

FORMING MISSIONARIES IN JORDAN: AN INTERVIEW WITH A FORMER ANGLICAN MISSIONARY TO THE HASHEMITE KINGDOM

By Duane Alexander Miller¹

1) Tell me about where you were a worker and when. How did you end up there?

In 1983 I became a freshman at university, and although I had been a believer for some years, I embarked on what turned out to be a disastrous year academically and spiritually. I nearly failed several courses, collapsed morally, and fought depression and discouragement. I appealed to my parents for a year off, and they granted it, on condition that I go to Jordan and study Arabic for a year. This I did at a language school for workers. That year revealed that I had a gift for languages and intercultural work. It also restored my relationship with God and fixed the Middle East in my mind as a place for Christian service

I then attended a large mission conference in Urbana, Illinois in 1987, and there, upon hearing a rousing call for surrender to God's international mission, committed myself to work overseas for the Lord. After my wife and I were married in 1992, we agreed to test the call by spending some months in Jordan together at the same language school. We returned to the States six months later (much to Mave's relief), certain only that she and I were not agreed on the nature of God's call, and I worked in various places and then attended seminary at Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pennsylvania.

¹ Miller lectures in Church History and Theology at Nazareth Evangelical Theological Seminary (NETS). His blog is duanemiller.wordpress.com. The name of missionary has been withheld at his request.

While I was at seminary [my wife] enrolled in a course on world missions, and there, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, she turned her life over to God for overseas ministry. A few months later we joined Anglican Frontier Missions, raised support from individuals and churches, and made arrangements to return to Jordan so that I could take over the directorship of the language school which I had first attended at age eighteen.

We arrived in Jordan April of 1999 and in June of 1999 I became the director of the language school. We continued ministering there until I turned the language school over to new leadership in 2007, when we returned to the United States.

2) Your ministry put you in a position where you were able to know and influence a large number of young and new missionaries. What were some of the main things that you tried to teach them?

1. That pleasing God is the only worthy goal in any phase of ministry. Others goals constantly seek to influence us, i.e., fluency in the local language, impressing others, emulating some famous missionary of the past, having a large group of friends, saving money, winning a certain number of converts, not making the mistakes of so-and-so. All these goals, and many other seemingly worthy ones, compete for prominence in our thinking, but when allowed to dominate they can all become idolatrous and all devastating to the psyche, family, fellowship, and personal satisfaction of the worker.

2. Similarly, in language instruction I encouraged students to focus on faithfulness to the language-learning process rather than on achieving results. I taught that faithfulness is our obligation whereas resulting skills are a gift of God, necessarily variable according to His will for each individual. Thus, I hoped, the terrible pressure of expectations in language acquisition would not add to the host of other difficulties and stresses already being experienced by students new to

the culture of Jordan, and, counter-intuitively, the freedom from pressure would enable the student's mind to relax itself and acquire language more naturally and freely.

3. I tried to pass on to students some insights into Jordanian culture. I hoped that my descriptions of customs and people of that land demonstrated both the God's love for the Arabs and the delightful humor that can be derived from cross-cultural experiences.

3) I'm sort of cheating here because this is really like ten questions in one. But you also were able to see how new batches of missionaries shifted over time. Could you tell us about the changes you saw, for better and for worse? I am thinking about sending agencies, spirituality, commitment, origins, denominations, mission goals, and so on, but feel free to mention anything else.

I saw no appreciable difference between the character or spirituality of the workers of 1984, 1993, 1999, or 2007. In every group there were those who could not make the adjustment to life in Jordan and/or who gave up and went home. In every group there were also people who not only worked hard but persevered and became fruitful laborers.

Where I did see a difference was in the nationality and race. In 1984 and 1993 most of the workers were white Europeans and Americans at about a 1: 2 ratio, with the occasional person of African or Hispanic or Asian origin. From 1999 to 2007 about half of all workers were Americans, about 15% were Korean or other Asian, and the number of Europeans varied from 20 to 30%.

4) You were in the field when the C5 debate began. How influential was that in Jordan? Did you see any positive or negative effects come out of that debate?

The C5 debate affected Jordan because agencies which embraced insider movement theology operated in Jordan. However, they kept to themselves and tended not to attend formal language training, and most of the discussions I had on the topic were with workers who, like myself, did not embrace insider concepts. I have not had enough exposure to the work of C5 people to evaluate the results.

5) Do you have any advice for other Westerners working closely with Korean workers?

My experience with Koreans leaves me with nothing but a feeling of joy and privilege that I was able to share the wonderful work of the Gospel with such people. If I had any advice, it would be to include Koreans on your leadership teams where you can and to enjoy them. They bring a refreshing fervor and childlike kindness to bear on ministry which is much needed.

6) You're an evangelical Anglican priest. How did other evangelicals receive you? How did the local Anglicans receive you?

Surprisingly, evangelicals were almost universally very respectful of my Anglican orders. Local Anglicans were also exceedingly deferential to me as an ordained priest. They became less enthusiastic about me when I excommunicated their bishop² for associating with American heretics.

7) Is there anything particular in Anglican heritage and practice that you found helped you to weather the mission field?

Being part of the hierarchy of a bona fide local church was a tremendous help in my own adaptation to the local culture. The Angli-

² Bishop Riah Hanna Abu el-Assal, a native of Nazareth, was bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem from 1998 through 2007. The Diocese of Jerusalem consists of all of Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria.

can Church gave me an acceptable excuse to attend events at which I could observe the local culture and language. It also meant that I was functioning in a professional category which the Jordanian counter-intelligence services considered legitimate and unthreatening. Finally, being part of an Arab Church obscured what I imagined to be the sometimes negatively politically charged overtones of my identity as a white American male.

8) I still remember what you told me the first time I met you at a conference in Cyprus about kids: once there are more children than parents everything is chaos. What is your advice to young couples who sense a vocation to the mission field but also would like a family?

In my view children are a blessing from God and should not be avoided. However, you should clarify to yourself whether you believe that missionary work justifies the spiritual or physical neglect of the spouse and children God gives you. If not, then a large family will affect your career and you should prayerfully prepare yourself for the emotional difficulty you will experience when you must give up missionary opportunities to care for family. I personally found that with five or more children overseas travel and living become exhausting, expensive, and muddled.

9) Can you foresee a day when Muslims will be allowed to legally convert to Christianity in Jordan?

In the near term I expect conversion to Christianity to become steadily more difficult and less legal all over the world.