

Reflections

New York City - July 28, 2008

As I reflect on the month in New York I think about what I anticipated before coming. One of the things I hoped to get was personal reassurance about my abilities to be a missionary. I hoped that I would come out of this with more credibility and sense of being more qualified, more “official”. I also hoped that I would grow more intimate with the Lord. He had certainly been drawing me closer in the weeks leading up to coming. I really expected my personal walk to just explode and blossom during my month here. I expected that I would be challenged in my personal weaknesses: navigating an unfamiliar place, trying to find the places to get our basic necessities, allowing my kids to be cared for by others for extended periods of time, working with people who were very different from me, and working in ministry with a new church. I hoped to grow in these areas and to discover other areas where I needed to grow and flex. I wanted to gain some knowledge about language acquisition and be encouraged about the likelihood of my learning Spanish. Finally, I hoped to come away with a good grasp of the big picture for how church planting could remain the central focus for us while we work with felt-needs ministries like education, healthcare and even hospitality.

As training began, I started to search for that reassurance and credibility that I felt I needed. Maybe it would come through the classes. Perhaps I would find it in my role with my church. Might God even give it to me through a word from someone else? A week or so into July, I realized that rather than finding personal assurance I was more convinced than ever that I was completely devoid of any special qualifications or abilities that would make me an effective missionary. I began to feel desperate. When would I ever feel like I belonged here, in this group of people who have dedicated their lives to serving God in an intentional, full-time, visible way? As our classes continued, a theme emerged for me: the relationship between dependence and humility. More and more, what I was hearing started sinking in. The result was a newfound appreciation for this opportunity for Christ’s power to be showcased by my weakness. Not that I think I have this dependence thing mastered. No, I am sure that it will be a constant battle between

my desire for affirmation and my willingness to lay it down and humble myself as a servant. But now I will be more aware of the struggle and more likely to embrace my weakness as an opportunity for Christ's power to be made manifest. My search is over!

Less than two weeks into July the stress and tension of the situation here came crashing down on us. Scott and I were short, irritable and argumentative with one another. My thoughts were of nothing but tasks, schedules and needs. Pete Scazzaro's talk about slowing down, centering our life, having a personal Sabbath and Daily Office seemed like a cruel joke! Since we arrived I had completely ceased my beloved early-morning routine of listening to a new sermon on my i-pod while walking and running several miles then returning home and spending up to an hour in the Word and in prayer. What kind of missionary was I? Here I was, doing all this training, preparing and ministering and not even getting in the bare-minimum of personal devotion and prayer. All my thoughts of an explosive experience of the Holy Spirit were out the window. In the past I would have been so self-condemning that it would be hard for me to approach God. I think that the saturation of grace-based teaching and living over the past three months is sinking in and starting to take root because that is not what happened. Instead, I got up early one morning, put on my running shoes, clipped on my I-pod and headed for the park. After listening to an encouraging sermon by one of my favorite pastors, I returned home and had an extended daily office with prayer, reading of the word and meditation. To my delight, it was just as sweet as it had been when I left off. I met the same loving embrace of Christ, the same sweet fellowship of the Holy Spirit and the same assurance of grace. Although it was not exactly what I had originally hoped for, it was perhaps an even better, more realistic and more affirming experience than something "explosive".

The schedule and pace of pre-field took off from day one. All our hours in the day were completely filled between assignments that Ascension had for us and MTW training at Evangel. After about 10 days I could not keep going at that pace. On the second Saturday our team was supposed to have an all-afternoon working session to prepare crafts, paint scenery, build props and get ready to set up for VBS. Our youngest child, Cody, was cranky and tired from a solid week of no naps and I was at my breaking point. Scott and I were on edge with one another and had no time to really sit down and talk it all out. We arrived at the school to start and I looked at Scott and told him, "I can't do this. I need to go home." I think he saw how serious this was for me because he told

me to go. I took Cody and we went home. I spent the afternoon cleaning up, preparing a shopping list, doing some laundry, reading and resting. That night we opted to put the kids to bed early and sat down to figure out what to do. We were able to identify the main things that were causing so much stress and conflict. We talked about setting some boundaries individually and for our family. I think we finally realized that we had the ability to make some decisions that would protect our emotional health and our family's sanctity. Learning to set some limits and boundaries was one of the most helpful lessons that I am taking away from our time here. While I want to grow and be stretched in all areas of ministry and personal aptitude, I also need to be able to accurately evaluate how I am handling the pressure and stress. I cannot expect so much of myself all at once. I discovered that there are certain things that have to be healthy and intact in order for me to be able to move out into areas of challenge. For me, I need some basic things for the children to be taken care of before I can really put energy into personal growth. Knowing this ahead of time will help me once we reach Belize. Next month, I know what things I should take care of before trying to jump right in to the ministry 'needs'.

Learning Spanish has been high on my list of priorities as I have thought about getting to Belize. Even though the national language is English and all the schools are taught in English, the heart language of the people is Spanish. All of the churches that we will be working with use Spanish for services: announcements, singing, prayer and preaching. Our primary role in Belize is to help promote and start small groups within the village churches. Most people who might come to a small group or Bible study can most likely speak fairly good English, however, we think that we will be far more effective in ministering to that culture as we work to learn the language, because language is more than just words. Learning the language will enable us to better understand why people do things the way we do. It will help us understand what values are present in that culture and give us a better grasp of their worldview. The language training provided by MTW through the PILAT program was some of the most helpful instruction I have ever received on any topic. I was very skeptical about how much a general class on linguistics that was not specific to my target language would help me. I was pleasantly surprised. Now I feel like I have plenty of tools to choose from to help me in learning Spanish. Understanding the learner-driven model of language learning helped me to get some concrete ideas about things that I can do to facilitate my own learning. I love the fact that I am not dependent on someone else to "teach" me but that I

can control what and when I learn and at what pace I proceed. I am excited about learning a new language and have a lot of confidence in being able to do it on my own, since we are not going to language school at this time.

Finally, I had hoped to get a clearer view of the big-picture for how church planting is central to our presence on the field and how “deed” ministries fit into the vision for advancing church planting movements. First, John Leonard helped to set the stage for how evangelism and discipleship fit into the greater vision for church planting. His ideas about discipling unbelievers and evangelizing believers challenged everything I thought I knew about these two aspects of ministry. It took me more than a week of wrestling with these ideas to get to a point where I really understand his position. For the most part, I agree with him. I think his perspective is valid and I hope to be able to implement some of those principles while we are in Belize. After that, Bill Yarbrough spoke to the issue of how the “deeds” aspect of a word and deed ministry fit into the greater context of church planting and the facilitating of church planting movements. Bill challenged me to think of my motives in ministry. He reminded me to be in constant prayer for humility, for genuine love for others and for the Holy Spirit to lead and guide everything that I do. The verse that he used, Micah 6:8, was a great summary for what should be my guiding principle in ministry. “What does the Lord require of you but to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God?” This verse has been resounding in my head in every context since then and I hope it will continue to be what prompts me to look closely at my own heart in every situation and what drives me to fervent prayer. He made me feel like acts of kindness, service to the community and aid for the poor and suffering are exactly what I should be doing. How encouraging! For these things I do not need any special qualifications or abilities. God has equipped me for these things already through the indwelling of His Holy Spirit. This was very freeing for me and added to the relief and comfort I felt at discovering how my weakness could be strength in God’s economy.

I cannot imagine moving on to Belize in two weeks without having gone through this month first. As difficult as it was at times, I know that God has used it to continue the great work that He has been doing in preparing me for cross-cultural missions. I am very grateful for all the instruction, encouragement, admonishment, challenges, struggles and even conflict. During these few weeks, I have had an opportunity to begin putting into practice many of the things I have learned through training events like I&O, Living

in Grace, visits to the field and the Pre-Field training here. It is one thing to hear good teaching, another to intellectually understand it, but it is far greater to “live” it. This month has given me a chance to live out much of what I have been hearing and meditating upon for the past 18 months. New York has been like a micro-ministry field. I have experienced a crash course in acculturation, language acquisition, team development, partnering with other ministries, boundary setting, conflict resolution, personal spiritual growth and exhaustion, basic survival skills, family upheaval, individual and collective goal development, church planting, justice and mercy ministry, and articulating vision, to name a few! After all this, I know that the hardest part is yet to come. The next 3 to 6 months will probably bring great excitement, uncertainty, joy, pain, loneliness, friendship and more. My prayer is that God would bring to mind many of the truths that I have learned and that He would work them deeply into my life as I learn more and more to rest in my dependency on Him.