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A MISSIONARY PEACE CORPS

THOMAS JULIEN

An encouraging sign in an increasingly cynical nation has been the emergence of the Peace Corps and its success in attracting some of our country's finest youth. To say that some join its ranks merely in search of adventure does not alter the fact that others, seeking more in life than a ranch-style home and a 35-hour week, are genuine in their desire to serve others.

It is only natural that the success of the Peace Corps should have provoked renewed interest concerning the advisability of seeking missionary recruits on a short-term basis. If the challenge for short-term service were widely presented in our churches, would our youth respond with the same enthusiasm as others have responded to the Peace Corps? And if so, could they be effectively integrated into the existing missionary program, or would their presence cause more problems than it would solve?

It is our privilege to have two young men serving in France for fifteen months as "Cadet Missionaries." Both are students of Grace Theological Seminary, and have taken a year's absence from their studies in order to serve on a foreign field. Not only has their presence made a valuable contribution to the France work; it has also provided an opportunity for evaluating the effectiveness of missionary service on a short-term basis.

SHORT-TERM MISSIONARIES AND MISSIONARY TRADITION

For some, the very expression "short-term missionary" is in itself a contradiction. In their thinking becoming a missionary implies offering oneself for life, and they would be unwilling to honor anyone with the term "missionary" who intended to serve less than that.

Around the word "missionary" a whole tradition has grown up, permeating the thinking of Christians with regard to service in a foreign land. Most of this tradition is good, for it has been mothered by necessity and experience. Some of it, however, can be detrimental to the ability of the church to respond to new challenges and changing situations in missions. Though much of this tradition is not rooted in the Scriptures, it is nevertheless true that any departure from the accepted way of doing things is viewed with suspicion by some.

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Can short-term missionary service be reconciled with traditional thinking concerning the missionary call, length of service, and the nature of missionary work? And if not, should we be willing to depart from these traditional concepts in order to meet more efficiently the present need?

The Missionary Call

Everyone is agreed that no one should become a foreign missionary without a call, but here is where agreement ends; few have been able to define the call with any precision. This failure was noted by the Christianity Today reporter to the 1961 missionary convention at Urbana, who wrote, ". . . a student asked a panel of eight recognized missionary leaders to define a 'missionary call.' For 10 minutes or so the panel talked around the question; none attempted a clear-cut answer."¹

The aura of mystery surrounding the missionary call is without doubt one of the reasons for the paucity of missionary candidates. If a young person is told he needs a special kind of call before volunteering to be a missionary but is never told what this call is, he will encounter difficulties discerning God's will. Norman Cummings, in an excellent paper on this subject, states that the answer to "What is a Missionary Call?" will determine the caliber and the number of laborers in the spiritual harvest fields of the world.²

The popular idea that a missionary call is different from any other call and that a missionary is therefore a special kind of a person is not found in the Scriptures. On the basis of Christ's commission all Christians have been called to the task of world evangelism and thus share equal responsibility. The question to be asked is not so much, "Have I been called?" but "Where and how does God want me to serve?" The response to the challenge of foreign service, either on a short-term or permanent basis, will be proportionate to the ability of the church as a whole to assume its missionary responsibility, realizing that, "essentially, a call to foreign service does not differ from a call to service elsewhere."³

Length of Service

Implicit in our concept of the missionary call is the conviction that a true missionary is only one who dedicates himself for life service. Though a Christian in the homeland might change situations freely, any missionary who leaves the field for reasons other than health or the political situation is forced to carry a certain stigma.

In one manual for missionaries the author mentions that some youth might find short-term service appealing, finding that this service will better equip them for service at home. But he goes on to say,

This book is not written for that type of person. It is written for those who believe they have a clear call of God to missionary service abroad. Quite likely, you were asked a question in your candidate's papers as to whether you intended to offer for life service. In the glow of the consciousness of God's clear call, you were prepared to answer, "Yes."⁴

This idea that a true missionary is one who is called to serve all his life in the same country, or at least in a foreign country, is commonly held, but here again, it is not found in the Scriptures. The apostles moved freely from one country to another, and it would be difficult to say whether Tarsus, Antioch, or Jerusalem meant home for Paul. In our generation it is not unreasonable to suppose that God is calling Christians to engage in certain tasks for a certain period of time on foreign fields and then return home to serve in another ministry. That they are sent for a short-term ministry abroad does not mean that they are not missionaries in the fullest sense of the word.

Nature of Missionary Service

In spite of the fact that all missions now have in their service numbers of people engaged primarily in secular tasks--construction, bookkeeping, or simply being housewives--the feeling still persists among some that real missionary work is only preaching the gospel or healing the sick. This feeling haunts even some of God's most effective servants on the foreign field, for though they are engaged in necessary tasks they do not fit the traditional missionary image and therefore complexes arise.

In an imaginary interview between a reporter and Paul, the apostle speaks of John Mark and says, "We took him on as a kind of private secretary. He was a help in booking ship passages, arranging lodgings and food, and doing most of our correspondence." To this the reporter replies, "But that's not missionary work. We're interested in real missionaries: street preaching, pioneer work, and that kind of thing."⁵

Because of language and cultural barriers most short-term missionaries will not be doing much preaching and "that kind of thing," but this does not mean that they are not missionaries, sent by God. God's gifts and callings are many, and whereas many are called to preach and teach, the mission field offers other opportunities of service almost as varied as those at home.

Employable on the mission field as short-term missionaries are doctors, nurses, teachers, Bible teachers, journalists, accountants, bookkeepers, stenographers, printers, technicians of all kinds, including X-ray and medical, maintenance men, bookshop managers, literature salesmen, radio engineers, hospital administrators, evangelists. One might say that almost anything that is being done today to earn a living at home may be usefully employed on the mission field.⁶

A MISSIONARY TASK FORCE

If some of our traditional concepts are not scriptural, this does not mean that they are wrong, and we do not wish to say that they should be abandoned. We have already mentioned that these convictions were born of necessity, and necessity requires that most of them be preserved. Though the missionary call is not essentially different from any other call, it is also true that no one has the right to offer himself for foreign service without a deep sense of God's leading in that direction, for much more is involved in going to a foreign country than in

going from one city to another, and when the going gets rough sometimes the only thing that keeps a missionary on the field is the conviction that God called him there. Though there is no Scripture verse stating that a missionary must offer himself for life, the fact remains that anyone who wants to have a lasting spiritual ministry among a foreign people must devote his life to living with them and learning to know and love them. No mission board should be expected to invest several non-productive years in training a missionary in language and customs only to see him remain home after his first term. Though the mission field offers unlimited opportunities of service, many of them secular in character, let us not forget that any work which does not directly contribute to a spiritual ministry becomes meaningless. Our commission is to preach the gospel.

Traditional concepts will remain, but what we wish to say is that not every missionary should be made to fit the traditional pattern. There will always be need for the conventional missionary, and he will continue to occupy the key position among the foreign workers, but all realize that he is not able to meet the challenge that is before him. Everywhere the cry is the same--not enough missionaries, or missionaries so over-burdened with routine duties that the spiritual offensive suffers. Should we not seek in every way possible to supplement our present missionary force, even if it means laying aside some of our traditional ideas?

It is said that one of the most significant tactical developments during the last war was that of the task force. To the traditional infantryman were added units of engineers, artillery, and other services. Working together for their mutual protection and advancement, each element of a command supplemented the others. The key man was still the infantryman, but it was only through the help of the others working with him that he could devote all his force to penetrating the enemy lines.

Perhaps the short-term missionary is one answer to our missionary shortage which has not been sufficiently exploited. It is not right for the career missionary, proficient in a foreign language and trained through years of experience, to have to spend his time doing the routine work that others could do as well, or better, on a short-term basis. By the addition of well-chosen short-term workers, forming a missionary task force, the career missionary could be freed to give himself more continually "to prayer and to the ministry of the Word." Further, some of the short-term workers will find their way back to the field for life service, with the advantage of having already gained an understanding of the work.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

What has been said thus far is mainly in the realm of the theoretical, and that which works in theory does not always work in practice. When breakdowns do occur, however, it usually does not indicate that the theory was faulty, but that there were problems in its application. A missionary program involving short-term workers will be successful to the extent that sound principles are applied in the selection of the candidates and their integration into the foreign program, and these things must be worked out by each mission board and field council according to the particular problems.

Selection

Some will object to short-term missionaries on the basis that it will attract too many people who are only interested in a trip abroad with no permanent obligations. This objection is valid to a certain point, but it ignores the fact that along with these, many others will offer themselves with a genuine desire to fulfill Christ's commission. It is up to the mission board by its screening methods to distinguish the good from the bad, a task doubly difficult in view of the fact that many of those who are merely interested in a trip have genuinely convinced themselves that their motives are good.

The selection of short-term missionaries, though on a different basis, should be no less thorough than the selection of those who plan to serve for life, and especially in the areas of spirituality, physical fitness, and emotional stability.

But in addition to general qualifications, it is absolutely essential that the short-term missionary be chosen to fill a specific need, and he be trained in the area where he will serve. Conventional missionaries are often sent to do a task defined no more carefully than preaching the gospel or establishing churches. Their years of language study offer them a period of adjustment during which they can analyze their situation and determine how their gifts will enable them to serve best. Short-term missionaries have no such privilege; they will have to go directly to work upon arrival. They should not be expected to create their jobs.

It is evident that the home board must work hand-in-hand with the field in the appointment of short-term missionaries. Perhaps some fields do not have a need for short-term help, and others will find it more practical to enlist help locally. By all means a candidate for short-term service should not be sent to a field merely because he offers himself, even though he have admirable qualifications.

Financing

Some will object to short-term workers on the basis that the costs are too heavy in proportion to the benefits received. This objection is based on the faulty supposition that the short-term worker will have to go through the same period of adjustment as other missionaries before he can begin to make an effective contribution, and that by the time he begins to be useful he must come home.

As a matter of fact, it is a false economy which requires the experienced missionary to spend his time doing tasks which could be done by short-term workers were they available. The investment in conventional missionaries is considerable--several years of language training, outfit costs, the necessity of supporting an entire family in a foreign country, to say nothing of medical and retirement obligations.

On the contrary, short-term missionaries are often single and require but an extremely small allowance. Even the investment made in their passage to a foreign country seems less imposing when one compares their total cost to the amount of service they render.

Coordination

Some will object to short-term workers on the basis that they require too much of the conventional missionary's time, and to be sure, in many instances the presence of extra people would only drain the time and energy of those already over-burdened.

If the wartime task forces proved effective, it was because these diverse forces were united under a single command; mismanagement would have proved disastrous. The element of success was coordination.

Lack of coordination of the various forces on the foreign fields is one of the grave problems in missions. Some mission leaders estimate that missionary output could be doubled without the addition of a single worker by the application of sane management procedures. Yet, among missionaries it is one thing to develop workable strategy and tactics, but quite another to secure the full cooperation of the missionary personnel. Most missionaries are strong individualists; they set their own hours and decide how to use them; they are not subject to the orders of a superior, and no one discharges them if they do not produce.

However, the duties of short-term workers must not only be well-defined, they must also be enforced. These workers must be expected to serve under the direction of the missionaries permanently on the field. They must keep regular hours, and devote themselves faithfully to their work during those hours. In spite of careful screening, some short-term workers will arrive on the field who were not meant to be there and who find it impossible to adjust to the missionary situation. Under those circumstances the field council should be given the liberty, if necessary, to ask the uncooperative worker to return home.

It would be idealistic to say that short-term missionaries are the solution to the personnel shortage felt so keenly on the mission fields of the world, but their presence could greatly alleviate the problem. In view of the scope of the Lord's command, not only comprising the whole world but also addressed to every Christian, it is the duty of each of us, at every period of our lives, to ask our Lord honestly whether we are fulfilling our missionary calling. For a great many now at home, this will some day mean service in a foreign land.

DOCUMENTATION

1. Christianity Today, January 19, 1962, p. 29.
2. Cummings, Norman L., "What is a Missionary Call?" Paper read at the E.F.M.A. conference at Winona Lake, October, 1962.
3. Chambers, Oswald, A Spiritual Clinic, pp. 179-180. Chicago: Moody Press, 1958.
4. Houghton, A. T., Preparing to be a Missionary, p. 91. London, IVF, 1956.
5. Brow, Robert, "Is This What Paul Told the Press?" Evangelical Missions Quarterly, Fall, 1965, 1. 30.
6. Davis, Raymond, "A New Dimension in Missions," Evangelical Missions Quarterly, Summer, 1965, p. 26.