



'Home is worth the journey'



John and Sarah Gieske are based in Senegal, West Africa. John is a Vernacular Media Consultant; Sarah recently gave birth to their third child, and is preparing their older two for school and preschool. She writes:

When I joined Wycliffe as a linguist in 2006, I could see myself in 15 years' time: single, living in a remote village, fluent in the local language. I could hardly wait to get started!

Just occasionally while hanging up my washing I wished I might one day hang up my own child's clothes. And now, almost 15 years later, I am married to a wonderful American man, living in a large town and speaking a smattering of various local languages; I have three children, am currently doing some home education with





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two of them, and I carry at least one basinful of clean clothes down from the roof every day!

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After joining Wycliffe, I worked in language analysis for two years and then went back to the UK for Intercultural Studies at All Nations Christian College. There I had the opportunity to pursue studies in ethnomusicology, the study of how Christians in every culture engage with God and the world through music. On a brief visit back to Senegal, I was introduced to a handsome young American working in the media department. As we kept in touch via blogs and emails, I wrestled with the potentially huge change in my ministry if I were to become a wife and mother. Our long-distance courtship, with some brief times together, and a lot of prayer from a lot of people, led to our engagement, marriage (in England) and relocation to the south of Senegal.

We chose to prioritise staying in Senegal over citizenship applications for each other's countries. We knew it would be tempting to settle somewhere more comfortable and lose sight of our citizenship in heaven (Philippians 3:20). So from the beginning we decided that if God were to give us children we would be bringing them up in a country neither of us called 'home'.



The view from the roof of the Gieskes' home in Senegal



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Our elder daughter and son were born in Senegal, and both spent many hours of their infancy being carried on the back of one or other of our Senegalese friends. Their Sunday school repertoire includes Doug Horley's 'Lovely Jubby', the American hymn 'This is my Father's world' and 'Enfant, Jésus t'aime' (Jesus loves you, child), with a different style of dancing for each.

They fit in with neighbours when they dig in the sand, and stand out when they fly their kite! At friends' homes they enjoy eating ceeb bu jën (fish and rice – but so much more!) from a shared central platter; home favourites like chickpea and cashew curry we eat from individual plates around a low table.

The Christmas season involves mince pies (homemade from local ingredients), carols and cartoons at a missionary gathering, and a full day in a village singing, dancing and feasting on yassa poulet (chicken with lemon-onion sauce and vermicelli) with our church family. Best of all, they get to spend Christmas Day with their cousins (another Wycliffe family, the Wilkinsons), who live in the same town as us! It is so rare and precious to have family who share two of our three worlds.



Drawing with some friends in Senegal



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We spent half of 2020 on home leave in England, where our younger daughter was born. In some ways the restrictions made life in the UK more familiar to her siblings, without soft play areas, double-decker buses or an English-language library. They relished time with grandparents and cousins, Sunday school crafts, iPlayer, and adventures in forests and playgrounds. But they also longed to return home. As my homesickness was soothed for a while, theirs was deepened: through this contradiction, we understand one another better.

Our children see that the Bible is at the heart of our life and challenge us to live out its truth

I consider it a privilege (albeit sometimes an exhausting one!) to be at home with the children, pointing them to our true home, ministering to those around me as a wife and mother. Our children see that the Bible is at the heart of our life and work, and repeatedly challenge us to live out its truth. They know that everything we have is a gift – from God, through someone else. They often have to remind us that Jesus understands us as no-one else does, even if the Senegalese are baffled by our introversion, Brits by our exuberance or Americans by our deliberate reliance on others. With their simple trust they look forward to the day when our whole family will be together, along with friends from every place we have known and loved. Home is worth the journey.