

Integrating the Five Components of Mission

Panel Presentation by Katie Eberhard

I struggled a lot with the decision and courage to take up the call to mission. I often attempted to negotiate with God, saying “God you must have the wrong person!” But in the end it was the tugging on my heart that I couldn’t deny. I knew God was calling me to Zambia.

I had an experience that may seem overly romantic to some, but is exactly how it felt to me was - I got off the plane and took in those first few breaths of Zambian air and it was as if I was breathing with the fullness of my lungs for the first time - I could feel my heart burning within me. Instantly I knew that I was exactly where I had to be.

Before I left for Zambia I came across a postcard with a couple verses from Psalm 139 on the back - “If I fly on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.” I placed this card next to my bed wherever I slept in Zambia to remind me every morning – wherever I’m going, God is already there. And every night – wherever I went, God was with me. This helped me get through the hard times and gave me the courage to keep at it every day.

LIBERATION -

This is an area where I learned a huge amount while on mission. In college I was actively working to eliminate injustice and promote human rights, but I gained a much different understanding when I was living amongst the poor and marginalized for a long time. Eventually, the causes and ideals I was working for took on human faces and gained individual names. In addition, I didn’t (probably like most people my age...) think seriously about death, specifically my own death before that time.

One of my first mission placements was at St. Anthony’s Children’s Village, which was an orphanage for children under the age of seven. Many of them were HIV positive or infected with serious diseases like tuberculosis. Thirty-three children died during the first year it was open, so a few of us planned a memorial service to hold on All Souls Day in memory of those children who had seemed to be forgotten by everyone else. During the service, we learned that another baby passed away. We took a moment to add one more name to the memorial at the front of the chapel. I was an emotional wreck, but the others were much stronger and kept singing – “Natuleya,” a song that stresses - “We are going. You are also being called home.” This revealed to me that they did not distance themselves from the one who died.

After this I struggled with grief and the response of my fellow caretakers to all these deaths. Knowing I was upset, they would try to comfort me by saying “that’s just the way it goes.” But this got me even angrier. I could not accept the idea that in some way it was God’s intention that all those children were dying. Because I grew up in the United States, where it is not normal for babies to die, I knew that life did not have to be this way. But, over time I began to understand better what they were really getting at. Heaven was much closer to their minds than mine. That was what gave them the strength to keep going.

The hope they embodied served as liberation for me from fear and depression – and moved me towards action and the desire to serve a source of life.

WITNESS –

We as missionaries are uniquely blessed in our position of witnesses of God's love. We are able to see miracles and healing in a way that other people often miss.

I went over to Zambia with the hope to do a lot for the people I met there... but eventually I learned that it was less about the doing....

The most compelling witness I was able to provide was simply through my presence.

Most of the people I was working with and living with were shocked that I could leave my family and friends for so long. But it was only through the "leaving" that I was able to better understand our common humanity and become a channel for others to learn this too. I was able to make new family. Build trust and friendship.

Often people ask me if I was homesick, while I was in Zambia. Yes I was, everyday. But now I am homesick for Zambia too, everyday. The other side of this is that I was more at home wherever I was in the world.

Some of my favorite moments were when I was with the kids at St. Anthony's and could then reprimand the new kids when they called me mazungu, which means "white person." The kids would say "Iwe, te mazungu, ni ba Katie fye" which translates – "That's not a white person, that's just Katie." My color hadn't changed, certainly my language skills didn't get that much better, and I still wasn't able to get my hips to move quite right to the music. It was only that I stuck around. The children began to accept me as one of them because I made myself available to them, and they knew I was committed to them.

During my time there, I accompanied a lot of people on their last weeks, or even days of their lives – I also stood by the side of a lot of people as they dealt with the illness and death of their family members. I felt completely useless most of the time because I couldn't do anything to stop the disease and I had no idea what to say to comfort them... but I began to understand that what was most important to them was that I stayed around. I was there to let them know that they were not alone.

It sounds too simple, but think about Jesus at his most trying moment – in the garden on the night before his execution. He didn't want the disciples to come up with a plan-b; he didn't even want them to defend him when the soldiers arrived.... All he needed was their presence.

Really, the Gospel is all about calling for peace and unity among all God's children. Mission puts us in the unique position to reveal the truth that we really are brothers and sisters - Regardless of blood ties, economic barriers, or political borders. We are able to truly stand on the side of the poor if we take the time to understand them as equals and be welcomed into their community.

Mission is something that doesn't go away after we finish up our term...it's a part of you for life. And I think it is this proclamation that is our main responsibility – we are all the same, we are all children of God.

I've been back for less than a year. I am still grappling to understand a lot of what I experienced and all I did provide while there.

When I first came home, I really struggled to share my stories. I didn't know how to describe all that I had witnessed. I couldn't process it in a way that I would be able to spit out anything that would make sense. It is truly awesome to realize how my life has been used. I think my co-workers and housemates would be shocked to hear this because now all I do is talk about Zambia! But honestly, it took about 6 weeks just to allow it to sink in and then slowly I could start talking.

Now I find that sharing brings me healing. It helps to keep it all fresh in my heart.

The five components of mission: proclamation, witness, dialogue, liberation, and spirituality are inter-related and continuous. I find that reflection on these revelations calls me to be quiet and still because they speak to me *about* the holiness of this work that we've undertaken. I find I to be a beautiful and tender revelation to understand that mission is less about the things I did and more about how available I made myself to be used by God.

I don't believe I've learned all that I can from the Zambian people and the experiences I've had there... I am still learning every day.

Katie spent three years in Zambia with Franciscan Mission Service.