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### **Responding to God's Call: Women Gifted For Cross-Cultural Missions** – Marguerite G. Kraft

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Born into a Christian family and raised in a pastor's home in the Midwest, I always, from as long as I can remember, wanted to please God. As missionaries from many parts of the world visited our church to report on what God was doing through our financial and prayer support, my family often hosted them or was included in their meal schedule in other church families' homes. As a child I listened and admired them, and I began to feel the responsibility of carrying the gospel message to places around the globe.

I went to a Christian college where many students were being trained for mission work and missionaries often spoke in chapel. It was there that I met my future husband who had received a definite call to serve God in Africa. By saying "yes" to his proposal of marriage, I responded to that call as well.

After our wedding we continued our preparation for life in missions with Summer Institute of Linguistics and anthropological training. He went to seminary and I took graduate classes to better understand cross-cultural work in Africa and Bible translation. We also started a family with twins, a boy and a girl. We were accepted by a mission board to do pioneer church planting in an unreached people group in northeastern Nigeria. By the time we actually arrived in Nigeria the twins were almost two years old.

We lived near a city in the home of the founder of the mission for a few months of language study. We both were excited to finally be involved with the people learning their language. In fact, the mission usually sent their new arrivals to a language school in another area, but we convinced them that our training in linguistics would enable us to learn more efficiently on our own. We wrote our own materials focusing on learning the tones as our new language was a language where the tone on each syllable was assigned. Many words were similar except for the assigned pitch. We also learned the very practical phrases first so we could be out using it with the people, e.g., "How was your sleeping? Did you get up well? How is your family?" In this way we found we were making friends and slowly becoming a part of the community. Years later when we met Tom and Betty Sue Brewster we realized that we had much in common on the subject of how to learn a second language. We were excited

to find they were publishing *Language Acquisition Make Practical* to enable others to learn the language as we had. Fast-forward two decades and I am using their materials for my Language Learning class at Biola University as I placed my students in homes where the language they were learning was spoken. This was an experiential introduction to culture as they learned the language.

Back in Nigeria, after a few months of language study we moved to our village of 200 people where we were to learn another language, this one unwritten, plant a church, and begin Bible translation. It was then I began to realize the many differences between male and female. My husband got busy right away with spending time laying the foundation for church planting, outreach, and developing local leadership. I needed to learn how to set up a home without running water or electricity, and without stores nearby for purchasing the necessities. Boiling all drinking water and cooking on a wood stove was a challenge along with how to manage market shopping and growing vegetables that I knew how to cook. Keeping the children safe and healthy was high on my list of responsibilities and concerns. I felt isolation from family and friends back in the U.S. more deeply than my husband did (there was no telephone or email connection at that time). I assumed the responsibility of keeping them informed of our welfare by letters, though it took a month to get letters to the homeland.

I knew that I was where God wanted me to be, but my “fitting in” to the new environment was much slower than my husband’s and my time for language study and use was more limited. I remember feeling a bit envious of how easily he adjusted to his new work. Since I previously had had close women friends and now language and culture barriers and family responsibilities were slowing down the process of making new ones, I found I was leaning more on my husband for emotional support. One night he agreed to play Scrabble with me, but only for an hour! He had important job-related things to do. I was shocked and hurt that he would limit his participation to an hour no matter where we were in the game. I also really looked forward to the times I could relate to other missionary women, but due to our isolated location and the cost of travel, that didn’t come often enough.

God taught me so much in those years. Since then I have tried to understand women and their needs and gifts more clearly. My years of teaching in the School of Intercultural Studies at Biola University gave me opportunities to interact with both single and married women who had cross-cultural experience and others who were preparing for such service. I now see very clearly some of the many ways that God has made male and female distinctly

different and with the intent that they work complementarily in doing His work. I will focus on just four of the ways God has gifted women and show how these gifts fit in mission work.

### **Gift of Nurturing**

First, God created women to be the ones to bear children and the gift of nurturing came with it. Women in all societies carry the direct responsibility for nurturing the children. They provide love and care, proper food, protection, and oversee their physical, social, and spiritual development. Men often are involved, but in a different way than women. In some societies the childcare is so clearly women's responsibility that if a child gets sick or dies the mother is blamed. It has been noted that in order for a newly planted church to survive/grow the women who nurture the children must be involved.

Women care about the whole person and their fit in society. In the history of missions women have often been responsible for orphanages, schools, hospitals, skill training programs, etc. Related to this nurturing process is patience and the realization that it takes time to bring about change. Men often give up and are willing to withdraw, but women tend to hang on and hope for the desired end. Filled with strong energy, women's bodies are built for long-term endurance.

I have experienced the nurturing instinct in my own life as we relocated five times in the decade after our missionary experience. My big concern was the wellbeing of our children. I got involved in their schools, scouting, and Little League, and made sure they and their friends were transported to their many activities. Later in life I continue to nurture the family by being sure we celebrate all birthdays and have vacation times together if at all possible.

Women's natural nurturing instinct is seen in how they use the materials and funding available. It has been observed that if funding is given to a man it is very apt to be used for his gaining status in the society or his own pleasure. But when funding is given to women it is used for the family or the community welfare, to help others do better or survive.

Betty Sue Brewster modeled female nurturing in many ways. I recall as I met her for the first time how I was struck by the care and encouragement she so lovingly gave to her husband who was confined to a wheelchair. She exemplified strong energy and the commitment and love to make his life of service to God possible. This God-given nurturing was later seen in her raising their son and in her in-depth relationship with her students.

Teaching was not just an academic endeavor to Betty Sue. She really cared about her students and was patient in her involvement in their lives.

### **Need for Relationships**

The second God-given gift bestowed on women is the need for relationships. Two anthropologists researched the strategies and relationships in boys' and girls' play. The results showed that girls' play is usually in groups of just two or three so they promote relationships. It is unstructured and stresses cooperation and relationship building, paying attention to others' feelings and needs. Boys' play is in larger groups with fixed rules and goals and promoting competition. Thus they learn to be assertive, competitive and focus on achievement. We see, then, that feminine socialization emphasizes intimacy in relationships, sensitivity to people, and the process of interaction. On the other hand, male socialization emphasizes independence, power, and attention to outcomes. This research was done in the US, but I suspect that similar results would be found in other societies.

The female relationship emphasis shows in communication style as well. Women use conversation to build and sustain relationships with others. Men use conversation to achieve and maintain independence. Men see conversation as negotiation to achieve and maintain the upper hand and to protect themselves from being put down and pushed around by others. For most women conversation is a way of establishing connections and negotiating relationships. I have seen this in my marriage when I share an experience (such as at a faculty meeting) with my husband. I go into great detail and he only wants a quick report. Or maybe I ask about his faculty meeting and I get one short sentence and I would like some relationship-building detail.

It has been very important to me to have meaningful relationships with other women. I grew up with a sister just 14 months older than myself and we shared in most of life experiences in our early years—music lessons, church activities, camping, jobs, dating, etc. Looking back I clearly see that as I have moved from place to place as an adult I have made at least one intimate friend in each location. This person has listened as I shared my ups and downs in life and been an encourager as together we worked through the daily issues we both faced. Church women's groups have also provided pleasure and challenge and given me the opportunity to have meaningful relationships with women.

Women need intimacy and belonging and seek them continually. Because of this male/female difference women are often less of a threat when working cross-culturally. Whereas men in the receptor society may fear their loss of position and power when a foreign male arrives, women are anxious to develop meaningful relationships with other women regardless of cultural differences. Female cross-cultural workers need to plug into the local women's social times in order to have an effective ministry.

Again Betty Sue has modeled relationship building and its effectiveness as a tool for evangelism. She gives easily of her time and energy to become friends with those around her. Her humility belies any seeking of status or power. She serves those around her to assist them in being all they were meant to be in life.

### **Organizational Skills**

The third way I see God has gifted women especially is in their organizational abilities. This may be initially in order to run a home. For a mother has to have many things going on at once and be flexible, move ahead, and take everybody's needs into consideration. Men tend to be better at focusing on one thing at a time, to the point of forgetting all else in life during that time. Women tend to look at the totality of what they do, focused not just on a single task, but rather on how each task fits in the overall scheme of things.

Researchers have shown that the left hemisphere of the human brain is more specialized for language, logical analysis, and mathematics. The right hemisphere is more specialized for artistic and spatial abilities, and for an emotional and nonanalytic approach to reality. Men's brain hemispheres are more strongly specialized than women's. Men tend to be either right or left brained. The female brain draws more equally on both sides and some researchers claim that the fibers running down the center of the brain linking the two hemispheres are thicker in females, possibly allowing more "cross-talk" between the two hemispheres<sup>1</sup>. It may be because of this that women's intuition and holistic organization gives them an advantage in remembering and organizing, and a tendency to be weighted down trying to handle too many things at once. I recall many times that I noticed and envied my husband's "single-focus" approach; yet other times I became annoyed that he couldn't seem to manage more varied responsibility.

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<sup>1</sup> Kraft, ed. *Frontline Women*. 2004, 11 quoting Dianne Hales *Just Like a Woman*. 2000, 245.

Women's attention to detail and skill of fitting everything into the total picture, dealing with many people has been very valuable to many offices and organizations. We have seen this God-given gift in Betty Sue's life as she has managed home, office, teaching, looking after a disabled husband and scheduling travel to many parts of the world.

### **Spiritual Sensitivity**

The fourth God-given gift to women is spiritual sensitivity. Women the world-over recognize the need for and seek spiritual strength in their lives. This can be seen by their presence outnumbering men in the temples, shrines, and even in churches. This openness to the spiritual within Christianity has changed the world. In the early days of carrying the gospel to many lands, women, close to God's heart, were the prayer support, the financial support, the challengers of children to heed God's call, and the sending force to the unreached.

Looking at spiritual activity worldwide, we find that this female spiritual sensitivity has been used also by Satan. In many areas women are seen as spiritual leaders such as spirit mediums, shamans, diviners, and fortune-tellers<sup>2</sup>. Women worship their gods and spirits and seek their help in everyday living, e.g., health and grades in school for children, faithfulness of husband, fertility. Using charms or spiritual items to gain power in a society where they have little is very common. In many places men are seen as masters of their fates and they do not tend to seek the supernatural as much as women do. However, men acknowledge the supernatural powers of a woman and sometimes even fear it.

Building on women's sensitivity to the spiritual, women are great spiritual warriors for God. They have been very effective doing spiritual warfare—both prayer and action—that has resulted in saving lives, breaking addictions, preventing suicides, and conquering diseases. Women are a majority among intercessors, prayer bands, and those giving love and care to God's people and reaching out to others.

Betty Sue has modeled what God can do with this spiritual sensitivity. She, at a very young age, was responding to God's call. As she walked with Him she was aware of the acts of Satan and the battle going on for God's kingdom. Even in the difficult times she kept her

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<sup>2</sup> Kraft, ed. *Frontline Women*. 2004, 188.

focus and heart centered on her Master. Her commitment and faithfulness is evidenced by all who know her.

We live and work in a man's world. Standards in society have been regimented and preserved by men. The school system is male-based with girls having to learn to think and act like men to be successful. One writer has referred to this as implicitly adopting the male life as the norm<sup>3</sup>, and then trying to fashion women out of a masculine cloth. However, women effectively working their way through the systems, have now been able to achieve many positions not previously open to them. So today we have women more involved in setting and preserving the standards of society. Fortunately, this is carrying over into areas of mission work as well.

Professionally I have had the privilege of teaching for many years along with men who shared the same desire to prepare God's people to reach out to those who need to know and grow in Christ. I have encouraged experiential learning as I required students in some of my classes to live in a cross-cultural setting or to interview and learn firsthand about cultural differences. I also originated the required internship program for all of our majors as preparation for effective cross-cultural work. These all reflect my concern for the whole person to be ready to be all that God wants her/him to be. As chairman of the undergraduate program in Intercultural Studies I introduced an annual retreat to help build community and good relationships with the faculty. This position as chairman also allowed me to spend more time with individual students lining up their academic programs to help them reach their life goals. In a small way this was a "woman's touch." Again, these are the kinds of things Betty Sue would have done were she in my position.

Gender science has brought out the differences between male and female, demonstrating that women are not an inferior or second sex, but a separate sex, unique in body, mind, and spirit<sup>4</sup>. I feel that the differences are God-given and women need to recognize and appreciate their gifting. Even though educated women today have had to climb to where they are through the male system, they still have within them these giftings of God. What a blessing and challenge to use them for His glory. God gave male and female strengths and weaknesses with the intent that they complement one another. Women's vision, including

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<sup>3</sup> *In a Different Voice*. Carol Gilligan. 1994, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Kraft 2004, 18.

seeing the big picture, meaningful connections, the need for nurturing, and a working closeness to the supernatural, may open up new and unexplored possibilities for God's work.



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