

## **Discovering Calling**

### **Introduction**

I spent the summer of 2017 in complete denial. Throughout the 10 years we lived in Toronto, my parents were always mentioning the possibility of us one day moving to Korea, or somewhere in the States, or elsewhere in Canada, and yet we never did. Surely their talk about going to Africa would lead to the same outcome. It was not until my clothes were packed into suitcases and my books in boxes that the reality of the situation came upon me. My family would be uprooting our lives to move to a completely foreign country. My father had received a request to work as a lecturer teaching Theology at University of The Gambia. The Department of Christian Religious Studies had been newly established and was in need of professors. After much consideration about the feasibility of our departure and many nights of prayer, my mother and father had decided to accept the request and serve as missionaries. Alongside the grief that came from leaving my friends, hometown, and church, I felt anxious and uncertain about living in a world so vastly different from anywhere I had ever known.

While we were preparing to move, many people expressed their concerns about what this decision would mean for my brother's and my future. They stated that we would lose access to the education and opportunities necessary to attend university and get careers. Truthfully, we had the same fears. While these were valid and well-intentioned concerns, they were shortsighted. My time in West Africa was not a void in my teenage years, stunting my growth, but crucial in the formation of who I am and what I want to do. Though my father's decision to serve in The Gambia is what fuelled our move, God had a plan for each and every one of our lives. As I enter my twenties and reflect on how the last seven years have shaped me, I find it difficult to imagine how different my life would have been if I had stayed in Toronto that fateful summer. At the time, my parents believed that we would not be in The

Gambia for long and reassured me that I could proceed with my life in Canada a couple of years later as if nothing had happened. This could not have been further from the truth. The time I spent in West Africa permanently altered my life.

Living on the mission field as a child is not without hardships. For children of missionaries, also referred to as missionary kids (MKs), who were relocated at a young age to a foreign country, often with difficult circumstances, it can be hard to understand why our parents and God have placed us where we are. My goals in sharing my story through this essay are twofold. Firstly, I want it to be a word of encouragement for missionaries who worry about the future of their children and for MKs who are struggling with their identity. Being obedient to God's calling and living the life He planned for us is never done in vain, but rather holds blessings beyond what we could ever imagine. Secondly, I will draw from my own experiences and the insights of scholars' works to understand some of the tensions that occur within missionary families and what can be done to mitigate them.

## **Background**

I am frequently asked, "Where are you from? Where is home for you?" Each time, I find it difficult to respond simply. I am a Korean, born in the States, raised in Canada, who has spent much of my adolescent years in West Africa. Due to my international upbringing, who I am is defined by the quilted fabric of my childhood: the languages I can understand, the accent I speak in, the comfort foods I reach for, and the complex thoughts that fill my head. I, like the majority of children who live in various countries during their developmental years, have subconsciously adopted the values and cultures of those places (Pollock et al., 2017). This is often the case for third culture kids (TCKs), individuals who live outside of their passport countries and take part in an "interstitial culture" that draws from both their home and local culture (Tan et al., 2021, p. 82). Thus, as a TCK, my "worldview, social relationships, and identity development" have been molded by my multicultural experiences

(Volpei, 2019, p. 12). The love and appreciation I have for the different countries and cultures that have raised me are spread wide and thin.

Throughout my encounters with countless TCKs, and more specifically MKs, I have heard all variations of their definitions of *home*, where it is that they truly feel they belong. Some will say that *home* is the country of their childhood, others will name the country of their parents' ministries, and others still state the place that was most influential in their lives. As demonstrated by this array of interpretations, TCKs' ethnic background is not always an accurate representation of which country or culture they identify the most with (Kim et al., 2019). I have similarly had a hard time designating one country as completely my own. For me, *home* is not attached to a single geographical location. For as long as I can remember, I have never truly settled into any one place, knowing that we would need to leave sooner or later. Instead, *home* is where my loved ones and the precious memories we share reside. The places I feel the comfort of belonging and warmth of nostalgia stretches to encompass numerous cities across different countries. Wherever I find myself, I know that home isn't a single destination, but a feeling I can return to.

## **Life on the Mission Field**

### ***The Gambia***

My sentiments towards The Gambia have changed significantly over the years. When we first arrived in the tiny West African country, everything was uncharted to me. The air was thick with a heavy humidity. The airport had a single run-down shuttle bus carrying all of the sweaty passengers to a hall with exposed wiring. The billboards on the street were selling products I had never seen and celebrating holidays I had never heard of. Our new home had trees of exotic fruits and was frequented by bats and monkeys. My brother and I spent hours running around in the backyard filled with these exciting things. By dinner time, all of our

limbs were completely covered in mosquito bites. Soon after, we fell ill with malaria. Such was our introduction to this strange, new land.

As our family attempted to establish our routines, we joined a church and my brother and I began attending school. Being in an unknown environment with unfamiliar customs proved to be very difficult. One night, a few weeks into our move, our family sat together and were talking about how we were adjusting to The Gambia. My brother, who was eleven years old at the time, began to cry and said “I like it here, but sometimes it feels very lonely.” He was not alone in feeling this way.

Back in 2017, there was a lack of quality English schools with properly enforced curricula and well-trained teachers. MKs were usually either sent to boarding schools in a neighboring country or, if they were too young, home-schooled by their parents. My parents opted for a third option. My father enrolled us into a French School across the dirt path from our house. My brother and I had been in the French-Immersion program in Canada and were familiar enough with the language to barely get by. My French was very limited when I first began my time at the École Française de Banjul. While all of the other students spoke perfect French and barely any English, I lugged around a giant English to French dictionary, relying on its guidance for every thought I needed to communicate.

For the first time in my life, I experienced first hand the embarrassment and frustration that arises from not being able to speak my mind with ease. My peers would often point out my mistakes and correct my pronunciation. Everyday I would hear, “*T’as dit quoi? Ce n’est pas comme ça qu’on dit...*” To make matters worse, the French curriculum and grading system was foreign and rigorous. I flipped through the dusty pages of my dictionary furiously and strung together sentences to write multiple-page essays and in a language I could hardly speak. In addition to the linguistic and academic hurdles, I also had to navigate the complexities of a classroom that felt far from welcoming. There were a total of four

students in my grade, and I was the only girl. The boys in my class were rough, aggressive, and not at all serious about their studies. During the two years I spent in our tiny classroom with tattered curtains and broken desks, I tried my hardest to understand their jokes, mediate their arguments, and become friends with them.

Regardless of how difficult my time at the French school was, I recognize that it built my resilience and taught me to empathize with others in similar situations of trying to fit in. My time there also allowed me to stay with my parents for a little longer before never being able to live with them again. For this, I am grateful. Many MKs are sent straight to boarding school, which means that, on top of moving to a new country, they are separated from their parents and sent to live with strangers. This is especially difficult for those from non-English speaking countries who struggle with the language barrier in their new homes. Though learning in French was no easy task, I had the rare privilege of doing so with my parents by my side, which made all the difference.

At the local church we attended, everyone spoke Wolof, and none of the kids my age were comfortable enough around me to make sure I was included. What shocked me about that church was not the services that went on for hours or the lively dancing and singing, but how utterly alienated I felt. Church, for me, had always been a place I was incredibly comfortable and involved. It was somewhere I looked forward to going to and that I spent much of my time at, because my parents were both pastors for much of my childhood. I was not used to being shy and passive, but with each passing week, my brother and I found ourselves waiting by the car immediately after service, eager to go home. Our parents constantly encouraged us to make more of an effort to get involved. This seemed like an impossible task when the effort was not reciprocated.

One Sunday, I was standing awkwardly under the church mango tree, fighting the temptation to seek shelter in our car, as my brother had already done. A boy approached me

and asked if we could talk. I was hesitant but my parents insisted I go. “*Stop closing yourself off,*” they said. He led me to the small alley behind the church and sat me down. He then proceeded to open his Bible and tell me that I was possessed by an evil spirit. As tears welled in my eyes, the boy told me that the only way I could be saved is if I met with him weekly to pray together. After this incident, my parents stopped pressuring me to talk to anyone against my will.

Outside of school and church, my parents rarely let me leave the house alone. As a young girl, the scope of things I was allowed to do were much more limited than they were for my brother, for safety reasons. They would only allow me to go to the neighborhood convenience store or book shop if my brother came with me. I would beg Micah to come with me, but he rarely agreed. Once in a while, my father and I would go on walks together by the beach, when he had the time to do so. On the streets, we were constantly being called either “*toubab*,” meaning White person, or “Chinese” followed by a scramble of racist syllables. Though I am neither of those things, it was futile to argue with them. After several failed attempts to correct them, I learned to ignore them. Other times, middle-aged men would stop us to ask my father how many cows they would need to pay for my dowry. The once pleasantly tropical weather became hot and suffocating. My loneliness felt permanent and all encompassing.

During this time, my relationship with my brother grew much stronger. The very unique circumstances that only he and I have experienced together created a bond. I feel understood by him in a way that I do by no one else. When I moved away, I was intentional about maintaining consistent communication with him. I feared that he might feel alone, the way I did before. It has always been my hope that he might see me as someone that he can rely on and trust completely. I want to be someone he can turn to with any thoughts, concerns, and hardships as he experienced throughout the many stages of his life.

Back when we first landed in The Gambia, the other MKs had been in the country for much longer than we had. Whenever we would meet, they spoke of how boring it was there and how badly they wanted to leave. The missionaries whose children had already grown up and left would mention regularly that their sons and daughters never come to visit them. One particular conversation that left a lasting impact on me happened years ago when our family was visiting another missionary family. The parents were ecstatic to have their daughter visit them for the first time in years and had invited us to meet her. Her praises poured out of their mouths. Yet, when she and I were alone, she began to tell me of how she resented her parents and all the ways that they did not get along. At the time, I wasn't able to understand where all of this tension and disharmony could be rooted in.

Looking back now, I believe that this evident disconnect between the missionaries and their children can be explained by a lack of belonging. I am led to believe that there is an absence of purpose that deters missionary kids from visiting The Gambia once they graduate and begin their lives elsewhere. There is little to do there, and we lack the freedom to complete tasks on our own. The Gambia is not necessarily a walkable hub of exciting places and activities for young people to get involved in. Additionally, we do not have our own community or friends to come home to. For the MKs that graduated from boarding school, the majority of their friends have long left the mission field and live abroad. As a high schooler, I also felt very detached from The Gambia and my parents' ministries there. Before moving to our village, Kembujeh, we lived in a disconnected neighborhood where no one interacted with one another. My father would go to his lectures throughout the week and my mother worked at the Gambian branch of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES) as an administrator. I was not ever able to take part in either of their work or observe any developments first-hand. I knew in my mind that they were working diligently and doing important things, but my lack of involvement made me feel as though my time in

The Gambia was meaningless. I wondered what I was doing there if I wasn't contributing to or gaining anything.

Loneliness and neglect can also be contributors to resentment bred in MKs towards their parents, their circumstances, and even, God. Missionaries' time and energy are divided between their ministries and their families, oftentimes unevenly. While Kembujeh is to me a place I gladly escape to from my hectic life in Toronto, I return each summer to find my parents increasingly involved in the community and submerged in responsibilities. Each day, from dawn till dusk, they are juggling numerous tasks. In our village, they have taken on the roles of pastor, teacher, nurse, painter, welder, counselor, and more. With parents this busy, family time is precious and restricted for missionary households. Kietzman et al.'s (2008) article describes instances where missionaries' work is so demanding that they become less attentive to their own children, which in turn, leaves the MKs feeling hurt and disconnected from their families. It can certainly be difficult sharing your parents with an entire village. Multiple MKs have confided in me about their broken relationship with their mother and father. They've told me about how they barely call them and fight when they do or how their parents are too busy to tend to their needs or wants. At times, MKs may feel as though they are in competition with their parents' ministries, and indirectly, with God (Kietzman et al., 2008). The resulting struggle for attention and frustration can manifest in the form of defiance or distance.

I believe that a way to remedy this issue is by finding ways for MKs to feel more connected, not only to their parents and their work, but to the mission field and its ministries as a whole. Though the time I spent in The Gambia seemed to drag on when I was younger, I now willingly visit the country every summer. Ever since my parents have moved to Kembujeh, I have been able to closely observe the value of the work that they do. As they devote their time to spreading the Gospel and tending to the needs of our neighbors, I can see

how my parents are impacting the precious lives of the families in our village. Through these things, I recognize how life-giving it is for them to obey God's calling. I myself have had the privilege of getting involved. A couple of summers ago, I was able to volunteer at a missionary-founded international school where I taught English to primary students for three months. Last summer, I invested more of my time in spending time with the children in our village by hosting little events for them, such as movie nights or campfires with treats. The many ministries taking place in the country is extremely moving to me and has been exciting to take part in. Kembujeh has now become a source of joy and healing for me. The children in our neighborhood greet me with excitement, calling out "Auntie Esther" as they run up to me from all directions. They are eager to share a bite of whatever I am eating, to partake in any game I introduce to them, and they fight with one another about who gets to sit next to me. When Sunday comes around, they come to greet us at our door just to walk with us to church. My heart swells for them. I have found my place in The Gambia.

### ***Senegal***

In 2018, a year into living in The Gambia, my family went on a trip to Senegal. Traveling from our home, south of the Gambian river, to Dakar, the capital of Senegal, by car was a very long and rough journey at the time. The bridge had not yet been built, and so cars were transported across the river on ferries. We woke up before the sun rose and waited in line for hours to get to the other side of the river. The roads of rural Senegal were extremely bumpy and had police officers at every intersection, hoping for a bribe. Near the end of our ten hour drive, I was exhausted, grouchy, and sore from sitting for so long. However, as soon as we entered Dakar, all of my tiredness disappeared. The city was bright and alive. I pointed excitedly at the large digital billboard that greeted us. After months of being surrounded by The Gambia's endless landscape of sand and bushes, I was thrilled to see the paved highways, multi-floored buildings, and bustling crowds. It was during that trip that I visited

Dakar Academy (DA), an American Christian boarding school, for the first time. All of the stories I had heard from other students who had attended the school came to life. I knew this was exactly where I wanted to be.

After two years at the French school in The Gambia, my parents' finally decided that I was ready to go to DA. I only had two years left of High School, and it was time to start thinking about what would allow for the smoothest transition to university in North America. I was worried at the thought of having to adjust to yet another school system and was nervous about being separated from my family, but my eagerness to be a DA student and leave the French school triumphed all. Still, moving countries, living away from my parents for the first time, and attending a new school were huge changes in my life. Throughout this transitional period, I found the support of my dorm parents and dorm sisters to be extremely helpful. Though the first couple of weeks adjusting to the new environment were rocky, I never once felt alone. My dorm parents cared for each of us with immense love and attention. I spent much of my time at DA sitting across from them on their couch, sometimes crying, most times laughing, and constantly confiding in them. During this time, I also developed a deep connection with the other girls in my dorm as well. I experienced true friendship and sisterhood within my dorm family. I did everything with my dorm sisters, from waking up, to excursions out of campus, to having late night conversations. In and outside of the dorm, I made lifelong friends with whom I explored the city of Dakar. I quickly grew to love the people, land, and food that surrounded me. I have remained in contact with a majority of the friends I had there. We have been a consistent source of love and support to one another as we establish our lives outside of high school and West Africa. The community I found there has been invaluable. For this reason, Senegal to me was like an oasis in a desert.

Attending a school catered towards MKs was transformative. For the first time, I was able to see that God had not forgotten about me, but that he had been training me.

Throughout the many lonely and difficult times in The Gambia, He had been training my patience, raising endurance, and broadening the scope of human experience that I could understand and empathize with. Most importantly, my time as a student in the Christian school, under the love and fellowship of missionary families, allowed me to see that I was not alone. Surrounded by others my age and by staff members who were experienced with working with MKs, I felt incredibly perceived. There, I was taught to focus on my own faith outside of that of my parents. My involvement in the various outreach events of the school furthered my sense of belonging in the mission field. I look back fondly on the trips we would make to the villages of Senegal where we would spend all day painting classrooms and evangelizing and all night chatting amongst each other in our tents.

All in all, DA was absolutely the right choice for me. I completely blossomed into the person that I am now and loved being in an environment where I was surrounded by people of all different backgrounds, and experiences. Despite our differences, there was a mutual understanding among us. This can be attributed to the fact that the bond TCKs form with one another is not based on conventional identities such as nationality or ethnicity, but on the shared experience of living between cultures (Tan et al., 2021). Thus, boarding schools, like the one I went to, can play a significant role in strengthening the academic, social, spiritual lives of MKs by bringing them together (Hawley, 2004). Senegal remains to me a place of healing and excitement. Whenever studying at Toronto becomes lonely or difficult, I look forward to returning to Dakar and making new memories with old friends.

I must recognize, however, that the boarding program is not for everyone. Students' ability to adapt and feel at home at boarding school can be impacted by a variety of components such as their age, personalities, and family patterns (Hawley, 2004). Many of my friends from high school have voiced their discomfort with living with so many other students. They have told me they disliked sharing everything, always being in a loud

environment, and having little time and space to be alone. Living in a dorm setting is not ideal for everyone, and it's unfortunate that most MKs do not have any other choice. There were, for instance, DA students who dreaded leaving their families and going back to school once breaks are over. There are also students who, to this day, hold bitterness towards DA. As a conservative Christian high school with the responsibility of guardianship over many teenagers, it enforced copious rules and regulations. The clothes we wore, the music we listened to, where we were allowed to be and what time, in addition to all of our digital activity were monitored. Being under constant watch was stressful at times. Some felt that they were targeted by association and, at times, judged with unjustified accusations which would create tension between them and staff. I have heard numerous alumni breathe a sigh of relief as they left DA, swearing they would never return. It always made me sad to hear how eager they were willing to leave it behind, but I also understood wanting freedom from the overwhelming pressure we were subject to.

With this in mind, I believe that, when it comes to schooling, it is crucial that parents listen to the unique needs of their children. A study conducted in 1994 on the impact of boarding schools on family patterns found great variation in students' satisfaction with the institution and their relationships with their parents (Hawley, 2004). Each individual has different circumstances under which they can thrive. This is why it is important for youths to be heard and understood by their parents when they express how they feel.

### **Life off of the Mission Field**

During my time in The Gambia when I would complain about having to be home all the time, my parents would tell me that they understood but that I should enjoy our family time while I was still able to. They said I would have plenty of time to spend with friends and do exciting things in the future. To this I would retort, "We have way too much family time!" Now, as a university student, I mourn the fact that I am unable to live near my parents and

rely on them as I navigate the difficulties that come with this stage of life. As I attend university in Canada while my parents are continuing to move forward with their ministry in The Gambia, I often wish that they were here by my side. However, no matter how difficult it can be to have an ocean between us, my parents never fail to make me feel prioritized. We video call multiple times a week and update each other on our lives, as long as the internet on their side permits it. Their presence in my life, even from a continent away, is essential and cherished.

Returning to Canada for my post-secondary studies after graduating high school was an obvious choice to me. I had spent the majority of my childhood in Toronto and knew I wanted to return even before I left four years prior. I moved back to Toronto with a misguided certainty that university life would be just as it was at my small Christian High School. To my great disappointment, my grand return to life in North America was not quite as easy as I had expected. All at once, I found myself alone in a big city with the task of finding a support system for myself. I sought out community at school and church.

Coming to the University of Toronto, I was excited to return to the city of my childhood but also to attend a school that promised me a world of countless possibilities. Now, as I near graduation, I can confirm that the hopes I entered this university with have been fulfilled. I have met professors who are invested in the well-being of their students and my knowledge of the subjects I am interested in has grown deeper. I believe that my enrollment at the University of Toronto and my subsequent pursuit of my double majors and minor are steps in the direction that God is leading me. Initially, however, adjusting to a newly acquired independence and the consequent responsibilities put me on a learning curve. As a university student living away from my family, it was difficult to strike a balance between looking after myself, maintaining a social life, and focusing on my studies. Aside from establishing a healthy and sustainable routine, there was also the difficulty of

re-entering into Western society and finding like-minded people. Living around MKs and TCKs, I had become so adjusted to being around people that understood me, valued community, and were quick to invest in meaningful relationships. It came as a shock to me when many of the students I interacted with did not seem to desire the same level of friendship I sought. Feeling sentiments of loneliness, anxiety and stress while transitioning to college life and readjusting to the dominant culture is common amongst MKs (Tan et al., 2021). This phenomenon is defined as reverse culture shock (Volpei, 2019). It occurs due to a number of variables that set MKs apart from their non-MK peers, such as “social and environmental issues, awareness of international events, idealism, and the value of spending time with children” (Hawley, 2004, p. 4). Though at first, I struggled with finding people who I felt truly respected and understood me, by the grace of God and after lots of trial and error, I eventually found a circle of friends that I treasure.

Since moving to Toronto, the church became the main way for me to stay connected to a Christian community. For the past three years, I have been attending our family’s sending church. Downsview Presbyterian Church underwent many changes during the four years that I was gone, but I had no trouble rejoining the community and participating as a serving member. For the first three years of undergrad, I served as a Sunday School volunteer there. I enjoyed spending time with the children and creating memories, similar to the ones from my own childhood. The love and care I have felt from the members of our church throughout the past four years has reminded me of God’s faithfulness. I have been working towards growing in my relationship with God and finding ways to seek Him out in my life.

### **Moving Forward**

Moving to The Gambia may not have been how I envisioned my own life, but it was in God’s plan for me. Becoming an MK and being exposed to perspectives and lifestyles outside of my own cultural bubble widened my worldview significantly. When considering

my academic and professional goals post-graduation, my interests lie in supporting vulnerable populations across low-income and/or conflict-ridden countries, through field operations, research projects, and policy making. My time in West Africa, contributing to my parents' ministries and taking part in numerous volunteering opportunities, has inspired me to work towards improving the circumstances of communities affected by poverty, instability, and inequality. With my education and varied experiences, I hope to work towards bridging the gap between countries around the world to accomplish social justice objectives for the common good. All the while, I am constantly aware of the fact that my life is not fully my own. I know that what I do needs to ultimately contribute to God's kingdom and adhere to His purpose for my life. Stepping into adulthood, I am excited to see how God will use my experiences as a TCK to guide me towards my future career and new relationships.

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