

March 2022 – Being a ministry of presence provides unique challenges for mission workers

One of the hallmarks of being a mission co-worker is that while there is a “job description,” the larger part of our service is a ministry of presence. We are called to accompany God’s children in the world. Some of us are ministers, professors, teachers, advocates. Others host delegations and work in agriculture. All of us interpret the context of the culture where we serve.

But we are called to be with our partners. To be present.

So, what does a ministry of presence look like when we are physically apart? I spoke with several colleagues, and the answer is: It’s difficult.

The Rev. Jessica Derise spent the first 18 months of her call as a mission co-worker serving a church in Russia figuring that out. Her first day in this new work was March 9, 2020. Two weeks later, the pandemic shut much of the world down. Suddenly, any expectation of her service evaporated.

“I thought my new call is going to be in a foreign land,” Derise said. “I’m going to be meeting with people, learning about them and then, right off the bat, it’s so different.”

Like so many of us have and some of us continue to worship online, Derise found her footing in that role. And she met with members of the congregation virtually. It was less than fulfilling, she said, especially in building relationships.

“Primarily, it’s a struggle because of security issues within Russia,” she said. “People just don’t want to be that forthcoming electronically for very, very real reasons.”

Jhanderys Dotel-Vellenga and Ian Vellenga faced a similar challenge, living in North Carolina with his parents, raising their daughter, Marcella, who was born in September 2020. With their move to Nicaragua where they would accompany members of their partner CEPAD and host visitors postponed, they relied on creativity and technology to connect.

“If we were down there, we would be able to travel,” Dotel-Vellenga said. “We would be asking, what is it that we can do to help you?”

Instead, because delegations from the U.S. aren’t visiting partners, that’s not the case. Leaders of CEPAD take GoPro cameras out to the field where they work with single mothers and offer development projects. Jhan and Ian create videos to share and have helped CEPAD to make a YouTube channel to tell their stories.

The Rev. Betsey Moe and her husband, Eric, and children also had plans thwarted when the pandemic prohibited them from moving to Guatemala where she would partner with CEDEPCA hosting delegations. Having finally arrived to settle in Guatemala in early January, the Moes still are relying on technology to do what they feel called to do: host delegations.

Because much of the country still is closed, the community the Moes expected to find still is limited. They have worked with partners to offer webinars and travelogue video projects to tell the stories, but the community they’ve yearned to be part of still is distant.

Derise finally was able to serve in Moscow with partner Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy by the end of last summer, but the military aggression from Russia against Ukraine that started in February upended all of that. In late February, she evacuated to the U.S. She continues her ministry through check-ins and conversations online.

“Just knowing that there are prayers and energy flowing back and forth seems to help all of us in this process. And just knowing that we’re there, supporting one another, in prayer and through faith can mean the world when people can’t even process their emotions right now,” she said.



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March 15, 2022