

An Ordinary Family in Mission

The most ordinary thing in the world is an ordinary man and an ordinary woman and their ordinary children. G.K. Chesterton captured, in this simplest yet most profound of phrases, the idea that the basic family unit created by God is vital to mission in the world.

In this day of short-term missions and whizzing vision trips, the emphasis is usually on individual contribution to kingdom work. In no way is the article meant to demean the great contributions made by religious orders of single people or the dynamics of the short-term paradigm, for surely the command to go and disciple the nations is not restricted to certain social units. However, let's take a look at the family unit in mission. These ideas were conceived as my husband and I grappled with a tentative theology of the family in mission during a course we taught at Overseas Ministries Study Center in 2006. The missional dynamics suggested in the following paragraphs are just as applicable across our hometown streets as they are across geographic boundaries.

Families are the core of a community. Anyone with children knows the impact of babies and children within a cross-cultural community setting. As a new missionary wife in Ethiopia, I knew we were being included in our new community when a venerable old mama poked her head inside our jeep window and spat a blessing upon the cheek of my newborn. I also remember saying to my husband when our three sons had all left Ethiopia for college, "I think we lack some luster in the total community now that our boys have left home." Even in our own churches and communities, we respect and enjoy observing a model family. Almost two hundred years ago, Rufus Anderson (1796-1880), missionary and administrator of ABCFM, wrote that "The heathen should have an opportunity of seeing Christian families." Mrs. Elizabeth Dwight, missionary to Constantinople in the 1800s, is reported to have said, "The heathen want not only ministers of the word, but pious, well-educated families...to be the living, bright examples of the doctrines of Christianity" (Robert 2005, 328).

Missional Families in the Bible

Let's consider a few families in the biblical narrative. Adam and Eve were to live as a family and be fruitful, both physically and spiritually. Abraham and Sarah's family provides several pertinent lessons; obedience to God's call, for example, is a recurrent theme in their lives. Several times Abraham moved into mobility mode with his household. Such obedience had to be based on a good measure of faith. They were to live before God and the world in a transparent and blameless manner. We also see the theme of sacrifice in their lives, in their leaving the familiar and in the offering of Isaac. Throughout, they were to live hopefully, constantly expecting a miracle. God himself was responsible to provide a son for Abraham and Sarah in order that their family would bless the families of the earth.

In a sense, Noah and his family were a missionary family in witness through their obedience in separating themselves into the ark. In their withdrawal, they exhibited all the dynamics we mentioned in Abraham's life. Consider what it was like for those of surrounding nations to observe any Israelite family's solidarity and their practicing belief in one God.

Moving to the New Testament, we read Jesus' words in Acts 1:8 "... and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea

and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." This promise and command of Jesus applies to all, including the missionary family. The early church families took this saying of Jesus seriously.

Perhaps the story of Aquila and Priscilla is the best example of a couple in mission. We know nothing of children in their family, but we know they were an itinerant couple in ministry. They "explained the way of God more adequately" to Apollos in Acts 18:26. They had a fruitful ministry of teaching and mentoring in several cities and were highly commended by the Apostle Paul as fellow workers in the gospel.

Another NT mission-minded family in the New Testament is Philip's. Philip was chosen to be one of the deacons to serve food to the widows and also gifted as an evangelist having an effective ministry in Samaria (Acts 8:4-8). He was also used of God to share the good news of salvation with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40) through whom the gospel moved south. We know that Philip "had four unmarried daughters who prophesied". I wonder what the family dynamics were which produced these prophesying daughters? What kind of a woman was Mrs. Philip? Certainly here was a godly family committed to kingdom work.

"As for Me and My House"

There is a pattern in the New Testament of ministering house to house, as well as of households who gave themselves to church and missional activities. How many in our culture go visiting house to house these days? Acts 20:20 tells us of Paul's method of going from one household to another. When Lydia, the rich business woman of Acts 16, believed, it was her whole household which was involved - family, servants, business associates. Luke records, "When she and her household were baptized, she urged us saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.' And she prevailed upon us." Lydia's home became a foundational place in early Christian history. Samuel Escobar comments, "Lydia's life cannot be understood apart from the social structure of which she is a part...when she is touched by the gospel, social transformation occurs as all her relationships and resources are now placed at the service of Christian mission" (Escobar 2003, 144).

As families and households, we are to model the principles of I Tim. 3:4-7 which assume that church leaders are those who manage their families well. We must, of course, honor these principles as families in mission. Only as families in mission live according to God's precepts will they be productive and fruitful in a missionary sense. Today's world sadly has millions of young people who are suffering from alienation, all kinds of uprootedness, divisiveness, divorce, sickness and death from HIV AIDS, and other forms of brokenness. Our family homes should be havens and examples, where morals, truth and meaningful community are lived out in love.

Communion in the Trinity

God gave himself to the world through the Son, Jesus Christ, being born into a human family. His presence and power continues among us through the Spirit. The Catholic Catechism beautifully captures this Trinitarian view point in its definition of a family:

The Christian Family is a communion of persons, a sign and image of the communion of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. In the procreation and education of children it reflects the Father's work of creation. It is called to partake of the prayer and sacrifice of Christ. Daily prayer and the reading of the Word of God strengthen it in charity. The Christian family has an evangelizing and missionary task. (Cited in Seamonds 2004, 58)

As the Christian family is a reflection of the divine family in fellowship and communion, so the Christian family extends its meaning into the church which becomes family for all Christians. The Apostle Paul wrote, "For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name" (Eph. 3:14). There is a flowing of communion and mission in the sending of which Jesus spoke in John 17:18; and 20:21: "As the Father has sent me, so I also send you."

We are bound up in the eternal relationships of the Trinity's communion, in the ever-flowing love within which we have the high privilege of being sent ones and in a spirit of sacrifice which gives and submits for the other. The family in mission has this firm foundation but also must work out, with wisdom, guidance and comfort of the Holy Spirit, how this will be modeled and exhibited in each context and situation.

Community and Individualism

In the West, we are obsessed with ourselves as individuals, our individual rights and fancies, our individual worth and quest for importance and self-gratification. I spent nearly 40 years in a very community-oriented society in Africa and feel that I only began to scratch the surface of dealing with my own individualistic way of thinking. This selfish individualism and divisiveness is always lurking in a broken world. We must recognize and guard against the stresses of missionary life which intensify a spirit of self-gratification and individualism.

It is such a natural tendency to think individualistically. For example, in various dictionaries of mission biography, it is interesting to note what is not mentioned about the lives of so many well-known male missionaries. One would never know, in many instances, that there had ever been a wife or children. There is very little appropriate sense or recognition of the husband-wife team in ministry. This, of course, reflects a certain dominance throughout history. Even in our current writing, we fail to consider the value of a solid family unit in holistic mission enterprise and the fact that the family's life together could well be the most influential part of the total ministry.

Another example is how mission strategists identify groups of people on which to concentrate. First are the elders of village, then the women, then the children. Instead, we need to get families together: families witnessing to families. Do our missionary families comprehend the challenge they bear to live out their family life in effective witness? Although we may call some countries "closed," no country is ever closed to the holistic witness of a family simply and profoundly living incarnationally, provided they have the necessary credentials and documentation to be residents there.

A pastor in New Haven, Connecticut, whose intercultural church has both a Western and a Spanish congregation, points out that in the Spanish congregation, whole families join the church at one time, while in the Western congregation, it is by ones and twos. The family "instinct" in the entire Spanish congregation is consequently much greater than in the Western congregation where people join individually. Similarly, the presence of a nuclear family in most any situation provides a sense of home, drawing in those who live alone, strangers, visitors and the deserted. Several recent writers have been suggesting that Moslem background believers should wait for baptism until others of the family are also committed. There is a strength in the simple family unit.

Hospitality, the Greatest Gift

A family in mission must be given to hospitality. Someone has described hospitality as "an open door in and an open door out." Hospitality expresses all that you are as a family and all that you have to give, both inside and outside your home. Ethiopians, when speaking English, often say "Get in" (instead of "Come in") when we knock at their door. Perhaps they have copied our idiom for "getting into" a vehicle. To me, it's an apt way of expressing the concept of "an open door in." Conversely, "an open door out" means "get out" into the community, to your neighbors, to those different from you. Of course, there is always a balance between "get in" and "get out" and the best advice is "get it all together" before you do either. These decisions take the grace and wisdom of God on a daily basis. According to Glenn Miles,

Paradoxically, a family is enriched when it is decentered, relativized, recognized as less than an absolute.... The Christian family is therefore not a safe haven apart from the world, but a powerful witness into the world. Even vulnerable families need to learn the responsibility (but also the joy) of reaching out in hospitality rather than focusing on the fears associated with a 'bunker' mentality. (2003, 36)

In the book *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity*, Douglas John Hall suggests that there are four quests of the modern person longing for something that our society "regularly denies and its operative values frustrate" (1997, 57), namely, the quest for moral authenticity, the quest for meaningful community, the quest for transcendence and mystery, and the quest for meaning. Embedded in these quests lies a wonderful challenge for the Christian family in mission to minister hospitably both at home and cross-culturally. First, in the area of moral authenticity, the family models holy living and disciplines which are increasingly missing in our society today. Second, meaningful community begins within a singular family in a world that is shredded by individualism, alienation, uprootedness and brokenness.

Third, in a good marriage union there is exemplified a partial answer to that modern quest for transcendence and mystery. There is something greater, more solemn, more wonderful, than just what meets the eye. I remember as a girl marveling at what made my parents tick, realizing they must have had a secret sweet communion that was mysterious to me. And doesn't the Apostle Paul hint at this in Ephesians chapter 5? What better hint than a successful marriage to model transcendence and mystery, of communion, of fellowship with God, for a secular society to observe? A few years ago, I asked friends of ours, professors at a prominent Christian institution in Canada, if they thought my husband and I would have had any chance of being relevant to north American culture when we would come "home" to retire after years abroad. They promptly responded, "Just live together as a godly couple into old age and you'll have a great influence. That's all you have to do." I didn't forget that advice. Last, in a family, life's meaning may be lived out in the most elemental levels of community: care, common concerns, need for livelihood, celebration, creativity, production, worship, etc. What a wonderful calling for the family in mission to offer, by their lives and hospitality, answers to these four quests.

Family Dynamics

In order that the family in mission be successful, the inner dynamics of the family must be guarded and cultivated. A strong marriage is essential to the flourishing of the family. The relationship between husband and wife speaks volumes. The longer we lived in Ethiopia the more we realized that our students at various levels of theological training were reading our lives more intently than listening to what

we taught. If the two contradicted, it was undoubtedly the life message that wielded greatest impact.

Essential to the family's witness is the husband and wife's modeling in their marriage what is of ultimate meaning and importance. A mutual submission, an honoring of Christ above all, is necessary. The Christian home "is to be Christ-centered rather than self-centered, in dialogue with the context in which it finds itself," writes Dana Robert. She maintains that in some instances, which cause confusion and frustration, "Headship of Christ over the Christian family has been replaced by the headship of the husband over the wife" (Robert 2003, 337). This is a sensitive subject which cannot be fully developed within the scope of this article.

In our life as nuclear families, we must develop healthy disciplines of living. I often think of the pioneer missionary families, both Ethiopian and expatriate, working in the mountains of Ethiopia where the church has grown remarkably over the years. The "whole family show" was so important. This included all areas of life: how we drive and maintain a vehicle or a mule; house maintenance; responsibility for gardens and surroundings; personal habits such as sleep; rhythms of life that include rest, exercise, work, and play; personal spiritual exercises and devotional life; house organization; care and nurture of those who may work in our home; family rituals and celebration; financial accountability; and the balances between "in the door and out the door."

Images of Encouragement

I would like to suggest four biblical images which have blessed and challenged our family as we have lived and continue to live in mission.

1. All believers are ambassadors. My husband and I always enjoyed a visit to the Canadian "ambassador's residence" in Addis Ababa with the red carpet welcome, chandeliers, and heavily laden tables of delicacies. It was a special pleasure, especially if we had just recently arrived in the city from our humble rural mission station. However, even in our rural setting, we were figuratively living in the ambassador's residence, for we were representing God's kingdom. We had the duty and privilege of meeting with people from all walks in life, not lording it over others in pomp or prideful distinction, but representing Christ and his royal kingdom humbly and appropriately in every situation.

2. All believers are priests (see Hebrews). One meaning of *priest* is *bridge builder*. That is exactly what a family should be – bridge builders in the community, representing Christ and pointing the way for others to salvation and abundant life. Being bridge builders demands cultural sensitivity and willingness to sacrifice time and energy for the sake of others.

3. All believers are pilgrims. A family in mission will know the ups and downs of traveling through valleys, across deserts and mountain passes, but on their way, they impact and share the journey with other pilgrims. Although buffeted or held up here and there, we have a focus or a destination and call others to follow with us. We're with each other on the trail, sharing the toils and snares of our earthly pilgrimage.

4. The family table is a beautiful picture of gathering and blessing. It illustrates the hallowedness of community, the provision of bread and wine supplied by God. The world, in its famines of both body and soul, longs for sustenance, largesse,

and a place to be at home. There is nothing more warming, more inclusive, than the sharing of a meal. What a joy to sit at table and make room for the world to join us.

Let us remember and put into practice the fact that these four images of living and serving start with our own closest neighbors across the street.

A Chinese writer has told the story of seventy Chinese Christian families, or "recognizable socio-cultural entities," being sent out as missionaries. They were dispatched to go with the good news and establish 70 churches (Hian 1999, 614). The article continues, describing an observation of Roy Shearer in his Korean experience that "the gospel flowed along the web of family relationships. This web is the transmission line for the current of the Holy Spirit that brought men and women into the church" (1999, 614).

We affirm family units as a beautiful composition of God's design and purpose and challenge them to move, unified and whole, in the mission God has for them. Families may be strategic in carefully planned short-term ministries as well as in long-term service. Mission agencies and churches should be encouraged to mentor young couples and families into fruitful service and mission.

In our home we have a lovely soapstone carving representing our own nuclear family of five. Father and mother and three children stand, clasping arms, in a circle of unity. They are bound together in God's purposes, by his love. There is a round open space in the middle of their linked circle which is symbolic of the globe of God's world and the family's strategic and beautiful potential to live out and witness to the values of the Kingdom of God.

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