

When I was growing up my parents acknowledged that they had dreams of me being ordained as a Catholic priest someday, so to that end, they sent me to numerous summer camps, each sponsored by Catholic religious orders. These male communities were all missionary societies and the priests facilitating them had all done international mission work in Africa prior to my attending these camps in the late 1960's and early 1970's. As a young impressionable student at the time, I internalized all of their stories and recruiting movies about themselves and decided that I wanted to be a missionary priest when I grew up. By the time I reached the eighth grade I was being recruited by three of these orders to attend their high school seminaries. I probably would have gone, but all of these schools were out of state and at the age of thirteen I was very nervous about leaving my family and moving so far from home. Fortunately, my parents didn't make me do this, so I attended a public high school close to our house. My parents wanted to send me to the all boy's Catholic high school but they couldn't afford the tuition at that time.

For the next six years, I didn't give another thought to pursuing a religious vocation until I became a junior in college. At the end of that year, I experienced a profound religious conversion, left the school and returned to my parent's home. Through a sequence of events, I encountered the Franciscans for the first time and wound up entering their candidacy program. I also switched schools to attend a Jesuit university and lived at home with my parents during that fourth year. Twelve months later, I officially moved into the Franciscan formation house to live and learn about this way of life. I was also deeply immersed in Jesuit spirituality, liberation theology, the Medellin documents and the "preferential option for the poor". This was shortly after Romero and the church women were executed in El Salvador, so I became convinced that this was the way to do theology and that to serve God one had to do ministry among the poor in Latin America – hopefully without becoming a martyr in the process.

For better or for worse, I never had the opportunity to pursue this goal because I wound up leaving the Franciscans while I was in the novitiate, shortly before I was to take first vows. I moved to the inner-city of Cincinnati and broke into the social service/mental health field working with impoverished people and ultimately going to graduate school to obtain training in counseling. I also married a Baptist woman from North Carolina who also lived in this community and was a licensed social worker. We

had a child and 14 months later decided to move into the Catholic worker house to minister to homeless families. We searched three years for a faith community and ultimately found the Episcopal Church.

Even though I worked my entire adult professional life amidst the “poor” of the inner-city, I still longed to do “mission” work with the church and my sense of call to ordained ministry was still strong. I pursued this path again in the mid 1990’s, this time within the Episcopal Church and was approved by my diocese to attend seminary. My wife, however, strongly believed that it was not a good time to uproot our family, so I heeded her advice and informed my bishop that I had to drop out of the process. I worked hard to put this phase of my life behind me and continued on with my employment thinking that if I was supposed to be ordained, it would happen in God’s time, not mine.

Ten years later, everything changed. My wife had died and my daughter moved away to college. During the course of the next year I felt compelled to investigate the possibility of pursuing ordination again. I had an opportunity to speak with my bishop and he told me the invitation was still open for me to return – I decided to take him up on the offer. Everything fell into place after that and by the following September I found myself at the Episcopal Divinity School.

When I arrived at EDS, the old thoughts of being a missionary priest in Latin America re-emerged. I spoke with Ian and we agreed that the summer after my second year would be a good time to go overseas to test this sense of call. The only question remaining was where I should go. This was answered when Bishop Thabo came to EDS for the fall semester in 2007. In conversations with him it became apparent that I would go to Grahamstown, South Africa.

On the plane ride over to South Africa on 19 June, an interior debate organically began between my current self and my adolescent self concerning my life long dream of becoming a missionary priest. I found it ironic that I was heading to Africa rather than Latin America since my early childhood goals were formed by missionary priests who spent time on that continent.

This should have been a joyful experience for me to finally realize my earliest life goal! But the reality was that I was confronted with a myriad of issues and challenged to revisit all of my youthful and collegiate notions of church, ministry, call, and missionary

activity. The entire experience was a constant wrestling match with myself and God as I sought clarification to all of this.

What seemed like a good idea in theory was now becoming real. Why was it that I wanted to go to Africa? What did I hope to accomplish? Did I want to be a missionary priest? How did I define “missionary” in the past and how do I define it today? As I pondered this anew, I settled on the idea that I was going to use my time in Africa as an experimental test to see if I could actually imagine myself being sent there for a long period of time. What type of ministry would I have? How would people accept or reject me? Did I have anything to offer? Could I actually fit into the culture and lifestyle?

One of the first things I noticed when I arrived in Grahamstown was the amount of security surrounding homes and buildings. High walls or fences topped with razor wire, gates with padlocks or electronic opening devices, iron bars and grates on all windows and doors. I wondered if fear was that predominant or if violence and break-ins really were a daily occurrence. I hadn’t even unloaded my suitcase from the car and I was already questioning if I wanted to enter into this world. My next realization was that it was very cold and there was no heat in any houses – what a challenge that was. I am still not acclimated to being cold all the time while I am indoors. Within a few hours I was already faced with how spoiled I am in my comfortable world back in the States. Safety and uncomfortable temperatures in my home are not concerns that I have. Could I give up these comforts? I don’t know.

Getting around town without a car was very easy and orienting to this smaller city wasn’t difficult at all. Shopping and restaurants were close at hand so all material needs were easily accessible. The contrast between rich and poor is very obvious so that dichotomy is always present much as it is in the United States. One of the most pronounced challenges is language. Even though many people speak English it often feels like a minority tongue. It was exhilarating to hear so many different languages being spoken, but the reality for me becomes: can I learn any of the other ten official languages or could I be effective speaking only English?

In visiting Anglican churches in the township and rural areas, it is plain to see that liturgical services and pastoral care ministry has to be conducted in the local indigenous languages. How effective could a white, English speaking male priest be in one of these contexts? I talked with four white, English speaking Anglican priests who had all grown

up in South Africa and not one of them had learned the predominant Xhosa language. These four clergy could recite a Eucharistic prayer and sing a few songs in the language, but could not deliver a sermon or carry on a conversation. All three, however, were fluent in Afrikaans, but they served in white English speaking parishes. In addition to the language issue, there is also the problem that I am clueless about the local culture, traditions and practices. Granted, some of these things might be learned over time, but it is certainly not the same as having an indigenous priest in the parish. In fact, wouldn't it be more empowering to have a home grown church leader than a Western foreigner? Especially since the end of colonialism and apartheid, my sense is that Black Africans don't need or want any more white overlords in any shape or form.

This issue became real for me when several of the Black clergy in the northern part of the diocese asked me why I was in Africa. I did my best to explain my reasons as outlined above. The matter-of-fact response I received was, "If you want to learn from us that is all well and good, but we don't need you or any other white foreigners taking charge, telling us what to do or how to do church." This was a sobering statement, especially since I had been invited by the white archdeacon to lead an entire day at the clergy school to teach grief and loss counseling. I completed the training and there was some participation, but it was very difficult to gauge the extent that I or the information was received.

In traveling to an impoverished rural town one day with 10 other white Americans, I had an opportunity to speak with the two missionary women (one was from the U.S. the other was from Argentina) who worked in that community about their understanding of mission. They described their work as a ministry of presence, being with and walking with those who are poor and marginalized. For them this also means living among the people with all the associated hardships that go along with it. Of course, they have an income and the option to leave and go anywhere else in the world if they choose to. I asked them if the term "missionary" had a positive or negative connotation for them. They acknowledged that there was certainly some baggage around this word, but they didn't feel that it was necessary to develop other terminology to describe themselves or this type of church activity. Another visiting lecturer at the College of the Transfiguration (COTT) who also happened to be in the car, chimed in that he didn't think we should allow the word missionary to be co-opted by people who see it as a pejorative and

therefore abandon it altogether. These thoughts have impacted my position on this issue, because up until this point I had been leaning toward replacing this term within my vocabulary. Now I'm not so sure; I will have to wrestle with this awhile longer.

The missionary model presented by these two women is appealing to me for it is the same one that I learned with the Franciscans as I lived this type of stark lifestyle with some friars for one year in an inner-city setting. I must confess that in revisiting this kind of immersion as a missionary presence I was amazed to learn that I have grown to like my comforts – e.g., indoor plumbing, electricity, hot showers, a full kitchen, central heat and a house that I can enjoy. It's not that I want a mansion, but living in a township or rural area like that does not appeal to me at all anymore. In one sense I am embarrassed by this statement, but on the other hand, that is my reality and I am being honest with myself about what I am willing and not willing to do. The other issue is that I can never truly be poor because of my background, education, family, support structures and accessible resources – I always have options whereas poor people do not.

This Isibindi program we were visiting (a project to support children who have been impacted/affected by HIV/AIDS) was very impressive on several levels. The very fact that a local (Black) parish priest was aware of a particular need in his larger community and he decided to do something about it was good to see. The second element was that there was a national organization that had already developed a model to address the issue of HIV/AIDS infected and affected children and was replicating this work around the country. Third, local women in the areas served were being hired and trained to do the front line work. Listening to these stories gave me hope for it was empowering for these women to become employed, gain a professional identity, become leaders in their villages and teach others useful coping and life skills. Then there are the children themselves who are accompanied in their grief after the loss of their parents, maintained in their neighborhoods and schools and supported in other physical and emotional ways which encourages them to lead a more hopeful life rather than one of despair and desperation.

The two foreign missionary women seemed to be thriving in this setting and were excited to be working outside of the official institutional church. Neither of them spoke the language but they were able to coordinate the program and act as liaisons with the national association. I have worked my entire adult life in similar non-profit

organizations in poor neighborhoods in the United States. I believe that this is important work, but a person doesn't need to be ordained or affiliated with any religious denomination to do this. Anyone with skills, training, experience or just a desire to be helpful can plug into one of these organizations. There are already many groups and associations that already do this, e.g., Peace Corps., Vista, Physicians for Social Responsibility, Doctors Without Borders, not to mention the plethora of social service agencies and philanthropic foundations. I believe that this type of work is important for the institutional church to support, encourage and advocate for, but I don't think it is a complete new model for missionary activity.

In an attempt to understand how some Africans view mission I asked two COTT lecturers, numerous seminarians, several clergy and some lay people what their understanding of missionary work was. All of them equated missionary work with evangelism and bringing people to Christ. They gave examples of holding tent revivals, reading scripture, preaching, singing and bringing people into the church. Several of the interviewees professed that they had participated in such mission work either as a leader or an attendee. Many of them said that the Anglican Church needed to send missionaries to the United States because the numbers of Christians was declining and the faith was deteriorating spiritually and morally. "It is our turn to send missionaries to America" said several of the interviewees. The general consensus among the people I spoke with seemed to be that the mission of the church and the role of the missionary are to preach the Gospel, baptize people and grow the church. Funny that this is the same model that Western missionaries used when they came to Africa in the last few hundred years. In addition, I asked these same people what their opinions were about having white, western, English speaking missionaries come to South Africa at the present time. Their answers split along racial lines: the seventeen Black clergy and seminarians said "No", they didn't want anymore white missionaries – lay or ordained coming to their country; the ten white, English speaking clergy and lay people all said they would welcome and support foreign missionaries coming and the four Colored clergy and seminarians were divided equally on this issue.

Their understanding and definition of mission and missionary didn't set well with me, so I consulted a few books at the college on the topic. The first writer I picked up was J. Andrew Kirk and he stated that

Christ is the standard by which all mission is to be judged. Mission flows from a desire to follow in the way of Jesus, who healed the sick, associated with outsiders, rebuked the self-righteous, challenged the absolute power of the state, restored people's dignity, opposed legalistic and corrupt religious practices, and ultimately gave his life to demonstrate that even enemies were encompassed in his love. Jesus tells his disciples to go and do likewise.<sup>1</sup>

This sounded better to me because it identified missionary activity with what Jesus did in his public ministry. It also brings in the element of siding with the poor, a principle I learned during my college and Franciscan days and it also requires us to challenge oppressive systems and seek justice for all people. Believing that I was on the right track, I found a book by David Bosch who exclaimed: (Yes, I thought of Ian when I read this!)

The primary purpose of mission, therefore, cannot simply be the planting of churches or the saving of souls; rather, it has to be service to the *missio Dei*, representing God in and over against the world, pointing to God. Since God's concern is for the entire world it affects all people in all aspects of their existence. It takes place in ordinary human history, not exclusively in and through the church. God's own mission is larger than the mission of the church. The *Missio Dei* is God's activity, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church may be privileged to participate.<sup>2</sup>

This definition comes out in opposition to just "saving people" and growing the church. In fact, the mission of God is described as being much bigger than the mission of the institutional church whereas the latter is privileged to participate in a much more universal mission of God.

In both scenarios, it is implied that God will use the whole of humanity to fulfill the *missio Dei*. There is no requirement that a person has to belong to certain religious groups or be ordained to do this work. Also, there is no mention that a person has to leave their own country to carry on this work. It certainly doesn't demand that a missionary enter into a new context to tell people how to live, act or believe: it is just the opposite.

We are called to enter into life situations wherever people are oppressed, marginalized, poor, broken, disenfranchised or hurting and walk with people, building relationships and forging supportive alliances. It also means that missionaries are open to being on the receiving end of mission because this is a two way street – nobody is exempt from receiving the love of God from another human being. We must be willing to acknowledge how and where we are broken and in need of redemptive healing. We have much to learn from each other. Mission is a mutual enterprise. It can be done within the institutional church as well as outside of its walls.

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<sup>1</sup> Kirk, Andrew J., *The Mission of Theology and Theology as Mission*. (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1997), 52.

<sup>2</sup> Bosch, David J., *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 391.

During my childhood years, I believe I was operating out of the traditional 19<sup>th</sup> Century model of mission that I learned from those Catholic religious orders. More specifically, missionaries were sent to a far off land and undertook certain activities to spread the Good News propagate the Christian faith and maybe support some social endeavors like building and managing schools or clinics. I believed that this was what God wanted me to do someday.

When I reached college, however, my understanding of missionary activity changed to that of liberation theology and Christian base communities. This notion of ministry propelled me into life with the Franciscans and followed me even after I left that order and married a non-Catholic. I struggled with this notion and couldn't see my secular professional work as mission oriented. I continued to hold up some romantic ideal of going far away to encounter exotic countries, people and cultures. I believed that I could somehow "help" people in their particular contexts to achieve liberation and justice in their communities and assist in ushering in the reign of God. No doubt my motives were influenced by Marxist thought and philosophy as a way to societal change in building a just, equal and fair world for all people.

I still want to grasp onto this hope, this higher ideal of working for and seeing this ultimate goal realized in the near future. On the other hand, I realize that this was not accomplished in Jesus' day and we don't seem to be any closer to this goal 2,000 years later, so I know that this will not happen in my lifetime. For the moment, I am content to know that I am still called to be a part of this process of transformation and I am comfortable leaving the end results in God's domain.

So, where does this leave me in my quest to define mission and missionary activity for my life? The best I can do at this time is this:

*All people of faith are called to be missionaries or emissaries who are concerned with God's divine relationship to the entire universe. Our missionary activity is both an individual and communal process in which we try to understand the mystery of our faith, describe its implications for all life and act as agents of transformation in our varied contexts as we attempt to reflect God's infinite plan for the world.*

This definition is a work in progress for me and it will probably undergo many revisions throughout the rest of my life. I am satisfied, however, that I went to South Africa and had this experience. The opportunity to unpack my childhood dreams and early adulthood experiences with the Franciscans was especially helpful. During one of

my conversations with a student at COTT, he suggested to me that if I really wanted to be helpful to the people in Africa that I should stay in the United States and my diocese as I engaged in ordained ministry. His rationale was simple: I live in the most powerful country in the world which consumes more than its fair share of the world's resources. Our lifestyles, attitudes and national policies greatly impact the rest of the world – mostly in a negative way. He suggested that I work to help change people's self-centeredness, consumption habits and attitudes and help Americans understand that they are part of the world community and that their actions greatly impact their brothers and sisters around the world. He said I could do this over the rest of my life – one person at a time. Steve, he said, that is your mission.

I haven't stopped thinking about this since I have been back. I know that I will take this new understanding with me as I move forward into ordained ministry. The context and form of my missionary work is still to be revealed!