

Treasuring the Church

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When my family landed in our new place of service in Southeast Asia, we were full of excitement and enthusiasm for the work ahead. We were in a small nation that was home to hundreds of evangelical churches. All we had to do was to convince them to boldly proclaim the Gospel to the millions of lost and unreached around them, and our job would be done. Soon after arriving, we joined a local Baptist church that was 700 members strong. In the eyes of the local convention, it would be seen as a thriving church. They had a well-trained pastor, a growing children's ministry, a beautiful building, and plenty of money in the bank. Yet, as the newcomers with an agenda, we saw all the flaws. Within our first few weeks at the church, we were unashamedly vision-casting for the church to reach a particular Muslim people group that is the least reached in the country. When I introduced myself at my first young mom's church get-together, I made sure to share why my family had come to this location and what our heart was for the church. In a few sentences, I basically told them all what they were not doing well and how I could help them fix their problem. With each new church interaction, we made a point to share why we were here and how we thought the church should interact with the lost around them. We shared boldly, brazenly, and sometimes carelessly. A few months into our time we began to feel defeated. We had minimal traction and had made little to no progress in the work. At every turn, we were actively discouraged by many,

including the pastors from our church, from doing any outreach work among the unreached Muslim people in the country. The church was still doing what it had been doing before we arrived, and we were simply frustrated and confused.

Recognizing our lack of progress, we realized what needed to happen. We stopped. We prayed. We re-evaluated. Here we were as newcomers full of pride and feeling like we were needed. We came in seeing only the shortcomings of the church, and we were more than ready to share what we saw with the church leaders and members and provide them with tools for how to improve. Yet, we had failed to genuinely love the body. We had not offered to serve within the body, except in ways that we felt would be beneficial for our strategy. We had bulldozed our way in, pointed out all the glaring flaws, and then stood by waiting for the church to ask us to help them. We needed to be reminded of the call found in Romans 12:4-5. “For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we who are many, are one body in Christ and individually members one of another.”

Through our prayer and self-evaluation, God revealed to us our pride and called us to humbly serve and join in what the church thought was important. So, I began serving in the nursery on a monthly basis, bouncing snotty babies on my hip and playing cars on the hard nursery floor during the service. We opened our home for a community group, giving up rare slow evenings as a family to study the Word with other church members. My husband, Louis, began serving on the church’s mission committee, sitting through late evening zoom meetings about mission budgets and proposals. I attended the young mom’s meeting, sharing only my parenting struggles and shortcomings. We invited people into our home, hosting the young, the old, the pastors, and the brand-new members. We joined in where the church felt they needed us, and slowly people within the church began to see that we had a heart for the church as a whole. As we interacted with more and more individuals from the church and in various settings, they would ask

us why we had come to their country. We would then share the mission to which God had called us and listen to their stories of God's work in their lives. We built genuine and deep relationships. We stopped triaging people based on who we thought was influential and able to further our goals. We realized that every person that we spurred on to deeper faithfulness in Christ was one more person who moved closer to faithfulness in gospel sharing.

As we got to know others, shared our stories, and dug in deep with them, we also invited those people to go out and share the gospel with us. One of those people was Sarah, a young local woman with a heart for missions. Sarah had done several short-term trips to other countries but was quite convinced that the gospel couldn't be shared with a certain Muslim unreached people group of her own country. She believed it would cause conflict and animosity. However, she was willing to go out together with us. That night, over plates of naan and aloo gobi, I shared the gospel with a couple we had just met. They listened. They smiled. They did not get up and leave. That one night transformed Sarah. The next month she shared at the church's prayer meeting about how she had gone out and shared the gospel with the unreached. As she stood in front of the church sharing that night, she, as an insider, had a greater impact than Louis and I, as trained missionaries, had in our 18 months of participation at that church. Sarah vision-casted so clearly, presenting the need, and sharing how the gospel could actually be shared. Suddenly, we had a multitude of people interested in being trained, joining us in our evangelism efforts, and hearing more about the unreached of their nation.

Another area where we saw growth was within our community group. When we first opened our home, we hosted only six people. We created a time of testimony at each meeting where we would share about people with whom we had had a chance to share the gospel or with whom we had follow-up and how God was moving. Within 16 months, the group grew to almost 20 people. Each member was full of passion for the lost. When we gathered, there were numerous people sharing about recent opportunities

they had to share the Gospel, whether in their workplace, with their family, in their friend circle, or with strangers. Our community group became one characterized by mutual spurring on as we all encouraged one another to reach all the lost! This group has since multiplied and is on the verge of multiplying again.

Now, it may not seem like an earth-shattering concept, but we saw firsthand that the deeper our love for the church, the more openly we could share about the need for the gospel and invite others into the work. Our pastor's wife, Grace, came up to me one Sunday asking if I would be willing to take her out to share the gospel. On Grace's next day off, we met for lunch in a local food center, enjoyed our bowl of noodles, and shared not only our table with another lady, but also shared the gospel with her. Grace left our time together that day excited to apply the lessons she learned in her workplace and with her neighbors. Slowly, one person at a time, people started to gain an awareness of the concept of the need for the gospel among the unreached of their city and the need for these people to be able to hear the gospel in a way that they could understand and respond. Our church even asked us to lead an evangelism training and prayer time during the fasting month of Ramadan to lift up our neighbors. Numerous church members attended this training and afterwards several of them came up to us expressing that they had no idea that Muslims in their country were coming to Christ and that they were challenged to be a part of this work.

God truly humbled us over our first months in this new context, and we have clung to the lessons that He gently taught us. We learned that no matter our context, we must enter humbly, coming ready to serve and to pour into the local church. We realized that we cannot make an idol of what we want the church to be. We were reminded that regardless of our differences, that we as a church are one body, confessing the same gospel. We saw that hospitality is a necessity as we open our homes, build relationships, and let others see our passion and calling. We also saw the importance of viewing all members of the body as valuable and needed. No one is non-influential.

We needed to stop expecting others to fit into our mold. I praise God for the way that He transformed our hearts. He has shown me what it looks like to treasure my church--to build it up, to not give up on it, to show up, to serve from within. May each of us commit to live lives of faithfulness and humility and invite others to walk alongside us. May we live out Ephesians 4:2-6 in our churches, no matter the context. "Conduct yourselves with all humility, gentleness, and patience. Accept each other with love, and make an effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit with the peace that ties you together. You are one body and one spirit, just as God also called you in one hope. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all, who is over all, through all, and in all."

Beverly Cooper currently lives and serves in Southeast Asia alongside her husband and four young girls. Beverly has served overseas for almost ten years. She is passionate about evangelism and discipleship of believers.