

Staying the Course in the Balkans

Randy and Joan Bell

For thirty-one years of our lives, we have been serving in cross-cultural missions. This may seem impressive, but many before us served longer and in more difficult conditions. How have so many stayed the course? The answer is not straightforward, and life is complicated, but we write to share some foundational principles that have helped us stay the course, persevere, and be resilient in missions service.

We start with definitions of perseverance and resilience. Perseverance is defined as “1) steady persistence in a course of action, a purpose, a state, etc., especially in spite of difficulties, obstacles, or discouragement; 2) Theology. continuance in a state of grace to the end, leading to eternal salvation.”¹ Resilience is defined as “1) the power or ability to return to the original form, position, etc., after being bent, compressed, or stretched; elasticity. 2) ability to recover readily from illness, depression, adversity, or the like; buoyancy.”² We believe both definitions apply to missionaries, but how do we cultivate these qualities? What has kept us going all these years? And, what keeps us going even today as we serve in a city and country that many people have never heard of?

¹ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/perseverance>.

² <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/resilience>.

The Call

Are missionaries a special breed? Extraordinary people? We would say no, they are not exceptional in any way (1 Cor. 1:23-29). They are gifted, of course, by the Holy Spirit and should be trained and prepared for the task to which the Lord has called them, but in our understanding, there is one key factor for becoming a missionary: the call of God. There is no way one could persevere through the unique difficulties of cross-cultural ministry without the call of God on his or her life (2 Tim. 1:8-12).

All Christians are called to fulfill the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). But some are called to go to the nations (Acts 1:8; Mark 16:15; Rom. 1:1; 10:14-15). We answered that call in 1988 when we both individually felt God pressing upon us to serve overseas, and the Lord used the call to draw us together as a couple before we married in 1985.

God's Grace and Faithfulness Throughout the Journey

Perseverance and resilience are best understood in light of the actual difficulties that were experienced. What follows is our story.

Our first cross-cultural experience was with the International Mission Board as Journeymen in Bangkok, Thailand. Serving in a drastically different culture exacerbated everything we faced: the normal complexities of church dynamics, having the pastor as our supervisor, and our own immaturity. But the Lord grew us through those times and reconfirmed our calling to go to the nations, which we embraced with newfound healthy fear and humility.

Since then, we have served as church planters in three different countries of the war-torn Balkans: Serbia, Bosnia, and Slovenia. The Balkan War was in full swing when we arrived in Serbia in 1994, but our conviction to go was so strong, and we had such peace that we didn't hesitate. We were also very "green" and might have thought twice if we knew what we would face. But as we dealt with these difficulties, God's call kept us there; we never felt the

Lord was releasing us from that call, and we believed we would be out of His will if we returned to the USA (Romans 1:5-6).

Settling in a country that was essentially at war with our home country set us on an even more intense path than if we were just in a new culture. Speaking English in public was a no-no for us as a family, and our children became painfully aware of this and even fearful to speak at all. At first, we had no teammates, but we were very blessed to have a supportive Serbian Baptist church and other missionaries who had previously paved the way. They helped us and taught us so much about navigating a culture and nation that worked in the gray zone—nothing was black and white.

Because Serbia was under sanctions, gas stations weren't open, the small neighborhood stores had little on their shelves, public transportation was overcrowded, medical care was severely limited due to a lack of supplies, and electricity was scarce. The government was also selling the electricity they produced to their enemies, and we went without electricity every day for hours. One day, after returning from Hungary, where we had to go to buy food and do our banking, we walked into our apartment to find it as cold inside as it was outside (-17C). Our windows had ice on them. Our landlord had a generator hooked up, but it powered only a lightbulb and the stove. On other days, the electricity would go out while washing clothes and doing other tasks. We also went without water sometimes, but thankfully, not as often. At this point, we could have easily returned to a country that had every luxury imaginable. But we stayed only by God's grace.

As the years passed, our two children got older, and we added a third to our family while living in Belgrade. We felt a strong conviction from the Lord to stay in the country to give birth, so our third was born under post-war conditions in a "better" hospital. In retrospect, we would not do this again, even though many inroads were made into people's lives because of it. Joan dealt with PTSD from the 5+ days spent in the hospital.

After finally getting wonderful teammates and working with them for a year, we all had to evacuate twice from Serbia. It took us 11 hours to get

to Zagreb (in Croatia, normally only 4 hours away). Our family was not in a good or healthy place after dealing with the realities of living in a war-torn culture. The culture wasn't all to blame; we didn't have good boundaries in dealing with the issues we faced.

God used this to clarify our calling. After we evacuated from Serbia, before we headed to Slovenia, we were processing our time in Serbia with our leadership. The feeling of "losing" our people group was a point of real grief for us because we felt called to them. Our Regional Leader's wife shared with us how she had realized that the Lord calls us to Himself, not to a country or a people group, although we do feel drawn to certain places and peoples. This statement not only helped us let go and move on but also showed us that our faithfulness is "to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us" (Eph. 3:20). He is the One to whom we are all called whether we are missionaries, ministers, or laity in Christ.

In time, we came to believe that the Lord was leading us to Slovenia. We lived on a tourist farm for four months while trying to find a place to live. Even though we were now in a new country, we would face other challenges and trials on different levels from the previous ones. Some of these challenges involved relationship issues. We were told we would have new teammates not long after arriving in Slovenia. We were excited to welcome this new family, but rocky roads were ahead. This proved to be some of the hardest trials we have ever faced, and we have faced this four times in our tenure in Slovenia.

Seasons of Fruitfulness

All missionaries and ministers, wherever they are, face ministry adversity. Seeing those who seem to be excited about a relationship with Christ then walk away, or seeing people apparently repent and walk with Jesus and then have the world (family, friends, status) uproot them is always discouraging. And, we have seen a lot of that through the years. But the Lord has also

given us wonderful seasons of fruitfulness that help keep us going to the next harvest and the next!

We did not see a church planted in our five years in Serbia (one later started out of a Bible study we did), but we did see churches start in Bosnia; one is still there while the other died. We considered a fifty percent success rate really good in our part of the world!

In Slovenia, we have led two church plants, started more than 15 Bible studies, and baptized more than 50 people. Thankfully, the two church plants are doing well, but many of those Bible studies died (some due to people not wanting to be part of a local body). Fifty people baptized in almost 25 years may not seem like many, but it is something we regularly rejoice over in this part of the world!

There were times we were ready to throw in the towel. Do we have the strength to endure these things on our own? No way! How could we? We look back in awe and realize it is only by His power.

We learned some things early, and one was His faithfulness amid all these battles. As mentioned above, we need to be faithful to Him, but He is the one who is first faithful and always faithful to us. Only He could give us the strength to endure, the peace to move forward and persevere, and the courage to stand and bounce back.

Core Commitments

Finally, some commitments and values we have had from the beginning have helped us with all the above – to embrace God’s call, to depend on his grace, and to be faithful between and during seasons of fruitfulness. We briefly mention four here.

First, we must have a solid knowledge of God’s Word to follow Christ and find the grace to persevere and engage in every component of the missionary task. Second, a long-term commitment to where God places us is necessary for us to see any gospel impact take place. As we look back on the hard times,

we see how much the Lord did that we would have missed out on if we had left when it became difficult. Third, learning the language and culture of the countries we serve is essential to long-term relationships and fruitful ministry. And fourth, we are to stay the course until God changes it. These have been essential to persevering, being resilient, and seeing God truly touch, move, and change lives around us.

Conclusion

There have been numerous times we considered leaving the mission field for various reasons (educational decisions for our children, bilingual challenges, learning disabilities, children going to boarding school, then children transitioning to college in the US, organizational changes in strategies and leaders, losing family members, and dealing with aging parents, etc.), but each time the Lord made it perfectly clear that we needed to persevere. If it were up to us, we would have been back in the USA decades ago!

Luke 14:26 encouraged us— “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, and furthermore, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” Our focus should and must be on Him. He is our sustainer and source of strength. Everything else must come second, including our desires, plans, families, comforts, and lives.

We thank the Lord that He called us, equipped us, and allowed us to be a part of His Kingdom’s work for so long. In the end, it is only by His grace that we can do any of this, but in response to His faithfulness, we too, want to be faithful to Him. The blessings and joys were worth all the hardships, and we would do it all over again!

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