

A CALLING FOR MISSIONS

How vocation-specific outreach can answer the deepest needs of God's world

BY TODD L. LAKE

"Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might."
ECCLESIASTES 9:10

If there is anything that binds evangelical Protestants together, it is the conviction that mission trips are good, an antidote to Christian complacency and a key component in fulfilling the Great Commission. But I believe that mission trips, in all too many instances, do not help the church fulfill its calling in the best way possible. Instead, these short-term trips have become a popular, nationwide substitute for what the church is really called to do.

Short-term mission trips are arguably a good way to get people involved in living out their faith, and on one level they do accomplish this goal. Thanks to what might be called "general-interest" mission trips, many Christians do good in many places while having their eyes opened to the needs of the developing world. In order to see the nature of the problem, we need to borrow a concept from economics: opportunity cost. Opportunity cost is a measure of what is lost by choosing one thing over another. In the case of general-interest missions, the opportunity cost can only be calculated if we compare the time and energy expended on them to what might have happened had another activity been undertaken.

The general-interest model of missions is based on a "y'all come" approach to putting together a missions trip. A country is selected, missionaries are contacted, a team is put together, plane tickets are purchased, and off they go to do good in Jesus' name. But what they are doing is, in almost all cases, wholly unrelated to what they do in daily life: Businessmen

pour cement for a new school, lawyers teach vacation Bible school, accountants lay the foundation of a church building. Consequently, otherwise admirable mission trips may be more of a hindrance to furthering the call God has placed on each of our lives than a spur to following it. For if missions is something I do that is unrelated to what I am passionate about studying or called to invest my life in, then I am learning a perverted lesson each time I go on a mission trip. I am learning that what God really cares about getting done in the world has little or nothing to do with what I spend most of my waking hours for most of my life doing. General-interest mission trips can turn being on mission with God into something that I do with my spare time. This is not a criticism of those who sacrifice money and vacation time to go on such trips; if that is all that is offered to laypeople, then God bless them for availing themselves of the chance to serve in any way possible.

The alternative to general-interest mission trips is what can be called "discipline-specific" or "vocation-specific" missions. While the terms are new, the idea is not. The most venerable type of discipline- or vocation-specific mission is the medical mission trip. These bring together a group of doctors/nurses or dentists who travel to a needy area to live out the good news of a Savior who came to "heal all our diseases." These medical professionals demonstrate the love of the God they tell about. In fact, this type of missions work has proved critical to the advance of the gospel in many countries. In Cambodia the only hospital in the capital of Phnom Penh that serves the poor free of charge is a missions hospital. It is not only a free hospital for the poor, but it is also one of the

best in the country. From my position in spiritual development at Belmont University, it was wonderful to send a team of our nursing students and faculty to serve there for three weeks while they were studying international nursing. The nurses-in-training saw a depth of need for their skills that surpassed anything they had ever seen in the well-staffed and funded hospitals in America.

Oddly enough, the universal acclaim of medical missions has not led to similarly creative thinking about how other academic disciplines and professions can be used in service to Christ and the advance of his kingdom on earth. Could it be that God wants to use computer technicians and business-people and artists and lawyers and engineers and second-grade teachers in vocation-specific missions? Furthermore, could it be that God wants to deploy all his people in strategic ways so they can use their highest level of training as co-laborers with God? If so, this means that God is eagerly inviting individuals to engage and transform the world by using the abilities they've been allowed to develop.

Vocation-specific missions trips thus become an opportunity for people to expand the horizons of their vocations. When Millard Fuller saw the grinding poverty of those in the poorest areas of Georgia, he went from building homes for the rich to building homes with and for the poor. He needed the same entrepreneurial drive and set of finely honed abilities to build and manage this new organization. The only difference was that he went from being one of countless wealthy builders to founding the most significant Christian housing ministry in history.

The problem is not with the hearts of those who go on mission trips but with the vision for missions itself. Imagine a college ministry or church that puts away the "Y'all Come" sign for mission trips and brings out signs that read "Business," "Art," "Music," "Law," etc. Here are some real-life examples of just how this can enable individuals and teams in various professions to learn how God might want to use their entire careers to meet the world's deepest needs:

project, which in turn becomes a gift to their Kenyan hosts.

Art—Students and professionals volunteer as art instructors each week at the Campus for Human Development in Nashville, Tenn., a Christian ministry to the homeless founded by Fr. Charles Strobel after his mother was murdered by "drifters" in one of the worst parts of the city. Strobel saw Christ in the face of the homeless and decided to treat them as equals in the search for healing. As part of the multi-layered program, artists teach painting, drawing, and sculpture to the homeless, who in this way are able to express themselves in new ways and see themselves as creative contributors to life. In turn, those who volunteer gain a new perspective on the homeless, and their experience can and does manifest itself in art that embodies their newfound connection with the poor. One result of Belmont University's involvement is an exhibit, premiering this month in the university art gallery, of art created by people who are homeless. Entitled "The Journey Home," the exhibit has been a collaborative project on the part of the homeless artists and their artistic mentors, which will give the wider community a chance to witness the dignity—as well as the plight—of the homeless.

Business—Marketing students and faculty at Belmont University took on as their class project Thistle Farms (thistlefarms.org), a cottage industry where former prostitutes make beauty products as part of their rehabilitation through the Christian ministry Magdalene House. These women have almost all been abused as children and become drug dependent. Social workers, counselors, pastors, and educators all play a role in their lives. However, it will take a better business plan, new marketing initiatives, and a strong online presence to allow many more women to be saved from the abusive, drug-dependent world they (and their children) have inhabited. The ministry's partnership with the Massey School of Business at Belmont University will be key to its expansion.

Information Technology/Deaf Education—Computer whizzes created a DVD to teach Honduran sign language as part of a series of college-based deaf-education mission trips

"The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Frederick Buechner in *Wishful Thinking*

Engineering—A group of engineering students and faculty travel to Kenya and spend two weeks in a village exploring what types of appropriate technologies might be of most help. The students return to the United States, making the development of appropriate technology their class

to a country where only 1 percent of the deaf know sign language. (Poignantly, on one trip, the faculty member suffered a near-fatal illness and lost part of her memory, including her memory of Honduran sign language; she wound up

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using the DVD to re-teach herself.)

It may be that an entire team cannot be put together of those in a specific area of expertise. But a team of eight to 10 can be created with, for example, a nurse, an accountant, a videographer, a homemaker, and a graphic designer. At an overseas ministry to the poor, the nurse provides direct care while the homemaker interacts with kids in the waiting room; while the graphic designer redoes the ministry brochures, the accountant improves back-office procedures. All the while the videographer is capturing this for use on the ministry's website for a report back to the church and to air on local cable access back home. Imagine how much less would have been accomplished during the trip if this same team were sent simply to teach VBS or build a wing onto a church.

Even more important than the greater effectiveness during the trip is the greater impact the trip has on the participants. They are challenged to consider where and how to use the competencies that God has given them. They see that they already have what it takes to make a difference for God in their chosen work. Most importantly, they can experience the value of following their vocation instead of conforming to a pre-determined career path. "Career" comes from the Old French for "racetrack." It connotes going with the pack. But vocation comes from the Latin "vocare," meaning "to call." In a vocation, we are listening to God's call on our lives and investing all

that we are in ways that God values.

Laypeople are ready to respond to the invitation to use their gifts in service to others, but they have been told for too long that God is really only concerned about calling ministers and missionaries. With more vision, churches can become places where laypeople explore together how God is calling them into the world to make a difference for Christ. We know that the hungry must be fed, but it will take nutritionists and agronomists and politicians to do it, not just a local food pantry where goodhearted volunteers show up week after week. The task of the church is to ensure that each member is being used by God to do those things that God wants done in the world.

Currently most laypeople view their career paths as a given. They strive to be honest and hardworking within the parameters of their profession, but they do not see how they might utilize their abilities in ways that are more directly aligned with God's purposes for the world. Unfortunately, most have never seen or heard of ways in which they might live their professional lives as an expression of their faith in Christ. In Romans 12:1 the Apostle Paul insists, "... offer your bodies as a living sacrifice...do not conform to the pattern of this world." Vocation-specific missions allow people to see how their passions and abilities might be used by God to engage and transform the world. ■

Todd Lake is vice-president for spiritual development at Belmont University in Nashville, Tenn.