

Your Life Is a Mission Trip

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Luke 10:1-9

Along with ten other Knollwoodians, I just returned from a mission trip to Nicaragua. Like most folks who go on a mission trip, we set out hoping to do some good, but we came back transformed by all the goodness we received.

We went to Nicaragua to work with Project Amos (www.amoshealth.org), a Christian non-profit working to improve the health of the most vulnerable communities in the second poorest country in Central America. Amos' model is to work with those communities in providing both clinic-based and community-based care. We spent most of our time at the Project Amos compound in Nejapa, an impoverished, semi-rural enclave near Managua.

While in Nicaragua, we joined in working with the locals in a variety of settings. The first was to help lead worship at the Second Baptist Church of Managua. While there, most of us had our first encounter with church pigeons, flitting about the rafters of the open-air sanctuary. At the River Jordan, Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. But at Second Baptist, Managua, I learned that church pigeons have their own brand of anointing, as evidenced in the small dollop of pigeon poop that landed on my shoulder while I was preaching.

It was the first of many surprises in Nicaragua. Other than the pigeon poop, all of them were good!

That week, we broke into teams. Two teams went into the local schools to teach basic hygiene, like the proper way to wash one's hands and brush one's teeth. Our Nicaragua hosts led the way, but our guitar-strumming songster, Ken Wilson, two able teachers, Beth Fields and Carol Danforth, and dentist, Suzanne Newsome, added a lot to the learning experience.

Later, two teams went to area homes with the consejeras. "Consejeras," Spanish for "counselor," are local women serving as community health workers. The consejeras awed us with their caring and compassion, their sensitivity and savvy, especially given the fact some of them have only a grade school education.

In the homes, these women offered to install water spigots on the five gallon buckets where most folks store their water. In Nejapa, many people get water only every three or four days, and then, at some ungodly hour, like 3:00 – 6:00 in the morning. Since all that water must be stored, it often gets contaminated and breeds mosquitoes. Something as simple as using a spigot on one's water supply, instead of hand-dipping the water, can reduce illness significantly, including diarrhea. I was shocked to learn diarrhea is the second leading cause of death in the developing world.

Our third assignment was working on a construction project at the Amos campus, painting long, steel beams for the roof of a new pavilion. In the stifling heat, this was draining, but important work, as it allowed the truly skilled labor--the local construction crew--to focus on building the trusses that would support the pavilion's roof. That pavilion, which financial gifts from KBC helped make possible, will soon host large health fairs for the community.

In short, our trip was fun, instructive, and rewarding. We learned a lot and maybe did a little good in the process.

As our time at Amos drew to a close, the folks there threw us a party. It was an open air party under a big pavilion where several dozen patients and community health workers gathered for the festivities. The party was supposed to start at 1 p.m., but that was on gringo

time, the uptight, North American version of being tied to the clock. On Nica time, a kinder, gentler approach to scheduling folks, people wafted in for the next forty-five minutes or so. As our driver, Guiermo, told me with a grin, "In Nicaragua, you're *always* on time."

As the women and children and a few men gathered, they chatted, embraced, kissed, laughed, and danced to the loud, festive music. The emcee was a clown dressed in a color burst of fabrics, her wild braids, flowing skirt, and blue tennis shoes, constantly in motion. Pretty soon, John Danforth was up there dancing with her, as the rest of us looked on in both shock and amazement. Eventually, even the most uptight gringos in our group--which would include me--got up to dance with John and the clown as best we could.

When the program properly started, the spokesperson invited our group to sing. The guitar-wielding Ken led everyone in stirring rendition of "Lavate las Manos," meaning, "Wash Your Hands," the song we taught the school children.

Then, to my embarrassment, our host introduced us as missionaries from Carolina del Norte--North Carolina. She even had the gathering sing, "Alma Misionera," a hauntingly beautiful song about the "soul" of a missionary. To me, "missionaries" seemed a rather exalted title for a rag tag band of North Americans who could hardly muster a dozen Spanish phrases between them. We were well aware the locals were doing the real missionary work in Nejapa, from ministering to the sick at the clinic, to visiting in the nearby homes.

But because of you, because of your financial support and prayers--and giving Ken and me the time to go--we showed up for a ministry of accompaniment, a coming alongside to offer encouragement and affirmation. To hear the folks at Amos tell it, such a ministry means more than we ever imagined.

So when at the end of that party on the pavilion, we were served watermelon juice and saltine crackers--because our finicky stomachs couldn't tolerate the real feast being served--it felt like a kind of communion. As in the company of those gringos and Nicas, consejeras and

travel-weary Americans, and brothers and sisters in Christ, the Risen One drew near whispering the assurance that even in the most humble acts of caring and hope, the Kingdom of God draws near.

Maybe, despite ourselves, we really were missionaries. We just didn't know it.

In reflecting on our trip, I found myself drawn to Jesus's sending of the 70, a story found only in Luke's gospel. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell of Jesus sending the twelve apostles on a mission to their homeland, Israel. But only Luke has the story of Jesus sending out the 70, a story that anticipates the church's mission to all the world.

The number 70 in the story reflects the 70 nations cited in Genesis Chapter 10 as comprising the known world. In Luke's second volume, the Book of Acts, we read of Pentecost where persons from "every nation under heaven" are gathered. Soon, fueled by the Spirit's wind and fire, the church's mission moves from Jerusalem, and Judea to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, just as Jesus commands in the book's opening chapter (Acts 1:8).

Thus, the sending of the 70 means the church's witness and mission is *for* everybody and offered *by* everybody. Not just the Twelve, or their successors, the professional clergy. But every rank-and-file believer who has the life and love of Jesus Christ beating in his or her Spirit-born heart.

One day on our construction site down at Amos, a heavily tattooed man came roaring up on his Harley. This barrel-chested man wore a Milwaukee Brewers t-shirt, as biceps the size of cantaloupes strained the fabric. The guys on the Nica construction crew--Gilmer, Juan Carlos, and all the rest, knew him and greeted him warmly.

Our bedazzled KBC work crew, gradually drew closer, like uncertain patrons at a zoo, eyeing a large, unfamiliar creature. But soon, they too were part of the conversation happily unfolding around the motorcycle rider with his goatee, dark glasses, and bandana.

It turns out he was a successful builder from Wisconsin who moved to Nicaragua to be a missionary trainer. And *not* of missionaries to serve *there*, but *here*. Along with his wife, this man planted his life in Nicaragua as part of what he calls the 1-51 movement, meaning in one week, he trains Americans in Nicaragua to be missionaries back home the other 51 weeks of the year.

According to this motorcycle-riding missionary, we can all be missionaries to our loved ones, to the people we meet during the day at the grocery store or gas station, and even to our fellow drivers on the road. Out of such little “random acts of kindness,” said our teacher, a big witness to Jesus can grow.

Maybe that’s what missionary trips do at their best: Teach us how to be missionaries not there, but here, where we are the locals who know the language and the culture and are best suited to live and share the good news of Jesus with our neighbors.

Clearly, the mission Jesus envisions doesn’t require a lot of luggage or planning or preparation: “Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals. . . . Whatever house you enter, say, 'Peace to this house!' . . . Eat and drink whatever they put before you.” The gist of his instructions seems to be, “Travel light and trust the hospitality of strangers.” Because missions is not a place you go or something you do. No, as a follower of Jesus, missions is who you are. It’s the sacrament of neighborly concern you live out in your own community.

I’ve seen this calling lived out in a profound way in our church’s growing ministry to refugees. At present, we have four “Good Neighbor” teams working with three Syrian refugee families and one from the Congo. Three of those teams are working in partnership with our friends at Temple Emmanuel. Surely, Jesus must be pleased that in the Deep South, Baptists are working with his people, the Jews, to welcome Muslims!

Yesterday, due to the leadership of Diane Lipsett and Chrissy Hardy--and a host of refugee ministry leaders and volunteers at KBC--along with help from our co-sponsor, Interfaith

Winston-Salem, a Pentecost-like gathering of nations descended on our campus. Congolese and Syrian refugees and North Americans of all ages, gathered to play and eat, to share and celebrate and learn. Truly, it was a holy, heaven-sent moment when the Kingdom of God drew near.

One young Syrian woman shared her story. She was living a safe, comfortable life in her four-bedroom house in Aleppo when the bombs started falling. Suddenly, her days and nights were terrorized by the whine of incoming mortar rounds and the fear her house would be the next one reduced to rubble.

Eventually, she and her family made a harrowing escape through a war zone to a refugee camp in Lebanon. But in Lebanon, already strained by a huge influx of refugees, this woman was met by resentment and harassed by the authorities. No one smiled at her, no one hugged her, no one opened their arms.

Finally, after long months in a refugee camp and a long process of vetting, she and her family boarded a plane to America, a place many in her culture regard with hostility and suspicion. She didn't know what to expect.

So imagine her shock upon arriving at the Greensboro airport when she and her family were greeted by a beaming bunch of Christians and Jews. These people held up signs that said "Welcome" in Arabic, even though unbeknownst to the greeters, one of those Arabic welcome signs was held upside down!

And yet, these strangers greeted her with warmth and affection, treating her as the child of God she was, leading her to think then and to exclaim yesterday when telling the story, "Oh, my God, these people are not *normal*. They are so nice. And they love us so much!"

No, these are not normal people. These are people on a mission. They hold sacred the obligation, sounded again and again in the Hebrew Scriptures, to welcome the alien, the refugees, the strangers. Because you were once aliens yourself, in the land of Egypt.

And in America too, where all our families came from someplace else.

And these are people on a mission because many of them heard and answered Jesus' call, "I was a *stranger* and you took me in."

So who knows? Maybe our friends in Nicaragua who called us "missionaries" were right after all. Because they saw in us some hint of the One who sent us there, as we surely felt the presence of the living Christ in them. As in even our humbling, fumbling attempts to help, the Kingdom of God drew near.

O holy Christ, you dared call ordinary people like ourselves to help in your mission of hope and healing. Now empower us to be emissaries of your goodness and grace, love and welcome, right where we are. Amen.

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