

# 5

## Following Christ in Mission

*by Debra Braaksma*

### Scripture readings

Isaiah 6:1-8

2 Corinthians 5:14-21

### Opening prayer

*Gracious Lord, we thank you that you have called each of us to be the hands and feet of Jesus to reach out with the message of your love to a hurting world. Lord, give us your heart of compassion and concern for the suffering and those who do not know you, a heart that compels us to follow you wherever you call us to be involved in mission. Amen.*

Have you ever considered how you can be involved in mission? “Our Call” challenges RCA members to reach out to people with the gospel, meeting needs in our own neighborhoods and cities and through global partnerships. In a world where barriers to the gospel in both global and local contexts seem to be increasingly hard to cross, these passages from Isaiah and 2 Corinthians give wonderful insights into what we as the people of the Reformed church need to do in order to position ourselves to be “following Christ in mission, in a lost and broken world so loved by God.”

The Book of Isaiah records how Isaiah was used to proclaim the Lord’s judgment and salvation. Isaiah chapter six makes it clear that the reason Isaiah was used in such an incredible way was that he put himself totally and unreservedly at God’s disposal, willing to be sent in mission

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Debra Braaksma and her husband, Del, served as RCA missionaries among the Orma people in Kenya from 1987 until 1998. Deb then served as supervisor of RCA mission programs in Africa until 2005, when she and Del returned to Africa as missionaries in Sudan.

wherever he was called. For instance, when in verse eight of this passage God asks, “Whom shall I send?” Isaiah quickly responds, “Here am I; send me!” It is important to realize that Isaiah had no idea what he was getting into. God did not initially make it clear where Isaiah was being sent or what he was being asked to do! If we read on to chapter seven, we find that God soon gives him very specific instructions, but initially Isaiah is only given a general sort of calling. God simply asks him if he is willing to be sent.

It is important to notice what precedes this call. How did Isaiah come to the point that he could say yes to going who-knows-where to do who-knows-what? In verses one through four we see that Isaiah has a personal encounter with God and is awestruck by God’s majesty. In verse five we see Isaiah’s response: after experiencing God’s glory he is absolutely convicted that he is sinful. But then in verse six—at God’s initiative—he is offered cleansing and forgiveness. It is only then that he can respond to God’s call.

We too need to have that initial encounter with God and experience forgiveness in Christ, before we can answer God’s call to service. For those who are clear about their relationship to Christ, the message of Isaiah is for us to give ourselves to do whatever God calls us to in local or global mission. Prayers such as “I’ll do anything but work with the homeless, Lord” or “I’ll go anywhere but Africa, Lord” fly in the face of this message.

Second Corinthians 5 gives further insights on the concept of call, as well as about the impetus behind Paul’s affirmative response to God’s call to be involved in crossing extremely high cultural boundaries in order to initiate God’s mission to the Gentiles. In verse fourteen, Paul begins this passage by stating that he is compelled by the love of Christ to be involved in mission. In 1 Corinthians 9:16 he puts this sense of being compelled in even stronger terms, stating, “An obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!” What urges Paul on in his mission to the Gentiles is this deep realization of Christ’s sacrificial love for him. As women and men in mission, whether it is in our own communities or in an international context, we need to be sure that our relationship with Christ is alive and well and nurtured through personal Bible study and prayer, as

well as through corporate worship and fellowship.

Another prerequisite for being involved in mission is an attitude of willingness to sacrifice. In verse fifteen Paul states that we can no longer live for ourselves, and it is clear that he considered the Gentiles' need for the gospel as more important than his own comfort. In the following chapter, 2 Corinthians 6:4-10, it is obvious that he sacrificed greatly for the sake of the gospel. As was true in the first century, crossing today's barriers with the gospel, whether they are in our own communities or in a foreign country, is just plain hard work, and nothing difficult is done without personal sacrifice.

These are particularly tough words for North American Christians to hear. Everything in our culture, our media, and even our hearts seems to shout at us to do just the opposite: to put our needs, our security, and our comfort first and foremost. Yet I believe that we all know people who have refused to do that—who show a compelling desire to follow Christ in cross-cultural mission rather than living for themselves.

I immediately think of RCA missionaries Lance and Elizabeth Edwards, who have just begun service in Mozambique in the areas of agriculture and HIV/AIDS ministry. Lance, Elizabeth, and their children, Katie and Ashton, are now living in a remote village in one of the poorest countries on earth. There is no question that this family has made a huge sacrifice to serve with the Reformed Church in Mozambique in this challenging setting, and they did indeed struggle to say yes to God's call to serve there. Here is an excerpt from a piece they wrote that gives a glimpse into their conversations with God:

“But God, we don't want to leave our church. At the church in Mozambique, we will not understand the language; there won't be Sunday school or small-group Bible studies. We are being fed, and we are growing here!”

*But my children in Mozambique are physically and spiritually hungry.*

“But God, we have so many close friends; we don't want to give them up to live isolated out in the bush!”

*But Lance grew up in the African bush, and both of you understand the African culture.*

“But what about the kids? They won’t have friends who are like them.”

*But Elizabeth has experience working with AIDS, and there are so many AIDS orphans.*

“But the kids won’t get to have music lessons, or do soccer and ballet...and God, what if they get sick?”

*But my children in Mozambique do not even have enough food to eat.*

“God, we really like the way things are right now. Why can’t we just have a normal job and a house in the suburbs like everyone else we know?”

*Because I have brought you together, and I have given you all the education and experience that will enable you as a couple to fill this need. And my will is not for you to be comfortable, but to serve my people in Mozambique.*

It just so happened that this battle with God coincided with our pastor’s preaching on offering one’s whole life as a living sacrifice. We began to see how God’s purposes had been worked out in our lives, despite the plans we had made. Our perspective changed from “We don’t want to go now” to “How can we not go?” After making a commitment to work with the RCA in Mozambique indefinitely, we have experienced a peace which has surpassed our understanding.

For my family and for me, the Edwards’ conversation with God strikes very close to home. In February 2005 we also answered God’s call to serve as missionaries—with the churches in south Sudan, another difficult setting, a war-ravished country that is experiencing intense levels of human suffering. I can say that some of the Edwards’ questions were our questions. But after responding to God’s call, we too have experienced a strong sense of peace, accompanied now by great excitement to go and serve there.

As people involved in mission, we need to appreciate the intrinsic value of all people. Verse sixteen of 2 Corinthians 5 urges us not to look at others from a human point of view. When we look at others through the eyes of Christ, we don't value them according to their intelligence, personal appearance, social status, or wealth, or even according to how much we have in common with them. Rather, we realize, as explained in verse fifteen, that all persons have value because Christ died for them. We also need to deeply understand that all people have the potential of becoming new creations in Christ, as Paul notes in verse seventeen. As we embrace this scriptural truth, we will realize that we cannot write anyone off as being unworthy of our efforts to show love and mercy (coupled with involvement in social justice). All people have the capacity to turn their lives around as they come to know Christ.

Now, let's look at the way in which we should serve. What are we actually called to do? Paul writes in verse eighteen that we have been given the ministry of reconciliation. Therefore, we need to understand the depth and breadth of what that involves and embody it in our service. Reconciliation means to bring into harmony, and it has to do with our relationship to God and to each other. Verse nineteen explains that the message of reconciliation is that God through Christ has reconciled us to himself. In other words, God has done everything needed to bring us into harmony with himself, and God has entrusted us with the task of letting a lost world know that God deeply loves them and invites them to put their faith in Christ. In verse twenty we are called to be ambassadors—those called to make an appeal to unbelievers.

So how do we actually cross boundaries with the message of Christ's love? The RCA is committed to doing such work in a holistic manner. Wherever we are doing mission—whether in a local or global context—word and deed belong together. We have only to look at the model of Jesus Christ himself to see that he spent much time healing and caring for people's physical needs as well as speaking with them about the good news of God's love for them. It is impossible to prioritize—word and deed are inseparable, essential components of mission.

If your church is like mine, much of your local mission work may be focused on meeting the social needs of those who are hurting. That

being the case, many or most of your members involved in these ministries may not consider themselves as having the gift of evangelism. However, people are most receptive to the message of the gospel when we are meeting their needs in times of crisis or despair. It is as we address their concerns that we earn people's respect and the right to be heard. While I believe that we should never make listening to the gospel a requirement before we give assistance, we must be intentional about looking for natural opportunities to share our faith. As Paul says, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15, NIV).

Let me share with you a time when God opened the doors for my husband, Del, and me to do this. While we were serving as RCA missionaries among the Orma people of eastern Kenya, El Niño hit our area with a vengeance. We experienced catastrophic flooding—fifty thousand people, the vast majority of whom were Muslims, were homeless, and many of them were marooned and unable to access any food. Reformed Church World Service helped us coordinate a relief food operation and an anti-cholera campaign that may have saved thousands of lives.

We went with our African colleagues into these flood-ravaged areas by helicopter and spent several weeks bringing assistance into villages where up to 10 percent of the people had died of cholera. At the time we did not think of ourselves as doing much in the way of evangelism. We spent 99 percent of our time meeting physical needs, stringing IVs from tree branches to patients lying on the ground and trying to save as many lives as possible. However, in each village we identified ourselves as Christians affiliated with the Africa Inland Church. We also publicly prayed for the people and told them we were there because God loved them. After the operation was over, we found out that this had had a tremendous evangelistic impact—several Muslim leaders went to the leaders of the Africa Inland Church, asking to learn more about the faith of the Christians—faith that had enabled the Christians to wade through muddy waters and enter cholera-infested villages to offer assistance.

As I look back on my eleven years of mission service, I believe that this relief operation was one of the hardest things I have ever been involved in. The logistics of getting food into marooned areas were a nightmare—the suffering that we saw was intense. I also think it was one of the

most rewarding things I have participated in. But to be honest, we almost said no. We were so close to saying, “This is beyond us—what can we do to help fifty thousand displaced people?” But thank God that, at least this time, we did listen to his call; we did step out in faith, even before it was really clear how we would be able to accomplish what needed doing, and we received a tremendous blessing.

Is there something tugging on your heart—a sense that God may be calling you to participate in local or global mission? The place to which you are called to serve is where the world’s deep need intersects with your great passion. But sometimes even when we have great passion about something, we find ourselves hesitating to serve. The task may seem too big, and we may feel inadequate. If that is the case, you are probably at exactly the place God needs you to be: totally dependent on God so that you are relying on him for strength. Don’t let anything stop you—boldly step out in faith to follow Christ in mission. He will be right there to provide you with everything you need to accomplish the mission to which he has called you.

## Questions

1. Are you “well-positioned” to be involved in following Christ in mission? Are you:
  - walking closely with Christ, spending time in personal Bible study and prayer and in corporate worship and fellowship?
  - willing to sacrifice: considering others’ need for the gospel as more important than your own comfort?
  - appreciative of the intrinsic value of all people, not putting limits around those you are willing to befriend and serve?
2. Where do you believe your great passion intersects the world’s deep need?
3. If you are not already involved in this kind of ministry, either directly or through support and prayer, what might be some first steps you could take to explore this opportunity?
4. If you do not have a sense of where God might be calling you to serve, is there someone who knows you well, and understands

your gifts and interests, who you could discuss this with and ask to pray for you?

### **Closing prayer**

*Lord, help us to rely on you for guidance and strength as we follow your call to service; keep our vision from being narrow, from only being interested in what we can personally be involved in. Help us to see the world from your perspective, Lord, and thus to also be faithful in supporting, encouraging, and praying for those who are serving you in places we cannot, that we might be involved through them in the Great Commission to make your love known to ends of the earth. In Jesus' name. Amen.*