

“The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.

Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.” Romans 8:16-17

Partnership in Suffering

The knock on the door came soon after dinner. I was already in my hotel room, in bed for an early night’s sleep after a day leading seminars with my hosts. We had been meeting quietly in a double room of a small hotel. For two days we had crowded in, all fifty two of us, sitting on beds, the floor and a few chairs. We came to the room in small groups so as not to draw attention, and I spoke through interpreters. At the end of the day, I wanted to go to bed early to rest for our last session on the following morning. When I heard the knock on the door unexpectedly, I thought that perhaps we had been detected by local authorities, but my apprehension was quickly dismissed when I opened the door and found two of the ministry leaders seeking to speak with me. I invited them in and listened to their request.

They asked if I would be willing to teach tonight what was scheduled for the next morning. I was tired from the long trip and two days of teaching, so I asked them what caused such change in plans. My brothers explained that the secret police planned to visit the hotel after breakfast because they had heard of some unusual meetings going on there. My hosts’ idea was to finish our material in the evening, then everyone could leave the hotel soon after breakfast the next morning and be gone by the time the police arrived. It was obviously a good reason to postpone my bed time, so I got dressed and walked quietly to the hotel room where we held the meetings. Everyone else was already there, confident that I would agree to come.

We had a great time of discussion and fellowship and by 11:00 PM we dismissed for the night.

The next morning, I saw a group of North Americans at breakfast, and I engaged in conversation with them. I learned that they had been visiting a neighboring province seeking to find Christians with whom they could work. This was their first time in country and they had in their hearts to find local Christians with whom to establish a ministry partnership. They were tracked by the provincial police and told to leave. Instead of leaving the country, they came to the neighboring province to try again. They were followed to our hotel and the local police were alerted to their presence. My Christian hosts learned about all this and decided we needed to leave immediately after breakfast the next day, before the police came.

Our plans had been developed many months in advance, with many prayers, and the local leaders had worked hard to find the right place and time to hold our seminars. The group of North Americans had also prayed and planned their trip. Little did they know that their plans would result in the disruption of ours.

We make much of globalization today and how it changes the way we do missions. On the one hand, there is more freedom to visit other countries and explore new opportunities. On the other, there is increased risk of conflict between different agendas. Some

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Christians are now able to travel freely almost anywhere in the world. Other Christians are still working under very difficult local conditions. It is understandable that those with greater freedom would want to come and help. At the same time, those with less freedom to develop their ministries risk exposure and disruption of their hard work by association with random visitors from the outside. This state of affairs calls for careful reflection about how we develop fellowship and cooperation with one another.

Christians in North America, Europe, Brazil, Korea and many other places face little or no obstacles to Christian activity, and are increasingly able to send traveling teams to other places, usually places where there is less freedom and where Christians are harassed and persecuted. These are two realities that do not easily come together. The story I told above had relatively minor consequences, but often the consequences are more serious, as in the recent case of Korean Christians taken hostage in Afghanistan.

I offer some considerations that might help as you plan your mission activities in difficult places.

1. Assume that the Lord has people already in the places you are going, and that your visit may have an effect on what they are doing. This will help you plan your steps more carefully and minimize the possibility of disruption and unintended harm. Today, one of the most harmful misconceptions in missions is to think that we are the only ones seeking to do the Lord’s will in a given place. I am often surprised to find a vital and

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growing church in places that seem, on the surface, completely devoid of Christian witness.

2. Assume that other outside groups, such as churches and mission agencies, may already have some activity in the country, and try to learn who they are and what there are doing.
3. If at all possible, begin your exploration of the new field in cooperation with those who are already working in that country. First, see if you can assist them and learn from them. Later, there may be benefit in you starting your own distinct work. If so, you will do it much better because of the good relations you developed and the things you learned. After all, you want to do what is good for God's kingdom and his people, right?
4. Reflect on the differences between your own country and the one you plan to visit and work. In particular, think of the differences concerning the freedom to be Christian and to do Christian work. These are not trivial, but serious matters, where lack of consideration can harm the very ones we want to serve. The recent Korean experience in Afghanistan

has generated difficulties not only for the Korean group, but for the Afghan church and for other mission groups that have carefully built their work there over many years of patient and faithful effort.

5. Remember that, in most cases, you can always return to the safety and freedom of your home country, while your fellow believers face the persecution that results from your well-meaning but ill-prepared presence in their country.
6. Think also of the work of foreign missionaries who have already invested many years, even a lifetime of work in the country, and the consequences to them, your fellow workers in the same vineyard, of your carelessness.
7. Proverbs 19:2 says, "It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way." Our zeal for the gospel should not result in unnecessary harm to the work of other believers. To be faithful is more than to risk all for Christ; it is also to do our preparation well with the resources the Lord has made available to us.
8. Today we can find information about who is working where with relative ease.

The WEA MC itself offers links and resources you can use via its web site. The US Center for World Missions offers a vast array of missions information. In fact, you can simply use Google to find almost all the information on missions you want. Just enter words such as "Evangelical missions" and you will be amazed how much you will learn.

These are only a few considerations which will help you prepare your missions trip and work. What other helpful considerations can you add to this list?

Finally, let us take full advantage of the new opportunities brought about by globalization. By full advantage I mean, let us be faithful in preparation, merciful to those who face greater suffering than we do for the gospel, and let us look kindly on one another and seek to work together with those who have already invested much ahead of us. We want to serve them in the spirit of Philippians 2:4 and 5, "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interest of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus..." <<

