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Mission Trips: Are They Worth It?

The long ending of Mark has these familiar words: Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.

Last summer Dana and I were part of the 7th Annual Interfaith Humanitarian Trip to Ecuador sponsored by Myers Park Baptist Church. 44 of us traveled down there at the end of June as part of 3 teams: a school team, a construction team and a medical team. We worked in Mojandita, a small indigenous community of a few hundred citizens, near the market town of Otavalo, about 2 hours into the Andes Mountains from Quito, the capital of Ecuador. It was a beautiful spot, 10,000 feet above sea level, right out of the pages of a travel magazine. We walked to breakfast every morning past a scene that could have been in the Swiss Alps. Many places in the countryside looked like Tuscany. I suppose people who lived there could have said that Switzerland and Tuscany look like Ecuador; regardless, it was a place of great beauty.

The way the project started is interesting and confirms that God works in mysterious ways. Keith and Darlene Korenchuk, who are here today, are adventurous world travelers who have taken their children all over the world. About 8 or 9 years ago they were driving on the Pan American highway in Ecuador and they came to a place where the road was closed, causing them to turn back to a hot spring resort called Banos. There, Keith relates, he was sitting by the hot springs reading when a tall Norte Americano walked over to him and asked, "What's your relationship to Jesus Christ?" Keith says normally that would have turned him right off, but there was something likeable about the guy and they began to talk. The fellow was a Canadian, Tim Horn who had a ministry in Guayaquil, the largest city in Ecuador, down on the Pacific coast. Keith and Darlene decided to take their family down to Guayaquil and work with Tim in the ministry for the rest of their vacation. They decided next year to bring a mission team to Guayaquil.

Now Guayaquil is hot, humid, mosquito infested, and dangerous not only from malaria and other tropical diseases but also from criminals. It is just the sort of place that needs missionaries but not an ideal place to bring people on a mission trip because the first principle of mission trips is to bring everyone home who started out with you. The Korenchuks felt they needed a place to take the mission team for rest and recreation after the work part of the trip and they happened on the small mountain community of Mojandita.

Mojandita in contrast to Guayaquil is an ideal place for a mission trip: it has a temperate climate, it is free of mosquitoes and banditos. It possesses a stable foundation on which to build relationships, an essential component of any such endeavor. There is an elected community board and the citizens are actively involved in the life and welfare of the community. Two of the leading citizens of the community are Bette Sachs, a native New Yorker, and Diego Falconi, an Ecuadorian, who met and married in Quito over 20 years ago and who have lived in Mojandita and run a bed and breakfast resort there for the past 10 or so years. The community has a medical clinic and a school for kindergarten thru 6th grade, which is the level of compulsory education in Ecuador. Members of the community pay \$1 per month per family to receive basic health care in the clinic. Dr. Garcia, a family physician from Otavalo, the large town down the hill, goes up to the clinic one half day a week to see patients. For that she is paid \$10 and it costs her \$6 round-trip for the taxi. The clinic is supported in large part by a contribution from Myers Park Church every year. The only drugs they have are what we bring. The project has established with the Mojandita community a healthy relationship, which has been consistent and respectful of their culture and ways for the past 8 years.

The people of Mojandita are very poor, mostly farmers, using relatively primitive methods. In spite of their poverty, they are very happy. But they tend to look at things very differently from us. Keith Korenchuk told me of an incident from one of the early trips. He and some of the men were wondering how to dispose of some old lumber with nails sticking out when one of the villagers suggested it couldn't just be thrown away. So they used hammers, to pull out all the nails and straighten them on a rock. At the end of 2 hours, they had a stack of lumber that in the US would have been fit only for firewood, and a handful of nails worth perhaps a quarter. To us it seems like a colossal waste of time and effort, but to the villagers who had 2 hours, but not a quarter, it made perfect sense.

I mentioned that our work was carried out by 3 teams. The school team, of which Dana was a part, did science, geography and crafts. The team brought about 75 Spanish language books for their library which until then had no books at all.

The construction team built shelves and desks for the library and painted the school.

I was part of the medical team which consisted of 5 doctors, a pharmacist, 10 nurses, and several translators. The Doctors were about as ecumenical as one could get. We had Roman Catholics, a Jewish doctor, I was the token Baptist. It was a very collegial group, confirming once again for me that doctors get along together much better than Christians.

Our ophthalmologist was ably assisted by the Korenchuk children who acted as her translators and technicians, doing refractions, assisting with eye exams and keeping records. The ophthalmology team performed about 140 eye exams and gave out about as many pairs of glasses, which had been donated by the Lions club. Us generalist doctors saw mostly common diseases-not much tropical except for lots of cases of worms, the usual backaches, skin rashes, gastrointestinal and genitourinary complaints.

Most of the people in Mojandita are indigenous descendants of the Incas, or a mixture with the invading Spanish from 400-500 years ago. They are a short people; many of the women were less than 5 feet tall. The people were generally healthy, probably because of their diet and exercise. Their diet is mostly vegetarian, mostly grain, and the terrain had no flat spots so they walked either up or down everywhere they went. I don't think I saw a single adult with a heart rate over 60. Most of us sitting here right now probably run in the 80s. On the other hand, they generally looked much older than they really were. Some of the mothers who brought their children looked like grandmothers.

One small child we saw at the Topo clinic way back in the mountains was especially memorable, a tiny thing no more than 4 years or so. Her mother brought her in for an ear problem and we were horrified by what we saw. The left ear and the surrounding skin and hair were caked with black tar that the mother had applied to treat an obvious case of impetigo. Impetigo is a bacterial infection related to filth. We gloved up and my nurse began to cut away the hair and to scrape away the tar from her skin. It must have hurt terribly, but the little child just sat there impassively staring straight ahead, with a few tears in her eyes, not making a sound. When I thought I couldn't stand it anymore, I reached out my gloved hand toward her and she looked down and put her little hand in mine, a universal language, I guess, and my nurse completed the cleaning. We counseled the mother about hygiene, probably to no avail, and gave her antibiotics to treat the infection.

Some may say, Hank, you read the Great Commission, but I haven't heard anything yet about proclaiming the good news. Well at the risk of sounding presidential, it depends on your definition of proclaiming the good news. I believe the scripture passages we read earlier and others like them, including the Great Commission, provided motivation for most of us on the trip. But what does it mean to proclaim the good news?

Others have commented on this. The ancient theologian, St Francis said "Preach the gospel to every corner of the world; if necessary, use words."

I also like this little poem by Emily Dickinson which I first heard in a sermon on witness. It goes like this:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant---
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As lightening to the children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind---

We had an experience on the trip that illustrates exactly the opposite approach. A church group from Louisville was down there at the same time we were. Their aim was to hold Vacation Bible School in the afternoons. I don't know whether it was a scheduling error or something more sinister that both groups were there at the same time, but it was not a good thing and it was the source of a fair amount of frustration on our part, and probably on theirs as well. Our teachers had planned recreational activities for the school kids in the afternoon, but on the second and subsequent days, the kids all disappeared from the school after the final bell. We found out the "competing" group had promised to pay for next year's school supplies for all the kids who came to the VBS for every session. The parents were poor and they could hardly afford school supplies; it was an offer they could not refuse. I am sure the children enjoyed the VBS activities. They probably benefited from it. The problem was, this group was doing evangelism with no means to continue the discipling process after they left. It was also a questionable way to proclaim the good news, one that I hadn't encountered since boyhood when I read in the newspaper about a visiting evangelist at a local church who promised free pony rides to all children who made a profession of faith during the tent meeting. I suspect in both these cases the truth did not dazzle gradually and I wonder how much truth was lost forever, because even young children know when they are being manipulated.

Dana and I have asked ourselves if we did any good on the trip. At the risk of sounding presidential, it depends on your definition of good. And I don't think the answer is self-evident. When Dana and I lived in Rochester, almost every summer our church hosted mission trips from churches in the south. The groups were for the most part poorly organized and more trouble than they were worth. About all they left us was a lot of advice on how we could do better, based on their superior knowledge and experience. So Dana and I had to ask, "Were we like that?" In a tangible sense, we left behind some nice books and library shelves and a painted school. But in regard to the efforts of the medical team, if one wished to apply a certain kind of standard, the answer would be "Those people don't need health care *per se*. They don't need ibuprofen and pepcid and worm medicine. What they need is public health. They need clean water and sewage treatment facilities and plenty of soap. Only then will they get rid of their worms and their impetigo. Only then can they really begin to benefit from health care."

The critics would be right. We didn't improve anyone's health. We didn't save anyone's life. Maybe I or my antibiotics saved the life of the little 4 year old girl, but only if she doesn't get the same infection again. Considering the filth she lived in, the chance she would get impetigo again is very high. If the only worthy goal is to make wholesale changes in the way people live, then we and all who go on these trips, are doomed to failure. So, did we do any good? In the final analysis, I think the medical team did what goes on in any Billingsley Road internist's office everyday here in Charlotte—we treated worrisome symptoms and gave comfort and reassurance. That is no little thing. Even a cup of cold water is nothing to hold in contempt.

There are many lessons for participants in mission trips. For me, most of the lessons are still framed in questions that I may be working on for the rest of my life.

Does God love me more because I have lots of possessions? Does he love the people of Mojandita less?

What about the whole idea of material possessions and self worth? How much of my sense of self worth is tied up in my possessions?

What is happiness and where does it come from?

I would like to close here with an idea from Carlyle Marney. Marney was perhaps the most insightful interpreter of the Christian faith for a whole generation of moderate Baptists in the 20th century and he was pastor of Myers Park Baptist Church during the sixties. Marney wrote this about the difference between individuals and persons:

The individual is the self with its things. The person is the self with the selves who created and called him out. This is Christian community. No human being who wishes to be person can any longer be individual.

Do you see what he is saying? He is saying that individuals can only become persons in community. Individuals can only become persons in community.

This is what mission trips are all about. And we saw this happen in Ecuador as we served these people in the clinic and the school and the library. As we met with the town council and attended their summer solstice festival as honored guests. And I began to sense the sacramental nature of doing a task for God by serving God's children, and to sense that such activity can bring grace to the partakers. While I believe that grace is by definition a free gift of God, that we can do and indeed did nothing to earn it, still we must not blind ourselves to those insights that God can provide in the humblest of places, amongst the humblest of his children, lest we miss the grace. Maybe that is just a fancy way to say, "It made me feel good." But I think not. Maybe it was just a cup of cold water, but that is not so bad. The trip to Ecuador did community in the truest sense, among the individuals who achieved more personhood on the trip, among the many faith communities in Charlotte that we represented and between ourselves and the people in Mojandita.

Back to the title of the sermon: Are mission trips worth it?

Yes.

Let us pray.

Lord of grace and goodness

We will go somewhere with the Good News, if you but call our names.

We will use words if necessary, if you but call our names.

We will tell it slant, if you but call our names .

We will build relationships with those we serve, if you but call our names .

We will become persons through community, if you but call our names.

We pray in the Name that is above all names.

Amen