

Do No Harm

- A Contemporary Reflection on Missiology

29 December 2006

Here's the bottom line: These days most local churches have decided that mission is too important to be left to their denomination. Now, most churches keep the money that used to finance denominational mission efforts and send it directly to their mission partners, or they go and do mission themselves.

That means that your mission committees have become, in effect, Boards of Local, National and World Mission.

What does this mean on the ground? Maribel, my wife, and I are PC(USA) missionaries. That means we work for you. Our salary is paid by our denomination. If you don't send mission money to the PC(USA), **we've** got a problem! I've been a PC(USA) missionary for 29 years. Our current term ended in October, 2006. Cedepca, the PC(USA) mission partner we work for, requested that we be reappointed for a new 5-year assignment. In August we heard from Louisville that we would only be reappointed for 20 months. The reason? Money.

And not just us: mission co-workers have been told that our denomination can't in good faith guarantee our positions beyond June, 2008. This despite the fact that last year Presbyterians here in the U.S. gave more money to mission than ever before in history, more than 2 billion dollars; but not necessarily to the PC(USA) or, when they do, they designate their funds to their favorite projects instead of to supporting the general mission of the church.

So how we do and fund mission as Presbyterians has got my undivided attention. This morning, now that you have your very own Board of Local, National and Global Mission, my job is to share with you a few things I've learned in 29 years of mission service.

Most importantly, I've learned that mission, done in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, should do no harm. In the course of human history, untold millions have been brutalized and murdered in the name of religion. So "Do no harm" is a good place to start!

Every day 10 direct flights arrive in Guatemala City from the United States. Many of those flights bear at least one mission team from US churches. You'll recognize them by their brightly colored, uniform T-shirts and energetic grins. These are good people that sincerely want to do good. Most of these good folks bring along invisible baggage they don't even know they have. That invisible baggage is filled with power. It includes a credit card, health insurance, skills that are currently deemed marketable by the global economy, a retirement plan, and a pretty good idea where their next meal is coming from.

Let's say, for the sake of argument, that they are going to build an orphanage in a Mayan town like Santiago Atitlán. There, they will be surrounded by people whose cultural heritage is 10,000 years old. These people know things about corn and kindness and herbal remedies that our grandmothers may have known, but that most of **us** have long forgotten.

Over 500 years Mayans have learned to tell outsiders what they want to hear. You want to build an orphanage? *Adelante*. But the Mayans will wonder why so many Guatemalan babies are now available for adoption. It didn't used to be that way. Not even in the worst years of the war. And they will wonder who benefits from the \$25,000 or more paid to Guatemalan lawyers for the paperwork.

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You want horror stories. I'll settle for three. Newspapers recently carried the story of a US minister who was retiring to work with a Mayan community in Guatemala. He is uniquely skilled, the story says, to work toward such noble ends as reconciliation and empowerment. But first, he will spend 3 months learning Spanish.

I know this community. A good friend, a PC(USA) missionary, before he died spent more than a decade working to earn the right to be trusted by this community and working to learn their language. Their language is not Spanish. Spanish is the language of commerce, of their oppressor, but not the language of their hearts.

Language is the house in which we live. The more languages one speaks, the more spaces one has in which to exercise hospitality, in which to create meaning in common with others.

Bottom line? 3 months of Spanish doesn't cut it.

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Horror story number 2: US medical teams are driven from the airport directly to the hotel. They unpack and go directly to the hospital. They spend their 5 days shuttling between hospital and hotel and get in a round of golf before they return home. They are skilled and dedicated specialists; they do good work and we are grateful. But they never arrived in Guatemala.

This particular group found that they were running out of patients. So their leaders began to use their personal networks to find more people in need. They found friends in the Guatemalan Army. Medical teams could be flown by helicopter to a regional army base where they could treat people in need.

What's wrong with this picture?

Guatemala's army has yet to be held accountable for its role in the genocide committed against the Maya in 36 years of civil war. Today, important sectors of the officer corps are deeply involved in drug trafficking and operating renegade paramilitary forces. And why does the Guatemalan Army, in peace time, have resources to spend on transporting gringo doctors when the local government health clinic is unstocked and understaffed?

This particular medical mission was filmed and photographed by Army PR officers; they were given a half-page in the government's monthly newspaper supplement.

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Horror story number 3? It's about the big suburban church that began to work with a rural Mayan presbytery in Guatemala, a building was built, scholarships were sent, transparency was a problem, some people on both sides ended up being hurt. But the church decided that they needed to keep sending money because people in the pews were now excited about their mission in rural Guatemala.

The pastor decided the Guatemalans needed to be trained in Presbyterian polity. She invested significant resources in preparing lessons based on the Book of Order of the PC(USA). Her intuition was correct: the book of order of the Guatemalan Presbyterian Church doesn't have much to do with life on the ground in a rural Mayan presbytery. She sent the lessons to a young adult volunteer working in the community, a fine, enthusiastic person, but with limited language skills, and no theological training, just getting to know the culture. Out of respect, people came to the classes. But nothing changed. And the money keeps coming. The pastor feels frustrated, the young adult volunteer feels frustrated, local folks feel bemused. Life goes on.

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Horror stories? Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, the Yucatán Peninsula, Honduras and so many other countries are littered with buildings built by mission groups, buildings that now stand empty or have been hijacked by individuals for their personal benefit.

Mission groups have become a growth industry in Guatemala. And why not? If Boards of Local, National and International Mission want to give God's money away, why not stand in line?

Do no harm.

Whose mission is this we're talking about? Not the mission of your local church. Not the mission of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Not even the mission of the Christian church. It is the mission of God.

Let's run that by one more time.

It is the mission of God.

So where do we go from here. Do I propose paralysis? No, a pause perhaps, to evaluate, to reconsider, but paralysis is not an option in today's world.

As Presbyterians we do mission in partnership. Let's unpack that concept. For a long time mission groups have preferred to translate "partnership" using the Spanish word *compañerismo*, that is "companionship." But "partnership" is a word from the world of business. *Compañerismo* doesn't quite fit the bill. "Companionship" is about warm fuzzies. Lord knows in our brutal world we desperately need warm fuzzies, but in mission relationships, starting with warm fuzzies often leads to benign paternalism and dependency. Dependency always trumps dignity.

"We are partners – *Somos socios*" is not the same as "we are companions – *Somos compañeros.*" You might have lots of companions with whom you would never form a partnership. I suspect you wouldn't form a partnership with someone who has nothing to bring to the table.

What do Guatemalans bring to the table? Under the right circumstances, if the space is cultivated with care, they can bring their way of being in this world; their sense of family; the immediacy of history; the immediacy of the Spirit of God in our midst.

What can Guatemalans bring to the table?

How clearly I remember an early experience of Guatemalan hospitality. This must have been in 1979 or 1980. I don't remember now why I needed to be at this particular place at this particular time, but it was morning, chilly in the shade. I was in an immaculately swept dirt courtyard between the sleeping hut and the cooking hut, waiting for the man of the house to arrive from his cornfield. I sat and observed quietly, enriched and humbled by the harsh beauty of a daily existence very different from mine. In a little while, the woman of the house brought me a boiled egg. There weren't many chickens around, but a few. It was clear to me that at this particular time in this particular place, this egg was the very best she had, given gladly and freely. It was a Eucharistic moment; I received the boiled egg with thanks

What Guatemalans can bring to the table is the Gospel: "The Son of Humankind came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

What Guatemalans can bring to the table is the presence of God. The palpable presence of God.

I have listened to your stories and to the stories of many groups that have traveled to Guatemala. I celebrate with you how your experiences in Guatemala and other parts of the world have been experiences of conversion and transformation.

Sometimes we earn the right to give as well as to receive. There is the story of a group of churches here in the U.S. that formed a partnership with a Presbytery in Guatemala; a part of Guatemala famous as our Wild West, with pistol-packing cowboys and deeply ingrained racism against Mayans. This has not been a partnership based on gringos building things or giving money.

Over time, as relationships developed, the gringos expressed the desire to have a series of retreats on Mayan spirituality; this was a part of Guatemala they did not know and that piqued their curiosity. For most of the Guatemalans, Mayan spirituality was no more than pagan witchcraft. But these Guatemalan church leaders understood that they had never sat down and talked to a Mayan Christian about their way of being in this world. Together the groups asked a Mayan Presbyterian pastor deeply rooted in the spiritual traditions of his own people to lead this time of sharing.

These retreats, I understand, have been a gift, a grace-filled space that has given birth to tolerance and understanding in those who have participated. It wouldn't have happened without the gringos taking the time to build trust; it wouldn't have happened without a group of Guatemalans who were willing to take a risk and challenge cultural barriers that have been in place for hundreds of years.

Then there's the story of the U.S. Presbytery delegation that came to meet with the leadership of a Mayan Presbytery in Guatemala. Most of the U.S. delegation were women and several of the women were pastors. The men who run the Guatemalan

church are still struggling with the issue of the ordination of women. Present in the room were the Executive Committee of the Guatemalan presbytery and the leaders of local Presbyterian women. The executive committee, all men, introduced themselves, they did not introduce the Guatemalan women. The U.S. delegation introduced themselves. Then the woman leading the U.S. delegation asked, "Can you please introduce us to our sisters."

I am not saying that career missionaries working for the PC(USA) always get it right. Far from it. I am saying that we are better equipped than "Lone Rangers" to learn from our mistakes because we are accountable to both the PC(USA) and our local mission partners.

Here's the problem with "Do no harm." Human relationships are always complicated. Add into the mix the issues of power and culture and money and gender and there will be harm. Both ways. Always. But there can also be the deep and transforming joy of reaching out to the other. Both ways. Always. Unless we reach out to the other, to those who are different, to those whose understanding of how and where God is present in this world differs from our own, we cannot be whole.

Bottom line: What's broke in our part of the world you can't fix. It's been broken for at least 500 years. Little by little Guatemalans, empowered by the Spirit of God, are making it better. Sometimes we gringos are invited to accompany them on that journey.

That brings us to the last question this morning: The mission is God's. But who is mission for?

Bottom line? Your mission to Guatemala is Guatemala's gift to you. Yes, your resources are important. Yes, your technical skills are needed. But your mission is Guatemala's gift to you.

Can you receive this gift?

The bottom line is how this gift has affected your ability to discern how and where God is present here at home? This is where you live. This is where God calls you to live out your faith every day.

As you approach the mission of God are you prepared to look into the mirror and embrace your own emptiness? Your own brokenness? Your own utter dependence on the mercy of God?

If so, come join us. The Spirit of God blows where she will. What does the Spirit require of us? To do justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly with God.

So, now that you have your very own Board of Local, National and Global Mission, these are some things that you need to keep in mind.

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