

Women in International Mission

Martha Mensendiek: A Second Generation

[THE LORD] HAS TOLD YOU,
O MORTAL, WHAT IS GOOD; AND
WHAT DOES THE LORD REQUIRE
OF YOU BUT TO DO JUSTICE, AND
TO LOVE KINDNESS, AND TO WALK
HUMBLY WITH YOUR GOD?

—MICAH 6:8

(MARTHA'S FAVOURITE BIBLE VERSE)



What happens to Missionary Kids? In a recent issue of Common Lot, I introduced three young adult children of missionaries. As I watch them carving out their own identities, I wonder where God will lead them in the years ahead. Might they ever follow in their parents' footsteps and become international missionaries? Just what does happen to all the Missionary Kids who have called another country "home," whose cadre of friends all speak another language, whose parents have lived out their faith in such a tangible way?

Martha Mensendiek, a second-generation missionary whose home is Japan, provides some insights. When Martha was 3 months old, her parents, both UCC ministers, took Martha to Japan where she spent her childhood. Martha explains, "...my parents influenced me most, though I never thought I would myself become a missionary." Now Martha serves Global Ministries at Doshisha University, Kyoto, where she teaches social welfare. Join me as I journey with Martha from New York, the place of her birth, to Kyoto, Japan, her home.

Ana

Martha's journey...

Martha writes, "I am grateful to my parents for teaching my siblings and me about Christianity in a way that made us want to claim it for ourselves. They were never pushy, and that helped us ask questions and inspired us to find out more. My parents' tolerance and gentle example had a great influence on me. There were other influences that ultimately inspired me to my commitment to mission including two other missionaries I knew as a child: Carolyn Francis, a retired Methodist missionary; and Shizuko Oshima who helped start a women's shelter in Japan.

"When I graduated from Earlham College [a Mennonite college in Indiana], I thought I wanted to go to a country in the "Two-thirds world" to help improve the lives of impoverished people. Several significant experiences led me to realize that I might have more to offer the world by using my bi-cultural background to work in the two countries that I am a part of, Japan and the USA, to bring about a more equitable world. "One experience was in India. I was staying at a Christian community in India where Christian brothers and sisters minister to the rural poor through medical care and education. One talk I had with a wise old Indian brother helped me see that there is a poverty in spirit in our "wealthy societies." and that poverty in India or anywhere else cannot be eradicated until there are some profound changes in the countries that control the power and wealth of the world.

“At the time I was also struggling with the question of how to be a Christian in a non-Christian society, and was troubled by the apparent exclusivity and intolerance of some Christian evangelism. This wise Indian man, living as a Christian in a predominantly Hindu society, said something that lifted the burden off my shoulders. He said, ‘Martha, you just do what your faith asks of you. We should not worry about whether other faiths are right or wrong. Leave that up to God.’

“Another significant experience was my first encounter with a victim of human trafficking. It was 1986 when the first women’s shelter opened in Japan. This shelter is for both Japanese women and foreign women from countries such as the Philippines and Thailand, who are bought and sold into a system of slavery to work in the sex and entertainment industry in Japan. These women have their passports confiscated and are forced into prostitution. When I heard the stories of these women, and the abuse and injustice they suffer, I felt called to commit myself to ending this present day slavery. I felt that the Christian church could not ignore reaching out to women in trafficked situations, just as Christ reached out to the foreigners and prostitutes of his day.”

Martha’s call to commitment led her to Washington D. C. where she worked with homeless mentally ill women through the Westmoreland UCC Volunteer Corps. Then she returned to Asia with Global Ministries, first as a Global Mission Intern to work at a women’s shelter in Tokyo.



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“I felt I wanted to join in on the work to stop the abuse of women and shed light on those who profit from this system of slavery. Japan and the United States, as major destination countries in this slave trade and with their influence in the world, must take the lead in putting an end to it. The shelter in Tokyo was started by the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. The Christian women’s commitment to the trafficking issue long before it became a hot issue among other organizations says a lot about the Christian witness.”

The next step of Martha’s journey took her back to her childhood home, Kyoto, to work as a missionary at the Kyoto YWCA, “an organization committed to peace and justice issues” and home to the very women’s shelter that had earlier inspired her call.

Home in Japan

I would sum up my call to mission as being a part of the Christian witness to diverse peoples in Japan. Japan has been a closed society, comfortable in its alleged homogeneity, but globalization has changed that. I feel that I am part of a movement in Japan to open up to diversity, to make it a more tolerant society for minority populations - racial, ethnic, and gender. At the same time, my hope is to help the field of social work and social work institutions become more aware of and competent in care for these minorities.”

Like most international missionaries, and Christians everywhere for that matter, Martha’s work and

commitment extend far beyond the description of any job contract. Her official assignment through Global Ministries is to teach Social Work at Doshisha University, one of the oldest Christian schools in Japan at 130 years old. (Along the way, Martha completed a Masters in Social Work at the University of Hawaii.) She admits, “However, I consider my other involvements just as important a part of my work.” These involvements include:

- Kyoto YWCA: serves on the personnel committee and volunteers with “the hotline and counseling center for foreign migrant workers and their families. I was a part of the [hotline] start-up 10 years ago. Many of my students have taken interest and have become involved in the center.”
- Habitat for Humanity: Advisor to the campus chapter, through which “we participate in work camps in the Philippines, Korea and India, do fund-raising, and some [students] are active in outreach to the homeless [in Japan].”
- The Bazaar Café: “a coffee house ministry of our local church conference in Kyoto. Housed in a renovated missionary house (property owned by the United Church of Christ), the Cafe is a vibrant place known for good ethnic food and a friendly atmosphere. Lots of activities take place there, including Bible studies, support groups for persons with special needs, and a craft shop which sells handicrafts from a women’s cooperative in

Thailand as well as organic fair trade coffee and tea. Bazaar Cafe is meant to be a place open to and accepting of diversity, a place where all people are welcome at the table, in the spirit of Jesus.”

Martha finds her work as a full time professor at a Japanese University both rewarding and challenging. Rewarding are “the informal times with students when they ask questions or share their own stories. When they take interest in the world and in local issues, and start to make connections and commitments to make this world a better place. When they ask questions about Christianity and want to talk about spirituality and faith.” Challenging.... “Japan is a very busy society and it is hard to carve out space for personal needs.” So Martha incorporates spiritual disciplines in her daily life including “centering prayer/meditation, daily devotional time (sometimes just a few minutes!)” for which she currently uses the UCC Calendar of Prayer, and exercise including walking, swimming and stretching.

Meeting Christ Face-to-Face

I asked Martha to relate a time when she met God or Christ face-to-face. This is her story:

“One of our YWCA staff has been struggling with her job, the weight of the many responsibilities, the long hours, the difficulty of working with few financial resources, and the challenge of working with various personalities. She has thought of quitting a number of times, and came to me for counsel a number of times. Though talking to me seems to help, she still struggles. Recently she decided to go to the Philippines where she had lived right after college. Soon after her return, she called and said she wanted to meet. I had been overwhelmed with work and felt burdened by many things. I thought she was going to share some problem at the YWCA. But here she was with this wonderful and inspiring message!





“She said that she had a wonderful time in the Philippines. Then she said, “I would like to be baptized.” She said that a conversation with a Japanese priest in the Philippines had been inspiring. He had encouraged her to entrust her worries to God and that would make her free. Then she thought about the various Christians she knows in Japan and how important it is for her that she works at a Christian organization with the values and commitments it upholds. Although she works for a Christian organization and is interested in Christianity, and a few years ago started to attend my church, she has not felt the need to be baptized. On the airplane home, she had a moment when she said her heart “moved”—that she needed to be baptized. She has heard the call. “This woman’s testimony was meeting Christ face-to-face. Through this woman who had come to me for Christian guidance, I was given the gift of Christ.”

Joy to the World the Lord is come.
Let earth receive her king.
Let every heart prepare him room
And heaven and nature sing!

These words from one of Martha’s favourite hymns ring true as we look over Martha’s life. Bi-cultural missionary, committed to justice and human rights, determined to include everyone around Christ’s table...Not only Martha’s parents, but the whole church, can be proud of what God has done with this Missionary Kid. Let heaven and nature sing!

Questions for Reflection

- What is it like to be bi-cultural? Interview someone in your congregation whose life bridges two cultures.
- “...just do what your faith asks of you. We should not worry about whether other faiths are right or wrong. Leave that up to God.” What do you think of this comment? How does it apply to you?
- Martha names the United States as a “major destination country in this [human trafficking] slave trade.” Learn more and identify a way you (individually or as a group) can respond.
- “The Christian women’s commitment to the trafficking issue long before it became a hot issue among other organizations says a lot about the Christian witness.” To what are you committed, as an individual or as a group? What “Christian witness” do you display to your community?
- Examine a copy of the UCC Calendar of Prayer. How can it best be used as a daily devotional tool? Share your experiences and ideas.

Prayer Opportunities

- Students and faculty at Doshisha University
- Martha and her work at the Kyoto YWCA and the Bazaar Café
- Japan, that its people may become ever more open to diversity and “the other”
- Women caught in sex trafficking, and for those who come to their assistance
- Global Ministries missionaries and their children serving around the world

Read Martha’s missionary letters at globalministries.com