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Welcoming People

Interview with Sarah and Liam

Jo: Have you ever wondered what it's like for someone to move to another country where there's a foreign culture and a foreign language?

Liam: You have to set up life, and you're doing it in a totally foreign place. You've got no concept of what you should do, what you shouldn't do, where to go for help, and you don't have the language to be able to actually do that.

Jo: I wonder what it's like for people coming to Australia, how do they feel welcome? I'm Jo Chamberlin and you're listening to *Messages of hope*.

Sarah and Liam had firsthand experience of what it's like to be strangers in a foreign country. They were missionaries in Turkey for four years, and during that time, they experienced the joys and the challenges of learning a new language, getting to know the local people and dealing with cultural and religious differences. Today on *Messages of hope* they share how being strangers taught them how to give hope and to be welcoming to those coming to Australia.

So, Liam and Sarah, you're telling us a bit about moving from Australia to Turkey. What was it like when you first arrived overseas?

Liam: There was a mixture of emotions. I guess initially, there's a lot of excitement when you first arrive because you prepared over multiple years and you're finally there in country and, you know, there's so many new foods to try. Things are just different, and then also overwhelming because you have to set up life and you're doing it in a totally foreign place.

We arrived with our seven-month-old baby, and then had two other children over there. So, there was an aspect of it being very difficult because your family's missing out on children growing up, you don't have that typical support that you often receive from family when they're close by. So that was hard.

Jo: Having children over there, young children, and that concept of not even being able to have your family nearby, what was that like for you?

Sarah: I think we felt guilty in the sense that we'd gone and taken my family's first grandchild overseas. That was really hard, and it was also difficult just not having them around for support.

Jo: What was it like for them? Did they express how they felt about you being away?

Sarah: One of my family members said they were quite angry, which is a fair enough. And they saw it as us choosing others over them. But other members of our family were really supportive of that too, so it was kind of mixed responses.

Liam: The hardest part was just the simple things were very difficult. So, when you wanted to go do something which you knew how to do in your home country, it just seemed to take five times the

amount of time and was very difficult just to complete. Just walking into shops and just feeling like a baby, because you can't talk. You've got no concept of what you should do, what you shouldn't do, where to go for help, and you don't have the language to be able to actually do that. So, it's very overwhelming. Just sort of feeling very helpless and hopeless at the start.

Jo: So, Sarah and Liam, I'd like to know, what inspired you to become missionaries in another country?

Liam: It was just after the Syrian war started and so there was lots of refugees going into Turkey and we just felt we could use our skills there to help both refugees and also the local church. As we prayed about it, God sort of just opened up doors, led us to people that knew about Turkey or had been to Turkey, and so we kept hearing "Turkey" and we figured it must be a God thing and we're meant to go there.

The organization we went with, they had a real focus on transformation of communities, and that happens as people encounter God. So, whether it's a welfare aspect or whether it's a faith aspect, ultimately, people can receive what they need through a relationship with God. And so, we went there to offer practical help if we could, but we also knew that God is also interested in people's lives in a personal, real way.

Jo: So, you're not only sharing the love of God, but you're actually being the love of God, aren't you?

Sarah: Yeah, and just building on relationships and deeply caring for people with no other agenda, other than just having conversations and being a friend.

Liam: The country we were in, missionaries are considered a threat to national security, and so it's a real big negative connotation within the society there. And so, we would even, you know, not even have that term associated with us. And so in that country, your presence there is to just be present amongst the community, build relationships with people, and then as they get to trust you and to know you, they start to ask questions; "why are you here?" or "what do you believe in?" And that gives the opportunity to share about our faith and the hope we have in God.

Sarah: We didn't know any of the language, so it took a long time to just actually be able to have everyday conversations with people. In Australia, a lot of topics like money, politics, religion are generally things you wouldn't discuss with somebody when you first meet them. But in Turkey, it's all on the table, so you can get quite interesting conversations right off the bat.

And I think that also comes in a natural flow of a friendship. Often it begins with a connection and then forming a deeper connection as time goes on and then that can lead to conversations of faith. We found that also (which is the same in Australia), lots of people take so long to trust you.

Some people think missionaries go in and they hand out Bibles and they go about doing all of that. But rather, it was holistic ministry, it was our whole lives. Our witness to Jesus was through everything that we did, which was just being a mum at home, going to an office, learning the language, being at the park, all of those things. And through that, then natural connections form and then there's natural opportunities to share.

Jo: After living in a foreign nation with a very different culture for four and a half years, Sarah and Liam returned to Australia with a new perspective on being welcoming and living in a multicultural community.

Liam: We came back with that appreciation of how difficult it would be for migrants, refugees in Australia. Just the amount of effort it took for us to set up life in another country, understand the language, understand the culture. For us, that was just a huge challenge and so we suddenly had

a lot of compassion for the people around us that had come from other countries. And knowing the challenges that they faced were the exact ones we had just experienced in Turkey.

And the other thing we noticed coming back was just how multicultural, even within the four and a half years overseas, Australia seemed to have become. Especially in Adelaide and the north where we had family and church. Knowing there's a lot more people from different countries around us, our eyes lit up and we were going "oh, all these people that probably need the same sort of help that needed when we were overseas!"

Sarah: There's a lot of Muslim women who come to Playgroup. It's a very multicultural Playgroup, and there was a lady there who was wearing a niqab, which covers the majority of her face. She was sitting by herself. So, I went over and talked to her. I chatted to her a bit about her family and things that day at Playgroup. And then a couple of weeks later I saw her at the library. And so, I went up to her and said, "Oh, Hey, you know, I met you at Playgroup the other day." She said, "Oh yes. I remember you."

I remember we started having a chat in the library. And only like a couple of minutes into the conversation, she said, "I've never met an Australian who's really wanted to talk to me, and somebody who's been interested." And she's like, "I've been here for eight years, and nobody's really taken an interest in talking to me a lot." And I said, "why do you think this is?" And she said, "it's probably because of the way I dress."

Sarah: So, I think if we can look past whatever clothes someone is wearing, whether that's a hijab or whatever they're wearing, even if it might be on the other scale and be not very much, just being somebody that they can talk to and actually showing a genuine interest in their life is, really something great that we can offer them.

I think it takes a lot of energy. It's a lot easier to spend time with people who are exactly the same as us. People who may work in similar jobs, have the same sort of family background, same culture, same religion – it's very easy, it means our conversations are easy. We understand each other. We know what's expected when we go to each other's houses. But when you're entering into a relationship that is cross cultural, I don't understand sometimes what I'm meant to be doing at someone's house and they probably don't understand what they're meant to be doing at my house. It is more challenging in trying to understand each other.

I find that it takes more effort on my part to continue to pursue people, and to follow up in friendship. Also, because people in more community-based cultures or family-dominant cultures, they have a lot going on with their family, so they don't have much time for friends. So, you kind of have to be that friend who keeps calling on them or saying, "Hey, would you like to catch up?" And they totally want to, it's just that they may not have the time. So being patient. And choosing to spend time with people of other cultural backgrounds instead of our own all the time means that it does take more effort. But the blessings that come through that are phenomenal.

Jo: What's something we should consider when reaching out to people of other cultures and backgrounds?

Liam: A good start is just developing connections in the community. Like going to shops where these people shop, going to parks, and just maybe even just learning how to say hello in a different language, and they will just appreciate it.

I can't tell you the amount of times I've just said one word in a different language and seen a shopkeeper's face light up just because I used their own language. So little things like that make people feel welcome, like that you're not there to judge them.

You just have to put yourself in their shoes, understand what would it be like for you to uproot your whole family and go to another country where you can't even speak the language. How stressful

that would be for any Australian family. Then you start to develop that compassion and empathy and just think, "it must be really tough for them right now to just be doing life here in Australia."

Sarah: And being that person that people can ring and go, "Oh, an Australian, who I can call up and ask them questions about documents!"

I'll often get phone calls about, what do I think of this? Or how would I recommend...? Or, do I have any hospital phone numbers or a doctor that they can call in the area? Or what should they do about this? Or medicine they should take because they're struggling to read the box. So, you know, having somebody who's a local is a nice connection for them,

Jo: have you noticed any particular blessings that you've encountered? Anything that you can note that was eye opening for you?

Life becomes so much more vibrant and interesting. And I think as well one thing that really changes is your outlook on life living in Australia when you are constantly meeting friends who've come from a war zone.

For us, one of the biggest blessings is just the happiness that you feel when you are helping someone, and how much satisfaction that can give you. And it's not hard. It's very simple things like just actually saying hello to someone or engaging in a conversation no matter how awkward it is.

Welcoming a stranger, you're giving them that hope for the future. And giving them some hope that Australia will be a welcoming place for them, even if they may not feel it right at that moment. But connecting them with the services. I often have some flyers in my handbag or write down details for anyone I meet in the supermarket, or wherever I am, of playgroups that I attend just to try and get people out of the home to playgroups. To get mums out of the home with their kids so that they can engage and be part of the community.

Jo: For somebody listening to this story who may be new to Australia, how would you encourage them to engage in their community?

Sarah: Get along to the community centre, go to the public libraries. A lot of the libraries are hubs of activities. They've got story times. Just go to these free activities that are offered and then try and meet people through there.

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