

Chapter 2

Stress and Singleness

The meaning of the term 'single' has undergone a remarkable change over the past twenty years. It used to mean an unmarried person and implied virginity. The terms 'bachelor' or 'spinster' were commonly used.

Nowadays, 'single' means being alone. It is used for those who have never married, for the divorced or bereaved, and for single parents. It no longer implies virginity but only the absence of a current sexual partner. Hence, when people say 'I am alone now' it means their last relationship has broken up and they have not yet made a new one.

In this chapter, the term 'single' is used for those who have never married. In the missionary context it usually implies celibacy; virginity may have been lost, but for religious reasons further sexual activity without marriage is refused.

The New Testament has something to say about singleness in the passage on eunuchs (Matt 19:11-12). By its context it is clear that the Lord is speaking to those who, for a variety of reasons, live celibate lives. 'Some are eunuchs because they were born that way' includes people who cannot marry due to some physical, mental, or social handicap that may have been present from birth. Current examples are the seriously mentally and physically handicapped, and certain cases of sexual and personality deviation. 'Others were made that way by men' indicates people who were born normal but due to some accident or illness have become eunuchs. Historical examples include boys castrated to preserve their singing voices, and – in modern times – radiation victims.

The words 'others have renounced marriage (made themselves eunuchs, NIV footnote) because of the kingdom of heaven' is especially applicable to people who have taken a vow of celibacy. It also includes missionaries whose response to the call of God may include an involuntary celibacy. No vow is involved, but under the usual conditions of missionary service marriage becomes less likely.

The full implications of missionary singleness are difficult to

understand in the home country. Orientation courses do not always include much teaching or discussion on the topic. It is usually after arrival in the host country that singleness becomes a practical reality, and an issue that has to be faced. In a recent meeting with young single women missionaries I asked what had been the hardest part so far. With one voice they said 'being single'. They enlarged on the dual nature of the problem. Not only had they no husband and so no children, they also felt deprived of male company in ordinary social circles. They felt utterly isolated in their struggle, the experience being so intensely personal. It is not surprising that the Lord ended his teaching on singleness with the words 'Let him who is able to accept this accept it' (Matt 19:12 Amplified New Testament).

Single missionaries do not usually accept their situation all at once. There are often definite stages of experience. These have been discussed effectively by Gillett, Long and Fowke in their booklet 'A Place in the Family'.¹ With their permission I have used the material on stages of acceptance and translated it into missionary terms.

Hope is the first stage. Many missionaries hope to marry when they go overseas and have heard all the rumours about match-making language schools. On arrival there, however, the facts hit home. They discover there are very few single men missionaries and comparatively large numbers of single women. The realities of the situation cause hope to start fading.

Most single male missionaries marry, and as the numbers of eligible men diminish, the remaining single women have to come to terms with the possibility of not marrying. For some this is relatively painless, but for others it may lead to a period of *self-doubt*. They begin to ask themselves 'What is wrong with me? Am I unattractive?' These thoughts cause personal unhappiness for a time, but ultimately the whole experience can become positive. Some women have told me they emerged from their doubts determined to make the most of themselves as women, whether or not they ultimately married. They began to pay more attention to their appearance, to dress as well as possible on a limited budget and to cultivate general interests and qualities like graciousness.

Acceptance of reality can come at any time. It can also be delayed by failure to understand what God is asking single missionaries to accept. What has to be accepted is that now, in this moment of time, I am single in God's best will. It does not usually involve acceptance of singleness for the whole future life. Apart

from those who have taken a vow of celibacy, I have only met one woman missionary who knew God wanted her to remain single and had accepted this.

Two missionaries I know made regular acts of acceptance of present singleness. To their great surprise they found themselves getting married soon after retirement from missionary service, aged 60 or more. They were glad they had not tried to accept singleness for their whole lives; otherwise they would indeed have felt rather foolish walking down the aisle!

The menopause may be a difficult time for single women, for it is a biological boundary. There is no further hope of children. Several single missionaries told me they had a little weep to themselves on their fortieth birthdays. The menopause was imminent, and singleness and childlessness were issues that had become even more likely. They found that a new act of acceptance was helpful at this point.

Maturity involves understanding that singleness is at present God's first best will. He has no favourites, and has not provided husbands and children for those he loves best. Maturity also understands that marriage is not a bed of roses, married missionaries having to deal with a variety of problems such as separation of husband and wife due to children's needs, and coping with adolescents. Single people gain maturity by differing pathways. Some experience little of the stages of hope, doubt, and acceptance of reality, passing almost at once to a mature outlook. Others, however, experience the struggle of each stage, which becomes part of their future ministry to others in trouble.

Special Problems of Single Missionaries

Single missionaries have problems caused specifically by their singleness, and if life is to be lived to the full it is important that some solutions be found.

Social Peculiarity

Living in a marriage-oriented society poses peculiar problems for single people. For example, social invitations may be related to professional position, such as the invitations I used to get to medical dinners. Usually the other doctors invited were men, who in typical Indian style gathered in one corner of the room, their wives gathering together in another corner. Which group was I

supposed to join? In that culture it would not look good for me to have joined the men, in whose group I belonged professionally. Therefore I tended to gravitate towards the women, but then a new problem emerged. Sometimes the women did not speak much English, but were offended if I spoke to them in the vernacular which indicated I did not consider them educated. In reality, their English was exhausted in a short time and my presence put a damper on their vernacular conversation. The result was an uneasy situation. I resolved the problem by taking a single national woman with me, so that we joined the women's group, and she acted as a bridge between the other ladies and myself. They assumed my friend did not speak much English (incorrectly as it happened), so were soon chatting to her in the vernacular, which released me to join in the conversation too. At intervals the men would call me over and I would chat for a little, then retire back to the women's side. All very complicated!

Accommodation

Single missionary accommodation raises the blood pressure of too many victims of traditional missionary housing patterns. Some of these encourage a feeling of second-class citizenship in single women. Recently I visited a remote mission location. The staff consisted of one senior single woman, several married couples, and an occasional single man. The single woman had to wait nine months to be housed, living the whole time as a boarder in various married couples' homes. Conversely, the single men and more recently arrived married couples were housed immediately on arrival. Finally the mission pastoral staff intervened and the single lady was housed, with an immediate improvement in her health and efficiency.

There are a few missions still unwise enough to permit a single person to live permanently with a married couple. This is a potential disaster course. The arrangement denies both the couple and the single person the privacy they require. There are obvious additional dangers inherent in this situation. I have known a close relationship develop between a husband and a single girl staying in the home, and between a wife and a single man. Missionary marriages have unusual strains upon them, and it is not wise to introduce another potential stress.

Living with strangers is a major stress factor for some single missionaries. Married couples have at least said 'yes' to their

future living companion, but singles have to move in with someone they may never have seen before. Companions may change frequently due to home leave patterns, so constant readjustments have to be made. Recently I was speaking to a group of single missionaries about the importance of getting to know each other's personal backgrounds. At this point one of the audience heaved a weary sigh. 'I have had 16 different companions in 18 years' she said. 'I could hardly learn their names, let alone their backgrounds'. One could only sympathise with such a trying situation.

Various things can help. Someone who is living with an congenial companion, should not feel compelled to continue for too long. Paul could not get on with John Mark, and they finally split up. There is no sin in this; it may be sound common sense. One should give the situation a good try, and if it is not working out, ask for a change. Paul and John Mark got on much better after a break from each other.

While trying to make a relationship with your living companion, allow plenty of talking time. One missionary told me she and her companion had much trouble getting along. They decided to talk it over, and after about 18 hours' talk (not all at once), they found they had gained a better relationship. They both belonged to a mission that practised a short daily period of Bible reading and prayer together, and although they felt hypocritical trying to keep this up they decided that to do so would open the door to the Holy Spirit's help in resolving the problem. They felt later on that this had been the right thing to do.

Someone setting up house with a new partner should remember that both parties are reasonably mature. Each has developed his own patterns of life – and both are equally good. For example, there are many different ways of eating eggs. Punjabis eat them hard boiled; the Chinese drop them raw into soup; the British eat them soft-boiled (exactly three-and-a-half minutes please!) Americans never use egg cups; the British always do. To make things more complicated, some of the British cut the top off the boiled egg neatly, while others bang them on the head. Such differences can cause critical comments, or even quarrels if the desired hard-boiled egg is regularly soft-boiled or fried. It seems childish to quarrel about such trivia, but when work is heavy and there are other stresses, it can happen. The ability to joke about it is truly helpful, for nothing defuses situations like a shared sense of humour.

There is no harm in living alone if it suits your personality better,

and provided it does not clash with the values of the local culture. But be careful not to become a recluse – even if you are tired with the work. Remember that entertaining keeps you socially and emotionally healthy.

Accommodation while home on leave is a difficult issue. In some missions, single people are automatically expected to return to the family home, and this can create real tension. Single missionaries have often held positions of great responsibility at a comparatively young age. They left home as a child of the family unit, and are now mature. In their absence, the family has adjusted to the loss of one of the children, and developed along new patterns. Despite all the good will in the world, when the single missionary returns home and tries to slot in again, role problems arise. The missionary tries hard to behave as the ex-child, which conflicts with maturity, and the family does not know how to adjust its current pattern to the returned ex-child. It is easy to see how tensions arise, and both sides feel stressed. Some years ago at a meeting with parents of missionaries, some of them admitted to the difficulty they experienced in this situation. 'We have moved on', they said, 'and wonderful as it is to have our daughter home we do find it difficult to fit in with each other. She is older now, and has been independent of home for some time.'

Many single missionaries would welcome a clause in the personnel policies that gave them a choice between rented accommodation or going to their family home. At a recent seminar on missionary stress, a mission administrator remarked that furlough accommodation should be offered to single people as their right. They should not be made to feel guilty about the expense, and a part of the annual budget should be earmarked for this purpose.

Solitude and Loneliness

Being alone is another important stress area. Single missionaries have to learn to cope with a variety of practical and emotional problems. They cannot, and should not, always be asking for help. Skills suitable for the location have to be acquired, be it opening a complicated fuse box or trimming the candle!

One aspect of being alone that may be painful is the lack of a permanent confidante. Singles have to learn how to be a unit of one, and not a family. This lack of a permanent person to share with can lead to an almost compulsive desire to share everything with the current living companion. In turn, the companion is

expected to share to the same extent, and is made to feel guilty for not doing so. I was once discussing with a single missionary the demands made upon her by her living companion. If my client did not share her thoughts and feelings constantly, there were tears, tantrums, and accusations of not caring from the other.

This is an unhealthy situation, based in part on a misunderstanding of successful marital relationships. Some singles think husbands and wives share everything, hence this pattern has to be aimed at if they themselves are to have good interpersonal relationships. In reality, wise husbands and wives do not share everything, but respect that inner core of privacy and individuality so essential to mental health. They understand that being of one flesh does not mean being one person, but two people living together in a more or less harmonious unity.

Rather than sharing for the sake of it, singles and married couples need to concentrate on accepting each other. As Anthony Storr puts it 'To know that another person accepts one just as one is, unconditionally, is to be able to accept oneself and therefore be able to be oneself, to realise one's own personality.'² Such acceptance does not, however, imply invasion of the other personality and its privacy.

A useful guide to whether sharing is healthy or otherwise is the degree of anxiety aroused by it. One missionary complained to me 'If only she'd leave me alone to get on with my life. She's always at me to tell her what I am thinking, or why I react the way I do. I never have any peace or private life.' If sharing is healthy it is spontaneous, non-threatening, and constructive.

One of the best ways of managing aloneness is to understand the difference between loneliness and solitude. This has been commented on by Elspeth Stephenson in her fine book *Enjoying Being Single*.³ 'Loneliness' she writes 'can become enjoyable solitude.' Loneliness means being alone with yourself, whereas solitude means being alone with God. I mean this literally. Single people often find that the pains of loneliness can be overcome by the knowledge that God is with them in the house. If he is not, then he is not keeping his promise to be with us always. Such experience takes a long time to gain, and there are many pangs of loneliness to be overcome as the knowledge of his permanent presence is developing. It is helpful to remember his presence and to thank him for it, even during the times when loneliness is an especial problem. Many single people know the hazards of Christmas when everyone goes away and work detains them alone at

home! During the last ten years of my missionary life I was deeply grateful to my family for coming out to India nearly every December so that we could holiday together and then have a wonderful hospital Christmas. Having had one experience of unavoidable isolation alone at Christmas, I never wanted another!

Handling loneliness is not only a spiritual matter. I am interested to see that Elspeth Stephenson and I agree on many points, although I had actually written this chapter before I read her book. The important thing is to keep clear of self-pity. Single people should avoid moping around feeling lonely. They need to do something creative and active. At danger times like Christmas they need to pick up other lonely people, at church for example, and ask them to dinner. As a routine they need to be involved with people, not only at work and in church, but also in social outlets. I defy anyone to learn Scottish dancing and remain lonely! But underneath all the activity the ability to cope with solitude should be cultivated.

Friendship

Single missionaries rely on friends for social life and companionship. Sometimes they are blessed by having a live-in companion who becomes a real friend, the relationship being relaxed and supportive. In this situation it is wise not to have every holiday together, for even the best of friends need a break from each other sometimes. Equally important is keeping the friendship inclusive of others, exclusive friendships being a potential danger in the stresses of missionary living.

Friends can be made at work, through the church, and through local social events. In Kathmandu I got a great kick out of seeing a senior member of my mission playing the lead rôle in *The Pirates of Penzance*, and several more taking administrative or supportive rôles. In less elegant places, friendship is more difficult, and in village settings missionaries may have to be content with calling on people and sharing knitting patterns or garden plants rather than making deep friendships. Although this does not meet personal needs, it can be restful and relaxing as well as providing further knowledge of the local set-up.

Friendships with nationals are rewarding and enjoyable, but difficulties can sometimes arise. When single missionaries live and work in the same institution as national friends, especially if there is one with whom the relationship is closest, jealousy and misunderstanding are a possibility. The national matron of a nurses

hostel spoke to me about this and asked my advice. She said that young missionaries wanted to integrate with nationals and to learn the language. So they began talking with the nurses, and gradually one emerged as a close friend. This was immediately recognised by the other nurses who began to make unpleasant remarks to the friend, and even to accuse her of a homosexual relationship. The problem was presented to me in several countries both by missionaries who had got themselves into difficulties, and by personnel in charge of missionaries and nationals.

It is important to make national friendships, for they are deeply rewarding, and it is not my intention to frighten young missionaries about it. They do, however, need to ask experienced people how to manage friendships in the new culture. I have advised young missionaries to make friends with a small group rather than with one individual. This is tough when the heart is crying out for an individual relationship, but it is a policy of wisdom.

Friendship with the opposite sex is also culturally hazardous in many countries. In places where I have worked, one-to-one opposite sex friendships between young people are rarely possible. It becomes a little easier as the single missionary gets older and is blessed with grey hair, which is a sign of respectability. But even then friendships should be handled cautiously. An elderly missionary I knew periodically met a senior church leader to discuss business. Despite the presence of his wife in another room at the time, a rumour went round that they were having an affair. Provided cultural patterns are watched carefully, however, friendships between opposite sexes are possible in some countries. In India, men and women can talk together on an open verandah, or can join forces as a group. It is being alone in a room together that causes cultural difficulties.

Single missionaries sometimes marry nationals, and it is good if their interest in each other is kept as culturally compatible as possible. Some of my friends have been approached by a match-maker wanting to express the interest of their client in taking relationships to a stage further. Repugnant as this idea is to the Western mind, it should not be ignored, for it may be the only way matters can proceed in certain cultures. While working things out, it is important that the national concerned is helped not to overstep cultural pre-marital norms. There was once a young missionary who made friends with a local single man. She had not been adequately oriented to the culture, and because the man spoke fluent English treated the friendship as she would in her

own country. She was devastated to find herself in danger of being raped because her Western-oriented behaviour had been misunderstood.

Single missionaries should ask the advice of older national and expatriate friends when contemplating marriage with a national. There is so much to be learned before a decision can be made. It is important to stay in the prospective in-laws' home for a time, to get first-hand experience of what marriage into the family would involve.

Biological and Creative Sexuality

The sex problems of single missionaries are rarely discussed. Some singles believe that by obeying the call of God to missionary service, which may result in singleness, sexual feelings will vanish. When this does not happen they begin to think something is wrong with their dedication, or that their calling was not genuine. They become confused and do not know what is going on. This confusion is related to lack of understanding of the two components of normal sexuality: biological and creative. The former is the instinct, the innate drive to mate and reproduce the species. The latter is the energy used in creative activity of many kinds, such as social concern, care for others, interpersonal relationships, creative work, and loving care for the family unit. Missionaries who have had preparatory lectures are sometimes taught that increasing creative sexuality will solve the problem of unfulfilled biological sexuality. It will certainly reduce its intensity, but will not of course remove it. The only people with very little biological sexuality are the very old, the very sick, and the very dead! Single missionaries can only accept the reality that they are biologically unfulfilled – most have neither sexual experience nor children.

How then can single missionaries handle the sex drive? First of all, sexual urges should be welcomed as a sign of normality. Missionaries are so often regarded as unusual, or oddities, that it is refreshing to be assured of normality in this way. Secondly, missionaries need to think through their personal beliefs on chastity or otherwise before they leave home. The majority of single missionaries, whether or not virginity has been lost, adopt the position of chastity unless they marry as the correct principle for them. (See page 95.) As the years go by and it becomes increasingly clear that singleness is what God has planned for them, a reaffirmation of acceptance of chastity is helpful. If this is what

serving God involves, then periodic renewal of willingness to be single is most supportive. It also keeps open the doors whereby God can give strength to cope with continuing sexual desire.

The next coping strategy is living wisely, and using common sense. There is no point going into situations where sexual temptation may be severe, however pleasant these may be. A young missionary was once travelling to Asia by sea, and while they went through the Red Sea there was a full moon. The nights were warm and romantic. One night she had been talking for a long time to a man she knew casually. He then made a proposition that could have ended in sex relations. It was at this point that her prior decision to refuse sex relations without marriage came to her rescue, and she was able to extricate herself. From then on she tried to use common sense and to avoid patterns of behaviour that would make personal moral decisions hard to maintain.

Fourthly, the level of creative sexuality should be kept as high as possible. Wide interests and social life, hard work, involvement with people and with the church, to name only a few, can give a feeling of personal fulfilment as well as helping to reduce biological sexual tension.

Three other sexual issues are relevant to the potential problems of sexuality: masturbation, homosexuality and illicit heterosexual relations. (John White uses the term 'illicit', rather than 'immoral' as in I Cor 7:2. I am using the word to indicate sexual relationships of unmarried persons).⁴

Masturbation arouses guilt and anxiety in the performer, due in part to the act and in part to the accompanying sexual fantasies. Christian books provide little help, Jay Adams,⁵ Charlie Shedd,⁶ James Dobson,⁷ and John White⁸ all taking somewhat different positions! I am somewhere in the middle. In my opinion, masturbation is not related solely to relief of sexual tension but is a release used to handle many other stresses. This is why some married people masturbate, using this as a form of release for many things. John White summarises some of them.

People who are anxious and lonely have recourse to it though it affords them scant solace. Children who are under stress at home, adolescents in turmoil, husbands whose wives are pregnant, men and women away from home all tend to masturbate. Some masturbate to get to sleep, others because they feel depressed or inadequate.⁹

I do not believe that single missionaries should wallow in guilt if tension is so great that they react with masturbation, but I do believe they should take stock of their life balance and emotional health. Are they overloading one aspect of their lives? Are they working all the hours God gives plus a few more? Have they neglected prayer and worship, or spending time with friends, or going fishing? What lies under the act – is it inferiority, sorrow or inadequacy? Is there a basic resentment or disillusion adding extra emotional tension? Concentrating in a guilty fashion on the act of masturbation is not what is required. It is the underlying tensions that should be studied, frustrated biological sexuality probably being only one of them.

In most cases, rectification of the underlying problem will help in general tension release. There is however one major exception. If masturbation becomes compulsive and out of control, or if sexual fantasies begin to dominate thinking to the exclusion of other issues, medical help should be sought. Such conditions occur in early mental illness, among other things, and should not be neglected.

The question of homosexual options arouses conflicts in single missionaries, especially in the current climate of opinion. This is another area in which a prior decision may prove to be a sheet anchor, for under stress overseas people who have had no previous experience can drift into homosexuality. Once again, it is not the sexual expression that is important, but the need that underlies it. Usually this is loneliness or feelings of inferiority and inadequacy, and an overwhelming need to belong to somebody. The tragedy is that sometimes missionaries who get caught up in such a relationship and want to break it are afraid to ask advice. They fear people will only be judgemental and fail to understand their heart cry for help. I can only urge such people to seek advice from a friendly doctor or skilled counsellor. The sexual problem they are struggling with is not half as important as the basic problems, and it is these which will be handled by professionals.

Casual or permanent heterosexual relationships in single people can emerge as a missionary problem. Let no missionary say 'it can't happen to me'. It can. Language teachers with whom many hours are spent are often attractive. So are local people, and lonely expatriates. It is easy to form sexual relationships in this setting especially if the local culture is sexually arousing. A young missionary struggling with a recent broken love affair was taken round a group of temples covered with erotic sculptures. Although

he tried politely to view them as an art form, as the guide instructed, the combination of the sculptures and his own grief produced a sexual urgency that was hard to control. In such a situation, the only thing to do is to leave it if possible. The power to leave when there is an intrinsic desire to stay and get sexually involved can only come from a *prior* decision before God not to indulge in sexual relationships other than in marriage.

Acceptance

Finally, can singleness be profitable? Acceptance of it from God's hand can make it so. Elspeth Stephenson wrote 'Some people... see being single as a gift from God... Hundreds of ordinary men and women past and present have done a work in the world and for their fellow men in every sphere of life which has only been possible because they stayed single'.¹⁰ On the other hand, persistent resentment of singleness can make it an unprofitable experience.

On a personal level, as opposed to a ministry level, single people have a unique opportunity for exploring channels of love. Although the channel of sexual love is unused, other areas can become really exciting. Love of friends and of the good things God has given us to enjoy, and the often unusually close love between single people and family members are experiences worth having. Our Lord was the best example. He as a single person enjoyed the love of friends, clients, and the surrogate family at Bethany. He loved picnics and wedding parties, and presumably going on the lake. He coped with the biological sexual unfulfilment of the celibate, and the pain of being a single person not part of a family unit. Yet he never gives the impression of being unhappy on this issue. He knew what it was to be loved by God as a beloved son, and to be loved by the disciples and the people he helped. He knew how to give love in return, culminating in the greatest act of love when he gave his life for his friends. I believe that much of this stemmed from his initial acceptance of God's will. I love the Epistle to the Hebrews in this connection, where Jesus speaks of having brothers, family, and children (Heb 2:11-13). Later on in the Epistle the writer points out that when Christ came into the world he said 'A body you prepared for me... here I am, I have come to do your will, O God' (Heb 10:5, 7). The body he accepted at the incarnation was to remain sexually celibate during the earthly ministry.

However, that was not the end of the story. When the work of

salvation was completed, the Church became the Bride of Christ, preparing for the final marriage described in Revelation 19. Single missionaries can be helped by this, for they follow the Lord's path closely. Like him they find brothers and children through their friends and the people whom they serve. They are members of a large international Christian family, and ultimately will share in the marriage ceremony of the Lamb and the Church. These are great mysteries, and theologians will certainly pick holes in the spiritual thoughts of a psychiatrist. But the concept helps me as a single woman, and may help others. We are unmarried in the flesh and may never experience human marriage. But we shall certainly experience heavenly marriage when the day of consummation of all things comes.

Notes

- ¹ Gillett, Long and Fowke, 'A Place in the Family', *Grove Pastoral Series* No 6.
- ² Anthony Storr, *The Integrity of the Personality* (Penguin, 1963), p 37.
- ³ Elspeth Stephenson, *Enjoying Being Single* (Lion, 1981), p 55.
- ⁴ John White, *Eros Defiled* (IVP, 1977), p 48.
- ⁵ Jay Adams, *The Christian Counsellors' Manual* (Nutley TX, 1973), p 401.
- ⁶ Charlie E Shedd, *The Stork is Dead* (Waco TX., Word, 1968), pp 70-73.
- ⁷ James Dobson, *Preparing for Adolescence* (Santa Ana Vision House, 1978), p 87; (Kingsway, 1982), p 73.
- ⁸ White, *op cit*, pp 34-42.
- ⁹ White, *op cit*, p 36.
- ¹⁰ Stephenson, *op cit*, p 68.

Other Useful Books

- Collins, Gary. *Christian Counselling*. Word Books, 1980, pp 131-142.
- Vincent, M O. *Understanding the Christian and Sex*. Scripture Union: USA, 1971, UK, 1973.

Chapter 3

Stress and Missionary Marriages

The overall quality of missionary marriages is impressive. Exceptions do occur, but generally speaking there is a high standard of communication and mutual care.

Missionary marriages, in common with all Christian marriages, have to survive many different stresses, such as old 'emotional baggage', the making and breaking of friendships, and financial shortages or disparities. Another common stress is related to the Christian concept of marriage. God has chosen human relationships to describe some of the most profound spiritual truths. Widows and orphans, virgins, husbands and wives, parents, brothers and sisters are all repeated biblical subjects. Many Christians therefore feel that part of their ministry is to demonstrate through their personal relationships the truth of what God has been teaching. Like other Christians, single and married missionaries take this aspect of their calling seriously. Hence, problems affecting relationships involve not only the difficulties themselves, but also guilt at an apparent failure of Christian witness.

In missionary marriages, the witnessing aspect can get out of proportion, due to the feeling of living in a goldfish bowl. Many couples are scrutinised constantly by loving but curious national neighbours. Everything they do is noted and discussed. The major source of information may be the cook, who can misinterpret what is going on. For example, husbands and wives have the right to an occasional bad mood. Indians, with their habitual courtesy, call this an 'off mood', and treat it with tolerance. The cook, however, may put a different interpretation on a simple off mood. 'He didn't speak to her much this morning' he reports to the neighbours, who are eagerly awaiting the daily news bulletin. 'Perhaps he is tired of her and going to take a second wife' is a common local rumour. Missionary couples need to come to terms with this sort of thing. There is no point wallowing in guilt over a local misinterpretation of a trivial marital hiccup. In the end it is the overall quality of the marriage that counts, not the daily erroneous bulletin from the cook!