



July - August 2001

Prologue:

Pastor Chad Miller of Spirit of Life Church and Derek Carter, pre-Seminary student at Houston Baptist University, went on a teaching and outreach mission to the Amazon in August of 2001. This trip was highlighted by a powerful teaching conference in Manaus followed by an excursion to a number of river villages and mission stations in the interior of the Rain Forest.

The following is Pastor Miller's journal of this trip. On Saturday evening, we celebrated the Commissioning and Consecration of the 100 group leaders of Pastor John's Church. The crowd was so large they rented a municipal pavilion near the Amazon River. It was a great night. Suits and formals were the attire of the group leaders. The worship was awesome! I delivered the message of the great life transformation that Jesus can bring through a small group in a person's home using the account of Zacchaeus (Luke 19). I challenged the crowd to not just see the 100 leaders before them, but the 400 leaders that were going to be harvested from these groups within the next year! It was awesome!

The Brazilians were so honored to have us there for this great event. They see us as their mentors who brought them this powerful ministry tool of small groups just a year and a half ago. Pastor John told me that after tonight his church would never be the same! He's right. We both looked out over the crowd seated in front of us encircled by the 100 consecrated and commissioned leaders holding hands and singing praise. It was clear what God was doing. We saw the harvest. And we know that there will be more – much more.

Praise God!

July 30, 2001: Exclamation

Let me see. I'm trying to remember if this is my 7th or 8th trip to the Amazon? I've lost count. As I'm running through my last minute checklist, it dawned on me how routine these mission trips have become to me. I know the drill. But I need to remember that God doesn't look at it this way. A mission trip is never routine. Even if it is number 8, God has new and fresh surprises planned for us.

I had a powerful reminder of that this morning in my devotion and prayer time. I read back through the Prayer of Jabez (1 Chronicles 4:9,10). It is only 2 verses. I've read it a hundred times. I've studied it, dissected it, preached it, taught it, counseled with it, and passed it on to others. I guess I expected that reading it one more time this morning would be routine. But God surprised me. He often surprises me when I get stuck in a routine. As I read Jabez's prayer, I noticed something I'd never seen before. Surprise - an exclamation mark at the end of verse 9:

"Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory!"

The translators of my Bible had put this "!" flare of excitement to catch routine readers so that they wouldn't miss the power of Jabez's request. It had been there all the time, but now I noticed it staring at me. Now I get it.

There is nothing routine about God or His plans for my life. And there is nothing routine about this mission trip, even if it is number 8. The exclamation mark is a big part of what the Prayer of Jabez is all about. He is asking God to give him His blessing and expand his influence. He wants God to rescue him from the low expectations and boring routines, so that he can realize the great aspirations and big plans God has for his life. That is an Exclamation Mark Request!

I realized God wants me to get ready for an expanding of my life's territory. He wants to push me beyond my self-imposed boundaries and out of my comfort zones, so that I will have an Exclamation Mark Mission Trip - Number 8.

Sometimes it takes a lot of exposure to the Word of God for me to notice God in The Word.

Now I know this trip will not be routine.

The \$150 Bag of Shampoo

Carol is the director of Care Ministries at Spirit of Life. She is always caring. And when she isn't caring, she is thinking about new ways to care. I've come to respect her intuitions when it comes to care. So when she wanted to put together gift bags for the wives of the pastors we would visit on this trip, I knew it was a good idea. Or at least, at the end of the trip, I would look back on the idea and come to the conclusion it was a good idea. I guess I didn't realize what I was in for. How much trouble could a few gift bags be?

Carol spent days shopping for all the girly goodies and brought them over for me to pack up. I was shocked. I didn't have enough room for all the pretty smelling soaps, spongy things, shampoos, lotions and potions. I had to go buy 2 more giant duffel bags to make room for it all. The "Beauty Bag" was really, really heavy.

I had second thoughts about this whole beauty supply inventory. Surely they have pretty smelling girly stuff in Brazil, too? Wouldn't it be easier to carry dollars and buy out the beauty stores down there?

But God is the one who has given Carol her care gift and she really felt her beauty supply mission was important. So I decided to go with it, reluctantly. I thought to myself, "Maybe this should be called the Amazon Mission and Beauty Supply Trip." But then I seemed to remember Jesus defending a woman who anointed him with sweet smelling perfume saying:

"I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." - Matthew 26: 13

I also remember it was Judas the betrayer of Jesus that criticized the perfume-pouring woman. Not wanting to go anywhere near that story, I loaded the Beauty Bag into the van.

At the airport, when we were checking in our baggage, we were informed that the "Beauty Bag" was over the size limit. Bad news.

"That will be \$75 for us to take the bag," said the Continental clerk.

Grudgingly, we paid.

After arriving in Miami, we checked in at the Brazilian Air Carrier where the clerk repeated the bad news.

"That will be \$75 for us to take the bag."

I said, "I guess that's because it over the size limit, huh?"

"No," the clerk said. "We count your carry-on bag and you are one bag over the 3 bag limit."

The thought immediately crossed my mind of dragging that Beauty Bag out into the main corridor of the Miami International Airport and starting a new care ministry: "Free shampoo, lotions and great smelling girly potions... compliments of Carol." It was a great temptation.

But a lesson I've learned from previous mission trips reminded me that the things that are the hardest to get to the mission field are often the things God will use to have the greatest impact. So, I paid another \$75.

As the clerk called an assistant over to drag the heavy bag onto the luggage carousel, I thought, "God must certainly have something interesting planned for this \$150 Beauty Bag."

I will just have to wait to the end of the trip to discover the answer.

July 31, 2001: When the Holy Spirit Speaks

We arrived in Manaus at 4:30am. It was great to see Pastor John and his wife, Erminia. We had a traditional Brazilian breakfast of cheese, egg and ham on a bread bun. Throughout the day, many of our old friends came by to say hello and visit.

Our first order of business was to purchase the printer we had raised money for. It took us about 4 months to raise the \$7,000 to buy the printer. I spent it in about 15 minutes. Signing the papers is what took so long.

Later in the afternoon we met Pastor Aldo, the new President of the Denomination. He wanted to introduce us to a pastor of an independent church, which had been starting churches in the interior. His name is Pastor Lucio Porto.

I really didn't know what to expect or what to say to this pastor I knew almost nothing about. He started his church about 15 years ago when he broke away from the Baptist Church. I gathered there had been some disagreements, so pastor Lucio ventured out on his own and started Christ the Redeemer Baptist Church.

Pastor Lucio currently has 5 churches in Manaus and 17 congregations in the interior. He also runs a top-rated school in Manaus that is on a par with the better schools in America. The income that this school generates supports the mission work Pastor Lucio is doing in the interior.

I didn't know what Pastor Aldo may have said about us or what his agenda was in making the introduction. I asked John if there was a strategy or plan to this meeting. Something interrupted our conversation, so I was walking into the meeting pretty much in the dark. I knew when we got in, John would turn to me and say, "My brother, what would you like to say?" And I really didn't have a clue.

Normally, in this culture, you build relationships slowly. First there are the polite exchanges, compliments are swapped, and there is usually a lot of relaxed conversation. If that goes well, perhaps you will spend some more time together. And if that goes well, you might agree to take a small step in doing something together. The operative words are slow and relaxed.

I was very much aware that Pastor Aldo, being the newly elected President of the Denomination, had a reason for making this introduction. His Denomination has been pretty isolated and I was sensing Pastor Aldo was trying to explore some ways to introduce ministry partnerships in his new administration. I thought this was a pretty indirect way of testing the waters.

As we walked into Pastor Lucio's office, I was feeling uncomfortably unprepared for this meeting. I remembered Jesus telling his disciples not to worry about what to say when they were called before questioners. He promised that the Holy Spirit would give them words to speak at the appropriate moment.

I was expecting Pastor Lucio to be a hard charging, savvy, independent businessman, a sort of religious Lee Iococca. I was wonderfully surprised to find a humble pastor. He invited us in and without me saying anything, he warmly welcomed me to his church. He began to give God glory for his ministry and share his passion to take the Gospel to people who have never yet heard the Message of Salvation. I just listened as he described how his church planting work had taken him beyond the river villages into the remote communities in the jungle.

He then said that the Holy Spirit had just revealed to him that I had the same heart to reach people who haven't heard of Jesus. He said he was humbled and thankful to meet me and his churches were open to us. I was amazed. I hadn't said anything. All I did was show up and smile. The Holy Spirit didn't give me words, He had already done all the introductions to Pastor Lucio's heart.

Then Pastor Lucio said the Lord had just given him a word to share with me. He said, "God always blesses us when we take a faith step to follow the Lord in taking bold steps in our ministry. We will never regret taking a risk to do something new and unconventional to build God's Kingdom." Looking right at me, he said, "We are brothers because we have the same heart to serve the Lord and reach the lost. And even if we never saw one another again, we are now brothers in the Lord."

I just continued to be amazed. I still hadn't said anything but hello and yet it felt like this stranger was speaking straight to my heart. It was unmistakably the Lord's Spirit at work.

I did get a few words in before our meeting was over, but the conversation had been very one-sided. I had said very little, but God had spoken so much to all our hearts. I'm not sure what's next in my relationship with Pastor Lucio, but I guess that's the point Jesus was making with his disciples. We really don't have to worry about what to say.

August 1, 2001: Chest Pains

Today, we are getting ready for my first seminar. I will be speaking to Pastor John's small group leaders and apprentices on the topic, Keeping Your Heart for Ministry. Many of these are the original leaders I met with 4 years ago and introduced the concept of small groups to. They are the ones that have put their hearts and spirits into growing their groups, multiplying them many times. They have been in the trenches for a long time. They have seen other fair weather volunteers come and go. I want tonight's seminar to be a refreshing wind to their hearts and a strong encouragement.

I knew they didn't need to hear another challenge to go out there and win another one for the Kingdom. They needed to know that the pastors who had recruited them, given them a God sized challenge, and asked them to make huge sacrifices as group leaders, cared about them and their hearts.

I thanked them for all the sacrifices and service they had given to the Lord in their groups. And I told them I was not concerned for what else they could do for the group ministry at their church, but for their hearts. That was a surprise that got their total attention. As John translated my words, he looked at me with a smile.

I described how just a few weeks ago, after working too hard in my yard in the sweltering, July, Houston heat, I had had some unusual chest pains. The pains were a reality check for me to realize that I'm not as young or invincible as I thought I was years ago. So, I made an appointment with a cardiologist who ran a complete battery of tests on me to check the health of my heart. You should have seen the total attention of John and his leaders. I described all the tests, blood work, stress test, nuclear dye injections, and ultrasound. And I told them how afraid I was that I had pushed myself too hard that day in the yard and damaged my heart.

After all the tests were run, the doctor said I was fine - my heart was normal and healthy! It was then I realized how important and powerful the word "healthy" is.

I saw the smiles stretching across the faces of John and the leaders. I asked them about their hearts. Had they had heart pains as they have poured themselves into relationships as group leaders. After 4 years, how was their heart for ministry? Was it healthy?

The rest of the evening I affirmed the stress and burdens that go along with ministry as a group leader. I could feel them doing a mental inventory of their experiences- the frustrations, failures, hurts and disappointments. I helped them do a spiritual heart check up. I shared 5 principles to Keeping Your Heart for Ministry.

It wasn't a mountain top experience, but it was a wonderful evening of affirmation and care. John and I were shepherds. Tonight, we cared for the flock. And when a flock knows their shepherd cares and is watching over them, including their hearts, it creates a powerful bond. They feel that from Pastor John.

Their hearts are healthy. The prognosis is great.

August 2, 2001: Standing at the Eye of the Needle

This afternoon, John took me to visit Magi.

Magi is a wealthy businessman who made his fortune in tug boats, pushing barges up and down the rivers of the Amazon. He knows everything about the rivers - the towns, who's who, the movers, shakers and the politics. John led Magi to Christ 12 years ago. They have a special relationship. He has been an important supporter of John's ministry through the years.

Last year, John arranged for our mission team to stay at Magi's hacienda the last night of our trip. Magi was very gracious. I think he was curious about us. He has spent his life on the rivers and he knows how rare it is for Americans to venture into the river world of the Amazon Rain Forest.

The rich and powerful have so many obstacles to follow Jesus. Too often, they cannot disconnect themselves from the wealthy lifestyle they have worked so hard to get. I am reminded of Jesus' confrontation with the Rich Young man in Matthew 19. When Jesus told the Rich Young Man to first go sell his possessions and give to the poor, he couldn't give up his wealth. He walked away from Jesus rather than walking away from his wealth. Jesus was right. It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven - *"Easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God"* (Matthew 19:23,24).

Magi is a good example of the transformation God can work in a person's life. He has made it into the kingdom of God. He has a great heart.

I sense a child-like faith in him. When Pastor John speaks, Magi listens to every word like a son listens to his father. But when he speaks about his river world, you can hear the rough and tough tugboat captain speaking. What a contrast! I guess that's what happens when you pass through the eye of the needle.

Magi's health is failing. The river years have caught up to him. He is no longer the big robust man he was when I met him a year ago. He has spent a lot of his fortune on doctors and not gotten very much for his money. Even though his is not feeling well enough to get out of bed, he is anxious to see Pastor John and his crazy, American pastor friend.

I am amazed that even from his bed, Magi is still plugged into the political grapevine of the Amazon rivers. He hears that we will be traveling up the Uatuma River in a few days and he tells us something that is not yet common knowledge. The Brazilian Government has found a vast gas and oil field in that area. They have done some test drilling and every hole for a distance of 100 kilometers have hit the same field. It is immense! All I can think of as he describes the discovery is the oil fields of West Texas in the early part of the last century. All the politicians are secretly trying to figure out how they can exploit this new resource. Many of them will become unimaginably, disgracefully, sinfully, filthy rich. It has happened before. A hundred years ago, it was natural rubber growing in the rain forest instead of oil and gas. That era was known as the Age of the Rubber Barons. I guess this decade will be the Age of the Oil Barons.

Guess who lives in the middle of this newly discovered oil field? Two pastors we have done the most work with in our river ministry, Pastors Jason and Guadisee. I think God is up to something.

I can't help but wonder what a man like Magi could have accomplished if instead of making millions on the river, he had made spreading the Gospel to those river towns his life mission? What if a man like Magi had been led to Christ early in his life and he had used his resourcefulness, savvy, passion, and brute strength to plant churches in the Amazon? Or is that what God is up to right now? Could it be that he is now coaxing Pastor John and I through our own "eye of the needle"? Perhaps we are the ones that need to leave our comfort and seize the great opportunity to plant a new kind of church in the river towns above this great oil field.

I picture these poor river villages we have visited becoming large boom towns. Thousands and thousands of people will soon be pouring into these towns to work the oil fields.

Magi knows.

I know.

These backward places will soon be flooded with the wealth of the First World. Imagine the impact a new kind of church like the paradigm Pastor John and I have been establishing could have during the coming oil boom.

Maybe it is Pastor John and I that are standing at the "eye of the needle". Maybe Magi is showing us two pastors the way through.

I can't help but wonder, what if Pastor John and I were to dedicate the next decade of our lives to starting New Spirit Churches beginning in the Uatuma River?

Jesus' disciples couldn't get past the camel passing through the eye of the needle. They felt it was impossible. I remember Jesus' words:

*"With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible"
(Matthew 19:26).*

I don't want to be stopped by the impossible God wants to make possible.

What will John and I do?

I have to finish the scripture passage I have just been reading. I'm in too deep to stop reading now.

Jesus continued speaking to his disciples:

"Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first." (Matthew 19:29-30)

Today, I needed a rich man to show me the way through the eye of the needle and to the real wealth of eternal life. Thanks, Magi. Thanks for showing us the way. I shouldn't be surprised. He has the same name as the wise men who followed a star and found Jesus.

© 2001 Pastor Chad M. Miller