MISSION AGENCIES: HOME FROM HOME

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Category: Observations

This year, Sue and I will celebrate 30 years as members of Wycliffe Bible Translators. That's a long time; more than half of our lives. We've been members of Wycliffe longer than we've been parents and our boys are both grown up, married and doing well.

For those who have never been members of a mission agency, especially serving overseas, it is difficult to describe what it is like. You work with people who share the same vocation, the same underlying beliefs, motivation and passion. It's more than just working together, it goes far deeper than that. Added to that is the whole thing about working a long way from home in a different language and culture. Missionaries often spend a long time isolated from friends and colleagues, which makes the time when you meet up for workshops or conferences even more precious. These experiences forge deep bonds and sometimes deep frustrations. Nothing in my life has compared to the experience of being part of a mission organisation in Africa. Even working in the Wycliffe home office wasn't as intense as being part of the Ivory Coast-Mali group.

The nature of life in mission agencies has an impact on the life of those involved. Firstly, it means that adjusting to life in one's home country can be very difficult. The sense of community and support that comes from sharing life with a like-minded group of people a long way from home is difficult, if not impossible, to recreate. Secondly, it makes it very easy for people to think that their particular agency is special.Â Every agency has its own traditions and idiosyncrasies, but that doesn't mean that there are fundamental differences between them.

I'm reminded of this, because I've just had the privilege of spending a week with a group from OMF at their international headquarters in Singapore. It was a real privilege to be with this group at a conference reflecting on the future of mission. I stand in awe of people who do what they do; planting churches - translating the Bible into minority languages is far easier! I was really encouraged, when during a session on risk-management and mission, they decided that the biggest risk of all was that the people of Asia would not hear the message of Jesus! That's getting things in the right perspective!

During the conference, I was really struck byÂ how much I felt at home with the OMF-ers. Yes, they do some things differently to Wycliffe and they talk about slightly different things, but the passion and the motivation are very similar. The conference was excellent and I very much appreciated the interaction aroundÂ the various papers that were presented. However, the thing that will remain with me was being part of another agency for a few days. I learned more about OMF, but I also gained new insights into Wycliffe, as I saw my own agency through somewhat different eyes.