

PRAYING FOR IWs

Letters and emails come from International Workers filled with news and pictures and prayer requests. We hear them speak at our Global Focus Weekend or other events and they share how dependent they are on our prayers. They put out signup sheets to get their prayer letters so we can pray for them. They regale us with stories of how they knew someone “back home” was praying.

We know prayer works. In our own lives, we can look at myriads of examples where prayer was all we had—that lifeline to the ear of God. Maybe it was a little thing, like finding a lost item, or a big thing, like a life-or-death situation, but we know He heard and answered.

So how do we pray for our International Workers? There are times when a name pops into our minds and we have no idea what they need or what’s going on, but we know that our sovereign God knows the situation. We can certainly pray the things Paul prayed for people in his epistles as we *all* need to grow in faith, in love, and in truth. We need to endure, to press on, to count it all joy. IWs are no different.

One thing I’ve learned over the many years in the C&MA is that these folks are just like me! They have good times and bad, daily struggles and daily joys. So what are the things that we encounter? Let that be your springboard of prayer when you don’t have a list from them.

1. Meal prep. Okay, we are pretty spoiled here in the U.S. and can find the ingredients, easily purchase them, refrigerate or freeze in bulk, and so on. That’s not always true in other cultures. New recipes call for new ingredients. Old recipes often need to be abandoned. A Bosnian refugee family was sponsored by one church during the Bosnian war and when the wife came into their new apartment, she hugged her refrigerator. In her mind, it was huge! She was used to a very small appliance, like a dorm fridge! Another refugee family was overwhelmed with the variety of products on the shelves at Walmart! There were probably seven brands of ketchup! IWs have their own set of circumstances to adapt to for feeding themselves and their families.
2. Homesickness. With the technology of today, our IWs can facetime or Zoom with their loved ones. We all know it’s not the same as being there. Time differences make it difficult to talk “whenever.” Special events with pictures and a call during it are not the same as being together for hours, hugging, laughing, crying, watching the next generations playing, and just spending time as family or friends. They’re all missing those times. Loneliness is a very difficult battle, especially for single IWs who are *very* alone.
3. Finances. How are they going to get extra money when an emergency arises? What is the banking situation? Are they meeting their support goals? What’s the economy doing in their locale?
4. Ministry. One of the things I’ve noticed about International Workers is how they view every connection, every new person as a potential relationship. We have a tendency to pick and choose who we want to “hang” with, but that’s not necessarily kingdom thinking. When the people around them are difficult or demanding, how do they handle it? They seem to always be looking for ways to show hospitality and do outreach, all in the name of Jesus and for His glory.
5. Health. Medical care is often very different from what they left behind here. Between the facilities and the technology and the staff, it can be frightening. What happens when something arises and they need something besides Tylenol?

6. Language. Can you imagine having to think, to say everything in a different language than English? Learning the language is very time-consuming, much longer than the amount of study that is allowed for formal learning. It takes time to learn the local phrases and make them come naturally! In the meantime, they can feel isolated in the middle of a crowd.
7. Culture differences. What is acceptable in the U.S. is often taboo overseas. Some places find it proper to belch loudly as a sign of enjoyment after a meal. Others do not define “personal space” and can get much closer than Westerners prefer. If we are around a family who has a different approach to child-rearing, for instance, we can get uncomfortable. Hygiene and homemaking skills can produce sensitivities that need to be adjusted to. Multiply that many times over, as that same awkwardness is often felt by our IWs.
8. Other religions. We’re in the Bible belt, so most people we know have some type of background or exposure to the Bible and Christianity, even if they are not believers. There is some point of reference to begin with when we share Christ in our lives. I know how confused I am if someone starts talking about chemistry or physics or something else that is beyond my understanding, so that must be what someone with no knowledge of spiritual things feels. Our IWs need the sensitivity and the right words to say. They need perseverance for the times it seems to not make an impact in their relationships with the people.
9. Family back home. Oh, how hard it is to say goodbye! Who will be there when they come back in two or four years? How will they get back when something happens? Who will care for the family that doesn’t come back for the emergency? Praying for whoever might step in for the IW family during similar times would be key.
10. Security. So many of our IWs are working in areas where they are flying “under the radar” in a majority religion other than Christianity. That takes faith. Having the right papers, getting visas, not endangering the nationals—those are real concerns.
11. Home Assignment. There is such an adjustment to being in the U.S. after being away for 2-4 years. We are amazed at the rapidly changing society and we live here! There’s a switch back to our culture from the one they’ve become accustomed to. Demands of family and friends can be difficult to balance. Their children enter schools where they are outsiders, really struggling to relate and make friends in a place that’s literally foreign to them. Education is different. Pressures to conform or be bullied—so many possibilities that hurt their children. It seems so much “safer” back overseas where they know what to expect. And then they return to the field and have to adjust all over again. Parents’ hearts hurt for their kids.
12. Purpose. They need to know why they are there, what the task is before them, and stay focused on that. Can’t we all get distracted and forget what we’re supposed to be about? Praying that the God of heaven will daily renew their sense of purpose is critical.

These are just some of the things we can pray for our International Workers when we don’t have a specific list of requests. Any of them will do! God hears us when we pray, when we talk to Him and listen to Him. If He brings someone’s name to your mind, there’s a reason. Even when you don’t know how, PRAY.

“The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.” James 5:16b

“With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints...” Eph. 6:18