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Christians who feel called to ministry will tell you that receiving a clear “calling” is a piercing, wonderful experience. A calling brings clarity, but it also demands a response, one that usually requires courage, sacrifice, and deep sense of purpose. Just ask Gardner-Webb alumna and American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter Rachel Buck ('09), who leaves this month to fulfill a two-year call to missions with New Life Deaf Ministry (NLDM) in Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

A Derry, N.H., native, Buck became interested in ASL when first exposed to it at a youth cheerleading camp, and she took informal sign language classes at her church during high school. Looking for a small, Christian college in the South with an ASL major, Buck enrolled at Gardner-Webb expecting to study sign language and be a teacher. She had no idea what other options were available to her.

“When I was first looking for a school with sign language, I had no idea about the interpreting field,” said Buck, who minored in interpreting. She spent her college years interpreting for Gardner-Webb’s Deaf population, preparing for what has become a dynamic career in interpreting. She also participated in several Deaf ministry opportunities, including a short-term mission trip with Gardner-Webb to El Salvador.

Directly out of college, Buck landed a full-time job as an interpreter with Gardner-Webb’s Noel Program for Students with Disabilities. Then in the spring of 2010, she was asked to help lead a short-term Gardner-Webb Deaf mission trip to NLDM in Honduras in the spring of 2010.

“When I was first there two years ago, that was really the first time I had ever seriously thought about going into missions full-time,” said Buck. “That’s when God began working on my heart, preparing me for this opportunity.”

Buck was overwhelmed with compassion for the Deaf community in Honduras, a largely underserved and unreached community. Since many Honduran parents live in poverty, and can’t afford the time or resources necessary to learn sign language, many Deaf children in Honduras do not enjoy the educational opportunities that hearing kids do. In fact, an estimated 322,000 Deaf people live in Honduras, but less than 1% of them graduate from high school.

Among their several ministries, including the New Life Deaf Church, community outreach programs, and the Tegucigalpa Signs of Praise worship group, NLDM operates the Happy Hands Christian School for the Deaf, which reaches out to Deaf children of all economic levels. Many of the students live below poverty level, and many have absolutely no language before coming to Happy Hands.

While serving alongside the Happy Hands school in 2010, Buck struck up a friendship with NLDM's director, Christy, who expressed an interest in Buck's coming to work with the ministry on a long-term basis. The feeling, Buck says, was mutual. "When we left to come back to the U.S., I just had a strong feeling that I would be back, that it wasn't goodbye forever," Buck said.

Shortly thereafter, Buck emailed Christy to inquire about whether she could come back to NLDM for a month, hoping to gauge whether a long-term stint in Honduras would be feasible. As it turned out, Christy had already been talking with several of her leadership team about Buck. The "calling" was growing clearer.

Since the summer of 2010, Buck has been praying, preparing, and raising support for her two-year commitment, which begins this June. She will actually return to the U.S. later this fall for three months of mission training, before returning to Honduras in January to complete her commitment.

While in Honduras, she will serve as special projects assistant at NLDM. Her responsibilities will include helping to coordinate a child sponsorship program through the Happy Hands School, a much-needed program since Happy Hands refuses to turn away any student, regardless of their ability to pay. She will also coordinate NLDM's publicity and social media marketing efforts, and help to initiate a microbusiness program that will train parents of Happy Hands students to make crafts for sale at Honduran markets, with the hope of generating income for their families.

Buck says she has no expectations for the trip. For her, it's all about obedience. "I'm really not going with any kind of expectations as far as what I want to do or what I want to accomplish down there, but to really just be open to where the ministry needs me most," she said.

As you might expect, Buck does have some lingering fears about moving to another country, especially as a single, American woman who knows very little Spanish. Still, she takes comfort in knowing that once she gets to Honduras, a strong NLDM community is waiting to help her transition. Ultimately, she says, there is peace in her calling, and in the knowledge that God is in control.

For more about New Life Deaf Ministry or about Rachel's story, email her at rbuck@nldm.org or visit www.nldm.org.

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Communications intern Travis Sherrill contributed writing and research for this story.