

JULIA CORBETT

Julia's Story

Julia Corbett is Calvary's Children, Youth & Family Coordinator. She comes to Calvary from a unique background. Here is her story.

I was raised in a small town in Northwestern Russia, 70 miles from the Finnish boarder. My childhood was that of a typical Soviet child. I stood in long lines with my family in order to exchange our ration cards for food. We almost never saw fruit and rarely had meat on the table. My classroom at the local daycare was adorned with a large portrait of "grandpa Lenin," decorated with red ribbons and lush green house plants. When I started elementary school, I was expected to recite poems and sing songs about Lenin and the wonderful life I now have, thanks to his work. God was never talked about in my family, as both of my parents, and especially my father, were active members of the communist party.

In 1991 everything changed. The borders were opened, and I saw the first foreigners coming to our town. A lot of them were Finnish Lutheran missionaries, who came to bring the Gospel to a people deprived of the good news for 70 years.

My Orthodox grandmother was the one who, upon hearing about the meetings that the missionaries held in our local community center, brought me to a baptism there. Soon after that, I started attending a Sunday school at a newly formed Lutheran congregation in town.

By 14 years old, I became one of the Sunday school teachers, and at age 16, I was the Sunday school superintendent and the youth group leader at my church. Around this time, the Finnish special conference in the ELCA and the Division for Global Mission invited me to come and study youth ministry in the US.

In 2003, upon my graduation from Trinity Lutheran College with a Bachelor's degree in Youth and Family Ministry, I and my husband Jason returned to Russia. In a diocese of 15 small congregations, we were responsible for coordinating youth and children's ministry. Our work included training volunteer and paid workers in congregations, organizing camps, retreats, and special events for youth and children, as well as providing con-



gregations with curriculum for their ministry. In addition to that, we were launching a college student ministry in the capital city of the diocese, which we did from our own apartment, and conducting weekly meetings for teenagers in two neighboring congregations.

Many people have asked me and my husband, "How were you able to do all this?" They wonder how Jason ever dared to make such a leap of faith and go to Russia with me in the first place. The ministry that God called Jason and I to do in Russia was incredibly challenging and, at the same time, greatly rewarding. There is still great need for missionaries in Russia and many places all over the world, and God continues to call people to this awesome ministry.

However, just as much, God calls each one of us to minister to our neighbor wherever we are: to our spouse or child, to a fellow-parishioner or to our pastor, to a new emigrant or a homeless person on the street. And this ministry, just like the work in the mission field, may present its own challenges.

Wherever we are and whatever we do, we are called to love our neighbors and to serve them. The Bible uses various metaphors to represent this service: it's bringing generous fruit as a branch on a vine, it's washing others' feet, it's being a blessing...

However, there is one metaphor that I felt the closest to, when we were doing our ministry in Russia. I felt that my ministry was that of a vessel that brings God's living water to a thirsty world.

I saw thirst everywhere... People we encountered every day were thirsty for unconditional love. Living in the harsh reality of Russian culture, where criticism

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is rarely held back and where people pride themselves in “saying what they think,” everyone from a little orphan child to an elderly church worker yearned for a sincere word of affirmation. Russia has a history of attributing little worth to human lives. As a result, we worked with scores of people who didn’t see themselves as very valuable... Every day we found ourselves bringing God’s bountiful love to people, who were desperately thirsty for that love.

From elementary school kids to elderly, most people we worked with were plagued with overall skepticism. People couldn’t see things improving any time soon, they didn’t see any hope for their lives. By sharing God’s interest in their lives and by modeling how things could be done differently, we brought hope to those who were desperate for hope.

Especially evident in the college students we were working with was an enormous thirst for a relationship with the living God. We saw people searching for any kind of spirituality out there, for a way to anchor their lives in something bigger than themselves. Lost and confused after 70 years of atheistic propaganda, people tried to find their own way to spirituality. Some turned to horoscopes or feng shui. Others, completely ignorant about religions, saw Islamist suicide bombers on the news and decided for themselves that all religion is dangerous blind fanaticism. Many used nominal Orthodoxy as a “patch” for the real need for God in their lives. Hanging the right icon in the right corner of their apartment somehow helped them ignore their thirst for the true God.

However, as you all clearly see, this side of the ocean is no less thirsty than the Russians. People still thirst for unconditional love. They seek true joy and satisfaction in their lives. Many are struggling in deep-seated loneliness and depression, thirsty for true fellowship that we, as the Body of Christ, are called to provide. People want peace in their lives. They thirst for meaning, for clarity and freedom from confusion.

The world is thirsty, and it is only true fellowship with the living God that can satisfy their thirst. So we are called to be the vessels, who bring the living water to those, who thirst: to bring hope, to bring love, to bring GOD!

But there is one most important thing in this whole process... and that is what made this metaphor so real to me, when I was working in Russia. As I was seeking to love my neighbor and to meet everyone’s need, I realized that I ceased to stay connected to God myself! All the love that I was trying to share with people was like trying to squeeze water out of an almost dry towel. I kept trying to bring water to others, but I myself stayed thirsty!

A moment came, when I allowed myself to be so overcome with others’ needs, that all I prayed about were other people. My prayers ceased to be a love conversation between me and my loving Father. It ceased to be a time when I brought to the Lord my life and my true self, with all my faults and needs, a time when I could truly “drink” from God’s source of eternal life. My prayers became a part of my work for God, my service to my thirsty neighbor.

John 7:37-38 states: *On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice: “If anyone is thirsty, come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.”*

“Come to me and drink! And then I will give you enough! Enough love, and peace, and joy for you and those you encounter on the way. Don’t try to do it yourself. Quit trying to squeeze water out of a dry towel. Stay close to me, and I will supply you with the strength you need. If you let me, I will fill the vessel of your soul so full, that it overflows into the lives of others!

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It was tough for me to accept this lesson, because it meant that I actually had to give up my self-reliance, slow down, and draw near to God. I had to make God and my relationship with Him a higher priority than my ministry.

A lot of us are hard-working people, and we take God’s commandment to love our neighbor seriously. We have great intentions, we try hard. But for some reason, often it feels like hitting your head on a brick wall: painful and useless. Or at other times we really feel that WE are making progress, WE are accomplishing something... until we crash.

“If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink!” It’s still a challenge for me to this day. And God keeps reminding me time to time that the only way that I’ll ever be able to truly love my neighbor is only when I am filled with His love. Filled to the brim. Filled and overflowing...

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