

# Women in International Mission

## HOLY ENCOUNTERS

An interview with Lydia Johnson, edited by Ana Gobledale

*If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
if I settle on the farthest side of the sea,  
even there your hand will guide me,  
your right hand will hold me fast.*  
—Psalm 139:9-10

**W**here do we encounter the Holy? In the brilliance of a sunrise? In the embrace of a loved one? In the eloquent words of an ancient text? In the pulse of music? In the hush of a forest? In the pounding of the sea? In the face of a stranger? For many international missionaries, short and long-term, the Holy is encountered in the Other, the initially mysterious stranger made known through sharing life and breaking bread together.

Many people think those of us who leave the comforts and familiarities of our North American families and homes have made a great sacrifice. But, truth be told, the sacrifice more often comes upon our return to North America, when we leave the unique and special relationships we have forged in our new home and with our new “family.” As international ambassadors of the church, we have been commissioned to extend God’s radical embrace across the lines of race, ethnicity, culture and language. In return we receive the welcoming hospitality of our international partners. The resulting Holy Encounters

encourage and empower both the missionary and the Nationals who learn to walk together in the service of God and God’s people.

As I prepare to return to North America following my 4 ½ year appointment in Australia with Global Ministries, I find myself reflecting on my Holy Encounters during this time. While the presence of Christ has been felt less dramatically than during my years in southern Africa, the Holy has indeed been weaving in and through my relationships here – with ministry students, colleagues, friends, and strangers.

Lydia Johnson has served Global Ministries in Jamaica, South Africa, Fiji and currently in New Zealand. Her experiences, too, demonstrate the persistent weaving of the Holy in and through life, from her childhood in North Carolina to her current ministry with Pacific Islander women. The words of her favourite psalm undergird her faith in this persistence of the Holy in her life: “If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the farthest side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.” (Psalm 139:9-10). As you meet Lydia through this interview, I invite you to celebrate her life in mission and her encounters with the Holy that sustain and nurture her faith and witness.

### LYDIA...AN INTRODUCTION

Lydia traces her Christian roots back to her sixth-great-grandfather, John Witherspoon, considered one of the ‘fathers’ of American Presbyterianism, who came to America from Scotland and was the only minister to sign the Declaration of Independence. In the family tradition, Lydia’s father and brother are both Presbyterian ministers. Lydia continues this legacy, but, she explains, “I migrated to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) as an adult, where I was ordained in 1980, and consider myself a ‘free church radical in the Reformed tradition!’” She continues to “identify very strongly with [her] Appalachian mountain culture, including its vibrant music and dance forms and strong, resilient, independent streak.”



From her parents, Lydia learned “that ones faith can lead one anywhere, and that we should never be surprised by what God may call us to do or where God may lead us. Being a minister’s family, we often hosted missionaries and people from other countries who accompanied them on their travels, and they inspired my passion for being a missionary at a very early age. At age five I told my parents that I was ‘going to live in Africa and take care of sick babes’ - no doubt responding to something I had heard from a visiting missionary. I also recall a woman from India staying in our home and being awestruck when she combed out her very long hair (hence my vow not to cut my hair, which I’m still holding to at 59!).

While a music student at St. Andrews College, Lydia experienced a life-transforming Holy Encounter while on a “cultural immersion experience.” She writes, “My first cross-cultural experience, with the Mesquite Indian people in the jungles of Nicaragua, showed me how enriching such experiences could be. I have never presumed that I was ‘saving’ anyone, I have only prayed that I might stand in solidarity with others with an open heart. And how enriching that effort has been!”

Lydia studied at Harvard Divinity School and apprenticed with the sacred dancer Anne Hebert Smith at Yale Divinity School. Lydia has enabled others to encounter the Holy through dance and drama by creating two dance-drama companies: one at a Methodist boarding school for troubled teenage girls in New Mexico, which she considers “a wonderful cross-cultural experience.” and the other for low-income children, teenagers and adults while co-directing an ecumenical lay religious education center in North Carolina.

## FROM NICARAGUA TO NEW ZEALAND – LYDIA’S CALLING

**Ana:** What happened, Lydia, to make you consider international mission?

**Lydia:** *While living in the Mesquite Indian village in Nicaragua, with no electricity or running water, I learned many valuable lessons. I became aware of how sinfully rich most Americans were, in comparison to how most of the world’s people live; how little I needed materially in order to be a whole person; what courage and dignity these poor people exuded; and the complicity of my own country in injustices perpetrated on powerless people around the world.. I began to make*

*connections between social structures, government polices and the suffering of ordinary people, and came away ashamed to be an American. That experience fueled my desire to live amongst, learn from, and share with people of other cultures, wanting to stand alongside those who suffer most – ‘the least of these.’*

**Ana:** What is your “mission work” in New Zealand?

**Lydia:** *After teaching at the Pacific Theological College in Fiji and after my divorce, I moved to New Zealand in 2000 and taught in the theology department at the University of Otago. I had a pastoral care role with the many Pacific Islander students, and became involved with a group of theologically trained Pacific Islander women wanting to form an association to write and publish – ‘make their voices heard’ – in the context of their patriarchal societies. In 2006 the Presbyterian School of Ministry in Dunedin offered this new association, Manahine Pasefika (the Association of Oceanian Women Theologians), office space, in exchange for my teaching part-time. I serve as the Editor and acting Administrator, until funds are found to support a Pacific Islander woman. Manahine Pasefika will soon publish its first book, *Women and Ministry in Melanesia: A Kanak Perspective*, by Tamara Wete of New Caledonia – in both English and French! We are working on our first Study Guide for church women’s groups all over the Pacific, which will be published in several local languages.*

**Ana:** What is the most rewarding part of your work?

**Lydia:** *Assisting my Pacific Islander sisters in their empowerment, in finding their own voice and speaking out loudly and clearly and without fear; helping them to find solidarity and solace by connecting and networking across cultural, language and church differences; and being an editor for very creative, capable women who are all trying to write in English, which is not their mother tongue. When one woman said to me, after I edited something she wrote, “I sent you a rough diamond and you polished it and made it shine,” that made me so happy!*

**Ana:** What is the most challenging aspect of your work?

**Lydia:** *Trying to encourage the women in Manahine to be more confident. They have achieved theological degrees yet most of their churches still refuse to ordain*

women, so these women are under-utilized or not utilized at all by their churches. They have grown up in cultures of silence (where women are concerned), and at times it is difficult for them to 'speak truth to power' or to believe in their own gifts. Being an encourager in this kind of cultural context is hugely challenging and I am at times discouraged myself.

**Ana:** What spiritual disciplines strengthen you in your work and daily life?

**Lydia:** *I simply could not survive without an active life of prayer. The older I get, the more it seems that my whole life is becoming a prayer. I seem to turn to prayer at any time of day or night, but certainly I couldn't keep going if I didn't begin and end each day in communion with God.*

### AN ENCOUNTER OF THE HOLY

**Ana:** Share a story from your current work or life situation to share a time when you met Christ/God face-to-face – a story of a Holy Encounter:

**Lydia:** *I believe I meet God face to face every day, but the birth of Manahine stands out. I traveled to Fiji to meet with Joan Filemoni-Tofaeono a Samoan woman and former student of mine, who for some time had had a dream of a network of Pacific Island women-doing-theology. Joan said, "I feel the time has come for us to go ahead and start something." We agreed our network name must include the word 'mana' (a common word in most Polynesian languages for 'sacred power') because we are going to celebrate the sacred power, 'mana', in women and are going to enable "mana" to spread by empowering women at the grassroots. Then, wanting to include a common Pacific Islands word for 'women' in the new name, we realized that the word for 'woman' in many island languages has the root 'b'ine' or 'i'ne' (as in Vabine, Wabine, Fabine). This is also the word for 'womb' and often for 'earth'. So we said together, "Let's call ourselves Manahine!" From there Manahine has grown like a tropical flower.... Sounds like a miracle to me!*

Holy Encounters persist in Lydia's life, as they do in each of our lives. The words of Lydia's favourite hymn, "the 'ole-time' Appalachian mountain hymn" Bright Morning Stars are Risin', reiterate the constant persistence of God upon our lives,

*So how can I be lonely? My Lord is ever near me.*

*His [sic] wondrous love surrounds me,*

*Day is a-breakin' in my soul.*



*Ana Gobledeale has served our church through Global Ministries in South Africa, Zimbabwe, the USA and now Australia where she and her husband, Tod, are chaplains and lecturers at Churches of Christ Theological College.*

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How have you experienced the persistence of the Holy in your life?
2. Where and when do you most strongly sense an encounter with the Holy, with God?
3. To whom have you been or are you a voice of encouragement and empowerment?
4. How have you been challenged or discouraged by traditions that limit the role of women? Or another group of the population?
5. What freedoms, as a woman, do you take for granted in your church, community and nation?

### PRAYER REQUESTS

Lydia Johnson, her family, her faith and her work.

Women serving as missionaries with Global Ministries – especially those who are single or divorced.

Female theologians in the Pacific writing and publishing *Manahine Pasefika*.

The islands of the Pacific effected by rising ocean levels.

**FURTHER READING** by members of Manahine:

*Reweaving the Relational Mat: A Christian Response to Violence Against Women from Oceania*, by Joan A. Filemoni-Tofaeono and Lydia Johnson (Equinox Press, London). A theological reflection about the churches' complicity in the problem of violence against women, focusing mainly on Oceania (the South Pacific), but with implications for churches in other parts of the world.