

BECOMING WOMEN ON MISSION WITH GOD:

LESSONS LEARNED

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Introduction

In 1999 my husband Scott and I were appointed with the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention to serve as career missionaries in Western Europe among unengaged peoples. At the time our two children were five and three years old respectively. Our family was confident of the call God had placed on our lives, however we had no idea how this calling would unfold in a cross-cultural setting. Before surrendering to the call to missions Scott was serving as pastor of a rural church in Alabama and I was a stay at home mom. We had no idea what a “people group” was but we knew we had to obey and that God would equip us for the work to which He had called us. Once we arrived in Germany, God used a relationship I established with another mom to force me to examine my heart and subsequently shape the way I would look at other women who needed Christ. A changed heart and a renewed love for others shaped the way I lived out the gospel in that cross-cultural setting and continues today as I work to equip other women to live on Mission with God.

When we first arrived overseas our children attended kindergarten in our multicultural neighborhood. I was only beginning my language studies so I couldn't understand anything when the kindergarten met with the parents at the beginning of the school year. Thankfully, a German

mom spoke English and offered to translate for me. Her daughter was in the same classroom as my daughter and so Tanya and I became friends. Our girls became playmates as well. Before we had ever left America, I had asked God for a friend because I knew I would need friends as much as my children would. It didn't take long before I realized just how different my worldview was compared with that of Tanya. Not only was she an unbeliever, but there were so many other things personality-wise as well.

I found myself complaining to the Lord about *how* he chose to answer my prayer for a friend. I found myself concentrating on her bad habits, foul language, etc. and how they would affect my children and home. This is when the Lord spoke clearly to me about a problem much deeper than my new "friend" and what I considered to be her bad habits. I realized that I was more concerned about my being made to feel uncomfortable and my children hearing curse words than I was for this woman and her household's salvation! God then graciously reminded me not only of the specific call that he had placed on our family to leave America and be a part of bringing the nations to Himself, but that if I had remained in America I would still be responsible for being a part of seeing the nations come to Christ. This realization started me on a personal and missiological journey that continues to the present. This experience served as the springboard that led me to recognize and learn many things about God and my part, as a woman and as a mom, in His mission.

This article is intended to provide a glimpse into some of the lessons I learned and also to help missionary trainers assist women to live more effective missionary lives. *By living an intentionally gospel-centered lifestyle in our home and community, women have a unique opportunity to participate in the advance of God's mission by making disciples of target audiences, many of which are inaccessible to men.*

Gaining Access Behind the Veil takes Time

In my time on the mission field we mostly ministered among Muslim peoples from the Middle East and Central Asia. In these cultures, the men and women live in separate worlds. Over the years I came to realize that as a woman, I was able to enter a world in which men were not welcome. This cultural separation allowed me to have time alone with other women that was both unique and deeply personal. Being involved with other women provided opportunities to bond in ways that would not occur in the presence of men. The women I ministered among shared their burdens, experiences, and joys of life with one another and as a result developed deeper relationships. Many of the women had difficult marriages and were often beaten by their husbands and sometimes by their in-laws as well. They felt safe with other women, many of whom shared similar experiences. This time together was, in some ways, sacred.

Though I was a Westerner and could not fully relate to their specific culture, experiences, or lives, I was able to share about the life and marriage that Jesus intends for all of us to have. I was able to listen to them, pray with them, and share stories from the Bible. The women also asked questions about my own marriage which allowed me to speak about the way marriage is to mirror the way that Christ loves the Church. Not only did these discussions lead to bonding, they also provided the opportunity to share the hope that I have in Christ and how that hope sustains me when the circumstances of life around me seem so hopeless. Women who fail to make themselves available for these long relational bonding experiences often miss the chance to share the gospel with those who so desperately need to hear it.

Not only do women have a unique role in God's mission because of cultural divides, we also perform many unique roles in a society. Women do things together in non-Western cultures that men almost never do: taking care of the home, shopping, and childrearing. One of the

adjustments that Americans must make when moving into a Muslim context is realizing that the women they are seeking to minister to spend a lot of time in their homes with their children and with other women and their children. My experience was that, unless women were out shopping, they were typically in their respective homes with other women. They were cooking, cleaning, visiting, taking care of children, or simply catching up on the latest gossip.

“Family” is the Key to Overcoming Frustrations

I frequently talk with new female missionaries who are frustrated living in a context that was previously foreign to them. One of the most frequent frustrations is loneliness. Young mothers with small children often feel trapped in their homes and find it difficult to find other women and children in their community. Single missionaries also struggle with loneliness as they seek to not only find national women to build relationships with, but also desire to find others that would become ‘like’ family to them. In these instances I encourage single missionaries to make national families “their family” and plant themselves into their new communities. Nationals, whether believers or non-believers, want to feel like they have something of value to offer foreigners and believe they can give to you as much as you desire to give unto them. Let them! Another way that singles can not only fight loneliness but find a partner in ministry is to minister alongside a married woman on the field as she is doing ministry in the community. Many people in a Muslim culture find it difficult to understand how the parents of a single female would allow them to live in another country without a spouse or some type of supervision and protection. When singles can introduce nationals to a ‘substitute’ family, whether that be another missionary family or a national family, they can be received by the culture in a more positive way.

Living with Missional Intentionality

In my experience, and in my conversations with new missionaries, I have discovered two specific areas of intentional living that provide open doors for mission and ministry. However, each of these can also be missed if one is not careful about maintaining an intentionally missional mentality. The first is *maintaining a hospitable home and an attitude of hospitality*. Coming from the deep-south in the United States, I always thought I knew how to be hospitable. However, after being in the homes of others from around the world I quickly realized that I had a lot to learn! In the beginning, I was always concerned with my time. I worried about how spending time with others was going to interfere with my schedule. Then I realized this was a poor understanding of hospitality. When I considered the women that had me into their homes set aside large chunks of time, or were willing to spend all day to just sit and talk, I was always humbled at how valuable time together really was.

It was also humbling to think about when families spent most of their earnings just to prepare a meal for me and my family. One of my favorite resources for women ministering to Muslims is *Miniskirts, Mothers, & Muslims* by Christine A. Mallouhi. Concerning hospitality she writes, “For Muslims to feel comfortable with our spirituality they need to feel comfortable with our hospitality. Hospitality is not only a custom in our home, but a key into the kingdom of God” (pg.153). She highlights an Arabic proverb ‘Baitna Baitkum’ (your home is our home) as a reminder that Christians are not simply inviting people into our home, but inviting them to enjoy the blessing of our home in Christ. (p. 154) Women must recognize that we are not just serving a meal or tea and coffee, we are cultivating a lifestyle and offering each person we host a generous heart. I have found that many Americans struggle in this area. If we want to form deep relationships with other women, we must have them into our homes and at our tables. We must

interrupt our lives. Many women on the mission field miss this opportunity because they are too busy making their home a “refuge” for their husband and children rather than a home for those who need to find refuge in Christ. Living for Christ and partnering with Him in bringing the nations to Himself requires sacrifice. I challenge women to plan to sacrifice when it comes to having a hospitable home.

Another example of intentional living is including children in ministry. For those with children, it is so important to involve them in the work of the gospel. We frequently talked to our children about why we lived overseas and what our purpose was for what we were doing there. In our experience, no matter how old our children were, we could find ways to involve them in the work. For example, when we had guests in our home, our children greeted them at the door, served refreshments, took their plates to the kitchen after a meal, etc. We also found that by allowing our children to do things for our guests it showed we were a normal family and that we were planting our lives in our new culture. When we hosted teams from the U.S. our children served as translators or tagged along and met new friends at the park. This provided connections with families and opportunities for sharing the gospel. Often, missionaries are overly protective of their children, isolating them from nationals. This causes them to miss this unique opportunity to minister to others as a family. It is important to see the value in involving our children in whatever is taking place around them rather than trying to constantly protect them from all of the normal interruptions of life that come from ministering to the people around you.

Practical Ways to Cultivate a Missionary Lifestyle

1. *Pray.* The Great Commission is so overwhelming that prayer is essential. Make it a habit to be known as a woman of prayer. Model prayer in front of nationals as you pray for them

and with them. I would not only pray with them but would share about the prayers I had prayed on their behalf in my personal times with the Lord. This opens the door to talk about the different ways in which believers pray and understand prayer and to teach what scripture says about prayer and how it instructs believers to pray. Have your prayer partners in the states and all over the world join you in praying for the women and children in your life and community. As I mentor women who are headed to the mission field, I encourage them to cultivate a missionary prayer life. Praying for others and seeking to be known as a woman of prayer. Prayer takes practice and it is my experience that we do a great service to young missionaries by helping them learn to pray before they leave.

2. *Follow the Lord, not other people.* Far too many women on the field are looking for the approval of others as it relates to their roles on the field. It is unhealthy to compare yourself to others who are also serving the Lord. Jesus says, “come follow me.” Keep your eyes on Jesus and preach the gospel daily to yourself. When I am meeting with women and preparing them for their time on the mission field, I spend time helping them explore their calling and their spiritual gifting. I want them to “be comfortable in their own skin.” I encourage them to think of ways God can use their specific gifting to participate in his mission. I try to let them know that God has created and called them for a role. It is my hope they will follow him as they leave for the mission field.

3. *Be intentional.* As women we are busy in every stage and season of life. Be creative and make good use of your time in every season. When you go about your daily routine make sure that it involves interacting with other women whether you are at the bank, post office, paying bills, shopping, market place, or going to the park. Go to places in your community so that you can run into the same people often and build relationships. As I mentor those preparing

for the field I encourage them to practice being intentional in these areas while still in America. I find most women realize how little they are actually doing this here and I challenge them to develop an intentional lifestyle in these familiar surroundings.

4. *Depend on the Lord and be willing to be obedient.* We can do nothing apart from Him and it is in His strength alone that we can do anything good for Him. Make sure that you are spending time daily in the Word and in prayer. Preach the gospel to yourselves daily. Dr. Chuck Lawless says, “We MUST intentionally plan evangelism into our lives. We MUST so love God, so believe the Gospel, and so grieve over the lost that we do what it takes to be obedient to the Great Commission.” Many women come to me when they feel unprepared for the mission field. I always remind them that there are tools, resources, ministry experiences, giftings, etc. that go into our preparation. However, I encourage them to learn to depend on the Lord and cultivate a relationship with him. I try to encourage these women to learn to develop a devotional life that will sustain them and one that does not require resources they may not have available in their location.

Conclusion

As women we must be intentional with the gospel in the small tasks that fill our days in order to participate in God’s mission. Our time with other women should be spent sharing truth from the scriptures with the intention of those women repeating the truths to their households and in their community. We must also bring along others whether it be other missionaries or nationals so that we can model for others in order to extend our reach by sending them out to do the same. With the present uncertainties around the world, missionaries are not guaranteed another day in their current country. Therefore it is important now, more than ever, to train up

others who can further the work of the gospel producing a ministry of multiplication that long outlasts our physical presence.