

How to Transform a Mission Team into a Spiritual Growth Opportunity

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Many churches today are sending mission teams in urgent response to natural disasters. In New Orleans and along the gulf coast, for example, local churches have converted education space and mobile trailers to house mission teams from across the country. Teams are often sent for one to two weeks and do significant work. Group participants bond in a memorable experience, and sometimes they incorporate Bible study and prayer into their labour. But you can make a meaningful task group into a profound "small group" that will transform spiritual lives and shape Christian lifestyles forever.

Re-imagine the mission team as a "pilgrim band". When the ancient pilgrims traveled to holy destinations, they banded together to do two things. First, they held one another accountable to "live like Jesus". Second, they held one another accountable to "act like Jesus". This discipline not only blessed the sick, hungry, homeless, abused, lonely, and addicted people they met on the way. It also transformed ordinary people into future saints, martyrs, reformers, and church leaders.

Living like Jesus

Contemporary asceticism is all about living simply. When Jesus sent the disciples into mission, he commanded them *to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics* (Mark 6:8-9). Translate that into contemporary language, and you insist that your mission teams take nothing for their journey except their favorite hammer; no fast food, no extra suitcases, and no extra money except that which they will give away to the poor. Wear work boots with steel toes, and just one all-weather jacket with a lot of pockets.

When a mission team becomes a small group, the group leader and participants hold one another accountable to *focus, focus, focus*. Keep your eyes on the holy destination to be with Christ blessing the world. Leave behind the ipods, designer sneakers, cosmetics, and all the "creaturely comforts" that tempt us away from God's business to redeem lives. Discomfort is no longer something we have to endure. It is something we *welcome*. Every itch, muscle strain, headache, cut and bruise; and every degree of fatigue, grumble of hunger, and longing for drink is one more way for our body and soul to participate in the death of Christ. Every balm, stretch, breath of fresh air, and healed wound; and every minute of sleep, satisfied stomach, and quenched thirst is one more way for our body and soul to participate in the resurrection of Christ (Phil. 3:10-11). Living like Jesus makes a sacrament of our suffering.

Contemporary asceticism is also about living faithfully. The risen Christ asked Peter three times: *Do you love me more than these?* He was pointing not only at the frying fish, but at the occupation, familiar surroundings, and way of life to which Peter had returned (John 21:15-18). Peter had misunderstood his mission service as just an *interlude* in his normal life. Even so, many church members go on a mission trip as a kind of "vacation" from their normal lives. They separate personal time from work time. They deserve a few hours or a few days off to do what they want. And when it's over, it's over.

When a mission team becomes a small group, the group leader and participants hold one another accountable to *permanent change*. The mission trip is just part of a mission-driven life. It's just one leg of a journey. Nothing is the same for one or two weeks, and nothing will be the same ever again. This is called "life in the Spirit", or "the Way", and it is marked by a different way of living. On the mission trip, and for the rest of your life, you intentionally live according to counter-cultural behavior patterns called the "fruits of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22-23). You intentionally stake your life on counter-intuitive faith convictions about Christ crucified and risen (1 Cor. 1:18-25). You align your career with counter-productive visions to redeem the world as "ambassadors of Christ" (2 Cor. 5:17-21). Living like Jesus makes a lifestyle out of a mission trip.

How do you do this? Everything hinges on the attitude of the leader. If the leader simply manages a task group, then the participants will simply do tasks. It will be good work. Everyone in the task group will feel great satisfaction. On the other hand, if the leader intentionally builds a small group, then the participants will mature in Christ. The labor will bring them closer to Christ. The leader shows the way. The leader models the simple life. The leader mentors the faithful lifestyle. If the leader dares to live like Jesus, then the participants will also have the courage to live like Jesus.

Hold every team member accountable to behavior that models the "fruits of the Spirit". It may be before, during, or after the work, but the leader challenges every member of the team to make every unrehearsed deed and spontaneous word reflect the love, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control that is the "way" of Christ. The leader trains every member to seize every opportunity to communicate the Gospel by word and deed. No beneficial act is performed without sharing the faith motivation for doing it; and not faith is shared without doing some practical thing that blesses strangers unconditionally. That's living like Jesus. The leader leads the way.

Acting like Jesus

The Gospels record many things that Jesus did. Some were predictable and some were unexpected. At different times and places Jesus helped people survive, improved their quality of life, freed them from entrapment, cured them of disease, empowered them to fulfill their human potential, restored quality interpersonal relations, and challenged them to fulfill their God-given destinies. So does the mission team. The mission trip is not just about rebuilding a house, digging a drainage ditch, feeding hungry children, building churches, or any other particular job. *In the midst of all that*, the mission team is busy acting like Jesus.

There was (and is) a pattern to Jesus activities. That pattern is imitated by the mission team as small group. Whatever the mission team is doing, participants should train themselves to look up, look around, and pray.

- **Observe hidden agony:**

Look carefully at people, noting their age, culture, affluence or poverty, conversation and behaviour. Note signs, advertising, architecture, technologies, and other things that reveal the nature and mission of the place in which people move. Listen to the conversations unfolding around you.

Discern the hidden yearning for grace and thirst for God. Identify and remember the broken, lost, lonely, anxious, victimized, or entrapped. Make a mental note about that person over there, or this person right here. Open your heart to feel their pain.

- **Imagine giving a tangible blessing:**

Observe people again, and imagine whether they are married or single, what occupations they might have, and what life issues and key questions are on their minds. Speculate why people choose to be here, rather than someplace else. Sense the undercurrents of feeling and nuances of hope.

Imagine giving them a spiritual present, all wrapped up and free of charge, containing the one thing that will heal, guide, befriend, encourage, ennoble, or liberate their lives. Think outside the boundaries of your personal limitations. Disregard the cost, and picture a blessing as concretely as possible for every person who crosses your path during the day.

- **Look for signs of the Holy Spirit:**

The risen Christ is already among these people, and is already in the mission field ahead of you. Look for signs that the Holy Spirit is here, at this place, and among these people. Remember the acts of kindness, generosity, helpfulness, justice, and peace that happen on a daily basis, in big and little ways, that we often miss because of our self-absorption.

Prayer quietly as you labour, that the Holy Spirit will also work inside you. Pray that The Spirit will open opportunities for you to participate in the ministry of the Spirit that is already unfolding around you. You may have an opportunity to say something, do something, or just praise God for small miracles.

At the end of the day, the small group should gather for prayer and Bible reading. Now, however, your prayer and meditation is guided by greater mission sensitivity. Pray for each of the strangers you remember. Name the gift of grace you hope God will give each one. Examine your own actions to see if you accelerated or hindered the Spirit. Thank God that the Holy Spirit was working before you arrived, is working while you are on the job, and will continue to work when you leave.

This is the method of Jesus. It is the thread of spirituality that connected all the many deeds he performed, like pearls on a string. This is the string. You picked up a hammer, and the Lord God was in it. You hit your thumb, and the Lord God was in that also. You refrained from cursing, and the Lord God affirms you. You took a risk to speak a kind word, and the Lord God laughs with delight. Observe the agony, imagine the blessing, participate in the Spirit, and pray for the stranger. This is what transforms a task group into a pilgrim band.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with doing good work! But when a mission team becomes a small group, something even bigger happens. The participants themselves are transformed. They not only return to the church feeling good, but they return to the church different people. They never return to normal. They are changed forever. God's mission is not something they occasionally do, but part of their identity and purpose. They live like Jesus and act like Jesus *all the time*. The mission field is not longer over there. It is all around us.