

TCK Implications For Missions In A Covid Crisis

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In this article we take a look at the global pandemic experience from a Third Culture Kid perspective. A certain level of disruption is normal for TCKs but, like the rest of us, TCKs have been caught off guard and thrust into uncomfortable limbo. Dreams have been dashed and relationships interrupted, the ability to process sudden change and trauma has proved challenging too. Everyone's story is unique, but we are privileged here to view the disruption through the eyes of some TCKs affected.

Airports are favourite places for many Third Culture Kids (TCKs). Vibrant, bustling hubs like Changi Airport saw over one million travellers come and go each week. High mobility was one of the hallmarks of being a TCK and frequent intercontinental travel by air means airports are familiar places, usually with fond memories, symbolic of their transient lifestyles.

But in 2020 airports around the world have become eerily deserted, like ghost towns as international travel has almost shutdown. TCKs' inbuilt propensity for travel has been dramatically curtailed. For some, travel this year has been the result of sudden and sometimes traumatic disruption and the comfort and appeal of once-familiar airports has been overlaid with stress-filled transits to uncertain destinations.

One family I know were comfortably adjusted to being in three different countries: parents in Indonesia, a brother and sister in boarding school in south India and two older brothers studying in Australia. When India went into partial lockdown on the 17th March the younger sister had a stressful unaccompanied journey back to Indonesia via Singapore. Her older brother remained at school, preparing for his Cambridge A Level end of school exams in June. When the second, more stringent lockdown was announced by Prime Minister Modi on 24th March he managed to travel eight hours by road to Bangalore airport to catch one of the last flights out of India to Abu Dhabi and then on to quarantine and isolation in Melbourne. Other students were not so fortunate.

Another Australian family based in Central Asia, had four children at the same boarding school, but they were unable to leave in time and were 'trapped' at school for a month until they managed to board an evacuation charter flight to the UK. Their mother joined them three weeks later, but they were marooned for several more weeks until they miraculously managed to board a

flight from Germany back to Central Asia to be reunited with the rest of the family.

These are typical of many similar scenarios and experiences of sudden departures and disruption to life, education, family and friends. The educational impact has been especially tough for those completing their schooling and transitioning to college/ university. Probably the hardest emotionally, has been the loss of eagerly anticipated rites of passage for school leavers: leavers' programs, graduations and a host of related activities and events which were cancelled. In the case of Hebron School, where the students above were studying, there was a hastily arranged Graduation in the auditorium the day before the lockdown, attended only by resident staff and a few stranded students. A pale shadow of the real thing, but huge credit to the staff and students for doing this—it will be remembered as the most unique Graduation in the school's 120-year history! Other schools arranged virtual Graduation programs (see below) but many students were abruptly uprooted and displaced from all that was familiar — building RAFTs¹ to facilitate healthy closure, farewells and transitions, just could not happen.

There has also been much anxiety resulting from incomplete final exams and uncertainty about entry requirements for further studies, and the related visa and travel restrictions to join courses in the passport country or chosen place of study. For those who were able to get into their chosen course there has been the imposition of lockdown and online classes.



John Barclay was born on the Indo-Nepal border to Australian missionary parents in 1954, raised in Nepal and attended boarding school in south India in the 1960s. He and his wife Janine are both teachers and served with Interserve from 1988-1996 in Nepal, and from 1996 to 2015 in India. John was Principal of schools in both countries. For over 10 years they also served as Interserve's International TCK advisors and resource persons. In 2010 John completed a doctoral dissertation on families serving cross-culturally. John's current area of interest is supporting Asian MKs/ TCKs. They now live in Melbourne and have three children and four grandchildren.

Roshan, an Indian TCK in this situation wrote:

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative ripple effect in my life. I often feel bored, almost trapped as I stay in the house 24/7. For the first few months there was a tension that would loom in the air of the house. I could not see, touch or feel this microscopic foe, yet its effects were all around me. That fear was truly bone-chilling.

During the lockdown I was left to my own devices in the house, for the most part, and kept myself busy, by learning an instrument, learning to cook, and reading fairly extensively.

I'm extremely grateful to have spent this time with my family, who were relatively safe in the house, but I can't say the same for quite a few of my friends, who were left stranded from family and friends for a prolonged period of time, which has definitely left a deep, negative psychological and emotional impact—feeling scared and vulnerable, with just walls (literal or figurative) around them.

Roshan's older sister Monica (who suggested the title of this article should be "A Gap Year Noone Wanted") was completing her Law degree and secured a job with a Human Rights NGO when the lockdown commenced, and she returned home:

With COVID, I have spent the longest time with my family in the past five years. Though we all have our set day and order and functions and temperaments, we somehow navigated through and spent time playing games, experimenting with food, watching movies... I won't say that it has been perfect, but we have managed to sail through.

Monica's broader reflections indicate a mature sense of responsibility and optimism for the future:

This lockdown has brought up so many questions about structures and injustice across the globe and as the young generation who are supposed to take the world forward... we have somehow been entrusted the job to find solutions for this Post-COVID world. That definitely makes me so afraid. Despite my anxieties and worries about my future, God has constantly been showing me that He is in control. God's timing in planning out my future and my work, has been a blessing this COVID season and on many days, it gets me through. God's reassurance is what has been my guiding force for the past few months.

An additional challenge for TCKs of all ages who have been forced to leave their homes and return to their (often unfamiliar) passport countries, as well as the loss

and grief inherent in that, is that many have returned to face quarantine, lockdown and isolation. This is hard enough for adults, but even more so for TCKs who are used to rich socialisation in cross-cultural contexts. 'Re-entry' (often a misnomer for TCKs) is invariably challenging but made more difficult when TCKs are unable to attend school, church and youth groups, meet with extended family members and all the other social interactions that usually help the transition and re-entry process.

Sharon, another college student in her final year, sees the value of the pandemic on her spiritual growth:

Coming home and being cut off from religious gatherings [at her college] was what I needed—and that was what the pandemic gave me... the silence I needed. It gave me time to contemplate my views, my thoughts, my values, the way I see God and the way I see my fellow human beings. It helped me build a more regular spiritual journal where so many of my thoughts that were only cluttered and mismatched in my head came to meet on ink and paper and were consolidated and made sense. My faith became more internally vocalized and I was able to practice what I think, believe and say. This I believe, was a blessing in disguise—it was the isolation I never knew I needed.

Adult TCKs are not immune from the impact of COVID-19. Our youngest son Aidan, born and raised in India, sent me a WhatsApp message a few weeks ago that simply stated:

Missing India but thankful to have some photos to look through.

He is a man of few words, but this immediately resonated with me and my own experience as a TCK forty years earlier—a sense of longing for my heart-home. There was a deeper significance in his short message, for that was the date he had booked to fly back to India to attend a classmate's wedding in Delhi and to visit his alma mater in south India. This was his first opportunity after five years, to return to the land of his birth, his 'heart-home' and it was thwarted by COVID-19. I rang him as soon as I received his message to talk about it. He was not angry, just frustrated, and disappointed, and philosophical—but I understood what he was feeling and was able to empathise and encourage him.

Aidan, like many TCKs, loves airports. He loves flying—so much so he is now a commercial pilot (still flying because he's a flight instructor), so he's likely to spend a lot of time in airports in the future, if his

ambitions are realised. But right now, his desire and plans to return to India, his native place, are grounded.

Jonathan is an American TCK who has spent most of his life in Thailand. He was President of the Chiang Mai International School Class of 2020 and gave the valedictory speech at Graduation—to an empty auditorium but an online crowd. In his speech Jonathan quoted Einstein's aphorism: 'Life is like riding a bicycle—to keep your balance you must keep moving'. He encouraged his classmates to keep moving despite all the obstacles that have been thrown their way by Covid-19, and to maintain their balance as they move on through life. He also exhorted them to be grateful to those who had supported them through these difficult months. His speech can be viewed [on Youtube](#)—it is worth watching to the end.

Gratitude despite adversity seems to be a common theme for these TCKs—it is a healthy antidote to anxiety and despair. Another common theme in their stories and feedback has been their experience and awareness of God in their lives. Monica shared an article written for a Christian student magazine in which she writes:

In God's timing when everything comes to a standstill is the best moment of our lives where we can rediscover ourselves. This is a time to reorient our lives to God and make Him the centre of our lives. Because, in the "Instant Culture" we forgot that waiting is part of what it means to be human, more importantly, what it means to be a Christian.

As Human beings, we all like to think we are in control and we often forget that only God can see

into our future. God doesn't give us those quick answers or results. In fact, God has purposed us to constantly wait! So that we would be entirely dependent on Him!

She then draws on the experience of Joseph [arguably a TCK] to illustrate her point:

Take the life of Joseph, for example. Joseph was forced to wait on the Lord, but while he waited, he got busy doing what he could. His good attitude and work ethic resulted in promotion along the way! This story reminds us that God is not inactive when we are waiting. When you are waiting on God, most often He is working behind the scenes to put all the "missing pieces" in our lives in place before He fulfils our desires or request.

Be willing to learn and listen: waiting is part of our world, now. In the new normal, until things get smoother, we may have to wait, for longer periods. God's waiting room is a classroom! In the process of waiting we learn obedience... God's promises may take a long time to wait. We may have to take decisions, contrary to our plans. These decisions may not involve the 'comfortable yes'. It will be a terrifying yes, but a yes which will place us straight into the arms of JESUS.

As [TCKs], let us remember that time is never wasted with God. HE shapes and moulds HIS children and in our lowest, most vulnerable moments, He will walk with us, despite, the fear, and anxiety we carry with us.

Joseph in his trials, disappointments and frustrations had learnt this lesson which he tried to impress on his brothers: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people." (Genesis 50:20).

For all of us, TCKs, ATCKs and those who care for TCKs, the words of Proverbs 19:21 remind us (especially in this COVID-19 year) that our plans and expectations are in God's hands: "People may plan all kinds of things, but the Lord's will is going to be done." (GNT)

Footnotes:

1. RAFT is an acronym well known in TCK care circles related to transitioning well from location to location. It stands for: Rconciliation, Affirmation, Farewell, and Think Destination.

For further reading: see also this very practical article by Lauren Wells: '[Caring for TCKs During Covid](#)' with reference to other useful resources.