

Top Salvation Army Leader: What to Do When You Encounter a Bend in the Road

Jolene Hodder has spent most of her adult life ministering to those on the edges of society, and much of that work has been in Africa. After one long time of service on the continent, she and husband Kenneth thought they had earned a well-deserved break. But she encountered what she calls a “bend in the road” when God called them back to the continent a second time.

That journey of obedience has now been told in her new book, *A Bend in the Road*, and it’s a virtual roadmap for anyone experiencing an unexpected change in their life. I had the opportunity to talk with Jolene about that journey and what she learned as a result:

Phil Cooke: Tell me a little about what you and your husband Kenneth are doing right now for the Salvation Army.

Jolene Hodder: Since our return from Kenya in January, my husband and I have assumed responsibility for leading The Salvation Army’s spiritual and social work throughout the western United States and the South Pacific. What we do in every location depends upon what each community needs. But our mission is always the same: “To proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and meet human needs in His name without discrimination.”

Phil Cooke: You arrived in your current position via Kenya. Tell me about your experience there.

Jolene Hodder: My husband and I were responsible for all the Army’s work in Kenya West. We oversaw 813 pre-primary and primary schools, 77 secondary schools and 33 social

institutions, as well as 508 corps (churches). This does not include over 900 other ministry fellowships. My passion was, and still is, to see all women grow into their greatest potential in Christ. I experience great joy when I see women thrive in their homes, family life, in their communities and in their areas of giftedness.

Phil Cooke: You had spent time in Africa before. What were your feelings about going back a second time?

Jolene Hodder: While I loved my home and ministry in Kenya in my first assignment, being so far away from family was extremely difficult. As my parents grew older, and my daughter moved away from Kenya to attend college, I wanted desperately to be in the same country, if not closer. Not only did I miss many family celebrations in my first missionary assignment, I also missed being with family during major health issues. So, going back to Kenya was definitely a step of faith. However, God is faithful, and He blessed me during my assignment more than I could have ever imagined. I am so thankful I took the path He marked out for me, and I would encourage others that when God calls you to an unexpected place, He doesn't leave you hanging. He has a plan, and no matter how unusual or unplanned it may appear, God always has a purpose for your life.

Phil Cooke: When did you realize you needed to start recording the journey into a book?

Jolene Hodder: When we were sent to Nairobi for our first assignment, I promised our parents I would write weekly. We also promised each other that we would never keep anything such as health and safety issues from one another. Not wanting to worry our parents but be true to my word, I attempted to write our experiences, always adding a positive twist. Before long, I saw those positive twists as blessings from God. While I was writing for my parents' benefit, the writings became my way of seeing God reveal himself through the challenges.

Before long, I began receiving messages from all over the world asking me to put the letters into a book. Apparently, my family had been forwarding the letters to their friends, and their friends forwarded them on as well. Anyway, since I hadn't kept the letters, I asked people to send me what they had. My first book, *Walking in White*, is a collection of those letters. When we returned to Kenya for the second assignment, people asked me to write letters, but it was simply easier to put together a blog. After our return to the United States, the publisher asked to print these entries into a book, *Around the Bend*.

Phil Cooke: Today, “missions” doesn’t seem to capture the heart of American Christians like it once did. Things have changed so much that it almost seems like America itself needs to become a mission field. Why do missionaries still matter today?

Jolene Hodder: First, just as the world is now more technologically connected than it has been in the past, so the church can and should function with a far higher degree of interdependence. Missionaries are one way of ensuring that this takes place. Second, whenever someone called to ministry has the opportunity to serve in another culture or another part of the world, he or she will always return home with a far broader and deeper understanding, not only of a different place on the globe, but of the kingdom of God itself. In our case, for example, my husband and I learned far more from our Kenyan brothers and sisters about what it means for the church to function as a community than we ever had living in the United States. We’ve brought that experience back with us to our current roles, and I think we’re more effective as a result. Third, and perhaps most important, whenever we send out missionaries, whether it’s to Africa, Asia, Europe or even to North America, we say something about our confidence in the future that God’s Word promises—one in which “every knee will bow and every tongue confess” (see Phil. 2:10-11) that Christ

is Lord. So we must always ask ourselves: Do we still believe that? Missionaries prove that we do.

Phil Cooke: What's the focus of your book *A Bend in the Road*?

Jolene Hodder: Following God's call, wherever that might take you, is always an adventure. The book simply shares the spiritual lessons I learned on my personal journey living and ministering in Kenya. And hopefully it will be an encouragement for anyone trusting God during times of unexpected or difficult change.

Phil Cooke: If you could say one thing your experience as a Salvation Army leader in Africa taught you, what would it be?

Jolene Hodder: As long as my faith is just a tiny bit bigger than my fear, I can do just about anything. The Kenyans I grew to love had so little to call their own. Many struggled to survive each day, and yet their faith allowed them to live with abandon, trusting in a loving and merciful God.

Phil Cooke: What's ahead for Jolene and Kenneth Hodder?

Jolene Hodder: Without doubt, there are many more bends in the road ahead and many more adventures to be had. Our responsibility on this journey is simply to follow God on the path He has chosen for us. {eoa}