

# Current Thoughts

*from Dwight's corner*

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Over 200 persons attended the GRR Mission Conference this weekend. It was truly one of those great events! An incredible range of experiences and learning was available. The planners did a wonderful job, and the volunteers at Cherry Hills excelled in their hospitality. It is impossible to give testimony to the things that touched me personally without it appearing that I am dismissing others. But I cannot think of any other way to do it. So, here is a description of what is swirling in my heart after the Conference.

Rev. Lisa Harris (Bethel Neighborhood Center, Kansas City) preached on Friday evening. It was the best presentation of the complexities of poverty in general, and children in poverty in particular, that I have ever heard. It was a very important teaching moment—our entire denomination needs to hear Lisa. She challenged the presuppositions and prejudices of many good and well-intended persons.

As Lisa talked about poverty with all its complex components—societal, educational, economic, etc—there were two lines that really struck home. The first was, “mission is not an extracurricular activity.”

Whether she intended it or not, the phrase stimulated two thoughts for me. Mission is not merely another add-on to the list of possible Christian activities. If we are not involved personally in mission and if our churches are not actively engaged in mission, then we are skipping the core curriculum in the school of discipleship. The other thought stimulated by the phrase is that “mission” is not just something that happens “out there” (another meaning of “extra”). Yes, “mission” is half-way around the globe in Durban, South Africa where Doctors Rick and Anita Gutierrez work with HIV/AIDS (and other health issues) on our behalf. But mission is also just across the street from my home where there are both physically and spiritually hungry women, men, boys and girls. Mission exists in all places in between at the same time. It is blindness, if not hypocrisy, to see the one without the other. No wonder Dr. Kristina Gutierrez (Nicaragua) could say that the best way to raise up the next generation of mission-minded Christians is to send young persons on mission trips—first at home and then abroad. Want to see a “real missionary?” Look in the mirror!

The second phrase that came from Lisa’s lips was spoken as she unpacked the overwhelming nature of poverty. Given the complexity of the reality and the high probability of any one of us does not have the skill and resources to cope with poverty, Lisa said “At least, give them Jesus!” Is there any church anywhere that cannot do that? (If not, I wonder if they qualify as a “church”). Jesus Christ is the rock-bottom

content of Christian mission. Like Peter said, speaking to the crippled man at the Beautiful Gate: *I don't have enough money to solve your problem. But I do have Jesus—here He is!* And then touched the man. Jesus Christ is the only adequate motivator, sustainer and content of mission. The church that attempts to do mission without Jesus Christ will sputter and stall. The church that is motivated and sustained in mission by Jesus Christ will never exhaust its divine content.

I also appreciated the brief presentation by Doctors Anita and Rick Gutierrez (and even more so the private conversation with them later). While their dedication and competence was impressive, it was their expansive faith that most impressed me. I wanted to shout when Rick stood and said “Jesus is the Lord of healing.” Clearly, he understood the cosmic implications and consequences when we confess “Jesus is Lord of all.”

Another presentation that especially touched me was the workshop led by Revs. Claudia and Cristiano Barbosa. Claudia and Cristiano are co-pastors of Living Hope Brazilian Church, a new church plant in the Kansas City area.

I was riveted by Claudia’s testimony when she described what happened when she was a girl growing up in Brazil. Her parents came to her when she was 8 or 9 and said: “God has called us to be missionaries to the United States. Pack your things in one suitcase, and let’s go.” Claudia is now a second-generation missionary to the United States. She and her husband, Cristiano, are called to the immigrant Brazilian population in this country. They discovered a growing Brazilian community in Kansas City, and went there intentionally. The Great Rivers Region has been privileged to partner with them in this missionary endeavor.

While this immigrant population is mostly invisible, it is not the stereotyped impoverished community most Anglos imagine. They struggle mostly with the culture and the legal system. The Barbosa’s are there to be with them and to share Jesus Christ. As Cristiano said: “I cannot solve their passport problems, but I can help them get a passport to heaven.” Their goal is “to embrace the Brazilian community with the Word of God that heals and restores lives.”

This same immigrant church gathered up \$4000 to send Claudia back to Brazil on a mission to poor children. It was hard not to cry as she described buying bread and packing her rental car with every scrap she could, to give abandoned and neglected children one slice of daily bread in the Name of Jesus Christ. Along with the bread, the children were given a cheap, toy whistle as a gift. As Claudia was driving away shrill whistles filled the air in celebration of what God had done.

I think I heard whistles as I left the parking lot of Cherry Hills on Saturday.

