

More than the sum of our parts

Melissa Lipsett is the Acting CEO, Chief Operating Officer and Director of Missional Impact at Baptist World Aid Australia, a Christian aid and development organisation. Vanessa Klomp had the opportunity to speak with Melissa recently.

What was your journey to becoming a Christian and developing your faith in Christ?

I didn't grow up in a Christian home. It was an unhappy home for a variety of reasons, so my early years were difficult. I did have some important Christian influences though; my grandmother was deeply faithful and faith-filled, and she tried hard to intervene in my circumstances. She wasn't able to do that, but I know she prayed for me and my family, and I firmly believe her prayers laid a foundation for what was to come.

I left home at 17 to join the Royal Australian Navy and, to be honest, I was a mess. My family had been split apart by tragedy and I carried deep-rooted guilt and shame. When I was 20 though, a Navy Chaplain opened the pages of the Bible to me and showed me that I wasn't who I thought I was, but I was who God said I was. It blew my mind, in a good way, and I resolved there and then to become a Christian. I've tried to follow Jesus every day since.

How did becoming a Christian change your life?

The other remarkable thing about those early Navy years was that I met a man who would become my husband (now of 38 years). Pete wanted to shield, protect and care for me, but he wasn't entirely sure about this Jesus thing – he had grown up in a difficult environment too and wasn't particularly enamoured by the idea of Christianity. But God is good and, within a few months, revealed himself to Pete, too. Now we could together leave past wounds behind and forge a new path. And we did!

We committed ourselves to discipleship and made wonderful, lifelong friends as we learnt more about Jesus and the Christian life together. Longer term friends and family thought we were a little odd, but mostly they accepted who we had become – I like to think that's because we just tried to love them as much as we could; no lectures, no piousness, just love.

In building our family, we tried to live out our faith on a daily basis. I wish I could tell you that my kids have trodden an easy path of faith as a result but it's not that simple. It hasn't always been, nor is, all that I hoped or prayed for. But we love our kids deeply and still, every day, trust that God loves them far more than we ever could. We just try to emulate that love.

I can remember telling my kids, "Love Jesus and love

the church, and pretty much everything else will fall into place." On the whole, I still believe that!

You have had a varied career holding a number of leadership positions. Can you share about your previous roles and what led you to your current role with Baptist World Aid Australia?

The Navy was great leadership training – truly foundational – and adding an understanding of servant leadership to that from my faith has made me passionate about the capacity of great leaders to make a difference; that we can (and should) all be leaders in our own sphere of influence.

After the Navy, I moved into serving the local church; I truly believe that the local church, functioning in the way God planned, is the hope of the world! Along the way I studied and was ordained – the latter a pragmatic response to church functioning and the leadership role I believed God was calling me into. I have always been passionate about mission and was able to be part of building an international mission portfolio, with the privilege of supporting a number of locally based missionaries in a range of countries. This brought me real joy and I wanted to learn more, so when the opportunity came to step out of local church life after 20 years and support the work of Bible Society Australia as their Chief Operating Officer, I did.

That gave me extensive opportunities to work cross-culturally and internationally; Bible Societies around the world work in over 200 countries – a global reach that very few other organisations have. We opened the pages of the Bible for people, and I was able to witness the transformation that I myself experienced so many years ago.

However, when Baptist World Aid approached me about the possibility of serving with them, I knew it was God's call. I have become more and more sure that God calls every follower of Jesus to join Him in His work in the world, to usher in a glimpse of His Kingdom here on earth. And I wanted to be a part of that with the poorest and most vulnerable people on the planet.

What are your hopes for Baptist World Aid Australia as it aims to help transform communities around the globe?

I love Baptist World Aid and I am so proud (already!) of our team, our supporters, our partners and the work we are doing. There is so much more that we can do together though because we are

more than the sum of our parts. This really excites me as I know there are so many more people and like-minded organisations who we can partner with to make an even bigger difference. Imagine a huge global movement of people, motivated by the love and call of Jesus, who work to bring about a world where poverty has ended and all people enjoy the fullness of life God intends!

Nothing beats the stories we hear regularly of how God has worked in someone's life because of our supporters and partners. Like Rubel who was part of a children's and youth club through our child sponsorship program in Bangladesh. Today, Rubel is a 25 year old husband, father and garment worker who is also raising chickens, skills he learned through the savings club our partners began. He is also studying in an honours program at university and his wife translates the Bible into their local language. Rubel's life is different today because our Christian partners taught him the skills he needed to bring his family out of poverty. And they've been safer and healthier since COVID hit because of hygiene lessons he learned as a child. All because God's people responded to supporting children in vulnerable countries!

Can you share a highlight from being in this role so far?

There have been so many – meeting our partner churches around Australia, meeting and talking with our passionate and faithful supporters, getting to know the work of our international partners, hearing stories of transformation in and through our international programs and getting to know our terrific staff team who are smart, young and passionate about what they do.

As a leader, what is the biggest challenge in your Christian walk and how do you deal with that challenge?

Being a Christian leader is both a great privilege and responsibility. That is a burden I must be prepared to carry and sometimes it's heavy. My interior life needs to match seamlessly with the exterior. I know people are looking to me and I don't want to let them down. I want them to see at least a glimpse of Jesus in me when they do. I'm painfully aware, as my grandmother used to say, that I'm the only Bible some people will ever read, and I know that I don't always get it right.



Photo: Baptist World Aid Australia

Melissa Lipsett has had a career spanning from the Royal Australian Navy to working with the poorest and most vulnerable people across the globe with Baptist World Aid Australia.

Forgiveness is an art form – something that we get better at if we practice for long enough – and we need to forgive ourselves as much as anyone else. I'm still working on that and I have to remember to look to Jesus for my example.

What is your desire for the future generation of Christians and what is a piece of advice you would like to share with them?

I so want them to know that Jesus loves them and that He can handle anything they want to throw at Him – their doubts, confusion, anger, distress. It's all ok to 'dump' on Him because He'll just keep telling you that He's there for you.

Sometimes you won't feel it and you'll just have to trust and hold on by a fingernail.

It's so worth hanging on though, and I promise you there will be moments when He makes himself known and gives you enough faith and courage to go another round of whatever it is you're dealing with. And sometimes there will be great joy, which is often disguised as peace that isn't easy to explain. Mostly, I've found that when I respond to God's call to serve others rather than myself, even in those times I fail to do this well (and there are many) I learn again that the privilege of serving others helps us really live as God intends. I'm convinced of that.



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