

Community Church of Issaquah

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My Life as a Missionary

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After 4 years of high school, 5 years of college (I had to go an extra year because I had chosen to march in the 3rd Selma march against my Baptist College's direction) and 2 years of seminary, I had grown very weary of education. Lacking only one more year of seminary, most intelligent people would have chosen to just finish with a master's degree and be done. I wasn't like most focused students, so instead I followed a different path.

I had heard about a two-year missionary opportunity, similar to the Peace Corps but as a part of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board's work with young adults under the age of 25 called Journeyman Program. In a conversation with another seminary colleague, he and I decided to throw our hat in the ring and see if we would qualify. To be honest, I never thought I would be accepted. But lo and behold, I got a phone call telling me that I was at least qualified for an interview. This was long before any such thing as Zoom, so a representative of the SBC came to my seminary in person just to check me out.

Of course, there were the usual questions – “Why do you want to do this?” “Do you think you would make a good missionary?” Things like that which I tried to be mature and answer with some sense of respect. The interview

lasted a couple of hours, and I went back to studying for exams like all the other women and men striving to get educated. You can imagine my surprise when I received the call telling me I had been accepted into the program.

Soon I even received an official letter of acceptance asking for my signature approval. It also asked me to suggest my three favorite countries where I would most like to serve. That was easy. Being Italian, I gave Rome as my first choice, and the next two were just countries and cities where I thought I would love to live – Paris and Sao Paulo, Brazil. I got my assignment a few days later - Nairobi, Kenya, East Africa. That was not at all what I was expecting. All I knew of Africa was what I had seen in the Tarzan movies, so I was a bit anxious that I would live in a treehouse and be boiled in a pot if I wasn't good. When I called my mother to tell her my good news, her response surprised me. After a short silence on the phone, she asked, "Can't you just stay home and get a real job?" I tried not to laugh.

Following our 8 weeks of training and vaccinations for every disease you could imagine; I boarded a plane bound for Tarzan-land. After a long two-day trip taking me to New York City, Athens, and Uganda, I stared out the window in amazement. The huge skyline of tall buildings was what I was seeing as the plane landed. I was not expecting to see a city of more than 2 million people, and my fear of boiling in a huge pot disappeared from my mind. My home for the next two years left me in awe.

My new missionary family had worked hard to prepare things for my arrival, but my new residence wasn't quite ready. I would be living in the cottage behind the residence of the Swedish Ambassador but until it was prepared, I would be staying at the inn of the Mennonite mission. It was there that my life began to change as I learned more and more about what the work of a missionary was. Here are some lessons I learned as I began my term of service.

The first lesson - **Life as a Minority**. My first full week at the inn, I was anxious to know what was happening in the world's news. It was suggested that I could walk the two blocks to the local market and purchase an English language newspaper. That seemed to be a good idea, so I began the two-block walk. I had not gone far before I realized that I was the only White person in sight. Having been raised in segregated Alabama, my subconscious fear of racial violence overwhelmed my comfort and circumstance, and I turned around and literally ran as fast as I could back to the inn. I had never been in the minority ethnically before and this was a new awareness for me. It took me a few days before I could grasp the reality that for two years, I would be among the small population of Whites in a world of Black Africans and other ethnicities.

The truth is that when missionaries go to most third-world countries to share the Gospel, they will be a minority race. But the beauty of the lesson learned is that your world is opened so widely that the smallness of your past is gladly

put behind you. Because Kenya was a British colony for many years, there were some other Whites, and because the development of the nationwide railway system brought many East Indian and Pakistani into the country, my whole world grew to an amazing and beautiful reality.

The second lesson – **Language Matters.** Even though I had grown up in a broader family where some spoke Italian, I never learned to say more than ‘hello’ and ‘thank you.’ Instead, I had chosen to learn American Sign Language. In my very first days as a missionary in Kenya, I was in awe of the variety of languages. Many were tribal, two were national – Swahili and Kikuyu – and the variety of other nationalities and their languages was at times overwhelming. It was also surprising to me how many Kenyans spoke English as a holdover from their days as a British country.

Though my missionary assignment in the beginning was to teach religion in schools, I loved to have someone teach me new words that created closer friendships. When I left the big city and journeyed into the beautiful world of East Africa, there were times when a smile or a handshake were also an effective way to communicate without words. Sometimes, there were even surprises. Once when some other friends and I were driving from Kenya to Tanzania, we had stopped at the border for security clearance.

There were some beautifully dressed Maasai tribal people whom you could photograph for a small price. I jumped at

the chance. And when I had taken the photographs and stepped up to pay, I held out my hand with the money. One of the tribal men grabbed my wrist which startled me. Even more startling was what he said looking at my watch. “Hmmm, Timex. Cheap but good.” Yep, there at the border crossing of two Eastern African nations words were shocking. Language matters. I found out that the man had been educated in London and was just home for the summer trying to make money for his schooling.

A third lesson: **the Clarity of Mission.** I quickly learned that it was not mission to make everyone I met a new Baptist but simply to spread the Good News of Christ. Even though I was sent by the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, I never felt it was my job to add more Baptists to the rolls of that denomination. Instead, I wanted to share the message of Christ with others who might never have heard that before. My assignment was to teach religion to secondary school students in preparation for their Cambridge Exam. As part of their British heritage, this is the exam given at the completion of their secondary classes. They have 3 chances to pass the exam and if not, they would not receive a diploma or credit for having graduated. A part of that Cambridge exam was religion, so my task was to help them learn the basics and prepare for that important exam.

In the mornings, I taught in a Catholic girl’s school and in the afternoons, I taught in a Muslim girl’s school. It was a very heart-warming experience. During the breaks

between terms of school, I volunteered to work in the Baptist Publishing House writing Sunday School materials for African youth. As you can see, it was not my job to preach to the masses and convert hundreds to the Lord. I learned quickly in my two-year term that if I lived the Gospel and shared that message with anyone who came into my life, that alone would be my calling as a missionary.

That's my personal story about my short missionary journey, but there's a message here for each of us, and it is simply this – we are all missionaries. We don't have to go to Kenya or Haiti or Mexico to do it. We are missionaries in the world in which we create for ourselves. All we need to remember is that our task is simply to live the life of Christ and share his story whenever we have opportunity. The reality is that we live on a mission field. We don't have to travel to another country to find it.