

MISSIONS DESTROYED MY MINISTRY

How God's work in the heart of a reluctant pastor unleashed a pent-up global passion within his church

BY SANDY ISFELD

There are, it seems, a handful of moments which deeply alter our life's pathway. This story is about one of them.

CHURCH BUSINESS AS USUAL

Five years ago our church would have seemed normal, an Alliance congregation made up of young families. We were doing contemporary, and even some cutting-edge things to impact our smaller bedroom community located just north of Calgary. Airdrie Alliance was a growing, happening church, annually seeing 10-15 percent increases, with quite a few baptisms, a strong

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Youth Group and dynamic Kid's Ministry, and we were evangelistically impacting those who visited one of our three weekend services.

We were about to launch our third building program in 11 years to accommodate the 700 plus worshippers. Our energy was strong and our optimism was increasing. Our vision was to creatively and locally reach people with the gospel and, in so doing, become a larger church.

You get the picture. We felt this was being missional.

At this time, my wife and I were in deep discussion one night about what our church had become under our leadership. After several hours of painful probing and diagnosis, we both felt deeply convicted by the Holy Spirit, that in his view, we weren't cutting edge at all, and that when it really came down to it, most of what we were doing was not really missional. Most of our time, money, and resources went toward us.

Around this time I visited Mosaic (church) in Los Angeles, and was moved by the missional paradigm being cast there. I was gripped by reading some challenging missiologists and I started to assess and question my role and priorities as a Senior Pastor.

As a pastor, I had never been on a missions trip—had never visited one of our fields, nor did I have a desire to. So, not surprisingly, our own local church's missions efforts were neither central nor intrinsic to our vision. Somewhat bothered by all that, I prayed: "Okay Lord, if you want me to go on a missions trip...go ahead and take me up on it...but you initiate

it...I won't." I distinctly remember feeling something was noted in an unseen realm.

A thought came to me a week later. "Where would you like to go on such a trip?" I mused on it, and decided I would like to go to Asia and experience China, but especially I would like to go where a least-reached people group exists up in the highest mountain ranges known. I had been reading about these people, and had a fascination with their culture, their remoteness, and their exotic version of Buddhism. I told no one about this prayer.

A month later, a district worker was putting together a short-term missions trip to the very region and people group for which I had prayed and he felt I should go. My elders approved, thinking it could only help our church become more global in its focus. So, in the Fall of 2005, I went. And it was there, in the midst of a crowd of this least-reached tribal group, standing outside their great temple for Buddhism, that the living and missional God met me in a most dramatic way.

Standing outside the temple amidst the pilgrims as they walked, chanted and prayed,



I also prayed: “Lord speak to me...through these people.” Shortly thereafter, a young boy approached me and I saw strangely in his face the features of my own son. He had the same look, eyes and smile. When he offered to pray and do obeisance to the spirits for my tourist money, I was stunned and could not move.

At that moment I was overcome with two powerful sensations. One was the feeling of God’s righteous anger for the idolatry practiced by the thousands who were publicly worshipping the Buddha there that night; and the other was that of the deepest, purest compassion and mercy I have ever experienced—compassion and mercy for the boy, his people, his city, their lost condition, and their desperate need of Christ.

Something deep inside me broke loose. I was wrecked by the compassion and holiness of God. I wept uncontrollably, stunned and broken. I knew in an instant that this place, despite its dark idolatry, was territory where Christ wanted to build his church. I came back home looking at our culture and world with missionary eyes. I didn’t feel like a pastor any more.

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During this time, God had also been at work in our people. A pent-up global passion was manifesting in our church and members came to me about the need to do something to lead our church into a true global vision. It was as if my trip experience was like a match struck and thrown into a barrel of gasoline. Missional passion literally exploded in our church within a few months.

SO WHAT’S DIFFERENT?

We put together a team to establish a new global vision and direction for our church. They were some of the most spiritually passionate people I know. God was truly the initiator in all of this, and in a very real sense we felt then and now like we can hardly keep up with him and the doors he is opening. We have embarked on some kind of crazy-holy adventure, where our church could actually become a place to reach the nations. Scripturally, we embraced Acts 1:8 and the Antioch church example for ourselves.

We began to regularly profile missions work in our worship services. We put missions into the budget and developed a plan for future international campuses of our church in two key global cities. We are beginning to take trips to these cities, and are also looking to partner with our cluster missionaries in greater and seamless ways.

Our short-term mission trips have increased (about 40 people went on 20 different trips in the last three years). We developed a global prayer base with over 50 intercessors who pray regularly for our international work. Locally, I was invited to preach the gospel to 200 Muslims and this has now led us to host an annual province-wide prayer rally for the people of Islam everywhere in our world.

Last summer, we partnered with Place of Rescue in Cambodia (Marie Enns) and raised \$100,000 to build a school and two houses for AIDS orphans. As I write, our youth are gearing up to go on a missions trip to Mexico. At our Annual Meeting, our members approved a budget increasing our giving to the Global

Advance Fund, reaching a tithe portion. To strengthen our local outreach, we launched a mission work called the CREW to be the hands and feet of Christ in our city. Over the

next 12 months, we are trusting God as we launch our 5th S (Sea to Sea) plans by starting two new campuses in our city aimed at two distinct tribal and cultural groups in Airdrie that we have been unable to reach in the past.

God has fanned something into a flame at Airdrie Alliance Church and we are amazed by it. This mission to me is now tangible, real, and something we work on every day. The motivation for being involved in it is desire and not just obligation. And we see it as God’s mission, not ours.

The thing the Lord did in the heart of this reluctant pastor is something he alone could do. And if he did it for me, he can do it for others. We, in our local churches, are the missionary team, linking with others across the street and around the globe to reach a lost and broken world. ☩

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