



My Sojourn in Mission

CMR Canadian Mission History Legacy Series

Anywhere, Anytime, Any Cost: Can I trust God with my postal code?

Jean Barsness (Author)

juanitadebarsness@gmail.com

Calgary, AB CANADA

Abstract/Summary—*The work of God down through the centuries is made up of millions of intertwined stories; stories of God's grace expressed through people. Jean's sojourn is a reminder that the glory of God is manifest through people who listen and walk in obedience to Him. "Anywhere...Anytime...Any Cost" is a call to embrace all God has for us and join Him in the grand adventure of life, regardless of the zip code. Jean's story is one of those many pieces in the grand Canadian global mission mosaic that weaves a multigenerational tapestry of Canadians engaged in international ministry. This is snapshot of God's faithfulness to a young prairie woman who after sixty decades of following God reflects back at the events of life to see His fingerprints all over her life. Her story is a call to mind Søren Kierkegaard's observation that "...life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards."*—**Editor CACook**

Keywords—Africa; Alliance Academy; Andes Mountains; Ashabraner, Beth Maxfield; Balboa, Canal Zone; Briercrest Bible College (BBC); Church planting; Commitment; Cost; Culture shock; Divine Guidance; Dr. Shidler; Ecuador; Elim Academy; Europe; Gospel Missionary Union (GMU); Immigrant; Irish; Kansas City; Kidnapping; Latin America; Little, Harry & Liz; Missions; Panama; Prairies; Quito; Reimer, Gil; Relinquishment; Saskatchewan; South America; Spanish; Steinbach, Manitoba; Theological Education by Extension (TEE); Trauma; Underground Communist Party; Widowhood.

Six decades ago. It seems so long ... and yet, hardly yesterday. I stood in a Bible college gymnasium, only a teenager faced with a choice. Could I really trust God with my postal code? That mission's conference was the tool God used to show me the reality of His Lordship. I was reluctant to surrender, but still I scribbled my signature on a card that read "*Anywhere, Anytime, Any Cost.*" They were the words of determination and devotion from the heart of a teenager. I meant every word but had absolutely no idea of the implications.

Early Years

One evening at the conference, I crossed the line from being a believer to being a follower, making a public declaration that I would relinquish my dreams and personal plans and tuck in close behind Him to walk by faith into the unknown. I had no idea what radical abandonment to God might look like but that is what walking by faith means. Life

stories then become illustrations of how GOD blesses, guides, provides, and shows Himself strong to those who relinquish all to follow Him in obedience.

As I have trusted Jesus, He has taken me places I would never have dreamt. He has given me more years to serve than I ever expected. He has enabled me to do more than I ever could imagine. This is my sojourn . . . from the Canadian prairies to the high-rises and beaches of Panama, to the majestic Andes Mountains of Ecuador, and then back to where it all began.

The words of Beth Maxfield Ashabraner resonate as Beth beautifully conveys the reality that we are all alike and all are on a journey, "*I am just like you. I am created, cherished, claimed and chosen. My soiled soul, like yours, has been washed sparkling clean in His living water. I, like you, am not my own; I am His. I, like you, have embarked on a spiritual sojourn . . . one that has led me across seas, through valleys, over mountains. I rejoice, as you do, in a Saviour who took the time to grip the pen of grace and scribble this rugged story of redemption . . . my story.*"¹

As a teenager, I said an overwhelming yes to God. I have handed Him my pen, and I have asked Him to write my story because it is also a story of His amazing grace. I yearn to showcase God and illustrate, from six decades as a Christ-follower, that He is unreservedly trustworthy and deserving of my radical abandonment to Him. Each of us has a story to tell. This is mine . . .

I am the daughter of an immigrant. The genesis of my story begins with a glimpse into the life of an Irish immigrant who listened to the voice of God and booked a voyage to New York in March, 1912, rather than in April of that year. Had it been the other way around there would be no story to tell as my father would have been on the Titanic. He and his two cousins booked passage on the SS Canberra. When asked why he came third class, he simply responded, "*Because there was*

*God drew me to Himself
through events and people
but most powerfully through
the prayers of my parents.*



no fourth."

Dad homesteaded on the bald prairies of Saskatchewan, then met my mom in church. They were married and the next day sailed for Ireland. After a year on the Emerald Isle, my parents, Harry and Liz Little, returned to Canada. They became the parents of three sons and then on January 29, 1934, twin daughters were born and four years later, another son completed our family.

My story as a follower of Jesus begins with the choices and commitments faced as a teenager. God drew me to Himself through events and people but most powerfully through the prayers of my parents. At the age of fifteen, my sister, brother, and I attended family camp. On the last night of camp, the evangelist led the congregation in an old hymn, "*Be in time, the Master calls, be in time.*" I was under incredible conviction but I resisted through five verses; my feet were glued to the sawdust floor. On the last chorus I reluctantly went to the altar. Quietly I repented, confessed my sins and received the gift of salvation Jesus offered. As I arose from my knees that Sunday night and walked back to my seat, I knew without a doubt that I was His child.

The next day I opened my Bible. I had read the Bible before but this time it was different. "*If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature, old things have passed away, behold all things have become new.*" (II Corinthians 5:17) That July 19, 1949, those words were alive. One decision had changed not only my eternal destiny but also my entire life.

At age fifteen and only six weeks old in Christ, my parents enrolled my twin sister and me in a Christian high school where I began grade eleven. Chapel attendance each day of the week and church services twice on Sundays were used by God to help me in grow in my spiritual walk, in my faith, and in the knowledge of God's Word. After high school graduation, I knew that God's plan for me was to attend Bible school, but His plan interfered with my well designed personal project. I reluctantly obeyed, but grappled with the distinctive implications of Lordship. GOD challenged and won my heart in my graduating college year. It had been more than two years since I put my trust in the Lord for salvation. I thanked Him for Calvary. I was not worthy of the nail prints in His hands. I was confident that I was His child, however as His child, I wanted my own way. I wanted to write my own story. I had become well aware of the implications of following Christ and I was also cognizant that Jesus did not hide the cost involved. I knew the pertinent verses related to discipleship - was I content with just being a believer, not a disciple? Was I satisfied with being a fan and not a follower? Why was I so hesitant in crossing that line from being a believer to being a fully devoted follower of Jesus?

My signature on that small card which said, "Anywhere, Anytime, Any Cost" ... gave God the permission to bless me with His direction and provision.

How could I ever trust God with my postal code? Jesus described the requirements of a Christ-follower when He

spoke to the multitudes saying, "*If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple . . . whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be my disciple.*" (Luke 14: 26, 33 NKJV) These were demanding words. But then, one evening in response to a powerful message delivered at a missions conference, I scribbled my signature on that small card which said, "*Anywhere, Anytime, Any Cost.*" That signature gave God the permission to bless me with His direction and provision.

My journey then became one of divine guidance by the One Who chose and set me apart for service anywhere! Some months later, the Director of the Gospel Missionary Union (GMU) spoke at an evening service on our campus and told of how God had placed a burden on his heart for Panama. Due to mechanical problems on a flight from Ecuador to Kansas City, he had spent a couple of days walking the streets; he thought Panama must be the Shanghai of Latin America. He prayed and envisioned Panama being the next country that GMU would enter.

At the close of his message, Dr. Shidler asked if there was anyone in chapel who would pray about becoming a pioneer church planter in Panama, the small country where the party begins and never ends, the country that joins Central and South America. Within my heart was a quiet urging of the Holy Spirit which prompted me to ask for an interview with Dr. Shidler the next day.

He handed me an application form for career missionary service; there were no applications for short-term ministries. Consequently, an invitation was extended to attend candidate orientation at the Kansas City headquarters of Gospel Missionary Union. We were appointed to various ministries in and around the city and placed in situations where we would learn flexibility and adaptability. At the conclusion of five months of orientation I was appointed and licensed as the youngest candidate ever to be appointed as a career missionary with the GMU.

Panama Period

Anywhere? God was showing me that Panama was His plan. Missionaries are sent ones, so a partnership with a team of senders was essential. It was definitely a new walk of faith trusting God to direct my steps to those who would be part of the team. I vividly recall how inadequate I felt as I began to write letters requesting the opportunity to speak in churches, presenting the need of Panama. Who would even want someone so young and without missionary experience, much less credibility, to speak in their churches? I cried out, "Where do I begin?"

There was no doubt in my heart that God had called, chosen, and set me apart for cross-cultural ministry. God is faithful and I experienced His amazing provision, and was humbled by those who shared out of riches and others out of personal poverty in order to send me on my way. Eight months after my appointment, I flew to Panama to serve. It would be five years before I would return to Canada. At this time in mission history, a missionary term was long and

uninterrupted. The thought of coming home early was unthinkable. Skype, text messaging, and emails were nonexistent. I would not hear the voices of my parents or siblings for five years.

After one month as a single missionary, I vividly recall writing a letter to my parents, *“In four years and eleven months, I get to come home.”* The fears of the unknowns of the first missionary term were soon dispelled, however, as I began language acquisition and cultural immersion. Life had its difficult days with the realities of culture shock, intertwined with good days of growing friendships, member care, and increasing facility in Spanish.

In time, a church in a small interior village had been planted and was growing. During this first term, Panama had very much become my home, so when it was time to leave for home assignment, the farewell was as painful as the goodbyes had been five years earlier.

A Partner in Panama

The planned one year home assignment in Canada was packed with surprises. Reverse culture shock was an unknown but nevertheless experienced. Meeting my future husband and becoming engaged was not in the plan. Although Gil Reimer from Steinbach, Manitoba, was not on my agenda, I was delighted that God had it on His. Following one more year in Panama as a single missionary, I returned to Canada to be married.

Returning to Panama for my second term, my husband began his first. It was a term characterized by many firsts—our two children were born, we were part of establishing a church in an educational interior city, and we were surprised by yet another first, namely, that misunderstandings turned molehills into mountains. Had it not been for a beloved mission president who believed missionaries are too valuable to lose, it might not have been only our first term together, but also the last.

Our next term was distinguished by new assignments, a new location, a new strategy, and a new curious and unexpected guest. One afternoon, a cordial and well-dressed man in a brown suit showed up. His visit was intentional; he was looking for Gilberto Reimer. He understood Gilberto was a noted Bible teacher from whom he wanted to learn. He added, *“I do not want to be a Pentecostal, a Methodist, or a Baptist. I just want to study the Bible. Where is there a Bible Study that Gilberto teaches?”* I gave him the address of the home in Panama City where we met for Bible Study. Somehow, his craving for the Word did not seem authentic. I did not expect to see the man in the brown suit again. Little did we know that Panama was not as safe as we thought.

I do not want to be a Pentecostal, a Methodist, or a Baptist. I just want to study the Bible. Where is there a Bible Study that Gilberto teaches?

Two years later a week began which changed our lives forever. It was Monday morning, February 11, 1974. Gil had just arrived home from camp on the Atlantic side of the Isthmus. His duffle bag filled with dirty clothes was thrown on the floor. Next to his, was my duffle bag packed with clean clothes and ready to go. In an hour I would be out the door and on my way to participate in the final girls' camp for the season. Before I left, we enjoyed our lunch together. I have forgotten if we had egg salad, tuna, or tomato sandwiches, but I cannot forget Gil's comment, *“Honey, won't it be good when this week is over and everything gets back to normal. You will be home from camp and the children will be home from boarding school. How wonderful it will be to be back to a normal and have a typical routine week.”* How could I possibly imagine that the “norm” would soon be gone forever?

A few hours after I left for camp, Gil also left home to teach the Monday evening Theological Education by Extension (TEE) class. Following his class and before he returned to the city, he came by the camp where I was and asked if I needed anything. If so, he would send it out the next day with Doña Clotilde. Then he kissed me good night and left. How could I possibly know that embrace would be our last!

The Week the Changed our Lives

Only hours later, Gil was kidnapped from our condo in downtown Panama City. An entire week of praying, waiting, and anticipating filled each day. Daily I asked God to give me a promise to strengthen me from His Word. Not a day passed without just one promise, but many. Then early Sunday morning, February 17, I opened my Bible and asked God for another promise, a promise that would be filled with assurance. I desperately needed a fresh promise of hope. My well-worn Bible opened to Psalm 68 and I began reading those verses of victory. My heart leaped. Yes, this was the promise I needed. I read the first four verses, *“Let God arise. Let His enemies be scattered; let those also who hate Him flee before Him but let the righteous be glad, let them rejoice before God; yes, let them rejoice exceedingly. Sing to God, sing praises to His name, extol Him who rides on the clouds; by His name YAH and rejoice before Him.”* (Psalm 68:1 – 4 NKJV)

Amazing! This will be the day! I will rejoice exceedingly in God! Interestingly enough, as I read the next verse it seemed that God had changed the font. He had not only changed the font but also the font size. He had bolded and capitalized each letter! I read verse five. It wasn't what I had expected, but it was God Himself saying, *“A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in His holy habitation.”*

In that very moment, at six o'clock on Sunday morning, I knew without a doubt that I was a widow and my children were fatherless! I had shared all the other promises with friends and family gathered in the living room. This one was too painful! I could not share it with even one person. I kept it to myself, pondering it in my heart throughout the day, *“a father to the fatherless, a defender of widows”*

Later on that Lord's Day just before three in the afternoon, the phone rang. It was a call from the Chief of Police in Balboa, Canal Zone, requesting my presence at the police station. There the Chief Inspector gave me the news that Gil's body had been found on the banks of the Panama Canal with eleven stab wounds and horribly mutilated. There were no words, except to tell him that my husband was now with his Lord and Saviour, the One he loved and served. That was all.

In silence we drove back to the apartment. Everything was deathly quiet in the elevator as we moved up to the sixth floor of our apartment building. There was no reason to talk. My shattered heart was lying in pieces all over the elevator floor. Everyone at the apartment believed that Gil would step off the elevator. He didn't.

Our apartment was filled with friends and family, waiting with great expectation. Can you possibly visualize our arrival? An entrance without Gil! I wondered, once I've been broken, can I ever be whole again? What happened next was surreal. Everyone was in shock. Tears began to flow freely. Some began to scream and others started lighting candles. My dear mother-in-law, whose heart was breaking screamed, "I will never hear his laughter again!" A few hours later, my son asked that his little sister and I go to his bedroom, away from all the turmoil and upheaval all around us. My first thought was that Glen wanted to get away from everyone and have a good cry. Rather, as we entered his room, he took his Bible off his night table and began to read Philippians chapter one finishing with verse twenty-one; "*For living to me means simply Christ, and if I die I should merely gain more of Him.*" (J.B. Phillips N.T.) He added, "*This is Dad, it is better.*" I was in awe of how God had so prepared the heart of a ten-year-old boy for the hour of crisis!

On the day of my husband's funeral, my little blue-eyed daughter awoke as the morning sun streamed through the window. She looked at me and said, "*This is going to be a good day.*" I reminded her that this was the day of her daddy's funeral, to which she replied, "*I know, but Mommy, Jesus suffered so much for us, can't we suffer just a wee bit for Him?*" I was astonished. Once again, I saw how God had prepared. This time it was the heart of an eight-year-old blond little girl. A day that I dreaded quickly turned into amazement.

Immediately following the funeral, interrogations, many of them horrific, became the weekly norm. What about the man in the brown suit? Within a few weeks, he was investigated only to reveal that he was not penniless or uneducated as he had made us believe. The man in the brown suit resided illegally in Panama, was a medical doctor, and the director of the Underground Communist Party. It was now confirmed that a communist spy had infiltrated our Bible studies and was a total fake and fraud. Soon I learned that for some months, Gil and I had both been followed, and thus it seemed best for me and my children to leave Panama. Pain described the holes in our hearts as pictures were taken off our apartment walls, books were taken off our shelves, closets and school desks were emptied, and packing began. We were leaving Panama, the country we called home, saying goodbye to our mission

family, including our dearest Panamanian and American friends. I was losing all that was dear to me. Now, where?

The Transitional Years

Anywhere? As years earlier, I had scribbled my signature on that small card, was I now able to trust God with my postal code? There were several possibilities open to us but transferring to Quito, Ecuador, had trumped all other options. My ministry designation had been changed from church planting in Panama City to a varied ministry in Quito. The Alliance Academy in Quito had replaced Elim Academy in Panama. After nearly four months in Quito, classes were concluded and vacation time had begun and time to leave for our previously scheduled three months in Canada. The exit date was on cue but the departure city had changed. Surely these were enough changes. Could there possibly be anymore? I thought not. We planned to be back!

College classrooms would be totally out of my comfort zone! Why would I even entertain such a wild idea?

In light of the trauma we had been through, God surprised us when we received an invitation to spend a year of recuperation on the Briercrest campus. Working in the campus library was a good plan although I had never imagined that SOH OSO would ever be my postal code, even for just one year. During that one year, the invitation was extended to remain at Briercrest, continue my education, and join the faculty teaching mission courses. The very possibility of college teaching had never entered my mind! College classrooms would be totally out of my comfort zone! Why would I even entertain such a wild idea? If that were to happen, I would have to upgrade my education - what a scary thought! I was daily hearing the groans of students seated in their library carrels, their minds engaged in assignments, papers, and exams. As a new widow with children, why would I even want to go down that road? Was there not another option? Couldn't I just return to Ecuador?

Widowhood and God's Promises

Never did I realize that God's wonderful plan would include college teaching rather than church planting or returning to my home province of Saskatchewan rather than remaining in Latin America. All within short seven months, our move took us from a spacious high-rise condo in Panama City to a one-room apartment in Quito, Ecuador, to a mobile home on a Canadian prairie college campus. God's agenda totally took me by surprise.

During the years of widowhood, I experienced all the blessings that God promises for widows as revealed in His Word. Isaiah 54 was especially meaningful. However, God in HIS wonderful loving sovereignty provided the context for the three of us to meet our future spouses. Within less than a dozen years, wedding bells rang one, two, three times in the college chapel.

You see, it had been just another Caronport high school graduation, but this one had unexpected personal ramifications. I was introduced to Alton, the father of one of the graduates. In the fall, wedding bells rang in the chapel on Briercrest campus.

Claire and Ruth and I graduated in the same class at Briercrest. Years later, while the Greiner Family Singers were on campus, mutual friends invited us for lunch. It was during lunch that their son noticed my daughter for the first time; she was only fifteen. Bevan waited. Five years later they were married and wedding bells rang again in the chapel on the Briercrest campus.

Not long after our arrival on the Briercrest campus, my son was getting ready for church. I struggled as I helped him with his tie. I became frustrated with not being able to help. He became frustrated with me not knowing how. We needed help, so we called George, who with his family, lived on the other side of the wall in our apartment block. Little did we imagine that the neighbor who would teach him how to knot a tie, would later become his father-in-law! Glen married George's daughter and wedding bells rang a third time in the chapel on the Briercrest campus.

Global Ministry

Anywhere? God gave opportunities and doors opened for ministry with several faith mission organizations. Once again I marveled as I saw GOD taking me further than I could ever have imagined and gave me the joy of ministry on three continents - South America, Europe, and Africa. If I had not relinquished everything to the Lordship of Christ, I wondered where would I have ended up. Where would I have settled if I had insisted on my own way and lived out my life according to my agenda rather than His.

As I reflect on decades as a Christ-follower, I resonate with the patriarch Abraham who lived his life building altars. He

built many altars of worship, but Abraham also build an altar of relinquishment when God asked him to offer his only son. In the process of time, as I relinquished everything to the Lordship of Christ, I built altars of worship but also altars yielding my vocation, location, marital status, health, and releasing my children for ministry.

I wondered where would I have ended up...have settled if I had insisted on my own way and lived out my life according to my agenda rather than His.

How many more altars? How many more miles? How far? I don't know. However, I do know life has been a great God-adventure. It all began when I radically abandoned everything to Him. He has blessed me above and beyond! However, blessings are not the rationale for yielding everything to Him. No one describes the purpose and motivation for total surrender more eloquently than well-known hymn writer Isaac Watts when he penned, "*When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of glory died . . . His love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all!*"

The cost? Hardly. It is only a privilege in view of the price Jesus paid. I owe Him everything - my soul, my life, my all! That is exactly why I abandon all to follow Him. He alone is worthy. Six decades of following have taught me that it is not only safe but glorious to trust God with my postal code!

REFERENCES

- [1] Bethany Maxfield, "A Savior's Scribbles," Missions Publication of The Church of God Vol.66 No 5, September/October 2002. www.bethanyashabraner.com

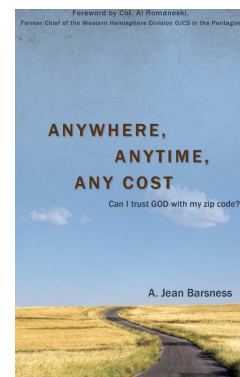
About the Author—Jean Barsness (DMiss) has a lifetime of missions experience as a career missionary, professor of missions, international trainer, and cofounder of CrossTraining Global. Jean is a mentor, Bible study teacher, missions consultant, and an international conference speaker. She has her M.A. in Biblical Studies and a Doctorate of Missiology (DMiss) from Trinity International University. Jean and her husband make their home in Calgary, Canada. They have a blended family of five with grandchildren and great grandchildren. Jean's book, (published September 26, 2013) is available at www.amazon.ca and from the publisher <http://www.wordalivepress.ca>

"This story is the powerful testimony of a woman's life completely surrendered to God. Through tragedy and triumph, the pages resound with the truth of God's faithfulness. Dr. Barsness yielded her life to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and He provided for her. Truly, her story is an example to us all!

Cindy Klassen,
Six-time Canadian Olympic Medalist

"The work of God down through the centuries is made up of millions of intertwined stories; stories of God's grace expressed through people. Jean's story is a powerful reminder that the glory of God is manifest through people who listen and walk in obedience to Him. Anywhere...Anytime...Any Cost is a call to embrace all God has for us and join Him in the grand adventure of life, regardless of the zip code.

Charles A. Cook, PhD
Professor of Global Studies and Mission (Ambrose University College)
Chair, Global Mission Roundtable (EFC)



About the CMR Canadian Mission History Legacy Series—“*My Sojourn in Mission*” is part of the *Canadian Missiological Recourses* (CMR) *Canadian Mission History legacy Series*. The series encourages Canadians engaged in global mission to record their stories or the stories of others (past or present) in order to provide insights or lessons learned past global involvement that might help successive generations of Canadian mission scholars, international workers (missionaries) and church leaders. The CMR is a repository of information about Canadian contributions to global mission and provides a venue for thoughtful missiological reflection that is clearly Canadian.