Jeanette Boersma 1918-2002

Missionary nurse in Iraq and Oman



Both Jeanette's parents were born in Friesland in the Netherlands. They both arrived in the USA with their parents aged 15. Both families lived in Roseland a south-west section of Chicago and both attended the same church. For the two young people, friendship blossomed and in due course they married.

Many of their friends also married and started families, but for Jeanette's parents there were no children yet! They longed for a family. Jeanette's mother prayed like Hannah that if God would give her a child, that child would be dedicated to His special service. Jeanette was born in 1918. Her parents saw this as a direct answer to their prayers. Later she had two brothers and two sisters.

In 1926 Dr Paul Harrison, a surgeon in Arabia, visited the Mission Fest at the Boersma's home church. Jeanette was only 8 but he made a great impression on her. Returning home that night she said to her parents, "***I would like to be a missionary***". Her father asked Paul Harrison what would be the best preparation for a girl who wanted to be a missionary. His answer was, "***Let her become a nurse***". God reminded Jeanette's parents of the vow they had made before she was born! They didn't tell her about this until she was on the mission field years later.

Aged 15 Jeanette made a public confession in church of her decision to follow Jesus. In 1935 she graduated from high school and in 1936 she began nursing training. Shortly after this Dr Mylrea of the Arabian Mission was to speak in the area. Jeanette went with her father. Again she had a strong desire to go out in mission. A little while later she went reluctantly with some other ladies to a missions meeting at Moody Bible Institute. Although she hadn't wanted to be there, the Holy Spirit was at work and she found herself responding to the Lord that she would go wherever He chose and be what He wanted her to be. She was filled with peace and joy. It was some time before she shared this experience with anyone.

Jeanette graduated from nursing school in 1939. After working as a nurse for 1½ years she began to feel very unsettled. She remembered her promise to the Lord. She went to share her thoughts with her pastor and ask his advice. He suggested she should get some Bible training. In 1941 she went to the Reformed Bible Institute in Grand Rapids.

As she came close to graduation in 1944 Jeanette wrote to the Reformed Church Missions Board saying she was ready for any field. Following her interview in April 1944 she was asked to go to Arabia. Her call had come through workers in Arabia and she immediately sensed that this was God's leading. It was arranged that she would leave for Arabia in October 1944. She sailed on the SS Colonial from Philadelphia with three other workers of the Arabian Mission – Harriet Wanrooy and Ed and Ruth Luidens – the Arabian Mission was nearing its 55th anniversary.

The SS Colonial was Portuguese registered and since Portugal was neutral in the Second World War they felt it would be safe to cross the Atlantic. In fact there were 70 missionaries on the ship from different missions going to different destinations. Jeanette commented that it reminded her of Jesus sending out the 70. Of this number 22 were first termers. Every day the whole group gathered for fellowship, Bible study and prayer. The ship docked in Lisbon on November 3, 1944. There were quite a number of missionaries in Lisbon who had been 3 months waiting for a ship to sail onward to their various destinations. Eventually this group swelled to 500!

On December 6 Jeanette and Harriet were to fly on a Dutch plane to Gibraltar and then on a British plane to Cairo where they would meet Ed and Ruth Luidens who were arriving on a separate flight. They met up in Cairo and on December 14 Jeanette and Harriet left by military plane to Basra via Baghdad.



Reformed Bible Institute – Grand Rapids

On arrival at the mission compound in Basra Jeanette's first task was two years Arabic language study. As part of the final exam she had to give an evangelistic talk in Arabic to a group of Arab women.

In Basra she attended two churches on Sundays – Arabic fellowship in the morning and St Peter's Episcopal Church in English in the evenings. Most people in the Arabic church were Armenian refugees from the terrible massacres in Turkey between 1895 and 1925. Some had escaped death by wearing the skins of goats and sheep on their backs as they crawled through the fields like the believers described in Hebrews 11:37.

Just as Jeanette was starting her language study she was asked to go on a temporary assignment to help Dr William Moerdyk in Amarah. Typhus and bubonic plague were approaching the town and a nurse was needed to immunise school children. Once the emergency was under control she returned to Basra to continue Arabic studies. At the end of two years she passed her language exams and was sent to Amarah to serve as a nurse in the hospital. At that time Amarah was the third largest city in Iraq with a population of ~55,000. The walled mission compound was about 5 acres of land on the edge of town. Working in the hospital was a great help in language learning.

During her time in Amarah Jeanette became increasingly aware that God was calling her to a life of singleness and that He would give her the "gift of singleness" – all the qualities needed. She saw the need for single medical workers who were free to change their schedule at a moment's notice. Despite the attentions of a number of fine Christian men, she kept to this calling and was fulfilled and happy.

In 1948 Jeanette's first term of service ended. She crossed the Atlantic once again on the SS Exeter. They stopped at Alexandria, Athens, Naples, Genoa and Marseille. The journey to New York took three weeks and a day. Jeanette used the time to write the talks she would need to give to different groups. She wasn't very confident in public speaking so she needed to have her talks well prepared and memorised.

During her time in the USA Jeanette wanted to do more specialist training in midwifery and gain certification. In autumn 1950 she enrolled in a six-month course run by the Frontier Nursing Service in Wendover County, Kentucky. As part of their training, they covered 700 square miles of hills, mining operations and woodlands with a population of ~10,000 people. After a year and a half Jeanette was ready to return to the Field. The mission assigned her to Muscat, Oman where there was an urgent need for a nurse to replace a worker who was retiring.

Jeanette had definite confirmation from God that her place was back in Arabia. She was briefly delayed due to some health problems. She sailed to London on the Queen Mary – sister ship to the Queen Elizabeth. From London she flew on a KLM flight to Basra via Munich and Cairo arriving on October 14, 1951. After a week in Amarah to collect her belongings and say her goodbyes, she sailed on the British India steamship line from Basra to Oman.

She was met by Dr Wells Thoms and his wife Beth. He was the son of Dr Sharon Thoms who had gone to Arabia in 1899 and sadly died in an accident falling from a telegraph pole in 1913. His wife Marion had died of typhoid in 1905.

There were ongoing discussions in the mission about the relationship between the evangelistic division and the medical division. Jeanette was to divide her time between these. She would work part-time in women's evangelism and also be in charge of The Women's Hospital in the old part of Muscat.

Oman was one of the first countries to embrace Islam during the lifetime of Muhammad. For centuries it was a loose federation of Muslim desert tribes. These tribes were relatively isolated, self-sufficient and strong minded. The modern history of the country began ~1500 when the Portuguese moved in to open new trade routes to the East. Omanis removed the Portuguese from Muscat in



Omani Family

1650. After that they were under the French and the British. At one point Napoleon had plans to take over the country, but the British neatly outmanoeuvred him by signing a treaty with the Omanis in 1799.

At that time the Said family were the rulers of Oman. They also controlled Zanzibar. The alliance with the British continued for many years. In 1950 the population of Muscat was ~3,000. Muscat was the seat of power for the government. Mutrah, about 3 miles away, was the commercial centre with a population of ~9,000. Oman was famous for dates and camels. They grew about 84 varieties of dates!

In the wake of World War II unrest was sweeping across the Middle East. The then Omani ruler worried about the changes he saw in the Gulf countries – lack of interest in religion, immorality, alcohol abuse and weakened families. He was anxious to guard his country from such things. Government soldiers appeared at the mission compounds and especially at the churches. They wanted to prevent any attempt at "christianising" Omanis. Many Omani believers were Baluch. Some stopped going to church. Some were taken to court, fingerprinted and asked why they went to church. They responded that they worked for the mission. They remain strong in their faith.

At one point the Mission School, started by Peter Zwemer in 1896 when he took guardianship of 18 boys from a slave ship, was shut because it was known they taught the Bible and had prayers. They continued to meet secretly in the Mission House but attendance dropped to 13 pupils. Mr Dykstra and Dr Thoms asked for an audience with the Sultan and he gave permission to re-open the school.

The Women's Hospital was not affected by the scrutiny of other parts of the mission. In Jeanette's first year there were 156 deliveries and the following year there were 252. There were also many home deliveries. In just a few years the hospital deliveries were up to 50 a month. Work in the hospital was demanding and there were also many 'out calls' that had to be fitted in during the afternoons – the hottest part of the day! They strongly believed that they should help people in the community.

Although oxygen and incubators were not available in Oman, God gave the hospital success in caring for premature babies. Malaria was the most common disease. The parasite can enter the brain and cause convulsions. Omanis associate this with demon possession and instead of going to the hospital they call an exorcist or visit a religious leader. Trachoma was another severe problem. In the Mutrah Hospital Dr Thoms did as many as 24 eye surgeries in an afternoon.

When blood was needed, it was hard to convince Omanis to donate even to their family members. The blood types of all mission workers were recorded and they often had to leave what they were doing to give blood. Life in the hospital and in the community was very demanding. Jeanette realised she was neglecting her personal walk with Jesus. She writes, "**When Christians neglect their personal walk with the Lord, He doesn't punish them, nor does He leave them. In love, He keeps on bestowing blessings and sends many reminders that He is waiting with arms outstretched. ... When Satan sees Christians slipping, he is waiting to take over. Even if he cannot win a believer's soul, he delights in throwing unhappiness and chaos into a life that is meant to be glorifying God**".

Spiritual warfare was part of Jeanette's life both in Iraq and Oman. Sometimes a person came to the hospital with problems they couldn't diagnose from a scientific viewpoint. They didn't seem to be in the physical realm. The mention of the name of Jesus would create turmoil in the patient. Dealing with Satan's attacks and manifestations in homes, in the patients and among the mission workers was a constant need throughout Jeanette's time in Oman. Her book, **Grace in the Gulf**, written in 1991 in her retirement, gives many examples of this as well as practical guidelines of Biblical ways to ***"Resist the devil"*** (James 4:7). She writes, "**Just as some people are too quick to blame evil spirits, others are too slow. I think Satan is just as active in this country (USA) but our eyes have been closed. Science and humanism have been our guides and neither has room for spiritual things**".



Launch in Amarah - Iraq

Several nurses who had been forced out of China by Mao Tse-Tung joined the work in Oman in 1954. They had great teaching skills and they started a Nursing School in Mutrah. There was relative peace in Oman but unrest was sweeping other parts of the Arab World. In 1958 there was a revolution in Baghdad and King Faisal II was killed. In 1959 the Amarah mission station was closed. George Gosselink and Harvey Staal were the last Arabian Mission workers to leave Iraq. They made appeals to the new leader, Abdul Kereem Qasim, to retain the property in Amarah, but to no avail.

The workers in Muscat and Mutrah had been praying for a lady doctor for The Women's Hospital. At last in 1961 Dr Alice Vander Zwaag joined them. She had been 2½ years with the Mennonite Mission in Jordan and had learned some Arabic. She was able to do 'C' sections and had special skills in treating vaginal fistulas and cervical artesia that resulted from the custom of inserting rock salt into the vagina after childbirth. Dr Alice lightened the load of the doctors in Mutrah as well as easing Jeanette's responsibilities in Muscat.

In the early 1960s Jeanette and others had opportunities to tour the interior of Oman and set up temporary clinics in a number of places. In Sohar they were provided with the best house in the town. It was the only one with electricity from a generator and a fridge. Dr Thoms did many eye operations and other medical procedures. In Mazaara they set up a temporary hospital on top of the mountain. Donkeys transported all the supplies as well as the patients! They normally stayed two weeks in each place leaving behind Gospel portions. They were warmly received and the hospitality of the local people was amazing.

Work in the Mission School in Muscat was growing. In the mid-60s there were 70 girls and 10 boys. There were more girls since there was no other school for girls. There was a government school and a private school for boys. Sultan Said bin Taimur and his successor, Sultan Qaboos bin Said, allowed students in the Mission School to study the Bible and have prayers. The big event of the school year was the Christmas Programme. Since there were no movie theatres and no television programmes, this dramatic presentation attracted a wide audience.

Jeanette made friends with a number of women in the Royal Family. They were single due to a lack of suitable bachelors and they were lonely. They visited Jeanette in her home and she visited them.

As the years passed by there was something troubling Jeanette. It was the fact that she didn't have a college degree. In 1965 she was starting a 15-month furlough after a 6½ year term on the Field. She discovered that Barrington College in Rhode Island would give her credit for her nursing studies and her time at the Reformed Bible Institute. She was given three years credit towards a B.S. degree.

She wasn't happy to leave her mother alone since her father had died in 1962. Her mother agreed to go to Barrington with her. They had a very happy time there. They made good friends in the college and the church. In June 1965 Jeanette graduated with a B.S. degree. As well as success in her studies, she felt the time with her mother and in the Barrington Baptist Church had been a real time of refreshment and growth in her walk with the Lord. Now it was time to return to Oman.

On November 6 she flew from New York to Bahrain and then on to Muscat. The workload in The Women's Hospital was ever increasing. Many came from the interior. Jeanette writes, **"I saw a greater response to God's Word in the first 5 weeks back in Muscat than in my previous 20 years of work in Arabia. It was apparent that the Holy Spirit was working in their hearts. The power of the Lord was stirring among them".**

The year 1967 brought reports of the discovery of oil in the interior. Several companies had been drilling for some time, but with no results. In the town of Fahud the first well struck oil. More wells were drilled and oil began to flow. Excitement was in the air!



Oman

In 1968 the Sultan began to build the first government hospital outside Muscat. At the same time communists from Yemen were coming over the mountains and creating havoc for the government in Dhofar – a province in western Oman. British commandos were assigned to desert patrols to help keep order.

The Sultan's son, Qaboos bin Said, had been under house arrest for several years since his return from England where he had attended Sandhurst Military Academy. He had been exposed to western ideas. He was progressive, intelligent, far-sighted and practical. Unknown to everyone, he was gathering power and preparing to take over the government. At this same time conflict between Israel and Egypt exploded in the Six-Day War. Violence was all around. Throughout the Gulf there were demonstrations against Israel, America and Britain.

On July 23, 1970 the rule of the old Sultan came to an end. He was injured in the almost bloodless coup and flown to Bahrain for medical attention. He was then taken to London by the British. Power had changed hands. Sultan Qaboos bin Said took control of the country as it was about to leap from the old to the new. The people of Oman rejoiced. There was dancing in the streets. They anticipated that the change would be for the better. The new Sultan immediately set about a programme of development and reform in health, education, agriculture, industry and mineral resources.

In 1971 Dr Ebenezer, a specialist who had retired from the Vellore Medical Centre in India, came to Oman. He was asked to travel south to Salalah to examine the eyes of the Queen Mother of Sultan Qaboos. Jeanette was asked to go with him to the palace in Salalah ~700 miles west of Muscat. Jeanette writes, **"On arrival we were led into the royal quarters. There were six of us in the room – the Queen Mother, Sultan Qaboos, two other Omanis, Dr Ebenezer and myself."**

After the examination the Sultan himself served glasses of lime juice to Jeanette and Dr Ebenezer. This simple act of service made a great impression on Jeanette. The Sultan asked Dr Ebenezer about his background. He spoke of his life in India and why he was a Christian. He asked the Sultan's permission to tell him about his best friend. With permission granted, he told him about Jesus coming to earth – His life and His death and resurrection and the fact that God loved him, the Sultan, in a personal way. The Sultan listened graciously and seemed to ponder the words. They assured him that they were praying for him as were many other Christians. They found it easy to visit the Sultan. The whole visit lasted about two hours.

In 1976 Sultan Qaboos married his first cousin, Kamila. She had been a student at the Muscat Girls' School. The marriage ended in divorce 3 years later and Kamila remarried. There were no children.

Amazing things were happening in the country. There was a rise of nationalism and Islam. A massive development programme was underway. Schools, hospitals, clinics and roads were built. Radio and television were taken forgranted. In just a few years the country was catapulted from a way of life unchanged for thousands of years right into the 20th century.

There were far-reaching implications for the mission. Omanis could now get free medicine in the new hospitals. The mission was eager to avoid any semblance of competition. They met with the Minister of Health and agreed on a plan to incorporate the mission medical work into the new government programmes. Jeanette wondered how the changes would affect their Christian witness. Jesus said, ***"You are the salt of the earth."*** (Mt. 5:13) Until now the salt had been somewhat scattered, but always returned to base! The 'piles of salt' were about to be widely scattered. The mission workers met to discuss whether they should put any limitations on what they would do for the government. Jeanette writes, **"We voted to make ourselves available anywhere in the country without limitations"**.

There was a new zeal for Islam and a Ministry of Islamic Affairs was established to ensure the strength of Islam and prevent proselytising. Public evangelism was not allowed, neither was distributing evangelistic material free of charge. Still there was a new interest in religious books and these were sold at a fair price in the Mission Bookstore in Muscat. Different religions were accepted



Bazaar Gate Muscat

as long as they stayed in their place. The Sultan gave land for Christians to have churches and worship. He also gave land for a Christian cemetery.

It was a difficult time for Omani believers. Many seemed to fall away. The mission workers were discouraged when this happened, but they reminded themselves that they had seen the work of the Holy Spirit in these lives and they prayed and trusted God for those who had believed.

Jeanette had another furlough in 1974. She wondered if her job still be there when she returned. Many mission personnel were being deployed in government hospitals and schools. She very much hoped she would be able to return to The Women's Hospital in Muscat. On her return, she learned that Oman's director of nurses had assigned her to the town of Sur about 250 miles south-west of Muscat. She learned that they had wanted to assign her to Somayil, but the people there had refused to have her in their hospital! Some years earlier she had given out Scripture portions in that town and been reported to the authorities. During all the years she was in Oman the Scripture Gift Mission in London supplied her with boxes of beautiful Scripture portions. These were given out in the hospital and wherever they visited.

So her new placement was to be in Sur. She resolved to go forward in the name and power of the Lord Jesus. There was a delay in organising transport as the roads to Sur were almost impassable. This is the reason Jeanette had never visited Sur in her many years in Oman. Some women from Sur had been treated in the Muscat hospital. They came by launch and returned the same way.

According to historians, Sur had been one of the wealthiest towns in Oman. The wealth came from shipbuilding, exporting, smuggling, piracy and trading in slaves. Some of the early mission workers had visited Sur. They were still remembered. Smuggling and the slave trade had been stopped by the British and by the government of Oman. Jeanette writes, **"I was aware of being observed. The people were polite and reserved. But I was a novelty being the only white, western, infidel woman in town"**. She was given a villa on the hospital compound.

Religiously, Sur was more conservative than Muscat. Jeanette had the position of 'Matron' meaning she was in charge of the hospital along with the chief medical officer and the hospital administrator. The only non-Muslims were Indian nurses who were mostly Christians from Kerala. Many of their lives were a real witness to the Muslims working alongside them and they were often asked about their faith.

Jeanette's introduction to the Bedouin people came when a Bedouin father, Abdullah, brought a tiny, sickly 15-month-old to the hospital. He weighed less than 9 pounds. His mother had died, so his father stayed with him. He looked and acted more like a wild animal than a human baby. The family had branded him in several places with hot irons – an old folk remedy to get rid of evil spirits. After 3 days the father wanted to return to his herds. He signed a paper giving the care of little Yusuf over to the hospital. The plan was for a local woman to care for him, but her plans changed and Jeanette took over Yusuf's care which she managed as well as her job at the hospital. When Yusuf reached 15 pounds Dr Matthews was able to operate on his inguinal hernia. Jeanette began to be known as Umm Yusuf! In due course she was able to return him, in good health, to his Bedouin family. Jeanette believed God had brought him to Sur to give her an entrée into the lives of the desert people.

A good paved road now linked Muscat to Sur. This road carried more and more traffic and there were many accidents. In 1980 Jeanette was at a meeting in Muscat. Next morning she got up early to return to Sur in their new Toyota land cruiser. She was moving along easily at 65 mph. The road was clear. Somehow she must have nodded off for a moment. The Toyota hit a bump, crossed the road and crashed through rocky terrain. Jeanette was trapped in the car. Two men stopped to help. She was able to get out of the car although her left arm was fractured. The men took her to the police station and the police took her to Ibra Hospital. She received excellent care and on her return to Sur she was overwhelmed with visitors – both Omani and expatriate. She later learned that Lillian



Bedouin Camp

Huiskens, a nurse in the old Mission Hospital in Muscat, had been praying for travelling mercies for her the day that she had the accident.

Prayer was vitally important to Jeanette. She writes, **"Prayer is everything to me. Even before I was born my life was shaped by my mother's prayer"**. Time spent in prayer both alone with God and with groups of other believers underpinned all of Jeanette's time in Oman. Through God's grace she had no lasting effects from her car accident. She continued to visit the Bedouin. In October 1982 Abdullah brought Yusuf back to her. Tests proved that he was suffering from viral encephalitis. Antibiotics couldn't help. Treatment could only alleviate his symptoms. Everybody was praying for Yusuf. His condition worsened. Abdullah insisted he should take him back to the desert to seek help from their "healer". Jeanette couldn't prevent this happening. For her it was a struggle between modern medicine and Christianity on the one hand and superstition and the powers of evil on the other.

The next day Jeanette drove out to the Wadi only to discover Yusuf had died the night before and had already been buried. She wondered if her friendship with the family would continue. Abdullah said to her, **"It is over for Yusuf, but please don't leave us!"**. By God's grace she had become a part of this family in the Wadi.

In 1983 Jeanette was 65. She began to think about retirement. Many of her colleagues had retired. She had been in Sur almost 9 years. It was her home. She wasn't ready to leave. It was time for her furlough. Should she return to Oman? After much prayer she sensed the Lord directing her to go on furlough and then return for a further 3 years.

After a furlough visiting with her family and speaking at meetings to urge young women to consider medical work in Oman, she returned to Sur. She wanted to make the most of what she believed were her last 3 years. She visited Rostaq, Sohar, Tanam, Behla, Nizwa and Muscat on one trip. She was known as 'The Matron from Sur'. She was thrilled that in most places the Christians were meeting for worship and she could encourage them in their walk with God.

The time sped by and the day came when Jeanette had completed 42 years of overseas service. It was time to leave land and the people that had become her own. She arrived back in the USA in May 1986. She still had 3 months service to complete with the mission. In July she returned to Chicago and moved into her parent's former home. Her time with the mission formally ended in September, but she agreed to continue taking meetings. She stayed in close contact with colleagues in Oman and with Omani friends.

In November 1987 a good friend in the Omani Royal Family flew Jeanette back to Muscat for several weeks. She was able to visit many old friends in Muscat and Sur as well as the Bedouin family in the Wadi. Her visit was a real surprise to them as they never expected to see her again! She was also able to attend the Grand Opening of the Royal Qaboos Hospital in Qala. Sultan Qaboos was there. After the ceremony a few people had the honour of being ushered into a private room where they were able to shake hands with the Sultan. Jeanette was included in their number. As she shook hands, she said, **"We give God thanks for you and for all you are doing for your country"**. He recognised her and he smiled. The occasion was shown on television that evening. One of her friends said, **"The Sultan almost never smiles on TV, but I noticed he smiled when you spoke to him!"**.

Jeanette was encouraged to find active prayer groups in most of the places she visited. Hindus were coming to faith as well as many nominal Christians. Still there were almost no Muslims willing to put their faith in Jesus. She writes, **"There was much that encouraged me, however, I felt that missionaries should stand firm and give themselves fully to the work that had begun so long before"**.

"***Let us not become weary in well doing, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up***." (Gal. 6:9)

Her visit came to an end too soon and she was on her way back to springtime in the American Midwest. She felt she was shuttling between two different worlds. As she began to settle into a new pattern for retirement, she felt God was teaching her new dependence on Him and leading her into new paths of spiritual growth. One of these paths was very unexpected. After a routine medical check, tests indicated cancer cells in her abdomen. She was facing surgery. Would it soon be time for her to be promoted to heaven or was there still more work for her to do on the earth? Many prayed and Jeanette committed herself to the Lord. She writes, "***The surgery was serious, but the Lord saw fit to use it to remove the cancer completely. There was no worry about further complications and radiation was not necessary. … My heart was filled with gratitude to the Lord and to all the people who stood by me. I thanked God for returned health and strength and complete healing***".

Between 1988 and 1991, with the help of David DeGroot, Jeanette recorded the story of her life in her book **Grace in the Gulf**. During her time of service in Oman the local people had given her the name **Khatune Naeema** meaning: **Respected foreign lady … Grace**. Indeed this is certainly what she was – respected among colleagues and respected among local people wherever she went. She wrote, "***This book speaks of the leading and faithfulness of a great God in my life even from the time before I was born to the present. To God be the glory and praise***".

Jeanette's pilgrimage on earth ended on January 14, 2002. She died of congestive heart failure. Her task on earth was complete and she entered into the joy of her Lord.

