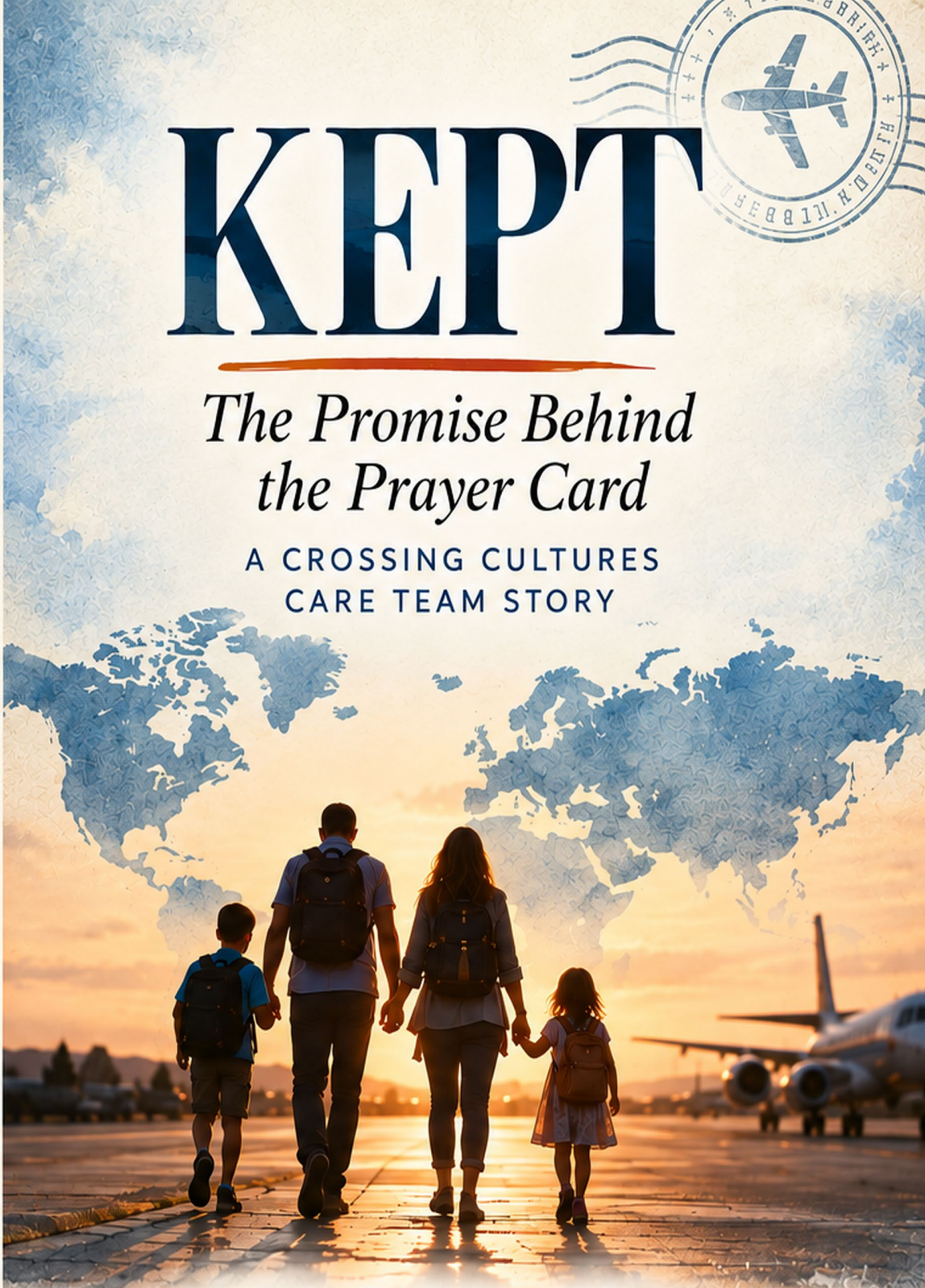
KEPT

The Promise Behind the Prayer Card

A CROSSING CULTURES CARE TEAM STORY



Russell G. Semon, Ph.D.

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This is a work of fiction. Cornerstone, its people, and the families it sends are composites; any resemblance to actual persons or congregations is coincidental.

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The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time forth and forevermore.

Psalm 121:8

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Before You Begin

This book is for people who pray for missionaries and give to support them. If there is a prayer card on your refrigerator, this story was written with you in mind.

It is a story. Cornerstone Church and the Bennetts are not real. What happens to them is. For several years now I have sat with missionary families and individuals while they served overseas and after they came home. Nothing here is any one family's story, but all of it comes from what families like them have lived.

Each chapter closes with a passage of Scripture and a short reflection on it, *In Scripture*. After that come two parts. The first, *An Invitation*, is a question to think about, not a task to do. You do not have to answer it right away. The second, *What Cornerstone Used*, names the tools the church in the story relied on. You can skip it, or follow it into *Crossing Cultures Care Teams*, the guide that shows a church how to do what Cornerstone did.

As you read, you may find yourself wondering where you would fit, and what part you might play in caring for a family like this one. That is the question this book was written to ask.

CHAPTER ONE

The Send-Off

The cake had the Bennetts' faces on it. Donna Pruitt had ordered it with their family photo printed on top: Eric and Sarah in the middle, Caleb and Lucy on either side, and underneath, SENT WITH LOVE, CORNERSTONE FAMILY. A few people thought it was a little strange to cut into. Nobody would have changed it.

By 10:40 a.m. the fellowship hall was full, and the line to hug Sarah Bennett ran past the coat rack and into the hallway. Cornerstone had about seven hundred on a Sunday, across two services. Not everyone stayed after the service, but a good crowd did, more than came to most things at Cornerstone. The Hendersons had driven in from Tyler. Sarah's college roommate had flown in from Ohio. A few neighbors who had never been inside the building came too.

An hour earlier, in the sanctuary, Pastor Dave Hollis had called the family forward. The elders gathered around them to pray, and then, without anyone planning it, the rest of the congregation got up and came too. Row by row they came forward until everyone who could reach had a hand on someone who had a hand on the Bennetts. Young parents came with toddlers on their hips. The high school group came down the side aisle together. Walt Brauer had chaired the missions committee for eleven years, and nobody at Cornerstone had ever seen him cry. He prayed the commissioning prayer with tears in his eyes.

"Lord, you are sending them," he prayed, "and we are sending them, and this morning those are the same thing."

Marianne Cole stood in the eighth row with her hand on the shoulder of a man she had known for thirty years, and she was glad. She was also aware of something else that she could not put a name to. It was not guilt. She had prayed for missionaries every

Tuesday for twenty-two years. She gave enough that she noticed it in the grocery budget. She did not doubt her own faithfulness. This was something different. It was not a feeling that she should do more. She was cautious of doing more; she had watched good people at church wear themselves out doing more. It was closer to a sense that there was something in all this she had not yet understood. She decided to think about it later.

Eric and Sarah were both in their thirties. Caleb was nine. He kept one eye open through the whole prayer. Lucy was six and fell asleep leaning against her father's leg before it was over. Someone took a picture of that moment, Lucy asleep, Eric's hand on her hair, the church crowded around them, and it hung in the church office for years.

The prayer cards were on a table by the door, next to the guest book and a basket of magnets. Jess Landry had set up the table. At thirty-four she was the youngest person on the missions committee by twenty years, and she had planned most of the morning with Donna.

Sarah had designed the card herself. It showed the family sitting on a bench, with a verse along the bottom and their new mailing address in very small print. Across the top it said THE BENNETTS, and underneath, PRAY · GIVE · GO. On the back were four prayer requests: safe travels, language school, Caleb's adjustment, and team unity. These requests would be accurate for about six weeks. The card would stay on refrigerators for years.

Donna had ordered three hundred magnets. People picked up a card and a magnet on their way out, and that week the Bennetts went up on refrigerators all over town, next to school lunch menus and dentist reminders and the cards of other missionary families, some of them faded from years in the sun. Marianne moved her pizza coupons to make room and put the Bennetts at eye level, right in the center. Later she would remember doing that, and how it had felt like she had done something.

That was the thing about the card. Putting it up felt like keeping a promise. But it was only a card on a refrigerator.

The Bennetts flew out on a Tuesday. Eleven people went to the airport. They stood at the security line and said goodbye several times over. Eric carried Lucy through the checkpoint, and she waved over his shoulder until they turned the corner. Then the eleven people went to lunch, and everyone agreed that the send-off could not have gone better.

It could not have. This is not a story about a church that failed. Cornerstone did everything it knew to do, and it did those things well. The send-off was never the problem.

The problem was Wednesday.

Not the first Wednesday. That week Sarah sent three updates to the church: they had arrived safely, the airline had lost a bag, and here was a picture of Caleb asleep on two suitcases. The problem was all the Wednesdays after that, when the updates slowed down. Updates always slow down. It isn't that people stop caring. Life on the field gets busy and hard, and writing a newsletter to everyone on the list about how you are really doing starts to feel like a performance. And nobody back home has the specific job of asking.

Three Sundays after the airport, between services, Edna Fitch stopped Walt Brauer at the coffee pot. Edna was eighty-one. She had been praying for missionaries longer than Walt had been alive, from a handwritten list she kept in her Bible. She kept it tucked at Third John, a letter so short most people have to look it up, and she had never said why.

"Walt," she said. "How are the Bennetts? Really?"

Walt had been on the committee eleven years. He had prayed over the Bennetts at the commissioning. Their card was on his refrigerator. And he realized he did not have an answer.

"They're doing great," he said. "Settling in. Language school."

Edna looked at him kindly.

"That's what the card says," she said. She patted his arm and went to find her seat.

Walt stayed by the coffee pot for a while.

He was not a dramatic man, and nothing dramatic happened. He just did the math. The church had spent eleven thousand

dollars and one memorable Sunday sending the Bennetts. As far as he could tell, it was spending nothing at all on keeping them. People were praying for them. He believed that. He was praying for them himself. But he was praying from the back of a card printed in June, and it was almost October. If Sarah was crying every night, or Caleb had stopped sleeping, or the money had run short, Walt would not know. Worse, he could not say whose job it would have been to know.

Cornerstone had a missions pastor, but he also led the church's outreach, and he had fifteen sent workers to keep up with. He knew the Bennetts' names, and their country, and when their support came due. He could not know how they were sleeping.

Jess Landry had asked Walt twice that summer whether Cornerstone did anything for its missionaries besides send cards and money. Both times he had told her yes. Standing by the coffee pot, he was not sure anymore what he had meant.

The whole church loved the Bennetts. He was sure of that. But love was not the question.

The question was whether anyone had been given the job.

Walt poured out his coffee and went to find Pastor Dave.

❦

Marianne heard about the conversation at the coffee pot the way people at Cornerstone heard about most things: from Donna, by Thursday, with a few details wrong.

That night she stood in her kitchen with a dish towel over her shoulder and looked at the Bennetts' card. For the first time since the commissioning, she let herself think about what she had felt that Sunday. Twenty-two years of Tuesdays. Twenty-two years of giving that cost her something. She was faithful, and she knew it. That was what puzzled her. The feeling did not accuse her of anything. It seemed to be asking her something instead, and she did not yet know what.

She did not know that Walt had started a list of names, or that her name was on it.

She straightened the card on the refrigerator, turned off the kitchen light, and went up to bed.

❦

You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God… that we may be fellow workers for the truth.

— 3 John 6, 8

In Scripture

John wrote to a man named Gaius, who welcomed the workers the church sent out, strangers to him, and sent them on their way well provided for. We know almost nothing else about him. John's word for what he did was not supporter, or donor. It was fellow worker.

An Invitation

Think of one person or family your church has sent. What would you want to know about their life right now that isn't on the prayer card? Let yourself wonder whether you could be one of the people who knows.

What Cornerstone Used

Nothing yet. What Walt builds next is laid out in *Crossing Cultures Care Teams* and in its tools at crossingcultures.care/cc-care-teams.

CHAPTER TWO

Invited, Not Announced

Marianne heard that the church was starting something new the way she heard most things at Cornerstone: from Donna, at the grocery store, with a few details wrong.

"It's a committee," Donna said, picking through the avocados. "Or maybe a ministry. Walt has a binder."

"What kind of ministry?"

"For the missionaries. The Bennetts first, I think." Donna lowered her voice, though not much. "Nobody's announced anything. That's the strange part. You know Cornerstone. If we were building an ark, there'd be a sign-up sheet by Sunday."

That was true. Cornerstone ran on sign-up sheets. There were sheets for the nursery, the food pantry, and the Christmas pageant, all clipped to a board by the welcome desk. For twenty-two years Marianne had signed the ones that came her way. She was a dependable volunteer, and she knew it, and she did not mind.

She watched for a sheet that fall, but none came. There was no bulletin insert, no announcement from the pulpit, and no table in the fellowship hall. Walt did carry a binder, and it did get thicker, and through October and November he looked like a man working on a hard problem. Jess sat in on most of his meetings with Pastor Dave. She was the one who had found the guide he was working from, late one night, after an internet search that started with "how do churches take care of their missionaries."

Marianne waited. She was not offended. She was curious.

The Bennetts' newsletter came in November and again in January. Each one was shorter than the last. Language study was hard. Caleb had made a friend, a boy from the apartment downstairs. Lucy had learned to say "thank you" and "bathroom."

There was a picture of both children in winter coats that didn't quite fit. At the bottom Sarah had written, "Thank you for your prayers. We feel them."

Marianne read that line several times. She believed it. She also thought it sounded like something a person writes when there is no one in particular to tell the rest to.

Most of what happened that fall, Marianne learned later.

In October Walt went to Pastor Dave with what he had worked out at the coffee pot. Dave agreed, but he said the first question was not Cornerstone's to answer. It was the Bennetts'.

That same week Walt wrote to Eric and Sarah himself. He had never written them anything but a Christmas card. He told them the church wanted to do more than pray from the back of a card, and that it did not want to do anything to them, only with them, and only if they wanted it. He attached a short description of a care team from the guide Jess had found. He told them to take their time, and that no was a good answer.

Sarah wrote back two weeks later. They had read it twice, she said, and prayed about it, and talked with their field leader. They would like it. She asked one thing first: that no one from Cornerstone contact their organization about them. Whether and when to tell their organization about the team was hers and Eric's to decide. Walt forwarded the email to Dave with one line of his own: "She said yes." Then the elders spent two meetings asking whether Cornerstone was ready to keep a promise like this for years, and what it would cost, before they said yes too. Dave asked Fran Ostrander, a longtime Cornerstone member, whether she would be willing to coordinate, if the Bennetts wanted her, because she had lived on the other side of it.

On the video call in January, Dave told Eric and Sarah that Fran was willing to coordinate, if they wanted her, and asked whether there was anyone else they would rather have. Sarah said, "Fran," before Eric could. After that, Dave and Fran mostly listened. Eric and Sarah said they did not want a committee that reported on them. They wanted a few people who would actually know them. Sarah wanted someone she could talk to who would

not pass things along to the prayer chain. Caleb, who had wandered into the room, wanted to know whether Mrs. Vu could be on it. She had taught his Sunday school class the year before they left. Then Fran asked Eric and Sarah who they would want, and wrote down every name they said. Before the call ended, Dave asked them what their organization already provided, what it did in a crisis, and what the team should know about security where they lived. They told him what they were free to tell. Then Eric gave Dave one name and one number, for a crisis or a worry that someone was being harmed. Dave wrote it down and gave it to Fran, and to no one else.

❦

They came on a Tuesday evening in February.

Later she suspected the day was not an accident, since Walt knew Tuesday was her prayer day. At seven o'clock the doorbell rang. Pastor Dave Hollis was on the porch, and with him was Fran Ostrander. Marianne knew Fran the way you know people in a church of seven hundred: by where she sat and what she brought. Fran sat in the fourth row on the left at the early service, and she brought chicken spaghetti to every potluck.

Ray made coffee and then, after thirty-four years of marriage, knew to take his cup to the den.

They sat at the kitchen table. Dave did not spend long on small talk.

"We're forming a team for the Bennetts," he said. "A small one. Six people, each with a defined role, for eighteen months. At the end of that we'll sit down together and decide honestly whether to keep going. Fran has agreed to coordinate it. We'd like you to consider being one of the six."

He handed her a single page. At the top it said Relational Liaison. Below that it described the core responsibilities of the role in plain terms. Fran answered her questions about how many hours a month it would take, and when they would review whether to keep going.

Marianne had been asked to do things at church for twenty-two years. Usually there was a need and an empty slot, and she was the person who hadn't said no lately. This was different. It was specific. She read the page twice.

"What does it mean, in plain English?" she asked.

"It means you'd be Sarah's person," Fran said. "At least twice a month, you talk with her. Not to get news for the prayer list. To ask how she's really doing, and then listen."

"Why me?" Marianne asked. It came out more bluntly than she intended.

Fran had an index card in her hand, but she didn't look at it.

"Three reasons," she said. "Walt has more, but these are mine. You still ask the Lindqvists about their son by name, and he went to Peru in 2011. When the Abernathys' baby was in the NICU, everyone brought food, and you took care of their dog for three weeks, because nobody else had thought about the dog. And I've sat behind you for six years, and I have never heard you repeat something that wasn't yours to repeat."

She paused.

"And one more that isn't mine. In January, before we asked anyone, Dave and I had a video call with Eric and Sarah. We asked them what they needed this team to be, and who they would want on it. Your name was on both of their lists."

Marianne didn't say anything. She was not used to being noticed that clearly, and she didn't know what to say.

"Don't answer tonight," Dave said. He set a thicker booklet on the table and pulled several sheets from it. "This is a personal reflection guide. It's just for you. Nobody sees it unless you choose to show them. After that, Fran will sit down with you again. And Marianne, you can say no. If you say no, it won't change how anyone at Cornerstone thinks of you. Even if you say yes, any of us can still step back right up until the covenant is signed. I mean that."

At the door, while Dave went to start the car, Fran touched her arm.

“Hal and I served in Mali for twelve years,” she said. “We came home for good in 2019. Do you know what people asked us most, those first few months back?”

Marianne shook her head.

“Whether it was hot.” Fran smiled. “It was.”

❦

Marianne worked through the guide over three evenings at the kitchen table after Ray had gone to bed.

The first page said there were no right answers and no passing score. Marianne had spent most of her life getting things right, and at first she didn’t quite believe it. The guide had twelve short sections. Each one described something a person on a team like this would need, asked a question about it, and gave six words to choose from, from Curious at the low end to Anchored at the high end. The guide said the words were not a measure of anyone’s worth, only a description of where a person was growing.

She answered honestly, and it took longer than she expected. She was stronger in some areas than she had thought and weaker in others. One of the weaker ones made her stop. In the margin beside it she wrote, “I try to fix things.” After a minute she added, “Even things that aren’t mine.” She had never written that down before. Seeing it on paper made it harder to argue with.

On the second evening she took the guide into the den and asked Ray whether he would support her in this if she said yes.

He took off his reading glasses. “You’ve been different since June,” he said.

“I know.”

“I don’t know what it is.” He folded the glasses. “But I’d rather you do this than keep wondering about it.”

❦

The interview was the next week, in Fran’s living room. Before she asked anything, Fran said, “This is about discernment, not a test. I want to say that out loud.”

Marianne had half expected to be evaluated. Instead Fran asked about her. She asked what might make this role hard for Marianne. She asked what Marianne would need from the rest of the team when things got heavy. “And they will,” Fran said. She asked how Marianne would know if she was getting too tired, and who would tell her if she didn’t notice.

Marianne told her about the note in the margin.

“Good,” Fran said. “Then you’ll understand why the covenant says what it says.”

Near the end, Fran asked, “Who takes care of you?”

Marianne started to answer and stopped.

Driving home, she realized she had been asked more about her own life in that hour than she could remember being asked in a long time. She had not been the one under review. She was being prepared.

The next Saturday she rode with Fran to a church across the river, about half the size of Cornerstone, with three or four hundred on a Sunday, to sit in on a team that had been doing this for four years. She watched six ordinary people, the youngest of them a nurse who had come straight from her shift, spend an hour and a half talking carefully about one family serving in Thailand. After that came a week with nothing on the calendar. Fran said that was on purpose, so she would have time to pray.

She said yes the following Sunday in the church parking lot, through the open window of Fran’s car. It was not how she had pictured it.

❦

There were supposed to be six of them. Gene Talbot was going to be the sixth, the at-large member who helps wherever help is needed. Gene had said yes in January and had come to the first training night with a legal pad. Then his son-in-law received deployment orders. Gene said it plainly. His daughter and three grandchildren would be moving into his back bedroom in April for most of a year.

He called Fran the next Monday. That same week, before anyone asked him, Fran called Eric and Sarah about Micah Landry, Jess's husband. Eric said Micah had set up their laptops before they left, and that someone who had grown up as an MK would mean a lot to Caleb someday. So Fran and Dave asked Micah, and Micah came to the second training night with his laptop and a lot of questions. On the night the team was to review and sign the covenant, Gene came anyway.

It was the last Tuesday in March, in the Hollises' living room, the third of five training nights. Linda Hollis had set out six chairs in a circle before anyone arrived. The team had come in one at a time.

Fran, the coordinator. Walt, who would lead the team's prayer and had already started a list that went well beyond the back of the card. Donna, who would handle practical needs; she had cried when she was asked and then gone quiet, which no one at Cornerstone had ever seen. Micah Landry, who would take the at-large role. He was thirty-six and worked in information technology for the hospital system, and he had grown up in Bolivia, the son of missionaries. He and Jess had two children, Owen, who was ten, and Molly, who was seven. Micah had said yes on one condition: two evenings a month, not more, and never on Thursdays, because Thursday was soccer. Fran had written that on his role page and thanked him for it. Teresa Vu, who had taught third grade for thirty-one years and would be the one to stay in touch with Caleb and Lucy. She had already completed the church's child-protection training, the same training the nursery workers took, and said she was a little insulted by it and completely in favor of it. And Marianne.

Gene stood just inside the door with his coat on. He didn't sit down. He knew there wasn't a chair for him.

"I prayed about it for two weeks," he said. "If I signed tonight, you'd be getting whatever was left of me after those kids. The Bennetts deserve better than that."

"Thank you for telling us straight," Fran said, and she meant it. "The terms come around again in eighteen months. May I ask you again then?"

"You'd better," Gene said.

"And when the Bennetts are home," Fran said, "we'll need people around the table who aren't on the team."

"I'll grill," Gene said.

Then he asked if he could pray for them before he left, and he did, standing, with his hat in his hands. After the door closed behind him, Dave said, "That's what a good no looks like. I would rather have Gene's honest no than a yes that runs out by May."

At 7:15 p.m. Fran set her laptop on the coffee table and turned it to face the circle. It was 8:15 a.m. the next morning where the Bennetts were. Eric and Sarah were sitting at their kitchen table with cups of coffee. The children had already left for school.

Marianne had not seen Sarah's face, except on her refrigerator, since June. She looked thinner, and tired, and glad to see them.

Dave asked how they were doing.

"We're fine," Eric said.

Sarah was quiet for a moment. "Mostly," she said.

Nobody hurried past it. Fran wrote something down.

Then they turned to the covenant.

Each of them had been given a copy the week before and asked to read it slowly, alone. Marianne had read hers at the kitchen table with a pencil in her hand. She hadn't marked anything. There was nothing in it she disagreed with, but some of it made her nervous. Fran read the opening paragraph aloud. Then they went around the circle, each person reading the next line, and when it came to the laptop, Eric and Sarah read too.

Show up consistently.

Care for the whole person.

Follow our missionary's lead.

That one was Sarah's. "I like that one," she said.

Maintain confidentiality, keeping what is shared within this team, with the single exception of a risk of harm to self or others, which we will bring to pastoral leadership without delay.

That one was Donna's. She read it, and then she read it again. "Well," she said. "That one's for me." Everyone laughed a little. Donna didn't. Later, she signed her name more slowly than anyone else.

Escalate wisely. Sustain our team. Reflect honestly. Address conflict directly.

Then came the three things they were acknowledging, and the last one came around to Marianne.

"That our missionary is not a project to manage but a person to accompany," she read, "and that our job is to see them clearly, not to present them as fine."

She thought of the note in her margin. Not a project. Not something to fix. She also thought of Sarah saying "Mostly," and she knew Sarah was listening. She read the line steadily, but it stayed with her. It would be months before she fully understood why.

They talked through the covenant together before anyone signed. It took longer than anyone expected, and it was the best part of the evening. Then Dave opened his Bible. He read the passage printed on the training sheet for that night, from Ecclesiastes, about two being better than one and a threefold cord not being quickly broken. Then he read one more verse.

"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

Marianne looked at the six chairs Linda had set out before any of them arrived. There were exactly enough. She thought about the words "prepared beforehand" and did not say anything.

The form had a place for each person's name and role. Fran wrote Care Coordinator. Walt wrote Spiritual Encouragement Lead. Teresa wrote MK Lead. Donna wrote Logistics Support Lead. Micah wrote At-Large Member. Marianne wrote Relational Liaison.

Dave signed last, on the line at the bottom marked Pastoral Oversight Representative.

"I'm not signing this as your supervisor," he said. "I'm signing it as one of you. If you bring me something heavy, I'll answer within a day. Hold me to that."

Fran had emailed the Bennetts a copy of the covenant the week before. Now Eric held their copy up to the camera. He and Sarah had signed it at their own table that morning. Fran wrote their names in the space at the top of the team's page marked Missionary Name(s), and held it up so they could see.

Then Dave asked Eric if he would pray. Eric had expected to be prayed for, and it took him a moment. He prayed for each of them by name. He thanked God for Gene. At the end he said, "Lord, they've promised to keep us. Keep them too."

❦

The house was dark when Marianne got home. Ray had left the light on over the stove.

She stood in the kitchen with her coat still on and worked out the time difference. It was 9:45 a.m. where Sarah was. Before the call ended, Sarah and Marianne had decided on Thursday mornings for their talks, after the children left for school. Marianne worked out what time that would be in Louisiana. It was Wednesday night. She put it in her phone. Then, because she was who she was, she wrote it on the back of an envelope too, folded it, and put it in her Bible where she would see it.

From the top of the stairs Ray called, "Well?"

"I'm Sarah's person," she said.

❦

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

— Ephesians 2:10

In Scripture

Paul spends most of two chapters telling the Ephesians what grace saved them from. Then, in one sentence, he tells them what it saved them for: good works God had prepared before they knew to look for them.

Henry Blackaby and Avery Willis put the same truth this way: "You may have thought you were saved just to go to heaven when you die, but God says, 'I saved you to be on mission with Me to redeem a broken world.'"†

For some, that mission means going. For many more, it means keeping those who go. Scripture never calls that the smaller share.

An Invitation

If someone from your church asked you to serve on a care team, would you let yourself consider it before answering? Notice what makes you want to say no quickly, and what makes you want to say yes.

What Cornerstone Used

The Care Team Selection Profile, Personal Reflection Guide, and Structured Selection Interview (Tools 6–8); the Role Clarification Guide (Tool 9); and the Covenant of Shared Stewardship (Tool 11). In *Crossing Cultures Care Teams*, Chapters II-5 to II-7, and at crossingcultures.care/cc-care-teams.

† Henry T. Blackaby and Avery T. Willis Jr., *On Mission with God: Living God's Purpose for His Glory* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), chap. 1.

CHAPTER THREE

Learning to See

The fourth training night was about learning to see.

Fran handed out a workbook with eight sections, one for each part of a missionary's life. Spiritual. Emotional. Marriage and family. Adjusting to the culture. Ministry and the sending organization. Physical health. Practical needs and money. The children. Fran said the team would sit down with Eric and Sarah and talk through all eight within the month, and then again every three months for the first year, and any time something big changed.

"The point isn't to fill in boxes," she said. "The point is that we don't only ask about the parts that are easy to talk about. Left to ourselves, we'll ask about ministry and the weather. We won't ask about money or sleep or how the marriage is doing. The map makes us ask."

Then she paired them up to practice. Walt played a missionary from a short case written on an index card, and Marianne was supposed to ask him about one area. She drew Marriage and family.

It was awkward. Walt was a good sport, but Marianne could hardly get the words out. She asked how things were at home. Walt, reading from his card, said, "Fine. Busy." Marianne said, "That's good," and was about to move on when Fran, walking past, said quietly, "Ask the second question."

Marianne looked at her.

"The first answer is almost always 'fine,'" Fran said. "The second question is where the real answer is."

So Marianne asked, "Busy how?" and Walt looked at his card and said, "Busy enough that we haven't had a real conversation

since Christmas." Everyone laughed, because it was Walt saying it, but Marianne didn't forget it.

The last part of the night was about what to do when something was wrong. Fran walked them through the levels, from paying closer attention, to calling the team together, to helping the missionary find the right person to talk to, maybe a professional counselor. She did not give them the number for the Bennetts' organization. "Eric and Sarah gave one name and one number to Dave and me," she said. "It's for one thing: a crisis, or a worry that someone is being harmed. Nobody else has it, and nobody else needs it. In a lot of places, even confirming that a family works with a mission organization can put them at risk. Anything else, we take to Eric and Sarah. If we start talking to their organization about them, we've put ourselves in the middle, between them and the people they work for." Then she said one thing three times, slowly, so nobody could miss it: if anyone ever said anything about hurting themselves or someone else, or anything that made them worry a child was being harmed, they were to call Dave right away. They were not to wait for a meeting. They were not to handle it alone. If it was a child's safety, Dave would follow the church's child-protection policy, and the law, on who needed to be told.

The fifth training night was not training at all. It was their first real monthly meeting. They followed the agenda they would use every month from then on: prayer, an update from each role, anything on the watch list, what each person would do before next time, and prayer again. It took an hour and ten minutes. Nothing remarkable happened. Before they left, Micah set up the team's own email account and the laptop that would hold its records, and showed Fran, with himself as her backup, how to open them. He also set up a group text for the team, for scheduling and prayer reminders only. Fran made one rule for both: nothing went into them that the team would not say out loud in a meeting. Micah showed Walt twice how to find the group text. The second time, Walt wrote the steps on an index card.

"Good," Fran said as they were leaving. "That's what it should feel like: complete, thorough, well done."

❦

Marianne's first Thursday call with Sarah was on a Wednesday night in April, at seven o'clock Louisiana time.

She had written down four questions on a notepad. She had her Bible open beside it, though she wasn't sure why. She was more nervous than she had been at the interview.

Sarah answered from her kitchen with her hair still wet. They talked about the weather, which had turned warm, and about language school, where Sarah had a test coming up in June. They talked about the market near their apartment. It was pleasant. After twenty minutes Marianne realized that she had not asked any of her four questions and that Sarah had not said anything she couldn't have put in a newsletter.

She thought of Fran saying, "Ask the second question."

"Sarah," she said, "how are you sleeping?"

Sarah stopped. "Not great," she said. "Why?"

"No reason. I just wanted to know."

Sarah looked at her for a moment. Then she told her. She woke up most nights around three and couldn't go back to sleep. She lay there going over vocabulary, or worrying about the kids, or about money, or about the walk home from language school after dark. She had not told anyone, because it seemed like such a small thing to complain about.

"It isn't small," Marianne said.

That was all. They talked for another fifteen minutes. This time Sarah told her about the first month, when she had come home from the market twice without what she went for, because she couldn't find the words and didn't want to point. When Marianne hung up, she wrote in her notebook: Sleep. 3 a.m. The market. Language test in June.

❦

The first full care map took two video calls in the last week of April. Fran and Marianne did it together, with Eric and Sarah both on

the calls. Fran asked most of the questions. Marianne took notes and asked a few of her own.

They went through all eight areas, and some of it was easy. Eric liked the field team leader and felt well supported by the organization. The kids were healthy. They had found a doctor who spoke some English. That part sounded easy until Sarah explained that it had taken four months, and that the first time Lucy ran a fever she had stood in a pharmacy holding up her phone while Eric translated for the pharmacist from across town.

Some of it was harder. Fran asked about money the same way she had asked about the weather, and Eric said that their monthly support was down about eight percent since January. Two supporting families had stopped giving, and one church had cut its budget. The car had needed a repair they hadn't planned for. They were all right, but only just.

"Has anyone asked you about that before?" Fran said.

"No," Eric said. "Nobody asks about money. It feels strange to bring it up."

Fran asked about church, and Sarah said they had not been in a worship service they could understand since they arrived. They went every Sunday and understood perhaps a third of it. Sarah said she hadn't realized how much she would miss simply singing in English. Her mother had turned seventy in March. They had sung to her on a video call at five in the morning, and the call froze twice.

When Fran asked about the marriage, there was a pause.

"We're good," Eric said.

Sarah said, "We don't fight." She thought about it. "We don't talk much, either. We're too tired."

Fran wrote that down without comment and moved on.

When they came to the children, Sarah said Lucy was doing wonderfully. She had friends, she had picked up more of the language than either of her parents, and she was happy.

"And Caleb's fine," Sarah said.

Marianne asked the second question. "What's he been reading?"

Sarah opened her mouth and then closed it. “He hasn’t been,” she said slowly. “Not since Christmas, I think. He read everything we brought, and then his friend downstairs moved away in February, and I guess he just stopped. I didn’t really notice until you asked.”

Fran wrote it down as something to watch.

That night Marianne could not sleep either.

She lay in bed thinking about the questions she had asked. How are you sleeping. How is the money. What’s Caleb reading. She had asked a missionary about her marriage. Twenty-two years of praying for missionaries, and she had never once asked one of them anything like that. It felt like prying. She wondered if Sarah was lying awake on the other side of the world, sorry she had said so much.

In the morning there was an email from Walt. As the team’s Spiritual Encouragement Lead, he had started sending a short email every Thursday with a passage of Scripture and a line or two of his own. This one was from 2 Timothy 4.

“Do your best to come to me soon… Luke alone is with me… When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments.”

Under it Walt had written only, “Paul asked for his coat.”

Marianne read it twice. Then she got dressed and went on with her day.

The May meeting was the first one with anything on the watch list. Fran read the notes from the care map out loud, without the details that weren’t the team’s to know, and they went through them one at a time.

With Eric’s okay, the money went to Fran and Dave. They would talk to the missions committee about whether the church could increase its monthly support before the end of the year.

Sarah's sleep stayed with Marianne. She would keep asking about it, and help Sarah think through what she could try. The worship services went to Walt, who said he would ask Eric and Sarah whether they would like a recording of the Sunday service from Cornerstone each week, and whether they would actually want it or only say yes to be polite. Cornerstone streamed both services, but the site it used was blocked where the Bennetts lived. Micah said that if they did want it, he could save each service as a file and send it through an app that worked there, so it would be waiting for them by Sunday afternoon.

The marriage went back to Eric and Sarah. Fran would ask them who, if anyone, they would want to talk with about it: a counselor, a couple they trusted, or their pastor. She would also tell them that Dave was willing to check in with the two of them together every other week, and to ask the questions about their marriage that they would rather not share with the team. They chose Dave, and he set the first call for June.

Sarah's mother went on the list too. Walt put her birthday on the calendar he kept for the family. Donna asked Sarah whether there was anything her mother would want from the team. Sarah thought about it and said a better way to call would help, since the call on her birthday had frozen twice. Sarah asked her mother first, and she said yes. The next week Micah drove out to her house with a tablet, set it up at her kitchen table, and showed her how to answer a call.

Caleb went to Teresa.

Before the meeting, Marianne had asked Sarah on their Thursday call whether it would be all right to tell Teresa what Sarah had said about Caleb. Sarah had said, "Please."

Teresa set up a video call with Caleb for that Saturday. Sarah sat in the room with him, the way the team had agreed all contact with the children would happen. Teresa did not ask Caleb why he had stopped reading. She asked him what the best book he had ever read was, and he told her, and she said she had read it too and asked what he thought of the ending. They talked for forty minutes.

At the end of the call Teresa knew three things. Caleb had read every English book in the apartment at least twice. The e-reader his grandparents had given him had stopped working in January. And the boy downstairs, who had been his only friend, had moved to another city.

Teresa gave Donna a list on Sunday. Micah found an e-reader that would work overseas and set it up with a library account. Donna had a box in the mail on Tuesday, with the books and the e-reader in it. The shipping cost more than the books. Donna said that was what the logistics line in the budget was for. When the box arrived, Micah walked Sarah through the library account on a video call while Caleb watched over her shoulder.

That was all it took. It was a small thing, and they had caught it while it was still small. Fran called it the first level: paying closer attention. Nobody needed to be called in. Nobody needed to worry. Someone just needed to ask.

Teresa and Caleb started reading the same book at the same time, and every other Saturday they talked about it, with Sarah in the room. Teresa said it was the most fun she'd had since she retired.

❦

Asking about Sarah's sleep turned out to be only half of it. At the May meeting Fran had said the other half was helping Sarah think it through.

So on their next Thursday call Marianne asked more. Had Sarah talked to the doctor about it, the one who spoke some English? Not yet. It had taken four months to find him, and she did not want to spend an appointment on something that sounded so small. What had she tried? Warm milk. A hot bath, when the water heater cooperated. No screens after nine. None of it lasted. Could she rest during the day? Not on school days. She had language class every morning, and the afternoons belonged to the children and the market.

Marianne asked what woke her. Sarah thought about it. Part of it was her own mind going over vocabulary and worry. Part of it was the street. The café across the road closed at two, and the delivery trucks started at four.

“Is there anything we could do from here?” Marianne asked.

Sarah laughed a little. “Earplugs that actually work,” she said. “The ones here fall out.”

Donna mailed two kinds, and Micah found a small fan that would cover the street noise and work on their outlets. Sarah said the fan helped, and the earplugs helped some. She also agreed to ask the doctor about her sleep when she took Lucy for her next checkup, and to try lying down for twenty minutes after class, before the children came home.

Marianne wrote all of it down. Some of it had helped. But Sarah was still waking at three most nights, and Marianne kept it on her list.

On the same call Marianne asked about the walk home from language school after dark. Sarah said she had started walking with a classmate who lived two streets over. On the nights the classmate was out, Eric came to meet her at the corner.

❦

In June, a year after the commissioning, Marianne was on her Thursday call with Sarah when Caleb leaned into the picture, holding up a thick paperback.

“Tell Mrs. Vu I finished it,” he said. “Tell her she was wrong about the ending.”

❦

Do your best to come to me soon… Luke alone is with me… When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments.

— 2 Timothy 4:9, 11, 13

In Scripture

Near the end of his life, writing from prison, Paul asked Timothy to come before winter and to bring his coat and his books. The man who wrote much of the New Testament was cold, lonely, and short on reading, and he said so plainly. Scripture kept the request.

An Invitation

Would you be willing to learn to listen the way Marianne did, asking the second question and staying with the answer? Who among the people your church has sent would you most want to listen to?

What Cornerstone Used

The Missionary Care Mapping Workbook (Tool 13), introduced in training Session 4 (Chapter II-7), in *Crossing Cultures Care Teams* and at crossingcultures.care/cc-care-teams.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Limits of Love

Sarah did not pass her language test in June. Eric did.

She told Marianne about it on their Thursday call in a flat, even voice, as if she were reading the result off a page. She could take it again in the fall. Lots of people needed two tries. The school had been kind about it.

"How do you feel about it?" Marianne asked.

"Fine," Sarah said. Then, after a moment, "Stupid. I feel stupid. I'm a grown woman, and I can't order a sandwich without Lucy translating for me."

The second care map was in July. The team did one every three months that first year, and this time they went back over everything from April first.

The money was a little better, because the missions committee had agreed to raise Cornerstone's monthly support starting in October. The Sunday service files came every week. Sarah said singing along in the kitchen on Sunday afternoon had become the best hour of her week. Dave had had his first two calls with Eric and Sarah. Fran said only that they had gone well and that he was keeping to every other week. Caleb was reading again. Lucy was still the happiest person in the family.

Sarah's sleep was better and not better. The fan and the earplugs helped with the street. She had asked the doctor at Lucy's checkup, and he had found nothing wrong and told her to rest more. She was lying down after class most days. She was still waking at three.

But Fran marked two areas to watch. Under Emotional she wrote: Sarah tired, flat. Under Spiritual she wrote: Sarah says prayer feels "like talking to the ceiling."

Then Walt made a mistake.

Every Wednesday he sent a prayer list to the church's prayer team. That week, under the Bennetts' names, he wrote: Pray for Sarah, who has not been sleeping and is struggling. He meant it lovingly. One of the women on the prayer team mentioned it to her daughter, who had been Sarah's friend since college. By Saturday the daughter had sent Sarah a message asking whether she was all right.

Sarah told Marianne on their next call. She was not angry so much as embarrassed. "I told you about my sleep," she said. "I didn't tell the prayer chain."

Marianne brought it to Fran, and Fran called Walt that evening. She did not soften it. The covenant said they would address conflict directly, and this was what that line was for. Walt listened, and then he was quiet for a long time.

He called Sarah himself that week. He did not explain or defend himself. He said he had been wrong and that it would not happen again, and he asked her how she wanted prayer requests for her family handled from then on. Sarah said she would like to see every line before it went to anyone. From then on, she did.

Marianne worried for a while that Sarah would stop telling her things. She did not.

At the August meeting the team agreed that Marianne would move from every other week to every week, if Sarah wanted that. Fran called it the first level, paying closer attention. Sarah said yes right away. Marianne noticed that she seemed relieved.

The spiritual area went to Walt. Fran gave it to him anyway, and he took it more carefully than he would have a month before. He did not call Sarah. He called Eric, and asked how Eric was doing, not with the ministry, but with God.

Eric was quiet for a while. "I read the Bible every day," he said. "For sermons. For the Bible study I lead. I can't remember the last time I read it just for me."

Walt said he had been there. He asked whether Eric would read the same thing he was reading, one psalm a day, and talk about it with him for fifteen minutes on Saturday mornings. Eric said yes before Walt finished asking.

On his next call with Eric and Sarah, Dave asked whether they ever prayed together, just the two of them. Sarah laughed, and then she didn't. Dave suggested something small. After the children were in bed, they could read the same psalm Eric was reading with Walt, out loud, and each pray one sentence. Ten minutes. Some nights it might be only the reading. That was enough.

Walt did not want Sarah left out. He asked Marianne to ask her, on their next Thursday call, how she would like the team to help with the part of her feeling like her prayers were like talking to the ceiling. Marianne told her what Walt had offered: a devotional book he could mail, a short passage of Scripture sent just to her each week, a call with Walt, or more time with Marianne around whatever reading Sarah was doing. Sarah said she would think about it. The next week she asked for the Scripture, and for one more thing: that Marianne pray with her for a few minutes at the end of their calls. From then on, Marianne did.

❦

The call that changed things was on the last Wednesday night in August.

It started like most of their calls. Sarah asked about Ray and about the heat in Louisiana. Then Marianne asked how she was sleeping, and Sarah didn't answer.

"Sarah?"

"I cry every day," Sarah said. "Not about anything. I just cry. In the shower, mostly, so the kids won't hear. I wake up at three and lie there until the alarm goes off. I open my Bible and nothing happens. I can't remember the last time I prayed and meant it." She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "Everybody back home thinks we're doing this great thing. And I can't even get through a morning."

Marianne waited.

"Eric doesn't know how bad it is," Sarah said. "He has enough to carry. Please don't tell him."

Marianne had been trained for this moment, and she was still frightened. She remembered what Fran had said three times on the fourth training night. She made herself ask the question plainly.

"Sarah, I need to ask you something, and I want you to tell me the truth. Have you had any thoughts of hurting yourself?"

Sarah looked straight at the screen. "No," she said. "No. I promise. I'm not there. I'm just so tired, Marianne. Some days I think everyone would be better off if I just went home."

"Thank you for telling me," Marianne said. She believed her. She also knew this was more than she could carry alone, and more than she was supposed to.

"Sarah, I believe you. And this is more than I should carry by myself, and more than you should either. You know how this works. We went over it with you and Eric before we ever started. When something is this heavy, I bring it to Fran, and with your okay, Fran brings in Pastor Dave. Just the two of them. Nobody else on the team. And not Eric. Eric is yours to tell."

Sarah wiped her eyes. "Dave's calling us Tuesday."

"Then you could tell him yourself, in your own words. I'd like that better. Or, if you're willing, Fran could talk to him tomorrow, so he won't be hearing it for the first time. Would that be all right?"

Sarah was quiet for a long time. Then she said, "All right."

❦

Marianne did not sleep that night.

She lay in the dark and made plans. She could buy a plane ticket and be there by Saturday. She could call Eric herself. She could look up a list of things that help with sleep and send it in the morning. She could find a Christian counselor online and email Sarah the link. She could tell Sarah to come home for a few months and not worry about what anyone thought.

Around two in the morning she realized that every plan on her list was a way of fixing Sarah. She thought of the note in the margin of her reflection guide: I try to fix things. Even things that aren't

mine. She thought of the line she had read aloud on covenant night: not a project to manage, but a person to accompany.

She got up, made a cup of tea, and wrote down only what Sarah had actually said, in Sarah's words, with the date. Then she went back to bed and lay awake until morning anyway.

At breakfast Ray watched her for a while over his coffee.

"Something's wrong," he said.

"I can't tell you about it."

He nodded slowly. He had known that might happen. They had talked about it before she signed.

"Are you carrying it by yourself?"

"No," she said. "I'm about to call Fran."

"Then all right," Ray said, and went back to his paper.

❦

Fran came over at nine. Marianne read her the notes. Fran listened without interrupting and asked only two questions: had Marianne asked about self-harm, and what exactly had Sarah said. Then she called Dave.

Marianne heard Fran's side of the call. Fran did not say Sarah was depressed. She did not guess at causes. She told him only what Sarah had said: crying every day, waking at three, unable to pray, feeling like she was failing, sometimes thinking everyone would be better off if she went home. She said Sarah had denied any thoughts of self-harm. She said Sarah had asked them not to tell Eric. She said Sarah had agreed that Fran would call him today, and that Sarah might want to talk to him herself.

Dave was at the hospital with a church member who was having surgery. He called back in an hour and a half from the parking lot.

He asked Fran a few more questions. Then he asked to talk to Marianne.

"How are you doing with this?" he asked.

"I want to fix it," Marianne said. "I can't."

"No," Dave said. "You can't. Neither can I. Moses tried to carry everybody's problems himself, and his father-in-law told him, 'The thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone.' That was true for Moses. It's true for you and Fran. And it's true for Sarah." He paused. "You did exactly the right thing last night. Now let me do mine."

That afternoon Marianne looked up the passage in Exodus 18 and read it through twice. She did not say anything about it to anyone.

❦

Dave and Fran set up a call with Sarah for Saturday morning, her time. Dave did not want to wait until Tuesday. Sarah asked if Marianne could be on it too, and she was.

Before the call, Sarah told Eric herself. She said later that it was the hardest conversation of their marriage, and the best one they'd had in a year. Eric joined the call from the other end of the couch, holding her hand.

Dave did not lecture them. He said, "Sarah, what you're carrying deserves more than the six people on this team can give you. That isn't a judgment of you. It's just true. I'd like you to talk with a counselor who understands missionaries."

He explained what the church had already set aside when the team was formed. Cornerstone would pay for six sessions with a counselor experienced in missionary care, someone her organization could recommend to her, by video, at a time that worked for them. After six sessions, they would all talk again about what came next.

Sarah's first response was that she didn't want to be the missionary who couldn't handle it.

"You're handling it," Dave said. "This is what handling it looks like. You told someone the truth. That's the hardest part, and you already did it."

Eric spoke for the first time. “I knew something was wrong,” he said. “I didn’t know how to ask.” He looked at Sarah. “I’m sorry.”

Sarah wrote to her organization’s member care office herself. By Monday she had three names. Sarah chose one, a counselor who had grown up as a missionary kid herself and had worked with families on the field for fifteen years. The first session was ten days later.

❦

The team never knew the details. At the September meeting, Fran said only that a need had come up in the Bennett family that pastoral oversight was now involved in, that the Bennetts had agreed to professional help, and that the church was paying for it from the line set aside for that purpose. She asked them to pray. Nothing about it went into the group text.

Donna did not ask a single question. Marianne noticed, and she thought Donna noticed her noticing.

Marianne kept her Thursday calls. She did not ask Sarah about the counseling. That was Sarah’s to share or not share. She asked the same things she always asked: how Sarah was sleeping, how the kids were, what had been good that week and what had been hard. Some weeks Sarah talked about the counseling, and some weeks she didn’t.

Fran called Marianne once a week through September. Each time she asked the same question she had asked in her living room in February.

“Who’s taking care of you?”

By the third time, Marianne had an answer. “You are,” she said. “And Ray, even though he doesn’t know what about.”

❦

In October, on a Wednesday night, Sarah came on the screen and said, before Marianne could ask anything, “I slept until five.”

Marianne laughed. “That’s wonderful.”

"And Eric and I have been reading the psalms together at night," Sarah said. "Praying feels like praying again."

"My counselor asked who I talk to," she went on. "Besides Eric. I told her that every Thursday I talk to Marianne."

After the sixth session, Dave and Fran talked with Eric and Sarah again, as Dave had promised. Sarah wanted to keep going. The elders agreed to pay for six more sessions, and then to talk again.

❦

The thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone… So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you.

— Exodus 18:18, 22

In Scripture

Moses was settling every dispute in Israel himself, from morning until evening. His father-in-law Jethro watched for one day and told him the truth: no one can carry that alone. The answer was not to care less. It was to share the load, and to bring the heaviest matters to someone who could carry them.

An Invitation

Could you hear something hard from someone far away without trying to fix it, and trust a team to carry it with you? Be honest with yourself about what you could carry and what you could not.

What Cornerstone Used

When Strain Deepens (Tool 15) and the budget line for professional care (Tool 2), in *Crossing Cultures Care Teams* and at crossingcultures.care/cc-care-teams.

CHAPTER FIVE

Someone Should Go

It was Donna who said it first, at the November meeting.

"Someone should go," she said. "Somebody should get on a plane and go see them. Sarah's had the worst year of her life, and all she's seen of us is a laptop screen."

Several people started talking at once. Walt said the missions committee had money for travel. Teresa said she still had a passport that was good for another three years. Donna said she would book the flights herself.

Fran let them talk for a minute. Then she said, "Yes. But not yet."

She explained. The team was eight months old. A visit was the most valuable thing a team could do, and also the easiest to get wrong. A visit that came too early, or on the wrong dates, or with the wrong people, or for the wrong reasons, could cost the Bennetts more than it gave them. Before anyone booked anything, the team had to answer some questions, and the first one was not theirs to answer.

"Do Eric and Sarah want us to come?" Fran said. "Not 'would they be polite about it if we offered.' Do they actually want it? And if they do, who do they want, and when?"

Donna sat back. "Well," she said. "All right."

❦

Fran asked the Bennetts in December, carefully. She told them the team would like to visit sometime in the coming year if it would help, and that "no" and "not this year" were both completely good answers. She asked them to take a month to think about it.

They took the month. In January Sarah wrote back. They would like a visit in the spring. They would like Marianne to come, because she was the one who already knew what their life was like. And they would like someone the children knew. Caleb had asked whether Mrs. Vu could come, and Lucy had asked whether Mrs. Vu could bring candy.

So it would be Marianne and Teresa.

The planning took two months, and the visit almost didn't happen twice.

The first dates Fran proposed were in April. Sarah wrote back politely that April was when she would retake her language test, and she didn't think she could study and host at the same time. Fran apologized and asked her to choose. Sarah chose the middle of May.

Then Eric checked with his field leader, who said the middle of May was a national holiday in their country, with crowds and closed offices and heightened security, and recommended the following week instead. So it became the last week of May.

In March, while the visit was still being planned, the team reached the end of its first year. It had checked on itself at three months and at six, the way the guide said to. This time Eric and Sarah filled out their own evaluation of the team. Most of what they wrote was kind. Their one request was for Lucy. She had noticed that Caleb had a book club with Mrs. Vu and she did not. Teresa started a Saturday call with Lucy too, with Sarah in the room, and Lucy chose the first book.

The church paid for everything out of the line it had set aside in its budget for the visit: flights, a guesthouse a ten-minute walk from the Bennetts' apartment, meals, and taxis. Nothing would come out of the Bennetts' support or their grocery money. The visit would be five days. Teresa went through the church's safeguarding guidelines again, because the same rules applied overseas as at home. She would never be alone with either child, and she would do nothing with them that their parents had not asked for.

Micah spent an evening at Marianne's kitchen table getting her phone ready for the trip: an international plan, a translation app,

the Bennetts' address saved in the local language, and a way for the team to reach her that did not depend on the guesthouse Wi-Fi. Ray watched for a while and then asked Micah to do his phone too. Micah did Teresa's the next night.

Then Sarah sent the plan. She had written out each day. Monday they would arrive and rest. Tuesday Marianne and Teresa would come for breakfast and walk to the market with Sarah while the kids were at school. Wednesday was for whatever came up. Thursday afternoon Marianne and Teresa would watch the children so Eric and Sarah could go out to dinner. Friday everyone would go to the park. Saturday they would fly home.

At the bottom Sarah had added a few things. Please don't post any pictures online. If anyone asks, you're friends from home. Please don't bring gifts for our teammates, because it makes things awkward. And please don't plan anything for Wednesday. Wednesday is for nothing.

Fran printed the plan and gave Marianne and Teresa each a copy. "This isn't a draft," she said. "This is the plan."

❦

The Bennetts' apartment was on the fourth floor of a concrete building with no elevator. Sarah met them at the door on Tuesday morning and hugged Marianne for a long time without saying anything.

The apartment was small and clean. There were children's drawings on the walls and a row of shoes by the door. The kitchen had two burners, a small refrigerator, and a window that looked out on the building across the street. Marianne had seen this kitchen on her screen every Thursday for more than a year. It was strange to be standing in it.

That first morning she did what she had promised herself she would not do. She noticed that the window over the sink wouldn't close all the way, and she started to suggest a fix. She noticed that the refrigerator was nearly empty, and she started to say she would go to the store. Each time she caught herself in the middle of a

sentence. Sarah didn't seem to notice. Teresa did, and gave her a small look across the table.

They walked to the market. Sarah knew the vendors and could bargain now, slowly, in the language she had passed on her second try. She was proud of that, and she should have been. She bought vegetables and a bag of bread and two kinds of tea she said Marianne had to try.

Caleb came home from school and showed Teresa his bookshelf. It was full. Lucy did not let go of Teresa's hand for the rest of the afternoon.

❦

Wednesday was for nothing, and on Wednesday afternoon, while the children were at school and Eric was at the office, Sarah and Marianne sat in the kitchen with the tea.

Sarah started talking. She talked about the year before the team was formed, when nobody asked how they were. She talked about the language test, the first one, and how she had walked home from the school and sat on the stairs of the building for an hour because she couldn't face telling Eric. She talked about the counselor and what it had been like to say some things out loud for the first time. She talked about her mother, who was getting older, and how she worried about being so far away. She talked about the day the care map call had come and Marianne had asked about Caleb's reading, and how she had cried after they hung up, not because something was wrong, but because someone had noticed.

She talked for almost two hours.

It was the hardest thing Marianne had ever done. She wanted to answer. She wanted to say "I understand," though she didn't, not really. She wanted to offer advice. She wanted to tell Sarah about her own mother. Twice she wanted to pray out loud right then. Each time, she didn't. She poured more tea. She asked a question now and then, short ones. Mostly she listened.

When Sarah finally stopped, the light in the kitchen had changed, and the children would be home in twenty minutes.

"I'm sorry," Sarah said. "I didn't mean to talk so much."

"I came a long way to hear it," Marianne said.

❦

On Thursday evening Eric and Sarah went out to dinner, just the two of them. Sarah said it was the first time in more than a year. Marianne and Teresa stayed with the children together, as Sarah had asked. They made pancakes for supper because Lucy said that was the rule when parents went out. Teresa read to both of them on the couch. Caleb pretended he was too old for it and listened to every word.

When Eric and Sarah came back, they were holding hands.

Friday they went to the park. Saturday morning Eric drove them to the airport. Sarah came too.

At the curb, while Eric got the suitcases out of the trunk, Sarah said, "There's a verse in Second Corinthians where Paul says God comforted him by the coming of Titus. I always thought it was a strange thing to put in the Bible. Like, why does it matter who showed up?" She shook her head. "I understand it now."

Marianne hugged her and did not say anything, because she couldn't.

❦

At the June meeting, Marianne and Teresa reported on the visit the way the team had been trained to report on anything: what they had observed, and separately, what they thought it might mean. With Eric and Sarah's permission, Fran updated the care map. The children were thriving. The marriage looked better than it had a year before. Sarah was stronger than she had been, and still tired. The apartment needed a window repair, which Donna said she would ask Eric about. Marianne did not mention that she had noticed it first.

With Sarah's okay, Marianne told the team one more thing. Sarah worried about her mother, who was getting older, and about being

so far away from her. Donna offered to visit her once a month, if her mother would welcome it, and to tell Sarah, not the team, how she was. Sarah's mother said she would like that.

Twice during the meeting Marianne heard herself start a sentence with "When I was there…" The second time, Fran said gently, "Marianne, you saw a week. Walt's been praying for them every day for a year, and Teresa and Donna and Micah and I have been watching too. The visit added to what we know. It didn't make anyone the expert."

Marianne laughed. "You're right," she said. "I heard myself."

At the end of the meeting, Walt said he had one more thing. His binder had a second tab now. Since the team had started, other families Cornerstone had sent had asked him, one way or another, whether they could have what the Bennetts had. One of them was the Caldwells, who had been serving in Kenya for twenty-seven years and planned to come home for good the next spring. Walt did not have an answer for them yet. He said he wanted the team to know that people were noticing.

❦

The next Wednesday night, Marianne called at seven o'clock, the same as always.

Sarah answered from her kitchen. Behind her, the window over the sink was shut tight.

"Eric finally asked the field office to send someone," Sarah said. "Donna kept asking him until he did. It took the man ten minutes."

"I know," Marianne said. "I can see it."

❦

For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear

within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus.

— 2 Corinthians 7:5–6

IN SCRIPTURE

Paul arrived in Macedonia exhausted and afraid. He does not say the trouble ended. He says God comforted him, and he names how: Titus came.

AN INVITATION

What would serving actually cost you: the hours each month, your calendar, perhaps a trip? And which part of the work fits how God made you: listening, praying, practical help, the children, or holding a team together?

WHAT CORNERSTONE USED

Field Visits Done Well (Chapter III-3), including its six questions before you book, in *Crossing Cultures Care Teams* and at crossingcultures.care/cc-care-teams.

CHAPTER SIX

Homecoming

The Bennetts came home for their first stateside assignment in June, three years almost to the day after the commissioning. They would be in Louisiana for seven months.

Six weeks before they landed, Fran sat down with Eric and Sarah on a video call and built a plan with them. Not for them, she said. With them. They went through it line by line. Where would they live? A retired couple from Cornerstone had a furnished rental house that would be empty until the end of January, and they offered it for the cost of the utilities. What would they drive? A man in the Tuesday men's Bible study who owned a car lot had a minivan he would lend them. Did the kids need to be enrolled in school? Yes, in August. Did everyone need to see a doctor and a dentist? Yes, all four of them, and Sarah had a list. Did they want time with Sarah's mother written into the plan? Yes, Sarah said, as much as they could get.

Each line got a name and a date beside it. Most of the names were Donna's.

Then Fran asked a question that had nothing to do with logistics. "How much rest do you need before anyone asks anything of you?"

Eric started to say two weeks. Sarah said, "Six."

Eric looked at her and didn't argue.

So the plan said six weeks. For six weeks after they landed, the Bennetts would not speak at church, give a report, visit a Sunday school class, or be asked to. Fran wrote Dave's name beside that line, because the pressure would come from people at Cornerstone, and Dave was the one who could tell them no.

Dave did it from the pulpit, two Sundays before the Bennetts landed.

"The Bennetts are coming home on the twentieth," he said, and people clapped. "I know a lot of you want to see them, and hear from them, and have them at your class or your house. You will. But not yet." He opened his Bible. "In Mark 6, the apostles came back from their first mission and told Jesus everything they had done. And he said to them, 'Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.' So that's what we're going to do. For six weeks, the Bennetts don't owe us anything. Please don't ask them to speak. Please don't be hurt when they say no to things. If you want to help, Jess Landry's young families class is organizing meals, and Donna has the sign-up."

Some people were disappointed. One Sunday school teacher told Fran she thought it was a little much, since her class had been praying for the Bennetts for three years and only wanted twenty minutes. Fran thanked her, said she understood, and said the answer was still no until August. She did not pass the conversation on to Sarah. That was part of the team's job too.

❦

Eleven people went to the airport. Marianne noticed the number and thought of the last time.

The Bennetts came through the doors looking exactly as tired as people look after thirty hours of travel. Lucy saw Teresa first and ran. Caleb was taller than Marianne remembered and walked slowly, carrying his own backpack and his sister's. Sarah found Marianne in the small crowd and held onto her. Owen and Molly Landry held up a sign they had made themselves. It said WELCOME HOME, and it was spelled right, which Molly pointed out.

Donna had stocked the rental house. There was milk and bread and coffee and cereal in the kitchen, sheets on the beds, toothbrushes in the bathroom still in their packages, and a note on

the counter with the meal schedule for the first two weeks and the Wi-Fi password.

Sarah stood in the kitchen and opened the refrigerator and looked at it for a long time.

"It's so full," she said.

❦

For the first two weeks, the Bennetts mostly slept.

Then, slowly, they started to come out. Gene Talbot grilled in his backyard on the Fourth of July, as he had promised he would. His daughter and grandchildren were there, and his son-in-law, home from deployment, and the Bennetts, and the Landrys, and the whole team. Nobody asked Eric about the work. Gene asked him about fishing. Caleb and Owen found Gene's old basketball hoop by the garage and played until it was too dark to see.

Marianne's Thursday calls became Thursday lunches. They didn't talk about anything in particular. Some weeks Sarah wanted to talk about the field, and some weeks she wanted to talk about anything else.

One evening the Bennetts came to Marianne and Ray's house for supper. Lucy wandered into the kitchen and stopped in front of the refrigerator. The prayer card was still there, at eye level, where Marianne had put it three years before. The photograph had faded a little.

"That's us," Lucy said. "When I was little."

"It is," Marianne said.

Lucy studied it. "Why do you still have it?"

Marianne thought about how to answer. "Because I still pray for you," she said. "But now I know what to pray for."

❦

In the seventh week, after the rest was over, the family had a debrief. The mission organization provided one for every family coming home. In the spring Fran had asked Eric and Sarah whether their debrief was on the calendar. They would spend three

days with a counselor the organization used for returning workers, a woman who had done this for twenty years. Eric and Sarah would each have time alone with her and time together. Caleb and Lucy would have their own time, suited to their ages.

The debrief was the organization's to provide, and the team would not take part in it. If the organization had not offered one, the team would have asked Eric and Sarah about it and helped them find someone qualified to lead it. Fran explained at the July meeting why the team was not part of the debriefing process. She explained that a debrief is not a long visit or a good talk. It is a structured process, and it should be led by someone trained to do it, someone who knows how to walk a family through a whole term and what to listen for along the way. The team's part was to facilitate the process as the family directed, and then to leave it to the family.

Donna asked, "Is something wrong? Do they need it?"

"Everybody needs it," Fran said. "Every family coming home should have one, not just the ones in trouble. It's like a physical."

Donna nodded. "Then I hope it goes well."

The debrief was in the first week of August. Afterward Sarah told Marianne only that it had been good, and hard, and that she had cried more than she expected and slept better afterward than she had in months. Marianne didn't ask anything else.

❦

Caleb had the hardest time.

He was twelve now. He had left Louisiana at nine, and the boys he had known were in middle school and had moved on. He didn't know the words they used or the games they played or the things they thought were funny. He was supposed to be home, and he wasn't, not really. The place that felt like home was on the other side of the world.

He didn't say any of this. Teresa noticed it instead. In August, after school started, she saw that Caleb had stopped mentioning lunch. She asked Sarah, with Caleb's knowledge, whether he was

eating with anyone. Sarah asked Caleb. He had been eating his lunch in the library every day since the second week of school.

Teresa did not try to fix it. She talked with Caleb, with Sarah there, about what it was like to be new. She asked him whether there was anyone at school who seemed all right. There was a boy in his science class whose parents were from Nigeria, who had moved to Louisiana two years before and also ate in the library. Teresa asked whether Caleb might sit with him. Caleb said maybe.

The next week he said they had eaten lunch together twice. The week after that, the boy came over to the rental house on a Saturday.

Micah understood it better than any of them. He had come back from Bolivia at thirteen and eaten lunch by himself for most of a year. One Saturday he and Eric took Caleb and Owen out for burgers, and Micah told Caleb about it while Eric listened. Caleb did not say much. But on the way home he asked his dad whether Mr. Landry could come to his soccer game.

Lucy cried at bedtime for most of August because she missed her best friend overseas. Sarah set up a weekly video call between the two girls. It helped some. So did Molly Landry, who was in Lucy's grade at school and decided on the first day that they were friends. Teresa said it would take time and that it was supposed to.

❦

In August, when the six weeks were over, Fran gathered the requests that had come in. There were twenty-three of them: Sunday school classes, the women's missionary group, two other supporting churches, a mission conference in Monroe, a youth group, a radio interview. She brought the whole list to Eric and Sarah and asked them to choose.

They chose seven. Fran and Dave sent thank-you notes to the other sixteen and took the disappointment on themselves.

When Eric spoke at Cornerstone in September, he talked for twenty minutes. He did not talk about numbers. He talked about the day the box of books came for Caleb, and the Sunday service

that came to their inbox every week, and the day the window was fixed, and the night Marianne asked Sarah how she was sleeping. He said that in their first year on the field they had felt forgotten, and that in their second and third years they had not.

❦

In October the team did a care map with Eric and Sarah in person, in Fran's living room. Most of it was good. They were rested. The marriage was stronger. Caleb had a friend. Lucy had stopped crying at bedtime.

At the end, Fran asked the question the whole team had been carrying since June.

"Your return date is in January," she said. "What are you thinking?"

Eric and Sarah looked at each other.

"We've been praying about whether to go back," Sarah said. "We don't know yet."

"You don't have to know tonight," Fran said. "Whatever you decide, this team is with you. If you go back, we'll go with you, the way we have. If you don't, we'll help you finish well."

That night, after Ray went to bed, Marianne stood in her kitchen and looked at the card on the refrigerator for a long time. She did not take it down.

❦

The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while."

— Mark 6:30–31

IN SCRIPTURE

When the apostles came back from their first mission, Jesus listened to everything they had to report. Then he did not send

them out again or put them on display. He took them away from the crowds to rest. Hearing the whole story and protecting the rest that follows were his own practice before they were ever ours.

An Invitation

A family's needs change from season to season. Could you stay with one family through a homecoming and a going out again, not just through the beginning?

What Cornerstone Used

The Re-entry Care Plan (Tool 16) and Homecomings (Chapter IV-2), in *Crossing Cultures Care Teams* and at crossingcultures.care/cc-care-teams.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Kept

Eric and Sarah decided in November.

They told the team at the November meeting, in Fran's living room, in person. They had prayed about it for months. They had talked about it with their counselor, with their field leader, with each other, and with their children. Caleb had said he wanted to go back because his best friends were there. Lucy had said she wanted to go back if she could still call Mrs. Vu.

"We're going back," Eric said. "Not because we think we have to. Because we want to."

Sarah said, "We couldn't have said that a year and a half ago."

Nobody said anything for a moment. Then Walt said, "Let's pray," and they did.

❦

There was work to do before January.

The team's covenant had been signed for eighteen months. They had renewed it once, the September after the visit, all six of them around Fran's dining table with the Bennetts on the laptop. That term was ending now too, and the Bennetts would be going back for four years, longer than any one term of the team.

Fran did not rush it. She set aside the whole December meeting for it. Before anyone talked about who would sign again, she asked the team to look ahead: what would the Bennetts need in the next four years that they had not needed in the first three?

The list was not long, but it was different. Caleb would start high school overseas, and in a few years someone would need to talk with him about college and about what it would be like to come back to Louisiana at eighteen. Eric's new role would mean more travel. Sarah's mother was getting older. Donna would keep

visiting her, as she had since the visit, and Fran said the team should talk with Eric and Sarah now about what they would want if her health changed while they were overseas. Somewhere in those four years there would be another homecoming, and maybe a hard one.

Then Fran asked each person to think and pray about whether to sign again, and said, as she had the first time, that no was an honest answer.

Walt said no. He said it the way Gene once had, plainly. He had chaired the missions committee for fourteen years, and the second tab in his binder needed someone to carry it. He would keep praying for the Bennetts by name every day. He would keep his Saturday mornings with Eric, too, on the team or not. But he wanted to spend the next year helping the missions committee think about the other families who had asked.

Fran kept a promise she had made two and a half years before. She had asked Gene at the first renewal, and he had said not yet; his daughter's family was still with him. Now she called him again. His son-in-law was home. His daughter and grandchildren had moved into their own house in October.

"You said I could ask again," Fran said.

"I said you'd better," Gene said.

So Gene took Walt's place as the one who would lead the team's prayer. He said he could not write emails like Walt's. Walt said that was not the job, and gave him the list.

Micah signed again, with the same two evenings a month and the same note about Thursdays. Teresa, Donna, and Marianne signed again. Fran said she would coordinate one more term. Then she asked Jess Landry to start sitting in on the meetings, so that when Fran's time came, the team would not have to start over.

Fran wrote one more thing in the notes. The team would review again in eighteen months, and every eighteen months after that, for as long as the Bennetts were serving. People would come and go. The promise would stay with the family.

They did a new care map with Eric and Sarah, so the next term would start with a clear picture instead of an old one. Donna

started a list for the trip back, the same list as the trip home, run backward. Teresa and Caleb chose the book they would read together in January. Marianne and Sarah agreed that their Thursday calls would start again the second week after the Bennetts landed, at seven o'clock on Wednesday night, Louisiana time.

❦

The second tab in Walt's binder had grown.

By December it held four names. The Caldwells, who had come home from Kenya for good in April after twenty-eight years, and who were finding out how much a country can change in that time. A young couple from Jess's Sunday school class, in their first year of language school in Southeast Asia. A single woman in North Africa whose mother had stopped Walt after church to ask whether "Sarah's kind of team" was something Cornerstone did for everyone. And a family in Brazil, sent before Walt joined the committee, whom he had never met.

Walt brought the list to the missions committee in December. He did not ask them to start four teams. He knew better now. He asked them to start with one, and to do it the way the first one had been done: the missionaries asked first, then leadership made ready, then a coordinator the family chose, then people invited, not announced.

Bev Harmon said she would pray about coordinating it, if the family wanted her. Fran said she would help whoever it turned out to be, and that doing it well might take most of a year. Nobody objected. Three years ago, Walt thought, someone would have asked for a sign-up sheet.

❦

Pastor Dave re-commissioned the Bennetts on the second Sunday in January.

It was smaller than the first time. There was no cake. The family came forward during the service, and Dave called the team

up to stand with them. Then he invited anyone who wanted to come forward to come, and some people did, and some stayed in their seats and prayed from there. Jess Landry's whole Sunday school class came forward together, with their children.

Dave read from Acts 14.

"And from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled. And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them."

"The Bennetts have done that with us this fall," Dave said. "They told us what God has done. Now we send them again." Then he read Psalm 121, the whole psalm, and asked Marianne to pray.

She had not known he was going to ask. She stood with her hand on Sarah's shoulder and prayed for each of them by name. She prayed for Caleb's friend at school, and for Lucy's best friend on the other side of the world, and for Sarah's sleep, and for Sarah's mother, and for Eric's new work at the field office. She prayed for the next four years. She did not pray for anything she did not know to be true.

After the service, in the fellowship hall, Sarah handed out the new prayer cards herself.

She had designed this one too. It was almost the same as the first. The family sat on a bench. Their names were across the top, and the address was still too small to read. But Caleb was taller than his mother now, and Lucy had lost her front teeth and grown new ones. On the back, instead of four prayer requests, there was one line: For how to pray this month, ask any of us. Under it were six names.

❦

The whole team went to the airport. So did Dave and Linda, and Walt, and Jess with the children.

They stood at the security line and said goodbye several times over. Eric carried the backpacks this time, and Lucy walked

through the checkpoint on her own. Caleb turned around once and waved at Teresa. Sarah hugged Marianne last.

"Wednesday night," Sarah said. "Seven o'clock."

"I'll be there," Marianne said.

Then the Bennetts were gone, and the team went to lunch.

❦

The next Sunday, between services, Edna Fitch found Marianne at the coffee pot. Edna was eighty-five now and walked with a cane. She still kept her list in her Bible, at Third John.

"Marianne," she said. "How are the Bennetts? Really?"

Marianne told her. Before they left, Eric and Sarah had told the team what they were glad for people to know and ask about, and Marianne told Edna those things. They were tired from the trip. Sarah was sleeping well and was a little afraid it wouldn't last. Caleb missed his friend from science class and was glad to be back with the ones he had left. Lucy had already been to her best friend's house twice. Eric was starting a new role at the field office in February and was nervous about it. They had gone back because they wanted to.

Edna listened to all of it. Then she nodded slowly.

"That isn't what the card says," she said.

"No," Marianne said. "It isn't."

Edna patted her arm and went to find her seat.

❦

That night Marianne stood in her kitchen with the new card in her hand.

The old card had been on her refrigerator for three and a half years. When she took it down, there was a clean rectangle on the door where the sun had not reached. She put the new card in the same place, over the outline of the old one, and held it there with the same magnet.

She thought about the Sunday of the first send-off, and the feeling she had not been able to name. It had not been asking her

to do more. It had been asking her to come closer. She knew that now.

She turned off the kitchen light and went up to bed.

❦

As his share is who goes down into the battle, so shall his share be who stays by the baggage. They shall share alike.

— 1 Samuel 30:24

The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward.

— Matthew 10:41

In Scripture

Gaius welcomed the workers the church sent. Timothy was asked to bring Paul his coat before winter. Jethro told Moses to share the load. Titus came, and Paul was comforted. Jesus took his tired workers away to rest. Antioch heard the whole story of a finished work, and then sent again.

Most of these people are remembered for one act of keeping: a door opened, a coat carried, a load shared, a visit made, a rest protected, a story heard. None of them did it alone.

This is what a care team is. Not a program, but what the church has always done when it remembered that the people it sends still belong to it. God's mission has two kinds of work in it: going, and keeping those who go. David would not rank them. Neither did Jesus.

The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in. Very often, he does it through his people.

An Invitation

Is there a family or a single missionary you find yourself carrying in prayer more than others? If you were asked to keep a promise to them for years, would you? If your answer is becoming yes, tell your missions leadership you are willing.

WHAT CORNERSTONE USED

The Discernment Arc (Chapter IV-1), with the Structural Stewardship Guide (Tool 18) for renewing terms and naming successors and the Care Discernment Review (Tool 17) at major transitions; and The Second Team (Chapter V-1). In *Crossing Cultures Care Teams* and at crossingcultures.care/cc-care-teams.

For the One Who Has Been Wondering

If you saw yourself in Marianne, this page is for you.

Maybe you have prayed for missionaries for years. Maybe you give, faithfully, and it costs you something. Maybe there is a card on your refrigerator right now. None of that is small, and none of it is wasted. This book has not been an argument that you have done too little.

But you may have felt what Marianne felt on the first page: not guilt, and not a push to do more, but a question you could not quite name. Here is the answer this book has been working toward. God did not save you only for yourself. And his mission has always had two kinds of work in it: going, and keeping those who go. Most of us will never be sent overseas. Many of us are being asked to keep.

Scripture never treats keeping as the smaller share. "The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward" (Matthew 10:41). "As his share is who goes down into the battle, so shall his share be who stays by the baggage. They shall share alike" (1 Samuel 30:24).

If you want to take a next step, the next pages suggest a few places to begin.

Where You Might Begin

The invitations at the end of each chapter asked you to think about whether you might serve, with whom, and how. If your answers are leaning toward yes, here are a few ways to begin. You do not have to pick the right one today. Start with the one that fits where you are.

Ask. Talk to your pastor or the person who leads missions at your church. Ask whether the people your church has sent have a care team: a small group with defined roles, a covenant, and a plan to stay with them for the long haul.

Join. If a team already exists, tell its coordinator you are willing to be asked. Notice that word. Care teams are not built from sign-up sheets. They are built when the right people are invited to defined roles for set terms, so there may not be a place for you right away. In the meantime, ask how you can pray for the team and what kind of help the family might need when they are home.

Help start one. If there is no team, ask your leaders whether your church would consider forming one, and offer to help. A team usually begins with one right coordinator and a pastor willing to sign the covenant. You might be one of those people. Or you might be the person whose question gets it started. Your willingness matters. So does your patience while your leaders do it well.

Respect the sending organization. Most missionaries are sent by a church and an organization together. The church does not contact the organization about the missionary. In some parts of the world, even confirming that a family serves with a mission organization can put them at risk. Ask the missionary instead for guidance and direction in communicating with their sending organization and what they provide in terms of support.

Crossing Cultures Care Teams is the guide this story was written to accompany. It walks a church through each step, from deciding leadership is ready, to forming and training a team, to staying with a family for years. Begin with its Start Here page, at the front of the book. The tools are at crossingcultures.care/cc-care-teams.

Whatever you decide, keep praying. You will find you know better what to pray for.

For the Church That Wants This

Cornerstone is not a real church, and the Bennetts are not a real family. But everything that happened at Cornerstone can happen at yours.

The team in this story was built step by step, following a model that churches are already using. The missionaries were asked first, and nothing went forward until they said yes. Leadership then made sure it was ready. The family chose the coordinator, and said what they needed and who they wanted before a single invitation went out. Members were invited to defined roles, with a clear term and honest hours, and were free to say no. The team trained together, read its covenant aloud, and signed it with its pastor as one of the parties. Then it met every month, whether or not there was news.

From there the story followed the same model through its seasons: mapping the whole of a missionary's life, responding at the right level when strain deepened, making a field visit well, guarding a family's rest when they came home, helping facilitate the debrief, sending them back, renewing the team at the end of its term, preparing for the years ahead, and watching others in the church begin to ask for the same.

Each of those steps is described in full, with the tools to carry it out, in Crossing Cultures Care Teams, the guide this story was written to accompany. The tools are also available at crossingcultures.care/cc-care-teams.

If you are new to the guide, start with the page called Start Here; it shows you which parts to read first. Training for churches that want to begin is available through Crossing Cultures at crossingcultures.care.

You do not need a large church. Cornerstone was a large one, but the team Marianne visited across the river came from a church half its size. A small team with clear roles, a signed covenant, and a working plan for when things get hard is the model, whatever size your church is. What you need is one right coordinator, a

pastor willing to sign as a party, a modest line in the budget, and the willingness to start.

The Texts Behind the Story

Front matter Psalm 121:8

One · The Send-Off 3 John 5–8

Two · Invited, Not Announced Ephesians 2:10

Three · Learning to See 2 Timothy 4:9–13

Four · The Limits of Love Exodus 18:13–27

Five · Someone Should Go 2 Corinthians 7:5–7

Six · Homecoming Mark 6:30–32

Seven · Kept Acts 14:26–27; 1 Samuel 30:21–25; Matthew 10:40–42

Scripture quotations are from the ESV.

They sent a family.
But the story didn't end there.

When the Bennett family left, Cornerstone Church gathered with tears, cake, and a commissioning prayer. They sent them with love. But sending was only the beginning.

KEPT is a story of what happened next—a church learning what it really means to keep the promise behind the prayer card. Through the eyes of ordinary people, this novel invites readers into the real challenges, quiet faithfulness, and unexpected blessings of walking with a missionary family over time.

You'll meet the Bennetts, a family called to serve overseas, and the people at Cornerstone who discover that care does not end at the airport. It continues through seasons of encouragement, crisis, distance, homecoming, and new beginnings.

THIS STORY WILL ENCOURAGE YOU TO:

- See the missionary behind the prayer card
- Consider where you might fit in
- Discover practical ways a church can care well
- Be reminded that you are part of a larger story

For those who pray, give, and wonder what more they can do...

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