

Learning to Leave, Leaving to Learn: 1990 to the Present

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We were consecrated in June 1990 as career missionaries offering ministry in evangelism, Christian education, church planting, discipleship, and theological education. One of our final preparations before leaving for Colombia was to attend “Learning to Leave, Leaving to Learn,” a missions course at the Link Care Center in Fresno, California. There, we were encouraged to recognize and identify the culture and country we were leaving. How had the religious, social, and economic values and input we had received from our education, work, and life experiences shaped us and our worldview? We had lived and ministered for seven years in Kingsburg, California, and had begun our family there, but who were we? Colombia was going to present us with a different culture, life circumstances, and challenges. We would be learning Spanish in Colombia, so we looked at how language had shaped our understanding of US culture. Our language learning would be done not in a classroom but with private, one-on-one tutors as we enmeshed ourselves in the daily life of the neighborhoods where we would live and move around. We had learned English and US culture this way, and we were encouraged to recognize the importance of learning Spanish and Colombian culture in a similar fashion.

My wife, Mary Lou, and I left the US as thirty-four-year-olds and will return to the US to retire in 2026 at age seventy. We have spent about half of our lives in the US and half of our lives in Colombia. As we move toward retirement, we are repeating our process as we “learn to leave” Colombia and “leave to learn” to live in the US again. We acknowledge and appreciate that our unique language and culture is a fusion of these two halves of our lives.

We arrived in Colombia ready to learn the language, the culture, and life among its people. What a humbling experience. In learning, we formed various relationships with those who could teach us. Those people included Colombian Covenant pastors and spouses, church leaders, Colombian friends and neighborhood acquaintances, Covenant missionary staff, Norwegian Covenant missionary staff, and other international missionary parents. We are still in close relationships with a number of people who shared our initial learning relationships. As we focused on building these and hundreds more relationships over the years, we were establishing a foundation for long-term ministry and friendships in Colombia. That foundation has allowed us to know, learn, and experience God in ways we had not known before.

Assuming the position and posture of learners and forming healthy and holy relationships of integrity with others are both central in showing us who God is as mission. What do I mean by God as mission? God as mission includes the living out of a personal and communal relationship with God in pursuit of oneness with him and oneness with one another as we were created to be. God as mission includes our growth process of knowing God and our relationship with God in Christ through learning who God is—our triune God, God's character, virtues, and God's many names in Colombian culture, society, and language.¹ God as mission includes our knowing God as love in action, seeing God's activity, and responding to God's invitation to join God's activity as we can, learning God's identity, seeing and accompanying God's participation in the life of his creation, recognizing God's initiative, and heeding God's call to accompany God in restoring creation to its identity in Christ. For us this is done in the context of walking alongside and ministering with the Covenant Church and social justice outreach ministries in Colombia.

We believe that God as mission in Colombia is revealed in its best form in the local language and culture. God is love and God is holy, desiring that we live holy lives in relationship with him and that we participate in God's mission of reconciling and redeeming all creation to God's self through Jesus Christ. We believe God works through all local languages and cultures. Because we came to Colombia as learners, our position and posture toward others sought to be respectful of their voices, opinions, and knowledge through the sharing of resources, skills, and insights. Both parties benefited from these relationships, which helped build mutual trust and respect. These relationships were not one-sided. As we were

¹ Many congregations in Colombia include a name of God in their church name.

learning language and culture, we realized that it wasn't all about us and our need to know; rather we could also be, and wanted to be, sharing and ministering. We came to understand and respect the local culture and appreciate local traditions, customs, and communication styles as paramount for developing effective ministries.

First, a bit of history. The Covenant mission began its work in Colombia in 1968. Until 1988, the Colombia Covenant focused its ministries and church formation in the city of Medellín. Because of civil unrest, security issues, and a voiced threat against US citizens by the Medellín drug cartel, the Covenant office staff decided to evacuate the Colombia mission team from Colombia in the fall of 1989. This abrupt evacuation caught everyone unprepared. The evacuation, the temporary absence, and the return of the mission to Colombia brought to the surface many questions, misunderstandings, lack of clarification, trust issues, and unplanned for situations.

The Association of Colombia Evangelical Covenant Churches, which includes the ADIPEC, the Covenant mission, and the Norwegian Covenant Mission, worked to re-establish good relationships, communication, and understanding of how to partner together after the evacuation. However, a failure to fulfill an agreed-upon strategy for how to have ADIPEC work together with the Covenant Mission and the Norwegian Mission led to a split in 1992. Three churches stayed with ADIPEC, and eight churches with the two missions left to form the Federation of Covenant Churches of Colombia (FIPEC) in 2009. This division and what followed in terms of vision, strategy, and how to partner in ministry have been focal points for much of our thirty-five years of work as missionaries learning how to relate to, minister with, and “walk alongside” the Covenant of Colombia. God calls us to be “one in him and with others.” This calling is a continual walk together filled with challenges and blessings.

God is shalom and is always working with us to become who we were created to be—one with God, one with others, and one with God's creation—that we might establish shalom in all these areas. Our Covenant Colombia Mission, the Colombia Covenant Churches, and our common ministries partner together in shalom to expand the kingdom of God in Colombia, thus living into our name, “Pacto” (Covenant in Spanish).

I ministered in the Covenant Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation program during the 1990s in Bogotá. One basic principle taught repeatedly is that God is a God of order. Order is basic to ministry with addicts to bring order to their lives and relationships with God. Learning how God

is order in mission within the Pacto of Colombia was a major piece of our ministry during our initial years. Many of our gatherings discussed goals and objectives, but the establishment of a strong, unified vision and strategy took about twenty more years to achieve. The Pacto was working with many local, regional, and national visions coming from diverse contexts, with many diverse voices wanting to be heard. The Pacto was growing and expanding, and yet without an agreed-upon and well-communicated vision and strategy the hope of unity in ministry together, fulfilling God as mission, was hard to accomplish. It appeared like a fulfillment of Judges 21:25: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit” (NIV). In the midst of the chaos, however, God as mission (Gen 1) continued to guide and inspire the Pacto’s growth and expansion.

Many individual meetings took place with various groups of Pacto pastors and leaders, the Covenant, and the Norwegian Mission, each making decisions within their own group. These decisions were then shared with the others with the aim of coming to some unity. Each mission verbalized a desire to serve the vision of the Pacto, yet their actions didn’t always live that out—especially when they needed to wait for the Pacto’s input and direction, or they needed to alter their decision, or they needed to submit their vision to the wider vision of the Pacto.

Throughout our years with Serve Globally, we have witnessed the movement of God as mission shift from a mission field approach containing shades of colonialism, paternalism, and a focus on the identity and vision of the missionaries and their sending church, to a focus of missions as continual learning, strategizing, listening, envisioning, submitting, serving, and advocating. We have seen the freeing up of personal, local, and regional visions to form a national vision of being one together. We believe it is a goal that God calls us to as mission. What we learned as we established and built relationships, and learned to live, minister, and accompany God in God’s mission together was the importance of serving from a posture of kneeling in grace and love, despite differences of opinion, position, or vision. We wanted our relationship with our sisters and brothers in Colombia to reflect who God created us to be, while respecting who God created them to be. There were hard moments when trust was challenged. Yet we showed up to meetings and gatherings, and planned opportunities to be together. We participated, interacted, listened, and learned. We certainly made mistakes, spoke out of turn, offended others, and felt offended by others. We learned we could acknowledge our

errors and our offenses, and we were forgiven, so we could continue to work toward strengthening and growing our relationship together with God as mission.

We also began keeping in mind certain mission principles, asking ourselves certain questions, and looking through specific filters as we worked and ministered together with the Pacto in planting churches, evangelism, discipleship, mutual mentoring, children's ministries, youth, women ministries, theological education programs, and social justice outreach.

We want to do everything that:

1. Responds to the felt needs of those with whom and to whom we minister, appreciating the local culture.
2. Protects dignity and a sense of self-worth.
3. Encourages sustainability as much as possible.
4. Stimulates self-initiative.

We want to avoid anything that:

1. Creates dependency, is demeaning, or bypasses Colombian leadership.
2. Provides everything needed.
3. Reduces the Colombian role or responsibility in the process.
4. Makes our task impossible to fulfill.

We want to constantly ask the following questions:

1. Do they think that they can talk to you? Do you think you can talk to them?
2. Do they think that you will listen to them? Do you think they will listen to you?
3. Do they think that you "see" them? Do you think they "see" you?

We learned to identify when we were moving away from living out God as mission in our ministry relationships with the Pacto and within our Covenant Colombia mission team. We held each other accountable and encouraged each other to stay true to our desire to be in a positive relationship with the Pacto and with each other, and to ask the question, "Are we doing more harm than good?" We felt supported by the Serve Globally office team and were ministered to by the member care team when we needed it most. As I had the opportunity to represent the Covenant in front of the Pacto in meetings and gatherings on a continual basis, and, since I was a "missionary," I was offered the opportunity to speak

into whatever the item of business was. It's nice to be given a chance to speak up, but I knew that it was better to stay quiet if I didn't have something to say worth listening to. I learned to stay quiet more than I spoke, because a "missionary's voice" could carry power and control—two negative attributes that our Covenant Colombia Mission team was seeking to leave behind.

We worked to model Jesus's example of servanthood and reflect a vision centered on faith, community, service, and resilience in the face of challenges, all deeply rooted in the context of Colombian society and the global Christian mission. We dedicated ourselves to building relationships within the missionary team and with the Pacto leadership through personal interactions and communication that we might achieve mutual understanding, effective collaboration, and a stronger community. We wanted to move from acting as external experts dictating initiatives to accompanying and encouraging the discovery of how we all have been empowered to learn alongside one another. A priority was spending time with Colombian pastors and their families, not just in formal meetings but also in informal settings. Mary Lou and I began to make frequent trips to different regions, often staying in the homes of our partners, sharing meals, and engaging in casual conversation to foster deeper relationships and understanding. An emphasis on shared learning and growth meant co-facilitating gatherings and retreats. Regular and open communication with Colombian leaders about the state of our hearts, our struggles, prayer requests, and perspectives offered mutual support. We even shared daily text exchanges focused on spiritual reflection. We sought to support existing visions and serve others in identifying and accessing resources, rather than imposing or depending on external solutions. We wanted to move far away from any position or posture of control. We found that we needed, as Christ taught, to accompany those we ministered and lived with and to move beyond spiritual matters, acknowledging and addressing the social and economic realities faced by our Colombian brothers and sisters and communities. We became more adept at walking alongside our sisters and brothers in finding support for various projects aimed at alleviating poverty and fostering economic independence.

As we learned to live and minister in Colombia, we knew we were also called to promote unity and reconciliation among different regions and groups within the Pacto. When we heard about existing hurt, tension, and division, we actively participated in fostering forgiveness and healing through dialogue and prayer, hoping our posture would reflect a humble and servant-hearted approach to ministry and mirror the life

and teachings of Christ. We did not possess all that was asked for or sought from our Colombian sisters and brothers, so we actively sought to connect Colombian ministries and communities with various support groups and organizations both within and outside Colombia to expand resources and opportunities.

We prayed and hoped that our ministry in Colombia was defined by God's grace and a commitment to long-term relationship building, mutual spiritual growth, and collaborative efforts in order to encourage local leadership and address the holistic needs of the Pacto and its communities. Our aim wasn't simply to impart knowledge or solutions but to walk alongside our partners as fellow travelers on a shared journey of faith, transformation, and mutual growth.

Achieving all this involved introspection, self-awareness, and ever-growing spiritual practices. The goal was to identify and confront personal biases, assumptions, and compulsive thinking patterns that hinder genuine connection and understanding on everyone's behalf. Honesty with ourselves and a willingness to be transformed by God's grace was necessary. We needed to create an atmosphere of safety, trust, and mutual respect where open communication and vulnerability were encouraged. We found a community where we could be honest, safe, vulnerable, and trust one another. This community created opportunities for shared learning, mentorship, and mutual encouragement among leaders. Unity was fostered as the healing of past divisions and conflicts was prioritized. Some past divisions and conflicts were uncovered and exposed, allowing for forgiveness and reconciliation. Other conflicts remain to this day, covered up or unresolved.

We wanted to be changed by the experience together. It was humbling to recognize and acknowledge that all we were learning and involved in was not a one-time event but an ongoing process of spiritual and relational transformation. Both givers and receivers became prepared to embrace God's transformative power to realize justice and unity, thus putting into practice God as mission in our lives and ministries. We began to focus on our shared identity in Christ Jesus as the foundation for unity. This identity transcends cultural differences and formed the basis for our fellowship of faith and mutual support. A sense of belonging and community was fostered among diverse groups within the Colombian church—a church body that didn't always express a desire to acknowledge and address unity amidst the diversity. Eschewing action or activity that could be interpreted as imposing external solutions allowed us to work alongside Colombian leaders, support their initiatives, and encourage

them to take full ownership of their ministries, as we were learning to do with our own ministry as a Covenant mission in Colombia. We realized we needed to find a healthy and integral balance beyond immediate concerns to long-term development and support, emphasizing long-term presence and connection. A long-term presence and connection were necessary to make sure that the ministry was done locally—and very, very seldom, if ever, done off site. In this way we hoped to avoid the pitfalls of paternalism and seek to learn from and serve our Colombian colleagues. In essence, we aimed to live out the concept of “being one,” not through uniformity but through deep, mutually transformative relationships built on a shared faith in Christ, a commitment to mutual growth and empowerment, and a sensitivity to the unique cultural context of Colombia.

Mary Lou had a covenant agreement with God regarding serving in missions with our family. She knew I had been called to missions as a six-year-old and that I was committed to fulfilling that call, following God’s timing. Growing up in the Covenant Church, Mary Lou had heard from many missionaries about their experiences in their countries of service and she was impacted by the differences between their lives abroad and hers in the US. She was not ready to give birth in some of those conditions, and she asked God the favor of not sending us into missions until all of our children were born. God kept his covenant with us. Two months after our fourth child was born, the Holy Spirit began to move through our focused times of prayers, confirming my call and calling Mary Lou toward long-term missions. Mary Lou received a call to be a career missionary with the Covenant through a visionary dream from God that assured her of God’s call and God’s continual presence, protection, and provision for our family.

As we prepared to depart, we included our children in our conversations and prayer time as we wanted them to be prepared to leave and learn as well. Since baby girls in Colombia get their ears pierced at birth, our three daughters were excited to get their ears pierced before leaving for Colombia. Our son declined. Our children were seven, five, four, and two-and-a-half years old when we arrived in Colombia. Since we all were learners of language, culture, customs, traditions, and life in Colombia, we helped each other navigate the beginning years together. We learned Spanish together as a family and decided to speak Spanish when in public. Learning to interact and talk to each other in Spanish added a new dimension to our family dynamics, which continues to this day.

Our children were included in our activities and travels throughout the city of Bogotá and throughout Colombia. Many of our ministry

newsletters from our first years in Colombia related our family dynamics and mutual learning. We are blessed that our children enjoyed their experiences in Colombia. Our family being seen and active together was a good testimony for us as we participated in the church planting happening in Bogotá in the 1990s. We were asked by the Covenant of Colombia to move from Bogotá to Medellín to minister to the pastoral families and church ministry leadership families. We did so in 2000.

Mary Lou and I covenanted with each other that one of us would always be home overnight with our children when they were in the home with us. We did not want our ministry to separate us as a family. There would have been many reasons for missionaries to be out of the home together and to leave children under someone else's care, but we chose not to do that. This agreement also reflected the security situation during our first fifteen years in Colombia, including Colombia's internal armed conflict. Our whole family needed to keep up-to-date and knowledgeable about the conflict and current events in the country. Thus, we had evacuation plans, contingency plans, security protocols, and security networks. Covenant World Mission always knew where we were, and we were in constant communication with them. This aspect of our lives had an impact on our family dynamics, decisions, and prayer times.

Three of our four children lived with us until graduation from high school. Our oldest daughter, Lissa, returned to the US to graduate. They each chose to enter college in the US, and each dealt with the "learning to leave (Colombia) and leaving to learn (about the US)" in their own ways. This learning continues for our adult children today. We will be leaning on their expertise to help us live well in the US as we retire.

As part of our learning to leave Colombia, we invited our four adult children to return in February 2025 to bring our time together there as a family of six to a close. Lissa wrote some of her thoughts and insights of these experiences, which she entitled "Integration."

INTEGRATION: combination, unification. When God seeks to glorify himself in you holistically.

WHAT IS BEING INTEGRATED:

Life for Lissa in Colombia (age 7–17) and her life after departing Colombia in January 2001.

Lissa's BACKGROUND:

I grew up on the mission field, living in Bogotá, Colombia from ages 7 to 17. Bogotá was the first of many homes and places where I have lived. I have struggled to understand how it all fits together. Recently, the Lord has taught me about integration and showed me how to pray to become fully integrated. I share the prayer, verse, and celebration that shapes my understanding of its meaning.

Lissa's PRAYER:

Lord, I believe you have given me a gift in understanding INTEGRATION. This means integrating and embracing everything so that you can use me and work through me. Please renew my mind and heart according to my life experiences, both as a missionary kid and beyond. These experiences are an INTEGRATION to bring you glory; nothing has been wasted in my journey. Renew my mind and heart to this one big place, this even ground, this ROCK, stretching from Colombia to the United States, one solid plane. May I stand firm on it, dance and cartwheel, pivot as needed but come to KNOW and BELIEVE in the solid and level place that it is and who you have created me to be. Amen!

Lissa's VERSE: Psalm 40:2

He lifted me out of the slimy pit,
out of the mud and mire;
he set my feet on a rock
and gave me a firm place to stand.

Lissa's CELEBRATION:

God has given me an opportunity to fully walk in freedom. In February 2025 I visited the places in Colombia where I grew up, twenty-five years later. The truth of living integrated and whole has been realized. I can joyfully take ground for Him, standing (or dancing!) firm. I have overcome a once “uneven” ground in my life. I sing praise and glory to the Lord!

Our family did a “walk about”—visiting people and places in Bogotá and Medellín. We experienced some very holy moments of refreshment as we remembered, revisited, released, redeemed, and rejoiced. We prayed through memories, celebrated our years and life together, and praised God for his faithfulness and for loving us for who we were, who we are, and who we will be in him. We praise God for his loving faithfulness in calling us to join him in mission with the Colombia Pacto community, for how they walked alongside us as we came alongside them, together discovering who we were, learning and celebrating who we are, and anticipating who we will grow to be in Christ.