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Giving God a Chance: A Pentecostal on the Journey's Edge
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At the age of 13 I wrote in my diary: “*Only that which is worth dying for, will I live for!*” One might smile and think that it takes an immature, naïve teenager to proclaim such big words—far too pompous for down-to-earth living. And yet, 57 years later, I can say that I really meant it, and I still mean it. Life is too short for alternative routes, only that which is upon God’s heart, should be upon mine.

Looking back over my life and ministry, I marvel at the ways God has directed my path, as well as the different designs He has allowed me to start and be a part of. He has truly surpassed my wildest imagination and filled my life with wider experiences and challenges than I could ever have dreamt of.

I know that 1Cor. 1:27–28 is an often-quoted verse for people who want to appear humble in their self-presentation when talking about their calling. But as for me, the description matched only too well: “*the foolish, the weak, the lowly, and the things that are not*”. These all described how I saw myself, due to low self-esteem and an inferiority complex.

Because of a speech deficiency, I knew that I made a fool of myself once I opened my mouth to speak. So how could I ever become useful to the Lord, and secure enough to allow myself to be exposed to others? Fortunately, the problem was attended to at the age of 11 (a minor physical operation), and years of speech lessons followed; but on the inside I remained ‘that little insignificant girl who most probably had no or little chance in life’. Even when it came to the choice of occupation, I thought nursing might be the best for me, which might be my only chance to get to the mission field, perhaps as a theatre nurse wearing a face mask that would help keep my mouth shut.

I nearly went wrong because of that sense of inferiority. Fortunately God had a faithful servant who simply asked me the right questions: “But Marit, are you sure nursing is what you want to do in life? Hasn’t God given you special communication gifts?” The same man helped me to see that I should go for my dreams, so I did.

Looking back today, it amuses me to see that my entire ministry has consisted of speaking, in one way or another: teaching, preaching, lecturing, debating, counselling, and sharing. Often, when facing big crowds and gatherings, I have to think about the early days when I sought ways of avoiding people, and often blushed if I had to open my mouth to say something.

Truly, God seems to love starting with the littlest, to demonstrate how far he can go with us if we give him a chance. And that is what I have been doing through life: I have been giving Him a chance, again and again. And He has proven faithful and taken me from one level to another, from one area of ministry to other areas, all according to growth and experience along the road.

In the Lutheran State Church in Norway, it meant quite a shift to become a Pentecostal in the early 1960s, and the shift did not come lightly in my case. In my thinking I had to leave the Lutheran Church for two reasons: Firstly, I saw in the Scriptures that water baptism should follow a personal decision to follow Christ. Secondly, I longed to experience the infilling of the Holy Spirit according to Acts 2. Neither of these views corresponded with Lutheran theology, and as a result, I became a loner and an outcast for some years both in family circles and in my home village. I was the first and only Pentecostal in the whole area. This was a major test of obedience for me and it helped me to be clear at the cross roads of choosing the blessing of the Lord upon my life, or choosing social acceptance from people around me.

Having completed my five years of vocational training (MA in Teaching), I felt the time had come for me to go for missionary training, only to find that the Pentecostal Church in Norway had no such school! Pentecostals in those days did not believe in academic training, the emphasis was on the workings of the Holy Spirit. I knew that this had to be changed, by someone, someday, somehow... as for me, I went out as a missionary without missionary training, and had to find my own way as best I could.

In the 1960s (1966–1975) for two terms, I set out to the mission field with the intention to spend my entire life in Swaziland, a landlocked country in Southern Africa. But after nine years, and a period of severe tropical disease, I was denied a valid health certificate to return to Africa. In my narrow-minded understanding of a divine calling, I took this to be a hindrance staged by the devil.



My missionary time in Swaziland¹

I did not see the full picture at that time, that God had other plans, still within the same calling to do missions, but more in the background rather than on the front line. I would become a catalyst in promoting missionary training back home in Norway, and in so doing, the nine years spent in Swaziland were most important for my own learning through field experience, more so than the actual missionary work I was involved in during those years. For, I was now beginning to see that there is *one* commission, to make the Gospel known to all nations. It is one and the same calling whether you yourself go to become a missionary or you engage in equipping others to become missionaries or you support missions in other ways.

From then on I would be more behind the scene, training young people in Norway for missionary work, as best I knew how. I asked for permission to sway or influence the Bible School curriculum more towards missionary training, hoping that one day we might have a Missionary Training Institute. But as time went by and more young people came to be trained, I painfully realized that I was lacking the missiological insights necessary for training others and I hungered to give them more. It was now time for me to upgrade my own qualifications.

My lack of qualifications is what brought me to the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary in the United States in 1985 to do a ThM². I was so hungry for learning that I signed up for four and five classes per quarter, far too much for this stumbling, ineloquent foreigner who had not been a student for years and yet with the good Lord's help I succeeded. People around me, professors and fellow students, were all so supportive and encouraging. It was

¹ Available from <http://www.pym.no/sider/tekst.asp?side=1370>.

² Masters of Theology in Missiology course work was foundational for the DMiss program.

during these few short months I also learned to use the computer, which helped a great deal, but also created a good deal of stress for me.

One night as I had been working hours on a paper due the next day, one of the students cut the power to our apartment complex and I ‘lost’ the hours of composing I had done on the computer without notes. I still remember what comforting words I got from the Bible that very same night from Jeremiah 36, when the LORD told Jeremiah/Baruch “Take a scroll and write on it all the words I have spoken to you concerning Israel...” seemingly in vain when King Jehoiakim burned the scroll. Then the word of the LORD says in v. 28: “Take another scroll, and write on it the words that were on the first scroll.” In other words, start afresh! So they took another scroll and 36:32 ends with, “And many similar words were added to them.” That became my experience as well. However, now I can add that it was a kind of experience I do not want too often!

One day Paul Hiebert, probably the most profound and gifted lecturer I have ever had, came to me and said that he would like to see me go for the D.Miss³ program and that he wanted to be my mentor—I could hardly believe it. As a result I wrote my dissertation in 1987 titled; *Changing Worldview of Nguni Africans and Its Implementation for Norwegian Pentecostal Missionaries*. In it I examined Nguni traditional and modern worldview and the Norwegian as well as the Norwegian Pentecostal worldview. I discussed the tensions and dynamics between these opposing worldviews. The key issue were the importance of understanding worldview in missionary work.

Books could be written about the many “living documents” I met and interacted with at Fuller, people with such unique missiological insights combined with a humble lifestyle and practical love. They were people of integrity. From each one I learned things that shaped my future. While at Fuller I did get to travel to Tucson, Arizona with professor Dan Shaw and several other students to represent Fuller’s School of World Mission at an Evangelical Free Church conference. We drove the 8-hour one-way trip in a van and I so enjoyed the break from studies and the interaction with students. All other social occasions and opportunities to get to know people were lost due to my self-imposed study schedule.

One such loss was getting to know Betty Sue Brewster during that time and I am so thankful for this opportunity to tell my story to honor her contribution to world mission. I trust

³ The Doctor of Missiology in 1986 was a 40-unit course based program with an 8-unit dissertation.

that in some way it might further the teaching and the legacy Betty Sue has presented to mission and specifically to women in missions. During my first year at Fuller, Tom Brewster died and that December I experienced the loss the community felt. However, Betty Sue continued on teaching and training students for cross-cultural ministry, which has been a model for me to follow. I have benefited greatly from *Bonding and the Missionary Task*, especially the definition for a missionary:

A missionary is one who goes into the world to give people an opportunity to belong to God's family. He⁴ goes because he, himself, is a believer in this most meaningful of relationships. His life should proclaim: "I belong to Jesus Who has given me a new kind of life. By my becoming a believer here with you, God is inviting you through me to belong to Him" (Brewster 1980, 6).

I see that Betty Sue practises what she believes and teaches, and that a simple lifestyle is one of her values. I remember Charles Kraft talking about Jesus and saying, "*Jesus hardly ever spoke messages, he was the message*". The same can be said about Betty Sue, "she is the message". Again from *Bonding*, "The missionary's task thus parallels the incarnational model established by Jesus Who left heaven, where He belonged, and became a believer with humankind in order to draw people into a belonging relationship with God" (1980, 7).

In 1987 I returned to Norway with two degrees from Fuller and hoped to start upgrading our Bible and Mission School in Norway. Since our School had no academic accreditation, we had to link up with some other university that would approve of our curriculum and standard of teaching and allow our students to write their exams under their umbrella. The University of Trondheim approved of us, and for four years we were affiliated with them and slowly a change of attitude was seen among Pentecostal leaders when it came to academic studies.

Then, after four years as head of the Bible and Missionary School at Hedmarktoppen, my dream fell to the ground. In 1991 I was diagnosed with cancer and my future was most uncertain. Cancer stopped me from proceeding, and since I was the only qualified teacher who could cover missiological courses, there was no one to continue the program. When I, two years later, again could resume duties, I no longer had the same strength and energy to start all over again, physically reduced as I was and uncertain about my own future.

⁴ The Winter and Hawthorne 2009 reprint of this article in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, uses more inclusive language than this 1982 original.

But a seed had been sown, and today I am glad to say that The Pentecostal Church of Norway now sees the need for academic training and we have been granted approval and accreditation for our own Training Centre at university level. Other people have dedicated themselves to run the work I had been doing and I have been invited to teach a couple of courses, for which I am grateful.

Apparently it is in my DNA to see needs and then do something about them, and often those needs are challenges that had never been acknowledged. I have learned that for such unconventional pioneering work one must not be too sensitive to criticism. It is always most convenient not to offend anyone by 'foreign' ideas and simply allow things to be done the way they have always been done. Old trails easily become untouchable theology that one must not challenge or question. However, sometimes, for the sake of the Kingdom of God, some of those doctrines must be challenged and perhaps even changed.

The issue of women in leadership was one such issue. To this point in time we had no female pastors, nor elders, in our Pentecostal churches in Norway. I knew that a change had to come, and I was happy to be a change agent by encouraging young women to cultivate their leadership skills and be prepared for the day when doors into leadership positions would open for them.

Little did I see myself as the very first one called upon to clear that road. Neither did I think, at the time, I would be able to fill the requirements, still reduced and on crutches as I was after the cancer treatments I had been through. But a little Pentecostal church where I had been of some advisory help for some time, was united in their calling, they wanted me to be their pastor. With our congregational church structure where each local church can decide for themselves how to run the work, there wasn't much that could be done to stop the procedure.

At my ordination and instalment as a pastor, national TV was present to cover the happening, something that had never taken place! Pentecostal leaders wrote to newspapers and Christian magazines to criticize both me and the church that, in their opinion, had broken away from the 'biblical pattern'. People wrote to me to express their sorrow and heartfelt concern for me. One said that for years he had admired me and rejoiced at the way I had been used all over the country as a speaker in conferences and churches, but was now worried that all doors would be closed to me and that I no longer would have invitations anywhere. Meanwhile God blessed our work and the church was almost doubled in size during the three years I served there.

Quietly other churches came along, women were elected as elders and soon there were some female assistant pastors. Today we have churches that call women to be chief pastors, without TV coverage, as it no longer has sensational value!

For years I had seen the need for counselling, especially among leaders, and had often been called upon to help. Now that I had the opportunity to go for qualified training, I decided to do so. I was admitted for in-service training at Modum Bad, a Christian Centre for Psychiatry and Counselling and received the clinical pastoral education degree. Following this, to my great astonishment, I was called upon to set up an office in Oslo, directed towards Pentecostal leaders in need of help.

Remembering the criticism I had suffered a few years earlier, I was very uncertain that I was the right one to do that kind of work within the Pentecostal Church. Did I have the necessary credibility and trust needed? By 1998 time showed that the need was great and leaders and churches did come for help. The ministry was called Synzygus, which means ‘being of help’ or ‘walking alongside’ and I was the general manager until 2008.

Parallel to this, I had been asked to join a Crisis Team established by Modum Bad, consisting of psychiatrists and counsellors, where two of us at any time could turn out and be of help to missionaries who struggled, whether it be out in some mission field or they were brought back to Norway for counselling. This link to Modum Bad became of utmost value to me, since we all were unitedly involved in the wellbeing of missionaries and we formed a body of competent professionals that could be of mutual inspiration and assistance to each other.

To my greatest surprise I received invitations from all over the country to hold seminars, within our own Pentecostal churches as well as other churches. I learned that obeying God pays in the end, even though one at times might appear to be deprived of popularity. I further learned that credibility is different from popularity. And lastly I have learned that one can be respected, despite the disappointments some may have felt. Today I enjoy nationwide respect where my services are wanted and appreciated, cross-denominationally. Occasionally I am requested to serve internationally as well. My last trip was to India in February 2012, and in December 2011, I was in South Africa and Swaziland.

Ordinary retirement age in Norway is 67, and after having run the Synzygus work for 10 years, I was happy to hand it over to a well qualified successor in 2008. Having worked within church and missions all my life, I immediately saw that my pension would not be splendid. With

the need to supplement my income, I was actually glad there was a need for me at a nearby hospital, to join the chaplain crew. They had never before employed a non-Lutheran pastor, so this was a new experience for both the hospital and for me. I was given responsibility for a psychiatric department, where I am still working. I love my work, both among the patients and with the staff. Almost daily spiritual issues are brought up and I am free to pray with patients and share the Gospel with them.

Norway has become a harbour for refugees from all over the world. In the part of Oslo where I live, nearly 60 % are from either Africa or Asia, and many now come from Eastern Europe. I live in a compound consisting of 189 apartments. Five out of 21 names on our mail boxes are Norwegian, the rest are foreign. And I love it! Most of them are Muslims, and often they put secularized Norwegians to shame by their devoted religious conduct, and they challenge us who are born-again Christians to live out our faith. In this environment, right on our doorsteps, I can live out my missionary calling by sharing Christ with them.

In closing I would like to summarize in five points what my journey as a single Pentecostal woman in ministry has taught me:

(1) The Kingdom of God is bigger than our different 'kingdoms'.

(2) God's calling to missions has no geographical, nor vocational limitations. Going, sending or equipping, it is all equally important for the spreading of the Gospel.

(3) So-called 'closed doors' often mean new openings and new beginnings.

(4) Focus is important. Instead of allowing health problems to drain strength out of me, I can focus on what is still operational. With three different cancer diagnosis and a number of joint replacements⁵ over the last 21 years, long ago doctors said that I could qualify for a permanent health insurance payment, but I refused to accept it because I have found that what I pay attention to, becomes essential. Even with certain physical limitations, there is still much that can be done. The example set by Tom and Betty Sue taught me much about limitations. Their focus on opportunities rather than on obstacles is important. Nevertheless, health needs must not be neglected and my next major joint replacement is scheduled for November 2012.

(5) God is faithful, and He is the best of all lords to serve. Now, 57 years into the journey, I can repeat what I wrote at the age of 13, and I truly mean it:

Only that which is worth dying for, will I live for!

⁵ Joint replacements have been necessary due to after-effects from chemo therapy.



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