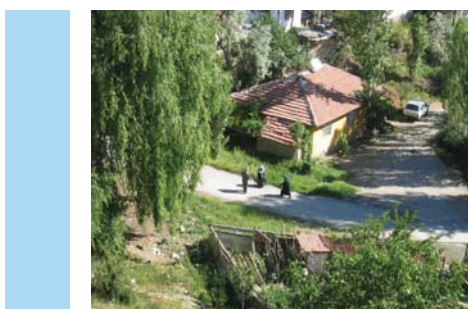


a strange new landscape



Diane reports on going On Track to West Asia with Interserve England & Wales.

It was 3am and I was travelling north on a bus through West Asia. All around me people were sleeping or chatting quietly as the vehicle rumbled on through the hot, sticky night. It appeared I was the only foreigner on board, a middle-aged Englishwoman keenly interested in everything around her but isolated by a lack of common language.

I was alone in a strange land, but I was surprisingly content. Seated on that bus amid strangers, I knew with absolute certainty and some amazement that God was with me.

The sequence of events that brought me here began two years ago when my husband collapsed in his office in Croydon after suffering a major stroke. Pete and I had been happily married for 32 years. We were both Christians and we had enjoyed our life together, bringing up our two children and latterly had both been absorbed full-time in our respective occupations. Six days after he collapsed, Pete died.

I wasn't prepared in any way for the event or for the grief that followed. But even in the darkest hours I knew that

the Lord was holding me up.

Time offered to God

After Pete's death I continued to work as the editor of a series of local newspapers, and life returned slowly – but it was a completely different life in a strange new landscape. I began to think of what I could or should do in my new situation. I applied to my local university and was offered a place to study English and Art History.

With the structure for my life in place for the next three years it seemed logical to do what a lot of students do and take some 'gap' time. It was an opportunity for me to offer the time specifically to God to thank him for bringing me through this difficult period. A friend and former mission partner suggested I apply to Interserve's short-term programme, On Track, and wrote an introductory letter for me.

At my interview I said I didn't mind where I was sent or what I would do, but offered up my editorial skills. It was a completely new experience for me – to be entirely dependent on God's will and not on my own planned choices.

My placement was agreed, and three days after leaving my job I flew off from Heathrow – a mature On Tracker. I had been assigned to help edit the manuscript of a long-term partner, and I would be staying with her for six weeks.

Sights and sounds

As a short-term worker you are advised to be flexible because you might not do what you were expecting. In my case I did spend a large part of my time enjoyably absorbed in working on the manuscript of a history of Christianity, but I was able to be involved in many other projects too. My first few days were spent sitting at a desk in a small school library run by another long-term partner, cataloguing books ready for a move to new premises.

I walked through my local streets at seven each morning to catch the school bus, and became familiar with their sights and sounds. The most evocative was the wailing chorus of the different calls to prayer broadcast by loudspeakers from the tops of the minarets of neighbouring mosques. I soon became used to the carpets

ape



hanging from windows, secured by upturned chairs, and seeing groups of women sitting outside together chatting, all wearing their headscarves and distinctive long coats. On my return I saw the men who had gathered later to play backgammon and drink tea in small cafes.

Tea seemed to be as much a national obsession as back at home in England. It was consumed in small glasses, taken black with a little sugar and was drunk at all times and in all places – on boats and buses, in cafes and shops and in the street. Shopkeepers stood outside their stores with tea glass in hand and young waiters ran along the pavements carrying trays laden with the amber liquid.

My kind and generous host went away for a week of my placement, and during this time I was able to help at a summer school for refugee children organised by the church. I heard the stories of the parents and saw the strength of their faith as they told of lives uprooted from their culture, families and friends.

I also spent time speaking to creative writing groups, babysitting for young mission partners, walking a dog and helping to staff a second-hand bookstall at the church fair.

And I had a chance to organise a three-day adventure on my own, including that trip on the night bus. I was astonished at the hospitality and kindness of the local people. The owners of the hotel in which I stayed invited me to drink tea with them and took me with them on a family outing to a local beach.

Reflections

What I gained from the experience was to see at first hand the day-to-day lives of partners in the field, with all the challenges and frustrations they face but also the joy they clearly have of living each day in a close relationship with the Lord.

I felt for myself the oppression of a country whose people don't have the joy of certain salvation, and I realised just how great is the need for persistent prayer both for them and for the partners who have been called to serve them.

I now understand the paramount importance of encouraging partners to first spend time learning the language of the country they work in. There are so many opportunities to talk to people, and the need is great.

But most of all I was challenged through the times I had for reflection on my own spiritual growth. I know my faith has deepened as a result and it has been a privilege to serve the Lord in this way.

It is an experience I highly recommend to Christians of all ages.

Prayer pointer

- ♦ Pray for those continuing the projects with which Diane was involved, and for the people they seek to serve.
- ♦ Pray for Diane and others who have served and been changed by God through programmes like On Track.
- ♦ Pray that people in all stages and walks of life will come forward for short-term cross-cultural service.