

Mission Moments – February 23, 2007
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Following Jesus into the U.S. Mission Field
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"Dancing of the Offerings"
by Mike Zehnder

"Is that where the animals are kept?" I asked, pointing to a circle of bamboo poles, one of many such circles peppering parts of the untamed fields in Nigeria. "No," I was told. "That's where people sleep. The poles keep the wild animals from attacking them while they sleep." It was my first foreign mission trip, and I had just demonstrated my complete ignorance of the impoverished living conditions faced daily by the third-world poor.

At lunch, we shared a loaf of bread. I saw maggots – fly larvae – crawling in the bread. The Nigerian man at whose table I sat was about to speak. I hoped to hear him say, "Oh excuse me, I see your bread has worms in it. Let me get you another." Instead he asked, "Would you like to offer a prayer of thanksgiving for this food or shall I?"

"Oh, I'd be pleased if you offered the prayer," I said, relieved that I would no longer be tempted to pray, "Lord, get me out of here!" or "Lord, please give me the strength and stomach to eat these worms in my bread so I don't insult my host or embarrass myself by gagging."

"Gracious, abundant Father in heaven," he began. "We thank you for this tremendous blessing of food when there are people all around us, even right here on this street, who have nothing at all to eat and whose stomachs are distended from lack of nourishment . . ." He went on for 10-12 minutes, thanking God for food and daily blessings, and fervently lifting up those who had less.

Around the two-minute mark, my eyes became moist with the realization that though these Nigerians were impoverished in physical ways, I was impoverished spiritually in the area of gratitude. They had so much thanks for so little; I had so little thanks for so much.

A few days later, we were worshipping with a congregation whose open-air "church building" in the jungle consisted of a waist high brick wall and four poles holding up a thin, tin-covered roof. After about three hours of worship, we were midway into the service and it was time for the offering.

I had already become used to the congregation "dancing in place" as they sang their songs. It was refreshingly enthusiastic praise. But I was surprised to see people now getting up from their chairs, whirling around in circles, bowing low, stretching high, all while loudly singing praises to God. One by one, each worshipper danced up the center aisle and placed some coins or some bills into a pot that was at the front. This offering process took almost 15 minutes. I leaned over and whispered to my host, "What do you call this?"

"The dancing of the offerings," he replied.

“But why does each person dance to the front?” I queried.

“Pastor Michael,” he said, “You have to understand that in my country we are so very, very poor. We have very, very little. But this should not and does not keep us from giving a portion of what we do have to the Lord. The Bible says, ‘The Lord loves a cheerful giver.’ We don’t want God to think that just because we are poor that we are giving merely out of duty or obligation. We want Him to know that we are truly happy for all we have and for what He has done for us through Jesus Christ. So we dance our offerings up to the front because we want the Lord to see that in spite of our poverty, we are still grateful and cheerful givers.”

I had just received a message far greater than the one I was about to deliver. It was humbling to see thankfulness in such pure form: thankfulness not for an easy life, nor for what God might do for them, but for the joy of daily life and salvation.

When I participate in worship with congregations around the country, and I hear them singing a *Te Deum* with mighty pipes, or giving thanks to God with Chris Tomlin’s *Forever* rendered by Praise Band, the posture and enthusiasm is what grabs me. Or, rather, the lack of enthusiasm...which reminds me of my own lack of enthusiasm on that first mission trip, sitting at table before wormy bread.

Americans cheer enthusiastically as a man catches a piece of pig-skin hurling through the air, as though he accomplished the greatest thing in the world. But when we stand before a gracious God who “richly and daily provides me with all that I need,” and who has “purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil – not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death,” it seems our enthusiasm wanes. Why?

No wormy bread is ours, but **heavenly riches**. As Paul put it, “For [God] chose us . . . to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ...to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.” (Eph 1:4-7) This is reason enough for unbridled enthusiasm and joy in our worship and in our daily living.

The glory of the Gospel is so much more attractive to unbelievers when they can observe believers who look less like they’ve been baptized in vinegar and look more like they’ve been baptized in the joy of the Holy Spirit. As “ambassadors” for Jesus Christ, (2 Cor. 5:20) we more faithfully represent Him when we **look** like we “remember all his benefits” as we “rejoice in the Lord always” in worship and in living. And the more we are rejoicing on the inside, the more apt we are to “tell everyone what He has done.”

That’s what “satisfied customers” do. They share the good news of what has brought them happiness or satisfaction. How much more ought those who have experienced GOD’S **Good News** shine for all the world to see!

So “Praise the Lord, all you people, and forget not all his benefits.” Dancing is optional.

Moment Extras

Questions for Reflection

1. For what am I thankful? How have I expressed my thanks to God?
2. For what is my church thankful? How do we express our thanksgiving to God?
3. Are my heart and offerings in tune with one another?
4. What do my offerings say about my faith in God? What motivates the offerings I give to God?
5. Is our God a God to be celebrated or mourned? When a guest comes to your worship service, what do they learn about God from your worship?
6. What is one thing you will do to enrich your personal worship experience?

Research

“Although large majorities of the public claim to be "deeply spiritual" and say that their religious faith is "very important" in their life, only 15% of those who regularly attend a Christian church ranked their relationship with God as the top priority in their life. As alarming as that finding was, its significance was magnified by research showing that, on average, pastors believe that 70% of the adults in their congregation consider their relationship with God to be their highest priority in life.”

Source: The Barna Group
(www.barna.org – Barna Updates – All Barna Updates - December 20, 2006)

Personal Devotional Resources

The Life Journal - at www.lifejournal.cc

Journaling is an excellent way to both record and process what God has spoken to us. It's also a useful tool to use at a later time, to reflect on and review some of the 'gems' that you have received. Without writing them down, you may forget those blessings and some very important lessons.

For All the Saints

A prayer book following the full two-year lectionary from Lutheran Book of Worship. There are four volumes in this series. Volumes I & II contain readings for the entire church year from Advent through the Pentecost; likewise with volumes III & IV. The volumes include daily readings from the two-year lectionary and saints of the church, but also the psalms, psalm prayers, morning and evening prayers, responsive prayers, compline, and biographies of the

saints quoted in the book. Go to www.augsburgfortress.org/store and enter "For all the saints" in the site search box.

From the Archives

The article "Worship Fuels Mission," from a February 2006 Mission Moment, speaks to this issue's topic. www.centerforusmissions.org – Resources – Resources by Topic – Worship, Articles on worship.

News from the Center

Upcoming Training Events. See our website or contact our office for more information.

- March 16-18: Worship in the Urban Context; Milwaukee, WI
- April 13-14: Sharing Christ in the City; Gary, IN
- Basic Mission Planters Training, Mon-Fri July 23-27, 2007, Irvine, CA

Report on Basic Mission Planters Training

Join us in praising God for the dedication and hard work of those who attended Basic Mission Planters Training Feb. 5-9. Fourteen mission planters, two of them from the Alberta-British Columbia District of the Lutheran Church--Canada, worked hard on their Mission Initiation Plans. Two have already submitted completed plans. The group was also blessed by the attendance of Rev. David Bueltmann, President of the Central Illinois District of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod.

Mission Moments, a biweekly electronic newsletter from the Center for U.S. Missions, brings information and encouragement to all who desire to share the God's great love in Jesus Christ with others. The Center for U.S. Missions provides research and training for mission work among unevangelized people in the United States. A partnership of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod World Missions, Concordia University in Irvine, California, and the North America Mission Executives of the LCMS, the Center serves all Christian denominations.

www.centerforusmissions.org
Contact us at office@centerforusmissions.org
1530 Concordia West; Irvine, CA 92612-3299;
949-854-8002 x1780; fax 949-854-6854
Michael Ruhl, Executive Director, mike.ruhl@cui.edu
Glenn Lucas, Director of Training; glenn.lucas@cui.edu
Mike Zehnder, National Worship Consultant; rmike.zehnder@cui.edu
Michelle Connor, Coordinator; michelle.connor@cui.edu
Karen Kogler, Mission Moments editor; karen.kogler@sbcglobal.net

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