

# Two Missions You Can't Live Without



*By Krin Van Tatenhove and friends*

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## INTRODUCTION

**F**ifteen years ago, Robert Fulghum said, “All I really needed to know I learned in kindergarten.” I could say that all I needed to know about a pattern for Christian mission, I learned on a Sunday in 1966.

I was ten years old, seated with my grandparents in the pews of their congregation, The Church of the Open Door, a well-known evangelical presence in the heart of Los Angeles. The church’s red neon cross was an icon rising above the smoggy streets, drawing members of all classes and races.

Grandma and Grandpa were salt of the earth, blue-collar folks who survived two failed farms during the Depression. They had grown up in mainline denominations, exposed to the patterns of religion. But as they said, “the Gospel never caught fire in their lives.” That is until a Billy Graham crusade during the mid-50s. My grandpa, the holdout in the family, had a “born again” experience in the Los Angeles Coliseum, joining thousands of people streaming down the aisle to commit their lives to Christ. I wish I had been there as that tall, raw-boned Dutch farmer tearfully said, “Lord Jesus, I accept you as my personal Savior.”

Whatever you feel about such experiences, whatever you feel about the necessity of Christ for salvation, let me assure you of one thing. My grandpa was never the same. And that was a wonderful thing!

Back to that Sunday. I don’t remember the sermon, the hymns we sang, or the words of particular prayers, but there is one image burned indelibly in my mind.

On the wall behind the podium and choir—the place that drew everyone’s eyes—was a vast map of the world. A leader in the congregation stood and read Jesus’ last words to his disciples before his ascension into heaven: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8, NRSV).

Suddenly the map lit up with tiny lines of light streaming from L.A. as their epicenter. It was like the map of an airline’s international routes. Yet these lights meant flights of passion. They showed the many places around the globe that The Church of the Open Door was reaching out to proclaim Christ’s love: supporting missionaries, planting new churches, investing in hospitals and safe water systems.

Wow! The sanctuary transformed! It was part of the heartbeat of the Kingdom—a vital, connected staging platform for changing lives in far-flung locales. That was my first lesson for the day.

*The second one came after church.*

The community of Los Angeles was still reeling from the Watts riots. If you don’t recall them, let me refresh your memory. After the Civil Rights Act in 1964, race



**Historic picture of The Church of the Open Door**

relations seemed to be improving. However, certain states like California tried to circumvent new federal laws, passing propositions to block fair housing. Anger seethed in the inner cities.



**A lone National Guardsman keeps watch the night of the Watts riots**

On August 11, 1965, L.A.'s South Central neighborhood of Watts ignited with some of the worst racial violence in American history. A LAPD officer pulled over motorist Marquette Frye, who was with his brother, Ronald. The officer suspected Marquette was driving drunk. While he questioned him, a crowd of onlookers formed. The boy's mother, Rena Frye, showed up and a struggle broke out. More officers arrived on the scene and struck the brothers with their batons. The crowd grew in such numbers and rage that after the police arrested the Fryes and left the scene, tension exploded. The ensuing riot lasted 6 days. When the smoke cleared, 34 were dead, 1000 wounded, \$100 million in property damaged.

The Church of the Open Door was only a few blocks from Watts. On that Sunday in early '66, my grandma and grandpa did an audacious thing. They joined with some of the African-American members of their own congregation to "walk for peace" in Watts—hiking through risky neighborhoods, greeting people, passing out tracts that talked about the unity that is ours in Christ. My grandma said, "This is our calling; to try and love our neighbors wherever God has planted us."

A world with faraway outposts, an inner city neighborhood plagued by violence, my grandparents reaching out to both: *my lesson was complete.*

We all know that early lessons mature, mellow, and expand with wisdom and experience through the years. I am still learning the power of Christian mission day by day. In my 20 years of ordained ministry, it has become my central motivation, my clarion call from the pulpit. That's why I chose a pretty bold title for this booklet, "Two missions you can't live without." Why such an extreme statement?

It boils down to something Jesus said: "I came so you can have real and eternal life, more and better life than you ever dreamed of." (John 10:10b MSG).

Most of us realize that being a Christian is not about religion; "religion" has done enough damage in the name of Christ to drive untold millions away from the church. Being a Christian is about a relationship with the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ. It is about the higher purpose for living that He gives us, a calling that transforms every area of our lives. As we follow him on this new "mission," learning to be His disciples, we receive Spirited passion that opens our eyes to the meaning of existence both now and forever.

This is **abundant life**, filled with an overflowing of grace, mercy, and meaning we have only imagined.

Couldn't we all use more of this passion? I hope your answer is "yes!" I hope you want a faith that transcends mere religion and bursts outside the walls of the institutional church! I hope you are hungry for conviction rather than convention,

This simple booklet suggests two missions that are indispensable in discovering Jesus' abundance. That's why we can't fully "live" without them.

Let's get started...

## CHAPTER ONE: FIND YOUR CALCUTTA

**A**uthor Shane Claiborne spent a number of months serving with Mother Teresa and the Sisters of Charity in India. He learned many lessons there, but perhaps one of the most important came through a phrase Mother Teresa often repeated: "Calcuttas are everywhere if only we have eyes to see. Find your Calcutta."

I'm sure you've heard the word *incarnation*. The Latin root is *incarnatus*, which means *to make into flesh*. We use incarnation to describe what God did for us in Jesus Christ. Instead of remaining the distant God of the galaxies, our heavenly Father came to us in the flesh through his Son, Jesus, who walked and talked with us, ate and drank with us, shared our joys and our sorrows, then suffered on our behalf. Paul's letter to the Philippians puts it this way:

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.* (Philippians 2:5-8)

How can we have the same mind as Christ? The answer to that question is the basis for every good sermon ever preached on this planet. But for the sake of this book, there is one part of the answer that shines through all of Jesus' teachings: to be like him, we must serve the poorest of the poor in our immediate locale. **We must become servants of the least.**

Most of us are familiar with the great lesson found in Matthew 25:31-46. Jesus tells one of his most pointed parables. He says that in the end, when we stand before God for a review of our lives, the final criteria will not be what we have expected. The Lord will not ask how often we prayed or attended church. He will not ask if we were faithful in our daily devotions, or whether we had victory over that nagging sin or sins that plagued us throughout our lives.

No, the benchmarks in the end will be much simpler. Did we feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, invite strangers into our homes, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned? Did we help topple the sinful, discriminatory pyramid of this earth's social structure, doing whatever we can to help the last become first and the first last?

Jesus gave us this commandment in both words and actions. Read the Gospels again. See how many times he fed the multitudes, healed the sick, and laid his hands on the eyes of the blind. In some villages, the scripture says they brought out "all their sick" for him to touch. **All of them!**

There is a gripping scene in Broadway's latest production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Stage lighting and a layer of fog obscure the floor; we are only dimly aware of human shapes huddled there in the darkness. Jesus enters the scene and suddenly, one by one, the figures stand and implore the Lord to heal them. One is blind, one is bleeding, one is tormented by demons, another plagued with skin disease. Their twisted shapes rise up to him and he touches them, one after another, giving of his energy and love until they threaten to swallow him up. Jesus lifts his hands and cries

out to the Father for power and patience.

My heart filled with love and gratitude as I sat in the audience. I saw more clearly how Jesus poured himself out daily for those who needed him the most. He did not hold back. He gave until it hurt.

*He calls us to do the same, beginning in our own backyards.*

Let me ask you a pointed question. In both your personal life and the life of your church, are you being intentional about finding your Calcutta? Have you examined the patterns of your Christian discipline to include reaching out to the poorest of the poor in your vicinity?

To do this—to become *Matthew 25 Christians*—we all need to overcome some hurdles. Let's look at these hurdles more closely.

### **Overcome the hurdle of “mere” charity**

Check writing is necessary. Every ministry of justice and social concern needs money to fuel its outreach. Whatever percentage of your income you have decided to donate, I pray it will gradually expand in the years ahead, helping you discover the joy of giving as a lifestyle.

But check writing is not enough. It can buffer us from the face-to-face contact necessary for true, life-changing empathy. I am certain that when Jesus asked us to feed, clothe and visit, he meant us to do it in person, not by proxy.

I heard a quote attributed to Thornton Wilder: “Charity is the stammering apology of the unjust.” That may sound harsh, but it has a core of truth. In too many of our churches and personal lives, we want to give out of our abundance to soothe our consciences. We know that we live in the wealthiest nation on the planet. We know that even those of us who live modestly are rich by Third World standards. We may also know that the gap between the rich and poor has increased dramatically in the United States—that each night in America, nearly a million people are homeless, and that homelessness among children and families is rising faster than any other category.

We may know all of this, but still give only our money. We write checks to frontline workers and never put a personal face on the least of those in our midst. We never encounter them firsthand, never learn their names, never let their humanness touch us one-on-one.

*In short, we miss the opportunity to meet Jesus in disguise.*

My son, Pieter, is a budding writer and some of his poems have touched me deeply. Here is one that gets to the heart of the line between charity and hands-on mission.

### **I Hear the Divine**

I hear the divine  
His raspy cough  
Emphysema, leukemia, and who knows what else  
I touch the divine  
His wrinkles and stretched skin  
Oily hair

I see the divine  
 The stains on the knees of his trousers  
 The big toe that peeks out his torn sneakers  
 The lice infested hair  
 I smell the divine  
 Piss and wine and rotting teeth  
 The perfume of countless dumpsters  
 I taste the divine  
 The warm saliva that seeps out the glands in my mouth  
 I breathe deeply off to the side  
 I swallow the lump in my throat  
 Not the threat of tears but the threat of vomit  
 I hand him my dollar...he thanks me  
 And I walk quickly away.

It is not just the homeless we avoid. It is the drug-addicted, those with AIDS, gangbangers, criminals, welfare cheats, widows and widowers who live out of sight and out of mind, immigrants of all types. Why? Because once we put a real face on poverty, once the nameless suffering ones become real human beings, it is harder to turn away. A friend of mine in New York said, "Every day I rode the train into Manhattan. At numbers of stops I saw them—the homeless, the vagrants, the runaway teens—staring up at me through the glass. Their faces haunted me until I had no recourse but action." She went on to lead a ministry in her church that reached out monetarily *and* physically to the homeless.



**Homelessness among women and children  
is on the rise in America**

Do you want the abundant life that Jesus promised? Then after writing your check and placing it in the mail or the offering plate, get up and go! Venture outside the walls of your church and home. Find your Calcutta after the model of Mother Teresa and the Sisters of Charity. Each day they went outside their compound, found the sick and the dying and physically cared for them, touching them, picking the lice off their skin, cleaning their wounds, praying with them, loving them ***up close and personal.***

Each day they had the privilege of holding Jesus in their arms.

**Overcome the hurdle of "who is worthy?"**

The following words were written by Bob Lupton, President of FCS Urban Ministries in Atlanta, Georgia ([www.fcsministries.org](http://www.fcsministries.org)). They speak to this question of “who is worthy” from both a humorous and poignant perspective.

“People with a heart to serve others want to know that their gifts are invested wisely. At least I do. I don't want my alms squandered by the irresponsible and ungrateful. Since I'm often in a position to determine who will or will not receive assistance, I've attempted to establish criteria to judge the worthiness of potential recipients.

- **A truly worthy poor woman:** a widow more than 65 years old, living alone in substandard housing; does not have a family to care for her; has no savings and cannot work; has an income inadequate for basic needs; is a woman of prayer and faith; never asks anyone for anything but only accepts with gratitude what people bring her; is not cranky.
- **A truly worthy poor young man:** has completed school, unemployed but not living off his mother; diligently applies for jobs every day; accepts gratefully any kind of work for any kind of pay; does not smoke, drink, or use drugs; attends church regularly; will not manipulate for gain either for himself or his family; is dependable and morally pure; does not act "cool" like his peers in the street; has pride in himself and is confident; may sleep in alleys but is always clean and shaved.
- **A truly worthy poor young woman:** lives in public housing but only temporarily; has illegitimate children conceived prior to Christian conversion; is now celibate; tithes her welfare check and food stamps; is a high school dropout but manages well with limited resources; places a high value on education and nutrition for her children; walks everywhere (grocery store, church, school, welfare office) with her children to save bus fare and keeps her sparsely furnished home spotless; occasionally runs out of food by the end of the month but will not beg from friends even if her children are hungry, because this violates welfare rules.
- **A truly worthy poor family:** is devout, close-knit; has a responsible father working long hours at minimum wage wherever he can find work; has a mother who makes the kids obey, washes clothes by hand, and will not buy any junk food; lives in overcrowded housing; will not accept welfare or food stamps even when neither parent can find work; always pays the bills on time; has no car; has kids who do not whine or tell lies.

“I want to serve truly worthy poor people. The problem is they are hard to find. Someone on our staff thought he remembered seeing one back in '76, but he can't remember for sure. Someone else reminded me that maybe to be truly poor means to be prideless, impatient, manipulative, desperate, grasping at every straw, clutching the immediate with little energy left for the future. *But truly worthy? Are any of us truly worthy?*

Does his tongue in cheek humor cut to the quick for you? It does for me. So many of us stop the flow of God's blessings in our lives by withholding our love based on "worthiness." When we encounter those whom the rest of the world classifies as "unlovely," phrases such as these run through our minds...

- She should get off welfare and get a job!
- No one is forcing him to take a drink or stick the needle in his arm!
- He chose to be homeless; he's reaping what he sows!
- Sure, AIDS is terrible, but that's the consequence of irresponsible and sinful sexual behavior!
- Why should we help them or their children when they snuck across our border illegally!
- Her own family isn't helping her, why should I!
- His imprisonment is his punishment; why should I try to make it easier!
- They made the decision to have all those children, let them deal with the consequences!
- Where is his father? That's the man who should intervene here!

Listen: I am not saying we should "enable" irresponsible behavior. Sometimes the best display of love is to say "no." What I am saying is this—the message of the Gospel is that ***all have sinned and fallen short***. The ground around the cross is level. If we elevate ourselves as superior to others because their sins are more heinous than ours, we have ceased following Christ and have turned to the dog-eat-dog gods of our culture.

Remember the Savior we follow, the one who did not count equality with God as something to be lorded over us, but instead emptied himself, became like us, and walked a path of humility all the way to the cross. Without that cross, none of us would have access to the fullness of God's love. And that access is not a result of ***our*** worthiness; it is a gift, because ***all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God***. This gift is called "grace," and it is the central and most powerful reality of the Christian faith.

Let's be clear about this. No matter how educated, hard working, ethical and responsible we think we are, in God's eyes we are no more worthy of his love than welfare cheats, addicts, the homeless, those with AIDS, illegal immigrants, or convicts. And unless we have experienced the pain of the streets, the gulf between the gutter and a home, the disease of addiction, or desperate poverty, who are we to judge? Our task, as Chuck Swindoll once said, is to "improve our serve," stretching our patience and perseverance for the sake of Christ and others.

We experience God as we serve the least because it opens our hearts to our own need. It increases our awareness of our own poverty in God's eyes. It instills deep gratitude in us that despite our own obvious flaws, we are loved unconditionally. When the cups of our lives are overflowing with this love, we spend less time

evaluating someone's worthiness, and more time embracing the chance to love them.

This isn't easy. Serving will *always* have an element of suffering to it. It will be hard work for no pay. It will contain no glory, causing us to crucify our need to be noticed. It will sorely test our patience. It will place us in situations where we start to fall back again on the worldly concepts of worthiness, growing critical and negative. We will start to wonder why we are exerting such energy for such little gain. After all, poverty and suffering will never be eradicated. Wouldn't our lives be better served by tending more to ourselves and our immediate loved ones? The needs of this world can be like a black hole, sucking away our energy with limited impact.

That is the exact moment when we must remind ourselves why we are serving in the first place. Certainly it is to feed, clothe, visit, build a home, or provide comfort. But this is shallow compared to the most glorious reason: we are serving because this is where we find Jesus. We serve because we are offering the gift of faithfulness to the one who died for us. We are taking part of our lives and pouring it out upon his nail-scarred feet. That is when we have communion with his compassion, when we feel his presence invade our hearts more fully.

This is a profound way that we experience God through serving the poor. When we open *our* way of being to *their* way of being, when we morph from sympathy to empathy, God whispers love in our ears. Our hearts grow larger and more able to hold the awesome, overwhelming presence of Christ himself.

Recently I experienced this firsthand. Our church is involved in the rehabbing of houses in a nearby neighborhood that is predominantly African-American. Our first projects were for widows on fixed incomes whose homes were literally falling down around them, the siding rotten with no insulation to ward off heat and cold. On the day we dedicated those first projects—dilapidated homes now gleaming with new siding and paint—it was **so easy** to feel warm and satisfied about our efforts. The widows—one in her 90s, another in her 80s—thanked us effusively with tears in their eyes.

Then we began work on the home of a man in his 60s. Though he receives disability for glaucoma, it was clear that he was physically and mentally strong enough to work and combat his unemployment. To top it off, he was gruff and stand-offish. Many people came to serve him, and his weather-beaten home showed immediate signs of resurrection. On a very cold morning, a number of us showed up to continue with the new siding. The owner, shaking off a night in which it seemed he had too much to drink, looked at me and said, "This is all good, but what are you going to do about my roof?"

My immediate response was impatience and anger. How about a thank you? How about some gratitude for being a recipient of free love and service? How about starting with "what is" rather than "what isn't?"

I tried something that moment that I often neglect. I prayed instantaneously for patience and wisdom to respond. I prayed for the mind of Christ. This helped me swallow my anger and say to him, "Let me tell you something you probably know in your heart. What you said is unbelievably ungrateful. You make it really hard to love you. But God knows too well how hard I have been to love in my **own** life. So let me tell you why I am going to work this morning with a joy in my heart you can't steal."

Even though you're the one receiving the aid, I am here because I am serving Jesus. It's because of my gratitude to him that I showed up. This work is to glorify him, and I hope somehow his love grows stronger in your life. If that happens, something far greater than rehabbing your home will occur here."

Then I turned on my heel, picked up a hammer, and went to work. Did I immediately feel at peace? No, mostly smug and self-righteous. But I am a firm advocate of "fakin' it 'til we make it." This was a chance for me to practice grace, and a couple hours into that day's work, my heart was focused more on Christ and less on the homeowner

This is a chance every one of us will have if we commit ourselves to finding our backyard Calcuttas. And I make you a promise: the more you practice grace, the more your heart enlarges to receive the powerful indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, God's love animating every area of your life.

That's the abundance we receive!

### **Overcome the hurdle of offering only "band-aids"**

*Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.* – Chinese Proverb

Once we start serving our community face-to-face, we enter into a new awareness of the systemic evils that grip our world. Paul calls these the "principalities and powers." In Ephesians he says, "Our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the ruler, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 6:12)

It is not my intent to have a theological discussion about evil. In some quarters of the mainline church, just to mention Satan is to be suspect, a primitive throwback to superstition; this, despite the fact that Jesus mentioned our Adversary on numerous occasions.

No, my intent is simply to point out that many gross injustices in our world have been "institutionalized." They have become so ingrained in both the foundation and daily pattern of modern living that we hardly notice, let alone challenge them. During the 60s, the counter-culture movement was often criticized as being hopelessly naïve—half-stoned, flower-loving hippies that spouted off about love and peace but had no clear awareness of life's realities, no plan for how to live in this world.

Perhaps. But there was a term used by this movement that had amazing clarity. As young people protested a steady military build-up in Vietnam, our men dying by thousands in a conflict half-way across the globe, they encountered a systemic power that opposed them with seemingly unlimited resources. They called it the "military-industrial complex," meaning an aggressive world view threaded through the American economy that held the clout and the desire to perpetuate a status quo of pyramid-based power. What are some of the hallmarks of this "complex" of power?

- First and foremost, it is *materialism*, capitalism without Christian restraint. It

leads to greed, to wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, and to protection of that wealth by any means necessary. It is pursuit of profit without regard to how it affects the environment or workers on the lowest rung of society. It is anti-Christ, meaning the antithesis of all that Jesus taught in regard to earthly power and possessions.

- It is racism, called “America’s great birth defect” by Condoleezza Rice, a horribly sinful remnant of the Tower of Babble.
- It is sexism, still leading some churches to oppress women, still forming glass ceilings in professions across our country.
- It is homophobia, fear and injustice shown to God’s children of another sexual identity.
- It is militarism, firmly rooted in a country that produces more instruments of destruction than any other culture on the planet.

You see these things, don’t you? You see how they have become ingrained in our culture. In this country we have martyrs who gave their lives in battling these “principalities and powers.” People like Martin Luther King, Jr. who dared to confront the systemic evils of both racism *and* militarism.

Now, listen. Here is what happens if you start serving in the Calcutta on your doorstep. You become more acutely aware that these systemic injustices are not abstractions, but daily realities affecting lives in the streets of your city. Some examples...

- You drive someone to a homeless mission (if you dare), or serve food in the dining room of that shelter. Gradually, something else happens: you begin to see the lack of front-line, affordable housing in your own city. You see how wide the gulf is from living on the street to being in the simplest of apartments.
- You encounter a family with unexpected medical emergencies. You buy high-priced medicine for them and their children. Gradually, something else happens: you begin to see how employers can pay minimum wage and provide no health care insurance; you see how, without this insurance, both the *accessibility to* and the *quality of* health care quickly diminishes. You learn the statistic that over 40 million people lack medical insurance in our country, and another 40 million are underinsured, ill-prepared for tragedy.
- You volunteer at the local school in your Calcutta, helping to tutor students. Gradually, something else happens; you begin to see clearly how the resources of given schools are directly tied to the economics of their neighborhoods. You see how higher tax bases buy better schools, how money buys private educations and a greater perpetuation of an upper class. Despite your criticism of easy slogans, you see how easily some children *are* left behind.
- You help someone with a bus pass to get to work so she can better her life. Then something else happens. You listen to her complain about the lack of

public transportation. You test the situation yourself, learning that your own 20 minute commute would be transformed to an hour and half every day, making your workaday week all the more wearying. You wonder why public transportation is not given higher priority in your community.

- You volunteer to teach ESL at your church, meeting immigrant families from a number of countries. Then something else happens; you learn the background stories of why these people and their families have fled, and your views on immigration will never again be so black and white. Statistics become real people.

Serving the poor is like entering a spiral of awareness about ourselves and the world around us. My prayer is that once you enter the spiral—once you uncover the systemic issues at work in your own backyard—you will not only hand out fish to those in need, but be a partner in teaching people to fish, helping create systems of sustainability.

Here are some examples I've witnessed.

- A group of doctors who, after serving at a homeless shelter, opened a free clinic more accessible than the county hospital.
- An affluent congregation that adopted a school in a poor neighborhood, determined to upgrade its technology to the level of their own children's private schools.
- An inner city church that started with ESL classes and within two years had become an aid center helping immigrants find work, medical care, housing, and a pathway to legal citizenship.

## SUMMARY

There is a Calcutta on the doorstep of your home or church. It may be a neighborhood plagued by poverty and substandard housing. It may be a local school that lacks resources, or an especially rundown nursing home that warehouses lonely men and women. It may be a homeless shelter struggling to meet its budget, or an outreach center to inner city youth. It may be an aid center that provides food, transportation, and medical assistance.

Only you and your church can *incarnate*, face-to-face, within the context of this first mission. Please do so. Let it teach you the difference between charity and empathy. Let it teach you the deeper lesson that the ground around the cross is level, and that ultimately none of us is "worthy" to receive the grace in which we stand. Let it teach you lessons about the affect of principalities and powers in your community.

Find your Calcutta. You can't fully live the abundance of your Christian faith without it.

## CHAPTER TWO: EXTEND YOUR TABLE

1 .1 billion. That's the number of people—Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, non-denominational—who follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. We come from countless cultures, of every skin shade imaginable, speaking vastly different languages. Sure, there are obvious schisms, factions, and ongoing theological debates. But here is a miraculous truth: even when we fail to grasp the reality, we are one in the Body of Christ. When we come to the communion table, it is literally the largest table in the world, a spiritual feast of staggering proportions. Truly, as Paul reminds us in Ephesians, we have “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father over us all...” (Ephesians 4:5-6, NRSV)

Now listen to the flip side. Martin Luther King, Jr. was prophetic when he said that 11:00 on Sunday mornings is the most segregated hour in American culture. We separate by race, class, doctrine and denomination at the very hour we could be celebrating the awesome unity within our diversity.

I'll never forget a moment many years ago when I walked into a worship service at Glide Memorial Sanctuary in San Francisco. I had never seen such an image of the Kingdom—men and women, straight and gay, black and white, poor and rich, sober and recovering, conservative and liberal—all standing and praising God together at the top of their voices. It made me realize the power of the Gospel to transcend barriers of class, race, and culture.

We have already talked about “local mission.” I hope that your involvement in your own backyard will help you break down barriers to the increasing diversity of *all* our communities. But here is where we come to the second mission we cannot live without: ***our partnership with people of other countries in the mission of spreading Christ's Gospel.***

Remember the world map I described in the introduction? Our linkage to far flung locales, our intentional effort to stand in unity with Christians around the globe is the second mission we cannot fully live without.

If we have been followers of Christ for any length of time, we have been involved in supporting missionary work. It may have been through the outreach of our particular denomination, or an agency we chose on our own. Perhaps you have had personal contact with people in the mission field, receiving dispatches from the front through letters or emails. Perhaps you have even had the joy of joining a mission trip to a country other than your own.

In the last few decades, there has been a watershed change in our notion of international mission. Our prior concept, forged in the 1800s, was the “noblesse oblige” mentality that we had a burden of reaching “unsaved people” in more primitive or pagan locales. This is still a motivation as missionaries give their time, talent, even lives to preach the Gospel amongst native tribes, secular nations like China, or in the hostile environment of certain Muslim countries.

However, this approach has now been illuminated with a new awareness: the fire of the Holy Spirit is burning so brightly in certain countries that *they* are renewing *our* faith. They are teaching *us* once again the purity of Christ's message, and the awesome

change he can ignite in people's lives.

When I say "extend your table," my focus is not simply the message of reaching others with something *we* have and *they* need. It is a call to dialogue and exchange. It is serving internationally with hearts and minds open to what others have to give and teach us as well.

There is a sentiment I have heard described over and over by participants in international mission work. I would paraphrase it this way: ***I went to serve, but I received so much more than I gave. I learned so much more than I taught.***

I have three friends I admire to share this experience with you in their own words. I will also share a story of mine. Listen to these words carefully and I believe you will see why this second mission of "extending our tables" is something we cannot fully live without.

### **LIVING "IN TIME," NOT "ON TIME": A lesson learned by Marie Hoffman**

I can say from my heart and soul that doing mission work in Mexico has changed my life in miraculous ways. I am not sure why God gave me such a love for Mexico, its people, and serving there, but what a force! It has been more powerful than a "burning bush" blinding me in the road, or a "bolt of lightning" hitting my chest. This call to serve in Mexico literally bursts through me with an emotion that makes me long to be there, often and always.

I have experienced so many beautiful miracles that I'm not sure where to start. Perhaps one lesson I can begin to describe will explain some of the magnitude of God's love I have experienced in Mexico through the beautiful spirit of its people. It is a concept once explained to me about the Mexican way of life. Mexicans live "in time" not "on time". When I was told this, I pondered the semantics for a moment, trying to get my brain around it, and then the explanation continued. People—*relationships*—are always the top priority. They are always more important than any schedule or agenda.

In Mexico, if you are en route to a very important meeting or appointment and you encounter a person stranded on the side of the road, you stop and help. NO QUESTION, NO HESITATION. The people awaiting you at the very important meeting will understand, waiting patiently and happily. It is a style of life that I believe Jesus would completely embrace and celebrate!

Thank God for the Mexican way of being! I see it every moment that I am there: in a simple hello, an embrace, a kiss on the cheek even before words are spoken! I



see it when a friend stops work on important papers to buy tacos from his friend who won't have enough money to provide for his family if he doesn't sell them all that day. I see it in the stopping and celebrating of life with others when they have just put on a roof to their very first safe and respectable home. Everyone pauses to thank God for such a miracle. I see it in the boy that rushes over to take the wheelbarrow of the woman who is struggling to make it over a big hill, leaving his shovel, his "post" for the moment. I see it in the woman who leaves the wash to make food for others who happened by at that moment, sharing her bounty even if it is only a plate of beans. I see it in the man who takes off work to help his neighbor build his house, even if it means he will lose his pay for that day. I see it in the girl who stops to brush the tear from her brother's eye and caress him, even if she's a little late for school.

People before agendas, without hesitation. What a beautiful way to live. Doesn't it make you think of the childhood song, "Lord, I want to be like Jesus in my heart, in my heart?" Thank you, Lord Jesus for Mexico and for the Mexican people. They are like you in their hearts, in their hearts.

### **THE POWER OF COMMUNITY: A lesson learned by Clay Roberts in Colonia Las Actrices Mexicanas outside Reynosa, Mexico**

Everything done together. That's my strongest memory. Looking back, I remember the day we poured a concrete roof, the final step to complete a new home for four family units who were living in a shack. The three second-generation children,

their spouses and kids would finally get rooms immune to flooding.

A large group from the neighborhood joined us. We assembled crude scaffolding, then situated the sand, gravel and cement nearby. A cement mixer, rented for \$50, occupied a center position near the unroofed walls. We had finished the wooden forms to hold the concrete the prior evening.

We passed out 5 gallon buckets. Smiles and jokes filled the air as we wondered what we had gotten into. Then someone pulled the starter



rope on the mixer and we were off. With the drone of the mixer filling our ears, sand, gravel, and cement literally started to fly. We passed buckets full of cement from the mixer to the first level, then the second, then the roof, where a crew with wheelbarrows received it and spread it out. The old scaffolding boards bowed with each bucket passed. Two workers per level alternately caught and swung the loads higher. Concrete was everywhere. Buckets broke, shirts and pants developed gray splotches, and concrete appeared where an eye or ear once had been. There were no

language barriers; the buckets came too fast. Just little nods, smiles and pats to say: *that was a heavy one, wonder how many more we need, I'll get the next one, you rest, thanks.*

When it was finished and quiet again, a collective sigh arose first, then a cacophony of hoots and hollers. Smiles all around. The family members peeked inside to imagine which would be their rooms. We moved on to eat together. Great food as always and plenty of back slapping. Someone announced our timing: three hours and fifteen minutes from start to finish. The crew chief, or *maestro*, let us know we had done well.

Let me tell you—the smiles and hugs from the appreciative families were so, so sweet. As we rested, the mother and father of the family came by for another thank you. They had washed up and dressed nicely since it was time to work their shift in a local *maquiladora*. That struck us all. They were going to work after already enduring such an exhausting day!

Working hand-to-hand and side-by-side with our new friends in Matamoros has forever deepened my appreciation of community. We were drawn together by a common need, a common goal, and the celebration that capped our accomplishment. Our group found it easier to share about our own lives now that we had that roof in common.

When I'm lucky enough to point out that roof to new folks that join us on a mission trip, I tell them, "I hope we can find a roof for you while you're here".

## **LESSONS LEARNED IN KERALA, INDIA**

**By Melinda Veatch**

In February of 2008, I was privileged to be part of a delegation that visited the North Kerala Diocese of the Church of South India (CSI). I have thought long and hard about what to say about my experiences.

I could tell you about the sights I saw: women with hammers breaking rocks into gravel along the high tea-plantation roads in Munnar province, elementary school children in uniforms singing their school song to us in Kalappad, breakfast with teenage boys studying at a technical school in Manjeri, or women grinding fresh spices from the forest the old-fashioned way at Bethania House along the coast.

I could tell you of the commitment of a doctor—now hospital director—in the remote area of Codacol to all people who need medical care, regardless of their ability to pay or their religious affiliation. And that commitment to care also demonstrated in the way he extended hospitality to us not only with a tour,



**Member of a CSI church plant among the poor in Munnar, India**

but with meals and a mid-morning tender coconut break.

I could tell you of the intelligence, deep faith, and humor in the Mother Superior at the CSI Convent in Telecherry—that she could raise so many girls with such deep love and discipline, while also playing a rowdy construction worker to a laugh-out-loud crowd in a spoof on the parable of the rich man who built a great storehouse and then died.

I could tell you of the great love of God that motivates mission workers in Marayoor in Munnar province whose calling is to build communities of care among the untouchable peoples of the mountains and cane fields and who walk 10 miles a day to bring medical care to the people of the villages and who not only seek to educate them on how they can move from poverty to better life, but walk with them as they do it.

These are just a few of the people whose faith and commitment to discipleship challenged and reshaped mine. Each of them affirmed the power of faith and the transformational nature of enduring discipleship. Their faith is never for themselves—it's not some secret belief they keep to themselves. Neither is it for proselytizing or coercing others to faith. Rather they practice their faith in a way that makes clear what they believe and to whom their lives belong in a way that draws others to them. They build community and unity by being daily, in on-the-ground ways, the genuine, loving disciples God is calling them to be through Jesus Christ.

As open-minded as I pride myself on being, I was convicted of operating out of a very narrow view of what life in India is all about. Had I not participated in this delegation, I would have continued with the allusion that I had enough “information” about life in that country. It was only in the exchange of relationship that I was made aware of my limited view and given the opportunity to broaden it. I am grateful that I experienced both things. My life is richer for it.

These images are etched into my brain, and I revisit them often—not because they are mental snapshots of a trip I took, but because they are windows to the people I met in those places and the way of life that has now challenged, reshaped, and affirmed mine as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

### THE TENACITY OF HOPE: ONE OF MY (KRIN) LESSONS LEARNED

Having spent a major part of my career in the American west, I have led over 20 successful mission trips to Mexico.

#### *This one would be different.*

I was visiting Nuevo Millenio in 2007, a dirt-poor neighborhood on the outskirts of Reynosa, Mexico. My purpose was to link the leader of **Puentes de Cristo**, a Presbyterian mission group, with Enrique Flores, the director of **Habitat para la Humanidad** (Habitat for Humanity) in the state of Tamaulipas, Mexico. Enrique helps families realize the humble dream of financing and building a 500 square foot cement block home.

When I arrived in the *colonia*, it was achingly familiar: rutted dirt streets, mangy dogs, ramshackle huts patched together with cardboard, corrugated tin, and

plywood. In the sharp summer sun, a dust devil swirled up to welcome our truck with a jolt of dirt and swirling trash.

We had another welcoming party, and that is when the scene changed dramatically. I met the informal co-op of homeowners working with Habitat to build homes and dignity. Nuevo Millenio was nearly in the countryside, beyond the scope of municipal services for water, electricity, and public schooling. That, however, would not stop a group of three older women. Led by Rosa Barron (pictured here), they rode the bus day after day to sit in the city offices of Reynosa municipality to plead for justice. Like the persistent widow in Jesus' parable, these women would not be rebuffed. Finally they succeeded in securing electricity. Water was forthcoming at the time of my visit.



But I had just begun to understand the sheer force of community spirit in this impoverished settlement. I next heard of their partnership with Habitat. As residents apply for the loans with which to build their new homes, they need to pledge a number of "sweat equity" hours from themselves, relatives, or neighbors. This presents no problem in Nuevo Millenio. Like Amish pouring out for a barn-raising, it is one for all and all for one. Neighbors gladly and willingly volunteer to help their neighbors with construction, knowing folks will lovingly return the favor. I would later work with them; the laughter, love, and unity as we poured concrete and lifted blocks was so powerful!

As word got out that a pastor was visiting the *colonia*, I got multiple requests to "bless homes" with prayer. Gladly! We began to walk from house to house, the group of neighbors growing around me. In one new dwelling after another—***so modest by American standards***—I prayed for peace, prosperity, and a certain knowledge of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. I prayed that these homeowners, having now tasted the dignity of owning a decent and solid home, would pledge themselves anew to helping others realize the same dream.

The final stop on our prayer circuit that hot afternoon was the home of the Avendanos. Let me describe this "house" in which a family of five was living. It was 10 by 15 with a dirt floor. The walls were weathered pieces of scrap plywood, pulled from the dump and patched together. No windows, only oily sheets hanging over openings. The door was a greasy blanket hung from a rod. The cooking area and a pit latrine were outside in the open air.

The Avendanos had specifically asked that I bless their newborn baby, less than 72 hours old. They had not yet even named her. I sat on a broken down couch outside their hovel as they handed me their beautiful daughter. She looked up at me with dark eyes as I laid a hand on her forehead and prayed for God's blessings upon her and her family all the days of her life.

As I handed her back, my interpreter relayed the Avendano's odyssey to me.



They had moved to the border from the interior of Mexico, hoping to change the poverty of their lives. With its many *maquiladoras*, Reynosa offers the lure of employment, and now both husband and wife worked shifts in these factories, staggered so that they could alternately care for the children. They told me they had applied for a Habitat loan so that they, too, could realize the dream of a small cement block home. They stood in front of their shack, all of five of them holding hands and smiling, and I was struck so deeply by the tenacity of their hope.

Three months later I returned. They had their home, still without windows, but a far-cry better than anything that had known in the past. They brought their daughter, Perla, to me, and said, "Agui is su ahijada, padrino." Here is your goddaughter, godfather."

### ***What can I say?***

I have heard and seen countless other examples of these life-changing testimonies. They are living parables illustrating Paul's words that we are "one body" across this planet, integral to each other's growth and capability. Truly, we have so much to learn from brothers and sisters at the table of our faith!

Extend your table. You can't truly live without it.

## CONCLUSION

Here is my message. It is simple to learn but takes a lifetime to practice: find your Calcutta, extend your table. If you do, I guarantee you will experience more of the abundant life promised to us as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Let me leave you with a story that many of us involved in Christ-centered mission use to keep us from feeling overwhelmed. Most of you know it—the story of the starfish—adapted from Loren Eiseley's book, *The Star Thrower*.



*Once upon a time, there was a wise man who used to go to the ocean to do his writing. He had the habit of walking along the beach before he began his work. One day he was walking along the shore; as he looked down the beach, he saw a human figure moving like a dancer. He smiled to himself to think of someone who would dance to the day, so he began to walk faster to catch up. As he got closer, he saw that it was a young man and the young man wasn't dancing, but instead, he was reaching down to the shore, picking up something and very gently throwing it into the ocean.*

*As he got closer he called out, "Good morning! What are you doing?" The young man paused, looked up and replied, "Throwing Starfish into the ocean."*

*"I guess I should have asked; why are you throwing Starfish into the ocean?"*

*"The sun is up and the tide is going out and if I don't throw them in they'll die."*

*"But young man, don't you realize that there are miles and miles of beach and Starfish all along it, you can't possibly make a difference!"*

*The young man listened politely, then bent down, picked up another Starfish and threw it into the sea, past the breaking waves. "It made a difference for that one."*

*His response surprised the man, he was upset, he didn't know how to reply, so instead he turned away and walked back to the cottage to begin his writings*

*All day long as he wrote, the image of that young man haunted him; he tried to ignore it, but the vision persisted. Finally, late in the afternoon, he realized that he the scientist, he the poet, had missed the essential nature of the young man's actions. Because he realized that what the young man was doing was choosing not to be an observer in the universe and watch it pass by, but was choosing to be an actor in the universe and make a difference. He was embarrassed.*

*That night he went to bed, troubled. When morning came, he awoke knowing that he had to do something; so he got up, put on his clothes, went to the beach and found the young man; and with him spent the rest of the morning throwing Starfish into the ocean.*

*You see, what the young man's actions represent is something that is special in each and every one of us. We have all been gifted with the ability to make a difference. And if we can, like the young man, become aware of that gift, we gain through the strength of our vision the power to shape the future.*

*And that is your challenge, and that is my challenge. We must find our Starfish, and if*

*we throw our stars wisely and well, I have no question that the 21st century is going to be a wonderful place.*