Missions as a Formational Experience

Being Intentional About Spiritual Formation

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As you all know, it’s central to our mission that students are formed spiritually while at Baylor. And I want to say at the beginning that, while we are all always programing to that end, I’m really much more of a mystic when it comes to the significant work that happens for us spiritually.

God’s universe is personal and there is a curriculum of wholeness for each one of us that has its way of showing up in our lives.... Sometimes we see it... sometimes we don’t. Sometimes that’s okay, God’s just at work even when we’re asleep, which is what Jesus said the Kingdom of God is exactly like. God does the forming of the soul...

But we have a part to play. What we do, is cast seeds... Like that parable that Jesus shares about the seeds and the soils. Here at Baylor, all the time, we cast seeds hoping that they fall into some fertile soil or fertile soul. That too, is what the kingdom of God is like.

And it’s going on all the time at Baylor but there are some places where we have a great deal of confidence that the seeds we cast are going to fall on good soil.

Mission trips seem to have a way of tilling the soil of a soul. And our hope is that we as leaders are conscious of that and mindful that it’s a very important time to be casting seeds.

To mix our metaphors and bounce into John’s gospel. ... the Spirit is at work, giving birth to something new... but we become Midwives of the Spirit when we’re on mission trips. Not rushing anything, not forcing anything, but just tending to the process and helping students to do the same.

Even though we’re going to be tending to students, I want to say first that we have to be tending to ourselves. In fact, that’s generally always the best way to have an impact in any given situation.

It’s your own presence.

Your own attention to your life.
Your own soul awareness that is so key.
Being attentive to your journey and what God is doing there, in you, makes it more likely that you’ll be discerning of that in someone else. And we need that from you on these trips.
Your not a tour guide...
Simply a trip administrator...
A professor with a passion for your discipline.
You’re a shepherd... discerning what is needed.

I. Discerning Developmentally

Our trips need someone who discerns what is needed... a kind of willingness to see what is before you... and this is spiritual work. Perceiving what is going on with a student... They’re all so unique in their stories and personhood, in their stage of faith.

Possible Stages:

1. Their faith may be very “childlike.”
   They may be new to the faith. Completely new to the stories and narrative, they may not have much to go on... They’re getting to know Christianity. They may be a new convert and very zealous and dogmatic or they may have a childlike trust.

2. Others may be just beyond that beginning stage and they’re putting their faith together doctrinally and morally. Sort of like we do with older children in church. Where we’re not simply telling stories but going deeper into what they mean in terms of who we are.

3. Many will be in an adolescent faith – that is centered in experience. They’re still in that season where faith is more relational. It’s not a Sunday School faith, it’s more of a youth camp faith.

4. Some, may be in a time of thinking... and thinking critically about the faith. These are the students who’ve taken a step back and are looking at things more objectively... or rationally. They’re beginning to ask the big questions and the hard questions.
5. Or... maybe they're beginning to put things back together on the other side of some serious searching.

So... all of those will likely be on your trips. And most of you will have some of each... And you have to tend to each of them. You're the midwife to what the Spirit is bringing forth at this time for them.

Think of it this way... one of these things is going on.

- Orientation...
- Disorientation...
- Reorientation...

Am I helping them nail things down... pull things up... or put things back together.

Is my job here to teach the basics
  or to bless their questions and searching and doubting,
  or to simple be someone who is confessing the basics
  in a very nonanxious way.

Are they being oriented to faith?
  Disoriented by life and their experience with it?
  Or Reoriented in a more mature way?

The Psalmists is always writing in one of these ways. And often you’ll see these Psalms side by side meaning, folks are sitting side by side in the pews or on a plane to Africa. It’s also true all this is in you.

There are seasons when we cycle through this... orientation, disorientation, reorientation. As Ecclesiastes says, there’s a time under heaven for everything.

So... just be mindful of who they are and be mindful of who you are. That’s what I want to emphasize... can your own self-awareness increase? Spiritually?
In some sense, their formation begins with our own. They're depth depends on ours. Deep calls to deep, as the Psalmist says. You’re depth in the spirit calling to the depth in them.

II. Discerning Theologically

It’s important that we’re deepening our own understanding and thinking about the task of missions. What’s happening theologically to you as you engage in this? How are your questions changing?

You’ll be developing a Missiology – A theology of Missions... are you doing that with some intentionality. Who or what is speaking into that? What does your missions stump speech sound like these days?

So... just as a way of priming the pump.... Let’s see if we can’t identify some helpful theological handles as we work with students around their Missiology.

*If a colleague in your department said, “Why are you doing this???” How would you answer that theologically?*

You have reasons, most of which are rooted in evangelical or social justice traditions. You have good reasons for going. I know in many ways I’m preaching to the choir here but I think it’s important for the choir to learn some new songs. In fact, it’s really important that a vibrant theology be animating us and for that to happen it needs to animate you.

Some new song that really is raising your own consciousness about God’s mission in the world.

1. The Nature of God (for instance)

   The ecstatic nature of God seems to compel us to go. God’s nature is outgoing. It is love and love is always, by nature, self-emptying. Love that is ecstatic is love that is always giving and going and moving beyond itself.
So we go because we are made in God’s image and cannot truly be alive a part from giving ourselves to the world.

Why go... why not just mail a check to Zambia?
   The theological burden is on us...
   How bout because we’re Trinitarian.

2. The Life of the Trinity

   The life of God is best described in our tradition as Trinitarian. This was the vision of God that the Church named as it dealt with the story and with the incarnation and with the experience of being in the Church on the other side of Easter. God was Father, son, and spirit... relational... in a complete self-giving, abundant, joyful reality. The language they used was similar to saying “a circle dance.”

   So, we go in order to join in God’s life... redemption in the world only comes through relationship... just as God’s very being is relational.

   Why do we go? If you’re chair or dean asks you, why, how will you answer. What’s emerging in you? A part of why this is important is that Christians have been going from the beginning and the history of missions is one that we look back on sometimes and blush because we didn’t it from an immature place... or from a theology that was rooted more in an political empire or in western culture than in the kingdom of God.
   We need to continue becoming discerning leaders... Theologically.

   We go because we are by definition as disciples those who are sent.

3. An Apostolic People

   The apostles are “the sent ones.” Jesus used this language in John... I am the one sent by the father. Then later in chapter 20...
Even as the Father has sent me, so send I you. Our identity as followers of Jesus is to be sending and to be sent.

And we go to share the love of God... and join in what God is doing as He makes the world right.

4. The Missio Dei

The Mission of God is about the salvation of all things and God is always and everywhere about this very thing. God is redeeming the world and chooses to do that in incarnational ways. God is saving the world... not just the souls of people mind you. All creation is being redeemed and it’s our great joy to participate in it.

You'll have many who see the primary aim of your trip, the end of it, to get to the gospel message. Our position would be that, the gospel... the good news of God’s love... is lost if your love for and service to others is only offered so that they'll listen to your sermon. Our theology is important... our beliefs... our message that we share willingly but it’s not a separate thing.

And when we do share it, it is because we believe that these are God’s people... God’s creation... and their fulfillment and the world’s has everything to do with knowing God and God's ways.

And we are joining God in God's work and in God's proclamation of his love and hope for the world.

So how are you growing in that... what might you read this year. I’m asking Becky to put together a suggested reading list for leaders... especially some reading around short term missions.

I know each of you have your own disciplines and expertise but Baylor’s mission really requires all of us become the priest God has called us to be. We have to grow theologically.
Even as we keep becoming educators. And we want you to keep thinking pedagogically as you're creating this experience for the students.

III. Thinking Educationally or Pedagogically

There are different ways of knowing what we know. Be mindful that all of these are in play, especially in this kind of experience and we should be intentional but not controlling.

The role of processing is important... and it’s only one part and one we tend to rely on but we’ll start there. Let’s call that the intellectual or the rational.

1. Rational – This is typically going to come in the form of processing and reflecting with the group or individuals. But it can also happen by reading... or lecture or presentation.
   I know many of you have become very adept at this but thought I’d offer a few suggestions. (And remember that the members of your team will be in different places spiritually).

   (1) Come up with a few standard probing questions –

   • Where is this theologically challenging for you?
   • What part of your system of belief seems to be affirmed by what you’re experiencing?
   • You’ve had Christian Heritage... What has the Church had to say about this issue?
   • If (your parent’s, your pastor, your roommate, your professor) were here
     - how might they explain this spiritually?
     - what questions would they be asking?
     - what might their hope be for you? ...Their fear?
   • When you have these thoughts __________ is there an accompanying feeling?
   • Where are you seeing your own captivity to your culture?
   • What would happen in your current church if you told them all you were feeling and thinking just now?
• If you could get God to answer one question that is emerging on this trip, what would that be?

  **Give them silent time to reflect on the question.**
  **Perhaps teach them forced choices or rotation**
  **Maybe give them something to read, have five minutes of reflection, and then talk about it.**

(2) Develop a stump speech or two – Be ready to answer the question you’re going to ask. Be willing to say you don’t know and quick to acknowledge your own growth, change, limited understanding.

  **Assure them that they cannot ask a question that hasn’t been pondered through the ages and that God welcomes their questions.**

(3) So encourage them to read… to find spiritual soul mates and great thinkers. They need to learn to think with the Church.

Remember, this (rational reflection) is just one part of the equation. We’re not just working mentally but physical.

2. Physical... Bodily...

Be mindful that, especially on trips like these, that things are taking place at a physical level that are a part of the knowing... a part of why they are able to see as they see.

What would you include in this?

* A flight... ascent
* Pilgrimage
* Sleep

* Waiting
* Touching
* Smell

* Tasting
* Working
* ????

Theses physical experiences are not irrelevant and you may be able to help them appreciate this... Perhaps one day on the trip you ask them to be mindful of their physical experience. And then make connections to learning later that evening.
Be aware that certain motions lead to corresponding spiritual realities. When we kneel, we’re humble. When we lift our hands we’re opening our hearts.

3. Relational

As an educator you’re aware of how the community in a classroom changes the learning. It’s even truer on a mission trip, so we nurture the connections and perhaps even make participants mindful of the connections.

• How has/is the community impacting them?
• Are they aware of their resistance to one another? ... To those they're serving? Where is loving hard?
• Who conveyed grace to them? Who was prophetic?
• Can they consider the possibility that those on the trip, those they are serving, are angels in their midst with something to give or teach or open or challenge?

4. Liturgical

While we worship for worship’s sake, we should be very mindful that worship and prayer are also formational... and also that our cooperate prayer has a way of moving us quickly to another level of consciousness and capacity.

So be aware of, mindful of that... and take care with moments of prayer. It all shouldn’t be extemporaneous and off the cuff... personal... sentimental... rational... devotional.

For instance:

• What if there were a scripture verse or passage that became a kind of unison prayer for the trip?
• What if you wrote a prayer? Or what if you invited them to write prayers of thanksgiving or intercession or commitment or blessing and use them in the prayer time.
• What if there was a passage of scripture that served as a kind of confession of faith that you invited them to share in each morning... perhaps saying it together. **(Do the beatitudes, have them learn the Beatitudes on the trip)**

• What if you used Lectio Divina, a divine reading of a text and somehow connected that text prayerfully to what they experience that day. For instance, inviting them to imagine something they met in one of those crowds where Jesus healed. Read the text slowly three times, inviting them only to listen. **(do lectio)**

• Can music be used? Hymns? Choruses?
• Could you be silent and silent together?
• Could their prayers be guided? **(examine... Ignatius)**
• What if there were candles lit and perhaps lit for specific prayer concerns?

The point is that artful language, symbol, scriptural words and images, sacred music, prayers (spontaneous or planned), are not only ways of expressing something to God but ways of knowing... and doing these together should be on your agenda.

**Conclusion**

Realize that **1 and 1 and 1 and 1 make 40.** There is a deeper knowing available during these trips because all of these things are coming together in a sacred synergy. Thinking, relating, working, praying... To do these together over several intense days is, as you know, a powerful experience and one that is taking place at an elevated level of awareness.

I return to my original point... your own awakening, intentionality, your own experience spiritually... theologically... Your own learning... your curiosity about what God is up to... is the most important thing for you to consider and to attend to.

Your own heart.

Your own openness...

Your own recognition of God's presence...

Your own listening for God's call.