't try to include me or befriend me. It was because I had shut myself off to friendships. After moving 5 times in 12years, I didn't see the need to make any more friends since I will be told to move before I knew it", a 15year old MK said. "I was in a boarding school for missionary kids from the time I was 3years old. I had a lot of friends who were MKs. Joining my parents on different mission fields from the time I was 11years old made me lose touch with my friends. It was difficult making new friends and I mostly kept to myself especially when we moved to new locations. Within the past 3years, I've been able to reconnect with my old MK friends and it's been great. I'm learning to open up more, rather than bottling up all my feelings" said a 25year old MK.

Many MKs have been raised on limited financial resources (by home-side standards), yet may have lived in very undeveloped countries where they may even have felt rich. This has an effect on the MKs view of wealth. For me, growing up, I remember asking my parents for things and being told to pray about it. That deepened my faith in God. It was amazing praying for a need or even a want sometimes, and seeing how God miraculously provided it. There were times though that I didn't get what I wanted, but I believed He had something better for me. "The hardest part about being an MK to me was not having everything I needed when I needed it. There was almost always little money at home so needs were prioritized in order of deadlines. Things like new clothes, phones and others just didn't meet the cut. Having to wear people's used clothes which they donated was one thing I didn't like. I was wearing clothes that were out of season all the time. I sometimes just craved for something

new" said a 23year old MK. "I was bitter at the lack of 'things' while growing up; and financial limitations as a kid caused me to make personal wealth my life goal. I just wanted to be rich and have nothing at all to do with missions because that meant poverty. I'm a missionary now, and God has taught me to be content with whatever I have, even though He is always faithfully providing for my needs", a 34year old MK said. "The most embarrassing moment for me as an MK was going to a church in my "brand new clothes" only to hear a child ask another if that wasn't his clothes" said a 13year old MK.

In conclusion, MKs, though not missionaries, are largely involved in their parents' work. They actively take part in reaching out to the lost from a tender

age. When praying for missions and missionaries, don't forget to say a word of prayer for their children. Pray that they'll be deeply rooted in their faith, and won't stray from God. Aside praying, you can also encourage them and support them in any way you can.

Reference: Some MKs from Africa

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