MENTORING FOR LIFE IN ABUNDANCE: LEARNING FROM PAUL'S EXAMPLE [1]

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Introduction

My wife and I recently spent 15 months in the Mediterranean following the Apostle Paul on sea and land. This was an amazing experience of getting to know the great missionary leader of the early church, not so much through his writings, but through his actions. The day before we loosened the lines and began the 4,000 miles of sailing (a fraction of what Paul sailed) we hung a beautiful icon of St. Paul, a gift from the former owner of the boat, in the cabin of *SailingActs*,

Through the icon and in many other ways Paul was on board with us those entire 15 months. On board a small sailboat you get to know yourself, your spouse, and any guests in new, intimate ways. Sailing with Paul was no exception. Paul is not someone you can ignore even if you try, especially when he is a passenger on your boat, as pagan captains of a variety of ships certainly must have discovered during the years of Paul's mission journeys. But as you know from the book of Acts, Paul seldom traveled alone, and so all of the apprentices and hangers-on sooner or later made their acquaintance with us as well.

It was the novice fellow-travelers of Paul who began to get our attention. Whether on land or sea in the Roman Empire, travel in the first century was an extremely uncomfortable and

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sometimes brutal undertaking (Casson 1994, 149-218). Paul lists the hardships of his travels regularly (2 Cor 11:23-27). Yet in spite of the difficulties and hardships of travel and ministry in the Roman Empire in the middle of the first century, we noticed that Paul never seemed to have much trouble recruiting helpers to go along with him on his journeys

My wife and I also invited others to go along on our journeys following Paul in the Mediterranean. We took with us, for different parts of the voyages, a young seminary student, two recent university graduates who spent six weeks sailing with us, and a group of twelve current university students for three week summer study program. We noticed that while many people expressed keen interest to sail with us, when we explained the challenging conditions of sailing in a small boat on the Mediterranean and outlined the amount of effort and commitment necessary to make rendezvousing possible in the uncertainties of sailing schedules, eventually most interested people backed out. Aside from one main exception, all of our voyaging guests who actually made the effort and sacrifice to join us were young, much younger than Janet and I.

For a number of years, my wife and I also have been leading Eastern Mennonite University's cross-cultural study semester in the Middle East. We believe in realism when we publicize this program and always emphasize the demands, the discomfort, the risks, and challenges when promoting the trip in that troubled region. Several things invariably happen. Far more students apply than can be taken. The students are always surprised by how much more challenging the experience is than what they anticipated. And finally, their faith is always challenged and generally strengthened on the journey. This is not surprising for there is biblical precedence for this.

Contexts of Jesus' Call

The Roman Empire in the first century was obsessed by achieving, enjoying, displaying, and protecting the abundance of the "good life" – health, wealth, pleasure, beauty, status, superiority, and power. The ancient pagan gods gave credibility to what they promised by embodying and flaunting their ideals. Everywhere one traveled in the empire, including in Palestine, the success of the pagan system was visible in the temples, villas, theaters, statues, and coins, the "handheld billboards of the empire" (Carter, 84).

Surrounded by the visible evidence of the credibility of Roman promises of abundance on one hand (Luke 21:5 for example), and the obvious success of the Jewish elite on the other, (Carter, 66-67), Jesus promised his followers a high-risk, costly, and sometimes dangerous, contrasting, alternative life (Carter, 50). He called people to follow him, carrying their crosses. He indicated that this life in abundance would be "with persecution," an incredibly unique combination of seeming opposites (Mk. 10:30).

Today, as in the first century, the promises of the good life, of prosperity, pleasure, security and status, are powerfully communicated. They are compelling and credible. North American contemporary culture, like that of the Roman Empire in the first century, is obsessed by achieving, enjoying, displaying, and protecting the abundance of the "good life" – health, wealth, pleasure, beauty, status, superiority, and power. Models and idols, the rich and famous of our culture, promise and embody the pagan, abundantly excessive, life-style of the Roman elite.

As in the first century, young people in the church are relentlessly tempted to emulate the gods of abundance. The North American church, seeking to call young people to a commitment to a life of leadership, mission, service, and ministry, is also tempted by these same, age-appropriate gods. Christian young people make career choices in a culture that is permeated by

promises of abundance and the fear of losing what they invest their life in. How do we call young adults for a life of serving, risk taking, and suffering leadership demonstrated by Paul in the context of this culture? How do we prepare and equip those who respond?

Jesus' promise of life in abundance was embodied by Paul in a unique way. He catalogues and comments on his encounters with Jesus, with violent detractors, his arguments with religious leaders, his hobnobbing with the rich and powerful. He "boasts" of his prison escapades, his shipwrecks, his beatings (2 Cor 11:23-27), and admits his deep friendships (Phil 1:8), his joy (2 Cor 2:3) his tears (2 Cor 2:4), and his contentment (Phil 4:11). He is unusually candid about being treated shamefully, and suffering humiliation and defeat. Yet, he cites all of these as honorable and as ultimately good (1 Cor 1:18-30). Amazingly, this does not seem to have discouraged gifted younger people, women, and even persons of high status, both male and female, of wanting to accompany Paul, learn from him, help him in his ministry, and to minister and lead the church themselves.

Let us look at the dynamics of Paul's ability to call and prepare others to a life of mission and ministry. We do not know how this actually happened, but I believe there are some clues hinted at in both the record of Acts and in Paul's own explanations of his actions.

Paul personally embodied the promise of Jesus of life in abundance. The rewards and risks of the life Jesus promised to his followers are visible in the action-packed life of Paul. The life of Jesus, as Paul embodied it, seemed to be especially attractive to the young, to Hellenized Jews, to women, and to unsatisfied pagans. I have come to view Paul as being, among other things, a *cultural explorer* of the power and glory of the Roman Empire. While Paul, having grown up in Tarsus was familiar with the pagan world, as a Christian he was now discovering new features of at this world. Like many explorers, he told tales of hardship in his travels. These

added to his attraction to at least some of the more adventurous novices. Explorers have always attracted and inspired the imagination of young people. It was obvious to the adventurous and the curious of all ages in the communities that Paul visited, that Paul was going somewhere geographically, culturally, and theologically. He was coming back with amazing information, conclusions, and stories. If you went with Paul, you could go somewhere in those ways as well. The challenges Paul talked about only added to the attraction of being included. He was a risk-taker, attracting risk-takers.

I believe that Paul was also an *experimenter* with the good news of the kingdom within the reality of the Roman Empire. It seems that Paul after his conversion actually became more like the Greeks than the Jews in his openness towards experimentation, adaptation, and innovation. Paul successfully represented the gospel of Jesus in ways that were at once attractive and disturbing to new audiences throughout the Roman Empire with its endless varieties of paganism. This relevance, this openness to new possibilities and optimism for the future, this ability to experiment with the good news in new ways, held an attraction to those who were open to change, who had imagination and energy, and perhaps little to lose. Again, the young, the women, the disenfranchised, and the dissatisfied were especially eager to participate in this movement of the kingdom in the Roman Empire, and even to join the leadership of the movement.

Short Term Missions

Short-term missions programs in North America recruit young people from comfortable congregations surrounded by the abundance of our culture. These young people may be sent into cultures where scarcity, discomfort and danger is the norm, to work with congregations that may be without resources taken for granted by the young people who have arrived. These programs

offer an opportunity for young people to do the kind of exploration and experimentation that produces personal growth in faith. Short-term mission programs often connect these young people with groups of Christians who may see themselves as, as the early church, as being in tension with their own culture. The young short-term missionary may encounter a kind of bold, powerful, suffering biblical faith among the Christian groups of these cultures, that is radically different from their experience of faith lived out by the church in their own culture.

This exposure is good, but can produce the kind of dynamic that is so well documented in Acts with Paul's fruitless attempts to explain his own changes in understanding and practice to the church in Jerusalem. The Christians in the church in Antioch, a Mediterranean seaport city church, were participants in the trade and travel of the Mediterranean. They were used to cultural interaction, exchange, and change. Their mentality was one of openness, of moving with the gospel into a changing culture of the empire. In contrast, the Jerusalem church, with its deep roots in tradition and desire for stability and peaceful coexistence, seemed to be far less open to Paul and his followers. Paul did not successfully mentor the leadership of the Jerusalem church.

This dynamic continues to be played out in the North American church sending young people into short-term missions. If the short-term mission experience has profoundly impacted the participants' existing assumptions about faith and life, these young people may experience a "cognitive dissonance" between their experience of the church in the world elsewhere and their experience of the church in the world at home. The North American churches to which short-term mission participants return after a brief exposure to the shocking realities of the world and the suffering, faithful church within it, may be experienced by the short-term missionary, at least initially, as places of unfaithfulness and apathy. The short-term missionary has returned home, but feels guilt, rather than gratitude. Religion professor, John Barbour in his article, "The Moral

Ambiguity of Study Abroad," laments that many study trips are "guilt trips" that expose participants to human suffering. While it is good to deepen participants' "moral sensibility, elicit their compassion, arouse their sense of injustice, and sharpen their understanding of world problems, including our society's role in creating and perpetuating suffering," this does not end our task. "We must help them move beyond guilt to responsibility . . . to clear thinking about what *we and they* can do. . . " (Barbour 2006. My emphasis).

How is this to happen? Like Jesus, like Paul, we must do more than briefly *send* our young people into the world. We must *take* them on a continuous, exploratory, high-risk, sacrificial movement into the world with the good news.

My denomination, the Mennonite Church, traces its origins to the Anabaptist Movement of the sixteenth century. The early years of this movement in Europe was marked by rapid growth, chaos, popularity, and persecution. Those Mennonites who chose to flee persecution, military conscription, or economic discrimination by coming to America, found themselves blessed by religious freedom, no military conscription, and economic possibilities. Under these conditions, the missionary fervor, growth, chaos and popularity that marked the early Anabaptist movement was slowly transformed into quietism, withdrawal, stability, and eventually, upward mobility. It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century, that the Mennonite Church in North America began to recover its earlier mission impulses, both at home and abroad. Historically, many other Christian denominations in North America have experienced a similar life-cycle.

While Mennonite service-oriented programs for young people, such as Mennonite Voluntary Service, PAX, and alternative service for conscientious objectors have been in existence for more than 50 years, it was not until the 1980's that short-term mission programs

were developed, partly in response to the eagerness of Mennonite youth to participate in programs such as YWAM and Operation Mobilization. While there was wide-spread affirmation of these inter-denominational missions programs, Mennonite mission leaders were also concerned that this phenomenon would not necessarily contribute to the life and mission of the congregations, or loyalty and commitment among the young participants to serve with the Mennonite church in mission and leadership in the future.

It is not my purpose in this paper to discuss the impact these new Mennonite programs have had on the participants, hosts, and supporting congregations. I would, however, like to focus on several conclusions from administrators of Mennonite short-term missions programs about the key characteristics of the experience that are most likely to have life-changing impact on the participants and be most appreciated by the hosts. Recently, I asked senior administrators of the short-term missions programs of three main denominational boards – Eastern Mennonite Mission (Salunga, PA), Mennonite Mission Network (Elkhart, IN) and Virginia Mennonite Board of Missions (Harrisonburg, VA) – to give their perspectives.

Risk and Challenge. Are young people eager or reluctant to consider assignments to areas with high physical or health risks, or to places with difficult assignments, or to places with extremely challenging living conditions and lack of comfort? Is it easier to recruit for "safe" and "easy" assignments?

The pattern demonstrates that, for young applicants, a possible assignment to an area of high risk and challenge is at least as attractive, and often more attractive, than low risk, predictable and more comfortable places. While this does not necessarily indicate that it is the higher level of difficulty and risk that make these assignments are more attractive than others, it is clear that the more difficult and risky assignments "attract certain kinds of applicants."

Applicants attracted to the more difficult and high-risk assignments are more likely to be open to adventure, learning, and challenge. It can be argued that those attracted to the difficult and high-risk assignments are most likely to learn, grow, and succeed in the assignment. “They go with a different attitude than participants of the low-risk, easy assignments.” For this reason, all of the agencies are honest and candid right from the beginning about the risks and the challenges of the assignment in order to ensure that the reality of the assignment and the expectations of the participants are compatible.

While at least certain types of young people are attracted to high-risk and difficult assignments, their parents and their home congregations are far more reluctant to send their young people there. “Parents pressure their kids to go to the easy places, places where there is lower risk.” Might this also be a reason for at least some young people to choose the very assignment their parents will worry the most about, a form of “mission rebellion?!”

Learning in Risk and Challenge. Do positive learning, growing, and contributing experiences in short-term mission have any relationship to the level of risk and difficulty of the assignment?

“I think it’s good when kids hit the wall,” one administrator told me, “because this is when real change and growth happens.” However, this occurs only when there are adequate resources available. Otherwise it can be disastrous.” The other two administrators agree. “The more challenging and risky the assignment, the more learning and growth occurs.” It seems that when young people are in situations where they feel they are in control and know what to do, they are not as likely to be learning new things or growing in their faith. Assignments in places where contact with parents and others who would offer support is not easily available, enhances learning and growth and for that reason is preferred by the administrators.

Good leadership is key to making high-risk, challenging situations a positive learning experience for the participants and beneficial to the hosts. What are the characteristics of good leaders who can mentor young people in short-term missions?

Leadership in Risk and Challenge. "The age of good leaders is not as important as experience and common sense," one administrator explained. "Flexibility, creativity, and the ability to learn as they go make good leaders." The ability to demonstrate genuine relationships with diverse people cross-culturally, how to deal with stress and disappointment, how to take risks wisely, were also cited as characteristics of leadership that transforms difficulty into a life-changing experience of positive growth.

My own experience in leading cross-cultural study groups to the Middle East is remarkably parallel to the observations from these mission administrators. Not only does short-term mission experience replicate elements of the early Anabaptist movement, these key elements seem to demonstrate the features of Paul's mentoring in his missionary activities inferred or described in Acts, with similar results in attracting young people.

Mentoring Like Paul

Recently I assigned a paper to my "Living Faith" class at EMU in which the students had to identify all of the gods they believed in, whether true or false. About half of the class identified wealth as a false god they served in some way. Now, one might draw comfort that the students are identifying their false gods in a Christian university that promotes alternative values. And indeed, this is the case. I am convinced that my university diligently seeks to instill alternative values in the classroom, in the career counseling services, and in a variety of other ways. But, in spite of espousing the values of Jesus in the mission statements and curriculum, this is incredibly difficult to actually practice. Listen to what one student wrote: "Security is one

of the reasons why I chose to go to college. Many people, from college administrators and admissions counselors, to my own parents, have told me that college education is the way to be secure and live a comfortable life financially." This makes sense within our culture, but does it sound in any way like Jesus' call to follow, or Paul's example of following Jesus, and leading others to do so?

Mentoring in a way that transforms the individual, contributes to the mission of the local church, and has the potential of transforming the sending congregations in the long run is demonstrated by Paul. We look again at the characteristics, cited by the mission administrators above, that Paul demonstrates.

Flexibility. While Paul seemed to operate with general goals, he consistently demonstrated the ability to change his plans on short notice, to take advantage of unforeseen opportunities, and to adapt his itinerary as he went along. Part of this might be attributable to the contingencies of sea travel both due to the weather and the lack of scheduled shipping, or to unexpected opposition or expulsion such as in Antioch (Acts 13:50) Philippi (16:39), or Ephesus (20:1). But at other times, Paul adjusts his own plans in response to new directives (Acts 16:6-10). You could not travel happily with Paul if you were expecting a tight schedule or fixed itinerary.

Creativity. Paul was creative his communication of the gospel, appropriating ideals, images, and experience in the empire to communicate the good news of the kingdom. To travel with Paul was to observe creative personal responses to a variety of challenges, from being publicly worshipped in Lystra (Acts 14:11) to publicly arrested and beaten in Philippi (Acts 16:22). Paul seems to be extremely creative and dramatic in these spontaneous events,

performing a kind of improvisational theater of the gospel on the incredibly diverse public stage of the Roman Empire. To travel with Paul was to be part of this drama troop.

Openness to learn. Paul speaks of his own learning during his travels. "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances" (Phil 4:12). Other learning is inferred. To travel with Paul was a learning adventure without a syllabus. One learned, not only from Paul's teaching, but from Paul's learning. I would add several other features of Paul's mentoring that made him effective.

Competence and broad credibility. Paul's education under Gamaliel, his writing and rhetorical skills, his identification with Christ in life, his growing list of achievements, even his Roman citizenship, all seemed to have contributed to his attraction and influence among those who accompanied him, as well as among the congregations scattered across the empire.

The confidence to expose novices to those risks he took himself. Paul's boldness seems to have been inspiring to those who followed him. Paul does not simply encourage others to be bold, to take risks, he is on the front line of risk taking. He personally demonstrates his eagerness for risk (Acts 19:30; 12:12-13). Paul does not ask others to go beyond what he himself demonstrates.

The readiness to be an advocate for change. As Paul's understanding of the world and the nature of the kingdom of God grew during his experience, he became increasingly dedicated to moving the Jerusalem church in the direction of his vision. He advocated for full inclusion of the pagan converts into the Christian congregations. Paul not only advocated *for* these converts and *with* these converts. This occurred on Paul's final visit to Jerusalem, the strange story of his arrest because the Jews they had seen "Trophimus, the Ephesian [Greek] in the city with Paul, and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple area" (Acts 21:29). While it is unclear

whether Paul actually had done this, I believe it would have been entirely consistent with his theology of the church as well as his previous actions of full inclusion of gentiles and other marginalized into the church.

Mobilizing a Mentoring Coalition

If we are serious about calling and preparing a generation of missional leaders, we need to consider the potential of our churches, our short-term mission programs, and our educational institutions to call and equip leaders to not only to move ahead themselves in creative and faithful lives, but to lead the church ahead in its mission task in the world. This is a feature of Paul's mission journeys. It seems to me that we cannot call young adults to the kind of leadership that will move the church away from its cultural conformity and toward the life of the kingdom of God, the kind of leadership that is sacrificial, high-risk, and potentially even dangerous (at least to status and prestige), and promise them financial security, status and affirmation from culture at the same time. Too much of what we do in church, youth programs, and university, is to prepare young people to fit into our culture of abundance, to equip leaders to fit the expectations of congregations and patterns of institutions shaped by our culture. We need to create a culture of mentoring in mission that involves congregation, mission programs, and education.

In 1995, we began a new mission-focused major at Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) within the Bible and Religion Department called Culture, Religion, and Mission (CRAM). One of the motivating factors in beginning this major was feedback from significant numbers of students beginning or returning to university study following one or more short-term mission assignments. Many of these students desired a study program that would directly connect with, and build on their life-changing experience in short-term missions.

In spite of predictions that this program would fail to attract enough students to make it viable, or that it would not attract the brightest and best, the opposite has occurred. CRAM is currently the largest major offered by the Bible Department, and attracts a higher percentage of honors students than almost any other program at EMU. We have been continuously attempting to integrate non-traditional options for study within this program that utilize the learning resources of our mission agencies, short-term programs, and congregations. I'll mention several key components.

CRAM requires a practicum of at least three weeks in a mission assignment. Students are encouraged to join a short-term, cross-cultural mission team organized by one of our Mennonite agencies. In addition to the orientation required by the sending agency, practicants must complete reading, journaling, and writing assignments during the experience, and a thorough debriefing following it. Where possible, they are supervised and evaluated either by their group leader, local missionaries, or the leaders of the local hosting congregation.

Another way that CRAM majors may fulfill the practicum requirement is by participating in a longer mission assignment that includes a training component such as Youth Evangelism Service (YES) of Eastern Mennonite Missions, or tranSend of Virginia Mennonite Board of Missions. This recognizes the learning value of these longer, short-term mission assignments, and allows the student to earn valuable credit in mission. It also brings students into a learning experience with non-students, missionaries, and generally is done with some level of cooperation and support from their home congregations.

All EMU students must fulfill a "cross-cultural study" requirement, either by participating in a semester-long study program led by a faculty member, or an intensive shorter summer cross-cultural. EMU connects this requirement to mission experience in two ways. All

students who serve on an approved missions program such as YES, can apply the available credit earned to fulfilling their cross-cultural requirement. On the other hand, on certain cross-cultural study programs, such as the one my wife and I lead to the Middle East, CRAM students may elect to do an independent mission study option, that fulfills the practicum requirement. In this way, mission, education, and congregational involvement, are brought together.

The CRAM program also has a junior year internship option. Arrangements are made for a student to serve in an existing one-year program with a Mennonite mission agency while studying at a local college or university, taking courses offered by extension from EMU, and doing several independent studies through EMU. Up to 30 semester hours of credit can be earned in this way in a calendar year, while the entire costs are the same as studying on the EMU campus. While the prospects for juniors to spend an entire year on a mission assignment is daunting and has resulted in only one student who has completed the program by serving with EMM in Ethiopia, that young man returned to the USA, graduated, completed a masters degree in linguistics, served for a three-year term as a missionary in Columbia, and has recently begun seminary studies.

These examples are only the beginning. Ideas that have been considered include EMU working together with mission agencies in their training programs for their short-term mission appointees. The proposal is for EMU to evaluate and accept certain courses and experience in the mission's training program as transfer credit. Conversely, the possibility for EMU to offer some of their undergraduate courses for credit within the missions' training program is being considered.

On a graduate level, Eastern Mennonite Seminary is developing a program that allows EMU graduates, with CRAM graduates having priority, to take mission-related seminary courses

during a mission assignment with no tuition costs. This program, funded by the "Samuel Grant," is cooperating with Virginia Mennonite Board's tranSend missions program to develop assignments specifically designed as a combination of service and study. This arrangement has generated high levels of interest among young people for it frees them from having to choose between mission service and education, and does not add to their mission support expenses. Again, this arrangement brings mission, education, and congregation together into the world for the development of the next generation of missional leaders.

But new challenges emerge along with new ideas for cooperating and mobilizing. For instance, there is a growing tendency for young people who previously have traveled cross-culturally or participated in short-term mission, who are at home in the world and have an appetite for adventure, to engage in "free-lance," mission-related service and travel adventures, entirely bypassing the application processes, accountability structures, and financial arrangements of mission boards. Will denominational institutions find ways of connecting with the creativity, individualism, and spontaneity of young adults who are at once committed to Jesus but who find church institutions somewhat irrelevant for living out their own vision?

Our Common Mentoring Mandate

In order to cultivate the readiness for challenge, adventure, and risk-taking of our youth toward a life of sacrificial leadership, mission, service and ministry, our congregations, our short-term mission programs, and our Christian educational institutions must move into the world together with the Jesus and the good news of the kingdom of God, exploring, experimenting, learning, and adapting. All of us, church leaders, educators, mission workers, and administrators, need to respond to the call of Jesus to follow him into the world with the good news, taking risks, trying out the gospel on ourselves in public, if we expect to attract the young,

the brightest and the best, and the pagans dissatisfied with empty abundance in life to the abundant life of following Jesus in leadership, mission, service and ministry. All of us, church leaders, educators, mission workers, and administrators need to demonstrate the life of abundance of Jesus by working together creatively to call and equip the next generation of leaders who will, like Paul, lead the church to explore its own changing world, and experiment with the good news of Jesus in our present global forms of pagan empire.

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