



WOMEN IN INTERNATIONAL MISSION

Lisa Smith: A Missionary in Germany

by Ana Gobledale, a missionary in Australia

I am the true vine, and [God] is the vine-grower...you are the branches....

[God] is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

—John 15:1, 5,8 NRSV

Missionaries in Australia and Germany? Do so-called “First World Nations” need missionaries? How does that work?

Global Ministries¹, for many years, has related to many partner churches around the world. Our Global Church Partners are like old friends and even family members, all branches on the one vine. Through our international partnerships, we have cared for our partners and have been cared for by them through good times and hard times, through political upheaval and natural disasters, through times of theological exploration and times of theological fanaticism. Sometimes being Global Church Partners means minimal contact through correspondence. Sometimes church delegates visit one another and resources and ideas are shared and exchanged. Sometimes it means constant contact through the presence of shared people—missionaries.

Lisa and Steve Smith in Germany, like Tod and myself here in Australia, are “gifts” to our international partners in respect to the historic relationship, not necessarily because of our international partner’s inability to meet their own needs. We establish a living presence, a living link, with our Global Church Partners, even though they do not “need” us. Because of financial restrictions currently facing Global Ministries, missionary placements based primarily on historical partnership and not on critical

presence (meeting a tangible need that the partner church cannot meet due to lack of finances or personnel) are becoming fewer. Lisa and Steve are important links in the relationship between Global Ministries and the ECU, especially between the United Church of Christ USA and the ECU who established an intentional partnership in 1980. Currently serving in Berlin, Lisa and Steve have passion and gifts to offer our Global Church Partner, the Evangelical Church of the Union (EКУ), not the least of which is speaking German!

Just who is Lisa Smith, Global Ministries missionary to Germany?

Early Influences

Lisa’s childhood family, “a working class family in a middle class neighbourhood” included her father, a restaurant owner since he was 16, and her mother who “worked as a cashier in department store.” Her parents were active church goers, and Lisa “enjoyed the warm feeling of security sitting with my family on Sundays... the church has always been my home.”

Lisa describes her early years in the context of a “circle of church affiliations.” First, she attended a federated Church (Disciples and Baptists) in West Lafayette, Indiana, where she was born. When her family moved to Dayton, Ohio, (Lisa was 7), they attended a Presbyterian church, until Lisa, at age 16, joined the United Methodist Church where she enjoyed the youth group and choir. While at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky, Lisa “mostly attended the Episcopal Church, but never joined.” Later, living in Lexington, Lisa joined Central Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), while she attended

*You did not choose me, but I chose you
and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last...*

This is my command: Love each other.

—John 15:16-17 NRSV

Lexington Theological Seminary, and was ordained there, thus “closing the circle of church affiliation.”

Lisa feels strongly influenced by her mother who “had a...phase where she was extremely charismatic, and that brought a lot of theological discussion into the house, so I grew up on Christian theology being the foundation of decisions and thought processes...I was brought up strictly on the premise of tolerance, modesty, self depreciation, curiosity, wonder, and respect for academics.”



A Call to Mission

“Although I always saw myself as underprivileged (when compared to those in my immediate surroundings), I knew my life was better than that of many others in the world and felt logically that I should do something for those less fortunate than me. Jesus’ life of service was always my example. So mission work in developing countries was always in the back of my mind as a possibility. On the other hand, I was pretty busy helping people in Lexington and found there is a lot of need in the United States as well, so [international] mission wasn’t a high priority—it was seen as an option.”

Lisa was both an associate pastor of a church and was working with the Senior Citizens of Northern Kentucky while in her third year of seminary preparing to be a hospital chaplain when she met Steve who was studying at the Patterson School of Diplomacy “across the street.” Lisa writes, “We felt strongly that God had called us together (so strongly that we married nine months after we met). My husband’s dream was to live and work in relations between his two home countries (his mother is a German citizen) so I had to be prepared to live outside of the United States if we were to fulfil both our callings.

And since I was already prepared to serve God wherever I was called, and Steve wanted to go to Germany, we applied in 1987 for mission service. It came to fruition on January 1, 1993, 3 years and 2 months after the fall of the [Berlin] wall.”

Mission Work in Germany

Lisa and Steve serve with the Evangelical Church of the Union (EKU) in the Berlin-Brandenburg

Region “in what is called the Konsistorium—what we would call the Home Office.” Lisa serves with “the department focusing on issues related to foreigners, especially migrants and asylum seekers,” is responsible for many of the business aspects of the Protestant Church of Berlin including work related to the Decade to Overcome Violence, provides counseling through the Ecumenical Centre for Foreign Students, and preaches periodically throughout the district.

What does Lisa enjoy about her work? “I love it when after doing a strict, liturgically correct, high church worship...people say, “Now that was really different!” because my style is so welcoming and humane. I love it when a student comes into my office sad and leaves full of hope. I love it when I learn so much about peace issues and world politics through contacts in the DOV [World Council of Churches’ Decade to Overcome Violence]. While she finds many aspects of her work rewarding, the most challenging aspect of her work resonates with so many women in ministry, “Keeping the family happy—including me.”

Where does Lisa encounter God in her work? “I see aspects of God everywhere and in everyone: when a young person stands up in the tram to give a seat to an older person; when the church comes through defending a young family about to be split up and/or shipped to a

dangerous part of the world; when people get up and go to the streets to fight for a reform in the social system; when the only thing people can talk about for days is how their heart is breaking for the victims of whatever catastrophe happened in the world recently; when anyone opens their heart and shows their weaknesses for however long—there I see God.”

“Here [in Germany] I discovered the spiritual strength of those who have had to maintain their faith under persecution—as well as how difficult it is for churches to compete in a secular world...This partnership relation has done much to teach me, and yet, I have been grateful to think we have had much to offer them as well.”

In a recent missionary letter, Lisa writes of her experience visiting a German prison:

“When the [United Church of Christ USA] UCC and the Evangelical Church of the Union (EKU) gathered together last November (2005) in Berlin to celebrate 25 years of full communion, I took a group of the guests to a high security jail here in Berlin. A few of the inmates joined us as we toured the facilities. I realized I’d never been fully aware of being with a criminal before. One of the young men, Pascal, who had already been there 10

years, had such a sweet smile and his eyes twinkled as he spoke. We all sat together in the church that looms over the center of the Jail compound. We sang a song based on a poem [Dietrich] Bonhoeffer had written while locked away in this jail. The title of the song is, “Von guten Mächten Wunderbar Geborgen” (From Good Powers wonderfully sheltered). I found myself being totally shocked to find out that Pascal was in jail for premeditated murder.

“The power of that moment of grace—in a church in the middle of a high security jail—singing of God’s presence with a dear man who happened to have committed murder—is about the strongest image of the Overcoming of Violence that gives me hope for the next 5 years of this decade—and hopefully beyond! I trust in God’s words that God will not fail us or forsake us as we journey through the rest of this Decade to Overcome Violence. We will come to some promised land—some visible signs of progress towards peace.”

Spiritual Discipline and Sustenance

When asked what spiritual disciplines she practices, Lisa writes, “I think I have been blessed with a

Reflection questions

1. Reflect on the role of international missionaries as “Partners in Mission.” What do you think about missionaries serving in our Global Church Partners in so-called “First World” countries? How might this relate to John:15?
2. Lisa says, “I see all of life as a spiritual experience based on an awareness of the need to balance heart and mind.” What do you think of this understanding of life?
3. Lisa describes Christ as “a rebel who struggled with frightened power-oriented humans in order to show them that the way to God was to be like God—full of mercy and compassion, and yet willing to be with the people to listen, learn, speak and act when faced with something that isn’t fair.” Who is Christ for you? What does it mean to be God-like?

Please Pray for...

- The ministry of Lisa and Steve in Berlin;
- Criminals like Pascal, convicted of violent crimes, and those who minister to them;
- The partnership of the UCC and the Evangelical Church of the Union (EKU);
- Musicians who write music and those who sing it creating moments of grace in worship;
- Lisa and others who minister to migrants and refugees in Germany and other countries.

Letters, reflections and worship resources by Lisa and other Global Ministries missionaries can be found at <http://www.globalministries.org> (or go through the UCC home page). The program Global Mission Partners can connect your conference with a woman serving in international mission. People-to-People Pilgrimages can help you plan an international mission trip to one of our Global Church Partners.

lifetime of excellent educational experiences which have trained my mind to think creatively, logically, psychologically, and spiritually, and that this foundation has been what guides me daily. I see all of life as a spiritual experience based on an awareness of the need to balance heart and mind. So I am trained from early on to be curious for facts, and yet be painfully aware of what the underlying emotions may be (perhaps my drama training?) and to try to sort them out psychologically (my Bachelors degree and my second academic love next to theology is psychology)—which is not always easy. But family and friends are a constant source of support and I try everyday to focus as much as possible on my gratitude for these special people in my life. So I'd say, the discipline of loving and accepting love, and focusing on the contentment not on the imperfections. This is a discipline I practice and will forever be practicing..."

Lisa does not like to be narrowed down to one choice; she has neither a favourite Bible verse nor hymn. She explains, "I don't have [a favourite verse] because it changes from day to day—hour to hour—minute to minute. I get all excited about some text and then go off on that for a while, and then in context of the world politics or personal experiences another text jumps out and gives me a moment of awe. My consistent Christian understanding, which is a basis and a goal for me, is that Christ was a rebel who struggled with frightened power-oriented humans in order to show them that the way to God was to be like God—full of mercy and compassion, and yet willing to be with the people to listen, learn, speak and act when faced with something that isn't fair."

When it comes to songs and hymns, she writes, "I've got quite a mix in my head and heart—mostly between German and English. Some songs are older, some are more recent. Sometimes I sing Dylan songs in church. Inspiration comes from all over. One of my favourite "religious" songs for a while there was "Is It Mine?" by Supertramp. I love singing the [German] liturgy...The way "Herr Erbarme Dich" (Lord Have Mercy) sounds reflected off the walls of churches, which are sometimes 400 hundred years old, gives me shivers, and the words have so much more meaning."

Lisa's call to be a missionary, whether in Lexington,

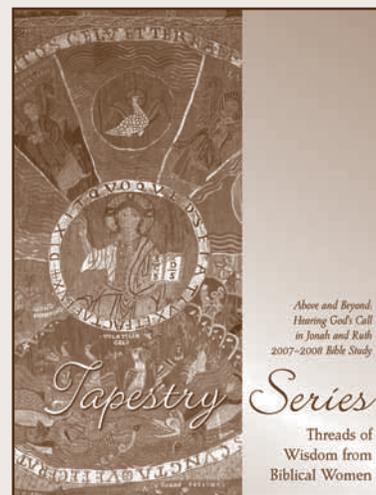
Kentucky, or Berlin, Germany, has resulted in much fruit. Let us give thanks to God for Lisa's work to end violence and to be an agent of love, both in her family and within the wider society.



Ana Gobledale has served our church through Global Ministries in South Africa, Zimbabwe, the USA and now Australia where she and her husband, Tod, are chaplains and lecturers at Churches of Christ Theological College.

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