

Missionaries 'R' Us

by Rev. Glenn Inglis

Early in his gospel, Matthew summarizes Jesus' ministry as teaching, proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom, and curing every disease (Matthew 4:23). In today's Gospel lesson, we find Jesus in the midst of his Galilean ministry. He is busy teaching, preaching, and healing in all the villages and towns he enters. The crowds continue to grow. Jesus has compassion for them, because they are harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

The lot of the Galilean peasants was not an easy one. They were harassed by the Roman occupation, sometimes carrying heavy loads at the whim of a Roman soldier and paying taxes when money was scarce. Nor did they gain solace or comfort from their religion, which added the burden of law without the comfort of grace. Jesus' compassion overflowed as he experienced human limitations and witnessed our struggle: there is so much suffering, so many afflictions, and so much hopelessness in this world! How can we possibly meet the need?

In the quiet of our worship service, we have a unique vantage point, to step back and give some thought to the world around us.

- People are harassed: in our modern society we often never measure up. We never seem to make enough money; have quite the right clothes—or figures to wear them; or the time to enjoy the simple pleasures of life. Some person, thing, ideology, or conspiracy seems to take away our peace and sense of autonomy.

In many countries people are harassed because of their gender, religion, or political affiliation. The poor are harassed by the experience of their acute poverty.

- People live with afflictions: it affects every area of life. There may be physical or mental health issues, or trouble at work or in the family. The plagues of despair often wash over us robbing us of joy and peace.

And there are the real plagues of hunger, disease, violence, and oppression that afflict the majority of the world's peoples.

- People feel a sense of hopelessness: the word itself describes our feeling of inadequacy as we survey the unsettling reality of our world and all its peoples. How can one person, one church, one denomination make any real difference? This world seems to lurch from one disaster to another and numbers—some 7 billion people all searching for comfort and joy?

And where are the leaders? There are so many experts, so many opinions, but who exhibits true wisdom? We feel at times like sheep without a shepherd.

No wonder some Christians and some congregations begin to look inward, focusing on their own needs and problems. They ask, ‘What difference can we make anyway?’ (This doesn’t mean looking inward through prayer and spiritual exercises is bad—not at all. For many, as they develop their inner life, God opens the doors to deeper engagement with the world.)

While some focus on themselves, others give money to let someone else do the work of helping the vulnerable. Well, that can be a good thing; especially if we make sure the mission we support has integrity, promotes sustainability, and defends human rights. But it would seem Jesus’ sense of mission involves more than writing a cheque.

In the face of such deep physical and spiritual needs, in the face of so few committed to a world of justice and peace, Jesus asks disciples to pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers to the harvest. What might this mean?

A wise minister once reminded a group of missionaries preparing for their first mission assignment that they were not taking Christ to Africa or Asia or wherever they were going. Christ is already there—already moving in the lives of people. Mission partners come to bear witness to the Lord of the Harvest whose compassionate ministry always precedes them.

In Malawi, for example, many communities have difficulty coping with the increased number of orphans resulting from the HIV and AIDS pandemic. The solution is to empower the communities to minister to their own vulnerable children. Agencies like Presbyterian World Service and Development (PWS&D) supply training, rental space, and food resources, but community volunteers take ownership to give their orphans a safe and nurturing environment to experience love in community.

Again, we despair over the abject poverty so many experiences day-by-day. Can a Canadian even imagine what it would mean to live on \$300 per year? In Malawi, a new program has been introduced by the Presbyterian Church to create ‘self-help groups.’ These groups consist of around 15 people who develop a special bond of trust and accountability. No money is given— even the poorest person must contribute a few cents a week. After a few weeks of training in bookkeeping and creating business plans, very modest loans are given out. People buy beans or tomatoes or used clothing to sell in the markets. The loans are repayable in six weeks and the profits go to school fees or medical bills. In a year, a group of very poor people can create a working capital of several hundred dollars. There is a new sense of empowerment—and joy in community.

Jesus did not undertake a solo ministry. He brought together disciples and followers made up, often enough, of those very people who at one time were harassed, hopeless, and lost. We also learn that Jesus sent these people out in pairs—again for mutual support and accountability.

Whether we engage in mission at the local or global level, partnership, community, and accountability are vital.

In so-called developed economies, whether we like it or not, we measure everything, and often everyone, in terms of money. We are, by Biblical standards, idolatrous people. Even when we try to look at the world through our Lord’s eyes, we invariably ask, ‘How much money will it take to do such and such?’ And there is never enough money.

Jesus didn’t tell the disciples to pray to the Lord of the harvest to send money, but to send people! It doesn’t negate the need for money to enable mission to happen—we are not naïve in this regard. But the point needs to be made that Jesus’ primary interest is in gathering communities in loving partnership to not only share the gospel, but to live the good news.

This kind of mission can happen anywhere, anytime, when Christ is honoured and the Spirit moves within God’s people.

(NOTE: An outreach story from your community, an experience from someone in your congregation, or a congregational project can be highlighted here. Share with your congregation how your WMS

group is moving beyond the cheque and living the good news in loving partnership.)

Jesus' model was to teach, preach, and heal. It was a model of the mission enterprise over the past 150 years. Education is vital; the Gospel must be preached; hospitals and health care must be there for those in pain.

The world is more complicated today. While the world's wealth may be controlled in the global North, the growth of the Church is in the global South. We in the North need to remember what Jesus taught about gaining the world and losing our souls. Part of re-discovering our souls—our passions—is to regain that love for God, for creation and for the everyday folks that Jesus exemplified.

The challenges are enormous:

- Climate Change
- World hunger
- Ethnic conflict
- God's Creation is under threat
- Technology can both cure and kill
- Religions being co-opted for devious political gain

Jesus gives us eyes so that we can truly see both the cause of our harassment and hopelessness, as well as the Light that shines, which the darkness can never overcome.

The challenge of mission is only partially in knowing what to do. The real requirement is how to do it—with love, with prayer, and ever expanding the community that lives to shine its own light of shalom—health, peace, and joy—through our faith in Jesus Christ.

The worship resources for Mission Awareness Sunday have been written by the Rev. Glenn Inglis and Mrs. Linda Inglis. The couple have served as PCC Mission Partners in Malawi and Lesotho over a period of 18 years where their work included pastoral ministry, chaplaincy, human rights education, care for the disabled and running the Blantyre Synod Health & Development Commission. In addition, they have served Congregations in Nanaimo, Langley and Kerrisdale (Vancouver) BC. Both Linda and Glenn grew up on farms in the Southern Georgian Bay area. Linda's home church is St. Paul's, Thornbury; Glenn's was St. Andrew's, Maple Valley (now closed) in a joint charge with Creemore. They have three grown children: Jocelyn with husband Ryan and baby Niall in China; Luke, married to Carly in Toronto; and Naomi in Vancouver. It is a period of transition from a very busy posting in Malawi to the quiet life on the Coast. They await the Lord's leading in the type of ministry that lies ahead.