Evangelical Missiological Society Series
no. 22

The Missionary Family

Witness | Concerns | Care



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Editors

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The Missionary Family: Witness, Concerns, Care
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Published by William Carey Publishing (formerly William Carey Library)
10 W. Dry Creek Cir | Littleton, CO 80120 | www.missionbooks.org

William Carey Publishing is a ministry of Frontier Ventures
Pasadena, CA | www.frontierventures.org

Aidan Lewis, editor | Rose Lee-Norman, indexer
Hugh Pindur, interior designer | Mike Riester, cover designer

Printed Worldwide
27 26 25 24 23 2 3 4 5 6 IN

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The missionary family : witness, concerns, care / editors, Dwight P. Baker and Robert J. Priest.
pages cm. -- (Evangelical Missiological Society series ; no. 18)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-64508-529-4
1. Missionaries--Family relationships. 2. Sex crimes--Religious aspects--Christianity. I. Baker, Dwight P., editor of compilation.
BV2063.M5645 2014
266.0085--dc23

2014016730

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WALTER AND INGRID TROBISCH AND A MISSIOLOGY OF "COUPLE POWER"

ANNEKE STASSON

Walter and Ingrid Trobisch were Lutheran missionaries in Cameroon, West Africa, in the 1950s and 1960s. Walter was German and Ingrid, American. In 1962 Walter wrote *I Loved a Girl*, a book about sexual and marital issues in Africa that ended up being translated into over seventy languages.[1] *I Loved a Girl* established the Trobisches as authorities on love, sex, and marriage, and they went on to lead marriage seminars around the world.

The story of the Trobisches' marriage and ministry illustrates an important tradition in Protestant mission theory—namely, the missiology of the Christian home. Although the Christian home has traditionally been the domain of women missionaries, the Trobisches' missiology of "couple power" blurred the boundaries between men's work and women's work. Both spouses spoke in public, both wrote books, and, at least initially, both took care of the children.

Through historical analysis of the Trobisches' books, correspondence, and diaries, this chapter will argue that while the Trobisches' joint involvement in mission was integral to their own sense of vocational fulfillment, it also took a toll on their children. The chapter will give a fairly critical portrayal of the Trobisches' family life, but it does so with the understanding that this is exactly the kind of thing that the Trobisches themselves did in their marriage seminars. They often used their own mistakes to teach others. This was part of the way they sought to deepen their own couple power and to deepen the

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couple power of those who sought counsel from them. It is hoped that the Trobisches' story might shed light on the ongoing conversation among mission scholars and practitioners about how to achieve a fruitful work-family balance on the mission field.

MARITAL PARTNERSHIP IN TCHOLLIRÉ, CAMEROON, 1953–56

The Trobisches' first years as missionaries in Tcholliré were also their first years of married life. Consequently, they were learning what it meant to be missionaries at the same time that they were learning what it meant to be husband and wife. As they worked at learning the local language, they also learned what all spouses learn—namely, to express their needs and to meet the needs of the other. As they ran a dispensary, they also learned how to accommodate one another and to forgive. As they taught people how to read, they also continued to get to know each other. Walter told Ingrid about growing up in Leipzig, one of the most cultured cities in Europe. She told him about life in the Missouri Ozarks with nine brothers and sisters.

Besides sharing stories with each other, the Trobisches also came up with other strategies for coping with the loneliness of life in the mission field. For example, they reserved Friday night as "game night." They would wind up their record player, play one of the three records they owned, and create space for relaxation and enjoyment. The mail typically came on Fridays, so this added to the joy of the evening.[2] They also made sure their home was a place where they could feel comfortable and refreshed after the challenges of the day. As Ingrid wrote in her autobiography, "Walter and I found it important to have a neat and tastefully furnished home in which we could relax after . . . exhausting mornings. Our two rooms, with the beautiful picture on the wall, the fresh vase of flowers, and even the brightly decorated table, helped to restore us."[3]

In their efforts to cultivate marital intimacy and keep a neat and orderly home, the Trobisches were doing what generations of missionary couples in rural Africa had done before them. Historian Dana Robert has observed that missionary attention to cultivating an exemplary marriage and home life is itself a distinct missionary strategy. This missiology of the Christian home, she argues, has been a "cornerstone of Anglo-American missionary thought and practice."[4] Nineteenth-century missionary societies felt that it was good

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for indigenous peoples to view the interactions between husband and wife and between parents and children in a healthy Christian home. In the words of American Board Secretary Rufus Anderson in 1836, "The heathen should have an opportunity of seeing Christian families."[5] Therefore, missionary societies began sending out more married couples than they previously had done. Gradually, sending married couples to the field became a hallmark of evangelical Protestant mission.

Couples developed various ways of handling the division of labor that came with married life on the mission field. Some couples worked alongside each other, translating the Bible into the local language and traversing the countryside to evangelize.[6] Other couples maintained the gender roles that were popular in their home countries, whereby men occupied the public sphere and women the private sphere. Among these couples, some found the Victorian gender roles completely acceptable. Although they faced struggles peculiar to their roles, each viewed the sacrifices as part of his or her missionary commitment.[7] Other couples who held to Victorian gender roles on the mission field found them oppressive. Many women, particularly, grew frustrated when domestic duties made it difficult for them to engage in the mission work for which they had originally come to the field.[8]

For their part, Walter and Ingrid did not operate under strictly divided gender roles in their early mission career. While they did some gender-specific work, such as Walter's preaching and Ingrid's attending at births, they shared most of the duties of their mission life. They both taught, handed out medical supplies from their dispensary, and went on evangelistic trips to the surrounding area. Because they shared so many of their missionary duties, they developed a highly satisfying sense of marital partnership.

In 1955 Ingrid gave birth to their first child, Katrine. As with many missionary mothers before her, Ingrid found that the women of Tcholliré opened up to her in a new way after she became a mother.[9] The women observed with interest the way little Katrine grew healthy and strong. They also saw how Walter shared the duties of carrying the child. The women then questioned Ingrid about these things. Walter's favorite response, when accused of being unmanly by carrying a child, was to say, "Before the baby was born madame carried the baby; now monsieur can carry it."[10] Both he and Ingrid were pleased when some of the men in the village decided that they, too, could carry around their little ones.

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As soon as Walter and Ingrid discovered that Walter's carrying baby Katrine was a lesson on marital partnership for their observing neighbors, they made a point of having him carry the baby often. This process, by which unintentional actions become infused with theological significance, has a long and fruitful history. Making daily life into "object lessons" has been a classic strategy for missionary wives.[11] In fact, it has given them a deeper sense of integration between their domestic and mission work.

Around the time when Katrine was born, one of the new Christians in Tcholliré took a second wife. Perplexed, Walter asked the man, "Don't you love your wife?" The man replied that he took a second wife precisely *because* he loved his first wife. She was pregnant with their first child, and since couples were to abstain from sexual relations until the child was two or three years old, he took a second wife. For him, respecting the sexual taboo and taking another wife to satisfy his sexual urges was a way of respecting his first wife. The Trobisches learned that in many traditional African societies, women tended to abstain from sex during pregnancy and lactation, lest the semen poison the child.[12] They decided then that one way of fighting polygamy was to teach people about human anatomy in order to show that it was not possible for the semen to come into contact with the child.[13]

Another problem the Trobisches encountered, however, was that couples in Tcholliré used this sexual taboo during lactation to space out the birth of their children. If a mother got pregnant while she was nursing an infant, her milk might be reduced and the newborn child might starve. This is likely why the idea developed that semen could poison a child. In their eagerness to correct mistaken biological knowledge and fight polygamy, it is doubtful that the Trobisches recognized how the sexual taboo during lactation actually protected the newborn child. What they did recognize was that in order for monogamy to become a more feasible option, couples would have to be given alternative methods of birth control.[14] The only method of natural family planning available at the time was the rhythm method, but in later years the Trobisches would teach couples in Africa about the more effective symptothermal method of natural family planning.

For both Walter and Ingrid, teaching about fertility became what they would later call "an open door for missions."[15] Children were an integral part of African society, so couples in Tcholliré who were struggling to get pregnant

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welcomed the fertility information the Trobisches offered.[16] For their part, the Trobisches hoped this interest would lead to interest in Christian faith.

However, conversion was not their sole aim in teaching about fertility. They also believed that helping couples manage their fertility was, itself, part of their responsibility as missionaries. Genesis 2:24 called for husband and wife to "cleave to" or be united to each other.[17] So enabling couples to "cleave" was, in the Trobisches' eyes, an important Christian aim. Natural family planning helped couples achieve or avoid pregnancy as each couple desired, and this strengthened marriages. Fertility awareness allowed couples to resume sexual relations much sooner than the traditional two years, and this, the Trobisches believed, also served to enhance marital satisfaction.

Walter and Ingrid garnered many of their ideas about marriage from their Swiss marriage counselor, Theodor Bovet. During the 1950s one of the most popular conceptions of marriage in German Lutheran circles was that it was a way of enacting the divine order of creation. Because God made man before he made woman, man was to rule over woman in church, society, and marriage.[18] Bovet's understanding of marriage was incompatible with this view; he emphasized that marriage was a companionship. As the Trobisches talked with couples in Tcholliré about natural family planning and developed their own ideas on marital partnership, they were influenced more deeply by Bovet's teaching than by the idea of marriage as a divine order of creation. Their preference for the companionship view of marriage over the hierarchical view was reinforced by their observations of the division of labor in Tcholliré.

For the Trobisches the division of labor they found in Tcholliré was unjust, leaving women "completely overburdened." Walter wrote:

> From 6 a.m. to 3 p.m. they [the women in Tcholliré] weeded their gardens, sometimes with a baby on their back. Then they had to fetch wood and water, take care of the children, prepare the food, which included pounding the grain, grinding and sifting it, a process that takes two hours time. Meanwhile the husband was already waiting impatiently for his evening meal, after which he demanded sexual union, in some cases even repeatedly. No wonder that those women often urged their husbands to take second and third wives. They looked at polygamy as a possibility to take once in a while a "vacation from marriage."[19]

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