

Michael Bryant remembers
missionary doctor
Helen Roseveare

HELEN ROSEVEARE

LIVING SACRIFICE

Growing up as a missionary kid to parents serving in Senegal with WEC International, I had the privilege of being exposed to countless godly women and men who served as missionaries in some of the world's most challenging places. But none stuck with me more than Dr Helen Roseveare, the humble and incredibly effective missionary doctor and educator who served in the Democratic Republic of Congo from 1953 to 1973, then as a missionary advocate until her death in December 2016.

Helen accepted Christ while at university in Cambridge, and publically declared her trust in Jesus, stating that she 'would go anywhere God wants me to, whatever the cost'. She was soon called to serve in North Eastern Congo to establish a hospital and training centre, initially in Ibambi then relocating to Nebobongo. The vast medical needs in this region were overwhelming and Helen soon realised that she could not accomplish much alone. Taking charge of an old leprosy camp, she established a training centre for nurses alongside the hospital.

The hospital grew rapidly and for a time she served in relative peace. However, this was short lived. As Congo gained independence in 1960, the country erupted into a brutal power struggle. Yet Helen remained and continued to work in the hospital, counting it a privilege to serve alongside her African Church family. Her example of perseverance in loving and forgiving enemies was remarkable and she continued to treat patients with ever-dwindling resources. She was given the name 'Mama Luka' after Luke, the biblical physician.

My own struggles and challenges of serving in Sierra Leone and living through a conflict in Senegal pale in comparison to the suffering Helen endured during the Simba uprising in 1964, where she was assaulted and brutally raped. For several months, she and many of her fellow missionaries were held at gunpoint, facing almost certain death while war raged around them. At times patients and staff from the hospital put their own lives at risk to protect her, having adopted her as 'our doctor'. Throughout this time, Helen often led prayers for their captors and was eventually rescued.

Incredibly, after a brief time back in the UK, she returned to a different part of Congo in order to continue with her work, again focusing on training local staff as nurses and doctors, continuing to show compassion despite her troubling memories. She was able to adapt to a country that had changed around her and encouraged many more students in their ambition to become doctors and nurses.

Despite her remarkable achievements, Dr Roseveare remained astonishingly humble. Her books are full of her honest struggles with pride, feelings of inadequacy and frustrations with her own impatience with the people around her. She remained honest throughout her life about her struggles, at times relating to other missionaries and seeking to put these right. She often learned

through her mistakes the importance of prayer before and during clinics and surgical skills and ensuring that her own ego disappeared.

In our era, where medical mission to Africa so often consists of shorter trips, there is a danger of detachment from the people being served. Helen's life teaches us about the importance of genuine community and friendship across cultures. Helen was equally comfortable with her African friends as British ones, adapting her attitudes and absorbing the language. Despite working in a colonial and post-colonial era, Helen refused to patronise her African friends, seeking guidance and discipleship from local African pastors. She recognised the importance of partnerships and empowering local people with the knowledge needed to spread the work, but has frequently stated that she learned and grew more in her faith from the Africans in her local church whom she served amongst than she could ever teach.

Helen fixed her whole life on Christ, living out many of her quotes, viewing her sufferings as 'minor sacrifices in the light of the great sacrifice of Calvary, where Christ gave all for me'. Her life teaches us that to fix our eyes on Christ should not merely be a line in a hymn or an abstraction, but a precious calling giving freedom and peace in the midst of earthly pain. She would often describe vividly how she knew God's loving arms encircling her life despite, or perhaps because of, her sharing in Christ's sufferings.

Yet, above all, looking at her life teaches us never to place a limit on God's power perfected in our weakness. As a single woman she was initially not seen as a high priority by other missionaries, and often had decisions made around her. Her headstrong personality, often seen as a flaw, was mightily used by God to transform situations around her. Her initial feelings of shame after being sexually assaulted soon evaporated, and this experience was used to encourage others powerfully who had been through very similar assaults. Through her ministry, many found healing – both emotional and physical, but more importantly, spiritual. To this day, she is well-remembered as the woman who established hospitals and medical training but, more than that, as a woman who shared Jesus.

Other obituaries for Helen Roseveare can be found in *The Telegraph* and on *The Gospel Coalition* blog:

- bit.ly/2ni49CQ
- bit.ly/2nGiwBR

Michael Bryant is a GP and doctor of tropical medicine.

further reading

Roseveare H. *Give Me This Mountain*. Tain: Christian Focus Publications, 1966
 Roseveare H. *He Gave Us A Valley*. Tain: Christian Focus Publications, 1976
 Roseveare H. *Living Sacrifice: Willing to be Whittled as an Arrow*. Tain: Christian Focus Publications, 1979
 Roseveare H. *Digging Ditches*. Tain: Christian Focus Publications, 2005