

## TELLING *HIS* STORY IN A CHAOTIC WORLD

Experiences of life often shape how we view our world, our families and God. Many of us have had moments when life was turned upside down either through difficulties, revelation from God or just personal growth. It is true that God reveals himself in ways that allow each of us to serve Him uniquely.

My family of origin was not involved in church, and for much of my childhood, I had been “curious” about God and very afraid of death. While in high school a couple of friends invited me to a bible study. The opportunity to learn more about God was very appealing and when the invitation came to accept Christ through His simple plan of salvation I responded, the first in my family to become a Christ follower.

After high school I attended Bible College where I met my husband. We became heavily involved in church, my husband’s education and growing a family. We planted a church before leaving for seminary and continued to do ministry, including missions, for several years. But as God does in all our lives, chances to learn more about Him in unexpected ways offered change and growth. I call them “tipping points” or “life lessons.”

In early 1994, a mission leader asked my husband to pastor an international church located outside of Amsterdam for the summer. It was very exciting to think about spending some extended time in Europe. Amsterdam’s reputation for drugs and sex is well known. And that was definitely there, but that’s not all we found. The Dutch have amazing family values, embraced by the government and the laws they’ve put in place related to work hours, holiday time and maternity leave for example, They are very friendly and inviting, opening their homes to those around them, especially newcomers. What I found were people who acted like Christians in many ways, but without a hint of religion. The churches are museums, as in most of Western Europe. I didn’t “see” God in ways that my North American worldview was comfortable with, thinking He would reveal himself in some inexplicable event. He quickly and gently reminded me that he lived in me and evidenced himself through all he had created. That’s all I needed to understand. All the trappings of what Christianity looked like in America were gone, nothing to fall back on or feel comfortable with. Just me, just God. In the church where my husband ministered, there were people from all over the world searching for God. They spoke differently, dressed differently and worshiped differently. It exploded my “American Christianity” box and challenged my view of how God works. It took me well over a year to understand all that He wanted me to learn. I needed radical heart change about what Christianity looked like in other places, how God was working in the world. And in God’s economy, no experience is lost!

Within a few months of returning to the states, an invitation came to work with a local mission agency. Though always embracing the idea of missions and supporting missionaries, I had never thought of working with people who want to serve God in this way. For fifteen years, mobilizing and recruiting became my focus. The changes I saw in missions have been profound.

The realities are complicated and yet so exciting. God is not done with missions or missionaries. He’s not done building His church. It just looks different. What I saw years

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ago, looked something like this: You feel God “calling” you to missions or ministry. You determine where and what that should look like. You sign up with your church or mission agency. You commit to a lifetime of service abroad. You often sacrifice many things that others would not in order to go (money, comfort, family, job, etc.) You work hard putting together a network of support that you hope will be there for your entire life of service and then into retirement. You and I know many people who have given their lives in this way. I am amazed at what they’ve accomplished.

The new generation is global in their thinking as well, and travel extensively. Some of the words used to describe this desire to make a difference, such as “a call” are often interpreted differently. “Everyone is ‘called’ aren’t they?” “Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I’ll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age”. Matthew 28:19-20 (The Message) This is their reality. They don’t look at what they want to do or who they are as “super spiritual”, although I believe many of them are. They want to change people’s lives in any way they can and bring the message of salvation to them along the way. They have no qualms about roughing it or going without the comforts of life. They enjoy a challenge. They want a variety of experiences and don’t necessarily want to commit for a lifetime, often going for a couple of months to a year or two. The idea is, “ I’ll try it and see if it’s what God wants me to do, there are lots of options to serve.” This is played out in a very similar way in the job market. Our parent’s generation worked at the same company all their lives, got a watch and retired. I read a statistic recently that showed the average college graduate today will change jobs at least five times before they’re 35 and may never retire.

Networking is a high priority and they use every avenue available to make that happen. (Facebook, Twitter, Skype, MySpace, YouTube, Constant Contact, blog, text, and less and less email. Many have never touched a typewriter.) They make their own videos through the resources that are liberally available. (Video Vimeo or hulu, Facebook, mySpace and Google.) For examples of how they use media, take a look at these YouTube videos: Social Media Revolution; Did You Know 210; Focus: Mark and Michelle Fittz.

The first two YouTube videos give us a quick view of how the world of communication is changing. Building community happens this way. The value is to live sacrificially and not serve alone. The concept of “team” and collaboration is strong. There is a willingness to minimize personal needs. (Much of what you’re reading is also evident in churches. Struggling with how people want to worship and serve has evoked the ire of church people for years.. Music, media, worship, service and other traditions have changed dramatically, leaving many wondering what will happen next and why things must change.) Now all this information may scare some people. So we can choose to ignore this very post modern generation who want to serve God, or we can embrace their strong desire to give themselves and make a difference in others lives on many levels which also includes spiritual needs. The fact is, meeting people’s physical needs often

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leads to opportunities to meet their spiritual needs. The Gospels are full of stories like this.

The following list shows the diversity of service related opportunities that are very appealing, holistic and most often sought after:

Orphanages  
Public areas- City dumps  
Big Cities - Serve the City ([www.servethecity.com](http://www.servethecity.com))  
Clean Water  
Building homes, churches and bridges (literal bridges!)  
Communication (radio, cell towers, etc.)  
ESL  
Micro-enterprise  
Teaching  
Feeding the hungry  
Evangelism  
Prayer Walks

In a church and mission setting, questions often come from skeptics about how to capitalize on these realities to give opportunity to those they have contact with in areas they are clearly passionate about. By the way, none of those fears or questions are on the lips of young people on campuses or local churches. They just want to give themselves away. Here are some things to remember as you talk about serving and going.

1. Don't be afraid of what may look different. (What they want to do and how they look)
2. Capitalize on what they use (Communication styles)
3. Tell a story that invites them to go
4. Show pictures, lot's of pictures, remembering their communication styles
5. Remember missions can be "contagious". Use those who have gone to invite others to go
6. College's require internships that can easily be done in a mission setting
7. Connect them with a mission organization if the church can't make it happen
8. Be open to new experiences
9. Remember that the "short term" route is often the best way to the "long term" route
10. Help them get there (emotionally, spiritually and financially)

Let's talk about the financial piece. The cost of international travel is high. That fact does not deter people from going. They willingly live on less and sleep in hostels or other places to make it possible. It is amazing how quickly they are able to put funding together because of their network of family, friends and communication opportunities. A young woman I recently heard about wanted to go to Honduras for three weeks to work in an orphanage. She needed about \$800 and raised \$3,500 in just a couple of months prior to the trip. With the additional funds, she was able to take a second trip to Spain for another month with another team. People do give to short-term missions; it's not a

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lifetime commitment! You've heard the triad "Pray, Give, Go". Everyone can be involved at some level. The reality is that even those who may not be Christ followers are willing to give to make an impact of this needy world.

In a church or non-profit setting, those who go are benefited by providing them an avenue for supporters to give. The Evangelical Counsel for Financial Accountability (ECFA) is a great resource, giving laws and guidelines for churches or non-profits that help others raise funds for missions. ([www.ecfa.org](http://www.ecfa.org) or Donor-Restricted Gifts Simplified ECFA) Here you will find information on what IRS requires as you gather, receipt and disperse funds. For instance, money raised does not belong to the person going to serve. The control of that belongs to the non-profit collecting or giving the funds. That means there needs to be clear communication about how funds get to those going and what they can or cannot do with those funds. For instance, a person can use the funds they've raised for anything that is directly related to the ministry they are going to do, but they must have receipts. Therefore, it is very important to have a detailed budget, including health insurance, of how much they need each day or month (lodging, food, personal needs and travel). If there is money left over after their time away, they can be reimbursed for specific purchases directly related to the ministry, but not for shampoo! The rules about donated money are complicated and non-compliance can result in a non-profit losing their status.

The world is changing around us at a pace that we all find difficult to follow. If we allow fear to keep us from embracing what God is doing and whom he's using, we will lose the opportunity to be part of the bigger picture. There are so many good resources that help us understand our changing world, as it becomes smaller and smaller. (Some say there are "six degrees of separation".) God is still in control, he will use his people, it will look different and it is His economy. So how do we respond?

Perhaps broadening our view or expectations of "normal Christian behavior" is a place to start. Do we get upset when Christians meet in a bar to talk about what they want to accomplish for God? My first encounter with this came during our summer in Holland when the leadership (Elders) met in a local bar or pub. I had never been in a bar and to be frank, it scared me. (What if someone sees me!) Are you aware that it's absolutely common practice in much of the world? One of my sons met friends monthly to talk about spiritual things at a bar. He lives in the states, not in Europe.

There are so many really difficult moral issues out there that we are often repulsed by but the postmodern world sees it all and although they don't necessarily embrace or live out what they see and hear on a personal level, they will watch and listen to things many of us would never consider. In other words, their boundaries look very different. Remember they are global in their thinking and would not want to be placed in an "American Christianity" box. They are postmodern. The fact is they look at everything differently. So the idea of looking at scripture in a different way should not be a surprise. My experience is that there are things they will not hold hard lines on such as drinking or speaking in tongues. But commitment to God and serving him is a strong value.

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We must allow our thinking to be challenged. Personally, my four children are constantly challenging me. I have chosen to listen carefully to what they say and how they live. It is a wonderful experience and although I may not agree in every area, I have certainly learned so much from them that has helped me understand and enjoy their generation. Ignoring what God is doing and whom He is using only causes further alienation. Can we accept them anyway? The answer is yes! Because God is God and He is in control and guess what, He used us!

Being missional in how we approach our world is so important. Reggie McNeal says, "The missional church is the people of God partnering in God's redemptive mission in the world...it requires a deconversion from "churchianity." He's written a book called Missional Renaissance. "Many churches fill their calendars, use their financial resources and organizational energy on people who are not part of their organization," says Reggie. Sounds like what Christ did! Watching contemporary issues and trends allows a glimpse into how God is working.

Here are some books and magazines that may be helpful as you think through this information. Remember, don't be afraid. God is still God.

Christianity Today

A Primer on Postmodernism by Stanley J Grenz

UnChristian by David Kinnaman

Blue Like Jazz by Donald Miller

The Changing Face of World Missions: Engaging Contemporary Issues and Trends by Mike Pocock

I mentioned some videos earlier. There are many more out there. Leadership Network ([www.leadnet.org](http://www.leadnet.org)) gives a broad view of how the church world and media is being transformed.

God has gifted and used us and He is doing exactly that in those who are emerging to serve Him in this chaotic world. It's exciting to know that although things are changing at a pace none of us are entirely capable of keeping up with, God knows, He's in control and we just need to pay attention.