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## Laura Stern: The shared adventure of ministry

*Although the image might make people today uncomfortable, a young pastor draws inspiration from a photograph of her great-grandmother, Lillian Riggs, who in 1913 gave up everything she knew to become a missionary.*

by [Laura Stern](#)



Photo courtesy of Laura Stern

The Rev. Laura Stern's great-grandmother left her home to become a missionary. She is pictured here in 1919 in what is now South Africa.

October 23, 2012

I am not a very good packer, especially under stress. I am the person to whom the “Forget Anything?” card in the hotel bathroom is marketed. On this particular night, however, I had packed the right thing.

I propped the black-and-white photograph of an early-20th-century missionary on the boxy hotel nightstand and climbed into bed. It would not be an easy night. No matter how deep I burrowed beneath the cascading pillows, I could not shut out my anxiety over the next day's events.

After years of seminary education, sermons, committee meetings and many, many prayers, I would be undergoing a day of questioning to determine whether I deserved full ordination as an elder in my

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GO

tradition.

To make matters more complicated, I was eight months pregnant. My belly pushed the mounds of covers upward, making me feel even more young, awkward and utterly female in a male-dominated profession. The baby shoved, twisted and punched within me as if to battle his mother's anxiety from the inside. In desperation I studied the window and the clock, looking for signs of morning. Then my eyes met hers.

In the photograph, she too looked young. A white woman dressed in white, hair pulled back, standing poised among bare-bodied, dark-skinned African children. A study in contrasts: white versus black, educated versus uneducated, "civilized" versus "uncivilized." My college professors would have had a field day tearing this photograph apart.

But for me, it was not an academic exercise. It was family. My great-grandmother -- whom I recall as hunched and wrinkled -- was captured here in her prime. At 19, she had left everyone and everything she knew to bring the gospel to foreign lands. She crossed the ocean in 1913, a time when German submarines patrolled the Atlantic. Pictured in this photo six years later in Vendaland (now a part of South Africa), she had found a husband, birthed a child and made a home.

According to family lore, she was not always as in control as she appeared here. When political changes pitted the indigenous people against white outsiders, tribal leaders plotted to murder the young missionary family. A translator informed my great-grandparents, who scrambled to collect their things for a hasty getaway. My grandmother, then a toddler, slipped away from her distracted parents. She stumbled upon the tribal leaders and charmed them with her big eyes, giggles and curls, and they in turn changed their minds, accepted the family and, to further seal the deal, gave their lives to Jesus. Well, so the story goes.

Where or what the truth is exactly, I will never know. My great-grandmother's soul-saving record matters much less to me than the strength of her convictions. At an age when it pained me to exchange the comfort of home for a college dormitory, she left her entire world behind and set sail into the unknown. Before email, before phones, before commercial airlines, before vaccines, before culture- and language-orientation courses, before all the conveniences and securities of modern international travel, she ventured out equipped only with a sense of calling.

On the eve of my ordination interviews, I finally recognized the look of a woman called by God. She had the mark, the distinction, the divine orientation that would draw her to Africa and compel her through a lifetime of ministry. Another relative once remarked that when my great-grandparents eventually returned stateside and she assumed the traditional role of pastor's wife, the call within her was evident. People listened when he preached; people wept when she "testified."

Though separated by 100 years, half a world, and different views of culture and colonialism, we were together that night. She peered down at me, reassuring me of our shared DNA, our shared womanhood and -- most important -- our shared sense of call. At long last, I drifted off to sleep. A night in her presence would give me strength for the questions of the new day.

The photograph still stands in my church office. On days when it is a struggle to find God, to find answers or even to find my own self, I take a seat alongside the other children in the picture. I gaze up at her in awe and give thanks for this shared adventure.

