

Because I Was a Sister Missionary

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I AM A FEMALE RETURNED MISSIONARY. A decade has passed since I returned from my mission in Germany. Since then I have finished graduate school, lived in Korea for a while, married, had two children. Yet my mission is still a constant in my life. More than by any other event, I measure my life by what happened before and after my mission. It is a pivotal point for me, as though I were a different person when I went out than when I came back. And my mission experience grounds me, not because of what I did so much as what I became and the relationships I acquired. Many of my closest friends come from my mission. Many who know me as I truly am knew me then.

My mission helps me in my work setting. I teach English to foreign students, and learning another language and having lived in another culture enhances my ability to relate to them. I am more patient with their timidity and uncertainties, more willing to overlook what seems like rudeness, more careful to understand them and make certain they understand me.

Of course, my mission influences my spiritual life. My belief and understanding go deeper because of it. When I have doubts or bureaucracy clouds clarity, I can cast my mind back to the time when the Lord clearly and unmistakably spoke peace to my soul on my mission.

But perhaps the area where I feel my mission affects me most is as a woman in the Church. I have a courage and a confidence I doubt I would have had I not served a mission. For example, in Sunday School

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class, I frequently express my opinion—sometimes any opinion—just so the voices in the class are not exclusively male. The women in my ward offer bright, intelligent comments in Relief Society but rarely speak out in Sunday School. Perhaps they are intimidated by the quick, sure answers of the men. But I worked with men like these when they were just nineteen. Call me a sister missionary who lived to tell the tale.

Missionary life began for me, as it does for most missionaries today, in the Missionary Training Center (M.T.C.) in Provo, Utah. It was a grueling two-month ordeal, even longer than basic training but serving much the same purpose, I'm sure. It was there I learned something of mission organization. First was the companionship: we were never, Never, NEVER to leave our companions. Then came the district, made up, in the M.T.C., of four companionships. In our district, we had three elder companionships and one sister companionship. A zone of maybe five to ten districts came next, and finally the mission.

In a companionship, one missionary was designated "senior." In the M.T.C., seniors were chosen by alphabetical order the first week, and then changed each week. My companion and I never worried much about the title. In the mission field, however, the senior companion was usually the one who had been there the longest and, therefore, theoretically had the most experience and wisdom as well as more responsibilities such as filling out reports and planning schedules. It was an honor to be called as a "trainer," which meant that a missionary was deemed worthy, kind, and knowledgeable enough to train new missionaries, or "greenies" as they were sometimes irreverently called.

Each district also had a leader. These leaders were responsible to and for the missionaries in their particular district. Usually, as was our experience in the M.T.C., a companionship of sisters served in a district with companionships of elders. The district leader, an important position, would be one of the elders.

Even more prestigious was the position of zone leader. Two zone leaders worked as companions. Unlike most missionaries, they had a car. They were the trouble-shooters for the missionaries, helping with problems or finding help. They informed missionaries about transfers, picked up new sisters and elders, organized and conducted zone meetings, and were liaisons between the missionaries and the mission president.

Assistant to the president (A.P.) was the highest position to which elders could aspire (although, of course, as with any other Church calling, they weren't supposed to). Generally only the very finest, most dedicated, and diligent missionaries became A.P.s. They helped the

mission president in numerous ways and were examples to all the other missionaries. By and large, the A.P.s I knew deserved the respect they received.

In the M.T.C. and in most missions, sisters served as senior companions and trainers, but elders held all other leadership positions. I don't know whether this was a directive from above or simply tradition. I do know, as a result of subsequent experience, that it can be different, but it usually isn't.

My experience with my district in the M.T.C. was a very positive one. We grew very close and generally worked well together. All eight of us were going to German missions, the elders to Hamburg, and we sisters to Munich. The elders valued us sisters and learned to appreciate the qualities we brought to the district. One day after my companion and I had been sick and had stayed in our room, the elders told us how much they appreciated our usual quieting effect on them. While we were gone, they had messed around so much that they had gotten little accomplished. They appreciated our femaleness and the influence it had on the group.

Though the elders may have been partial to women anyway, my companion and I earned the respect that they gave us. Our teacher at the M.T.C. challenged our district to memorize all of the discussions before we left for Germany, a feat not often accomplished by an entire district. But we did it. We competed with one another to be the first to pass off a discussion after we had memorized it. My companion and I were always among the first four to finish. The elders jockeyed back and forth for the other two positions.

My companion was very smart. Though she was the only one in our district who had never studied German, she memorized the discussions as quickly as anyone—usually more quickly. Our teacher confided to me that she was the only sister missionary he had met who didn't have problems of some sort. At the time, I thought that he was complimenting both of us. Later I realized he hadn't included me in his observation. As I've since thought about his comment, I've decided that it is a key to many of the challenges sister missionaries face. Although attitudes toward women going on missions seem to have changed in the last ten years, I believe sister missionaries still encounter many of the same problems.

I think our teacher admired my companion because she was so unlike the stereotype of a sister missionary. She was sinewy and athletic, although not masculine. Mostly she just didn't think like a female. She valued thought over feeling, analysis over instinct. As I think of it, though our teacher thought she had no problems, she was a real pain during the hour of physical recreation for the sister missionaries.

She was tough and stubborn, which served her well getting through the M.T.C., but she didn't mesh well with the rest of the women. She didn't like the emotional, teary, lovey way sisters sometimes acted. And she refused to go along with the group. She was not flexible and conciliatory. She didn't follow the rules of female interaction.

I think our teacher liked her because she thought more like an elder than a sister. She wasn't as different from elders as most sister missionaries are. And that difference between sexes is, I think, the crux of many problems sister missionaries face. The mission is a male organization where men tend to view female differences not as assets, but as problems—not only different, but defective.

On my mission, once in a while I found elders who appreciated and even liked sister missionaries because they liked women. I also learned that the attitude of elders toward sister missionaries directly related to the attitude of the mission president.

Since my mission, I've learned that many of our priesthood leaders don't know much about women and see our differences as problems to be endured or invalidated through sentimentality rather than diversity to be used to advantage.

Fortunately, not all priesthood leaders are like that. My first mission president, F. Enzo Busche, loved the sisters. He often said that the sisters were the best missionaries in the mission. And so, of course, we were. President Busche was tall with thinning sandy hair and a strong square jaw. He had been a successful businessman in Dortmund before he was called as a General Authority and always wore neat, dark suits.

He was kind and loving to us. In my first assignment, I was fortunate to be in the same ward with him and his family. We saw him frequently, and it was always a pleasure to be around him. His love refilled our reserves emptied from a week of rejections and disappointments.

Sister Busche felt a special responsibility for the sister missionaries and invited us to dinner from time to time. This was such a contrast to the rest of my mission experience when most members assumed the sisters could cook and take care of themselves; then the elders got most of the dinner appointments. But Sister Busche was a wonderful cook, and she took care of the sisters in Munich. We had the best of everything there. We were respected for our work and looked after with loving concern. Paradoxically, later when it seemed female abilities were suspect from every corner, we were expected to fend for ourselves more. Perhaps it had to do with value. When we were valued, we were treated well in all areas.

When he was called as mission president, President Busche did not speak English as well as he wanted. To improve his skills, he

insisted that the elders working in the mission office speak English, and even set aside time for lessons. He was very anxious to be able to communicate with missionaries in their own language during interviews. He even spoke in English at zone conferences because the majority of missionaries were Americans. He was very concerned about us individually, and we felt it.

A serious problem with the circulation in his legs prevented President Busche from sitting for long periods. So for our zone conference interviews, he would take a walk with each missionary, even when it was bitter cold outside. We all sensed his ability and concern and had absolute confidence in him as a leader. And he had confidence in us. During my first personal interview with him, in my greenie zeal, I said, "President Busche, what do I need to do to be a good missionary? Just tell me, and I'll do whatever you say." I have since often thought of his response when struggling with programs or correlation. "Sister Lamb," he said, "follow the Spirit." He had enough trust in his missionaries and in the Lord to believe that would really work.

Stories about President Busche continuously circulated throughout the mission—tales he had told in previous zone conferences, experiences individuals had had with him. According to one such story, he had sent only one missionary home during the almost three years he was president. It was said he would do almost anything to help a missionary complete an honorable mission and only let the one go home because the missionary had threatened suicide. It was very reassuring for me to know that if I messed up or my endurance weakened, my president would support me.

I began my mission just as President Busche was initiating an innovative program of sister districts, and I was made the companion of one of two sister district leaders. Being new, I didn't appreciate just how bold a move this was, nor how much confidence it showed. Working in a sister district was as normal to me as anything else at the beginning of my mission.

My sister trainer, Sister Burton, deserved every bit of confidence President Busche had placed in her. She worked hard and took very seriously her responsibility as district leader. She watched out carefully for the two other sisters in Munich, making sure they were as healthy and happy as possible. They seemed to have fewer dinner appointments than we did, and I remember feeling somewhat envious when she often invited them along with us.

Sister Burton was tall and thin—so thin that the batch of no-bake cookies we made and ate every night hardly made a difference in her shape, while I got a good start on a thirty-pound weight gain. This culinary habit was the one bad lesson she taught me. Whenever I

think of her then, I picture her in a blue plaid A-line wool skirt and the turtleneck she always wore with it. At first I teased her about wearing the same thing all the time, but I soon learned that you come to wear what is comfortable and warm or comfortable and cool because as a missionary you are prey to the elements.

Understanding this reality of missionary life, we sister missionaries laughed when some new sisters came to our mission with the news that the wife of the M.T.C. president had instituted a new grooming and etiquette class for the sister missionaries there. Those of us who had been in the mission field even a short time wondered if it taught how to gracefully chase a bus or how to stay neat and well groomed while out walking in the rain all day with a broken umbrella. We thought a grooming class was very funny, but we also found it insulting, implying by its very existence that women did not know how to groom themselves or that their appearance was not adequate.

And where was the grooming and etiquette class for the elders? After all, they were the ones who were only nineteen, who were often just learning how to wash and take care of their own clothes, who were often somewhat obnoxious. What about their appearance? What about their manners? Obviously, those in charge at that time at the M.T.C. placed greater emphasis on women's appearance than on men's. This seemed to coincide with what I heard frequently once I received my mission call: Elders didn't mind having sisters in the mission field; sisters were nice scenery.

Fortunately the elders in my M.T.C. district and in my mission under President Busche weren't able to dismiss sisters so blithely because we were the standard by which they were measured. Many sisters didn't have such an encouraging start, however, and were reminded from the very beginning that their appearance was what mattered.

My missionary experience was the opposite of Sister Burton's. She began her mission with slow days, crying companions, and judgmental elders. My experience with disturbed companions and critical elders would come later. Sister Burton had learned that to earn the respect of the elders with whom she worked, she had to work harder than they did—and never cry in front of them. For some reason, most elders thought crying was a sign of weakness instead of what it usually was: the result of fatigue or frustration, or excess water in the tear ducts.

I learned this lesson from her so thoroughly that once when I could not keep myself from crying in front of an elder (my zone leader no less), I told him how sorry I was and asked him not to think of me as a silly woman. He, being more compassionate and understanding than most elders, responded, "This isn't the boys against the girls." But I'm not so sure he was right.

Sister Burton taught by example, not by lecture. And she was determined to live up to President Busche's expectations and to prove to elders that sisters were good missionaries. She was dedicated and diligent. Often we got to bed at 11:00 P.M. or later rather than the prescribed 10 P.M. because we had been out teaching or (more likely) tracting until the very last minute. Our apartment was near the mission office, and once, on our way home, we ran into the A.P.s around 10:00 P.M..

It was probably cold that night. (I get cold just thinking about my mission. In fact, I often volunteered to do the dishes in Germany because it was the only time my hands got warm.) When we ran into the A.P.s, we had probably been out tracting, a humiliating exercise in futility it seemed to me. When we tracted, we took turns knocking on doors. Briefly the peephole would darken, and we would know someone was there. Then either no one would answer, or someone would answer and say either "Ich bin Katholisch" or "Ich bin beschäftigt." Never, never did they say, "Kommen Sie herein." Sister Burton said that of all her companions, I disliked tracting the most. She was probably right. I can't imagine anyone disliking it more.

Now, "offhanding" I could tolerate, perhaps because we had some control over our contacts. We would go to some busy public place such as a subway or train station, approach people, introduce ourselves, and ask if we could talk to them for a few moments. This wasn't much more effective than tracting, but somehow having someone walk away was easier than getting a door slammed in my face.

It was wonderful when we finally got a chance to visit someone and teach them about the gospel. Unfortunately that didn't happen very often. So on the night we ran into the A.P.s, Sister Burton and I were probably on our way home from tracting. I'm sure they commended us for being such fine missionaries and told us how much they appreciated us. I think they did appreciate us. We did good work, and we didn't cause trouble.

And not causing trouble was perhaps the trait elders admired most in sisters. If a sister ever did need help, she was labeled a problem. Unfortunately, as women we were in a bind. If we were sick or otherwise troubled and wanted a blessing, we had to ask a priesthood holder. And that meant admitting we were sick or troubled. After my mission, a man told me about some sisters in his mission coming to his apartment in the middle of the night asking for a blessing. He had been so irritated at being awakened that he had just sent them home.

After I received my call, men often told me that the sisters were either the best missionaries or the worst missionaries in the mission. Now I believe that there are just fewer sisters, so they are more obvi-

ous and easily remembered, not necessarily better or worse. And Sister Burton taught me something perceptive when I worried about being a worst missionary. She said we are all the best missionaries and the worst missionaries at some time.

Because Sister Burton was so diligent, we were always up at 6:00 A.M.. The only time we didn't get up then was one morning after a certain baptismal service. The woman had just been baptized and had gone to change her clothes when an escapee from a mental hospital burst in, pursued by the police. In the ensuing commotion, chairs, people, and a gun were knocked about. The man jumped into the baptismal font and baptized himself until someone finally dragged him out and hauled him away—after which we continued with the services.

That next morning we didn't get up until 8:00.

Sister Burton's rigorous schedule and high standards were what I had expected when I went into the mission field. In the M.T.C., we had been inundated with stories of faith-promoting experiences, scriptural examples, and General Authorities. And I believed everything I was told. So Sister Burton was not a surprise to me. We had a very good companionship, and I grew to love and deeply trust her. We worked well together—one picked up a discussion when the other stumbled; one remembered the scriptures the other couldn't. We prayed and had baptisms. We fasted and saw miracles. My time with her was exhausting and exhilarating. She had a tremendous impact on my life and remained my closest friend for many years.

President Busche was to be released just a few months after I arrived in the mission field. Before he left us, he arranged to have the first all-mission sisters' conference. Sisters traveled from all over the mission to attend, some of us having to stay over at other sisters' apartments because of the distance.

We came in fasting and prayer and gathered with President and Sister Busche and the A.P.s, who, whether innately or from President Busche's example, also respected the sisters. The conference was filled with reverence and love. There were about twenty-five sisters in the mission at that time. President Busche asked each of us to tell the most important thing that we had learned. Thinking that everyone would probably give the same answer, I kept track. But no one did. It seemed incredible at the time and still does. I don't know if I could think off-hand of twenty-five different aspects of the gospel. But each woman's experience had been just a little different; each of us had learned something unique.

But despite our diversity, a strong feeling of unity permeated the group. Memories of that feeling offer me hope when I despair over

being different from the seeming norm of the Church. At a time of tremendous spirituality and righteousness, the diversity was as great as the unity—a paradox I don't understand, but one that I cherish.

At the conference, President Busche noted the “abundance of womanhood” before him—more than he had seen for many years in all of Germany. Long after the conference had ended, several of us mulled over the idea of “womanhood,” wondering just what it was and where it fit with priesthood, motherhood, or fatherhood. We never did figure it out. But that day, I think it had something to do with our power. I felt powerful, as though I could accomplish anything. I was acceptable; we were all acceptable before God.

My mission went downhill from there. I had been transferred to a new companion just before the conference. President and Sister Busche were released and went home shortly after. Our new mission president did not like sisters. He believed women missionaries were sickly and emotionally unstable. And so, of course, that's what many of us were—or became. He put the sisters who were sick together so they wouldn't slow anyone else down. That way only one companionship was wasted.

My first contact with my new mission president was in a personal interview at a zone conference. I went with an open mind, ready to love and follow him as I had President Busche. My first impression, however, was of being in a dentist's office. The president wore very strong aftershave. And that's really all I can remember, except that I was disappointed. I was used to being loved by my mission president. Being near President Busche was a joy. I had no sense that this mission president cared about me. One of my friends remembers that at her first interview with him, he shook her hand and then glanced at his watch. She knew the interview was being timed and felt very uncomfortable.

The new president was small and thin, though my memory probably doesn't do him justice. We don't see people (or remember them) the way they really look. We see them the way we feel about them. He wore glasses and had thinning, gray-brown hair. It seems he always wore light-colored suits—probably polyester.

His wife was kind but looked a little worn. The story circulated among the sisters in the mission that when she was trying to comfort one of the sister missionaries, she had sympathized that a mission was miserable. When her husband heard the comment, he reprimanded her, at which she snapped, “Well, it *is* miserable.”

The president also praised his wife for raising their children. He said he had always been too busy to be much help with the kids. He was pleased that his “good wife” had done a wonderful job with them even though she had had to do it mostly on her own. I've heard other

Mormon men say the same thing. Praise like that is supposed to be commendable, I guess. But as I see it, it only shows how the man has abandoned what is supposed to be his most important duty. It is as if by praising the wife for doing his job, he can somehow make up for not being there for his family. I didn't think it was any more admirable than I do now. Yet he was a mission president, a high position in the Church. He appeared to be a very successful Mormon man—which is one reason I think the oft-heard maxim, “No success can compensate for failure in the home,” doesn't really apply to men.

The new president inundated us with programs and pushed us to bring up “the numbers.” And I felt a definite power shift in the mission. Previously, the most spiritual and Christlike missionaries had been called as the leaders, but now those positions were given to the missionaries with the best statistics. The two were not necessarily the same.

Several other changes indicated that we were in for a whole new game plan. Before President Busche left, in our final zone conferences with us, he reviewed our strengths and weaknesses as missionaries. He said our spirituality was our greatest strength and praised us for being so diligent in keeping the commandments and loving the people and one another. At one of the new mission president's first zone conferences, he told us we weren't in the mission field to make friends with the people but to convert them to the gospel. “If this were a business,” he also said, “we'd all be bankrupt.”

Had President Busche remained, I might have been one of the sister district leaders. As it was, I was put where I could have little contact with sisters other than my companion. Fortunately, I was never demoted to junior companion, as some elders were. But I knew right away I was not on the president's leadership track. Even though I always worked hard and did my best to live and share the gospel, numbers and statistics weren't important to me. And I wasn't above neglecting some of my statistical or motivational duties, like reporting when I passed off a discussion so that I could get a star in my file or carrying a rock around in my pocket to remind me of something—I forget what it was.

The sister missionary whom the new president held up as an example was a terror to the rest of the missionaries. She was very pretty and talented, but she was ice cold inside. All of the sisters I knew dreaded the possibility of being her companion or of being in her district when she later became district leader. Those who worked with her reported horror stories of discipline and statistics. Even when she was a greenie, she felt certain about how her all-sister district should be run. She told her sister district leader that personal interviews were a waste of time,

but if they had to have them, the sisters should speak in German. Because she never opened her mail until P-day, she had a way of making those who read letters immediately feel unworthy and undisciplined. It seemed she always reached her goal of baptisms. In our mission, not baptizing was the norm, one baptism was a great blessing, and more than one, a miracle. I have since learned that she actually had only a few more conversions than average. But at the time, it seemed like she must have had twenty or more from the way the president praised her.

At zone conferences and in newsletters, the mission president frequently recounted stories of this sister's methods and successes. Yet she was one of the most un-Christlike people I had ever met. She was supposed to be our light on a hill. Though she could appear sweet, I think underneath she was driven to be "the best." And in a country where we could sometimes get people to open their doors just by telling them to in a loud voice, where authority was almost as important as punctuality, she knew how to be authoritative. Perhaps that is how she was able to get people into the water.

The president's constant praise of this "ice sister" seemed to show that statistics and rules were more important to him than people. In contrast to President Busche, this president sent several missionaries home for infractions of the rules or simply because they couldn't handle the pressure. This was the case with a sister missionary from England who was transferred to an English-speaking mission. This was her way of giving up. Though she had had a particularly rough time, we knew that she could have been persuaded to stay, having persuaded her ourselves several times. And yet, the president had let her go. I guess he just didn't know how to handle her. We knew that was true for sisters generally when we heard he had requested that sisters not be sent to his mission. He also forbade missionaries within the mission to correspond with one another. Perhaps he sensed a general uprising and was trying to divide and conquer, but he only isolated and further discouraged us.

Morale got so low among the sisters I knew that one day my companion and I could stand it no longer and left our zone to visit a fellow sister. We were actually working in a threesome, but the greenie we were with got nervous at the last minute and stayed with a member until we got back. When the two of us arrived at our friend's apartment at two o'clock that morning, we had a wonderful celebration. We spent the next day in general recovery—laughing and relaxing with seeming impunity. We went home recharged, ready to rededicate ourselves to doing the work of the Lord (having reminded ourselves that it *was* the Lord's work and not the president's).

At the next zone conference, I was basking in a renewed sense of the Spirit, glad once again to be a missionary in the company of other servants of the Lord. My personal interview came and went uneventfully. I was so touched by an elder's vocal solo that I didn't even notice that the last person to be interviewed was the nervous greenie who had been with us the day we left the zone. And then one of the A.P.s tapped me on the shoulder and motioned me toward the president's room. Puzzled, I walked in to find the other sister. Finally I realized why we were there. Our two zone leaders and the A.P.s were waiting with the president. Why, the president demanded, had we left the zone without permission? I was proud that the two of us didn't buckle under all that authority. Oh, we bawled, but we never apologized, even when the president said he was going to send us home. And I think he would have except that one of the A.P.s spoke up for us. He had worked under President Busche and was one of the A.P.s who had seen Sister Burton and me out working so late that night. Perhaps he remembered us. Surely he understood the difference between President Busche and the new president. Perhaps he even shared our frustration and disillusionment. In any case, he spoke up and said that we had been two of the best missionaries in the mission. Though the president obviously doubted the A.P. and saw no concrete evidence, he allowed us to stay.

Months later as I was leaving my mission, I had a chance to talk to my companion from the M.T.C. She was crying, not something I'd seen her do often, even in the roughest times at the M.T.C. But she was crying on her way home from her mission because the mission president had told her in their last interview not to tell anyone that she hadn't had any baptisms in his mission. Somehow his words didn't surprise me.

Because of my mission president and the contrast in my treatment as a sister missionary, the end of my mission was very different from the beginning. I have hope that attitudes toward women going on missions have changed in the last ten years. Many of the best and brightest young women are going on missions, and support and respect for sister missionaries seems to have increased. But, sadly, many attitudes have not improved. Only a few months ago, I had several long discussions with a young woman in my ward. She related many of the same experiences that I had myself a decade before.

This young woman had wanted to go on a mission since she could remember. She had prepared herself and was only waiting for her twenty-first birthday. But she received so much opposition from Church members that she was doubting her decision. Her bishop at BYU encouraged her to get married instead of serving a mission. Student

friends asked if she had really fasted and prayed about her decision. She hadn't because she had felt for years that it was the right decision. But her friends made her doubt her conviction. One returned missionary told her that the sisters in his mission weren't very good workers and only wanted to "mother" the elders. A returned missionary she dated asked her why she was going on a mission because she was really cute.

And she was really cute—and spiritual and strong enough in her testimony and desire to serve the Lord that she went on her mission in spite of opposition from within the Church.

I believe that what this sister experienced and what many women experience as sister missionaries relates directly to women in the Church generally. Culturally the Church is a male organization, and the assets that women could bring to the Church are usually ignored or limited to a narrow domestic field.

Although many of my mission experiences are universal for all missionaries, a great deal of what I learned and experienced occurred because I was a sister missionary. The contrast between my two mission presidents and the atmosphere in the mission shows the power of a mission president, not only on sisters, but on all missionaries serving under him. I am grateful I served a mission in spite of the hardships and challenges, and I recommend such service to all young members of the Church, especially the women. I was very fortunate to serve under President Busche in the beginning of my mission. And when I think back on my mission, it is usually the beginning that I remember. When we sisters were strong, and we were good, and we were loved.