

WHAT ABOUT RISKY MISSION TRIPS?

A RED MOUNTAIN COMMUNITY CHURCH POSITION PAPER

INHERENT RISK

Risk is inherent to life in our fallen world, particularly in the age when modern travel brings us into direct contact with radical religion and politics. There are places where Americans are in danger just because they are Americans.

"I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me." — John 16:1-3

Risk is also inherent in the Christian life. There are places where Christians are in danger just because they are Christians. People of the Christian faith have always encountered danger in their efforts to spread the gospel. They have faced danger from those that oppose their presence and message, and from natural causes such as sickness, injury, and natural catastrophe. It is safe to say that the Gospel never would have come to us or to any one else if Christian workers had stayed home when things got risky. The faith has spread through the suffering of those who spread it.

As leaders at Red Mountain Community Church, we recognize that such risk is present in all mission efforts. We realize that there are certain times when such efforts should be called off. There are other times when they must be carried out in the face of risk. Here follows some of the principles that we would advise all to use in making personal decisions about their involvement in mission trips whether at home in the USA, or in foreign countries.

THE BOTTOM LINE PRINCIPLE

In any effort to advance the kingdom in any place it must be asked by the individual participants, "Does God really want me to engage in this mission?" This is the bottom line principle because in the end, all that matters is that we each accomplish what God has called us to do. There is no risk greater than that of not being obedient to His call.

We understand that as church leaders we can be made aware through God's Spirit, that His will for us as a church is to engage in a risky mission effort. When we become so aware, we are not saying that safety and well-being of everyone involved is guaranteed. We will make every attempt to communicate known risks. Then each individual, along with their guardians where appropriate, must determine if God wants them personally to be involved. So ultimately we see that the matter of risking one's safety and well-being is an individual one.

We do believe, as Christians of all ages have, that if a person's involvement in a specific mission effort is God's will, then God can and should be trusted with the outcome, whether pleasant or unpleasant. In the end, He will judge righteously and make up the losses. This is true even if it should cost us our physical life. We see this as a very basic tenant of the Christian faith.

THE PRINCIPLE OF RISK ASSESSMENT

As individuals determine God's will for them in such matters, certain sound principles can be of great use. In the Scripture we find times when life and safety were put on the line (Acts 21:10-14). We also find times when this was avoided (Acts 9:23-25; 23:12-22). The primary factor in the decision seems to have been the specific leading of the Lord in the matter. We assume that in such decisions, wisdom was sought out. We must do the same. Risk assessment is not determining if something COULD happen. Something bad COULD happen at home! We trust God with the unknown. When we speak of risk assessment we are speaking of determining the KNOWN risks and thinking through the likelihood of certain consequences.

There are two reliable sources of information in this regard.

1. State Department advisories are a source of information. They will often err in the direction of safety, but as citizens we owe it to our fellow-citizens to utilize this information. A State Department advisory against travel is not necessarily a "No!" from the Lord. It is a caution and a warning that significant risk is involved and should be evaluated carefully.
2. People on the ground, in the particular country and on location are another important source of information. Their assessment of the everyday situation is critical. If they say don't come, it is probably a deal-breaker. In all cases the evaluation of those on site will be sought out.

Those experienced in global missions would say that media reports vary widely in their credibility when they report on dangerous conditions within a country. They serve primarily as an alert to study the matter carefully. News reports, in and of themselves, should not become to us our prime source of information.

THE PRINCIPLE OF PRIORITY

The line can get rather subtle between Godly zeal and the mere fleshly pursuit of adventure. Missions can be the mantra, when sightseeing and tourism is the real motive. We can suppose ourselves to be doing the work of the gospel when there is no proclamation of the gospel connected with our own effort.

For these reasons there are secondary questions that must be asked in taking on risks associated with mission work. They are secondary because the primary question always remains, "Does God want me to do this?" Here are two secondary questions each individual should ask before they assume the risks inherent in mission work. First, we should ask, "What is the nature of the task that this particular effort requires of me?" Second, "Is this task that I will do connected intentionally to someone's proclamation of the gospel?"

These two questions are significant because in the Scripture, it seems that missionaries risked life and safety when one of two things was at stake. First, they put it all on the line to make a verbal proclamation of the Gospel and establish people in the teaching of the faith (2 Timothy 1:8-12). Second, they put it on the line when the health of the Church was at stake. Paul's trip to Jerusalem that eventually cost him his life was an example of this (Acts 21:1-14). He took that fateful trip against clear warning. He did so for the sake of the health of the Church as a whole—specifically the uniting together of Jews and Gentiles. Searching out a solid connection between the task we will be charged with and the proclamation of the gospel will often shed light on the wisdom of incurring personal risk.

CONCLUSION

Any service to our God involves risk on our part. The risk assumed by those who carry out the gospel directive is significant, even at home in the US. Therefore, the Lord's leading must be prayerfully sought out by individuals who might be involved in such efforts, and by their guardians. A policy and procedure cannot take the place of this individual process. Where the Lord's leading is present in an individual's life, they must entrust their safety and well-being to Him. Those in their family must do the same. What they must avoid is the greater risk of not being willing to go to the place that God wants them in. Throughout Scripture this failure is presented as of greater consequence than that of even the loss of one's physical life.