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Women in Missions

JEANENE REESE

Introduction

The following case study was originally presented in the first *Come before Winter*¹ renewal held in South America in 2001. In the past twelve years various teams have conducted twenty-five renewals on six continents serving almost a thousand female missionaries and national Christian leaders.

The women depicted here represent a composite of hundreds of women that I, and dozens of others, have been privileged to serve in this incredible ministry led by our executive director and my dear friend, Karen Alexander. Teaching notes for processing the case are provided and will hopefully help churches and individuals seriously consider how to provide better care and support for God's finest on the front lines of service in the kingdom.

What Should I Say to Her?

Case Study

Helen sorted the mail as she did each day—bills in one stack, miscellaneous items in another. Personal letters from family and friends were fewer than ever because of e-mail. “I miss the joy of receiving something on paper that I could touch and smell and read over and over,” she admitted to herself.

Near the bottom of the stack, Helen was surprised to see an unfamiliar handwriting. Curious, she sat down in her favorite chair and read the following:

October 29, 2012

Dear Mrs. Fuller,

I know that you don't know who I am, but I have grown up watching you as a missionary wife. I remember when our church started supporting you and Mr. Fuller, and I have always secretly seen you as a role model. Since I was about thirteen, I've known that mission work was something in which I was definitely interested. Seeing all of the pictures of the children that you worked with especially touched me. I feel drawn to mission work but I don't know if it's a calling. I certainly feel God moving me in this direction.

About four years ago I met an amazing man who felt the same way that I do about mission work. He is a missionary kid who watched his parents on the field and knew that he wanted to do the same thing. Our friendship grew and last year we got married. We both have advanced degrees in Missions and feel well prepared to serve. We are about to go on a two-year apprenticeship and that has prompted me to write. Our plans are to form a team with some of our friends in about six years and go full-time to a country that needs us. Both of us feel that these next two years will be a

¹To learn more about this ministry, see www.comebeforewinter.org (accessed February 12, 2013).

time of training and growth for us. We feel like this is a trial run for what our lives will be like when we actually go for long-term mission work.

The problem is that despite the fact that I really want to be a missionary and that I am truly ready to go, I still feel scared. There are so many things that I don't know about what we're going to do. I'm not just following my husband—we're walking hand in hand into this, equally committed. If I weren't married, I'd be going anyway. But sometimes I don't know if this is the right decision. I want to be a missionary and not just a missionary's wife.

Yet when I think about leaving my friends, I almost feel sick to my stomach. I'm so glad that we have e-mail, Facebook, and Skype and so many other ways to communicate. I know that I can stay in contact with them, but I'm afraid that I'm going to spend so much time keeping up with what is going on in their lives that I won't really connect with the people in our new church. On the other hand, I'm not ready to exchange a new culture and new friends for the ones I love so much. I know that I'm probably not supposed to feel this way, but I do. Does this mean that I'm not ready to go?

As for leaving our families, I feel unbelievably blessed that they both like to travel. I'm not worried about them coming to see us at least once while we're there. And I know that the bonds we share will never change. But it's hard for me to imagine not being here for my sister's graduation from college or my little brother's years in high school. My husband and I are both the oldest children and a little overprotective, and we're also both very close to our families. How did you handle that? My mom always talks about it in terms of our love being stretched across the world, but I'm not sure how long I can stand being away from them.

My last, and perhaps greatest, fear is what these two years are going to mean for my husband and me. I know that we will grow closer together and our marriage will be strengthened, but I worry about the times when we'll drive each other crazy. I have a hard enough time sometimes here in the States when I have my best friend and all of my other girlfriends here to swap stories with. It's not that I don't love him, but he is a man, and he doesn't think like I do.

How can I possibly rely on him as my only source of friendship, especially in the early months? He knows the language of our new country and I'm learning, but I'm worried that I will resent his ability to go wherever he wants to go and speak with other people while I'm still struggling through language school. Did you ever deal with this? Was it hard for you to relate to one another when it was just the two of you? And what was it like when you had your first child far away from what is most familiar? Or what if I struggle with infertility?

I appreciate any wisdom you could give me in these matters, even if you just want to send me an e-mail. I wanted to send you a letter since it seems so much more personal. You have blessed my life in more ways than you can know by the example you set for me growing up. Thank you for showing me that it's possible for me to go and do all of the things I feel God is calling me to do. I pray that God continues to bless you and Richard in your life and ministry.

In Him,

*Lindsay Michaels
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Helen closed the letter, laid it in her lap, and sat back in her chair. Smiling, she allowed her thoughts to roam back through the last twenty-five years she and Richard had spent together in mission work. She remembered arriving as an optimistic, bright and eager young woman who felt like she could conquer the world for Christ. Together they had set up their first apartment, studied the language and worked to get to know their fellow workers on the field.

Just out of a college and little more than newlyweds, Helen and Richard had found their new life challenging but also rewarding. "I was such an idealist then," she thought to herself. "Who could ever have

imagined how much I would grow and change over the years? Have I realized the dreams I came to this country with or have they changed as well? Have I done what God called me to do? Is he pleased with our work and our lives?"

Helen thought about the family and friends she left behind—her parents, a brother and sister. She had known that she would miss them and that she couldn't be present for all the special events. "But how do you explain the pain of missing a brother's wedding or not being there when a sister graduated from college? Those are times when families need to be together," she thought.

Wiping a tear from the corner of her eye, Helen said a silent prayer for her aging parents. "I was so unaware at first of the sacrifices they made watching their oldest child move so far away," she thought. "Guess I've gotten a little taste of that experience when Richard and I had to send Ginny off to school in the States. We all seemed ready for the adjustment," she mused, "but it was so much harder than I could ever have imagined." Times like these were when Helen felt the most alone and didn't know whom to turn to for comfort and support.

"But none of these things were as hard as facing the difficulties we experienced with John's birth," she admitted. "We suffered through a couple of miscarriages, and I was finally feeling like this place was home and that my language skills were more than adequate when he was born. We were so thankful for God's blessing then John developed breathing problems just a few hours after delivery. We struggled to communicate with the doctors and the nurses, no one seemed able to know exactly what was going on—how I wanted my family then," Helen remembered. "Our precious little, or actually quite big, son," she laughed to herself, "has been such a trooper through it all."

Doctors, hospitals, breathing treatments, medicines, setbacks and triumphs—all of these had been a routine part of his growing up years. Helen had always wondered if he had received the best possible care on the field or if it would have been better somewhere else. She remembered the traumatic arguments that she and Richard had during John's early life about whether they should stay on the field or return home. Many of these episodes were also in response to the medical bills that kept piling up and the stress that it caused. "Oh well," she sighed to herself, "he's doing much better managing his asthma now. He likes his new job and is showing a fair amount of interest in the latest young lady in his life. I'm just glad that Richard and I finally learned to pull together during that time, when the tensions of the work, the home and the children could have pulled us apart."

Helen's thoughts turned to the church they served. "What should I say to Lindsay about how I have grown these many years as young Christians gave me rich insights into faith when I was supposed to be the mature one? How appropriate is it to tell her about my critical sister in Christ who is still a continual thorn in my flesh? But then there's the demonstration of courage and faith of baby Christians who live in difficult situations that would challenge most to abandon their convictions, yet they remain strong. They truly inspire me. How do you describe what it feels like to fall in love with people, to take on their culture, their food and their language?" Although she had looked forward to the experience from the outset, the richness of living in another country blessed Helen and Richard more than they ever imagined. "That's not to say we've been without problems in our work here," Helen admitted, "but they cannot compare with the blessings. I hope I can convey these realities to Lindsay.

"I'll need to tell Richard about this letter," Helen thought as she rose from her chair. "He'll be pleased to hear that she is from the Hilltop Church that has supported us these past ten years. Overall, we've had a good relationship with each other," she mused. "They may overwork us when we're stateside for furlough and maybe they're not the best about sending care packages from home, but at least they aren't likely to unexpectedly cut the budget and leave us stranded as our first supporting congregation did. Not only were we struggling at that time with the shock of termination, but also the added stress of trying to raise funds while carrying on when the work here needed us so badly," she remembered. "Well, that's ancient history now," Helen reprimanded herself. But she felt a stab of pain even thinking about what a difficult and discouraging time it had been for all of them.

Helen went about her day reflecting often on the letter and reminiscing about her life in missions. She shared conversations about her possible response to Lindsay with other women on her team—both single and

married. With humor and grace these teammates shared how lonely, isolated, frustrated and exhausted they felt at times, but more significantly they reminisced with each other about the blessings they had experienced in life on the field, how much it had helped each of them grow, and how they loved who they were and what God allowed them to do.

That night as Helen finished the dishes after hours spent in Bible study, teaching, visitation, encouragement and hospitality, she finally had a moment to sit down and write a response to Lindsay. After twenty-five years in the field, she had so many memories and experiences, so much joy and sorrow. She once again asked God for guidance as she wondered, “What should I say to her?”

What Should I Say to Her?

Teaching Notes

Intended Audience: Groups of veteran missionary women, women preparing to serve in missions, or churches that support missionaries.

Background: The introduction that precedes the case gives many of the necessary details that could be reviewed with those who are set to process the case. The case has been presented in various contexts and has been modified for publication in *Leaven*.

When the case was first presented, the women participated with great enthusiasm and insight. They seemed genuinely appreciative of an opportunity to share what goes on in their lives on the mission field. When the processing was completed the small groups were asked to spend forty-five minutes in prayer together, instead they took an hour and a half. When they finished, one group reported finding “a pool of tears” on the floor in the center of their gathering.

Possible Objectives:

- To prepare young women training to go on the mission field.
- To express appreciation for women who have served for a significant length of time on the mission field.
- To facilitate discussion in churches that support missions—elders, staff, Missions Committees.

Opening: Read the entire book of 2 Timothy aloud to the group to provide a biblical backdrop for the case.

Processing:

1. Read the case together. Ask participants to identify the characters in the story and what they know about each. (Take notes on large pad and post in the room if possible, or use a white board to record responses).
2. Describe how you would like the group to look at the case from three possible perspectives:
 1. Those in Helen’s position—veteran missionaries
 2. Those in Lindsay’s position—new or less experienced missionaries
 3. Those sending family/friends off—the supporting church

Allow the participants to choose a perspective to represent in the discussion and then gather into the three different groups—numbering them 1), 2), and 3). Next instruct them to cluster in groups of three-five, with representatives from each of the possible perspectives, to discuss the following questions:

- What do you find most interesting about the perspective you represent in the case?
- What similarities/differences do you see in this case to what you have experienced or heard about women in missions?

- What do you think Helen should say in her letter to Lindsay? If she decided to write a letter to Lindsay's family, what do you think she should say in it?
- How do you think Helen can be encouraged and blessed in this process? What role does the supporting church need to fill in relation to her?
- What do you think churches could do to better support missionaries in general and women in particular?

As the discussion time draws to a close, ask each group to focus on one or two things they found especially meaningful to share with the larger group.

3. Lead the group in a larger discussion by asking each smaller group to highlight one or two things they discussed that they think are worth sharing with the whole group.
4. Each small group could be encouraged to write a letter to a missionary on the field, to a woman preparing to go to the field, or to a supporting church. (Stationery must be provided if this option is chosen.)
5. Conclude the discussion by instructing the small groups to spend time in prayer focusing on four things (instruct them about conversational prayer—where a leader directs and the group follows as if in a conversation).
 - a. Praise to God for his wonderful nature and abundant presence with all of us
 - b. Special prayer concerns you would like the group to pray for
 - c. Acknowledgement of blessings he continues to provide
 - d. For God's work of missions to spread throughout the world

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