A conversation with Cris Carpenter

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**DAUGHTER OF MISSIONARIES** *shares her faith — and finds a new family — while serving on an all-Brazilian mission team.*  
  
At age 27, Cris Carpenter is serving Christ while she rediscovers her roots in the country where she was born.   
  
Her parents, Bob and Donna Carpenter, served as missionaries in Brasilia, the capital of Brazil, during the 1980s. Cris Carpenter enrolled in Abilene Christian University in Texas and, while working on a psychology degree, went on a mission trip with Let’s Start Talking. The church-supported ministry helps non-native speakers improve their conversational English skills using the Bible.  
  
She traveled to Natal, a city of about 1 million souls in northern Brazil. She picked up some Portuguese and fell in love with the Church of Christ there. She quickly accepted the invitation from two Brazilian couples — Roberto and Marisa Signoretti and Osmildo and Marta Braga — to do an 18-month internship with the church.   
  
That 18 months has become four and a half years. Churches of Christ in Texas and several individuals support Cris Carpenter’s work, which includes oversight of an English outreach ministry. She is particularly fond of her Monday night bilingual Bible study, where she examines the Gospel of Luke alongside a dentist, two hair stylists, a security guard and a candy vendor.     
  
“They know that, while I care that they learn and practice their English, I care more that they learn and internalize what their lessons are about,” she wrote on her blog, [crisinbrazil.blogspot.com.](http://crisinbrazil.blogspot.com)**You are a single female serving on a team with two Brazilian couples who are old enough to be your parents. What is required to make that relationship work?**   
  
The same that is required to make any relationship work — respect. I deeply respect my teammates for the sacrifices they have made for the sake of sharing the Gospel in Natal, and I love them as my family in Christ.   
  
They are the most hardworking people I know, and I admire their dedication to God’s ministry in Natal.   
  
Since none of us are native “Natalenses,” the word “family” has taken on a whole new meaning as we have adopted each other, not only as family in Christ, but as let’s-spend-our-holidays-together family. They love me as a daughter and often like to treat me as such — lots of advice and home-cooked meals.   
  
But when we gather around our meeting table, they are eager to hear what opinions, ideas and input I have to share. They also respect me as a fellow servant in ministry.   
  
**What are the greatest challenges for you as a single woman on the mission field?**   
  
Even as part of such a vibrant church community, I still experience a lot of loneliness, not having an automatic family support system at home like the others do. Skype and e-mail are a tremendous blessing but often don’t bridge the distance between my family and me as well as I would like for them to.    
  
Another challenge is one that is not specific to the mission field, but something I suspect many single Christians face in churches worldwide — being pigeon-holed into singles groups and ministries. I think singles and married couples have a lot to share with and learn from each other.   
  
Many of my friends with whom I identify the most are married, but it seems there is an unspoken rule that once the Bible study starts we should split up into two groups. I would love to see this change.  
  
**What have you learned about sharing the Gospel?**  
  
That it’s much more complex than simply passing along information. Sharing the single-most meaningful aspect of my life with another person requires a lot of love and vulnerability.   
  
When I share the Gospel with someone, I have to be prepared to follow through with that person until the end, through questions, through crises, through joys and victories. I have to be vulnerable enough to allow that person to see Christ at work in me, which at times can be easier than others.   
  
I’ve learned that I must meet each person where they are at that point in their beliefs and work from there, trying to move too quickly can be painful and damaging.   
  
I believe that God grows the seed inside a person’s heart, but I also believe he entrusts us with the responsibility to stick around and make sure it’s getting plenty of water and sunlight.   
  
**What advice do you have for those working in short-term mission efforts?**   
  
Go with the attitude and spirit of a learner. Even if the purpose of the trip is for you to “bless,” “encourage” or “teach” people, go prepared to learn. Learn words in the language, learn about their cuisine, learn why the local Christians take communion the way they do, learn their greetings, learn what they believe about God, and learn what they are excited to teach you.   
  
Going prepared to learn will help in your adjustment and any culture shock, first of all, but it will also make you more approachable to the ones to whom you will minister.   
  
The impact you make — and your own spiritual growth as a result — will increase the more open you are to learning about them. And your hosts will thank you.  
  
**What would you say to other single women considering mission work?**   
  
John 12:26 is a verse that has been very meaningful to me in ministry: “If any of you wants to serve me, then follow me. Then you’ll be where I am, ready to serve at a moment’s notice. The Father will honor and reward anyone who serves me” (from “The Message”).   
  
If God is calling you to the mission field, follow him.   
  
When I first came to Natal I did not feel prepared or equipped to undertake the task in the least, but I felt called. I trusted that God would provide, prepare, equip and bless. And he has, in ways I never could have imagined.   
  
Moving by myself to a place where I would be the only American was terrifying. I still can’t really believe I went through with it. But God has rewarded that leap of faith by blessing me with a loving church family, a fulfilling ministry and an ever-growing desire to do exactly what he asks of me.