



# THE EXPAT GUIDE TO FRIENDSHIP

“The most terrible poverty is loneliness and the feeling of being unloved.” - **Mother Teresa**

In 2015 I sat on the cold tile floor of our house in the remote bush of S. Sudan. As the hum of the generator matched the mosquitos buzzing around us, my family settled in for our Friday night movie night. That night's feature was Mom's Night Out. Do you remember that one? The overwhelmed young mama in her closet crying while she looks longingly at high heeled shoes that she never gets to wear anymore? (I could so relate.) And then the next morning as she is walking into church with kids draped on and around her, mascara violating her face from a failed attempt to cram glam (you know, put makeup on while driving - I just made that up), she is met by them. The crew of women who know her, get her, love her, encourage her, spur her on, and lift her up. They got her face and spirits all in order and made plans for a much needed girls night out. A reason to put on high heels.

Cut to my family. My kids are laughing like “Absolutely we do all of those things”. My husband is nodding like “Yep. Kids are nuts”. And I am leaking. Literal tears are on my cheeks and they weren't from laughter. There was no need for high heels in the bush of Africa. Even if I had them the mud roads would eat them alive. But more than mourning high heels, I was mourning the friendships I longed for. Friends who would give me pep talks. Encourage me to do great things. Brainstorm with me about my problems. Laugh with me about everything in between.

Maintaining, growing, and investing in friendships as a cross-cultural worker is challenging. And no one mentioned that part of this journey. I hope that this guide makes you feel seen. I pray that this guide gives you hope and tools to have the deep, lasting, meaningful friendships that God intended for us!



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I'm sure if asked we all would come up with a pretty similar top 3 list of why global workers leave the field; money matters, sickness, and relationship problems would probably top our lists. But could we as easily rattle off why they stay? Why does it seem we spend more time on building structures to support what may cause us to leave and we tend to feel guilty investing in what may help us stay?

A recent research project conducted by LMFT Geoff Whiteman revealed that the #2 reason Global workers state they STAY on the field is because of **friendships**. When I chatted with him, he stated that a common thread for the most resilient global workers is that as their resiliency goes up, so does their emphasis on support through friendship.

So if having a good support system of friendship helps create resilient global workers, why is it so hard to find encouragement and resources about the challenges living cross culturally presents to having those deep friendships?

Let's start by digging into some common misconceptions we carry about friendship on the field.

## Misconceptions About Friendship on the Field

Although having deep and meaningful friendships is not a desire that is unique to global workers, they do face additional challenges when it comes to overcoming loneliness and developing these relationships. Let's identify some common misconceptions that may be impacting our relationships...or lack of.

- **Developing friendships is not an approved use of my time on the field**

One global worker recounted a take away from their training days was the quote..."M's are like manure. Spread them out and they do some good. In a group they are just a stinky pile of... crap." My guess is we are all familiar with the real need for people to take the gospel where it's not. And yet even the heartiest of global workers who answer that call will one day look around, and long for the support of a good friend.

- **My close friends in my passport country will continue to be my close friends. We have technology!**

Many global workers who are new to a field may unconsciously depend on Facetime or

technology to meet their needs. They may have unrealistic expectations about how future needs can be met by these relationships. They don't yet have a context for the impact that time and distance may have on those old friendships.

- **My teammates will be my best friends!**

I hope so! But for many this doesn't end up happening. And the reality of that can be devastating to those who have placed a lot of expectations on deep needs being met here.

- **Friendship is one of the things I laid on the altar when I said yes to the call.**

The grit is there with this mindset but the reality of what God wants for us is off. He created community and longs for us to know him better through it!

- **I can only spend time developing local friendships.**

Local relationships are so valuable and what we can learn from them is priceless. However God may be working through expat relationships to meet different needs that allow you to grow and serve.

- **Local friendships will be one way relationships.**

Just as we can over emphasize local relationships, we can also undervalue them as well. Although language and culture efforts are required to develop these relationships they are powerful!

*God's Heart for Community*

For many global workers, the needs around them are great, and their time is limited. In order to take the time required to develop relationships, they are going to have to believe that God has placed significant value on it. Let's take a moment to look at God's heart for community.

- **God Himself exists in community- the Trinity**

Father. Son. Holy Spirit. Three in one. How can we learn about who God is if we don't also know what it's like to be in community with each other? There are aspects of him that can only be fully realized there...in relationship with others. As human beings made in the image of God who want to truly know him more, we must position ourselves with shoulders touching and lives that overlap with others.

- **God values community with others that are like us. Others that submit to Him.**

"I will make a helper fit for him" (Genesis 2:18). This one I am so grateful for. There is

nothing like the encouragement from a friend who says, "I have been there and you can do this. Let me show you how".

We know that Adam wasn't alone in the Garden. God was with him. The perfect companion...almost. In his providence God knew Adam needed someone else. God knew the importance of having someone like "us" to go through life with. Someone to wrestle with concepts like obedience and submission and desire with.

I am so thankful for partners in the struggle. What would we do without them?

- **Jesus and They**

Perhaps one of the more touching emphasis that is put on relationships happens in the gospel of Mark. Read the words of Mark 2:1-5. If I were to pick a story in the Bible that would motivate me to invest in friendships, it's this one. Read this story taking note of the number of times the word "they" is used.

Are you back? Here's what I don't know. I don't know if these friends used to run around the city streets as kids before an accident caused paralysis to rob them of the carefree friendship they enjoyed. Or maybe this man had been paralyzed his entire life and for their entire lives they were the friends who loved sacrificially. But what I do know is that "they" were fervent friends. And I know that I want one. And I want to be one.

In this entire interaction, these friends don't say a word. The story is about the restoration of the paralyzed man, but the paralyzed man does nothing to bring it to pass. Everything is motivated by "they". And it is "they" that moved the heart of Jesus to forgive his sins and restore his strength.

I don't know if the paralyzed man even had it in him to believe anymore...but his friends did. It was their intensity and passion that did not give up in getting their friend to the feet of Jesus that healed him. There was no recognition. Their names will only ever be held in the word "they" recorded in Mark. There was nothing in it for them that the world would understand. But oh, what the world can learn from them.

I am jealous of their faith. I am jealous of their love. I am jealous of their humility. I am jealous of their friendship.

Jesus understood that there would be times we would need the arms of others to carry us to restoration. Jesus understood we would need friends like "they".

- **Jesus called his disciples “friends”.**

John 15:13-15 (NLT) “You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn’t confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me.”

I wonder what the exact moment was when Jesus looked at the disciples and thought, “Now. Now they are my friends”. For that lightbulb moment to happen to us it may be when we can trust someone with the stories we protect. Trust them with the parts of us we shield the world from. For Jesus, it was when he could trust them with the most important thing he brought in his flesh, the Word of his father.

But what really challenges me to value friendship is the mere fact that Jesus had friends at all! The one human that truly could be in perfect community with God and maybe have no need for earthly friendship decided that with his limited time on earth, it was worth it to open himself up to hurt and disappointment. To invest in friendship.

You will not find the warrior, the poet, the philosopher, or the Christian by staring in his eyes as if he were your mistress; better fight beside him, read with him, argue with him, pray with him. **The Four Loves, C. S. Lewis**

## *Biblical Examples of Friendship*

In the Bible, the inspired word of God left for us filled with important examples to learn and live from, we find several examples of friendships. If you would like to delve deeper into lessons we can learn from 5 different passages on friendship, we have included those for you in the “heart” section of this month’s resources.

I believe God intends for friendships to be an avenue for him to encourage and lift us up as a part of the body of believers AND as a way for us to learn things about him that we can’t do in isolation. These are powerful things for our life as a believer!

We’ve already addressed some misconceptions that can make growing friendships a challenge for the cross cultural community. You may not be surprised to know that the challenges don’t stop there. Let’s take a look at the additional challenges that expats face in creating, maintaining and growing deep friendships.

## Challenges Unique to Cross Cultural Workers

- **Time** Everything takes longer. That is a common thread heard from global workers. Whether it is the time it takes just to survive or the time required to attend to the great needs that are pressing in from all sides. With a limited amount of time (and energy) available, spending this valuable currency on growing personal friendships may seem like a bad investment.
- **Mobility** Global Workers often live a nomadic lifestyle. Even if they stay in one place to work, every few years they are picking up to spend a few months to a year in their passport country. When you are constantly on the move you don't put effort into many relationships. With this lifestyle it's easy to be distracted from putting in the work needed to grow relationships.
- **Transitions** And when you do stay put, people around you transition in and out of your life on a regular basis. Whether visitors, teams, or expat friends, the constant loss can cause a wall of protection to form that keeps you from willingly opening up and investing in deep ways.
- **Expectations** When you do find people to invest in, you may feel your relationship is doomed from the start because of unrealistic expectations. Team can easily fall into this category. When you have a shared mission and journey with someone, the high expectations put on the resulting relationship can lead to serious hurt when needs go unmet. Expectations seem to be a common weight global workers pile on each other that can lead to broken relationships.

Because we can join all of humanity in our need and desire for friendship, there have been several books published recently that are sure to be a great resource in our friendship journey. We have recommended a few for you in the "head" section of your monthly content.

However, in my search I found there to be a real lack of resources that were able to speak directly to our community about the challenges that are unique to us. Challenges in growing deep friendship as a global worker.

One of those factors is the way time, distance, and the shared experiences of cross cultural life change how we interact with our community. We've compiled a list of the 5 types of friendships that are unique to cross-cultural workers. For each type of friendship we have started you out with a few blessings and challenges to think about that go along with each. This may be the

first time you are considering that the friendships you have been lumping into one category actually should be viewed and cared for differently.

After reading this list we invite you to take advantage of the **Friendship Assessment and Friendship Snapshot pages** included in the “heart” section of your monthly content. Use them to help you see how to best care for and grow your friendships in each category.

We hope this list gives you hope and a new found grace for yourself as you learn to navigate each relationship you are in.

## 5 Friendships Unique to Cross Cultural Workers

If in this process you identify another type of friendship unique to global workers please share!

### 1 Passport Country Friendships

These are the friendships that you had long before serving in another country was on your radar. These are relationships that tend to be most fully realized when you are in your passport country.

#### Blessings

- Can be safe spaces for laying burdens.
- Can be financial and emotional support.
- Can help with logistics of things that require your passport country resources.

#### Challenges

- In preparation for your leaving, they may begin to pull away.
- The shared circumstances that bonded your friendships are spaced out by time and distance.
- Changes that happen gradually are felt all at once when you meet back up. Kids may not mesh. Values shift and morph.

### 2 Team Friendships

#### Blessings

- Shared mission! Shared struggles.
- Built in family.
- Help to shoulder the workload.



## Challenges

- Expectations. May unintentionally desire them to meet all of our needs. They can't.
- Their choices and actions affect us like no other friendship does.
  - Level of living.
  - Guests and furlough.
  - Choices in relationships with nationals.

## 3 National Friendships

### Blessings

- Provide cultural knowledge.
- New opportunities for God reveal things to you about him from their perspective.
- Provide connection to communities and relationships.
- Too many to name!

### Challenges

- Being truly open and vulnerable may not always be an option. (Why are you here?)
- Socio economic differences.
- Not having a job that is well understood can cause barriers.
- Possible challenge of patron client relationship.

## 4 Expat Friendships

Friendships with others who are living cross culturally in your host country.

### Blessings

- Face common challenges and situations together.
- They can become a safe place to ask advice outside of team.
- Their decisions don't as directly affect yours. Furlough? Visitors? Bring them on.

### Challenges

- You can feel competitiveness in mission.
- You may feel judgment in differing beliefs/values/methods.

## 5 New Passport Country Friendships

These are relationships that developed in your passport country after you left.

### Blessings

- Encouragement.

- There is no pressure that you meet expectations they had based on a previous relationship.

## Challenges

- Trust may take longer to form without the foundation of an in-person relationship.
- Slower growth with no shared experiences to connect you.

During this month we have created a **Friendship Snapshot and Friendship Assessment** for you to interact with each week. Print these out and include them in your weekly rhythm for this month as a practical way to assess and grow your friendships!

## *Being a Good Friend*

**John 13:35** Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.

Whether we like it or not, the people we serve are watching us. They are watching how we love and serve each other. Our friendships to them and around them are a witness to the Lord we serve and submit to.

So while you are asking the Father to help you grow in this area, here are some practical ways to be a good friend:

- Show genuine interest in what's going on in the life of your friends. Show you care about what they say, think, and feel.
  - Call them with no agenda except to ask about something they are dealing with or are interested in.
  - Plan a coffee date with a list of questions you have for them NOT a list of things you want to share with them.
  - Make a plan to do something they love even if it's not what fills you up.
- Accept them as they are. Encouraging growth in areas that are lacking is different than trying to change their personality. If they are an introvert, don't try to turn them into an extrovert.
  - If there are things that frustrate you about how they operate, take time in your quiet time to ask the Lord to show you the positive things about that aspect of their personality. Begin to look for that when you are together.

- Listen well. Don't tell them how to think or feel. Good friends encourage and lead each other to God and watch him change their thinking and feelings.
  - If you struggle with offering unsolicited advice, make it a goal to go an entire conversation with just asking questions.
  - Don't start your advice with "I think..." Try beginning any advice by going to scripture first. Not only will this grow your relationship as you seek the Lord together, it will help your friend to know where to turn for help when you're not around.
- Mutually share. Be willing to be open and vulnerable. True deep friendships can't be one sided.
  - If you feel you have friends but the friendships aren't deep, check your heart for walls you may not have known were there. Are you unintentionally keeping people at an arm's length?
  - Pray about the small circle that you can trust with your vulnerability.

Our investments in deep friendships will increase longevity and resilience on the field and lead others to know that we belong to Jesus because of our genuine love for each other. And that is an investment worth making.



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