

BELONGING

Interview with Rika

'What I have learned through meeting different people from all over the world, I've just found that, all of them want to be acknowledged as who they are, and they're looking for the space they belong to.'

Tania: What is it like to move countries, learn a new language, live in a new culture?

This is Messages of hope and I'm Tania Nelson. Today, we hear Rika's story of coming from Japan to Australia and the challenges she faced learning to belong in a completely new culture.

Rika: I'm from Japan and in 2002, I came here as a student. And after studying and working in Adelaide for six years, I went back to Japan to live again. Then got married in 2010 and got pregnant, came back to Australia in 2014.

Tania: Why did you come back to Australia?

Rika: That time, my husband and I were living in Yokohama, which is the city next to Tokyo and people were working long times, we were living in a smaller apartment. We couldn't imagine ourselves bringing up children in a tiny flat, working such long hours. We just wanted to have a bit more freedom.

Tania: Was it hard to make new friends in Australia? You said you had a young family at the time.

Rika: We didn't have our mum and dad to support us. My husband and I had to go for an interview at the school for the children, but the children were not allowed to be there. So, who is going to look after the children? We don't have any support, no family, no relatives and neighbours are busy too. The children need you, but still we need to get connected as an adult to somebody else. But people think 'oh, Rika is hands full, so busy, she might not have any time to chat with us.' And then they hesitate to contact me. But still, we have this longing to be local as well, not staying forever as international, but we want to be involved in the Australian community.

I sometimes feel I don't belong here, like I'm just temporarily living in this community, but not really belonging because I don't have a history here. And I don't have any older generation related to me living here. So, I have to cultivate everything by myself. If I don't move nothing expands. So, I'm always making efforts to get to know people or extend the community, but it really requires energy. And sometimes you just want to be withdrawn, in your own bedroom and watch YouTube or whatever.

When I feel very lonely, I don't need much advice or solution for that, but I need listening ear.

Tania: You weren't a Christian before coming to Australia, but you are now. Can you tell us about that journey?

Rika: In my whole life in Japan, I never, ever met Christians. I went to a huge university, like a thousand students in my year, but I never heard anyone saying, 'I go to church.' And

Christianity for me was like something belong to Hollywood. I didn't even know Jesus was from the Middle East. In my image, he was American.

I came to Australia, and I met Christian Japanese, and they prayed before the meals, and sometimes they invited me to their place. And they prayed for my exams. I thought, 'Who are these people? They're a bit weird!'

And they gave me the Bible, and it was like, 'I can't read this book! It doesn't make any sense to me!' But friends my age asked me to come to Bible study - the young people's Bible study - and they said, 'we'll provide you the meal.'

'Yes, I'm coming!' My friend was a fantastic cook.

So, I went to her house and then I enjoyed a meal with friends. And after, we had a Bible study. And I was quite surprised; they were seriously talking: 'How can I live?' And 'how can I give and surrender my life?' And that was completely different. And then praying for each other, and I just wanted it. Because making efforts and my own knowledge and ability was everything I could rely on, but that was very fragile. But they had somebody else. And then that was the beginning of my journey.

I really didn't have a good relationship with my father. When people pray, often in the beginning they say, 'Heavenly Father,' or, you know, 'Gracious Father.' I had a really bad image of the Father: controlling you, manipulating you, and they know *everything* right. But when I met the pastor and other people at the church, it quite changed my image of males. And one day I saw my Australian friend resting her head on her father's shoulder, and her father's arm just holding her shoulder. And I was like, 'wow, I've never seen this before.'

And then I felt like, if this is the father they're talking about, maybe yes, it's worth exploring.

Tania: Rika's now the cross-cultural coordinator at her church. Can you tell us how that happened Rika?

Rika: The previous cross-cultural coordinator was retiring and at that time I was a volunteer at Glynde Church. And we were asking 'so who's going to look after us? Do not abandon us! We have children! We want this playgroup and the coffee and chat, everything. Who is going to do that?' And this lady was saying, 'oh, God will provide.' 'Well okay, we will pray for that.' And later on, my very dear friend, she was Christian, and she was like my mentor since I became Christian, she had a terminal cancer and she passed away when she was 53. She was from Singapore, I was from Japan, we had a language barrier when we met each other but she was always loving and caring. And she learned Japanese to understand me. I thought, 'I would like to be like her,' not famous, not powerful in society, but she was always saying, 'Rika, Jesus' cross is the only thing you can rely on. Pray and tell people the gospel.' And that just hit my mind.

And after that, I was asked to apply for this position. I felt like God was calling me, not really because I was capable, but because *he* was there and he said, 'I will be there to help you.' So, I applied for it. And they took me.

Tania: So, what does your role look like?

Rika: I basically welcome people, talk to people, and I organise the midweek activities like exercise, coffee and chat, playgroup, Mainly Music and so on. And I share my faith and then listen to people if they want some listening ears.

I have so many people coming from different countries in midweek activities. Many are Muslims and many are atheist, and many came here as refugees. In the beginning, it takes a while to get to know them because they have established barriers, the bar's very high. But if you are around them all the time, laughing and smiling and then eating just next to them and they hear you're laughing, they gradually open their heart and they start talking. And they start to ask questions like 'which restaurant is good?' And you suggest some restaurant, or say 'I can take you there! Do you want to go with my family?' And you go together and then your relationship's there.

Tania: Rika shares some advice from her perspective as a newcomer on ways we can be more welcoming to people like her:

Rika: Some people are concerned if they can understand what we are saying fully. But we are not expecting people to understand our accent completely from the first time we meet them. I know it will take time. So, you just smile and shake hands and say 'welcome!'. And if they see your smile all the time, just being there, sitting next to them, they just feel safe. Even though they don't understand you, they feel safe. So, please do not underestimate your smile and this kind of action. And, also, maybe it's better not to categorise people. Everyone's different. So, get to know them as a person.

We're all humans even though we look different, we speak different languages. But we all have happiness, sadness, loneliness, and bitterness – everything all the same. Even the Australians. Some Australians come to our coffee and chat. Some of them are very lonely. Maybe they had an issue with their family background or separation from their partners. Everyone's looking for the space they can belong to. We are all humans. We are all the same, in a way.

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