



# Women in International Ministry: Half a Life in Turkey

By Ana Gobledale

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*MY LIFE has unfolded differently than I expected. In 1985, when Tod and I settled in Zululand, South Africa, with our newborn daughter, Thandiwe, I thought we would stay forever. But the world moves in a rhythm of its own, and the tendrils of apartheid law cut our stay short after 6 years. When we arrived in Zimbabwe in 1995, this time with daughter and son in tow, once again I felt I had arrived home and settled in for the long haul. But the violent establishment of Robert Mugabe's dictatorship in 2000 sent us fleeing our beloved home less than six years later.*

*While I have accepted these shorter-than-planned assignments as part of my life's journey, it has meant I will never serve in one place for 20 or 30 years. I admire those who have been able to stay put, to put down deep roots, to see a new generation rise in that place. Alison Stendahl headed to Turkey in 1980 to serve Global Ministries as a math teacher at Uskudar American Academy in Istanbul, and she still calls it home.*

*May Alison's reflections, interwoven with verses from her favourite Bible passage, Romans 8 24-38, inspire you. May you, like Alison, faithfully be Christ's hand and feet in the place you call home*

*Ana*

## GROWING UP WITH AN EYE ON JUSTICE

*...neither death, nor life, ...nor things present, nor things to come, ...nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

—Romans 8:38

Alison was confirmed at Mt. Olivet Lutheran Church in Minnesota where she grew up. She explains, "The church youth group and summer church camp were refuges for me as I dealt with a difficult home situation. I needed somewhere to feel safe and accepted. Church provided this for me." In her youth,

Alison, "struggled with Jesus as a historical figure and what his journey did for me. I looked at those around me for clues of what it meant by the lives they lived."

Being a girl of the 1960's keen on mathematics when girls weren't supposed to be good at math, Alison became sensitized to social justice issues, specifically gender inequality. At Northwestern University in the late 1960's, Alison became involved in "the anti-war movement, women's rights, racial equality and environmental concerns." She writes, "The Vietnam War was the ultimate reality that led me to a growing commitment to peace and justice. To this day I have never lost that vision."

During college Alison had become "discouraged with the church and wanted something that fed my soul." After graduation she headed west to Washington State to teach math and became active in Transcendental Meditation (TM), which, she writes, "brought my yearning spirit back to church. But I needed a church with a social conscience and a welcoming environment." She joined the UCC and ended up at University Congregational UCC in Seattle which remains "a special church in my heart."

## OPEN TO GOD'S CALL

*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*

—Romans 8:28

For several years Alison believed God wanted her to venture overseas. She writes, "I had applied to the Peace Corps a few times but always stopped the process thinking I was not ready. Then several aspects of my life converged. Doors closed, attachments were severed. I was unemployed." She had an experience on a church retreat that was "life changing, "God told me I was ready to move on." She applied for teaching positions including one with the UCC in Turkey. She continues, "I went off to Disneyland with friends. When I returned I found two acceptances. I was contacted personally by the recruiter of the American Board

Schools in Turkey and within four weeks I was in Istanbul for orientation." (\*The American Board Schools were founded by our Congregational predecessors in the mid 1800's.)

#### REWARDS

*For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*

—Romans 8:24-25

Alison enjoys working with youth. "Their fresh viewpoints and perspectives cause me to grow." She also appreciates working in the interfaith setting of Uskudar American Academy where the faculty and student body includes Christians and Jews but is primarily Muslim. "I have grown to appreciate the vastness of God and the power of prayer with a wider community of believers—Christian, Muslim or Jewish. I truly believe that the hope spoken of in Romans 8 transcends our small narrow definitions of God. God is so much more if we could only allow God to be God! I love my colleagues and the community we are working hard to create at Uskudar. The mutual support and caring makes one believe that something good can be created when a group of people is dedicated to making it happen."



Alison Stendahl: Serving Global Ministries as Academic Dean and math teacher at Uskudar American Academy, Istanbul, Turkey.

#### LESSONS FROM THE WOMEN OF TURKEY

*Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.*

—Romans 8:26

There is so much to learn from other cultures and other peoples. Alison shares her lessons on hospitality. She writes, "I have often reflected on the implications of the Martha and Mary dilemmas in the gospel story. I definitely aligned myself with Mary. I would always want to be in the thick of the discussion or just in the room to learn and experience. Service and hospitality, the Martha side of the story, are things I have learned more about from Middle Eastern women. These women are incredible in the extent they go to make their guests comfortable and happy, starting days in advance preparing food and making arrangements. How does one serve and not resent the effort or time taken from being with guests? Women know what it means to be a caregiver and I am now convinced that we are lucky in being so blessed. Contributing to an environment, seeing to the needs of those around us, anticipating problems and implementing solutions are the gel that holds life together. For a woman to be able to maintain her own physical, emotional and spiritual health, she must look closer at her relationship with God. She must find sustenance in the Spirit and from others around her. I believe we need to integrate our roles as Martha and Mary. Hospitality is something I am learning more about." The women of Turkey are her teachers.

#### CHALLENGES: SEEING GLIMPSSES OF GOD'S GRACE

*"Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?"*

—Romans 8:35

Alison writes, "I have experienced a great deal of brokenness in life. I have seen too many people die too young. I have seen mistrust and estrangement when I had thought hope would erupt. I have worked with others to create something we thought remarkable only to have it torn apart or pushed aside. I cringe when I hear stories of people killing





Alison Stendahl and her school colleagues.

### Prayer Points

1. Alison Stendahl and the staff and students at Uskudar American Academy in Istanbul, Turkey
2. Women worldwide who provide hospitality to family, community and strangers
3. All the Global Ministries missionaries supported by Our Church's Wider Mission offerings

### Action Opportunities

1. Write to Alison or another Global Ministries missionary encouraging them in their work and mission.
2. Learn more about Turkey. Find it on a map. Familiarize yourself with some of the major issues there today related to social justice for women, children and others.
3. Make a bulletin board to teach others in your congregation about the history of the United Church of Christ mission in Turkey.

in the name of religion or misdirected stereotypic animosity. So to see fleeting moments of God's grace and tangible incarnations of Christ's promised hope is precious. I catch glimpses of hope in a group of Kurdish and Turkish mothers of sons who have died in conflict with one another, at a conference in Istanbul trying to reach some understanding of the roots of ethnic unrest, or with the president of Turkey attending a national football game in Armenia. When a Jewish friend comforted me, when a Muslim friend prayed with me, God was present. I feel strongly that God wants me here [in Turkey] no matter the challenges and fears.

### SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

*And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.*

—Romans 8:27

Alison is strengthened by times of silence when she reflects, meditates and prays. She participates in a women's Bible Study Group. Her day includes an overlay of traditions, the call to prayer arising from nearby mosques and the tolling of bells at

Christian churches, both bringing her mind toward God. She writes, "I appreciate their interruption in my daily routines." Alison currently attends an Anglican Church in Istanbul where she enjoys the sung liturgy. "I find the words of the Nicene Creed drifting through my thoughts often during the week."

**BE THOU MY VISION**

"God is present in my life and work daily in ways that I sometimes have no idea of until weeks or months afterwards. When I felt called to pick up my life and move to Turkey, I knew that I was to serve in a mission of presence. I have lived half my life in a country that is predominantly Muslim and I am the better for it. I have learned so much about human nature, about being part of community, about living as a minority, about seeing my religion and my country from the eyes of the Middle East. I have learned about hospitality from the stranger and the importance of the moment. This indeed is God's presence.

"When we are focused on God as our vision and our light, we are guided and sustained."

*Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,  
still be my vision, O Ruler of all.*

— verse 4 of Alison's favourite hymn, #451  
*The New Century Hymnal*

Ana Gobledale has served our church through Global Ministries in South Africa, Zimbabwe, the USA and Australia. She recently served as Interim Co-Pastor, with her husband, Tod, at Kirkland Congregational Church UCC in Washington. They are in transition to parish ministry in the United Reformed Church in Great Britain.



I am a Stillspeaking Voice                      God is still speaking,

