

Chapter 5

God of the Unexpected

by Maida Anderson

I was walking down the street, heading to class, when my situation struck me. I was amazed to be walking on a street in Barcelona, Spain. BARCELONA! It was amazing! And unexpected. How did I get there? It was only possible because of God—the God of the Unexpected.

The Early Years

I was born on April 3, 1956, in the small town of Eckville, Alberta, the oldest child of Raymond (Ray) and Maila Anderson. Five younger brothers and sisters followed. When I was eight, my parents bought an orchard, and we moved to Oliver, BC. We did not grow up in a believing home. However, while I was in grade 12, my sister Ann came to faith through the ministry of a “Jesus coffee house,” which were very popular in the mid-1970s. Our younger siblings also became believers, but I had moved away from home for school and did not become a believer.

I went to the BC Institute of Technology to study computer programming and then worked as a programmer/operator in Richmond, BC. When I was twenty-three, my sister Tami came to Vancouver, and we moved in together. She started attending Richmond Alliance Church, and I went with her. On Sunday, March 16, 1980, the pastor gave a call to accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour. My heart started pounding, and I had problems breathing—I just had to go forward! After we prayed, I felt immediate peace. A baptism was already scheduled for April 13, so I was baptized four weeks after becoming a believer.



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I got involved in church ministry and learned about listening to the Holy Spirit. In March 1981, a speaker from an urban ministry in Vancouver came to speak at our church. At the end of his message, he challenged the congregation. He asked what we were doing in response to God’s call to urban ministries. Although

it was not what he had in mind, I felt the Holy Spirit talking to me about my response—going to Bible college. This was my second lesson in listening and responding to God—the God of the Unexpected.

Preparation for Service

That fall, I went to Canadian Bible College (CBC) in Regina, Saskatchewan. I was unsure why God wanted me to go to CBC, but I obeyed and planned to stay for one year and return to Vancouver. By then, I realized how little I knew about God and the Bible, so it seemed like a good thing to do.

We had weekly missionary meetings on Friday nights and an annual missionary conference in the fall. Was this what God wanted me to do? I prayed about it during the conference but did not hear from Him, so I decided that was not it. Then the former president of CBC, David Rambo, came and spoke at the missionary meeting. He was an American who challenged Canadian students to go overseas to places Americans were not welcome. God spoke to my heart, and after praying about it, I realized He was calling me to go abroad after all. The God of the Unexpected!

Looking back, I see how this was my first lesson in following God's leading, even if I did not know where it would end up. You see, I liked to plan. I wanted to know where I was headed and what awaited me. So, He called me to go to CBC without knowing why and where it would lead. I had to trust Him. And it's a lesson He has had to repeat a few times!

Because I was now planning on going overseas, I switched to a Bachelor of Theology program and graduated in 1985. The Alliance required overseas candidates to do a minimum of two years of home service, ministering in a local church, before going overseas. There were few church openings at the time, but I was offered a position on staff at CBC and Canadian Theological Seminary (CTS). After praying about it, I accepted the job and talked to the Vice-President for Missions, Arnold Cook. He decided I could use that as my home service as long as I was pretty involved in my local church and did it for a minimum of three years. Next, I talked to my pastor at Westside Alliance, Ron Erickson, who was willing to supervise me. I did this for four years before going to Canadian Theological Seminary full-time.

One advantage to working at CBC/CTS was the offer of free tuition for staff members. As a result, I arranged to take one class at CTS each semester and work longer hours to make up for my time in class. I managed to cover lessons for two and a half semesters of full-time study in four years.

If I had known the outcome of working in administration, I probably would not have done it. I had always enjoyed teaching and did a lot of tutoring in high school and beyond, so I planned to become a professor somewhere overseas. Therefore, I enrolled in the Master of Divinity in Cross-Cultural Studies. But the God of the Unexpected had other plans for me.

I had an interview with Dr. Cook when I started studying full-time at CTS, and he said that considering my administrative experience as a computer programmer/operator and on staff at CBC/CTS, the Alliance would like me to become a field secretary/bookkeeper. So unexpected, and yet ... there had been some indication that this would happen, so I had time to pray and think about my response.

Some of my professors at CTS were former missionaries, and David Hartzfeld once talked about one of his personal beliefs (totally off-topic!). He told our class he had covenanted with God to obey constituted authority unless it was unbiblical or unlawful, and he encouraged us to consider doing the same. So, after thinking and praying about it, I decided to follow his example. So, as Dr. Cook represented constituted authority for me, I would accept the assignment. But what did it mean for my future appointment?

After thinking and praying, I decided I wanted some assurances. Most, if not all, field secretaries at the time were associate missionaries on short-term agreements, but I still wanted to be sent as a career missionary. There is nothing wrong with going overseas for a short term, but I felt God was calling me to go long term. This also meant I would need full language study to communicate with nationals. Additionally, I wanted to be involved in ministry in a local church. It would be many years before I found out how involved that would be!

Another thing Dr. Cook talked about with me was my area study. As their thesis, missionary candidates needed to prepare an area study on their future ministry location. Since he was still determining where I would be appointed, he suggested I do a study on field secretaries in Latin America. So, I developed a questionnaire and sent it to the field secretaries in Latin America. Most of them graciously took time in their busy ministries to send me their answers. It was a fascinating study!

In January 1991, at the beginning of my last semester at CTS, it was time for my pre-appointment interview. This is the last hoop candidates jump through—an in-depth interview on your calling, spiritual life, and biblical and theological knowledge. If you pass it (by this stage, most do), you are recommended to the board of The Alliance Canada for an appointment overseas, and the board appoints you.

One thing I was looking forward to in the appointment interview was finding out where I would be going, as all my classmates who had gone before me found

out in the interview. But it was the God of the Unexpected again. Dr. Cook told me there were no openings in Latin America then, but there were openings in Europe, West Africa, and Taiwan, so I could go anywhere in the world. Wasn't that exciting? My immediate but inner response was, "Nooooooooo!" I wanted to know where I was going!

I was disturbed and anxious about not knowing where I would be appointed, and for a few days, I had difficulty concentrating on anything. Finally, there came a point where I decided enough was enough, I could not continue like this, or I would never finish my coursework. So, I spent all my time outside of class in prayer, sometimes even in class. I asked the Lord to show me why I was anxious. After all, I had applied "open," meaning I had no preference for where I went, and I truly meant it. So, why?

The Holy Spirit spoke and showed me I was not trusting God. He reminded me that God had always guided me in time for anything He asked me to do. I had to acknowledge this and ask for forgiveness. Instant peace!

The board met in March, and I wanted to find out where I was going then. After all, they had to appoint everyone to somewhere specific. Dr. Cook called to tell me the board had appointed me to "destination unknown." I still didn't know! A bad half hour followed; I realized I had already passed through this and did not want to do it again. I asked for forgiveness and again felt at peace. I had been appointed to go overseas, even though I was over the usual age limit of 32. Dr. Cook wanted to bend the age limits slightly to get more people into cross-cultural ministry.

During those years, Canada and the United States worked together in sending workers overseas under the U.S. Division of Overseas Ministries (DOM). They met later in the month, and I received another phone call. Dr. Cook asked if I was willing to go to Spain. Yes!

Now to begin the paperwork for a visa for Spain. In June, I went to Toronto for pre-field orientation and to the Toronto Institute of Linguistics (TIL) to learn how to learn another language. The Spanish consulate in Toronto, the only consulate in Canada where you could process visa applications, was across the street from the TIL, so I could apply for it in person, assuming it would speed up the process. Was I wrong!

After TIL, I returned to Oliver and looked for a job. I still had a balance on a student loan from CBC days which had to be paid down before I could go to Spain. As a result, I planned to go to Spain in January 1992. I was in touch with the field director (FD) for Spain, and there was no news about my visa. At the beginning of December, I asked the Lord to let me hear about the visa before Christmas. I did not hear from the consulate. The FD suggested we might have to begin the process

again! That was not the answer I was expecting. But first, I was to send him the papers the consulate had returned to me without any explanation of what to do with them. I sent them, and he took them to the appropriate Spanish government department. It turned out this was what was needed. The government had changed the process but had yet to inform us. The process changed several times over the years, and it took a lot of investigation to keep up.

Obviously I couldn't go in January, but at least the visa was finally in process. For the second time, I asked the Lord to expedite the process and hear about the visa before my birthday on April 3. Finally, I heard on April 1; my visa had been granted! After that, things moved quickly. The visa was stamped in my passport, I packed my small shipment, and the National Ministry Centre (NMC) bought my plane ticket. I left for Spain on April 18, arriving there the next day.

The FD had found a furnished apartment for me, so all I had to do was move in and unpack my boxes of personal belongings. A few weeks later, I walked down the street to the language school, marvelling that I was in Barcelona!

Serving in Spain

I could start language study almost immediately but could only study until the end of July; August was vacation month in Spain—no long-term courses for study until mid-September. So, even though I had very limited Spanish, I started working in the field office during the break in language learning. It had not been my first choice of ministry assignment, but the Lord had worked on my heart while I was waiting for my visa.

I had been given *Too Busy Not to Pray* by Bill Hybels (InterVarsity Press, 1988). On pages 135-136, he talks about ministry being consistent with God's gifts. God has given us gifts and is purposeful, so He expects us to use those gifts. He expects us to grow, but He does not usually call us to move in contradiction to the talents and abilities He has given us. This opened my heart and mind to what God was asking of me. Yes, I could teach, but I also had abilities in administration. God had given them to me and wanted me to use them in my ministry in Spain. Maybe I wouldn't have as much contact with Spaniards, but I could help the other missionaries in administration. So, I arrived in Spain ready and willing to minister to my colleagues in administration to free them to have more time for ministry with the locals.

Also, the Summer Olympics were held in Barcelona that year. It was fascinating to see the increased security in the city. I saw police with submachine guns for the first time! I was not there to attend the Olympics, but friends who were volunteers

could get two tickets to a soccer game, so I tagged along. The Camp Nou stadium was more interesting than the game, but it was fun to be there with thousands of people.

Shortly after I arrived, it was announced that there would be a feasibility study of Spain and France in September to discover if these countries were viable fields. It was very disconcerting. I had just arrived, and they might close the field! But the study commission decided Spain and France were definitely mission fields, so they would remain open. They also decided to relocate some people from Spain to ministries more suited to their gifts and abilities, appoint a new field director, and move the field office from Barcelona to Madrid. Unexpected changes, but at least we could continue in Spain.

The new field director couple, Raymond and Mary Ebbett, arrived in July 1993, and we moved the field office (and ourselves!) in November.

I finished my year of full-time language study in the spring. I was finally feeling comfortable enough in Spanish to become involved in ministry in the Barcelona church when the move to Madrid happened. There was no established church in Madrid yet, but a small group was meeting as the start of a church plant.

Initially, all the people involved were believers, but our members gradually invited unchurched people. I especially remember Carlos and Conchita. Carlos came at the invitation of his dentist, one of our members who shared the gospel message with most of his patients. Carlos was hesitant to participate at first, but he kept coming.

Just before Palm Sunday, we talked about what happened to Jesus during Holy Week, a significant week in the Spanish Catholic Church. The leader emphasized why Jesus died on the cross on Good Friday for each of us—pointing to people and saying, “For you and you and you....” We later got into smaller groups to discuss it, and Carlos was in my group. He said it was the first time he had heard that Jesus died for him. Carlos was in his sixties, had attended church in Spain as a child, and had never heard the gospel message before! It hit home to me then how spiritually dry, even dead, Spaniards were, how they really needed Jesus. For this reason, our new FD discussed the need to pray for Spain’s “spiritual greening.”

Conchita did not come with Carlos initially, convinced evangelicals were a cult. She did eventually come but remained aloof from the group. I spoke with her one-on-one about various things, showing her we were ordinary people. Finally, after

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a few months of attending the group, they accepted the Lord. Conchita and I became good friends, keeping in touch even after they moved out of Madrid. I look forward to seeing them again in Heaven.

The traditional schedule for career missionaries is four years on the field, followed by one year of home assignment in your home country. As an administrator, finding someone to replace you for a year was considered too complicated, so my schedule was different. I went to Canada for a three-month home assignment every two years, with a one-year home assignment after eight years. At least, this was the theory, but it only sometimes worked out due to issues on the field. As I was due for my first home assignment, I needed to prepare to speak to Canadian congregations about my work.

What could I share? Spain was a modern country, and Barcelona and Madrid were modern, cosmopolitan cities. Life was comfortable. But the spiritual background was desolate. Spaniards were resistant to the gospel message. They considered spirituality a private matter and were unwilling to discuss it. The only way to talk about Jesus was to establish a good relationship with someone before even broaching the subject. One of my colleagues said it was “building bridges of trust that stand the weight of the gospel.” New believers were scarce. (Carlos and Conchita had not yet accepted Christ.) The Lord gave me a promise in verses from Lamentations 3:21-26.

*Yet this I call to mind
and therefore I have hope:
22 Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.
23 They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
24 I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion;
therefore I will wait for him."
25 The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him,
to the one who seeks him;
26 it is good to wait quietly
for the salvation of the LORD.*

Verse 24 especially spoke to me; it was my hope over the years I spent in Spain. When I got discouraged about the slow growth or setbacks, I remembered to “wait for him.”

From 1994-2000, there were eleven international workers (IW¹) in Spain, so I was about 80% in the field office and 20% in church ministry. I was involved in discipleship with women, especially new believers, and leading small groups of believers.

In 1998, the Alliance in Canada already had its own Global Ministries (GM) department separate from DOM but had to develop its own sending and funding mechanisms because of Canada Revenue Agency requirements. Thus, GM became autonomous from DOM, and the Global Advance Fund (GAF) was born. We could no longer rely on the USA for support in these areas, although we continued to work together overseas.

The following year I became the regional financial advisory (RFA) for the new Silk Road Region, another surprise from the God of the Unexpected. As RFA, I worked with Canadian workers in the region, supervising their bookkeeping and travelling to their fields to train new bookkeepers and conduct audits. Having an RFA in the region meant they did not have to send someone from the National Ministry Centre to do these things, saving time and money. Of course, this meant more time in administration for me, but I was able to keep up with church ministries for a time.

In 2000, Spain added ten workers to the field, including some from South America, almost doubling our staff. This significantly increased the field office's administrative role, and I had to step back from church ministry. Over the next few years, more staff were added to the field, and more fields were added to the Silk Road, so I was kept busy in the office. When I was tempted to feel frustrated at times because I was not more involved in church ministries, the Lord reminded me, by looking after paying bills, organizing retreats and conferences, running errands, and so on, that others did not have to do it, leaving them time for ministry with people. My ministry was with the other workers.

More changes were coming. (Did I mention I don't like change? How did I become an IW where change is constant? Only God could have guided me through!) The Silk Road Region got a new regional developer couple, and they soon asked me to move to their location so I could work more closely with them in areas not related to finance. After praying about it, I felt God was telling me this was not the time to leave Spain, as I would retire in a few years. So, I suggested they find someone else to be the RFA, and I eventually turned over my responsibilities.

This meant I had a lot of time available for other ministries. While praying about what I should do, I was asked if I would pray about being on the pastoral

1 A new name for our missionaries to help those in closed countries not attract unwanted attention.

team of my local church. This would mean being very involved in local church ministry. Another surprise from the God of the Unexpected! After praying about it and consulting with people I trusted, I became a member of the church's pastoral team from 2016-2021, when I left the field to retire.

In those last few years in Spain, I also turned over many of my responsibilities to others, training them to handle new tasks. The last fifteen months on the field were during the Covid-19 pandemic, which was a completely unexpected situation. The hardest part for me was not being able to personally say goodbye to all my colleagues. Although I was in touch with them regularly, it wasn't the same.

But God always knows what He is doing, and I just needed to trust Him in this as well.



Comunidad Cristiana de Tres Cantos
(Christian Community of Tres Cantos)
pastoral team in prayer, 2020



Comunidad Cristiana de Tres Cantos church retreat, 2019