

Single Christian Worker Discovers Blessings Amid Discouragements

When Marie Edwards' car needs oil, she takes it to the mechanic herself.

When there's a party at the university where she works, she heads to the kitchen with the local women to help make tea. During her first trip to North Africa and the Middle East (NAME) with a group of short-term Christian workers, Edwards' blonde-haired, blue-eyed team members received "oohs" and "aahs" while she, with dark hair and dark eyes, was treated like just another face in the crowd.

Though once a discouragement, these instances are now seen by Edwards as blessings.

This 20-something Christian worker has lived in NAME for several years. Two things set her apart from most of her peers: she is unmarried and she is African American. Both have an impact on the way she ministers to her people group.

Advantages of Singleness

Edwards faces some specific challenges that a married woman may not. She lives alone, travels alone and has to carve out a place for herself in this male-dominated culture. But she realizes her singleness gives her a unique freedom to serve.

"I have a schedule that's not dependent on a family—which I'd like a family one day—but right now I can get up at 4:45 and rest in the Lord," she said. "I don't have babies to take care of and a husband to feed and things like that."

This freedom means she can travel at the drop of a hat, stay late witnessing in a family's home or invite her students to

her house anytime. Having a husband to share some of the day-to-day responsibilities would be nice, Edwards says, but she has more opportunities to meet people and build relationships on her own. For instance, when she takes her car to the mechanic, he invites her to his home to meet his wife and children—and she is able to share the Gospel with them.

Being so far away from her family is hard sometimes, but Edwards spends time with other Christian workers and their children who have become her family: “the international community is very, very tight and very strong,” she said.

She also has a core support group of women in the international community. They meet weekly for Bible study and prayer, and host game nights. She depends on several female Christian neighbors in her apartment complex, too—they take turns looking after each other’s homes, pets and plants when one of them is out of town.

Blending In

Edwards’ caramel skin, brown eyes and dark, brown hair show her African-American heritage. Because of her looks, her mastery of the local language and the way she dresses out of respect for the Muslim culture, many in her community mistake her for one of them.

“My hair is the same as their hair, my skin is the same as their skin and they see that,” Edwards said.

Though she didn’t like blending in at first, she discovered that the locals “trust me with their women, and they trust me to make the tea, and they trust me to teach their children,” she said. Looking so much like her people group also has given Edwards greater opportunities to be Christ’s heart, hands and voice because they quickly trust and accept her. Her looks also have made it easier to travel around the city.

“It helps to get to the hard places,” Edwards said. “... I can

drive [on a tough road] by myself and not get harassed. Anyone else ...would get stopped multiple times and probably turned back, but because they look at me and they see 'sister' or 'mother' or 'child,' they don't stop me."

Encouraging Others

Though at one time there were more than 50 IMB African-American missionaries, today there are approximately 30 among the nearly 5,000 missionaries serving overseas.

African Americans have a distinct advantage in overcoming cultural barriers in Africa, Edwards said, as well as in places like the Middle East, South America and Europe. "You'll find that you blend in a lot better than you thought you did," she said.

However, she continues to hear familiar responses when she speaks to African Americans about serving overseas: I can't do that. I can't go to live in Africa; it's not possible financially or socially. I can't leave my family.

Edwards' response: "God can do whatever He wants to do." She said it once seemed "impossible" for her to be in NAME, but she's there "by God's grace and His faithfulness."

"I just really think knowing that they can do it and getting the support of their families – I know it's difficult because family is so important and community is so important in African-American community – but you're just extending your family," Edwards said. "That's what I tell my family, especially my church family: 'This is your family, too, now.'"

*Name changed

To learn more about the unique impact that African Americans can make on the international missions field, contact Keith Jefferson, IMB ethnic missional church strategist, at kjefferson@ or call (800) 999-3113, ext. 1422.