

Called to Serve: Bringing Hope by Helping Others

Interview with Eloise

Do you ever feel inspired to make a difference but feel too small and insignificant?

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Tania: This is Messages of hope and I'm Tania Nelson. Today I'm talking to Eloise, a passionate young adult who felt the call to serve both in her local church and overseas as well.

Eloise, it's lovely to have you join us. Would you like to introduce yourself?

Eloise: I'm from Adelaide. I've lived here all my life except a couple of short stints overseas. And I have been serving in my local church for a few years now. I help out with my young adults group, I also love kids ministry. I've been helping with kids play groups, kids talks in church and stuff like that, and youth camps, a youth group at church as well. And whole bunch of other things. I love to sing. I love to be in the band at church, and I'm just very happy to help out where needed.

Tania: So, tell me what drives you to be involved in all these things, all these ways of what we call 'serving' in the church?

Eloise: Good question. So, so many reasons to do it. I think it's what we're made to do. Over the years, since becoming a Christian, I've tried to think more and more about my small and big life decisions, about 'okay well, how can I do this in a way that serves others or if I'm choosing between two different options? Which of these is going to be building up others and helping them and giving to them and loving them?' That's how I try to see life more and more.

Tania: Wonderful. And I noticed you mentioned something about becoming a Christian, which I'd love to hear more about. But first, I know that you've also travelled overseas as part of this call that you feel to serve. Tell us more about that.

Part 1: Leading a mission trip to Fiji

Eloise: Last summer, I was a leader with a youth mission trip - *Teen Missions International Australia*. My team was the smallest. We had six teenagers and four leaders. We were sent to Fiji for about a month to help out at a campsite there.

Tania: I think when most Australians think of Fiji, they think of a tropical holiday, maybe a resort, cocktails, snorkelling or whatever. What was the experience like?

Eloise: We didn't do much of those things. It was quite expensive, and we were on a budget. All our costs were fundraised - the kids on the team had to fund raise their own costs. So, we didn't have a lot of money spare to do touristy things.

The days were spent painting, building bunk beds, gardening, building various shelves and things for the kitchen. This campsite has camps constantly throughout the year, so it's not often that it gets to stop and have a bit of TLC and get to update the things. So, the family that runs it were very grateful for all of that.

In some ways it felt frustrating for a lot of the trip. We thought 'we should be going out more, we should be doing more things, meeting more people, helping more people, telling more people about why we're here and the hope that we have.' In hindsight, when we reflected, we realised that it was actually a gift to have to stay put because it meant that we really got to know each other really, really well. We got to know the family we were staying with really well, the teenagers really got to grow in their faith, and I think there was a lot to gain from that stillness that we had in not running around and doing all of the cool things or the helpful things that we wanted to do. It felt frustrating at the time, but by the end of it, we could see how much value there was in being there, really investing in that place and that group of people.

Tania: You were placed in a leadership team. You said there were four adults, similar age to you. Tell me a little bit about the makeup of that team.

Eloise: So, I was actually the oldest leader, which felt a bit bizarre because I still feel quite young.

We spanned in age from 20 to 25. So, I often had a bit of imposter syndrome being like, yes, I'm the oldest on the team, and yes, I've done other things, but I've never done this before and I don't know how to be a leader. How am I going to do this? And we were all very different in personality and we did have to learn how we fit together and how to work together because our role as leaders wasn't to go there and have this experience of doing mission for ourselves, it was about us supporting the teenagers to do that and for them to learn and grow. So, we had to learn to work together, to really be loving and supporting to the kids that we had in our care.

Tania: So, you were a leader and there were teens with you. Now, you know, as a parent myself, I'm thinking, letting my teenager head overseas potentially with people they don't know, how do you look after these teens who are, they're in a vulnerable, let say, stage of their lives?

Eloise: Absolutely. And the thought of that was very daunting. I was thinking, 'Oh, my goodness, I am responsible for these teenagers for a whole month overseas!' But the support that the organisation that we were with was fantastic. Our training was fantastic. And then we had constant support as much as we needed it while we were overseas from them back here in Australia. Because each team is sent not just on their own to a place, they are sent to partner with a local – someone who is already doing something in the place where they're at.

So, from that more practical side of things, it felt like we were really well supported, which was really good. But it still was a challenge. All of the teens were coming from different backgrounds, with different struggles, some of them quite significant. And so, there was a lot of time that we just had to spend getting to know one another, building trust.

I think we were really blessed with a wonderful group of teenagers who had quite a bit of maturity about them and had a wonderful sense of caring for one another. But then, yes, at times they are simply teenagers who are tired and hungry and are missing home and you've just gotta look after them and tell them to go to bed or tell them that they need to rest or to have a drink of water and get back to work or whatever the case may be.

So, there was quite a blend of the more parenting, caring sort of stuff. But then, also that more along the lines of friendship and growing together, which was really beautiful.

Tania: I've got a few questions about this idea of doing mission. Firstly, what do you mean by the word mission?

Eloise: It is used in a lot of ways, and I probably also use it in a couple of different ways. In a Christian context, when I think about mission, I think about doing God's work in the world. I think about sharing the gospel with people. But that doesn't just mean telling them. It certainly includes that, but it also means, coming alongside them, helping them, meeting their practical as well as spiritual needs.

But when we talk about doing a mission trip, we often use that in a particular way to mean going out of your context to serve others in practical ways but also in a way that is explicitly sharing faith, sharing hope, sharing Jesus with them.

Tania: Sometimes I've heard mission trips being criticised because, here we are, privileged white Australians, going overseas. And that attitude of, 'oh, well, we know better and we're trying to enforce our attitude, skills, gifts, whatever it is, to a different culture.' How would you comment about that kind of criticism?

Eloise: I think it's criticism that we really need to be mindful of because in the past, that has happened and a lot of damage has been done. But throughout history, in the past and now, there are missionaries who don't do that. And I think the key thing is learning from the culture, not coming in with what you think you need to do, but taking time to get to know the people and the place and what they need, not what you think they need.

And then coming alongside them and supporting them and empowering them, not coming in with your own ideas and things like that. So this trip that I was part of, yes, it's about going somewhere to help people. But more so, it's actually about learning from them and learning about what mission can and perhaps should be in many ways.

So, it's hopefully less about us coming in with our ideas and more about us coming in to learn and to support and to empower others.

Tania: Oh, I like that. What I'm hearing is mutual respect. I'm hearing learning from the culture, being open and receptive to what the people who are hosting you do. And learning from them and receiving from them. And enriching the lives of yourself, the leaders, the teenagers. How wonderful.

And how was it returning home from Fiji? Did you have any reverse culture shock from coming back to your home environment?

Eloise: That's something that the organisation was very, very aware of, and wanted to really care for the team members and leaders in that process. Before everyone's sent home, there's a debrief time back where you've done your training. It's a time to rest a bit, to reflect on what's happened, to reconnect with the other teams and hear their experiences and stuff like that. But it's also a very intentional time about preparing for going home, for the potential of reverse culture shock. That's a normal thing. It's not a bad thing. It can still be a very hard thing. But ultimately it can be quite good because you've learned something from another culture. You're seeing your culture differently. No culture is perfect. No culture is objectively better than others. And so, we're getting a new perspective coming back.

The thing that I probably found hardest, was I loved the slower pace of life. That was really beneficial to me, I didn't expect that. Coming back, I was really overwhelmed by the fast pace, the busy-ness of life back in Australia. And that's something that I'm still adjusting to, I think, because I just went: 'No, I think they do it better over there, in terms of that busyness.'

But, I try to, as much as I can, take what I learnt from that and create moments of stillness and try to remember what I learnt from there and bring that back.

Tania: It's interesting how, when you're immersed in your own culture, sometimes you don't see it. So, like you mentioned, busyness, well, that's just by-the-by here. We take it for granted. We think that that's normal. And then you go to a different culture, and you go, ah, it's not so normal, it might be normal for here in Australia, but not in other parts of the world.

Part 2: Eloise's Personal Faith Journey

Tania: Eloise, I can see that your passion for helping young people and for serving in many different ways in the church comes from a strong Christian faith, but I know that you haven't always considered yourself a Christian. Can you tell us a bit about your own faith journey?

Eloise: It's been a long process for me. My mum was brought up in a Catholic family and my dad's family is not Christian at all. And so, growing up, I'd very occasionally go to church with grandma at like Christmas and Easter to a Catholic church. But then, it wasn't till high school that I really started to learn more about what Christianity was and who God is and what the Bible is.

I went to a Christian high school. My parents didn't choose that school because it was Christian. I actually chose it when I was six years old because we did our school musical in the chapel there and I heard that they did musicals. So that's why I was going to go there.

So, God had a good sense of humour in that moment, I think.

Because when I started there, I was like, 'no, I just want to do music and drama. I'm not interested in this Christian stuff. I don't want to do Christian studies.' But by year 9, it was my favourite subject, and I just loved learning about it. I loved thinking about life and meaning and ethics and reading this amazing book or set of books called the Bible.

And when I finished school, I felt like something was missing. And I started thinking, 'oh, maybe I actually believe this stuff. I'm not sure, but maybe I do.' So, I started reading the Bible for myself, and I think I started praying. And it was a long process.

But somewhere in there I went overseas on a university exchange and while I was there, I got involved in an on-campus Bible study group. I thought, 'great, nobody knows me here. I can do this without anybody knowing. I can just explore this for myself and no one needs to know.' And I started thinking more and learning more and being a bit more convinced by it all.

Then I came back and got invited to a young adults group at the church that I'm now at, and started going along to that and just asked lots of questions, lots of really hard questions, and eventually worked up the courage to go to a church on Sunday, that felt like a big step for me.

Tania: What was it that made it daunting?

Eloise: I think for me it was something about it being public. That I was going to be exposed or something like that, or I wouldn't be able to just explore this for myself anymore.

It would mean that other people would know that I want to know about God and Christianity. And that felt like a really big step to me. But once I started going, I think it took probably one visit and all the fears were gone.

There was no interrogation. There was no, 'Why are you here?' Or, 'what do you believe?' Or anything like that. People were just happy that I was there and so, I was happy that I was there.

I do remember one moment, at home one night, just before going to bed, when I think it all clicked for me. I was, and still in many ways am, a perfectionist and at the end of the day I used to get quite upset about all the ways I felt I'd failed or let people down. And I just remember thinking one night, 'I can't be perfect. That's why I need Jesus. He's done that for me, and he loves me anyway.' And that was the real turning point for me.

Tania: Wow, what a story. And good to hear that, for you it was a process. I mean, you might have had a time when it just clicked, but sometimes you hear of other people who've had this, amazing, I don't know, like a lightning bolt from heaven kind of experience. And then others, well, not so much. It's a bit like a tapping on the shoulder slowly. I think God's very polite.

Eloise: Absolutely and very patient. Incredibly patient.

Tania: And Eloise, do you have any specific Bible verses that have been important to you on your journey?

Eloise: One that was quite important and challenging to me throughout this process as I started thinking about serving and mission was from a letter in the New Testament called James. It's quite a challenging letter, and in the first chapter, James writes, 'Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, (or in some translations, "true religion"), is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.'
And I started filtering my life through this question of: am I caring for orphans and widows, or in other words, the vulnerable people in society? Am I caring for them? What is my life shaped around?

So that was a really challenging verse for me that really caused me to reevaluate a lot of what I was doing and set me on a very different path in my life, one more towards ministry and serving and doing that in a more full time way.

Another one that, has been really significant to me over the years as I've thought about this and thought about what it looks like to be on mission and serving people every day wherever I am is at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus is leaving, he's going back to heaven, he's sending out his disciples into the world, telling them to make disciples of all nations, and to teach them what he has taught them. And his last words to them are: 'And surely I am with you always, to the end of the age.' And to me that's been pretty huge in remembering that I'm not doing this alone. I'm not doing this by my own strength. It's not all up to me to figure out what to do and how to do it and how to fix the world or change the world or meet everyone's needs. Actually, God is with me in all of this.

And sometimes I find it helpful to, instead of asking, 'Oh, what should I do next? What do you want me to do?' But thinking, 'what will we do together?' That has been very encouraging to me over the years.

Part 3: Final Comments

Tania: So, Eloise, if someone was going, 'I'd like to help my local community' or 'I'd like to serve overseas', what would you say to them and how do they go about it?

Eloise: I'd say excellent. Let's get started. There are so many needs when we look around the world around us. I sometimes find I get a bit overwhelmed when I start looking at how many different ways that we could be helping and serving.

There's lots of ways you can start. I think it's good to think about first, what are the needs around here? Of those needs, what might I be suited to helping in? What are the skills and the gifts and the interests that I have? Doesn't mean that you can't do something that you've never done before or something like building and you think, 'Oh, I'm not a very handy person.' But I think what's been helpful for me in the past is thinking, 'okay, when I look around at all of these options, what work do I really believe in and can see the value in and just want to be part of? I don't care what I'm doing with it, but I want to be part of it.'

That can be a helpful way of deciding what to do. But talk to people who are doing it. I have listened to a lot of podcasts over the years about mission and about serving and about approaches to it.

I've listened to a lot of different people's stories. What they've learnt, it's inspiring, it's encouraging, it's exciting. It's also very humbling. But you can learn so much that's going to set you up to serve well, to serve in ways that are truly helpful, and are not sort of the criticisms that you were talking about before of coming in and imposing our own ideas and stuff like that.

Don't underestimate the power of being friends with someone, being a neighbour to someone, visiting someone who doesn't get out of the house very often. It might be your grandma. Who knows? The needs could be closer to you than you think. It doesn't have to be big and amazing. It doesn't have to be overseas. Every small bit contributes to the whole and does make a difference. Making a difference for one person is making a difference.

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