

# Travels of an Itinerant Librarian 2011-2013

by Kathy Caddy

I have spent 11 months of my almost three years since retirement going to different parts of the world and helping a variety of Christian institutions in their libraries. I have often been asked how I came to become an itinerant librarian. A brief description of my earlier years should help explain the person I became in my latter years.

After I graduated from University in the late 1960's, I was given the chance to go overseas and work. My first job was in Ireland as a waitress and later in London as a nanny, I then toured Europe in the winter by myself. This included hitch-hiking and staying in hostels and living on bread and oranges. I guess I could call myself a pre-backpacker as I still had a suitcase and I don't believe the phrase had yet been coined. When I returned 4 years later I had graduated to a backpack, hiking boots and proper meals.

After one year of normal life teaching in Seattle, I went to the Alaskan bush to work as a volunteer with the Jesuits and Ursuline nuns. They were partners in a boarding school for Eskimos and Indians of southwest Alaska. We were in a very isolated community, 100 miles from the Bering Sea. We were there for 9 months living in community with students, nuns, brothers, priests and volunteers of all ages, as well as the local villagers. The village had been started by orphans who the nuns had taken in many years earlier.

We flew in and out from Anchorage. The only vehicle was used to take us to the airport as there were no other roads. Mail was flown in three times a week, weather permitting. This planted in me a love of working with people from other cultures, as well as an ability to adapt to life without all the conveniences I was used to having.

I did that for two years and then transferred to the nearest town and worked for the state of Alaska as a teacher. This was also an isolated community and at the time an article written in *Newsweek* quoted presidential candidate Ted Kennedy as saying it was "among the poorest, most violent towns in America". I think my skepticism to the press and its' hyperbole may have been planted then. It indeed was not perfect, there were 14 violent deaths (in a community of 2000) my last year there; but it was certainly not as bad as the press made out. I did have a very well paid position, which is why my second trip to Europe was easier than my first.

I then moved to Australia as it was close to Asia. I wanted to see Asia before I settled back into life in Alaska. I was unable to find work in an Asian International School as I couldn't go to any interviews while living in Alaska. Australia was recruiting American teachers in the mid 1970's and even paid for us to come and join you as well as giving us



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two tax-free years. This, quite fairly, led to many teachers striking and the program was cancelled. I actually had no desire to go to Australia and my politically correct friends were still upset over the white Australia policy (of which I knew nothing as I wasn't at all interested in Australia); but it was a means to an end. As so often happens, meeting a nice young man changed all of my plans.


Some 30+ years later when my four children were raised and I no longer shared my life with a nice young man, I was wondering how to best spend the final active years of my life, however long that may be remains to be seen. Travel had played a very small part of my life in those 30 years, except for occasional trips to the US and of course annual ANZTLA conferences. A trip to the beach was all I needed to feel content and pleased with my lot in life. Working at the Bible College of Victoria for 18 years had certainly awakened in me an interest in Christian mission, but as my husband was not a Christian, I didn't see it playing an important role in my life.

I believe Lynn Pryor must have planted the seeds of what a retired librarian could do in that area. Perhaps this talk may plant a few seeds with some of you. I wanted to serve God in some type of mission, either at home or abroad. It was a desire to return to Alaska as more than a tourist that got me enquiring about possibilities in this area. A week after I retired I was heading home to Oregon with the possibility of short-term work in Alaska at a Bible college. This was after contacting a former student who was flying for missions in Alaska. I did make many useful contacts while working at BCV.

That particular option fell through but an even better one came up and it was to work in a tertiary Christian college for village Eskimos. The students were transitioning between high school and university or work. The Covenant Church of Alaska had seen the need to help their young people transition into adulthood in a safe environment. The students actually came from the area where I had worked 40 years before. I recognized the surnames and knew what their village life was like.

When you meet Eskimos you are quickly impressed by their warm and gentle ways. However under that exterior there is much pain and suffering. Their homes are rife with abuse, alcoholism and violence, and suicide hovered over every family. The students shared their stories at a time set aside twice a week called “Story”. I believe I only heard one story where the person had not been abused. The college was set up both as a place of healing and education, religious and secular. It is now fully accredited by the state of Alaska and they can take credits earned there to other institutions. It also runs a well attended counseling centre used also by people from outside the college.

I was very blessed by the location of the college. It was not out on the windswept tundra I had lived on for four years previously. It was located in one of the most beautiful parts of Alaska, the Kenai Peninsula. I had an active volcano at the end of my street, actually 20



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kms away but framed at the end of my street. It erupted soon after I left. The beauty was often breathtaking; this is a part of Alaska that tourists frequent with its wildlife, birds, glaciers and mountains bordering the sea. Frequent visitors to the campus were the moose that we were advised to avoid. The bears were beginning to hibernate when I arrived. There were plenty of warnings of which areas to avoid. Bears and wolves still make meals out of foolish humans. I did not wish to become a statistic. It did make taking walks a little more stressful than in suburban Melbourne; but certainly more breathtaking.


I lived in the dorm with the girls and ate my meals with them. I helped in the college office as well as the library. There was a beautiful snowfall that year which was wonderful as I have missed a good snowfall since I came to Australia. It was all quite modern and comfortable, except when power went out and we had to drive around for 3 hours in the van so as not to freeze in our dormitories. We had a few weather incidents which brought back many long forgotten memories. This is a place people still freeze to death.

The library was staffed by a trained librarian who was thrilled to have someone to talk to at long last about the fine art of running a library. It was also quite new and had a collection of some 15,000 books. I did a lot of cataloguing and assisting the students. He was probably more qualified than me so I didn't have to teach him how run a library.

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This college was founded in 1988 by Broughton Knox from Moore College. The then present principal was David Secombe, also a Moore man. It no longer considered itself as part of the Anglican Communion but was now part of the Church of England in South Africa; part of what I gather was the liberal-evangelical divide. Once again I found myself in an incredibly beautiful part of the world. I was literally across the road from one of the most beautiful beaches I had ever seen. I come from a family of surfers and was more than a little amused to find myself across from the world famous Surfer's Corner.

I found the work there to be my most fulfilling as an itinerant librarian. The collection was much the same as what I had worked with at BCV. As in Alaska I spent two months with them. There seemed to be hundreds of books continually coming in to the library



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and I was able to keep this moving along as the librarian concentrated on other things. This was still South Africa and I lived behind 5 locked doors and even going shopping could be challenging as young African males can be a daunting presence when you pass them on the street on your own. My only ATM scam happened on my last weekend. It is one place I am planning to return to one day.


I then went to Ndola, Zambia to a small Brethren teaching institute called GLO. This was a challenge from the beginning as the students were on Easter break. A young American librarian had been through and had set up a computer system and entered 8,000 books. This was wonderful for the college, I certainly could not have set up a system as I didn’t have one and am not tech savvy enough to have done it. However it left me with only old pamphlets to enter. So the work was pretty boring and it was rather lonely.

We were 14 kms out from the small city of Ndola and about 2kms from the Congo. I did get to go to the Congo with one of the staff and we walked in to a nearby village. I couldn’t have done that without an African companion. I lived in a small house on the edge of a compound next to a wonderful Zambian woman named Rebecca, about my age. She and the young lady from the Faroe Islands (married to a Zambian staff member) kept me from being too lonely with their 4 lively young children. Being invaded by grasshoppers, frogs and all sorts of lizards helped me get over a few issues and I really did appreciate being in the real heart of Africa. I think they were happy to have me there; but I don’t feel I contributed much as far as the library goes. That is one of the challenges of being an itinerant librarian. Do they really need help or do they automatically say yes to any offer from the West?

I returned to Melbourne after 8 months away and asked one of our lecturers at MST, as he was heading off to Kuala Lumpur, to see if they could ever use a short term volunteer librarian at the Malaysia Bible Seminary. I was thinking of next year but got an urgent email saying they were desperate and could I come this year? I thought I had better go as they might not need me next year, which turned out to be the case. Plus, I still had children living at home so I didn’t have to worry about my house being left empty.

This turned out to be an excellent placement as there was so much work to do, indeed, the library assistant (who ran the library) said I was both the library angel and proof that God answers our prayers. They had been given a huge donation of books and she was feeling so overwhelmed that she felt she could not cope, so she prayed about it and then I show up! I don’t recall ever feeling so appreciated.

Malaysia Bible Seminary is 45kms out of Kuala Lumpur on the road heading north. It is situated in the middle of several small Malayan villages. A former resort, it is all marble and tiles (well the main building is). Structurally the library was very beautiful. And they had a fairly good collection. The computer system was one of those homemade ones that only make sense to those who developed



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them, usually former students who have since left the college!

Part of this facility is still used as a resort and conference centre. The resort raises funds for the college. MBS was one of two top theological colleges in Malaysia until recently. Everywhere I went people had had some experience with it. I was very, very busy. I certainly had a high degree of job satisfaction as the assistant was eager to learn as much as I could teach her about running a library. I discovered they have a consortium like ANZTLA but not very active. I managed to visit a few other theological libraries while there.

It could get very lonely on the weekends if I stayed at the college. Everyone left to do their ministry in the city or in their villages. I did have the consolation of an Olympic sized pool outside my door and I could always go out and look for monkeys. I lived in a small guest room and ate with the students. Kuiling, the assistant, was from East Malaysian Borneo and kept telling me people were nicer in East Malaysia. She suggested I contact her old friend and teacher who was working as principal in Miri, Sawarak on the island of Borneo.

I contacted him after I returned to see if they could use me for a couple of months in 2013. He soon let me know I would be welcome at the Miri Evangelical College for as long as I wanted to stay. This was exciting as it was the school of the country's main denomination, Sidang Injil Church, or the SIB. It was originally founded by graduates of Melbourne Bible Institute, the forerunner of Bible College of Victoria and now Melbourne School of Theology. I had handled the archives for the Borneo Evangelical Mission for years. Then Yen Ho (MST former librarian) suggested I contact Sabah Theological Seminary in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, where she had worked many years ago, so I did and was able to go there for a month.

In June and July of 2013, I headed north again and this time crossed the South China Sea for Borneo. I spent one month at both places. Sabah is beautiful, the country, the college and the library. Once again marble and tiles were gleaming in the jungle. I found a very well staffed, well stocked and well run library. I don't think my services were really all that needed and it had been one of the deans that had said I should come, not the librarian. She gave me the job of sorting out the authority files. She wasn't sure how to best use me and I think found it easier to set me with one task. Those of you who have volunteers know that it can be a challenge finding the right task for the various trained and untrained people who want to help you. You are also aware you need to provide a little variety to keep the volunteer interested and coming back. This did not happen to me in this place. I did my task and appreciated being in this part of the world. It is certainly one of the top colleges and libraries in South East Asia.

I lived in a family sized unit in a complex with other faculty. I had to keep my windows shut else I might have monkeys visiting me. If that should happen, you get a student from one of the villages and he




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kills it with his blow dart and has it for dinner. Fortunately that didn't happen to me, but it had happened to others. A short walk through the jungle brought me to the fairly modern city of Kota Kinabalu. Needless to say I had never heard of KK or Sabah. It used to be called British North Borneo. After my two previous assignments in extremely isolated places I enjoyed having a city to wander through on the weekends and not to be dependent on others for my times of recreation. Also I felt a great deal safer than I did in South Africa.

I then went to Miri, which has a special place in my heart. Partly because of the BEM connection and also because I enjoyed the indigenous people so much. They are very similar to Eskimos in their relaxed attitude to life. A very challenging computer system awaited me and a librarian who spent all her time covering old books that should have been binned. She was a delightful person and had had 10 months training in Hong Kong, which seems to be where many of them are trained. They study both library science and theology. She hadn't entered many books in a system that she had had for 10 years, possibly the down side of being too relaxed! There was a lot of work to do and I would only return if I thought someone would build on what I was doing. I would like to go back there as I felt I had a lot to offer. The college seemed to be in a period of transition and I would love to see it really thrive. There are several off site campus's connected to the college but they are in villages that don't speak English. Once again I stayed in a large house alone. Fortunately former students from BCV were next to me so I wasn't as lonely as I would have been otherwise. The people I met were so appreciative of the early missionaries from BCV that I was treated as a very special person.

I believe God has gifted me with some skills and character traits that allow me serve Him in this rather strange way. We all know the world needs medical workers who are willing to work as volunteers, as well as those with farming and engineering skills. But where do theological librarians fit into the bigger picture? I feel very humble about what I do in the greater scheme of things. But I see that libraries all around the world need skilled workers and the colleges are often operating with very limited budgets and staff with limited skills. Most of the students are being trained to go out as Christian workers and serve in their own communities. Some are coming to the West as evangelists and clergy in those denominations that are struggling to fill gaps.

I feel working with and sharing my faith with Christians from different backgrounds to be incredibly encouraging. One is both encouraged and encourager. They seemed to be quite touched that someone would spend their money coming to be with them and share their lives, if even for a short time. Why would one go to an African village if they could go on a cruise? Sometimes it would cost about the same. Hopefully, I can show people how to run their libraries more efficiently and effectively.



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It is also personally a time to grow in your own faith journey. Travelling alone is not an easy task and living with people who only have English as a second language is not for the faint hearted. One obviously is more dependent on God when life is not easy and this is certainly the case when I am overseas. One has many hours alone for the type of reflection we often avoid at home by turning on the television.

I am thrilled to see that Christianity is thriving in the parts of the world that used to be at the receiving end of missionaries from the West. But like us they often are facing the challenges of secularism, pluralism and materialism.

I have listed some things to think about if you hope to travel this path.

How well is English understood? This is a given unless you speak and write in another language.

Strange computer systems, some with no backup, some with no authority files. Many without much support, although every place I went had an IT department.

Much repetitive work (understand that they might not know what to do with you, but know they want some free help). They may not know that volunteers may like some variety in their day as they may have a different approach to work.

No matter how modern a place looks, the kitchen and bathroom won’t be what you are used to. Expect very basic living conditions and there are always strange and often unpleasant smells (as well as unusual creatures).

Be careful not to step on toes and imply you know more than them. They may have had various degrees of training or in some cases none at all.

Sometimes the college administration invites you but the librarian may have no say in this decision. I had one case where the person had ‘personal issues’ and it made it a rather challenging placement. They also may be afraid you will criticize them to their superiors (and sometimes you really want to).

Expect to be lonely as people are very nice but you can be an added extra at times, especially in isolated areas. (They need to take you shopping, etc.)

Food can be an issue unless you are one who can eat anything.

Making the initial contact and deciding what needs doing and what the living conditions will be. Is it a flat, a room? Are meals provided?

I certainly would encourage people to give it a go. Some of you may have connections with mission organizations or churches or friends already there who could guide you. Obviously these are all self-funded placements. I have gone back and started relief school teaching to help fund my work. (This of course is as challenging as travelling alone). It is certainly an exciting journey to be on at the latter end of one’s working life.