

## *Introduction*

### OUR SISTERS IN THE HARD PLACES

*W*e were sitting on our hotel room beds in Hong Kong. Our trip was almost over. Early the next morning we would be catching a flight to Tokyo and another from there to Los Angeles.

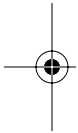
“We need to talk about our experiences,” we said to each other. “We have to get everything down on paper.”

The tape recorder had stopped working a week before while we were talking to women alongside a dusty road in Hyderabad, India. Those had been our last interviews before the all-night layover in the Mumbai (Bombay) airport on our way to China. But it didn’t much matter. We couldn’t have recorded in China anyway. We couldn’t even take real notes there for fear the authorities would confiscate them and use them to implicate the Christian women we were interviewing. Everything had to be written in a cryptic code that we ourselves could hardly decipher.

Our plan had been to get together with Cherylann, Rachel, Stacie, Gayle and Tina—the other members of our group—during the boat ride to the island of Macao, pool our recollections of who said what in China, and get it all down on paper. But the winds were blowing hard, and the water was so rough and choppy that everyone around us was seasick. We had spent the time praying with all our might that we would be able to keep it together and survive that miserable trip.

“We *must* get the stories down before we forget them,” we agreed.

But we were exhausted. By the time we arrived home the following day, we would have made eighteen flights in seventeen days. We had sat with women in three cities in India and two cities in China and on the





islands of Hong Kong, Macao and Singapore. We had eaten more unfamiliar food than we cared to recall, we had struggled to find drinkable water on three continents, and we had fought off hordes of mosquitoes, remembering that we had stopped taking antimalaria pills because they made us feel bad. Our insides were rumbling, our brains were spinning, and we were weary beyond belief. And we still had North Africa and Egypt to go.

The two of us flopped across our beds and lay in silence awhile. But our minds would not let us rest. We began to recall the people we had met and relive the experiences of the previous two-and-a-half weeks.

“Remember Wu Chein?” Michele asked.

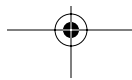
*Wu Chein was just a child during China’s Cultural Revolution, those dark years when intellectuals and people of social standing were targeted for reprogramming and families were ripped apart. Diffusion of power, it was called. Deconstruction of the old order. Traditional families were holding young people back, Chairman Mao insisted. The Communist Party was to be the real family.*

*The last time Wu Chein saw her parents, her father was kneeling, head bowed, with a sign around his neck that read: “I am a traitor.” Her mother was crying because Wu Chein’s brother had just announced he had joined the Red Guards and because ten-year-old Wu Chein, her school closed, was being taken away to work in the far-off countryside.*

*“Life was so hard,” Wu Chein said. “I worked for twelve hours a day, and there was little food. The people didn’t really want another hungry little girl there. My world was all loss and suffering.”*

*Having been raised in an atheistic society, Wu Chein had no knowledge of God. “I thought there surely must be a Creator,” she said. “But I couldn’t find one.”*

*When she was fourteen, Wu Chein’s search for a Creator led her to embrace Buddhism. But to her great disappointment, her feelings of loss and suffering remained. “My hope was gone,” she said. “I decided there was nothing left but to end my life.”*





*And so she began to watch for an opportunity.*

*There was an older woman on the farm who endured great abuse from the others. For some reason, Wu Chein confided her plans to her. The woman looked around to see who might be watching, then lowered her voice to a whisper and said, “Your problem, Wu Chein, is that you haven’t found the true Creator. May I introduce you to him?”*

*“I was attracted to Jesus Christ by hope,” Wu Chein told us, “but I was drawn to him by love. That is because I had no hope and I had never before felt love.”*

*In the years after Chairman Mao, as the Cultural Revolution waned, Wu Chein made her way back to the city. Both her parents had died, and she was never able to locate her brother. She wanted to become involved with other believers, but she saw how they suffered for Christ and she was afraid. Two years passed before she gathered her courage to approach some Christians and tell them she wanted to join with them. Today she is a leader in a registered house church of more than one hundred people—three-quarters of them women, just as in most Chinese house churches.*

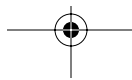
*Recalling Wu Chein’s story was wonderful. It revived us more than a night’s rest ever could. Other stories began flooding our minds.*

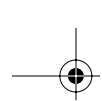
*“I’ll never forget Pastor Esther Nyanthi in India,” Kay said with a sigh.*

*Esther had graduated from a school of theology in northern India, but she declined an offer to live and work in that area. Instead she chose to work in southern India, in a village of people so desperately poor they could pay her only a handful of rice each week. Most of the men had left to find work in the city. The village was made up of those who had nowhere to go—starving women, children and old people who struggled to work the rice fields for a landlord who despised Christians.*

*“The landlord threatened the people, telling them he would have a curse put on them,” Pastor Esther said. “But it didn’t work. They believed in Jesus now, and they were no longer afraid of the landlord’s curses.”*

*In a final attempt to intimidate them, the landlord brought in a huge*





*Hindu idol and erected it in the middle of the village, right next to the small thatched church.*

*“I told them to ignore it and just go about their lives,” Pastor Esther said. “It was just a piece of wood. It could not hurt us.”*

*Before we left, Pastor Esther asked us to pray that the landlord would not burn the church down.*

Now we knelt by our beds and prayed for the people of Pastor Esther’s village.

### A BATTLE RAGES

In all the world’s hard places, it is women who suffer the most. And among those who struggle to see the kingdom of God advance and who are persecuted for the name of Jesus, women often pay a heavier price. Why must this be so? In our effort to understand, we turn to God’s Word and discover where it all started—in the beginning.

After God created the heavens and the earth, the sea and dry land, the animals and the first man, God set to work on his grand finale. God’s final creative gift to the man and to the world was a woman. She would be a strong partner, a completion for Adam and all humankind. According to the Creator, it simply was not good for man to be alone.

But something terrible happened when the man and woman sinned. Death and destruction began to work throughout every aspect of creation. Man would earn his daily bread by the sweat of his brow, and his special treasure, woman, would become the target of a great war. God warned of what was coming: “I will put enmity between you [the serpent] and the woman” (Genesis 3:15).

That war continues to this day. Eighty percent of the victims of war are women and children. So are 80 percent of refugees and displaced persons. Two million girls undergo mutilating circumcisions each year, and one quarter of them die as a result. The killing of infant girls in China and India has left entire villages without young women of marriageable age. In Indochina and Sudan, women and girls are sold into





the sexual slave trade. Because from birth girls are not valued, meat and protein are not wasted on them, and so their bodies are not able to thrive. They are not educated, so their cognitive skills remain underdeveloped. Two-thirds of the world's illiterate people are women. And most tragic of all, 80 percent of the people who are unreached with the good news of God's love in Christ are women and children.

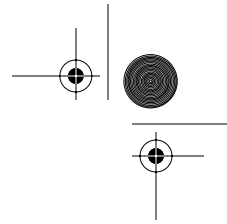
One of the greatest weapons in the arsenal of the woman's great adversary has been the prevailing views of religious teachers. Throughout the great religions of the world, there persist teachings that the woman is subhuman, a tool of Satan by which men are led astray. Jewish rabbis and Christian teachers have not been immune to such twisting of truth. Historically they too have been far too quick to devalue God's precious creation. But rather than quote them, let's look at what the Creator himself has to say.

#### THE GOOD NEWS

God's pronouncement to the serpent did not end with the enmity between him and the woman. The day would come, he said, when the woman's offspring "will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Genesis 3:15). Eve had no way of knowing that this prophecy would one day be fulfilled in Jesus Christ, God's own Son, born of a woman. And yet today Eve's daughters—women like Wu Chein and the believers at Pastor Esther Nyanthi's church—are finding hope and fulfillment in him.

For women who have been trampled down by society and the teachings of religious leaders, it is amazing to hear about a God who knows and deeply cares about them personally. Imagine how they respond when they hear what the Bible teaches about women: that they are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), that they are redeemed in Christ to be joint heirs to share in God's glory for all eternity (Romans 8:17), that the value of a woman is far above rubies and precious jewels (Proverbs 31:10), that before God there is no male or female (Galatians 3:28).





Women around the world are hearing the good news of Jesus Christ and are being drawn to God, their Creator, Redeemer and Abba Father. Today fully three-quarters of all Christians live outside the West. We have sisters and brothers in every one of the 189 countries that make up the United Nations.

We are family. It's time we get acquainted.

#### MODERN-DAY BATTLES

“Persecution? In this day and age?”

Most Westerners are shocked to learn that right now, in the twenty-first century, Christians are being punished and persecuted for simply being Christians. And when these believers dare to reach out and share the love of Christ with others, their suffering increases.

When American women recently heard some stories of their faraway sisters who struggle and suffer to serve God, we saw that they cared. They really did. And they were ready to take action.

“We want to know,” they said. “And we want you to give us stories we can use to inform others.”

“We believe in the power of prayer,” others told us. “Let us know what to pray for specifically, and we will commit ourselves to a prayer ministry.”

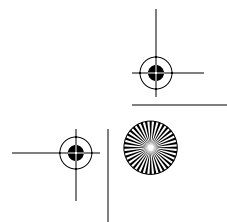
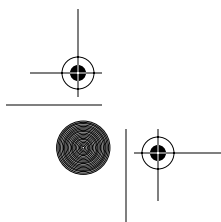
“We want to *do* something!” many women pleaded. “But we need to know where to start. Give us action points and turn us loose!”

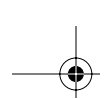
That set us to thinking. In many ways we too felt clueless and helpless. We needed opportunities to sit down with women who were living in the trenches and listen to what they had to say. Not advise. Not teach or instruct. Just listen.

So we made some contacts through Sisters In Service<sup>1</sup> and Partners

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<sup>1</sup>The focus of Sisters In Service (SIS) is extending the gospel to women and children in the least-reached places of the earth, through partnering relationships with local Christian leaders in Africa, China, India, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. SIS works to inform and mobilize those who have abundant resources to invest in local efforts that creatively and effectively extend God's love.





International.<sup>2</sup> We knew these organizations could put us in touch with women in the hardest places in the world. We rounded up a few hardy souls who were willing to join us, we packed our bags, and we went. Besides the locations in India, China and the nearby islands, the two of us took another trip—this time accompanied by Kay’s husband and daughter, Dan Kline and Lisa Ringnalda—to Senegal, Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt. There were other countries from which we gathered stories in various ways. In all cases we have changed names and identifying details to protect the women and their ministries. But the stories recorded are the true stories of our sisters who live and serve in some of the most inhospitable places on earth for Christians.

In India, on our very first stop, when we told a group of women that we had come to listen to their stories, one stared at us and then commented, “When North Americans come here, they are always up on the stage telling us things. They only want to teach us. Are you really here to listen to us?”

We really were.

We had left on the first leg of our trip just months after the infamous September 11 terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York. That we Americans had had a taste of life under the pain and threat of terrorism on our own soil helped us feel even more connected to people for whom this was a way of life. Though our lives remained infinitely more secure than theirs, we were able to relate to hostility and the fear of uncertainty in a way we could not have just a few months earlier.

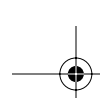
And it helped us to be more teachable.

“You in America really must study the teachings of Jesus about loving your enemies and doing good to those who want to hurt you,” our sisters in China admonished us.

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<sup>2</sup>Partners International “works to create and grow communities of Christian witness in partnership with God’s people in the least Christian regions of the world.” Founded in 1943 to assist Chinese evangelists, Partners International now works with eighty-five indigenous ministries in fifty-six countries to grow and strengthen the church through holistic witness in acts of service and proclamation. (Statement comes from Partners International’s website: <[www.partnersintl.org](http://www.partnersintl.org)>.)





The more we saw and the more stories we heard, the more we determined to stand up for our sisters in the hard places.

When we were in India, we invited a shy woman from the Dalit (Untouchable) caste to tell us her story. She slowly lifted her eyes until she was looking us full in the face and stared at us in wonder. With tears running down her cheeks, she said, “No one has ever wanted to hear anything I had to say. And you came all the way from America to hear my story?”

Yes. For there is great power in a story. A story has the ability to draw us in, then grip our heart and turn us until we are changed forever. Especially when it is a story that pours from the depths of another’s soul.

#### A TALE OF TWO WOMEN

*“I am the mother of three daughters and no sons,” Najma told us. “Cursed, that’s what everyone called me. My husband is a Hindu, and he wanted me to abandon the second girl, but I would not. When the third girl came, he insisted that I get rid of her, but I refused. I am a Christian and I could not let my girls go, no matter how much my husband and his family beat me.”*

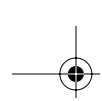
*Girls brought the family no status, they brought in no money, and for a family as destitute as Najma’s, the cost of the dowry required to marry a daughter off would be staggering.*

*The family began saving toward the first daughter’s dowry the day she was born. But there was no money to put away for the second or third daughters.*

*When Najma’s first daughter came of marrying age, they used all their savings to get her a husband. “He wasn’t much of a husband,” she said. “He was a drunkard and he didn’t work much—but we got her a husband.”*

*When Najma’s second daughter came of marrying age, there was no money left. So Najma and her husband sold their house and all their belongings to pay a dowry. “Her husband was not as good as the first daugh-*





ter's," Najma told us. "He was a drinker too, and he was also old and lame. He couldn't work at all. But at least she had a husband so she could work. Here a woman has to have a husband. Otherwise she has no one to take care of her, and she can only be a prostitute."

Then Najma fell silent.

"What about the third daughter?" we asked.

In a voice so soft we could hardly hear, she said, "When my third daughter came of marrying age, we had no money and nothing left to sell. So my daughter threw herself into a fire and died. She had to do it. There was no other way."

We sat in stunned silence.

There had to be another way! Najma was a believer in Jesus Christ. How could she have valued her daughters' lives enough to resist tradition despite all the punishment and abuse her husband's family heaped upon her, then resign herself to her youngest's suicide?

For the next several days, we listened to many stories from many Indian women. Most of them, like Najma, had come out of Hinduism, and almost all were poor and from the untouchable Dalit caste. Their stories were touching and inspiring and sometimes painful to hear. Amid them all, we could not get Najma's story out of our minds.

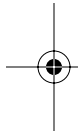
Then came Ivy.

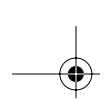
"I am the mother of three daughters and no sons," Ivy began. "My family said I should not keep all those girls, but I said, 'I will not abandon my daughters. They are a gift from God. Even if you beat me, I still will not let them go.'"

Like Najma, Ivy saved enough for her first daughter's dowry. And like Najma, she had to sell everything she owned to afford a husband for her second daughter. But her situation was even worse: her Hindu husband deserted her and the youngest daughter and left them to fend for themselves.

We braced ourselves for the story's ending.

"And my third daughter was coming to marrying age, so I could do only





*one thing—I could only trust God. I prayed and she prayed. We prayed together. I told my daughter not to fear, that the Lord God of heaven would hear our prayers. Every morning when we awoke and every night when we lay down, we would pray Psalm 61: ‘Hear my cry, O God; attend unto my prayer. From the ends of the earth will I cry unto thee, when my heart is overwhelmed; lead me to the rock that is higher than I. For thou hast been a shelter for me, and a strong tower from the enemy. . . .’*

*“And what happened?”*

*“I got a job at the Bible Faith Mission,” she said. “I earned money for my daughter’s dowry.”*

*The third daughter alone, of the three, is married to a Christian man. Today the young couple is preparing for the ministry.*

#### ONE BODY

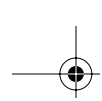
We North Americans find it hard to understand the challenges of balancing cultural constraints with the value of human life and personal rights that we take for granted. Any persecution we have suffered for our faith is not even close to what many of our sisters have undergone. Can we truly empathize with Ivy? Or Najma? Or Wu Chein? Or our sisters in Algeria or Palestine or Iraq or Nigeria or Sudan or Egypt?

We can, because we are all one body. Since the same nerves run through all of us, if one of us suffers, we all suffer. According to 1 Corinthians 12:23-26, that’s how it is. If we are not suffering with our sisters and brothers, then something is wrong. The body is not functioning the way it should be.

Imagine our surprise when we found that our sisters in hard places identified with *us*. When we told Wu Chein we admired her for all she was willing to risk in order to live for Jesus Christ, she smiled and replied, “To live as true Christians, to be like the Master, is not easy anywhere. I am praying for you too.”

Whatever your background or location, come meet some of your sisters from the hard places around the globe.





*Introduction*

If you are part of a group that meets regularly—a Bible study or small group—consider going through the book together. Group members might read the stories ahead of time, then come together prepared for prayer and discussion. You might then decide to take one or more of the suggested action steps, either individually or together.

We are confident that you will be encouraged and inspired by the stories of these women, just as we have been. It is our prayer that you will also be called to action.

We can make a difference together. With our faraway sisters, we can reach around the world and empower each other in Jesus' name.

