

Role of Short Term Missions in a Long Term Missions Strategy

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November 2, 2006

“Reflective man produces new philosophies; it is only the regenerate man who holds the clue to a society that is really new.” (Paul S. Rees, 17) If we are to ask ourselves what role short-term missions plays in a long-term mission strategy, it is imperative that first we have an understanding of the strategy of Christ. How was it that He brought about regeneration, and what place does ‘short term’ mission service hold in that grand plan? We must be willing to do more than merely reflect, but to take action and make changes if needed, in order to more effectively minister and bring about change.

As we look carefully at Christ’s strategy, we might consider that short-term opportunities such as Mission Corps serve the purposes of: **1) Acting as a prerequisite and apprenticeship for long-term missionary service, 2) Exposing the presence of syncretism in the theology of the participant in order to bring about careful study of the whole counsel of the Word of God, and 3) Bringing awareness back to the home culture as well as enriching the lives of the participants.** Through personal experience I realize that all of these may perhaps benefit the participant more than anyone else involved, yet are essential for the effectiveness of missionaries in a long-term mission strategy.

In his book, The Master Plan of Evangelism, Robert E. Coleman suggests that “Though He (Christ) did what he could to help the multitudes, he had to devote himself primarily to a few men, rather than the masses, so that the masses could be saved. This was the genius of his

strategy.” (36) So why did Christ come to save the world and then spend less and less time with the world as His time of departure drew near? Why was he always taking his closest disciples off from the hustle of the crowds to pray and learn from Him?

Humor me for a moment as I put on the hat of “educator.” As an elementary school teacher, the school district in which I teach has put in place a student: teacher ratio. The keeping of this ratio is enforced at all costs, in order to create the most appropriate learning environment for the students. If there are too many students and not enough teachers, effectiveness wanes. The teacher now has to spread his/her attention over a larger group of students and the possibility for personal relationship and effectiveness is diminished. Of course all of this is null and void if the teacher him/herself is not an effective teacher in the first place. Fortunately, we are dealing with a Holy God, so that is out of the question.

Could I suggest to you that because Christ was the avenue by which God reconciled the world to Himself, (2 Cor. 5:18-20) it was His perfect love that caused Jesus to focus his attention on a select few during His last days on earth? He the Master Teacher was pulling His pupils aside for individual instruction. Love was Christ’s mission. Love was Christ’s strategy. Perhaps His mission and strategy were one and the same.

If Christ came to reconcile the world to God and therefore gave us the ministry of reconciliation, then spending concentrated times with His closest disciples was the way in which Jesus accomplished that plan. Likewise, as a disciple of Christ, I experienced a similar time of tutelage, an apprenticeship you might say, as a Mission Corps volunteer in Papua New Guinea (PNG). In some aspects, the purpose of this ‘apprenticeship’ was two-fold: to provide field experience under the authority of the local missionaries, and to be pulled aside and out of my

normal sphere of influence in order to experience aloneness and direct instruction of the Master Teacher himself.

Volunteering in PNG provided many firsts for me: first time to live alone, converse regularly in a language not my own, experience earthquakes, and teach 4 different grades all at the same time. It was the first time to be thousands of miles from the familiarity of home over major holidays such as Christmas. Though I enjoyed the community of the other missionaries immensely during these times, I still experienced a loneliness I had never understood before. It was during these times that Jesus really became my closest companion.

When I was longing to hear a fresh word from God in my own language, or just wanting so much to be understood by others, it was only the Master Teacher who could teach me to be content. This awakened me to this simple fact: being a missionary is hard sometimes. It's better to learn that lesson as a volunteer, before assuming the responsibilities and duties of a global missionary. Being exposed to some of the hardships and challenges of missionary life through short-term assignments can make for a more effective long-term assignment. If you weather some of the storms ahead of time, you may have more realistic expectations when the bigger storms come.

As mentioned before, short-term mission assignments such as Mission Corps can serve as an apprenticeship under the authority of a global missionary currently on the field. A missionary is called by God, empowered by the Holy Spirit and sent by the Church. "Missions is the practical implementation of the mission of God." (Van Rheezen, 21) It is therefore necessary to understand the expectations and dealing of the governing body, in this case the Church of the Nazarene, and how they strive to implement God's mission around the world. Volunteering for a

year can provide deeper insight into how the Church operates in different world regions and give practical field experience in a foreign culture, while still closely connected with missionaries and indigenous peoples who, to put it plainly, know a whole lot more than you do. In my case, it provided a safe place for me to learn, be immersed in the culture and yet have the accountability of the mission family, as not to cause damage to the work of Christ and the Church of the Nazarene in that region because of my lack of training or cultural understanding.

In addition to serving as an apprenticeship or training experience, perhaps the redeeming value in short term missions is found in the awareness it brings to the participant and his/her home culture when he/she returns. Re-entry into the home culture can suddenly expose misunderstandings, inconsistencies and questions regarding what the participant has believed his/her entire life thus far. Through immersion in another culture and involvement with people of a different worldview, the volunteers can, through God's guidance and careful deliberation of His Word, identify the similarities and differences in worldviews and theology. It is hoped that this will cause the participant to investigate his/her faith and the influences that have formed his/her worldview.

What is a worldview? Michael Kearney puts it simply: "The worldview of a people is their way of looking at reality. It consists of basic assumptions and images which provide a more or less coherent, though not necessarily accurate, way of thinking about the world" (51).

Of the four general types of worldviews, pantheistic, theistic, secular and animistic, people from Papua New Guinea tend to come from an animistic worldview. Animism asserts that all actions and circumstances, whether disease, weather, death, etc. are controlled by spiritual forces and beings. Divination and witchcraft are used to try to contact the spirits in order to appease them or summon their power.

On the other hand, many western societies, such as the USA, often approach reality from a theistic or secular worldview. What happens when a cultural worldview merges with theology? Syncretism. Then the view of reality shapes the view of a holy God, when in fact our view of God should shape our view of reality. This can especially pose a challenge for the missionary trying to minister to a people with a different view of reality.

Gailyn VanRheenen in his book Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Strategies of Missions, has this to say about the effects of a secular worldview on the work of missions: “Western secularism has also impacted the missionary movement. People were thought to be self sufficient, able to solve all human problems empirically. This gospel of self-help became a part of the cultural baggage of the Western Missionary. The Bible however, pictures people without God as unable to direct their own steps (Jer. 10:23) ”

I would like to suggest that a short-term mission assignment such as Mission Corps could expose syncretism not only in the lives of the host cultures, but in the life of the volunteer as well. Some of this awareness occurs while on the field, but for many volunteers I believe it happens after returning back to the home culture. Let me draw from personal experience.

When I was in PNG, I was much more aware of my need for God’s presence, intervention and sustaining power in everyday activities. Going into town to the market was no less an adventure than navigating the rugged mountain rainforest. The sound of mourners parading through the streets, bodies covered in mud and ash, was a somber reminder that life is short. Stories of sorcery and witchcraft filtered through the nearby villages, reminding me daily that the spiritual battles that were taking place were just as real, if not more, than what I could see with my own two eyes. I had to make a decision: believe in an instant ‘god-in-a-box’ my

culture had created for me? Or believe the very personal, miracle-doing, prayer- answering, just, merciful, God of the Bible that I needed to deliver for me right now? I chose the latter.

Upon returning home in late June 2006, I was saddened and disgusted at the superficiality of life, the waste of time and resources all in the name of convenience. I missed the simplicity and practicality of daily tasks in PNG. Now surrounded by convenience, comfort and much mediocrity however, I found it all too easy to forget about my absolute need for God's protection, power and sustaining presence. Did I really need Him as much here in Kansas as I had in Papua New Guinea? Do I really need to ask for His protection if I'm just driving down the street in my own neighborhood? If I can just jog down to the grocery store for a quick meal, do I really need to pray for my daily bread? Do I really think He still drives out demons? Do I really need him to heal someone, even when I have access to excellent medical care here? I had everything I needed here, or so I thought. Life was easier, (yet much more complicated)

Had God changed? Of course not. But what did happen is that I had once again allowed the worldview with which I had grown up to shape my view of God. Syncretism had taken place. Ouch. All of the sudden the view of reality that my culture was feeding me was shaping my view of the God I had encountered in the highlands of PNG. Yet, now because of the experience as a volunteer, it was much easier for me to recognize that this syncretism was taking place. Had I not been exposed to a culture foreign to my own and developed a deep love and respect for the people of PNG, it might have been years before I identified what was taking place.

Awareness and understanding of a people group very different than our own is yet another benefit of a short-term mission assignment such as Mission Corps. Prejudices exist because of fear and fear is caused by the unknown. These prejudices, stereotypes and

misunderstandings will be perpetuated until someone, in faith, steps outside their usual sphere of influence to taste and see that the Lord is good, even in the unknown. Only then can the cycle be broken and our tunnel vision be cured. 1 John 4:18 proclaims, “ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear . . .” How can we learn to love a people we have never met? On commencing my yearlong stint in Papua New Guinea, I had no idea how much I would grow to love a people who, on the surface seemed so drastically different than me.

At first I myself was feared by the local people merely because of my white skin. In turn I also feared the “black skin” to some extent, until the perfect love of Christ drove out those fears, making way for trust and eventually a deep sense of respect and love. Little did I know that upon returning back home I would actually enjoy the smell of sweat and mud, and be energized by 100% humidity, because these things were so closely tied to precious relationships and shared experiences with my PNG brothers and sisters.

Because of the ability to have correspondence via e-mail, I was able to relay information about my home to my national friends and act as a conduit of information, bringing them news of a land very foreign to their own. In turn, friends and family in the States were bombarded with stories of a people that now played such a critical role in my life and who I was becoming.

For example, when hurricane Katrina pummeled through New Orleans in the late summer of 2005, news quickly spread throughout the missionary community and surrounding villages. At this point, those whose world had previously consisted merely of their small gardens and local market were now praying for a people and place halfway across the globe.

Likewise, when dozens of boxes piled up in the Mt. Hagen Post-Office filled with ministry training materials and school supplies from supporters and family members back home,

it was evident that something big was happening. The providence of God had put me in a position to train children's ministry leaders from throughout the Western Highlands Province during Holy Week, April 2006. This granted me the unexpected opportunity not only to train national leaders, but to communicate the work God was doing to the folks back at home.

These are only a few of a myriad of evidences that each party was now somehow more aware of the other and richer for it. The unknown was now becoming known. Perspectives were changing. Fear was being driven out by love, which of course was Christ's mission. It was His strategy. Thus the purpose in a short-term mission assignment such as Mission Corps.

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