

HOW TO BE EFFECTIVE IN MISSIONS WITHOUT BECOMING A VICTIM

The Great Commission is my Supreme Ambition

From the very first day that I heard the Gospel of Christ, 4 April 1977, I have been called to missions. For over thirty four years The Great Commission has been my supreme ambition. Starting with distributing Gospels of John door-to-door in Pinelands, being a Group Leader in Scripture Union Holiday Missions, teaching Sunday School, running Youth Groups and coffee-bar outreaches, ministering in old-age homes, mass literature distribution at railway stations and bus stops, then working in Hospital Christian Fellowship, starting a Bible Study and Prayer Fellowship in the Army which met every night and led many soldiers to Christ, through to the launch of Frontline Fellowship, over 29 years ago, the last command of Christ has been my first concern.

I've had the privilege of ministering in 33 countries, on four continents. This has involved well over 12,000 meetings, including many missions camps and conferences, and conducting Great Commission Courses.

The Need for Discernment

There is no doubt that the harvest is very large and the workers are far too few. However, I've become increasingly concerned about how ill-prepared most mission volunteers are on entering the field. Also disturbing is how little discernment is evidenced in all too many cases

Over the years, I have tried to give an honest and balanced report on the problems, frustrations and difficulties of the field, without unduly glamourising missions. Of course one wants to encourage and inspire fellow Believers to wholehearted commitment to world missions, but, even from the earliest years of Frontline Fellowship, I have felt the need to also issue words of warning and caution as to the real dangers and difficulties involved. The Lord warned us to count the cost and much of what I have heard in different missions conferences seem to be setting up well-meaning people for inevitable disappointment, and even disaster.

The Targeting of Missions

On a recent mission trip I visited a Bible College which had endured 21 burglaries in 2 months. The tragic story of seven international missionaries being robbed and abused in Zimbabwe prompted me to begin thinking about writing this article. Then the report back of a co-worker on a three and a half month mission to Congo impressed on me even further the importance of this article. We need mental toughness, emotional strength, spiritual discernment and a resilience to persevere in spite of the many discouragements, dangers and deceptions looming in most fields.

Threats and Theft

Certainly, in my 29 years experience in foreign missions, I have experienced thefts and threats, not only from pagans, but from false brethren and false shepherds within the church. Right from my very first mission trip to Mozambique, in 1982, there were the greedy and malicious back stabbers and traitors quick to steal and to report our "illegal" Bible smuggling to the local communist commissar.

Attrition

The trouble is the vast majority of missionary volunteers give up before completing their first term in the field. Many short-term missionary volunteers only go once, and, whether because of negative experiences in cross cultural confusion, misunderstandings, sickness or thefts, for one reason or another, fail to return to the field ever again.

Enormous resources are being spent on training, preparing and transporting to the field missionary volunteers who don't persevere, and return home within weeks or months – never to venture into any mission field again.

Prison Ministry in Mozambique

In 1989 I led a team of 6 American medical missionary volunteers to Mozambique. Within days we were captured, arrested and imprisoned, mistreated by the SNASP Secret Police and incarcerated in solitary confinement at Machava Security Prison in Maputo. Not surprisingly, none of those volunteers have returned to the field since.

Bombed in Sudan

However, one of the members of an Evangelism Explosion team that I took to Sudan in 2000 has continued to return multiple times since, despite us being bombed by the Sudan Air Force on his first Sunday morning.

Betrayed by Brothers

Of course, one expects persecution from anti-Christian, Marxist and Muslim, regimes when working in restricted access areas. However, most missionaries are not prepared for the blatant theft from those they have felt called to serve. Yet even missions dedicated to establishing hospitals and schools amongst desperately needy people have been cheated and attacked by the very communities they are seeking to serve, stolen from by staff, and looted by the local community.

The Judas Factor

We should not be too surprised. Even Jesus had His Judas amongst His twelve hand picked Disciples. Although Judas was entrusted with the finances of the Apostles, he was a thief. Not only stealing from the Lord Himself, but even betraying Him for mere money.

Muggings and Manipulation

I know of all too many cases of missionaries who have faced muggings and manipulation in the field, threats and theft, being used and abused, not only from the local people to whom they were sent, but even by fellow Christians. Not only stolen from by local believers, but by fellow “missionaries” and “co-workers.”

False Brethren

This may be a shock to many people wanting to get involved in missions. When I first became a Christian it never crossed my mind that someone could claim to be a Christian and yet be malicious or devious. Nor that we would not only be cheated and abused by local believers and fellow missionaries, but also by overseas ministries and churches.

Theft and Deceit

All too often there are those who don't pay their bills, fail to fulfill their promises, never keep up their end of the work load, and happily run up huge expenses which they leave for the local missionary that they are meant to be “supporting” - while they return to engage in brilliant fund raising campaigns entirely built upon deception.

Deception Operation

In dealing with guests from other ministries, we have sometimes been horrified by dishonest and unethical practices and claims. Some, who merely participated on one field trip with our mission, have gone on to make incredibly extravagant claims in their fundraising letters and videos. One launched an entire ministry with an impressive marketing campaign based entirely based on false claims and plagiarism. Pretending responsibility for Frontline Fellowship shipments and ministry activities in Sudan, one individual, who was merely a junior guest of a large team with no significant ministry role, later claimed to have been the leader of the entire operation, quoting all of our statistics of Bibles delivered, ministry conducted and flights chartered as his accomplishments!

False Claims and Unpaid Bills

Another individual, who came in on one Frontline Fellowship mission trip to Sudan and participated in the first few days of our Teacher Training Courses, leaving early, later claimed to have set up a couple of dozen schools in the area, and requested funds for his “staff” there. Needless to say, none of the teachers or pastors in the area were aware of any such activity. On numerous occasions we have been asked to arrange flights for overseas “missionaries” who later have left us to pay all their bills without so much as a contribution.

A Fool’s Errand

One needs to be aware of those who will happily send you on a fool’s errand. The book of Proverbs warns us about fools busy with some fantasy and unworkable project. There are people who want to live on your faith and want you to do their work for them. A mission in the hand is worth dozens of visions and concepts “in the planning stage”. They live by presumption – not by faith.

Integrity and Discernment

There is a desperate need for absolute honesty and integrity. We need to be people of our word, say what we mean, and mean what we say. We need discernment, precautions and a basic understanding of security principles. Otherwise we could be guilty of sending out dedicated missionary volunteers who will fall victim to muggings, theft, rape and murder. All of this has happened to mission volunteers in the field.

Financial Schemes

Then there are the financial scams from false brethren who pretend to have all kinds of ministries and exploit well-meaning Westerners with their slick fundraising letters and e-mails. As we actually travel to the field, we have been able to expose numerous of these “pastors” as the real pastors in the area have taken us to meet the well supported frauds in the local bar!

Cross Cultural Opportunists

Then there are the cross cultural opportunists and exploiters who seek sponsorships to travel the world and attend various missions conferences, only to gather as many names and addresses and e-mails as possible in order to soak well-meaning, but naïve, Westerners with emotive fund raising scams. “*Can you just help with some money?*”. Others try the politics of pity and guilt manipulation to get an American or European wife (and therefore a passport to the West): “*God told me to marry you...!*”

Guilt Manipulation

You would find it hard to believe how many times we have encountered cross cultural opportunists attempting to guilt manipulate some Western girl into marriage. Even “pastors” who are already married. If you ever doubted the Biblical Doctrine of the depravity of man, you will find more than enough examples to verify it in the mission field, and even at missions conferences.

Beware of Distractions and Deviations

The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. We need to seek first God’s Kingdom and His righteousness. The Great Commission must be our supreme ambition. Nothing must be allowed to distract or deviate us from that. We are called to build God’s Kingdom, not to enrich false brethren, false shepherds and false prophets. We are to have faith in God, not in human nature. We are to trust the Lord, not be gullible victims of con artists.

Protecting Precious Time and Resources

If we want to be effective in the Lord’s service, we need to protect our time and our limited resources from the unscrupulous and manipulative. Because of the abundance of free-loaders, who inevitably are attracted to the rich pickings, and targets of opportunity, at missions conferences, we now insist on early morning PT and prayer meetings to weed out those who have another agenda. Of course, false brethren

are able to put on a good act, but we find that as our Great Commission Courses progress with daily PT and prayer meetings, outreaches and late-night hikes, we begin to see the real person under the veneer.

Evaluate Track Record

There is no substitute for track record. We need to test all things. It is remarkable how many “pastors” and “bishops” turn out to be Bible illiterates. We have found this when we have compelled them to complete our multiple-choice Bible Exam!

Preventing Ministry Hijacking

There are so many frauds, fools, con artists and opportunists seeking to take advantage of missions. A large percentage of funds earmarked for missions don't really reach the Lord's work because of the abundance of dishonest scams and unworkable schemes which manage to intercept and hijack what is meant for God's service.

Recognising Reality

This may not be a pleasant message to hear or acknowledge, but it is the truth. The world should have already been evangelised and disciplined several times over if everything that is being said to be done, was actually being done. It is time for us to shine the light of God's Word on some of the shady dealings of professional fund-raisers and con-men who have found an abundance of gullible and naïve Christians to exploit under the guise of “missions”

Watch and Pray

We owe it to our Lord Jesus Christ to be watchful and alert, wise and discerning, taking proper precautions to avoid becoming a victim, so that we can be effective in real missions.

“God's work, done God's way, will never lack God's supply.”

“Only one life, it will soon be passed - only what's done for Christ will last.”

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