



My Cousin Valerie

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

In the Postscript of my book *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya: A Biographical History of Christian Missions*, I reflect on hundreds of missionaries over the centuries who made great sacrifices to learn a new language and culture and spend most of a lifetime missing loved ones back home.

I go on to tell how I as a thirteen-year-old felt the call of God and committed myself to be an overseas missionary. But as the years passed by so did that sense of calling. Truth be told, at least half of the outgoing women missionaries featured in my church monthly magazine were single—not good odds. I desperately wanted to someday have a husband and children, thus my turn away from that “call.”

Speaking of myself in the third person, I concluded the Postscript—and the book—with these words:

Only three miles away from her childhood home another young farm girl was growing up—her cousin, Valerie Stelrecht. They attended the same schools and the same little country church. Valerie, too, felt called to foreign missions. She, too, enrolled at the St. Paul Bible College to prepare for her life's calling. And she, too, longed for marriage and family. But her sense of calling to the foreign field came first. Valerie graduated from Bible college and soon thereafter bade farewell to her family and loved ones and set out alone for Ecuador, where she continues to serve today with the Christian and Missionary Alliance. Two young women whose lives paralleled each other's in so many respects. Two young women who felt called to foreign missions. Valerie went. I stayed home.

In the thirty-five years since publication, the book still sells well, not only as a text but for leisure reading, no doubt because there are so many fascinating missionary stories—stories of great courage and dedication, sure, but also of marriage failure, mental illness, ministry quarrels and discord of every stripe.

Over the years as I have taught graduate courses and traveled as a visiting lecturer, I have been asked about such problems. But the most frequently asked question has always related to the final twist—the story of Valerie and me. Students have wanted to hug me and assure me that I should not feel guilty about my choice (which, despite my purposely vague wording, I have not).

I have, however, always had great admiration for Valerie. After serving for many years in Ecuador, she was transferred to the Dominican Republic and ministered there until her

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retirement in 2017, after nearly a half-century of service. She represented the fear I had of being on the single side of the bus when women missionaries were transported around the world for a lifetime of hard work and loneliness.

But you only have to look at a photo of Valerie to see the joy and contentment she takes with her wherever she goes. She simply shines. And that is no doubt one of the first things Terry noted as he saw her again soon after she retired, decades after they both had graduated from Bible college.

He had served as a missionary in the Philippines with his wife who had died two years earlier. How fitting it was that Valerie's long tenure as a missionary ended with a twist. She and Terry became engaged, a wedding date set for August, 2018.

Despite the inconvenience of leaving our little garden shop for a long summer weekend and making a 12-hour drive back home to Wisconsin, we knew this was an event we couldn't miss. What a delight it was as we witnessed the ceremony, Valerie absolutely glowing and crowned with tender mercies in front of a packed church. □

—Ruth Tucker