

ROOTS AND FRUITS: “Love and be loved”

Hyderabad, South India

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At first I thought this conference wasn't for me. The words “mission” and “Scottish Missionary Movement” feel somewhat alien to me; certainly not part of my day-to-day vocabulary. They felt so strange that I put off putting pen to paper for at least a couple of months.

I'm not really familiar with the workings of the Church of Scotland, much less the Scottish missionary movement having been brought up in the Catholic Church. I felt that I had little to offer people that are much more knowledgeable than me about theology, folks that are “professional missionaries” with a vocation to take the word of God out to the world. I have no religious training. I don't talk about God in public. I'm no expert in matters of faith. For me, my faith is a private matter.

Yet, I find myself drawn to contributing a paper for Roots and Fruits in spite of my first instinct not to.

I've always known that God's hand is at work in my life; I just sometimes have trouble struggling with not knowing what is planned for me. I've often resisted God's influence in my life, feeling comfort in our secular society and rational thought. But somehow I'm always drawn back to a knowing God. He/She has this amazing strength of planting the seed of an idea in my mind, and not letting me rest until I've done something about it.

My “mission” story if you can call it that is a simple one. I was lucky enough to have been a volunteer with Scottish Churches World Exchange in India for two years in the late 1990's.

Near the end of University I started having questions about my life. I needed to learn more about the world and about people. I began questioning my own values and motivations. The lure of a graduate salary, house, car and 2.4 children held no appeal for me. I was fed up with the attitude that surrounded the academic world in which I lived. Having a Degree meant little to me about knowledge or truth. I was a fraud. I knew nothing about life.

No one in the secular world I inhabited seemed to be talking about the suffering and injustice in the world that I could see. I questioned why there was so much anguish in the world. At that time, I was having a tough time believing in God.

Yet, I had a knot in my stomach, knowing in my heart that I had faith, but needing to explore what it meant to me. I wanted to discover my relationship with God in practical and spiritual terms. To do that I knew I needed to learn, to serve, and to live with people that would help me discover the value of life, and faith. I needed to escape the commercially driven life that was panning out in front of me, where success would be judged by material wealth and superfluous goods.

One day I picked up a leaflet about Scottish Churches World Exchange. Their ethos immediately struck a chord with me. They talked about sending friends around the world, about the challenge of being immersed in another culture, about hard work and powerful rewards. And about being a Christian organization working with Churches and their partners. I sent away for the application pack. Then, of course, I did nothing.

I didn't think I had the skills or qualities to fit in. I didn't know anything about Christianity and mission work. Because I was having such a tough time with God at the time, I thought, “That's definitely not for me.”

It was a chance phone call from Lynn at World Exchange that changed my life.

Lynn called to ask why I hadn't applied, having asked for the application pack and we ended up chatting for half an hour before I (and thankfully later World Exchange) accepted this was something I had to do.

I really had no expectations of my life as a volunteer. All I wanted was the chance to widen my world view and learn something about “real life”. I went in blind. I said I’d do anything and go anywhere... and I did.

I ended up in Hyderabad in the beautiful heart of Moghul India, in a city with a population the size of Scotland and genuine warmth, at the Henry Martyn Institute. HMI is an Ecumenical Christian organisation dedicated to the study and teaching of Islam, the promotion of interfaith dialogue, and reconciliation.

My time as a volunteer was life changing, even though some of the tasks were not. Being a volunteer meant doing anything that my hosts asked. I catalogued the journal section of the library, which I detested, and was hopeless at. I had Urdu lessons every day to help me settle my nerves with the culture. I edited articles for HMI’s academic journal.

And after a couple of months of language tuition I was set to work in the *balwadi* unit - a wee nursery in the conflict-torn old city, supporting the teacher in creative teaching methods and teaching the bairns Scottish games and songs. If I achieved nothing else as a volunteer, I left a bunch of four-year olds in Hyderabad singing in a Scottish accent!

My time as a volunteer broadened my world view in ways I could never have expected. I learned about Islam and conflict resolution at HMI. I started the journey into community development, which is now my field of work. I made lifelong friends... and I met my Palestinian husband who was working at HMI at the time!

And through my time as a volunteer, I dealt with the saddest loss in my life, the sudden death of my beloved mum. Thankfully I had some days with her in Scotland before she passed on, and although losing her was a heartache, that year was still the brightest in my life.

My time with World Exchange turned out to be much more about me receiving than about me giving. I began to know myself. I gave love unconditionally to the wonderful friends that I met, and received warmth and generosity back in abundance. My time as a volunteer was the thunderbolt I needed to help me open my heart to people and to the possibilities that might come from my submitting to God’s will instead of resisting it.

I may have used my skills in small practical ways that had short term gain for the projects I was working in, but I learned to just love and be loved. To give and to receive. To listen to God and see His/Her work in the beauty of humanity. That was the centre point of my “mission”.

(1,128 Words)