**Interview 001 Pseudonym: John**

INTERVIEWER: Can you confirm for me that you have read the consent form and you are happy for me to record this interview?

JOHN: Yes, that’s fine.

INTERVIEWER: Great. Thank you. Just to start off with, can you tell me a bit about your background, about your faith history? How did you come to be a Christian?

JOHN: Yep, sure. So I was born into a Christian family in a lively Methodist church in [UK town]. So, yeah… my parents were very committed and sort of brought me up to be praying and reading my Bible and going to church. We went to conferences and events and things. I think there’s one occasion when we were on the way back from the Spring Harvest conference and I was asking them how they’d become Christians and how my grandparents had become Christians and then I said, how did I become a Christian? And they said, well you haven’t decided for yourself yet, so… That was in a Little Chef restaurant on the way back. I officially gave my life to Christ in a Little Chef restaurant somewhere in --shire. Yeah, there was no point in my life where I’ve had any sense of turning my back on God, although there were certain times I’ve made some stupid decisions and not been so serious about everything. Yeah, I would say I’ve been brought up in a Christian home and been a Christian my whole life and been very exposed to the causes of mission and evangelism throughout this time.

INTERVIEWER: Did you move away from home after that? At what point? And what kind of church did you end up in? You move away, you start looking for a church… what happened there?

JOHN: Yeah, the few years after I left home I had quite a few different church experiences. So, at 18 I moved to London for a gap year and worked for a schools work charity, a Christian schools work charity. And found myself in quite a modern evangelical Anglican church, near [central London]. After a year there I went to university in [UK city] and just by the fact that they were the friendliest people at the Christian Union I found myself with a [neo-charismatic] church in [UK city]. During this time I met my wife in [East-Central European Country]. And spent a lot of time with her home church in [ECE Country] which was a very conservative Baptist church. So, yeah, I had lots of different church experiences that were… they were all evangelical definitely, but different ends of the evangelical spectrum and expression.

INTERVIEWER: So who do you think have been the biggest influences in your faith? Who are your models?

JOHN: Without doubt my parents. I’d probably say my dad especially. Just, he taught me the very simple ways of Christian living of praying of serving the community around you, reading the Bible. So I think, yeah, his faith’s very simple but very devoted so I think that’s probably been very foundational. And my mum as well. It’s just my dad was a stay-at-home dad so I spent more time with my dad. The pastor in [ECE Country], [name], he… so he’s born in America but to [ECE Country-an] parents, but he’s in [ECE Country] as a foreign missionary for sure. Just, observing his life and his family life, how they live mission. [neo-charismatic church network] – so we’re still part of [network] – there’ve been a couple of years where because of location I was in a different church but we’ve been with [network] since I was at University and since we were married. So, their big emphases are on obviously the gospel but the nations, church-planting, social action, so the various different leaders I’ve been under in [network] have been very influential. [Church network] conferences have probably very much shaped my … yeah, adult formation of my faith.

INTERVIEWER: OK, So moving on to what you’re doing now. Can you tell me a bit about where you live, the kind of context you’re in?

JOHN: Yep, so we’ve been in [W. European city] in Catholic [region] in [country] since end of 2016. We were sent by a [church network] team to come and lead a group of Christians here who weren’t part of a church but wanted to become a church plant. And it probably would have been… well, it depends what you count as a traditional church planting model, but I think we went with the idea that it would be fairly traditional in that we started off with a team of about eight people, em, we’d meet as a house group and then when we were big enough we would start meeting as a church. However, the team we went to join and lead disintegrated very quickly so within three maybe four months. And so we were just left with one couple who didn’t actually have much, well, didn’t have any leadership experience or mission experience although they were very devoted to their faith. Em, and as you can imagine that probably set us back a lot, em, lots of challenges to get through. And as you go through these challenges it sort of re-shapes your idea of what, well it re-shapes your vision, I guess. And you… it forced us to take our time, so you get to know the local area much better than we would have done if we’d been “successful”, in speechmarks. Em, so you get to realise where the actual needs are in the city, where the gaps are, and what the churches are doing really well, what the churches are not doing so well. And we realised there’s actually quite a lot of churches already that are quite similar to what we probably wanted to become. And then you realise how many people in the city will never ever cross the threshold of a church. Even if they did once they never would again. Just the church culture, tradition, is just something that they’d find very difficult. And we also found ourselves, through our work and family life, engaging with people from lots of different backgrounds. And slowly starting to see bits of fruit here and there. And then you realise that actually we can try and build a Christian community that’s maybe not so … em…. Maybe would look strange to someone from a very churched background but actually can be accessible to someone from a completely non-churched background. So, our life here at the moment: my wife’s working full time in an office, em, I have a freelance contract with [charity] where I do some mission consultancy for them, I spend about 20 hours a week delivering food on my bike (so, bike courier), and I’m a sort of part-time stay at home dad with … the [teenager] doesn’t need any looking after but we’ve got [a younger child] as well. He’s… I collect him from school every afternoon and spend a lot of time with him. And actually just this week for the first time I’ve been able to take a very small salary from the church. So… yeah… so I will officially be part-time employed by the church now.

INTERVIEWER: Well, that’s good. I was going to ask about support. So you’ve answered the question about financial support. So you’re basically self-supporting there….

JOHN: Partly. [City]’s very very expensive. So, we raised funds to move over here… em… we used a lot of savings to move over here as well. And that was fine for a year… Yeah, our idea was, it’s an affluent European city, we’ll be able to get jobs that can pay our way. But the rent is so crazy here, we were just always falling a long way short of that every month. So about a year in we made a big effort to raise some regular support from the UK. So we get, it fluctuates a lot, but somewhere between £800 and £1000 a month from the UK. So with that and our employment we just about break even.

INTERVIEWER: So is that coming from churches? Or individuals?

JOHN: Both. The regular support either comes from [church network] churches or from friends.

INTERVIEWER: What about prayer support? Organisational? That kind of thing?

JOHN: So we’re definitely sent by the local church rather than a mission organisation. Em, we’re part of the … [*sentence removed because it identifies church network*]. And we probably go to conferences twice a year in the UK. We have teams come over from [network] churches two to four times a year for a weekend. Most Fridays I skype into a local church’s early morning prayer meeting. We have online support, like a whatsapp prayer group, a facebook prayer group. So, yeah, a big part of our support comes from the UK.

JOHN: How have you found moving to a different culture? How has that been?

INTERVIEWER: Well, timing was interesting because we’d decided early in 2016 that we’d move to [City] and we were going to move in the September and of course Brexit happened in June that year. Maybe, although it’s complicated things, maybe it made it a bit easier to leave the UK because the perception at least was that the UK was a less pleasant place to live than it was. And probably some of the things that we found frustrating about the UK were amplified through Brexit. Em, my wife is from [ECE Country] in the Balkans and had settled in terms of support network in the UK but she’d never really enjoyed British culture, so for my wife it was great getting out of the UK. I’d always had dreams that I would live somewhere in the Balkans or in the former Soviet countries or the Middle East and then, [W. European Country] was definitely a surprise for us, however, looking back, I think that [it] is quite a good halfway culture difference. I think to be honest longterm I probably couldn’t hack living permanently in the Balkans or in Russia or Ukraine or something. But [W. European Country] is close enough to UK culture; it’s got its huge differences but it’s not a million miles away, it’s probably the closest culture to Britain.

*[section removed discussing experience of countries’ cultural proximity to UK; could not anonymise current location of participant]*

JOHN: Sure, yeah. So, culturally… I mean my wife, she’s now got the other side, she’s still not back in the Balkans so she still feels the same home sickness. I don’t miss the UK at all; I love being part of another culture. This is three and a half years in so I don’t think it’s just a honeymoon period. I don’t think that’s an issue for me personally. The isolation is an issue but not the difference in culture.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about that.

JOHN: Yeah… I think… When you’re gearing up to move and go on mission or get sent out you think through lots of different issues and what it’s going to be like for the kids and stuff but for us probably the thing that we underestimated most was the isolation. Just being away from a strong healthy church family Sunday after Sunday, that’s probably the biggest thing to be honest. So, as much as it can frustrate you when you’re in the middle of it all, you underestimate how much goodness just being part of a worshipping community once or twice, three times a week, how much good that does for you and you don’t miss it for six to twelve months and then as you reflect with people why you’re struggling, that, yeah, actually… it’s because we’re not part of the local church here.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that’s the spiritual side? Or is it the friendships?

JOHN: Slightly more the spiritual but the friendship is definitely a factor as well. Definitely for my wife. Friendship wise I’m probably a little bit more self-sufficient, although I probably can be naïve with that sometimes, but definitely the spiritual side. Also, with hindsight, as soon as this small group had disintegrated a bit the smartest move would have been for us to put the whole church-planting thing on hold and join a local church, I think. For one, two, three years, and get stuck in there, get a good support network. But cos you never quite realise what’s happening to you as you’re going through it, the importance of that wasn’t so obvious. Probably also … I’m very happy that we were sent by a local church rather than a mission agency, but I think a mission agency would have emphasised that a bit more with us: you’ve got to be part of a local church and get a good support network around you.

INTERVIEWER: I was going to ask about working in team, but you’re kind of lacking team … that’s what you’re saying…

JOHN: well, it’s come round a bit now, yeah. There’s been one couple that stayed with us the whole way through, they’ve not got huge experience but they’ve been very loyal and supportive to us which has been important. In the last three to six months we’ve started to build something of team here. We’ve got another couple that are 100% committed to us, there’s another couple on the fringe that are almost there. Yeah, the team has made the difference in these last few months. If we’d done this interview six months ago it would probably have had a very different flavour to what it might have now. So team is absolutely critical. We always knew that, we just couldn’t build one.

INTERVIEWER: is the team that you’ve got, are they a similar kind of age to yourselves?

JOHN: so the couple that have been with us the whole time, they’re [local]. She’s, the wife is a similar age to me and my wife, she’s in her late thirties, but the husband is in his late fifties. And they’d only just been married a few years. So they didn’t have kids when we arrived here and they they’ve got a two year old child now. And our kids are sixteen and eight. So in a way, the father is an older generation to us but in terms of having kids a generation below us. There’s not a huge amount in common in that sense. And then the other couple that have just joined us in the last few months, they are British and they’ve got two very little boys. They’re a little bit younger than us; they’ve just turned thirty now.

INTERVIEWER: Talking about children, how do you feel about bringing up your children in a different culture?

JOHN: [City]’s a great place to bring up kids. There was never a sense of risk in terms of safety or opportunities. For my son, he had just turned five when we moved so he was very young. My daughter had just turned thirteen. So we knew that there was a bit more risk in terms of, like, social disruption and her sense of rootedness and stuff. And that has definitely played out a bit. She’s had a … I think she was fine for the first year or two and then with her turning to her mid-teens and the roughest end of puberty for her, it’s been a really tough couple of years. And she’s associated that with being in [Country] more than just the fact that she’s a teenager, so… She was very happy to move; we completely involved her in the whole process of moving here. There was another opportunity earlier that we actually declined because she wasn’t happy about that opportunity. But yeah, but now the narrative that she’s got for herself is that she’s unhappy because she’s in [Country]. The education’s definitely not been as good as we thought it would be so she’s going to go back in September to the UK to do her A-levels, which will be really good for her and she’ll be part of… she’ll go to her old school and be part of her old church community. And she’s very independent so this is a good solution. It’s not like an escape for her, it’s definitely the right thing to do. But at the same time, at least at the moment, as she looks at her time in [Country] she’s not happy about it.

JOHN: so she’s going on her own?

INTERVIEWER: yeah, she’ll go and live with some family friends of ours.

JOHN: we’ve observed a couple of models of this before which has worked really well. I think also… so she’ll be seventeen and a half when she goes, so she’s… she’ll start her A-levels a year behind. She’s definitely ready for the independence. And to sort of live her own life a little bit.

INTERVIEWER: So do you have plans for the future? Are you thinking long-term?

JOHN: Yeah. Yeah, we’d always moved here with sort of a long-term / indefinite timescale and that remains the same. We’re both very passionate about the areas I mentioned before: the Balkans, the former Soviet world, and the Middle East. My wife did her degree in [other W. European language] so she’s very passionate about [that country]. We would love to see opportunities develop in these parts of the world, but I think that would be more supporting mission in these parts of the world rather than being, living there. We see [City] as potentially a very smart strategic base for that sort of work. As well as local ministry as well.

INTERVIEWER: Do you consider yourself a “missionary”?

JOHN: Interesting. I think that the only reason I wouldn’t is just that it’s an old-fashioned word. But I think, if you break it down, then yes, we are definitely missionaries. But I would also, before we moved to [City] we moved to [UK town B], we were in [UK town A] in a large church and we moved to [UK town B] to be part of a church-planting team and I would see that as being missionary as well. And actually, I think everyone… all Christians are called to be missionaries even if they stay in the same place they were born… I think it’s just probably quite a helpful description but not helpful with all the stigma that might go with it and stuff.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of stigma are you thinking?

JOHN: I guess like colonialism, self-righteous evangelism… like, we know best and we’re going to go and teach you how to follow Jesus... we’re going to tell you the truth and improve your lives because we know better because we’re from the West or we’re from Britain or something. God’s definitely called us to pioneer and to lead but I would want to do that with a very open hand and, em, I want to partner with the local communities and serve… yeah, I want to serve them, I don’t want to do mission to them, I want to serve them.

INTERVIEWER: So how would you define “mission”?

JOHN: [pause – laughter] My wife’s just started a Masters in contextual theology with All Nations.

INTERVIEWER: oh lovely, I did the Masters there

JOHN: oh really?

INTERVIEWER: yeah, many years ago

JOHN: I think she might have asked me this question because she was asked it about two months ago. I haven’t got a clue how to define mission. For me personally the Great Commission is really important. So, “go into the world and make disciples… GO and make disciples of all nations.” So there’s definitely a sense of going from where you are – it doesn’t have to be geographical. It could be going from your church community to the community outside the church. So definitely going is part of mission. And making disciples, so yeah, teaching people how to follow Christ. And loving people is very important. Yeah… yeah.. this whole thing about serving and loving people. Em. I think these things… making disciples and serving people sort of go hand in hand for me in terms of mission. The Gospel is both of these things.

INTERVIEWER: Great. Lastly, I just wanted to ask about your social media use. What do you use? How much?

JOHN: Yeah. So, we made a family website, sort of like a mission website I guess when we moved out. We called it [Name of Website]. And it was a point of information for anyone who was interested in what we’re doing and it was a blog of news and reflections and observations. At the same time we started an Instagram account called [Name of Website] sort of parallel to this a little bit. And then we used our own personal Facebook and Twitter accounts for sharing news. As time’s gone on, so when was it? About eighteen months or so ago we started church social media accounts as well and a church website. I would say that these two things are slightly different. The church website is for local ministry, it’s for communicating with people locally. It’s also for information. And our personal things and this [City] Adventure Instagram and blog they’re for connecting with people back in the UK or back in the Balkans, connecting with our support network or being there to potentially find new people who might want to come out and partner with us.

INTERVIEWER: Is there anything you think I’ve missed that’s important?!

JOHN: What’s your – remind your title…

INTERVIEWER: It’s basically Millennials in Mission. So my research questions really… it’s such an unusual thing now, if you think about your generation in the UK and the secular society… why are people still going? So, I think really I’m looking at: are Millennial missionaries just different from other Millennials, or are they different from older missionaries and more like Millennials but doing it somewhere else?

JOHN: I think for me the foundation is probably very traditional. So my, on my mum’s side my grandparents were missionaries. My grandfather actually trained at All Nations back in the late 40s. And even in their seventies they went out to a British army base in Cyprus and were missionaries out there. And growing up at places like Spring Harvest, you’re very… getting the Tear Fund newsletter… you’re very much exposed to these more traditional types of mission. And then coming across [neo-charismatic church network], in the early 2000s. [Church Network]’s huge drives for mission and church-planting. But .. probably.. yeah, looking back now it probably was different to what I grew up with. If I think about some of the conferences and events and festivals I was at, they were probably tapping into the need in Millennials to feel a purpose: that you need a reason, you need a purpose in life. So they were probably tapping – I don’t know how consciously – you’d often go away from a festival thinking yes, this is my reason, this is my purpose, I can’t wait to go and church-plant somewhere else. Yeah, so I think for me it is probably a bit of the traditional stuff but then churches tapping into the whole notion that young people these days need a reason for their lives, a purpose.

At age seven at Spring Harvest, I have a memory of God speaking to me for the first time. And it was that I would be a missionary in the USSR. And that led me down a few different life choices. Just simply in terms of learning Russian at school, and then choosing… it merged into more of an interest in the old communist countries rather than the USSR specifically…. Which is why I then chose to go on a mission trip to [ECE Country] which is [region], where I met my wife and we were able to communicate in Russian because she couldn’t speak English. And then… I worked professionally for [charity] in homelessness in the UK, but then I had opportunities to do mission with [charity] and have been able to lead camps into the former communist world. So Poland, Ukraine, Romania… and I’ve been able to reach out to young leaders in Armenia, Georgia, and… So this I guess fulfils a bit of this call that I feel God put on me. I can definitely trace back specifically – one of the reasons I am doing mission now is because of being exposed to stuff at places like Spring Harvest and that being a context where you’re open to the voice of God.

INTERVIEWER: Great story!

JOHN: Yeah. It’s a really encouraging one for me personally.

INTERVIEWER: yeah. One of those things that you hold onto in the hard times.

JOHN: Yeah, yeah. It’s twenty-seven years after God spoke to me I actually set foot in the former USSR.

INTERVIEWER: Wow. I thought I waited a long time.

JOHN: I don’t know if it’s helpful or interesting. Soon after we were married… so we were married when I was twenty and my wife was twenty-four… and we were in and around [neo-charismatic church network] churches mostly. We were just so hungry to go to international multi-cultural contexts and do mission, to do some pioneering work. And on one hand being around [church network] fuelled that fire, but at the same time… I think [church network] is… we came in just at the right time. Maybe there was a bit of heavy shepherding in the 90s and stuff, 80s. But there’s definitely a sense of respect for church leadership and respecting them as a spiritual authority in your life. So, on one hand, as a movement they were like saying “go, go, go!” But local church leadership in two different contexts were like, “yes, we really believe this is for your life, but we would counsel you now to just take your time a bit more. Get settled as a married couple, as a young family, deal with some of your issues and baggage, before you go.” And I think this was really helpful for us. So, there was ten years from us first being absolutely certain that we would go out on mission to another country and actually ending up there. And that was sort of between the age of twenty-five and thirty-five. And ten years is a long time when you’re twenty-five. So, yeah, there was definitely that sense of patience and submitting to healthy church authority.

INTERVIEWER: So you think that – the wisdom of the older generation – was actually helpful there?

JOHN: yeah, absolutely. I’m really pleased about that. There were a few times during that ten years when I wasn’t, but yeah.

INTERVIEWER: interesting. Great. Well thank you.

JOHN: Very happy to help.