**Interview 019 PSEUDONYM: Jackie**

INTERVIEWER: So, if you could just tell me a bit about your faith history – just some general background, that would be really good.

JACKIE: So, em, oh where to start? I came to faith at a very young age. My parents were both Christians, so took me to church and that sort of thing and, yeah, in the home there were things to do with faith. And so at the age of 5 I made my own decision to become a Christian.

INTERVIEWER: Can you remember that? At 5?

JACKIE: I’ve got little bits of memory. But how much is things I’ve been told of what happened and how much is my own memory, I’m not quite sure. But I can remember having a real sense of assurance of faith. And a sense of growing in my … I guess as I grew up my understanding grew with it. And even from a young age, even from a sort of primary school age, having a real desire for my friends to know Jesus. That was just part of who I was. And although my parents are believers, my extended family weren’t. So I grew up very much in the reality of seeing the difference of living with a faith and living without a faith. And seeing the reality in that and, em, wanting, yeah, there was that heart in me for others to know Jesus. And I think I was always interested in different cultures and parts of the world and did people have the opportunity to know Jesus. So through high school years starting to get more interested. And first having a venture into short-term mission as a sixteen year old in the UK. I did a year or so in A-Levels where I kind of just, I guess, drifted a bit. I kind of, I didn’t really rebel, but I didn’t… I guess I was kind of finding my feet in life and after that really making a choice: no, this really is something I believe. Yeah, and then… So I actually ended up repeating a year of A-Levels, for various reasons. And after my A-Levels I had a year with an organisation called [NAME]. And it was a discipleship type year, and involved in ministry. Then … and at the end of that I really did feel a sense of leading towards cross-cultural ministry, but felt I really should go and get a degree as well, and get some training. So, em, sort of, I went to university thinking, this is almost an obedience thing – this is the choice to be equipped for life. And studied human geography. And whilst I was there God really, I guess, started refining my heart and my vision and, em, he brought along my path opportunities to go to Asia, to meet Asians… opportunities to step out in faith and opportunities to serve in new ways and to learn more of him and how he works and how I can serve him. Yeah. So I went to university, I finished my degree. By that time with a sense of interest in East Asia, but not knowing what that would look like or when that would happen. So after graduating, moved down to London for a while and worked down there with international students, and then went to Bible college. And each step was kind of a step of God opening up the doors, a step of, ok, this is the next stage that he’s leading me to, but not knowing where exactly it would lead. And just trusting him in that. So when I was at college, part of the course requirement is that we went overseas for a placement. And I hadn’t planned to come to [country]. It was probably one of the places that I was least interested in in East Asia. But an opportunity opened up and it seemed, yeah, it was the right thing to do. And it was whilst I was here that I felt God really speak to me about [country] about the [nationality] people, about the situation of the church in [country]. Yeah. And then, obviously went back to my course. And from there, started exploring more of how to go, what to do. And it took another two and a half years after finishing Bible college to arrive in Asia.

INTERVIEWER: that’s a long journey

JACKIE: yeah. But very much God’s timing.

INTERVIEWER: so, what kind of things are you involved in? what sort of work is it?

JACKIE: so now, I’ve been here 11.5 years. About 16 months ago I changed roles, and now I’m a personnel manager. So, I basically care for the workers, and hopefully see them flourish, do well, be effective. Yeah. And try and keep my hand in a little bit with the [nationality] community as well.

INTERVIEWER: yeah. Has your faith been challenged along the way?

JACKIE:: very much so

INTERVIEWER: could you tell me maybe some of the areas that you’ve found challenging?

JACKIE: I think moving cross-culturally, moving away from people you know, what you know, is quite a refining process. You have a choice to sort of seek God, push into God, to try and reason it in your own understanding. So I think for me there’s been times of learning to, to express to God what I’m feeling, what I’m thinking, the questions I have. To wrestle with God. To learn some more of his character. Like, that’s on a personal sort of level. Then seeing situations with others, or seeing what they’re experiencing and sort of a sense of justice – why does that happen? Why is that allowed? And wrestling with that as well. And often not having easy answers for it. And em, yeah, sort of trusting, trusting that God knows and God sees even if I can’t reason it. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: who would you say have been your models in faith?

JACKIE: in faith! If I go back and look over time, there’s been key people at different stages of life who have, em, have been models to me. So as a teenager: a youth leader. Who, yeah, who was just a good model. As a young adult there’s been older adults – maybe parent or grandparents age – who just looking at their maturity, their character, their faithfulness, seeing who they are, what they’ve experienced in life and who they are even because of what they’ve experienced in life. I think here, in the Asian context, there’s been particularly women but not just women, who are ahead of me in the process, who I’ve looked at and I’ve gone: there’s characteristics in them I yearn to have in myself. Yeah. That’s all weathering through the storm of life. The testimony to God’s faithfulness and them being faithful as well. And [nationality] friends. Yeah, [nationality] friends. A lady who became like a [nationality] mother to me and yeah, her witness in my life and sort of sharing of life to me, her openness to me. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: I was going to ask about how you found moving into a different culture. Do you want to tell me a bit more about it?

JACKIE: I think everybody goes through different stages in the process. You come, even if you think you don’t come with expectations, I think we come with expectations. There’s moments of amazing joy. There’s moments of amazing frustration. For me the key is getting to know people and their hearts. And then the things that are the frustrating things seem to pale away, where you see the reasoning why. I think where I was in my early days, Western-looking foreigners were very rare. So always being the outsider – obviously being an outsider – at times was a challenge. But then later on became fun, when you were part of the community and others from within the community would be like “who are they?” and then the fun and the jokes of being part of it. But it takes longer as the outsider to become part of it. There’s things I love about [nationality] culture. There is a generosity in it. But there’s things that sadden me about it as well. And very aware we’re still learning, we’re all still learning. I think for me, moving to a different part of the country sixteen months ago, has highlighted that for me because, yeah, I knew the central [country] context quite well, I’d been in my town for ten years, but what [nationality] culture looks like here is worked out in a different way. So I have a grounding, but I’m learning again.

INTERVIEWER: And I guess with the change of role, you don’t have so much natural contact with the people locally.

JACKIE: yeah, so I’m needing to be proactive about it.

INTERVIEWER: where was I going to go? … How did your friends and family react?

JACKIE: that’s an interesting one. I think my family were… my parents were supportive, but they struggled… They want to support missions, but there was that internal struggle that they didn’t necessarily verbalise, but… that sort of, “we support it, but why our daughter?” and that release of letting me go, although they were very encouraging and very helpful, there’s a challenge there and there’s a cost for them there. And there’s a sacrifice for them. And we do talk about it sometimes, but every time I come back it’s a challenge. And I have to think through: what does it mean for me to honour my parents in this season of life? I think my brother is different. He’s very much, yeah, you just, that’s what you do. At one point in life you go and live in another part of the world! The wider family, I think, they think I’m a bit strange! But I deliberately, when I’m in the UK, I deliberately try to have time with them and, yeah, so they don’t necessarily understand. They might do the “oh, you’re doing a nice thing” but they don’t really understand it. But I very much try to just have relationship with them still. Friends… so I was working before coming out. And work colleagues, yeah, I think they thought the idea of travelling and adventure was good. But they didn’t get the why. But at the same time they were all very supportive, they all came to my sending off, yeah, yeah. I think other friends, like, more sort of personal friends, I think they do have a sense of loss at times. Like just our friendship obviously looks different to if I was physically in the UK. And some have remained very faithful and we find ways to do friendship in different ways. And others the friendship’s changed. It’s just part of life anyway. If I moved to another region of the UK some of that would happen.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. How do you maintain contact then? How do you keep in touch with people?

JACKIE: different ways for different people. So, some it’s things like whatsapp messgaes, emails, facebook. I think Facebook’s been quite helpful, just because we can see each other’s lives. And then it’s when I’m being really intentional about being with people and being part of their lives. So I think the last few times I’ve been in the UK, friends being at a similar stage of life that you are now with kids from sort of newborn to end of high school now.

INTERVIEWER: yeah, I had mine late, so most of my friends have high school kids.

JACKIE: but yeah, just being there. So like the friends with pre-schoolers, just being in their house and doing life with them, like. That’s kind of the reality of that stage in life. You’re not going to go and meet up and do something outside the house necessarily. But just being with them and being part of their lives. Yeah. Others, it depends on the stage of life they’re at really.

INTERVIEWER: do you consider yourself a missionary? What does the term mean to you?

JACKIE: [sigh] Yeah, I think it’s an easy term to use, but it’s a term that’s often misunderstood. I think how the [nationality] Christian community view it is different to the [nationality] non-Christian community, which is different to British community. And even within British churches I think it’s often misunderstood.

INTERVIEWER: can you give me some… kind of how you think it’s seen then

JACKIE: yeah. I think… I think in the [nationality] Christian community it’s often, they just put you in the teacher category or religious teacher, you’re to be respected most of the time. But that comes with a whole weight of expectation that’s sometimes unhelpful. So when I first turned up to a rural church, there was ‘oh, you’re the trained teacher, you’re going to preach for us every couple of weeks’, whereas actually I was there more to equip and equip others to do things. Then, em, the wider [nationality] community, it depends on their expectations. Sometimes, yeah, you’re a religious teacher so that’s ok. Other times, ‘we’re not sure who you are’. British community it’s a wide range. So I often with British people I’d often say cross-cultural worker, well not even that, but “I work cross-culturally”. Yeah. And then depending on what they ask, I’ll share to different levels. If I want to end a conversation I usually say missionary to shut it down very quickly! [laughter] But in the UK I wouldn’t use missionary very often.

INTERVIEWER: how do you go about taking major decisions?

JACKIE: yeah! I’m… For me there’s, having done one last year…

INTERVIEWER: I was thinking it’s quite recent

JACKIE: Yeah, I think there’s often a sense of sort of God’s doing something in my heart, of, em, and a sense of needing ot seek him about something specifically, praying, seeking counsel of other people I know and I trust.

INTERVIEWER: who would you go to?

JACKIE: so, I would have, I would have a couple of mature Christians in the UK that I would value their input. And people who won’t necessarily just tell me what I want to hear, but will be honest with me. I will talk with friends sometimes – it depends what the issue is. Last year my decision to change roles, I didn’t talk to one of my closest friends because we were in the same team and the implications for her were significant. So I actually… normally I would have included her in that sort of thing, but at that time it wasn’t appropriate. I think ultimately it’s just a sense of God’s leading that, yeah, this is the next step, take it. Yeah. But I don’t want to make it a little bubble on my own, I want there to be, I do want to seek input from other people. And yeah, so some of the key people I talk to are my church leaders.

INTERVIEWER: That’s the church back in the UK?

JACKIE: yeah.

INTERVIEWER: How do you feel about your work/life balance?

JACKIE: [laughter] That’s something I’m trying to work on. It can be challenging at times. I think the danger of this sort of thing is that it can be all-encompassing in a bad way. Living cross-culturally, there is a higher level of, I guess, I guess we call it cross-cultural strain or stress. The longer you’re here, the more you get used to it. And I think it’s how you view things. Like do you view life in a holistic way or do you view it in a compartmentalised way? Yeah, so if I go – there’s a place I’ve started walking near the river – so if I go walking, am I there in my own little bubble, or if somebody smiles and says hello, am I going to be friendly. Well that actually could lead to a work-type conversation, but it also could just be a friendly chat in getting to know somebody. So I think it is a mindset thing. With the Covid situation, I was very very busy. I think for most people either you went into the busier than normal category or the quieter than normal category. But seeing things like that as a season and going, ok, this is going to be a few months of life’s not going to be so well balanced, but then I’m going to choose to readdress it when things calm down.

INTERVIEWER: did you stay throughout? Have you stayed?

JACKIE: yeah

INTERVIEWER: was that your decision? Was that an organisation thing? How did it work?

JACKIE: for me personally, I guess we talked aobut it… where I am wasn’t in a particularly difficult situation. If I’d said, look, I think I need to go, we would have discussed it. But there was never a significant “should you go; should you stay”. Most colleagues that I’m responsible for, we did have to have those conversations. Even people in [country] where we’d looked at the wider family context and we did have to say, ok, what’s most appropriate for your family, not just are you safe, that sort of thing.

INTERVIEWER: obviously it’s been really difficult for everyone and it’s interesting to see how different – cos I’ve been interviewing people throughout – just the different situations. Some organisations have told people “go back to your passport country” which seems a bit harsh, but on the other hand takes the decision out of your hands if you’re wrestling with it, so in some ways it’s a bit easier. Other people just got stuck because they had travelled and couldn’t travel back. So yeah, it’s been very unusual!

JACKIE: yeah, it has. And because I’m involved with people in a few countries, each of our countries is different, so I see it. And no decision is an easy decision.

INTERVIEWER: yes.

JACKIE: I think our approach has been really to try and individualise it. Wherever possible to have conversations with individuals. There might at times there might have been a need to say we want you to seriously consider this, but to not, didn’t want to sort of say it has to be this. And we didn’t want to do a blanket “everybody in place A must go!” Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: It’s been challenging, hasn’t it? what’s your experience of team life?

JACKIE: I’ve had all sorts of experiences. I’ve had some wonderful experiences and I’ve had some challenging experiences. I’ve been in teams that I’ve been the only foreigner. I’ve been in teams where we’re all foreign. I’ve been in a combination of teams. I’ve been in teams led by [nationality], led by foreigners. So different. Yeah. And some have been really wonderful – beyond what you would expect. Some have been really tough – the tough ones there’s been some wonderful coming out into a really healthy place. And there’s been a tough one that I had to choose to leave for my own welfare. So, yeah, the whole mixture.

INTERVIEWER: what kind of things made them difficult?

JACKIE: I think it was usually relationship challenges. Communication issues. So, when I was the only foreigner, I was just out of language school, just everything takes longer to understand, it’s harder work, you don’t have the nuances. But that ended wonderfully and some of those people are my closest [nationality] friends now. One of them I happen to work with now – it’s just what happened, we ended up… He moved five years ago, I just moved this past year, and we’re in the same office and we have quite a giggle. But I think it’s been relationship challenges and willingness of those parties to work through those relationship challenges, or to even see that things may not be perceived by the other in the same way or… yeah.

INTERVIEWER: do you have a plan for the future?

JACKIE: I don’t at the moment. When I moved up here, I had a sense of this was just the first step I needed, this was a step to take of faith, of stepping into something completely new and different. And that … and I don’t know how long it will be for. I have a desire to do further study, there’s a Masters I’m looking at, but I don’t really know. It’s kind of step by step.

INTERVIEWER: How do you maintain your own personal faith?

JACKIE: I think a key basic one is just regular time with me and God: reading the Bible, praying, worshipping. Choosing to be thankful to him. Yeah. Having that sort of daily walk, whatever the day looks like, just that daily walk with him. I think when that foundation’s not there, it’s very different. There’s being part of Christian community that’s always key, as well, whether that’s a local church, whether that’s, in my context at the moment I’m surrounded by Christians so… being part of that. Yeah. So there’s different elements of.

INTERVIEWER: were you in a less surrounded-by-Christians context?

JACKIE: very much so

INTERVIEWER: how have you found that as a change?

JACKIE: yeah, there’s a … it is different. And I think for me that’s still choosing to intentionally be part of the community, the world outside of my immediate work circles and church circles, because it is different. And I, yeah… I know I need to have community, or have an intentionality about connecting outside of my immediate Christian bubble.

INTERVIEWER: How and how much do you use social media?

JACKIE: how are you defining social media?

INTERVIEWER: define it however you like!

JACKIE: I think I use it in different ways. So on a personal level, I actually don’t… I don’t have that much. I have Facebook, which is great for just sort of news contact with friends and family, mainly from outside of my immediate context. During Covid I’ve actually been using social media to keep an eye on the Covid situation in [country] because a lot of sources of information are being shared that way and part of my role has been to keep on top of the news. I was one of the main people who could read [language] in our group, sort of keeping an eye in managing the situation, so I spent a lot of time on [nationality] social media. Then, things like instant messaging, different platforms, that actually I end up using now quite a lot for work. Because it’s how people like to engage, and if that’s how they like to engage, then that’s how I’m going to engage with them. Yeah. So, a lot of whatsapp and other similar things to whatsapp. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: ok, I think that’s all I had to ask. Thank you very much for your time.

JACKIE: are you nearly finished your interviewing…..

*Re-started recording during later informal discussion:*

JACKIE: we have quite a lot of people who’d commit for mid-term options. Not so much from the UK, from other cultures, other countries. And there’s different factors involved. And so they’d commit for say 2-3 years, and quite a lot of them will come back again. I just had a meeting about one family this morning in that situation, and a family with children. It’s not even the free single no-commitments people are the only ones, it’s people with children and other things to take into consideration. So definitely, I think there are cultural influences. Americans or Australians may be more independent in their cultural perception and wanting to have independence. But then I look at some of our Asian workers and because of family commitments, sense of responsibility to family or expectations of them, then they commit for short chunks. So different reasons but similar outworkings.

INTERVIEWER: I wonder if it relates to – you know the expression the “fear of missing out”? I wonder if it relates to that sometimes, that you don’t make a commitment too much in advance in case something better comes up.

JACKIE: I think for some people that is definitely the case. Not necessarily fear of missing out themselves, but fear of their children missing out or fear of their parents missing out.

INTERVIEWER: yeah, schooling is an interesting one. Because traditionally missionaries sent their children away to school, and I think that changed a generation ago – that’s not been happening the same for a while. But I wonder, because of the way that then GenX have brought up their children – very child-centred – whether they then are bringing up their children differently again.

JACKIE: yeah, I observe a difference between parents of different generations. Older parents and younger parents seem to have different approaches. And again different cultures different approaches. There were issues with like language and identity as well.

INTERVIEWER: can you give me an example of what kind of difference you see?

JACKIE: So I think, there would be cultures where there’s just the expectation that children will still go off to boarding school in some form, maybe later than it used to happen. There’s other cultures I think, like our north American colleagues, who that would not be an option, where, yeah, it would be home-schooling because there’s a culture of home-schooling. But I also see a difference with different generations within Americans. I think they would probably, the older ones would be more, ok, this is what the organisation says, or this is what the expectation is so we’re going to do it. Younger ones are probably more, no we want to be very intentional about raising our children, and a strong family ethos and family identity. We’ve got a worker who’s pioneered a new way of doing education that seems to be taking off and it’s very popular called [name]. it’s a hybrid between home-schooling and meeting together and that seems to be kind of the mid-point that a lot of people seem to be happy with. So, em, middle schoolers and high schoolers coming together once a month for a week. So they get the social thing of peers, they get the classroom or some form of classroom experience, but most of the time they’re with the family. And that seems to be a happy medium for a lot of families.

I see the difference in people who come later in life or who have been here longer, having more the ‘well the organisation says it so we’re going to do it how the organisation says it’. Where maybe younger people having more of an idea themselves and willing to push their idea. But I also see a difference in how our leaders react, having been in two different parts of the organisation with very different leadership style in both of them. And the more traditional leadership style being, well this is the organisation’s way and this is it. The other leadership style, which is probably younger – well not too much younger, but culturally different as well – being more, ok, let’s explore this, let’s see if it works. Yeah. And seeing a difference in the demographic of the two parts of the organisation as well. The more traditional one people not staying very long and then the other one seeing a much higher demographic of 20s, 30s, 40s. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: interesting

JACKIE: I’m sure having been cross-culturally yourself, you will have seen things as well

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. It’s fascinating. And I think it is changing. There are differences, definitely. It’s kind of, how do you put your finger on it and then how do you work with it? The organisations have all tried to change in the last 10-15 years. They’ve changed their names, they’ve changed their logos, you know, they’ve changed the way they do training, different things. Most don’t now require 3 years of Bible college like they used to, things like that. So, there’s definite changes, but is that – are they actually reaching the core of what needed to change or is…? And in member care, how do you support people who are different and how do you work with it?

JACKIE: and culturally as well. Because my heart is member care. Starting to think through, how do we do member care, or what does member care look like in different cultures. Like people coming from more collective cultures. Or more individualistic cultures. What does it look like? There’s the generational but there’s the cultural expressions as well. Yeah.

So it’s a fascinating topic you’re doing.