Stranger in a strange land

The word *missionary* makes me cringe a little. But I was one, and it taught me a lot.

By Diane Roth

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Long ago, I was a missionary. I lived for a time in a country where only a small minority of the people were Christian, where I could not assume that most people understand the shorthand expressions that I used to talk about my faith. If I thought about the water and the new life that came from it, I couldn't assume that people would make the connection with baptism. The words *justification* and *redemption* did not roll off the tongue; Bible stories like the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan didn't make people nod in recognition.

I was a missionary in Japan. To say the word *missionary* makes me cringe a little. I wonder what most people think of when they hear the word. Do they think about missionaries who brought not only the Christian faith but also colonial ways and intolerant views? Do they think of people who were actually more interested in claiming the country for their own purposes than they were about teaching about the love of Jesus? Do they think about all of the stereotypes of superiority and meanness?

Here's what it meant to me to be a missionary: it meant being curious. When I arrived in Japan I knew almost no words of Japanese. I had tried to take an evening class in the spring before I left. But I could not get any Japanese words or grammar to stick in my head. It was too strange to me, a language I could not get my brain around. I remember taking a walk with a friend who had grown up in Japan. She patiently tried to teach me sentences. Every word fell back out of my head. So when I arrived in Japan, I had everything to learn. I needed to learn to take the trains and the subways, to take off my shoes when I went inside, to eat with chopsticks, and to bow at the right time. I needed to learn some Japanese. I needed to find things at

the grocery store. I needed to be curious and to listen.

It meant being humble. There was so much to learn, and there were so many opportunities to make mistakes. Not just mistakes in speaking Japanese, but mistakes in understanding, mistakes in living. To live in another culture is to be learning all the time.

It meant being an outsider. In Japan, I always stuck out. I never fit in. No matter how much I tried, I would always be, in some sense, a stranger. I could learn to wear the kimono and I could learn to speak Japanese well, but in so many ways, I would never fit in. There is something lonely about that. And it was tempting, at those times, to retreat into the missionary community, where understanding came somewhat easier, and where I felt I belonged. But to do that would have been unfaithful.

It meant thinking outside the box. The missionaries I knew, whether pastors or laypeople, were some of the most creative people I had met. They were interested in how theology and their own culture intersected with the culture of the place they lived. They wondered about where the boundaries were: what were the things that needed to stay constant and where did message of the gospel need to be creatively re-imagined so that the people could hear it? What does "I am the bread of life" mean to people for whom bread is not a staple? What does the word *God* mean in a language where god is called *kami*—and there are thousands of them?

It meant being transformed. I know that I went to Japan thinking that I would transform lives. I went bearing that hope. But there were very few baptisms when I was there. Instead, I came to believe that the Holy Spirit was planting seeds, and who knew what would happen? Instead, the Holy Spirit was transforming me. I was different kind of Christian when I left Japan than when I had arrived.

I remember one Sunday afternoon after returning home I sobbed in pain. I'm not even sure all of what it was. But I think that while I lived in Japan, I had a sense that I knew what my life was for. I knew that every single thing I did had a purpose, even though I didn't know how God was using it.

I remember being sure, so sure, when I returned to the United States, that everyone was supposed to be a missionary, right where they were.

But I'll tell you what: I wasn't sure exactly how anyone, including me, was supposed to do it. People weren't going to come up to me on the street and ask me "what are

you doing here?" like they did in Japan. It was so obvious that I was a stranger. Now, it was not.

Now, my congregation is reading a book about the church and culture right here in the United States. The author makes no bones about the fact that we are called to be missionaries. Fewer and fewer people know the language and the symbols and the images of faith. People speak a different language. That is not a bad thing. But it means that the church needs to be curious and bilingual, humble and creative. It means that the church needs to be transformed.

That might be the hardest thing of all.

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