

I Never Thought This Would Happen

Mary Lou Sander, global personnel, Colombia

When I was consecrated as a Covenant career missionary to Colombia in 1990, I gave testimony of God's amazing and miraculous ways of calling me into mission work and confirming his call on my life through his word, presence, protection, and provision. Psalm 77:14 from The Living Bible sums it up well: "You are the God of miracles and wonders! You still demonstrate your awesome power." I took these biblical truths to heart, grateful for all God had done and was doing in my life through a series of miracles and wonders. God was doing the impossible in me—I was going to be a missionary. Wow! I never thought this would happen!

I was given a journal to record, and a scrapbook to help me remember visually the amazing adventure our Lord God had called me to and was equipping me for. In the first years I filled that scrapbook with God's beauty seen in the faces of Colombian people and our mission staff, as well as the places, churches, and ministries I came to love deeply over the years. Each of our family of six had our own photo books as we were "leaving to learn" about who God is in the culture of Colombia. These photos display in living color the many wonderful milestones in my life and faith journey. If you were to read my more than thirty journals written over these thirty-five years, you'd get a glimpse of who God is to me—our Creator God who is love (1 John 4:8b, 16), who is Spirit (John 4:24), and who inspires and invites me to respond by participating in mission with him wherever I am, and with whoever I am with. God does his ministry to and through me as I listen to his voice, abide in him, and follow him. "For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring'" (Acts 17:28, NIV).

We are his offspring, and we belong to the family of God as individuals and in community with other Christ followers. From my early childhood I always believed God invites all people to know and love him, and to reciprocate his love. “We love him because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19, NKJV). God is a continual movement of giving and receiving, for God is relational and inclusive. “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16, NIV). God calls us to himself that we may be born again and redeemed from our sin by the blood of Jesus on the cross. He calls us to receive his gift of eternal life by submitting to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Because God is love in action I too can be love in action as I walk by the Spirit, live a vibrant relationship with him, and give out in word and deed the great news of who he is to others, because of all that I have received from him.

I was seven years old when I asked Jesus into my life. My four siblings and I were blessed to be raised and nurtured by loving Christian parents who shared about God’s love, goodness, and salvation during Bible readings and prayer times. They were actively involved in several wonderful Covenant churches during our growing up years. My siblings and I were also involved. This felt like a natural part of my family and community life.

As my childhood faith grew, so did my love for God. Since my earliest days in Bogotá in 1990, God showed me more of who he is, including from my first two Colombian friends, Alcira, my Spanish teacher, and Gloria, my church friend. These women of faith helped me learn what it meant to live in a different culture and to be patient with myself in my learning and adapting processes. Alcira was an excellent Spanish tutor who taught and led well, especially when I felt stuck learning Spanish. Around this time, I received a letter with an encouraging message that said when I think I am not progressing in my Spanish, my mind is still working and taking in many Spanish words and phrases that will be retrieved when needed.

Alcira’s time extended beyond teaching me Spanish. She, her husband, Jorge, and their two daughters became good family friends. We shared fun times in our homes and in special outings that helped us get to know Bogotá and Colombian cultural practices and traditions. Alcira and her family shared their cultural knowledge, sensitivity, and wisdom of how to live, move, and be in Colombian society regarding language, politics, dress, speech, presence, prudence, and caution. We were always received with love and respect; they modeled for us the importance of greeting

one another and welcoming us into their home. As a couple, we saw how Alcira and Jorge worked in a team, communicating and helping each other in whatever task was to be done. They also taught us the importance of bringing something to share when invited to a Colombian's home.

Through the years we saw their faith in God and their relationship with Christ grow as we shared our lives and prayer needs, especially when we were rearing teenage children and later experienced our kids leaving for college in different countries—the USA for us, and Canada and Japan for Alcira and Jorge. We remain close friends with them to this day.

Gloria and I became close friends. God's Spirit prompted us to study God's word in the early mornings before she left for her job as the director of the Covenant preschool. I often accompanied Gloria, along with Erna, a good friend and Norwegian missionary, to the preschool where I shared Bible stories, did art projects and dramas, and visited the children's families. Gloria and Erna reminded me of the valuable spiritual practice of daily being in God's word, and listening for and trusting in God to lead, especially when circumstances loomed large.

Gloria was our children's first Sunday school teacher at the new church plant, La Española. She loved our kids and all the children there. Gloria and I did a lot of praying, planning, and recruiting more volunteers to serve and care for the children of the church and in the community. With the pastor's wife, Nancy, we planned children's camps, giving children their first opportunity to leave the city, stay overnight, and go swimming. Many came to know Christ as their Savior through this ministry.

We began regularly scheduled Sunday school teacher workshops with the five church plants in Bogotá. The Covenant Sunday school material, *Mi Pacto con Dios*, was taught in interactive ways and, eventually, all churches had these volumes of wonderful Bible stories and activities to share in their Sunday school classes. I truly enjoyed being an active member on this city-wide children's ministry team.

I learned new ways to creatively share God's love with the children and teachers from Gloria, Nancy, and others. I learned that children are children wherever they are and that God is alive and moving in spaces even when there are not enough tables, chairs, and supplies. The Holy Spirit moved through these leaders and children, encouraging me to be more flexible in my thinking and actions.

In 2000, the Colombian national church leaders asked for a missionary family to move to Medellín to come alongside the pastoral and ministry leadership families. So our family moved to Medellín. We worked in a team with our colleague Cathy Campobello. This was a blessed move

that Gary and I believe God confirmed in many ways. The move also involved some sacrifice; our four children were in middle school and in high school, not easy years to relocate.

In Medellín I learned and experienced more about who God is, who I am, and about God as mission.¹ I led and taught from Neil Anderson's study *Breaking Through to Spiritual Maturity*² in five different small group settings. I cherished the prayer covering from Colombian friends involved in this study—pastors, leaders, and students. Satan wanted to stop our learning about who we are in Christ and our walking by the Spirit. The enemy does not want us to live freely and abundantly in Christ as people with a new identity, position, and authority in him (2 Cor 5:17; Eph 1–3).

This study led us through many parts of the Bible, including a focus on the creation story in the first two chapters of Genesis. We read the great news of how God created all human beings in his image and likeness, to live in unity with God, others, and creation. God created all humankind with the same intrinsic value and dignity, giving us a shared vocation and responsibility to participate, multiply, and steward or govern well the world God created for us, doing so with God's good and perfect authority and leadership.

We were discovering, or rediscovering, God as Three-in-One—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who created us in love and goodness to be in a personal relationship with him. This living relationship can grow, develop, and be transformed daily if we choose to listen and follow him. Throughout the Bible, our triune God's giving and receiving is found repeatedly, for this is his nature. God's pattern of giving and receiving is foundational in my understanding of God's kingdom values of love, unity, justice, and peace or shalom. I do not just receive God's wonderful qualities and keep them for myself—no! I am (and we are) to live out God's kingdom values of provider, protector, provision, power, and peace, and to embody these *p* words for myself and others. We receive generously from God so we can generously give his blessings of shalom to others.

To do this well, I must fully embrace the inheritance God gives me now as I live in Christ, for this inheritance determines my identity and my actions. God is missional and relational, continually inviting us to

¹ See page 17, Gary Sander's article in this issue, "Learning to Leave, Leaving to Learn," for an explanation of this term.

² Neil T. Anderson, *Breaking Through to Spiritual Maturity: Overcoming the Personal and Spiritual Strongholds That Can Keep You from Experiencing True Freedom in Christ* (Baker Publishing, 1992).

participate with him as mission, to live out our identity in Christ, walk by his Spirit, and share the joyous message of his love, forgiveness, salvation, healing, and shalom. God invites all people to be reconciled to him and to one another, and to flourish now and forever in Christ Jesus. Salvation in Christ Jesus is not only personal, it is communal. I am not alone in God's mission; he wants us all to know him personally, to be his disciples, and to flourish in all aspects of our individual lives and in communal love, service, and advocacy. "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34–35, NIV).

Jesus, in his life, death, and resurrection, modeled how we, too, can participate in a love that gives and receives, is self-emptying, and self-giving love as "we live, move, and have our being" in him (Acts 17:28). Our identity is in Christ Jesus. May we continue to submit ourselves to Christ to be transformed from the inside out in both times of hallelujah and suffering. This continual pattern—from life, to death, to renewal or being brought to life again—is what Jesus modeled for us on the cross. Klyne Snodgrass writes in *You Need a Better Gospel*, "His death is our death, and his life is our life."³ I am humbled and grateful to God for all I have learned from him and my Christian sisters and brothers about what it means to live in Christ, to die to my false self, to die to my fear of not being capable enough, and to die to wanting to control. I am still a work in progress.

In 2004 I studied Scripture to learn about God's inclusion of women in full participation in ministry and read books, including the Covenant's writings and documents, about women in ministry.⁴ My eyes were opened to the ways God's heart is broken when his word is misinterpreted and limited to only some parts of the Bible. My eyes were opened to the widespread abuse and unjust treatment of women and people from around the world as I taught the CHET course "Women in the Mission of God." As I prepared for and shared the weekly lesson, I felt like my heart was being broken. I believe God's heart is broken every time people do great harm to others, whether in word, gestures, or in actions, and we do not repent of our evil ways. Our triune God as mission was reminding me that I am not alone. He continues to gather a community of believers

³ Klyne Snodgrass, *You Need a Better Gospel: Reclaiming the Good News of Participation with Christ* (Baker Academic, 2022), 125.

⁴ A selection of the Covenant's books on this topic can be found at <https://covbooks.com/products/women-in-ministry>.

to join hearts, souls, voices, talents, teachings, and inner strength to be trained as advocates for those suffering all kinds of abuse and other types of injustice in their lives. From 2006 to the present, many Colombian pastors and leaders have been trained as advocates for people suffering such abuses. I am grateful for this community of leaders from Colombia, Norway, and the US. They continue to raise their voices and live justly, teaching and preaching the biblical truth that all people are created in God's image and likeness, with the same value and dignity in God's eyes, and are charged with God's authority and leadership to govern well God's world so all people can flourish. This community of believers also teaches the principles of Advocacy for Victims of Abuse (AVA)⁵ and of Mending the Soul,⁶ and the basic human rights for all Colombian citizens. My friend Dora Londoño, former national president of Women Ministries of Colombia, once wrote, "Because we have felt the pain of abuse, because we recognize the importance of a friendly hand, and because we believe in the merciful restoration of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are with you, AVA, and the Colombia Covenant Human Rights Commission."⁷

There is purpose, strength, and courage to go forward when people work together in teams for the well-being of others and for God's kingdom values. In this way, we are participating in mending our broken and needy world. In this way I am a woman in mission, in God's mission, for wherever I am in the world, God is! I am forever grateful to God, to the many Colombians, and to many, many others from around the world who have journeyed with me in these amazing and miraculous ways I never thought would happen.

⁵ See <https://covchurch.org/resource/sexual-violence-uncovered-in-the-bible/>.

⁶ See <https://www.mendingthesoul.org/>.

⁷ Email in author's collection dated October 26, 2015