

Christian Workers – Finance for Living Series

culture shock:

the emotional turmoil of poverty, injustice and equality

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Difficult questions

What is it like to live and work surrounded by poverty, injustice and inequality? Are there some issues that you think might affect you more than others? How will you respond Biblically, emotionally and practically when you see sights that offend, anger and disturb you—and there's little you can do about it?

We asked fourteen missionaries who live, or have lived, in countries with high levels of poverty, injustice and inequality to answer questions posed by Rebecca Richardson, a 29 year-old from Manchester, facing these issues for the first time. Hopefully some of their comments might help you prepare for life in a similar setting.

Rebecca is not her real name and her story is a combination of issues faced by people in a range of different settings. Given the context in which some of the missionaries who responded still work we are not identifying them by name. Their work contexts include Central Asia, North Africa, East Asia, Asia Pacific, Eastern Europe and East Africa.

Start by reading Rebecca's story to get a feel for what she is facing and the questions this has prompted her to ask. Then take a look at the responses of the missionaries who have faced issues like this on a daily basis.

Rebecca's Story

I have just got off the plane. The airport is hot, sticky and crowded but I am excited to be where I have known for some years God wants me to serve him. The immigration official carefully scrutinises every piece of official paperwork I have with me, then lifts his stamp and presses that all-important imprint in my passport. Rebecca Richardson, aged 29 and up to yesterday living in Manchester, is now the proud owner of an initial two-year visa to work in this beautiful but needy land!

I collect my luggage and squeeze through the crammed customs area into the bedlam of the arrival hall. Being a young(ish!) single white female with light hair I attract a lot of attention and countless taxi offers. Thankfully I see faces I recognise pressing through the crowd towards me. It is Paul and Val, an older couple with my mission who are based in the capital. After hugs all round we brave the drive to their home where I will spend a couple of weeks getting used to my new adopted country.

As I lie in bed that first night, exhausted and exhilarated in equal measure, I think back just 10 days before when family and friends joined together in my church in Manchester for a commissioning service. It was a great evening, with prayers prayed, tears shed, commitments made, words shared and blessings offered. I am overwhelmed by the number of people who have decided to support me, including some I never would have expected. Their choice to give me some of their hard-earned income so I can show God's love to some of the most needy in this poverty-stricken country is such an encouragement and confirmation.

I've been assigned to a local Christian organisation that runs a hospital close to a poor part of a city in the heart of the country. I'm nervous about how my physio therapist skills will fit in. I hear that the

facilities are basic compared to what I'm used to in the UK but I desperately want to help those who, by birth or accident, suffer serious limb deformity. I want to show them that God cares for them and, where I get the chance, to tell them that as well.

Fast forward a few months. I am reasonably settled in at the hospital and have got into as much of a routine as is possible in this delightfully chaotic country. I live in a small house in a pleasant compound a short walk from the hospital with a doctor from the USA as my housemate. Rosie is lovely and has been here for five years.

In spite of my original hopes to live as much as I could like a local, this really hasn't worked out. Our gated compound is protected by armed guards. Almost all the others living in the compound are westerners, a good number also working at the hospital. Like most of the ex-pat Christians, I attend an international church in the city. Even though I really appreciate being able to care for some of the poor in this society in the hospital, at times I feel guilty being so separated from most of those I have come all this distance to serve. I have become friends with a few local Christians, but they are from the upper levels of society and attend the same church I do. I now realise that my life and background are so different from the rest of the local community, even from the local Christians, that I don't, and can't, fit in like I had hoped to.

So the shine has worn off my original enthusiasm a bit. Every day as I walk to the hospital I see injustice, poverty and inequality all around me. I can't even walk there unaccompanied. There is safety in numbers and having a man in our group is essential. And that's just in our small part of the city. Other areas are a lot worse.

Yes, I knew that there were great needs in this land. That's why I came here in the first place. But it is worse than I expected. The utter hopelessness of some of those I care for can overwhelm me. The violence in the slum areas is frightening. The way women are treated in this society breaks my heart. There seems to be no way for those born into abject poverty to make any progress. The government pays lip service to helping the poorest in society but corruption at the top is endemic. There is no effective healthcare or education unless you can pay for it; very few can afford the luxury of either. What I considered normal at home—even viewed as a right—here is a privilege reserved for those born at the top of the ladder; or the few who will never get on the ladder but somehow come across our mission and similar organisations where they get some basic help and care, but it really is just a few.

I also have conflicting thoughts about my finances. Before coming here I was sure that I could live on less than the mission recommended so I settled for a lower target. I know this means I'm not putting anything into my pension but at 29 I guess I can worry about that later. The costs here are higher than I'd expected, especially for ex-pats. Yes, I'm fine for my daily needs—in fact I feel embarrassingly wealthy compared to those we help every day—but I have no slack in my budget. My cousin has just announced her engagement and I'd love to be at her wedding—we were more like sisters growing up—but unless there are some special gifts in the next few months, I won't make it.



Because many of my friends from church are highly-paid local people or ex-pats working for major multinational companies, I simply can't afford to engage in the sort of social activities they do. They sometimes offer to pay for me, but that makes me feel like a sponger. It isn't at all that I want to live a high life. If I'd wanted that I'd have stayed in the UK and made as much money as I could as a physio. Neither do I want to spend all my free time playing board games with a few other hard-up western missionaries! But then I look around me again and realise that I am fantastically wealthy compared to those I see every day. So what if I miss my cousin's wedding or don't have much of a social life? I am a lot better off than 99% of those living in this country. But still.....!

One item I think I am spending too much on is my health and repatriation insurance. This was at the insistence of the leaders of my home church and they set it at a limit much higher than I am comfortable with. Apparently some years ago the husband of a missionary couple from the church had a really bad accident that required immediate medical transfer back to the UK. They didn't have any insurance and were working with a small mission with very limited resources, so the church ended up paying a huge bill for all the costs. I'm their first missionary to go overseas since then so this time they are insisting that my insurance covers every conceivable eventuality. I think it is way beyond what I need and while I appreciate the church paying half the premium, I'm left with the other half. And this in a country where people couldn't even afford insurance to cover toothache!

If I look at my needs I think I might not have enough. If I look around me at the local community I think I have way too much. If I look at the lifestyle of my friends back in the UK I can get angry at the waste I see in their lives; I could do so much more here if I had even half what they have. If I look at the lifestyle of those around me I realise that they view me with envy because I am so rich; they could do so much more if they had half what I have. Living as a western missionary in a poverty stricken land isn't always easy or simple to work out in practice.

I fear becoming immune to the poverty and injustice I see every day but I also know that I can't solve every problem I see. I feel caught and I'm not sure how to respond in a way that has integrity, is effective and isn't just a coping mechanism to deal with my own guilt and powerlessness.

I guess these are the sort of questions going round my head these days:

- If God has a special place in his heart for the fatherless, why are so many children living on the streets with no one to care for them and no one to protect them?
- How can I reconcile my own relative wealth, comfort and safety in a land where 99% of the population has none of these?
- What can or should I do when I see the results of serious domestic violence and know that it is tacitly accepted in this society?
- Every day on my way to the hospital I step over people begging in the street. I can't help them all, but if I help one then I am inundated by even louder cries for help from all the others. And the one I help is likely to be targeted by the others if I show undue favour to her. What can I do?

- I feel guilty when I think of how I used my money back in the UK and took so much for granted. How can I communicate my feelings to family and friends without appearing to criticise their use of finances, especially as a good number support me financially?
- I don't have enough to put anything towards my pension right now and I don't feel comfortable about that. However, every day I see people who are likely to go to bed hungry, so why should I put money into my old age when I could help them get a meal today instead?
- I feel uncomfortable about how the church I attend seems to respond to needs in the city. It seems that they do enough to deal with their own consciences but have no effective strategy in place. And with the wealth in that church, including the little that I could add, we could do so much.
- Sometimes I envy my missionary colleagues who have been here for some years. They seem able to block out the awful poverty that surrounds us and get on with helping the relative few we care for at the hospital. But sometimes I get annoyed with them too for ignoring so much of the need around us. I've tried to talk with them but it seems that they have taken a pragmatic approach. I'd like more of a thought-through foundation on which to base my response to what I see around me.

I'm not looking for specific answers to these questions. But what would help are some principles and pointers, Biblical and practical, that will help me know how to respond to the poverty, injustice and inequality that surrounds me while I live in relative wealth, stability and security.

Can someone help me?





Now that you have read Rebecca's story, we have listed below a summary of the responses to each of her questions. There are a few threads that are repeated throughout the responses. These could be summarised as follows:

- These are all difficult issues with no clear-cut answers
- Prayer is key
- Be humble
- Don't confuse western values with Biblical values
- Cultures are complex
- Talk to locals
- Talk to long-serving ex-pat missionaries

For each of Rebecca's questions we have outlined themes that appeared in a number of the responses. Where there are specific comments that might only have been mentioned by one or two but which we thought would add something helpful to the discussion we have added them also. Sometimes those responding took different, and even contradictory, approaches to some of the issues.

This showed us clearly that there are no easy answers and what might be the right approach for one person may not be the right approach for someone else, even if the context is the same.

One of the responses seemed to offer a particular blend of honesty, reality, challenge and solution. For sake of maintaining her anonymity we'll call her Sarah. We have quoted more from Sarah than the others and we hope her insights will be a special help to you.

We are not saying whether we agree or disagree with any of the comments from the fourteen missionaries. We simply offer them as their responses to the type of situations they have found themselves in over the years. We leave it up to you to find a way of responding to poverty, injustice and inequality that follows the principles of scripture, honours God and fits your personal circumstances. This isn't always easy and the decisions you make may differ from those of your colleagues. That's fine—there are no absolute right and wrong responses. Just make sure that you continue to offer a spirit of acceptance to those who take a different approach; be ready to have your assumptions and responses challenged and, where necessary, change your mind.

If God has a special place in his heart for the fatherless, why are so many children living on the streets with no one to care for them and no one to protect them?

Common themes

A theme running through the responses to this question was: sin. Words like self-interest, lack of sharing, selfishness, abdicating our God-given responsibility were used to describe why God's heart for the fatherless is not being worked out in daily reality.

Many of those responding expressed their frustration at the reality of child poverty and most said that Rebecca's question was impossible to answer in any satisfying way.

Another theme running through a number of the response was that each person has the ability to do something: we are God's hands and feet in dark places; ask God to give you his love for these people. He will help you not to be overwhelmed by the task and to know what your part is and what you have to leave to others. God shows his care through people like you going out to serve. If you didn't go there would be more children with no one to care for them.

A few specific comments

- A number of people emphasised the need to pray, including the importance of praying for wisdom to know how to respond and also to pray for the children themselves. One person said: "You can be a child protector through prayer. When you see these needs, pray with confidence, knowing that God will send workers in response to your prayers. Through this experience, you may learn to depend on God's strength not your own."
- One person quoted Matthew 25:35-36, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

From Sarah

I have no idea. No doubt the answer lies somewhere in the theological debates surrounding Original Sin and Man's Free Choice etc. Things I don't understand and quite frankly, don't have room in my head to grapple with at this point in my life. BUT, what I do know is that while we are sent to preach Good News to everyone regardless of race, religion, social status or income, we are given a specific command to care for the widows and orphans, to preach Good News to the poor. So, in my head I can't understand why these problems have come into existence, but I do know that God has commanded us to be His answer for looking after them. And to be overwhelmed into doing nothing because we don't understand why they are there in such vast numbers is not an option.



How can I reconcile my own relative wealth, comfort and safety in a land where 99% of the population has none of these?

Common themes

The material inequality in the world is unfair and can't be reconciled in our minds; would having less make you more able to help those you are there to serve? God has given you the resources you have, use them wisely.

A few specific comments

- The Bible nowhere promises that everyone will be equal, but we are commanded to share. Yes, you have certain obligations to help the situation and if you just retreat into your expat bubble you may be guilty of not fulfilling those obligations. On the other hand, if you burn out from giving out too much of yourself and your resources too quickly, you will have to return home and that will not be to these people's advantage. Therefore, you will be wise to pace yourself and look after yourself so that you can serve consistently for longer.
- You didn't grow up in that state of poverty and have never developed the skills to deal with it as the people you live among have done from their childhood. To stay in the ministry and keep working effectively you need to take care of your own wellbeing. You will find as you stay longer that some things gradually become easier and you develop coping mechanisms, while other things actually get harder to deal with and over the long term this results in culture stress. As an example, there are situations I am not prepared to put myself in after eight years on the field that I would have put up with initially. One of these is travelling cheaply. When there is the option of travelling by direct flight, even for more money, I will take it, so that I arrive on the field less tired and frazzled. I will also not buy the cheapest train ticket, as that subjects me to danger when travelling alone. Instead, I travel in the air-conditioned compartment whose doors are always locked.
- We try to keep a clear conscience before God and man, as it says in Acts 24:16. As regards what lifestyle we live before the poor, in our missionary country we try to be guided by the Holy Spirit and the local believers. I remember when, contrary to the advice of the local believers, we spent \$4000 buying a second-hand locally made car early in our ministry so that we would not live above the standard of the locals. We learned the lesson when we spent over twice that repairing the car and in the end bought foreign and always have done so since.

From Sarah

Firstly, thank God for all that you and your family have. Remain in a constant state of thankfulness and never take it for granted. Breed a generous heart. Tithe before anything goes out of your account monthly. It's not yours, it's God's, no-matter what your budget is. 90% goes further than 100% if you have submitted it to Him. Then work out how much you can give as an offering from the rest of the budget. Take people for coffees, plan generous treats for your close friends who couldn't otherwise afford them. Buy something for someone that you think has far more money than you.

Just a few weeks ago I was sitting with [a local lady] in her house. She is a lovely woman, but not taken to sentimentality. I have never really seen her show much emotion in years that I have [known her]. But this day, she was telling me about a family across the road where the mother had died and the father had just had a stroke and she broke down in tears. She desperately wanted to find a way that she could help this family. In my heart, I felt the strong prompt of the Spirit to get involved and we committed to helping buy groceries monthly. This is not good development practice. It is not sustainable forever and it is not reproducible. But it is listening to the voice of the Spirit that just whispers “love them”.

Remember that [economic inequality] is not your fault, nor is it your responsibility to solve all the problems in this society but God has sent you there to be an answer to one small part of it. So keep your eyes open and your ears listening for the part you have to play. Listen to the prompting of the Spirit as to when to be extravagantly generous to someone who has nothing.

What can or should I do when I see the results of serious domestic violence and know that it is tacitly accepted in this society?

Common themes

This issue was one that all 14 had some experience of and it caused them to be upset, angry, distressed, frustrated and exasperated. The most common response was the need to talk to local people to try to understand the complexities of the host culture. This wasn't to excuse or accept issues like domestic violence, but rather be able to help better by having a more complete understanding of why it is accepted in the society you now live in. Another common response was the need to show compassion to the victims. A number mentioned the importance of helping local Christians get an understanding from scripture of God's view of marriage and family and the ways in which Jesus honoured women—against the cultural norm of his day.

A few specific comments

- In the worst cases, we may be able to help victims escape from violent situations, although again it may be important to take some wise local counsel.
- I personally try to keep a balance between (a) feeling the pain, taking it to Jesus who also feels pain and (b) trying not to focus on it so that I can continue relating to, in some cases, the perpetrators of the offense.
- You've left a country in which most wrongs can be righted (or addressed) by the law, and come to a place where only God can right wrongs. It's time to learn about the power of prayer. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that God can't help that beaten up lady you saw. Turn to prayer for HER. Stop generalising to the entire population. Focus on the person you saw. Perhaps God allowed you to see her or come into contact with her so that you could pray for her.



From Sarah

Allow righteous anger to motivate you to do good. But there are lots of complicated levels of what is going on that are extremely culturally ingrained that you cannot completely understand, so don't think that you know it all. Also, don't put your home country on a pedestal saying that it doesn't happen there, why is this country so bad. It does happen there, this country is probably not much worse in lots of areas! Find locals who are also outraged (because even though it seems that they just accept the wrongs, there are plenty who are deeply angry about what they see in their communities) and start to try to understand from them the intricacies of what is going on. Find local charities and associations that are already starting, even in the smallest of ways, to impact these issues.

We see time and time again the foreigners knowing 'right' from 'wrong' with all the answers about what can be done to tackle these issues, but without locals being involved in the heart of the answers, you'll never make a difference. Be a learner and a question-asker, not one that has all the solutions. Empower locals that care to stand up and make a difference in their own land.

Every day on my way to the hospital I step over people begging in the street. I can't help them all, but if I help one then I am inundated by even louder cries for help from all the others. And the one I help is likely to be targeted by the others if I show undue favour to her. What can I do?

Common themes

Again, the theme of asking local people for their perspective was to the fore. A number of people talked about how easy it is to be overwhelmed by the need around you so the importance of prayer for wisdom was emphasised. A few mentioned that there can sometimes be a deliberate attempt to take advantage of westerners and not to assume that what you see is always the reality. A couple talked about the usefulness of seeking out local charities who help people in their own communities and giving through them.

A few specific comments

- We can never meet all the needs but we can treat people with respect. The need is not the call.
- Maybe God might lead you to help in a certain way—a special meal for a group of them (eg the children); helping some of the children with school fees.
- Don't be overwhelmed: Jesus had the same problem—even He had to be selective, e.g. he helped just one man at the pool of Bethesda; He only did what He saw His Father doing. You need to ask the Holy Spirit to highlight to you those individuals He wants you to help, and to show you how to do it.
- Being hasty and spontaneous is not always the most helpful response.

From Sarah

Leave home half an hour early and get down in the dirt (literally if you have to) beside these people and talk to them instead of just working out who to give a few pennies to. They are dirty and infective and smelly, but who cares—you can have a shower! Ask them their name. Ask them who their family are. Ask them where they live and what they love. They are real people and giving the odd one a few pennies isn't treating them with love and dignity, it is just placating our own consciences. Connect with them, and make friends. Then you will stop seeing just a crowd of beggars and you will start seeing individuals that are all different, all with different needs and fears and hopes and dreams, and all loved by God.

I have a young daughter. With the 'expat' lifestyle that you are struggling with, we also go to clubs for babies that come from affluent families both local and foreign, and she is making friends who have plenty of money. But at least one afternoon a week we go out walking in the city streets to find beggars. On our hearts at the minute are old ladies. The first old lady we find, I and my daughter sit down beside her. We ask her name and my daughter gives her a kiss. We ask her the names of her children and grandchildren. Then my toddler daughter gives her a small gift for her (named) grandchildren to buy sweets. And I speak a blessing from God over her family. We try to pass by again if we know she is there and we call out her name as we walk by and blow kisses.

Everyone around looks at us in astonishment as to why we know her name and why toddler with her foreigner mother is laughing a blowing kisses to an old dirty beggar who is responding with laughs and kisses. She has become my little girl's friend. The old lady has a name, and is just as much a dear friend to my little girl as her rich little friends in baby club.

Secondly, allow a trusted local to help you understand the different agendas and needs that are in play, because this is not just a homogenous group of needy people. Just like in your home country where you 'feel' the subtle differences in need, a local will be able to help you in your adopted land. Make sure this is a local with a soft and generous heart who you have seen help people, and ask questions. Why did they give to one person and not the other? What did they see that was different? Why did they give that person money, but the other person they took for a meal? Why did they refuse to bring clothes to one lady who said her child was freezing from lack of clothes, but yet they clothed another man's whole family who seemed to be not so badly off? As foreigners it is very difficult to understand subtle differences so find locals to learn from. [A local friend] has helped me in this. He never gives to people begging with children but one day he lifted a lady and her two children in his car, took them to the market and bought them a whole goat and took them home with their goat in his car boot! "What was the difference" I asked?! "Not sure" was his answer, "I just got a feeling that these people needed me right at this moment!"



I feel guilty when I think of how I used my money back in the UK and took so much for granted. How can I communicate my feelings to family and friends without appearing to criticise their use of finances, especially as a good number support me financially?

Common themes

Don't judge! This came through consistently. Also, your context has changed but theirs hasn't so be careful using your new setting as the basis for commenting or even thinking negatively about how others who are not in your context use their money.

Most also said that it is useful to share how you feel when communicating with friends back home, telling people the journey you are on in a way that reflects what God is doing in your life and does not reflect on them.

A few specific comments

- A man in a desert shouldn't criticise the way another man living in a flood plain uses water.
- Questioning our values and practices is a healthy thing, not a negative thing.
- When we are back in the UK we express our gratitude for such things like the NHS and even rain and we don't complain when things don't go perfectly.
- Two people focussed on Matthew 7 when Jesus told people not to judge others and to be careful about pointing out a splinter in someone else's eye while not realising that there is a plank of wood in our own eye.
- One person mentioned Philippians 1:5 where Paul is very positive about his supporters in Philippi and their partnership in the gospel with him.

From Sarah

Don't criticise, and really try not to be critical in your actions. Quite frankly it is between them and God what they do with the money they earn. Try to be a model to them for something different. Share with them your struggles in these areas in your own life, and tell them stories of the times when you are finding breakthrough for a new way to live. They won't help but be inspired and challenged and hopefully that will allow God to speak to them instead of you.

I don't have enough to put anything towards my pension right now and I don't feel comfortable about that. However every day I see people who are likely to go to bed hungry, so why should I put money into my old age when I could help them get a meal today instead?

Common themes

If you don't prepare for your future you run the risk of being a burden on others in your latter years. Also mentioned by most was the importance of understanding that you can best care for others when you learn to take care of yourself. In this context a number quoted "Love your neighbour as yourself", commenting that the first step to loving others is to learn to love yourself.

A few specific comments

- If you are acting out of guilt, you are under condemnation (Romans 8:1) rather than being under the conviction of the Spirit. God gives people different graces for different services. If you don't have the grace to joyfully ignore your pension for the sake of someone's meal today, then don't do it. That may sound like a cop out, but it's not. If you go beyond your level of grace, you will very quickly burn out. Also, consider the example of Christ. He didn't go without food when someone else was hungry or not sleep when someone else was exhausted. He focused on what God was calling him to do and it's just as well that he did, because God was calling him to provide atonement for all humanity throughout all ages! Imagine if he had burnt out because he was running around trying to ensure his lot was no better than the least of those in Israel? He would have missed the purpose for which he came to earth. Consider what God called you to this country to do and stay roughly within those parameters. In doing so, you will be much more effective because God will be working through you.
- Enormous question. No easy answer. There could be a way to do both. Or perhaps God is leading you to trust him with your future, and rethink priorities that you once held dear but now don't.
- I have talked to many missionaries who said they regretted not planning and saving better for their retirement. They regret that due to lack of finances they were unable to travel around as much as they would have liked to, some even within their home countries, to encourage and challenge others to consider mission work. They also reminded me how quickly retirement age creeps up on you.
- Listen to the Holy Spirit. There may be times when it's right to use some of tomorrow's funds today. Let God guide you, not primarily any agency. If it helps, you could set up a Standing Order for pension payments to be paid automatically each month from your account; then you wouldn't actually receive that money at all, and only have to allocate the funds that did come through to you!
- Definitely save, and definitely give. It's not either/or.

From Sarah

You have a responsibility before God to be a good steward of your finances. If you don't prepare for your retirement, then you are going to be a burden on somebody when that time comes. Someone is going to have to pay for your retirement. And you are not responsible to feed the five thousand. He is. He might ask you to bring your loaves and fishes so that he can use them to do the feeding, but he isn't asking you to go hungry. The little boy ate until he was full too didn't he?!



I feel uncomfortable about how the church I attend seems to respond to needs in the city. It seems that they do enough to deal with their own consciences but have no effective strategy in place. And with the wealth in that church, including the little that I could add, we could do so much.

Common themes

Be careful, be humble, be patient. Watch, listen and learn.

Talk to those who have been there for a lot longer than you have to find out the background.

If you have an idea, share it with other in the church.

Offer any skill you have to the church as part of their outreach.

Make suggestions, but don't judge.

A few specific comments

- Pray about attending another church, as well or instead of the one you attend. If God has put in your heart a desire to be close to the locals, committing yourself exclusively to an expat church probably isn't going to let you fulfil that desire and you will become bitter and critical because you yourself are in the wrong place. You may need to find a balance between making sure you get fed spiritually and get the fellowship you need, and finding your place among the local people and getting to know their culture.
- God might use you to be a catalyst for change but God is also wanting to change you.
- They may want to make changes but the prevailing political or religious climate might be difficult for them.
- Be open to examining why you feel uncomfortable. Don't respond just on the basis of feelings.
- Focus on the positives.
- Make sure that you personally are doing what you can to give to the poor.

From Sarah

Gather people around you who struggling with the same questions and burdens as you and start to prayerfully brainstorm what can be done about it. Why wait for someone else to do it if God is giving you the burden for it? I suspect you will find that once you start talking about it, there are very few people that truly love Jesus there that won't have struggled with the same issues. The 'older guard' who have been around for some time may have pushed it deep down and learnt to live with it, but I guarantee that once you start to talk about it, they will be challenged again. Possibly the hardest group that you will have will be the richer locals that attend your church. They might have just grown up accepting it for what it is and never felt challenged. In that case, ask your church leaders if you can start to open the Word to see what it says about serving the poor. It's not your job to convince people, it's His! While the expat members of the church might have most effect serving at a grass-roots level, it is the locals with more social influence and money who might be inspired to lobby for change at higher governmental levels. Both are needed for real change to ever take effect.

Sometimes I envy my missionary colleagues who have been here for some years. They seem able to block out the awful poverty that surrounds us and get on with helping the relative few we care for at the hospital. But sometimes I get annoyed with them too for ignoring so much of the need around us. I've tried to talk with them but it seems that they have taken a pragmatic approach. I'd like more of a thought-through foundation on which to base my response to what I see around me.

Common themes

The most common comments related to humility, prayer and talking to someone you trust who has been there a lot longer to get their perspective.

A number also mentioned that we can't meet everyone's needs. This included comments such as: you are *part* of God's solution in this country, not the whole of it; we will never be able to help everyone so it is good to focus on those that God brings to us and seek to help them to the best of our ability; your responsibility is you and your attitude to the poor and to maintain good relationships with colleagues who may have differing views to you.

A few specific comments

- One person quoted Deuteronomy 15:11, "There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed towards your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land", adding: this is not to say that we should ignore those we cannot help but realise that we are human and have limitations. We cannot reach everyone on our own but we can when we partner with others. Our heart should remain like that of Christ. Ready and willing to help those who are poor; whether in spirit or sustenance.
- It's good to honour one another above ourselves (Romans 12:10) and not to judge them (James 4:12) for their attitudes to the poverty around them—each one is responsible to God rather than to us.
- In order to live successfully in a very poor country people have to adopt different strategies and maybe they can give you some tips for the future.
- It is easy to blame and criticise others for their stance but your responsibility is you and your attitude to the poor and to maintain good relationships with colleagues who may have differing views to you. If you become too weighed down with sorrow you won't be able to function and do the job you came to do.
- These feelings are very normal but keeping them to yourself can sometimes drag you down. Ask others what their coping mechanisms are and how they reacted when they were new to the field.
- You are not your brother's keeper; his or her moral conscience. By the love you demonstrate you will open more hearts and remove more complacency than by anything else you may say or do.



From Sarah

Don't get angry with them, get angry with the system that has allowed these feelings to creep in. If they really are good people who love God, they have probably just become hardened and cynical in order to protect themselves from going mad. But you coming with new eyes could be just the thing they need to open their eyes again. As I suggested in response to a previous question, open the Word and pray for the Holy Spirit to speak and challenge.

At the same time, there may be things you need to learn from them about surviving here. Keep your heart soft. But you do need to learn that not everyone who begs is in terrible need. The people on the streets are normal human beings. Some are wonderful genuine people in terrible need; some are manipulative liars who immediately see your 'weakness' in caring too much and take horrible advantage of you. You need to be as wise as a serpent and as gentle as a dove if you are going to negotiate this successfully and in your newness here you may need to rely on the wisdom of those who have been around longer than you have.

Summary

So, having read the responses of fourteen experienced missionaries to the type of difficult issues you might face where God calls you to serve, what have you learned? Our own summary would be to repeat what we said at the start:

- These are all difficult issues with no clear-cut answers
- Prayer is key
- Be humble
- Don't confuse western values with Biblical values
- Cultures are complex
- Talk to locals
- Talk to long-serving ex-pat missionaries

And finally.... most of the Bible was written in contexts of poverty, injustice and inequality, so before you go it would be useful to spend time looking at how people in scripture dealt with these situations. That way you can build, for yourself, a set of principles that can provide a foundation for your responses rather than allow your emotions, which will be almost certainly confused and upsetting and perhaps even downright raw, determine how you respond.

The Finance for Living series of papers forms part of Stewardship's resources for Christian Workers. With contributions from a panel of advisors each of whom has significant experience within the area of mission, the series draws on their expertise to offer biblical teaching and practical guidance on issues affecting those living on personal financial support. The papers are available to download from the Stewardship website see <http://www.stewardship.org.uk/christian-workers>

This paper has been written by Myles Wilson, drawn from responses received from fourteen overseas missionaries and edited by Stewardship. Myles works with a wide range of mission agencies and Christian organisations with a special emphasis on training people in raising support. He is also the author of Funding the Family Business, see www.ftfb.org.

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