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"Strangers in a Strange Land": Assessing the Experience of Latter-day Saint Expatriate Families

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The word *expatriate* is derived from Latin *ex*, meaning out, and *patria*, meaning fatherland. In a broad sense, an expatriate is defined as anyone living outside his or her native land. Prominent scriptural expatriates include Adam and Eve, Abraham, Moses,1 Lehi and his family, the Apostle Paul, and Moroni. In a sense, all of us are spiritual expatriates with plans and hopes of ultimately returning to our home of origin.

For the purposes of this article, I define expatriates as those who retain citizenship in their home country and normally maintain family, social, financial, and professional ties there, but who move their domicile to another country, intending to pursue their career and live their life abroad indefinitely. These long-term, “perennial expatriate” families are committed to living, working, and raising their children in a foreign setting. The following discussion will focus on long-term expatriate Latter-day Saint families who live primarily in developing countries, mostly because my frame of reference and circle of expatriate associations are grounded in my family’s ten-year experience living in the developing world.

The Impact of the Expatriate Experience

The American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864) offered this reflection on the impact of expatriate life after a six-year sojourn in England and Italy:

> The years, after all, have a kind of emptiness when we spend too many of them on a foreign shore. We defer the reality of life, in such cases, until a future moment, when we shall again breathe our native air; but, by and by, there are no future moments; or, if we do return, we find that the native air has lost its invigorating quality, and that life has shifted
its reality to the spot where we have deemed ourselves only temporary residents. Thus, between two countries, we have none at all, or only that little space of either in which we lay down our discontented bones.²

Now, more than a century later, a discussion of the importance and impact of expatriate life remains timely and relevant. Rapid advances in telecommunications and transportation are bringing the world community closer and closer together. Interaction between individuals and institutions of diverse national, racial, and ethnic origin has increased dramatically, and global competitiveness and cooperation have emerged as vital issues for governments, businesses, universities, and churches. While virtually no literature about specifically LDS expatriates yet exists, a survey of scholarly literature yields numerous articles, books, and dissertations exploring how a burgeoning number of individuals and families are coping with the psychological, social, and emotional challenges of expatriate life. An empirical study published in 1996 estimates that 2,586,955 U.S. citizens (approximately 1 percent of the total population) were residing in sixty-five foreign countries. The majority of them opt to live in countries that are rich and close to home rather than in countries that are poor and far away.³ Another study indicates that U.S. companies are losing their competitive edge in the global marketplace because so many American expatriate families have problems adjusting to new countries and cultures. This study also estimates that 40 percent of all expatriate families will fail to deal successfully with the stress of living abroad.⁴ Much research has been published exploring the difficulties of repatriation and “reverse culture shock” as expatriates return to their native land after extended periods living abroad. It is estimated that approximately four million Americans now living in the U.S. fall in this category. In fact, the effects of expatriation and repatriation are so great on children that sociologists have coined terms such as Global Nomads or Third Culture Kids (TCKs) to describe children who spend a major portion of their formative years outside their parents’ native culture.⁵ Such children may successfully navigate both cultures but feel completely at home in neither; thus they are raised in a nebulous “third culture.” The website tckworld.com defines a TCK as follows:

A TCK is an individual who, having spent a significant part of the developmental years in a culture other than that of their parents, develops a sense of relationship to both. These children of business executives, soldiers and sailors, diplomats, and missionaries who live abroad, become “culture-blended” persons who often contribute in unique and creative ways to society as a whole.

The individual blend will vary, depending on such factors as the intensity of exposure to a second or third culture, at what age a child comes into contact with a culture other than that of the parents, and the
amount of time a young person spends within a second or third culture. The TCK’s roots are not embedded in a place, but in people, with a sense of belonging growing out of relationships to others of similar experience.6

One research project examined the experiences of repatriated TCKs—a “large hidden dimension of American life” who represent “an untapped national resource”—and the positive contributions they continue to make to their families, communities, workplaces, and to “the interdependent and conflictive world scene.” On the downside, the majority of TCKs experience “mild to severe difficulties with what has been called ‘re-entry problems’ or ‘reverse culture shock’” and never fully adjust. Following are some of the key findings gleaned from this study:7

- They fail and pick themselves up again. They succeed in jobs they have created to fit their particular talents. . . . They adapt, they find niches, they take risks, they locate friends with whom they can share some of their interests, but they resist being encapsulated. Their camouflaged exteriors and understated ways of presenting themselves hide their rich inner lives, remarkable talents, and often strongly held contradictory opinions on the world at large and the world at hand.8

- Only one out of every ten of our nearly 700 adult TCKs . . . say that they feel completely attuned to everyday life in the U.S. The other 90 percent say they are more or less “out of synch” with their age group throughout their lifetimes. Being out of step with those around them is especially noticeable (and painful) in the late teens and twenties, when choice of mate, occupation, and life style are being worked out. Some young adult TCKs strike their close peers, parents, and counselors as being self-centered adolescents, as having champagne tastes on beer incomes (or no incomes), as not being able to make up their minds about what they want to do with their lives, where they want to live, and whether or not they want to “settle down, get married, and have children.” They have what some call “prolonged adolescence.”9

- One characteristic of these adult TCKs which stands out is that the overwhelming majority of them are committed to continuing their education beyond high school graduation. Only 21 percent of the American population (24 percent of men and 18 percent of women) have graduated from a four-year college. In sharp contrast, 81 percent of the adult TCKs have earned at least a bachelor’s degree (87 percent of the men, 76 percent of the women). Half of this number have gone on to earn master’s degrees and doctorates.10

- Whether or not they have occupations or professions with an international dimension, in their daily lives they do reach out to foreigners, exchange students, and non-English-speaking minorities. As
one adult TCK put it, “We know what it is like to be confused in a country where we cannot speak the language well.”

- Most of those who marry (80 percent) have children and typically report that their child-rearing is in some way influenced by having lived abroad. . . . Rather than stress a national or ethnic identity, these adult TCKs seek ways to introduce their offspring to the diversity of the world’s people and cultures. Their message, overwhelmingly, is one of accepting, respecting, and treasuring differences.

- Adult TCKs are helpers and problem solvers. Drawing on their own experiences in new situations, [they] reach out to help those who appear unsure and play the role of mediator when conflicts arise. Nearly 90 percent say they can usually figure out a way to handle unexpected or difficult situations.

- TCKs are adaptable and relate easily to a diversity of people. . . . They feel at home everywhere (and nowhere). More than eight of ten report that they can relate to anyone, regardless of differences such as race, ethnicity, religion, or nationality.

- This relatively small number of people, about 2 percent of the American population, has been a rich resource. They relate Americans to the rest of the world and interpret the outside world to the immediate world in which they live.

**Challenges and Benefits of Expatriate Life: The Perspective of LDS Parents and Children**

I was unable to locate any published literature examining the experience of LDS expatriate families per se. But given the steady growth of the Church worldwide and the increasing number of Church members from many countries who live and work abroad, it is important to begin to understand the issues, themes, and challenges of LDS expatriate life.

A few caveats are in order. Broadly speaking, I would say that the experience of LDS expatriate families reflects many of the common themes and characteristics of expatriate life in general, regardless of religious affiliation, national origin, or geographic location—that is, many dimensions of LDS expatriate experience are not unique. I want to emphasize also that some features of LDS expatriate life discussed here are characteristic of the experience of many LDS parents and youth who live in any large urban area where Church members are a small minority and where social, political, and religious diversity abounds. The tremendous diversity in cultures, families, personalities, and church conditions makes it extremely risky to
generalize about LDS expatriate family life. In fact, I know of exceptions to nearly every assertion and observation I make below.

In attempting to assess the challenges and opportunities of the expatriate lifestyle for LDS families, I decided to distinguish between perennial expatriate families who have spent at least five to ten years abroad and those expatriate families who live abroad temporarily for a few months or years. I realized that the nature and impact of living abroad differs significantly depending on the duration of the stay and whether the family is among the majority of expats who choose to live in countries “that are rich and close to home rather than in countries that are poor and far away,” as stated above. The following analysis is based on personal experience and observation and on data from interviews with twelve perennial expatriate LDS families, all from the U.S., who have spent much of their careers in areas that are “poor and far away,” that is, economically depressed countries in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. I also cite the findings of an unpublished research project conducted by Hannah Pritchett, an undergraduate TCK student who surveyed other perennial TCK students at BYU about their experiences. The focus of this article, then, is on the
issues, themes, patterns, and challenges that characterize the experience of perennial expatriate LDS families from industrialized nations who raise their families in the developing world.

Moving to a new country and a foreign environment almost universally results in intense feelings of anxiety, alienation, and ambiguity during each new period of adjustment. The instability inherent in relocation creates pressures that can erode family unity and undermine marital relations, widening emotional fault lines that may already exist in sibling and spouse relationships. It is often the case in perennial expatriate life that a father’s job is completed at the end of a two- to five-year contract or posting. Those who work on a contractual basis are obliged to be constantly on the lookout for the next job opportunity, and the family is frequently required to move to another overseas location and undergo a new set of adjustments. A major point of family stress is that each new relocation requires working wives to give up a current job and face again the painful prospect of unemployment or menial entry-level work. Another stressor is that many expatriate fathers stay in-country to work while the wife and children return to the home country for an annual summer leave. In families with small children especially, this period of separation is not only a lonely one for the dad who must stay behind, but a tremendous burden for the mom who must handle all the stress of traveling with and caring for the family on her own. This perpetual state of insecurity and instability is one of the main challenges facing LDS parents raising families overseas.

As a result of their experience abroad, LDS expatriate youth frequently lack a clear sense of religious and national identity, thus joining the so-called “third culture” of individuals worldwide whose conduct, thinking, and values vacillate between the norms of their native culture and the local foreign culture. Over time they frequently develop a sense of being spiritually, culturally, and socially rootless. When young people raised in the third culture return to their first, native culture, they often feel as if they are on the margins of society, on the outside looking in. One possible explanation for this sense of detachment and anxiety is the continual necessity in the expatriate environment of breaking emotional ties and building new relationships:

One of the major areas in working with TCKs is that of dealing with the issue of unresolved grief. They are always leaving or being left. Relationships are short-lived. At the end of each school year, a certain number of the student body leaves, not just for the summer, but for good. It has to be up to the parent to provide a framework of support and careful understanding as the child learns to deal with this repetitive grief. Most TCKs go through more grief experiences by the time they are 20 than monocultural individuals do in a lifetime.16
LDS parents give high praise to the Church, whose organization and teachings help attenuate this problem by providing children with a built-in social network with local members, grounding them in core values, and imbuing them with a sense of who they are.

Expatriate LDS parents and children gain exposure to greater diversity of thought and behavior and, in the process, develop tolerance and sensitivity for differences in religious belief, political orientation, and personal lifestyle. I have noted during my time overseas and as a faculty member of Brigham Young University working with students from expatriate families, that LDS expatriates, young and old alike, who come to the heartlands of Mormonism after extended time abroad, often are confused by the lack of diversity in interpreting and applying gospel principles. They become disillusioned, even angered, by the perceived negative judgments that are passed on those who deviate from what is believed to be the gospel norm. To expatriates, such judgment appears to be an American LDS cultural trapping that is foreign to their gospel experience overseas. Many young expatriate Church members who attend Especially for Youth or BYU for the first time are surprised at the uniformity of thinking, dress, and behavior. They often speak of being put off by religious attitudes and ethnocentric political views of some Church members that seem rigid, narrow, ultra-conservative, and unable to accommodate a more open-minded perspective or divergent interpretation. The emphasis on not dating or associating with nonmembers, young men wearing only white shirts to church, not drinking Coca-Cola, keeping hair cut short, and “America first” nationalism are examples often cited. Over time, however, many expatriate children and parents find equilibrium and reconciliation by gravitating gradually toward people and organizations on campus or in their community who share similar perspectives and experiences.

Research data compiled by Hannah Pritchett during her undergraduate studies at BYU provides further evidence of the difficulty TCKs encounter in relating to their home culture peers after a long period in the third culture milieu. Her interviews with fellow TCK students reveal the anxieties induced by trying to fit in, to establish a sense of identity, and to define just what “home” means in their peripatetic lives:

TCKs find that when they move back there is a barrier, psychological, emotional, or even cultural, between themselves and their American peers, because of their very different experiences. Many stated this idea straight out: they “couldn’t really connect,” they “were completely different,” and “I felt that I couldn’t relate to my peers” are typical comments about trying to make friends in America. Repatriates notice that their American peers are different from them, and this lack of shared experience often works to create a barrier between them and their peers.
Teen slang, styles, and music can also be unfamiliar to an expatriate, since these expressions of popular culture change rapidly. Says one, “Everyone was saying words I didn’t understand,” and another, “I just never knew what the right clothes were.” Although these elements of popular culture may seem trivial, they are important to adolescents, and similar interests of this type help form bonds between teenagers. Expatriates may be surprised or frustrated by the reality of American life, but they always encounter a barrier between themselves and their peers when they return to their country because of the different experiences and perceptions their lives abroad have given them.

Most, however, found the most frustrating thing about the barrier was the lack of interest and questioning on the part of their peers. Often, says one, when she said where she moved from, “people don’t even know where that is” and so they don’t question. Others found that “people didn’t really care, and that was really hard to deal with, because I wanted to talk about it.” This complaint appeared over and over during the course of these interviews. For whatever reason, people are rarely genuinely interested in an expatriate’s experiences in another culture, and this is frustrating to the expatriate for whom those experiences are life. Repatriates quickly discover this, and most stop talking about it. When they do, others may say, “It sounds like you’re snobby and braggy,” as if by relating their experiences they are showing off. Most avoid this by trying to deny their membership in the expatriate group, and blend in. One said that she “quickly adopted a Utah accent and limited [her] discussions of personal experiences to non-country-specific tales.” Others simply choose a place in America and say they come from there, because it is easier than trying to explain living abroad. Expatriates, then, generally find that in addition to being different or “foreign” to their peers, their American peers are not even interested in their former lives, and this only increases the difficulty of repatriation.

However, the most important characteristic of a true TCK comes through as they tell these stories of returning “home”: they really have no home in the standard interpretation. To most, home is a place. To expatriates who spend their time moving frequently, or in places they don’t belong, home is defined by family and friends, and the relationships they have with others. They are trapped between worlds; one girl explained her life, saying, “I’ve spent most of my life in the Middle East, but I don’t feel like my culture is Middle Eastern culture.” Yet she doesn’t feel like American culture is hers either. Another girl expressed this same feeling, explaining that, having grown up in Latin America, “I felt like I was Latina,” but that true Latin Americans saw her as American. They don’t have “a place to call home,” and they “don’t really feel like [they are] from anywhere,” so they associate deeply with people instead of places. Most expatriates, when asked where they are from, name the place their family lives. For some, this connection is even more explicit. One says, “My sense of home and belonging comes from people . . . really the only people I feel ‘home’ with is family.” Another says, “I always viewed my home as wherever my family was.” Expatriates define
“belonging” as the people, not the scenery, surrounding them. In this way, they have no firm roots, since people can always change and move, and they may struggle to define coming “home.” Many, throughout their lives, feel “a lack of sense of belonging or loyalty to one’s place,” which they may even pass to their children. This lack of place is really what defines expatriates.17

The following anecdote reported by an LDS expatriate mother provides a parent’s perspective on the stresses and painful adjustments that expatriate LDS children often face when returning to the “center stakes”:

My husband and I have spent 14 years living in Asia. I had thought that growing up overseas had been completely positive, teaching our children to be more tolerant, exposing them to other peoples and cultures. That was until our children went to college in the States. Our daughter experienced “reverse culture shock” in adjusting to Utah culture. It was a typical pattern of expat re-adjustment: others weren’t interested in her experiences or background. She had to walk a fine line to avoid offending people who often considered her conceited when discussing her life overseas. Once she worked through this, she was OK and gained perspective about the whole experience of her expat life. She took six years to graduate because of an “adjustment period.” Adjusting to peculiar language and slang terms was difficult at first. They didn’t know what “the mish” was, for example. Our daughter hadn’t been to girls camp, and our son hadn’t experienced scout camp. Comments like “You’re not an eagle scout?” were painful. They were frustrated by political narrow mindedness and ignorance of world geography and international affairs exhibited by other students. Our daughter put up a picture of her boyfriend—a non-member, dark-skinned Indian from the Brahmin caste who was a wonderful young man with high moral standards, an outstanding student, thoughtful, kind, a hard worker. My husband and I were proud of her for making a good choice of friends with similar values. The reaction of her roommates was different. Some of them ridiculed her for this relationship; there were anonymous letters questioning her worthiness, encouraging her to repent. Finally, we had to help her deal with this by reminding her to be just as tolerant going back to U.S./Utah culture as an American going to Indonesian or Indian culture.18

Most LDS expatriates view the Church experience as one of the most rewarding aspects of their time abroad. Overseas wards and branches tend to be small and close-knit, offering many opportunities to serve and grow spiritually. Many LDS families and individuals become active for the first time in isolated, expatriate settings because they come to realize their need for spiritual renewal and wholesome social relationships. One expatriate noted that “there is no fence sitting” in expatriate LDS groups: you are forced to examine your testimony and allegiance and decide whether you
believe the Church is true. Nearly all expatriate families speak of growing closer during their time overseas, spending more time together and relying more on each other to learn basic gospel values without the “cultural veneer” that comes from being in a more homogeneous religious society. A branch president in Africa observed that living overseas had given his family a chance “to look beyond the Utah traditions to the heart of the gospel—to fall back to the basics. In big wards in Texas or California it is easy to skate by. But over here we’re forced to be contributing and serving all the time.”

Small, close-knit branches in developing countries have drawbacks, too. The language barrier can be frustrating as family members listen to talks and sing songs in a language they cannot comprehend. Although parents can compensate for this by providing family gospel instruction, children can grow impatient at being with their parents all the time. It is often the case that local and expatriate Church members come from sharply different socioeconomic backgrounds. The relative prosperity of expatriate families often means that local members depend on them to
assume the lion’s share of welfare and transportation responsibilities in the branch. Moreover, in developing countries, it is normally the case that local members have no experience with participatory government or religion, and consequently the brunt of Church work falls squarely on the shoulders of a few expatriate members. LDS expatriates who work at American embassies in developing countries tell of the stressful experience of being regularly pressured by Church members from the host country or surrounding countries to intervene in their behalf to obtain visas to the U.S., and then—after explaining that this is not possible—being thought of as “not a true brother.”

While LDS expatriate parents were grateful for the Church’s influence while living abroad, many of them expressed ambivalent feelings about raising teenagers overseas because of the difficulty of instilling gospel values and identity without the availability of fully developed Church youth programs. Several families pointed out the lack of programs and activities for teenagers as a major challenge of expatriate life: “I have learned I cannot depend on the church [in small groups and branches] to help raise my family, especially high school age children. For my teenagers, lack of church group experiences is a problem. I have no way of creating that LDS group social program of activities that youth need. They miss out on that teenage church experience—it’s gone forever, and I regret that they’ll never have it.”

Despite these problems of language and low membership numbers, LDS expatriates generally view gospel teachings and Church organization as crucial for making a success of overseas life. They thrive on the challenges of sustaining small Church units overseas, and typically sense something of a letdown spiritually when they return to large wards and stakes where the Church organization runs smoothly and the pool of Church experience and knowledge is deep.

LDS expatriate families from industrialized nations who live in developing countries face some unique problems associated with the affluent lifestyle that expatriates in these countries generally enjoy. Expatriate teenagers tend to have abundant amounts of money and leisure time and a scarcity of productive, organized activities on which to spend their money and time. To fill the void and cope with boredom, many teens easily fall into habits of smoking, drinking, drug abuse, partying, gambling, and premarital sex. To compound the problem, law enforcement officials in many developing countries (which normally have stricter laws governing these activities than Western countries) often turn a blind eye to illicit behavior of expatriate teenagers because they want to avoid belligerent confrontations and messy diplomatic entanglements. The stage is thus set for young expatriates to engage in destructive, illegal behavior with virtual
impunity. Unfortunately, a good many LDS youth ignore the guidance
provided at home and at school and succumb to the harmful enticements
of this extraordinarily permissive expatriate environment.

LDS expatriate parents almost unanimously cite a daunting challenge
also related to the affluence of expatriate life: instilling in children tradi-
tional LDS values of work, thrift, self-reliance, and responsibility. Because
expatriate families in developing countries frequently have a cook to pre-
pare meals and do the dishes, a maid to clean the house, and a gardener
to take care of the yard work, and because most expatriate teens are not
allowed to work in the local economy, there are few avenues available to
parents to teach young people the law of the harvest: working for and earn-
ing what you get. One parent described this dilemma as follows:

The most distressing problem we face is how to teach our children the
importance of work and personal responsibility. This is the single greatest
difference of living overseas. There are very few opportunities for
work, and lack of positive peer pressure to go out and start finding a
summer job in April and May as happens in high schools in the States.
Our nieces and nephews here in Utah know how to work; our own chil-
dren who have grown up overseas have no desire to do manual labor.

Amman Jordan branch members from Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, the Philippines, the
U.S., China, and Chile on a branch outing visiting ruins of the ancient Roman
city of Jarash.
Most parents are able to find a few household chores for children to do, and some parents manage to find part-time jobs for their teenagers at their company offices or their embassy. But for most LDS families in developing countries, the problem remains a pervasive and persistent one.

The expatriate setting in developing countries impacts the work environment and the ecclesiastical service of LDS professionals in positive and negative ways. The environment at work during the week and at Church on weekends usually provides rich and rewarding opportunities to associate with people from many different walks of life and backgrounds. But sometimes one’s LDS religious affiliation becomes an issue and a source of controversy in the office. For example, one father explained that colleagues at work have grown to resent his Church identity due to his receiving a larger overseas compensation package (which includes housing and food allowances based on number of children) than they do because he has a large family. Since they assume he has a large family because he is LDS, they resent that the company is, in effect, paying extra for his religious beliefs. Sometimes company officials are concerned that LDS expatriates have little chance for relaxation on the weekends (with meetings and church duties on the Sabbath, which is often the only day off), and thus come to the office at the beginning of the week not refreshed and ready to go back to work.

On balance, perennial expatriate families speak in glowing terms of their time overseas and of the ways in which their experiences continue to shape their worldview, enrich their relationships with other people, and deepen their spirituality. Following are statements and anecdotes from my interviews with various perennial expats that illustrate the profound impact of their life abroad.

I gained a much greater appreciation and bond of love with my wife as I watched her overcome the challenges and discomforts of overseas life and the extra efforts to move a family of five kids across the ocean once or twice a year. She faced down many social discomforts with non-LDS wives and clearly grew from the experience. We experienced so many adventures, challenges, and ups and downs that I just feel a friendship with her. It was impressive to see how she matured through the experiences and adversity. It made me realize that as a daughter of Heavenly Father her eternal potential is limitless. Shortly after we returned from living overseas, I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. The doctor counseled us that our marriage might be challenged by this ordeal. I survived the cancer threat and we found only strength in the adversity and a greater bond of love. I think our time together living abroad had something to do with that strength.
The importance of service became a more central part of my life while living in poor countries. The desperation of the African refugees touched my heart deeply. I have to admit I was a little frightened when I saw how many were gathering at our branch for humanitarian assistance. I just had to take the first step and wade into the sea of black faces to know each one personally. I knew I could not just send them on their way, but rather it was up to me and the other expat members to help this group of people one by one with their situations. There were no Church manuals or direction on how to do this. Members of the branch did this on their own, with their own money or through very generous fast offering donations. There are too many stories to tell, but they include helping these people with food, clothing, medical, dental, rent, schooling for the children, English lessons for the adults, visa renewal, and prison visits. After this experience, service no longer seems a burden, but a privilege, an honor, a blessing to be sought after.

Hamad, our bawwab, left a marked impression on us, especially our children. They all commented on his kindness and cheerfulness. Hamad was paid by all the tenants in the apartment to watch the door, wash the cars, and keep the street clean in front of the building. He lived in the garage under the building with his wife and two young children, to whom he was very loving and dedicated. When we first got there I think everybody was a little concerned about having a guy in a robe as our permanent handyman, but we hit it off right away. He would always show interest in how we were doing and was happy to see us come home after traveling. He did not speak English but communicated with us through his eyes, gestures, and good deeds. Our daughter Emily remembers him because he would walk her part way to school past the roundabout where the stray dogs lived. Emily was terrified of the dogs, and Hamad would carefully walk her through them scaring away any dog that came close. On one occasion Hamad came into our home to help move furniture. We had many nice things in the house, but his attention was drawn to our family picture. He quietly walked up to it, turned and said, “Kwayyis awi!” [“Very good!”] Nothing seemed of more value to Hamad than family and friends. He was the most loved bawwab in the neighborhood, and our children learned that even if you live in the poorest circumstances you can still be kind to others and find great happiness. In Hamad I saw the icon of meekness, love, and kindness. When I think of the meek who will inherit the Earth, I think of Hamad. Just little things like that and the relationship and spirit that developed was a surprising awakening from our preconceived notions of Islamic-Christian relations.

While driving through a remote desert region, I ran over a large rock and the rear trailer wheel blew out immediately. I stepped out of the jeep to look at the damage. A Muslim boy of about twelve wearing
ragged clothes and no shoes came right over and said he was sorry for my trouble but could help. As I tried to get the spare out from storage, the boy was already removing the flat. I was reluctant to let him help, but I could see he knew how to handle the tools and was quick about his work. I was impressed and let him continue. He took the spare and put it on with skill. I just watched in amazement and handed him tools. He then said he knew a place to get the flat fixed. Again I was reluctant but took a leap of faith because he seemed to have a good spirit about him. We drove the jeep and canoes through the narrow back streets of the nearby village, which is not a good place for an American to be, but he reassured me everything would be fine. We stopped at a small dirty tire shop no bigger than a bedroom. He took the flat and told me to wait by the jeep. In about 15 minutes he returned with the tire repaired and said it would cost about $1.50 (a fair deal by local standards). I was expecting to get gouged (as foreigners usually are) for about 10 times that amount, but again the boy radiated honesty. We then drove back to the parking lot and dropped him off. I offered him $5.00 for his help, but he smiled and said, “No. You were a stranger in trouble, and it’s my duty to help you. It’s what Allah would want me to do.” I was so struck with the goodness of this young man I did not know what to say and just gave him a tear-filled pat on the shoulder to express my gratitude. I thought about him the entire drive home. It made a profound impression on me to be reminded that there are many individuals not of our faith who are Christlike and charitable.

I coached my ten-year-old son’s coed basketball team. This was a stretch for me as I really don’t play basketball and didn’t think I could pull it off. When I met the team and their parents, I realized my lack of basketball skills would be the least of my challenges. Our team was made up of French, British, Norwegian, American, Egyptian, Palestinian, and Israeli children. I immediately had visions of a Middle East conflict and the ever-present French, British, and American ego clash among competitive parents and kids who didn’t know anything about the game. I figured I could count on the Norwegians to bring peace to the table. What followed was nothing less than a Cinderella story and a community behavior that the UN could only hope for. All of the parents were the kind of people you’d like to be friends with for life. They were genuine, gracious, appreciative, and the best fans you could ask for. They never missed a game and bonded together like they had been friends for years. Many commented that it was the best social event on their calendar and they wish it could go on forever. I even saw the Israeli and Palestinian parents sitting together and engaged in laughter.

The team was even more amazing. My star player was an Egyptian girl named Fatima who moved the ball like no other kid on the court. Many players were there for the first time but learned quickly. The British girl was slow and awkward, but her teammates made sure she got her fair share of play even if she missed the basket. As a result of the kids’
teamwork, some coaching help, and the parents’ support, we finished the season in first place. I found out later that the other expat coaches took advantage of my ignorance of the draft and left me with players they thought were the least competent. The experience for my son Taylor was priceless. He had many friends from many different backgrounds uniting to achieve a common goal. To this day he holds no prejudice toward any race, culture, or religion. A friend is a friend. My learning from this was on many levels, but perhaps the most important was a new hope, faith, or awareness that if a small population of “enemies” can bond with each other to build a winning team from “leftovers,” perhaps it can be done on a larger scale one person at a time, just as we work in the Church to reach and change one individual soul at a time.

My experience growing up in developing countries has helped me learn to adjust more quickly to different and often challenging new environments. When I entered the MTC to begin my mission, my teachers kept telling us that we would pass through several phases of culture shock once we arrived in Italy and that there would be a long, hard period of adjustment. Once I arrived in the mission field, though, I kept waiting for the culture shock to set in, but it never did. I realized that my previous experiences in leaving my comfort zone, adapting to strange cultures, and making new friends had instilled in me a kind of cultural flexibility, allowing me to adapt to changing circumstances more quickly and with less trauma than other people experience.

Living in a developing country was my refiner’s fire on many levels and matured my relationship with the Lord and testimony of the gospel. The hardships of a Third-World country, together with a difficult assignment at work, a challenging Church calling, and a large family, brought me to earnest prayer far more frequently than ever before.

I think the biggest benefit of living overseas is the respect you gain for people in general. It’s difficult at first, especially when you first leave your home country. I remember arriving in country and looking at the architecture thinking, “How could people live in these homes?” After making friends and going into their homes I realized the emphasis they put on “cozyness” was actually more to my liking than the architecture I was used to at home. There are tons of examples like this. The simplicity of the grocery stores (they only sell what you need), the style of fishing they do, the candy they eat, their opinions of money and happiness. I liken living overseas in a foreign culture to trading within an economy; when members of the respective culture bring their specialized culture and “trade” (combine) with their new culture, the result is a position beyond what they could have achieved alone in their original culture.
Being a teenager overseas was a challenge. The freedoms presented me were more of a temptation than I had found at home. Having been exposed to that atmosphere, I gained an appreciation for the law and order that we have in the U.S. Truly the freedoms we have in the U.S. encompass more than many Americans realize. That is not to say other cultures don’t have freedom. Most countries in the world do; however, I have noticed that there is almost an element of chaos found in the world that separates our way of life from that of most developing countries.

The greatest “Aha!” moment for me while living overseas was the realization that most people around the world share similar values of kindness to others, concerns about supporting their family and raising their children, and desires to live peacefully in the world. I grew up in a small Mormon town in Idaho, and even though I was taught to respect and care about other people, I had concluded that there was much to teach those outside the LDS faith and little to learn from them. After living for more than ten years in three developing countries and forming deep friendships and relationships with people of many different faiths, nationalities, and social backgrounds, I came to see the spirit of goodness and compassion—the common humanity—that characterized the vast majority of people with whom I interacted daily. I learned that if I withheld quick judgments, listened carefully, and observed others with an open mind, I was constantly taught and nurtured by the good example of those who were very different from me. This experience has continued to influence how I view and deal with others: I have learned to look beyond the surface differences and see the inner virtues that allow for warm, fulfilling relationships with people from many walks of life.

An unexpected but beneficial outcome of open-minded interaction with friends of other faiths is greater awareness of what is truly unique in one’s own tradition. While we have learned to look for and appreciate the common ground of shared morals, ethics, and beliefs, we have also learned to appreciate how differences define us and help us understand more fully what it means to be a Latter-day Saint and what sets the restored gospel apart in the religious economy. The process of examining our similarities and differences with non-LDS friends has deepened our testimony of unique LDS doctrines—the nature of God, eternal progression, continuing revelation, temple work, and priesthood authority—that are problematic for nonmembers but form, we have concluded, the foundation of the gospel’s power, beauty, and appeal throughout the world.
Reconciling the Spirit of Elijah and the Spirit of Ephraim

I have noticed over the past twenty years that LDS expatriates frequently encounter a fascinating though frustrating dilemma stemming from a tension between two gospel-centered principles. On the one hand, LDS families have a deeply ingrained nesting instinct—a righteous desire to put family first and to strengthen bonds with members of their extended family. I refer to this instinct as the spirit of Elijah. On the other hand, LDS families, particularly the perennial expatriate variety, also have a profoundly felt impulse to venture beyond the nest—a genuine desire to leave the comforts of familiar surroundings and close association with extended family in order to experience new cultures and strengthen the Church throughout the world. I refer to this impulse as the spirit of Ephraim. The inherent tension between Elijah and Ephraim creates psychological and emotional stress for many LDS expatriate families who find themselves trying to balance their desire to be close to extended family and their commitment to live most of the year in a place that seems (to their extended family) light years away and extremely perilous.

The irony of the Elijah/Ephraim clash became painfully apparent to me during our first few years overseas. At first, our family and friends were generally supportive and understanding of our decision to live abroad. Each summer when we came back to the States, they were curious to learn about our experience and expressed admiration for our courage, sense of adventure, and desire to serve the Lord in the uttermost parts of the vineyard. But when it became apparent to family members that our commitment to expatriate life was more than just a temporary case of wanderlust to work out of our system (as my father put it), the attitude of some of them changed: instead of support and admiration, we often heard heartfelt pleas to return home so our children could get to know their cousins and grandparents better. There were comments expressing concern about raising our family in dangerous regions of the world, and backhanded compliments like, “Sounds like you’re having a great experience. I’m glad you’re willing to live and serve the Church in those areas, because I certainly wouldn’t ever want to.” Eventually we learned to ignore those pressures, and our friends and extended family learned to reconcile Elijah’s spirit of family togetherness with Ephraim’s spirit of international outreach. I long for the day when LDS families throughout the Church will be encouraged to heed the spirit of Ephraim as willingly as they are taught to honor the spirit of Elijah. It would be a great blessing to individual families and to the Church as a whole if more and more LDS parents would respond to the need to
take their professional skills and church experience to the frontiers of the Lord’s kingdom.

Some Concluding Thoughts on LDS Expatriate Family Life

In sum, I would say that LDS expatriate families generally cope with the pressures and challenges of overseas life better than most other families who do not have the Church and gospel to buttress them. The majority of LDS expatriates highly recommend the experience to others, citing the high quality of education, the chance to get ahead financially, the rich environment for learning and personal growth, the enjoyment of social and professional associations with people from many nations, the opportunity to grow closer together as a family, and the blessings of serving in the front-line trenches of the Church. But the challenges and pressures inherent in expatriate life—including feelings of insecurity and alienation, the continual necessity of leaving one’s comfort zone and facing new adjustments, and the pitfalls of the affluent expatriate culture for LDS teenagers—require that those considering this lifestyle do so only after carefully weighing both the benefits and costs of living overseas.

Expatriate families are, in my opinion, a valuable but overlooked resource in the Church and in society at large. They bring unique expertise, fresh perspective, and firsthand understanding of peoples and cultures that are in short supply. They are a vital leavening influence in the Church and abroad. Building on Elder Bruce Porter’s metaphor of the beehive, expatriates are a unique group of bees who can pollinate the far corners of the vineyard where missionary bees cannot yet reach. In our efforts to maintain and strengthen the family (as stated in the Proclamation on the Family), we can learn much from the experience of our expatriate brothers and sisters. For my part, I dream about the day when the bishop will stand to read an official letter over the pulpit in sacrament meeting that encourages all families to consider living overseas for a few years. I look forward to a time when LDS families throughout the Church will heed Ephraim’s spirit of international outreach as willingly as they honor Elijah’s spirit of family togetherness. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that “a man filled with the love of God, is not content with blessing his family alone, but ranges through the whole world, anxious to bless the whole human race.” I am convinced that individual members, the family as a unit, and the Church as a whole would be greatly blessed if every family could experience firsthand the blessings and challenges of being “strangers in a strange land.”
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1. Moses’ expatriate experience produced a unique filial name. While living as an expatriate in the land of Midian, he named his first son Gershom, meaning “a stranger here,” because he explained, “I have been a stranger in a strange land” (Ex. 2:22).


4. Phyllis Mather, abstract to “An Investigation into Factors that Enhance or Detract from the Expatriate Family’s Ability to Build and Maintain Family Cohesiveness and Stability in an Overseas, Foreign Environment” (PhD diss., Walden University, 1996).

5. The term “third culture” was coined by sociologist Ruth Hill Useem based on her decades-long study of expatriate adults and children who feel alien in both their home culture and the foreign culture in which they live. See Ruth Hill Useem, “Third Culture Kids: Focus of Major Study,” NewsLinks: The Newspaper of International Schools Services 12 (January 1993), available online at www.tckworld.com.


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10. Useem, “TCKs Four Times More Likely to Earn Bachelor’s Degrees.”
11. Useem, “TCKs Four Times More Likely to Earn Bachelor’s Degrees.”
14. Useem, “ATCKs Have Problems Relating to Their Own Ethnic Groups.”
15. Useem, “TCKs Four Times More Likely to Earn Bachelor’s Degrees.”
18. Anecdote drawn from personal communication with the author. Interview notes in author’s possession.
19. All anecdotes were drawn from personal communications with the author. Interview notes in author’s possession.