

# BIBLE STUDY

from the Witness Season Web site

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Motivation for Mission, the Witness Season reflection for January, February, and March, is excerpted from a study written by Starr Luteri.

## **MOTIVATION FOR MISSION**

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Cor. 5:17)

## **WHERE, WHY, AND TO WHOM?**

If mission outreach is defined as service outside the church, what exactly does that mean? Where do we find ourselves beyond the boundaries of the Christian community? The question hinges on our definition of Christian community. Who is Christian? Who is not Christian? Moreover, how can we know?

Confusion about the purpose of mission results when one group of Christians tries to convert other Christians to a certain doctrine rather than seeking to serve where service is needed and wanted. For example, some recent evangelistic literature has described South America as less than 5% Christian because the people formulating the statistics do not regard Roman Catholics as Christian. Similarly, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the opening of Eastern Europe to Western missions, many Russian and Eastern Orthodox Christians have been shocked to find that they are identified as unbelievers by some groups of conservative American Christians.

As long as certain Christians insist that their way is the only way or that their interpretation of Scripture is the only possible interpretation, the Christian witness to the rest of the world will be fragmented and impaired. Our awareness of our own failings as Christians and the brokenness of the church may help us to be tolerant and forgiving of the imperfections of others. We might also become more cognizant of the real value of community, knowing how difficult it is to achieve.

Efforts that confuse the gospel of salvation with a particular denomination or a single Christian tradition do great harm to real mission outreach because they take the emphasis off our common faith in God and focus on our differing doctrines, histories, or styles of worship. The resulting conflict among various Christian groups and faith communities seriously handicaps our witness to persons who actually have no knowledge of God's grace through Jesus Christ.

Every major religion, whether Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, or Taoism, engenders the betterment and growth of people, teaches love and respect for others, and encourages faithful persons to share and relieve suffering wherever possible. Giving oneself in loving service to the Spirit, to other people, and to the world may be the common thread woven through every religion. Even though our hope is to share our own faith through mission efforts, we must still address other faiths with respect and be ready to learn from their distinct understandings of truth.

Perhaps it would be more useful to define mission as service outside our own faith community—that is, beyond the local congregation and neighboring churches—and outside our own denomination and tradition. Mission could also be defined as service directed toward helping others rather than toward building up ourselves.

Where do we find ourselves beyond the boundaries of the Christian community?

With this outlook, more opportunities for mission probably will become apparent closer to home. We are bound to encounter people outside our own faith tradition at our work, at school, among our neighbors, and in the community where we do our banking, shopping, and all the other activities of modern life. If we think of mission as not just evangelism but as service, we are apt to recognize opportunities in surprising places.

## WHAT HOLDS US BACK?

We are sometimes tempted to relegate mission to professional mission workers, although the gospel challenges each of us to look beyond ourselves and to serve others. Certainly, professional mission workers have special training for assignments far away from our comfortable, everyday world. Yet the gospel challenges each of us to look beyond ourselves. In this sense, it is true that all Christians are called to mission. We are all part of God's new creation, and every one of us is called to demonstrate that new life in everything we do. This is the reason we do mission.

What motivates us to think about mission in ways that limit it to the activities of the professional mission workers? If we know that we are a new creation, as we regularly confess in worship, and if we sincerely want to express this reality in all that we do, then why do so many of us need to be pushed out the door to do mission? Why the discrepancy? What's really going on here?

The motto of the Reformed church of the sixteenth century was "The church reformed and always just about to be reformed." This implied a continuous process of change. Over the centuries, change usually has been slow and gradual; however, there have been times, particularly during the Reformation period of the sixteenth century, when change was startlingly swift.

There is much talk of change in our society today, particularly around the discomfort many people experience over the rapid pace of change. The church is sometimes perceived as an anchor, a still point in the midst of confusion, a connection with what seems to have been a more dependable past, "as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen"!

If we are serious about being part of the Reformed tradition, we must be open to change. The very essence of our Reformed tradition is the faith that the Holy Spirit continues to act in and through the church, leading us into new understanding, enlightening us with new aspects of revelation, directing us into fuller and more perfect imitation of Christ.

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### **FAST AND EFFECTIVE . . . BUT NOT FINAL**

One way to support mission is to write a check, and there is no question that financial support of missions is crucial. Writing a check is nonthreatening; it gives the satisfaction of having done something to support mission without interrupting one's business and family activities or direct confrontation with the demands of other people's problems. The ability to provide financial support is, in itself, a gift of God, and many (perhaps most) mission outreach programs could not continue without the faithful support of Christians who never will be able to become active in mission in any other way.

But in the Reformed tradition we also believe that personal involvement in mission is crucial. The process of giving ourselves in service to others transforms us in countless ways, causing us to conform to the image of Christ who gave of himself entirely in service (Rom. 8:29). A delicate line exists here between sincere willingness to serve the Lord and others with financial support as the only realistic means of involvement and the rationalization that giving money somehow excuses oneself from hands-on service. As in the question of personal salvation, only the individual, through painfully honest prayer and soul-searching, can really determine the difference.

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## GETTING INTO THE ACTION

There is only one way to become actively involved in mission outreach: just do it. If we wait until we understand all the problems and issues involved in mission outreach before beginning the task, we will never begin. If we decide that we must work through all our theological and philosophical differences before we can work with mission partners from other denominations or other cultures, we will never achieve our vision. Once that step into direct activity is made, many of the fears and hesitations will be

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dispelled. And although the only way to become involved is to just do it, involvement can take many forms.

The numerous possibilities for mission service in North America and abroad require many different types of persons with skills and interests in a variety of areas. Clerical workers, mechanics, financial managers, equipment engineers, computer programmers, and maintenance specialists are needed as well as persons with knowledge of several languages, teachers, social workers, and medical professionals. Actually, it is difficult to think of any technical or personal skill that is not needed somewhere in the outreach ministry of the church.

While many different types of persons with different skills are needed, it is also true that the church cannot accept every individual as a professional mission co-worker. Individuals with unrealistic idealism, persons with questionable motives, or those without sensitivity to ethnic and cultural differences of different people may not be suited to cross-cultural outreach ministries. Personal qualities that are important in successful mission work are as follows:

- Christian experience must be central to the life of the outreach worker. A mission volunteer needs authentic faith that is expressed through a biblical understanding of both history and present events.
- Active membership in a local church or worshiping community is essential. Familiarity with the church as the body of Christ and a good knowledge of the Reformed tradition will enable the worker to witness in whatever work is taken up. In addition to active membership, volunteers for outreach need the ability to form healthy and supportive relationships with coworkers as well as with persons in authority. Few mission workers operate alone, so the ability to work and live effectively with others is very important.
- Today's mission workers need to be open to the various expressions of the Christian faith that are practiced both in North America and overseas. Efforts to impose one particular style of Christianity on others only confuse and damage outreach ministries. Christians also need to respect the traditions and practices of other faiths and to understand how to interact with persons of other religions with courtesy and grace.

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There is an old joke about a cynical Christian who declared, "Of course I love humanity! It's just people I can't stand!" It truly is often easier to love people in theory than to love them in reality, with all their human faults and diversity. When considering direct involvement in outreach, one must be careful not to assume that one will be able to serve persons from exotic cultures across the globe while despising the neighbors of a different faith next door. It would be senseless to decide to love and serve the Buddhists of Tibet or the Shintoists of Japan while harboring a grudge against the Latter-day Saints who worship two blocks away.

Mission workers need to be adaptable to different styles of living, whether their work takes them away from home or not and whether or not they expect to travel to other countries. Contact with other persons inevitably includes exposure to different customs and lifestyles, including distinct foods, housing, and educational standards. Something as simple as lack of heating or air conditioning in a workplace may not be tolerable to some individuals. Christians need to be honest about their own ability to adjust to such changes and to choose their area of ministry accordingly.

One of the best ways of discovering how to become most effectively involved in active outreach is to participate in short-term mission projects either at home or abroad. Such programs may involve a weekend helping to repair a church in an inner-city neighborhood or winterizing a home in a rural district, or they might consist of two weeks visiting and delivering relief supplies to communities in Central America. These short-term experiences require a minimum commitment of time and money, but they can have a deep impact on the life of individuals and congregations. Such programs are among the best ways that we can help young people to grow in the Christian faith and to encourage their future involvement in outreach ministries.

### **TIME TO TAKE ACTION**

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When an earthquake or flood strikes an urban area, that is not the time for the city council to begin debating the relative effectiveness of volunteer emergency services versus paid professional paramedic intervention. When the need is urgent, everyone must do whatever is necessary to meet the emergency. Later there may be time to consider the political or philosophical significance of the event and response. Or maybe not. The important thing is to get the job done.

The need to proceed with outreach mission service is that sort of situation. It is certainly interesting to talk about the differences in polity and theology between various churches and denominations, but the job of caring for the real needs of real people must be our priority. Our understanding of theologies can be shaped by the reality of our shared work instead of by the tragedy of our divisions.

### **ALL THINGS BECOME NEW**

In summing up our response to the question, "Why do we go?" it becomes clear that the answer is twofold: We go into outreach mission so that the love and concern of God for other persons will be realized through our actions; and we go because we are in the process of becoming new creations in Jesus Christ, and one of the most effective ways to grow in Christ is through service to others. We go for the benefit of others and for our own benefit.

The element of self-interest here is not inappropriate. It is impossible to serve others without receiving blessings oneself. No one can aid others without growing spiritually, both individually and as a congregation. If we are called to love others as we love ourselves (Mark 12:31), obviously we must first love ourselves. The irony is that we cannot make much progress in improving ourselves as Christians as long as that is our goal. In God's wonderful reversal of worldly logic, we improve ourselves only as we forget ourselves and set our minds on serving others. In that process, then, we will see God's hand at work and realize that we have become channels of grace, healing, and wholeness through our service.

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