

THE LONG ROAD OF CALLING

BY KYLE BAILEY

Associate Minister of Missions



I LED MY FIRST MISSION TRIP AS A CAMPUS MINISTRY INTERN. LESS THAN A YEAR OUT OF COLLEGE, I TOOK A TEAM OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS FROM ATHENS, GEORGIA, TO MONTERREY, MEXICO, DURING SPRING BREAK.

We left in the middle of the night, driving two 15-passenger vans. Long before the age of cell phones and navigation systems, we had just a road atlas in each van and a pair of walkie-talkies to communicate with one another. And, just to be safe, we also packed a box full of engine parts in case the older van broke down along the journey.

Looking back, I realize going on a trip like that probably sounds *absolutely crazy*. I would never, today, encourage a group of college students to drive thousands of miles and cross an international border unsupervised. Yet, those were different times. I, along with my team, believed God had called us on this mission. We went out in faith, trusting in God's protection and provision. God was faithful to us every step of the way, and we returned safely home after a week of incredible ministry.

I loved every aspect of the trip: the planning, the coordinating with national partners, the helping participants navigate the experience. At every turn, it was like God was confirming something within me. The work was joyous and natural and full of purpose.

One summer, I had just returned from church camp and I felt a clear impression from God. He was calling me to serve Him with my life and work. God clarified this direction during my college years with a calling to Christian ministry. Leading the team to Mexico further focused that calling to missions.

I FIRST FELT A SENSE OF GOD'S CALLING ON MY LIFE IN HIGH SCHOOL.

After college, I took a position as a student minister in my home church. As a congregation active in missions, I had many opportunities to join short-term teams in various places around the world. The trips helped shape my understanding of missions and the global church. Also during this time, I set out to read every missionary biography I could find. I was in awe of the lives of Jim and Elisabeth Elliot, Hudson Taylor, Rees Howells, Adoniram Judson, C.T. Studd, and many others. They heard the call of God, left all the trappings of home behind, and went out into the unknown of faith.

With a calling to ministry and missions, I started asking God *where* He wanted me to serve. I found myself a little envious, in a way, of the missionary greats I read about. They all seemed to have a calling to a place or to a people group. This was conspicuously absent from my own calling. I remember asking God to give me similar clarity.

I prayed, "I will go anywhere, God! Just tell me the *place*."

And God, as He so often does, had a different plan. I realized He was not so much interested in the question, "Where?" Rather, He was focused on a "Who?" Now, do not get me wrong, God does still call people to serve in specific places. This was just not my story. You see, God was doing a work deep inside my heart. He was teaching me to trust Him, for everything—without a road map. He was more concerned with who I was becoming than where I was going.



Mexico 1998



Costa Rica 2004



South Asia 2002



Panama Canal 2007



Latin America 2008



Latin America 2009



Eurasia 2019

Birmingham 2022



Through these formative experiences, a theme emerged in my ministry. God gave me a burden to connect the church to the world. I had seen the powerful potential to change lives through short-term mission trips. When done well, these trips not only bless the ministry partner and help reach the unreached, but they also serve as a spiritual catalyst for the participant. A week or two outside of one's comfort zone can produce the raw materials for God to do something special. Without the distractions of our daily routine, God seems nearer, his voice clearer. As in my own life, I saw others yield themselves fully to the Lord in these *thin* places where we can glimpse God's Kingdom on earth.

Many years after my initial calling, the disparate pieces of ministry and missions were coming together. I knew God was calling me to be a connector, to be a *bridge*. I wrote about the vision. I talked with my pastors and closest friends. It seemed so right and obvious, yet hurdles remained. In those days, the category of missions ministry in the church was undeveloped. I had a calling without a clear path forward.

This is a critical juncture in my story. Through mutual friends and shared experience in ministry, God brought Ali, my wife, into the picture. As only God can orchestrate, He had given each of us a very similar vision for missions and ministry. When we married, we were joined as husband and wife, *and* as partners in ministry. We now shared the vision of *the bridge*, and had a calling together.

**I HAVE CALLED YOU.
BE PATIENT.
WAIT ON ME.
THOUGH YOU
CANNOT SEE IT,
I AM WORKING.
BE FULLY PRESENT
AND SERVE ME
WHERE I HAVE YOU.**

I learned a very important lesson over the next few years: God's timing does not directly correlate to my own. I had a vision for ministry, and I thought I understood what it should look like. As Ali and I took steps forward in obedience to the call, the available opportunities often seemed to pull us further from the picture I held in my mind. While this was happening, I found comfort in God's words spoken through Habakkuk: "For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay" (2:3). I sensed God saying, *I have called you. Be patient. Wait on me. Though you cannot see it, I am working. Be fully present and serve me where I have you.*

Year after year, the core of the vision to be a bridge between the American church and the world remained constant. The pursuit of obedience to God took us to unexpected places. We traveled countless miles on short-term and mid-term mission trips. We sold our home and our cars so we could live lean and respond quickly to needs. I worked as a carpenter and contractor to have more vocational flexibility between mission projects. When our children were young, we were invited to serve with a ministry in Latin America for two years. Each experience, though not a full representation of my personal vision, provided a piece of the whole. We were on a long road of calling, believing God would give us enough direction to take the next step.

I always trusted I would eventually work in the local church. With this in mind, we moved from Latin America to Birmingham for me to attend seminary at Beeson Divinity School. While there, Ali and I served as Missionaries in Residence with Samford University Ministries. We had the wonderful opportunity to work with Third-Culture Kids and students with a vocational interest in missions. In this season, I developed a theological framework for missions and ministry that can only come from studying God's Word in community with other believers.

This experience opened a new and unforeseen chapter in our calling story. In what seemed like a detour, I spent the next decade working in higher education. The bulk of this time I worked with international students. I was serving as *the bridge* in reverse. Instead of connecting the church to the world, the world was here! I had the wonderful task of connecting students with one another, with domestic students, and with the local community. Though this was far from what I expected, I trusted God was at work. I loved the students yet felt a disconnect from my original ministry calling. But God confirmed over and over again I was in the right place...*for now*.

There were many times the gap between what I was doing professionally, and what I believed I should be doing, seemed like a vast chasm. Proverbs 13:12 states, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick..." My heart often ached to serve God and see the vision that I knew He gave me come to fruition.

**I AM INCREDIBLY
THANKFUL
ALI AND I ARE
SERVING AT
A CHURCH
WITH SUCH A
RICH HISTORY
IN MISSIONS
ENGAGEMENT.**

God helped me to understand that my work, though not in a church setting, was *ministry*. My profession did not change my identity or calling. Sometimes God would remind me of this in the quietness of prayer, other times it was through challenges. It was a lesson not easily learned. Yet, He remained a patient teacher. He helped me to learn contentment and how to be fully present where He placed me.

At just the right time, God opened the door for me to join the ministry team at Dawson. I am reminded of the second line of Proverbs 13:12, "...but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life." This is what I have always felt called to do. I am incredibly thankful that Ali and I are serving at a church with such a rich history of missions engagement.

I can see now that my experiences have shaped and prepared me for His purpose and for His calling. Though the road to get here was long, I would not trade a single moment of the journey.



Kyle Bailey became Dawson's Associate Minister of Missions in September 2022. Originally From Marietta, GA, Kyle graduated from Beeson Divinity School in 2013 with a Master of Divinity. He met his wife, Ali, as undergraduate students at the University of Georgia, and they tied the knot in 2001. Kyle and Ali served primarily with mission partners in South Asia and Latin America. They have two children (Thomas and Claire) and live in Homewood with their Goldendoodle, Gus.