

MISSIONARIES

“Tom, I hope these on again/off again sessions aren’t causing a problem with our project,” said Travis.

“No, not really,” replied Tom. “I will admit I’ve never written on this kind of schedule before. Sometimes, it can be a challenge to keep the continuity, but I like challenges. In a way, it kind of fits into a project like ‘Rogue Shepherd’. Besides, with the documentation you’ve been giving me on your missions, the writing hasn’t stopped flowing.”

“Well, Bill Adams feels like everybody needs a break, so he’s not taking anything on for a week. Maybe we can get a little more done the next few days.”

“Okay, so what’s on your schedule this week, Travis?”

“Today, I’m wearing the missionary-at-large hat. I usually like to first touch base with all the churches in the network. I like to see what they’re doing to see if there are specific directions we should be considering, or if there are any trends

we should look at. Then, I will go out into the community and look for opportunities.”

“How do you know where to start when you go out into the community?”

“If anything is revealed by the network churches, I will start with that. Otherwise, I think you have to look at what motivates people to turn or return to God. While there is always the goal to get people to come to one of our network churches, it’s more important to get people to come to God, whether they do that through another denomination or not. When I look at all the possible motivating factors, I also look at the mechanisms within our network to make sure we have possible solutions. If we don’t have what someone needs, I’m not in the least bit hesitant to suggest a church of a different flavor, as long as it stands on the same foundation of Jesus Christ.”

“How does faith fit into that picture?” asked Tom.

“Obviously, faith is a key element. It bridges the gap of two thousand years since the Lord physically walked this earth. The author and nurturer of faith is, of course, the Holy Spirit. It has been my experience that many people, unless

affected by something traumatic, have to be led down a paved path to the gate of faith that the Holy Spirit will open. A paved road won't build itself – that's why God has given it to us to construct.”

“But didn't Jesus say, ‘For the gate is narrow that leads to life, and those who find it are few’?”

“Ah, seemingly a contradiction to building a paved road, isn't it? The full verse in Matthew says, ‘Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.’ Jesus was warning the crowds of the reality of the world around them. I don't believe there is a contradiction because we are talking about building a paved road to the gate of faith where the Holy Spirit is in charge. That gate is narrow and the way beyond that gate can be hard, but He will give you the strength to travel from that point on. Since Jesus died on the cross to save all sinners, somehow, I don't think He would be telling us not to bring as many people to the gate of the Holy Spirit as possible. A paved road facilitates a larger and more diverse flow of

traffic to that point. You build a paved road with an organized and focused plan of action.”

“Do you feel like you have such a plan with your network of churches?”

“Yes and no.”

“What do you mean?” asked Tom.

“First of all, we need to look at Jesus’ plan. There is no record of Him having a long range, organized plan to get people to follow him. He healed the sick and fed the poor, many times on the spur of the moment. Crowds gathered around him when he started speaking on mountain tops and by the sea. He taught with authority among the learned and in the synagogues. But when it came to him being arrested, tried, and hung on the cross, most of those huge crowds deserted him. Even His own disciples cowered in fear.”

“So, was Jesus’ plan a failure?”

“The first part of getting people to follow him was a huge success and certainly something to emulate. The second part seems like abject failure, but of course it wasn’t. His victory over Satan and death was the greatest accomplishment the world has ever known. The Church today needs to

figure out how to follow the lead of Jesus on the first part while knowing we don't have the power (most would say or the desire) to accomplish the second.”

“How does that apply to the original question of any plan of the network of churches?”

“The numbers (and I don't mean we should be focused on numbers) do give us some measurement as to how we are doing. I think our little network of churches is unique in its ability to meet the needs of a diverse community. We've talked about the unique settings and ministries we have in the network. With our mix of congregations, we can do a lot in feeding and ministering to those in need of one sort or another. Obviously, we can't speak with the same authority as Jesus did, but we do have His Word and spiritual leaders to guide us through His Word. Jesus also taught through parables and countless metaphors and illustrations of everyday life that the people could relate to. So, I think it is critical that we scholars of the Bible take words written thousands of years ago and illustrate their practical application to today's world.

As far as a plan of the network of churches, we've never had a long-range plan. It all started

with Epiphany as the mother church and just bloomed from there. We didn't think we would buy an old school or theater or restaurant or hotel and so on. They were opportunities that just arose, and we were fortunate to have the people and the means to act on them. Now, it begs the question 'why were we given those opportunities?'. I firmly believe it was through the guiding hand of the Holy Spirit. I can't tell you how, but there are a lot of actions by the Holy Spirit that I can't explain."

"How do you feel about what you are doing as a missionary-at-large?" asked Tom. "Do you feel a sense of success as a missionary?"

"I have to smile a little at that, Tom. When we talk about missionary work, there is this conception of traveling overseas to some third world country and doing great work among those who have never heard about Christ. We hardly ever think about being a missionary in your own backyard. With this position, the activities of Rogue Shepherd Enterprises, and my extracurricular work, I am humbled by the lack of time I have to think about anything I may have personally been successful at. As a missionary-at-large, I have the opportunity to look at spreading the Gospel on a

broader scale as well as the individual spirit. I can outline the solutions to the opportunities and help my fellow pastors to stay focused. But anything I do pales in comparison to the opportunities that the people in the pews have.

In our little network of eight churches, we have about two thousand active members. They go out into the community every day at work, at ball games, at the mall, at school, at hospitals, and so on. If you count all the people they encounter daily, you're talking about thousands of opportunities to witness. Now, I know that not everybody has the ability to be a great verbal communicator of the Gospel. We have to go with the talents that God has given each one of us. But with two thousand people you have eight thousand eyes and ears. We in the church should make sure we are in a position to be there with the Good News when our eyes and ears tell us to be.”

“What are some practical examples of ‘being there’, Travis?”

“That’s a good question. If your neighbor is going through some tough times, pull out our list of programs in the network. We have food pantries, clothing closets, soup kitchens, financial assistance, temporary housing, medical counseling,

educational assistance, home help, and more. Tell them about it. If your neighbor is temporarily disabled, someone will mow their yard, take them to the doctor, do grocery shopping, and so on. We have all kinds of groups that send out cards. If someone at work has a child having trouble at school, tell them about the programs we have at the old school congregation. Know someone who could use some daily encouragement, we have daily email devotionals and inspiration that we can send to them. I've told you about our youth program and its ability to help with the costs of continuing education. Invite someone to come to one of our concerts or theatrical productions at the theater congregation. If you know someone that you think needs a push down the path to the Holy Spirit but, for whatever reason, you don't feel you can say the right words, just give us their name. We have an organized outreach program that includes targeted mailings, and you can do it anonymously. If there is something that we can't help with directly, we have a huge database of reputable third parties that we can refer to. You get the idea ... Here is that list of programs in the network that I was talking about."

“So, Pastor,” said Tom. “Now that I am one of those two thousand members, I don’t have the slightest chance of coming up with an excuse as to why I can’t be a missionary. Even if I was hesitant about witnessing verbally, I’ve got eyes and ears to see and hear, and the churches have the means to respond.”

“That would be a reasonable conclusion.”

Smiling, Tom said, “I was afraid of that.”

“Tom, I’m going to be doing a little informal session of questions and answers in a couple of weeks at a restaurant near the university campus. I think you might find it interesting. The college crowd can come up with some fascinating questions sometimes.”

“Will there be other missionaries there?”

“I’m not always sure who will show up, but there could be others such as yourself that might consider themselves missionaries.”

“Is that subtle pressure, Travis?”

“No ... no ... no ... but I am sure there will be plenty of free pizza.”

“Hmm ... Restaurant near campus, college crowd, free pizza ... That wouldn't be the world-famous Corky's Pizza, would it?”

“Oh, have you heard of the place?”

“Yes ... I've heard of it. I will see you there in a couple of weeks along with other ... pizza missionaries.”