

Missionaries: Safe or Expendable?*

By Phil Parshall

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This subject became more relevant to me in 1993. As I drove up to my 'Reading Centre' which is adjacent to a Manila inner-city squatter area of Muslims, I noticed large scribbled words spread across the front, 'All of you are infedil (sic) for us! You Americans'. Soon, with the aid of a knife, I had scratched out three words and set forth a more benign message, 'All of you are for us'!

The contemporary scene in our world reverberates with both political and religious crises. Missionaries, especially Americans, find themselves caught in the crossfire of competing ideologies. Afghanistan, Sudan, Liberia, Peru, and Columbia are just a few of the hot spots of intense danger.

Within the last two years in Mindanao, Philippines, an Italian priest was murdered, two Operation Mobilization young people were killed and 35 injured in a bombing, John Speers was shot in the head, a single lady missionary underwent the humiliation of rape, an American Catholic worker was held captive for 68 days, and two Filipinos affiliated with the Far Eastern Broadcasting Corporation were brutally killed while on the air. In another Asian country a police guard has been posted outside the bedroom window of a renowned missionary surgeon who has received death threats. Violence against expat Christian workers is perhaps at a level higher than that of any time in this century.

Our response is of critical importance. It appears to me that the tilt is toward a strategy for maximum safety and a minimum of risk-taking. We missionaries are being bombarded with seminars and advice on how to avoid danger. The multiple scenarios of potential disaster are enough to make a well-adjusted missionary cross the line into paranoia. At that point, fear kicks in as the dominant emotion of response. This then can lead to a curtailment of ministry and even to withdrawal.

Precedents

What really is a proper position of balance? More to the point, is balance the biblical response to danger? As we survey the New Testament do we not find vulnerability more common than concern for personal safety? John the Baptist, James, and Stephen all paid the high price of martyrdom for Kingdom concerns. Stephen particularly walked to the precipice with considered resolve. It would appear from the Acts record that he could have closed shop at any moment and escaped the

wrath of his assassins. But with uncanny conviction he pressed on to his last breath testifying to the sufficiency of the grace of God.

And what about the Apostle Paul? The book of 2 Corinthians is missionary autobiography at its apex. Paul, in this moving epistle, chronicles a life of frequent risk and deprivation. The only complaint the Apostle seems to register for us to ponder is the lack of other Christians willing to join him in his exploits for Christ. The stonings, floggings, imprisonments, shipwrecks, hunger and lack of clothes were all regarded as 'light and momentary troubles'. A present day supporting church receiving such a written chronicle of trials from their missionary would most likely counsel immediate withdrawal to a safety zone. Fortunately for all of us, the Antioch church was more visionary in their dealing with this pioneer of the faith who would blaze a path of Gospel propagation across Europe. We today stand in debt to this one who by contemporary mission standards would likely be referred to as a reckless eccentric. I simply regard him as one who saw himself as expendable in the affairs of the God of the universe.

Many have followed in the train of these anointed men. Rowland Bingham and two colleagues landed in Africa exactly one hundred years ago. Within one year two of the young missionaries had died. With a heavy heart, Bingham returned to North America, recruited more 'expendables', and sailed once again toward the 'dark continent'. Today the mission he founded, SIM, has close to 2,000 personnel within its ranks and four million affiliated nationals in this its centenary year. It is humbling to acknowledge the debt we in SIM owe to one man who counted his physical life of so little consequence to himself.

Practical Considerations

If, by definition, expendability equals volunteer martyrdom, then I could accomplish this with one swift act. Tomorrow I would go into the 'Muslim Centre' here in Manila and loudly proclaim a message of Christ and of denunciation of Islam. Within moments I would be in the presence of the Lord.

We as missionaries are to be spirit-led pragmatists. This posture allows us to combine the spiritual with being street smart. It is not proper to court death in our ministry. On the other hand, neither is it right to so value our lives that every new advance is negated by an over emphasis on risk potential.

The following are a few specific considerations which can be mooted by mission societies and individual missionaries:

Evacuation Policies

Missions should have general evacuation policies. It is, however, important for leadership far from the place of crisis to allow field personnel to be fully

decisive in emergency situations. There must be a bond of trust toward local missionaries.

Even down to the level of the individual missionary, I support maximum autonomous decisions. In 1965, my wife Julie, our six-month-old daughter and I were in India on vacation when the Pakistan-India war broke out. During the next few months our missionary colleagues in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) pulled out. Communications between India and Pakistan were virtually non-existent. After the war ended, we felt very strongly we were to return to the 'unknown', even though embassies were advising against foreign presence. I am forever grateful that our mission graciously allowed us to travel a circuitous route back to the land of our calling. They did require us to write a letter absolving them of responsibility, which I was more than glad to do. If they had decided not to risk our future into the hands of the Lord at that crucial moment it may well have closed our mission's ministry in that land and the subsequent fruit that has evolved since 1965.

Accommodations

There must be accommodation for those who do not feel they can enter a violent area. Likewise, no pressure, direct or indirect, is to be placed on missionaries who decide a withdrawal is mandated. All humans are uniquely created with a variety of emotional responses. The body's nervous system is overwhelmingly complex. There are people, Christian and non-Christian alike, who simply do not experience fear. I tend to think Winston Churchill was one of those men. Then there are the timid who, perhaps like Timothy, will struggle with fear all of their lives. It is not up to one group to judge the other. For sure, the Scriptures and prayer can help alleviate and temper fear. But for many, total release remains an elusive quest.

In recent upheavals in southern Philippines we have seen a variety of responses. Some have felt a strategic retreat was necessary. In one case a pastor received a death threat which led him to take down his church sign. But he stayed on. A large group of Christian workers, the recipients of threats, declared that if they are in the will of God then that is all that matters. One said he could as easily be killed in the States as in the Philippines. He felt safe in God's place for him wherever that might be.

Even the Apostle Paul showed flexibility. In Lystra he was stoned and left for dead. A miraculous recovery occurred followed by withdrawal. It is interesting to note that within a short time Paul is back in Lystra exhorting his disciples with these words, 'We must go through many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God'.

Nationals

One of the important components to making decisions about risk-taking relates to the opinions of nationals in the country where we serve. Foreigners may be a great encouragement to them in moments of adversity. Conversely, our presence may endanger their lives. We, as expat missionaries, have come to serve. Our decisions therefore must be made in tandem with those whose lives we may most affect.

In 1971 a civil war broke out between East and West Pakistan. The Bengali people of the East desperately wanted a foreign presence to remain so their sufferings could be documented to the world. It is with some measure of sadness, I have to say, that a very large majority of missionaries were on the first evacuation planes that flew out of the airport. Yes, it was a time of overwhelming turmoil and chaos. Rumours of rape were so widespread that after a few weeks I, too, sent my wife and daughter over to West Pakistan for two months. Those ensuing nine months of war were hell on earth.

But my point is the national Christians simply could not believe their spiritual leaders would so quickly leave them to face the crucible alone. Yes, the embassies had advised evacuation, but seldom if ever do they demand withdrawal. We had our own choice to make. Without judging individual situations, it does seem more than a handful of missionaries could have remained to shepherd the flock through their dark night of pain. Perhaps a missiology of expendability was lacking.

Conclusion

In December 1989 John Speers excitedly called me from the States to say that he and his wife Brenda and two small children would soon be joining us in Manila in Muslim outreach. After a very successful term of church planting among Catholics they were ready for the 'harder challenge' of Muslims. What a sheer delight to work with John for the next 18 months.

On June 11, 1991 I received one of the saddest phone calls of my life. John Speers, missionary *extraordinaire*, a Jim Elliot in the making, had just been catapulted into eternity as a result of a Muslim bullet exploding in his brain. His beautiful, talented wife became an instant widow. Three-year-old Shannah and one-year-old Josiah no longer had a precious daddy. The ultimate outworking of expendability became final, at least in this life.

Should John have taken such a risk? What about those in the south of the Philippines today? Liberia? Columbia? Peru? Scripture and mission history seem to lead us to ponder anew the fuller implications of the term 'missionary expendability'.