

MISSIONARY AS TRAVELLING COMPANION

ELINOR G. GALUSHA

Missionaries have had a bad image. Or at least a bad press. The images range from that of a small man in shorts and a pith helmet, through women in Mother Hubbards to Katharine Hepburn in "The African Queen." The images include stern-faced clerics bound to rescue half-naked heathens from hellfire, or to raise primitive people from disease and ignorance. They include well-meaning Americans bent on saving underdeveloped nations from poverty, over-population, or addiction to Communism. They even include aid workers handing out food to starving children. In the midst of all these negative images, what is a missionary today?

A missionary is essentially a travelling companion from another land and culture -- a companion on the way. One who walks in communion with God in Christ Jesus among a people other than her own. These persons do needed jobs: they serve as teachers of math, chaplains, nurses, speech therapists, occupational therapists, hospital administrators, agriculturists, doctors, theology professors, peace advocates, campus youth ministers, human rights workers, orphanage volunteers, Christian educators, English teachers.

They work with colleagues in that place. They are not the initiators of programs.

They struggle with the issues and concerns of the people of that place. How to prepare young Zimbabwe men and women to face

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the world beyond the village of their nurturing. How to understand the faith in terms relevant to the life of their own nation. They struggle with issues of their own role in another culture -- how to be fully a woman in a culture where women's roles are largely bounded by cooking, water carrying, child rearing and farming. How to live as a Christian in that new place.

A missionary is a travelling companion -- a companion on the way. Learning to be a faithful Christian in a new context: sharing one's vision of God in Christ while listening and learning of their vision. A travelling companion -- holding in absolute respect the colleagues with whom one works, not as inferiors to be taught, but as equals with whom to share. The task is not to "work one's self out of a job." That concept implies the "I'll stay until you are raised up to my level." To be a companion on the way -- remember the Latin roots of that word: com "with" plus panis "bread, food." To be a companion is to eat the bread of those people with them. Remember, too, "And when He was at table with them He took the bread and blessed and broke it, and gave it to them." (Luke 24:30)

The United Church of Christ in Japan sees missionaries and national Christians as equally sent into society to witness to God's love and justice, sent into society by both the Japanese church and the American church to companion each other in the task of witness to God in Christ. The task is not just to help people!

What does it require then, to be a missionary? It requires, first, faith and commitment. The person must know herself and the faith that undergirds her. She must be able to give account of the hope that is in her. She must be connected to inner resources of the Spirit. When Ben Wier returned from his ordeal of kidnapping in Beirut, he testified that it was these inner resources that sustained him through the dark and terrifying days. Faith and commitment first.

But also ego strength, but without many ego needs. A missionary must know herself, understand her own motivations and

be at peace with that self. A missionary must be one who doesn't need many strokes, who doesn't need many successes to sustain her self-esteem. A missionary must be able to fail, and then to go on.

A companion on the way in another culture must be able to see through other eyes than her own. She must be able to view the United States through other eyes -- to see as she is seen and to accept the picture as a valid view of reality.

What is a missionary these days? A Christian strong enough to be a servant of others, to live in solidarity with others in their situation, and to live for love and justice as Jesus did. It is profoundly simple; it is profoundly difficult. To be a missionary is to be a faithful Christian travelling companion through a part of life's journey with people of another land, another culture, and even, often, another faith.

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