

## Why Survive When We Can Thrive?

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*Overview: This testimony traces my journey as a Singaporean Chinese missionary before, during, and after my stint to Kazakstan with my family. Faced with gender prejudices, unpreparedness, personal struggles, and an unexpected crisis on the field, I was torn between self-preservation and continual trust in God. By God's grace, I am now not only surviving but thriving in Him. Through this experience, God showed me the importance of membercare and I have included some of the lessons learned in my testimony.*

### **Surviving Before the Field**

The years 1994 to 1998 were by far the most challenging years of my life. Ignorant of what was to come, my husband, two children and I excitedly embarked on our first mission field posting to Kazakstan. We had envisioned ourselves being instrumental in helping our church expand its vision for missions and getting more missionaries into the field (Mt. 28:19-20, 9:37-38). But before we left, I had to work through my uneasiness with two issues. I was concerned that we were not adequately prepared because the only training we had received for this assignment was a talk with a missionary couple about life on the field and attending a class on contextualization. When I voiced this concern to the church leadership, I was assured that we would be fine.

I was also uneasy that our church leadership did not recognize wives as full-fledged missionaries. These wives were not even expected to have a calling to go to the field. Instead, they were only required to take care of their families so that their husbands could do their ministry with as little distraction as possible from the home front. That contradicted my beliefs regarding women in missions, but not wanting to rock the boat, and believing that I should be submissive, I did not pursue the matter. However, deep in my heart, I believed that God has a mission for me on the field.

### **Surviving on the Field**

This belief that God has a mission for me was further shaken when I noticed that women in Kazakstan were considered second-class citizens and their opinions were not taken seriously. Women missionaries in our team were also not fully incorporated into the vision and direction of the work on the field--the very things I felt I could be a part of. My ministry was restricted mainly to children. I had limited opportunities working with adults because I was not considered trained in cell church ministry. My two years in the seminary as well as my experiences as a pastor's wife and a school teacher were neither validated nor recognized. By then, I was wondering, "Am I wasting my life?" Unfortunately, I did not feel safe enough to confide with anyone on the team or our church pastors when they visited us. They seemed to be preoccupied with fulfilling their own agendas and I was fearful of being reprimanded for obstructing God's work.

Meanwhile, my husband's and my relationship with our church leadership deteriorated as they did not understand our vision or strategies for the field. We encountered one disillusionment after another working with them. Sometimes, I wondered whether they were just playing games at our expense. The climax came after a very emotionally exhausting meeting with our church pastors who visited us in Kazakstan. We went to bed very discouraged that night. But, we had yet to face a greater challenge the next morning.

Two armed robbers rushed into our apartment when my husband opened the door to send our son to school. They beat up my husband so badly that he had to be hospitalized for a week. One of them wielded a knife at me several times and strangled me thrice. Worse, they even threatened to take with them our five-year-old daughter. Desperately, my husband and I cried out to God (Ps. 91) and much to our relief, they relented. I was in a daze for a few days after that robbery. But our team members ministered to us. They accompanied me to the hospital to visit my husband, cooked meals for us, and a team member who was a social worker helped to debrief us.

Confident that our church in Singapore would also stand by us, my husband and I requested to return to Singapore for a while to recuperate. However, our church leaders did not support our decision and they tried their best to discourage us from returning. They even flew in a counselor to try to dissuade us. Their rationale was that by remaining in Kazakhstan to deal with the after-effects of the trauma, we would recover faster. They could not understand that it was not just the trauma of the robbery that we needed to work through, but also our relationship with them. In the midst of such controversies, after much thought and prayers, we, however, decided to return.

### **Surviving through Reentry**

Back home, we found that our church had changed, and so had we after all the years of being away. My husband and I felt very alone in our reentry process in spite of debriefing and crisis counseling. Everybody seemed to be busy. We tried to work through our issues with our church leaders but the more we tried, the more we felt that we hit the ceiling. After numerous attempts, my husband resigned from being a staff in the church.

As for me, I thought that going back to teach would help me to readjust to life in Singapore. When I tried to explain to my supervisor in school that I needed time to adjust to the education system after being away for 5 1/2 years, she was unsympathetic. She compared my situation to the time when she lived in New York for 2 years and was able to keep in touch with the Singaporean education scene. She had no idea what it was like to live in a less developed country where sometimes it is difficult even to meet basic needs. After two months, I quit.

By then, I was totally broken. I was very angry with God for allowing all these events to happen when I had entrusted Him with my life. When I asked Him, “God, why do you abandon me when I have given my life to you?”, His only answer was silence. Puzzled and hurt, nevertheless, I clung to Him, who had never failed me before.

### **Thriving instead of Surviving**

It has been 4 1/2 years since then. As I look back at those years, I can only reiterate that God never fails! God allowed me to be broken so that I could receive all the inner healing I needed. He provided my husband and I with a wonderful friend who counseled and helped us through that painful period. This friend encouraged us to trust our God-given instincts and do what God has called us to do. God also took us to a nurturing environment where He rebuilt our lives. My husband is happy in his present ministry and my children are growing well. I was given the opportunity to continue my studies and I graduated last year. During my studies, God gradually revealed to me His purposes and plans for going through all these valleys. While writing a paper for one of my classes, I remember God telling me distinctly that although I thought my dream for missions had shattered, it had actually just begun. He had allowed me to go through all those experiences so that I could identify with missionaries whom I would be ministering to in future. Like Job, God had allowed me to go through such trials to refine me as silver so that I would be a vessel fit for His use (Job 23:10).

### **Thriving From Lessons Learned**

God has taught me many lessons regarding membercare. I realized that *missionaries need the support of their families, church, and friends throughout the whole process--before, during and after their stint on the field* (1 Cor. 16:15-18; 2 Cor. 8, 11; Phil. 1:3-5, 7, 4:15-16). Sending missionaries to the mission field is not a one-time event where we, the church, send them off and forget about them until they come back. But we are to continually support them spiritually, emotionally, and financially. Before missionaries go to the field, the church can help them raise financial and prayer support. While on the field, sending pastoral teams to minister to them is necessary. When missionaries return, the church can assign cell groups to “adopt” these missionaries to help meet their physical needs, pray with them, and give them a listening ear.

The importance of *being adequately prepared for the field and for reentry* into the home country is another lesson I have learned. Otherwise, we would be like foolish men who try to build a tower or house without considering the whole cost (Lk. 14:28-30). On hindsight, I would have gone through a

more thorough orientation program to be equipped for the field. This program should include understanding the dynamics of living in another culture and conflict management. Due to the circumstances of our return to Singapore, we were not well-prepared for our reentry into life there. Ideally, six months before reentry into their home country, missionaries should prepare themselves and their children. One way is to discuss issues such as current events, culture, fads, and the education system in their home country. They should also give themselves time to say goodbye to friends and places they love in their host country. A good closure will pave the way to a good reentry.

In addition, I learned that *considering the needs of my children is important* (Eph. 6:4). Because of our traveling while on the field, my son missed most of his second year in school. He later confided in my husband and me that he felt neglected during that time. After the robbery, we also had to help our daughter work through her fear of what would happen to her if I had died. My husband and I are learning to be more sensitive to their needs by spending time and communicating with them.

But the lesson that I treasure most is *the importance of my relationship with God* (Ps. 18:1, 2; John: 15:5). I realized that I was too dependent on the leadership of men and their opinions. While I should respect my church leadership and be open to their counsel, it is finally to God that I should depend and trust. Only when I abide in Him do I find my true sense of identity and calling.

### **Not Reshaping Foot to Fit the Shoe**

The heart of God is for the lost millions who have yet to hear the gospel (Rev 7:9). But the heart of God is also for missionaries who are plodding faithfully in the field (Rom. 10:15). As the Chinese proverb says, we should not “reshape foot to fit shoe,” sacrificing the important for the trivial. Similarly, we should not neglect the care of missionaries at the expense of reaching the lost. Let us help missionaries not only to survive, but to thrive by strengthening their hands so that together, we will reap the harvest that is already white.