

Me..., or We?

The wisdom of “team” in a missionary world

Dr. John Splinter



A friend of mine wears a Superbowl ring. Grant Williams played for the New England Patriots on their 2002 world champion team. He enjoys telling football stories, but his eyes really light up when he starts talking about his team-mates. Over the years he’s asked several former teammates, “What was the greatest thing about winning the Superbowl.” To a man, they say their best memories were of relationships ~ of being a team ~ working shoulder to shoulder with one another ~ through the grit and pain of it all ~ to the final victory. One thing is clear in Grant’s description of that Superbowl experience: *There’s not much talk about “me” ~ it’s all about “we.”*

By contrast, when a person thinks about missionaries, one of the first images that often comes to mind is of David Livingstone trudging alone through the African jungles, or the “Lone Ranger” riding across Western plains. And most missionaries do experience isolation and loneliness. For some the experience is challenging but manageable; for others it’s painful and destabilizing. Some live close enough to other Christian expats that regular contact is easy; others live within sight where the Earth ends.

The solo-player model might be square-chinned and flinty, but Western culture is changing and that model doesn’t seem to fit with where we’re heading. Additionally, the solo-model isn’t necessarily biblical. Jesus had a team of twelve, plus a larger group around them. When he dispatched the 72, it was in teams of two. Paul always had travel companions in his missionary journeys.

Whether the reasons are spiritual or generational, it’s clear that missionary work in this era will likely be best accomplished through use of teams. [Global Grace is building upon the strategy of teams. We have a ways to go but that’s where we’re aiming. In addition, we invite our entire staff to be thinking about their personal role in creating teams.](#) Toward that goal, here are eight thoughts.

Reason #1 ~ The World Has Changed

In the late 1700s through late 1800s, when Carey, Judson and Livingstone were taking the message of Christ to unreached peoples, much of the target audience had never seen a white person. Westerners were a novelty. Cultures were generally less politically hostile toward them. Getting to the field was a greater challenge, but once there, missionaries faced less probability of assassination by crazed religious zealots, and less harassment by national or state governments. It was OK to say, “I’m a missionary.”

During that era also, the family was the basic building-block of most cultures, so most kids grew up with greater emotional and relational stability. There was nothing like the 41% of U.S. kids being born out of wedlock, plus 40% raised in divorced homes, with high percentages of the

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remainder growing up in acutely dysfunctional homes. The fallout from these stats is devastating, with high percentages of younger people today entering adulthood with some level of attachment deficit issues and other psychological challenges. “Attachment deficit issues” generally mean problems, such as lower resilience in the face of isolation or trauma, greater need for relational support systems, higher probability of addictive behaviors, and reduced ability to sustain long-term commitments.

The destruction of the Western family system has had a bowling-ball effect upon formerly solid pins undergirding our culture. Since values are primarily transmitted through relationships^{1,2,3}, it’s not surprising to find research by George Barna that less than one-half of one percent of American adults aged 18-23 have a biblical worldview.⁴ As faith in God diminishes in today’s Western Culture, values become *contextually determined*, which explains why relativism has become the dominant moral ethic of this generation. Christian faith as it has been known and practiced for two thousand years, has today been reduced to just one of many nice ideas. Post-Modern philosophy is filling the vacuum. This is the milieu within which younger missionaries are rising.



Contrasting this with their grand-parents’ more stable relational soil of lifetime marriages, lifetime friends and church community, it’s no surprise that one of the more influential TV series in the 1980s – 1990s was “Cheers,” a series of mini-vignettes about young singles. To catch a glimpse of how this TV series reflected tectonic cultural shifts, take a moment and read the lyrics (see endnote #5).

If you just read the lyrics, did you notice the attachment and moral vacuums in each lyrical phrase? Now ponder this: the TV series was popular during today’s upcoming generation’s parents’ era. Those who were 15 – 30 in the 1980s and 1990s are now 45 – 60 years old, and it’s many of their kids now in the 20-30 age range pondering the mission field. That’s how fast our culture is transitioning. U.S. culture is no longer a solid and monolithic entity, like one of those old granite Post Office buildings. It’s now an avalanche in full roar. As we drift from faith in Christ nearly everything becomes *transitional*, and one of the residual impacts is that the younger the missionary candidate, the greater the likelihood that small, *integrated teams* are going to be essential for enduring tenure on the field.

Task One

Name three ways in your generation clearly differs from your parents’ generation:

How might these differences impede one’s ability to function in a solo missionary capacity?

Task Two

Recognizing it will be difficult for you to maintain the closeness and immediacy of your best friends and family in the States, how might you go about keeping these relationships close? Identify three or four ways you'll work at maintaining a strong and meaningful connection with family, friends and supporters in the States::

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____
- 4. _____

As you live cross-culturally, you will definitely need to create new relationships, especially with indigenous people. Quite frankly, the more you work at maintaining your Stateside relationships, the more it may draw you away from forcing yourself to create and maintain relationships with indigenous people. Recognizing this tension, draft a preliminary "plan" for how you propose to manage this common missionary conundrum: _____

Reason #3 ~ Support In Crisis



Trauma happens to almost everyone, but is more likely on the mission field. One researcher⁶ cites findings that within the U.S., 10% of men and 5% of women report experiencing three or more lifetime traumas. However, among 250 missionaries serving in West Africa, 71% of men and 64% of women reported having three or more traumas. That's 7X more for men, and 13X more for women! Those stats may or may not apply where you serve, but the fact remains, trauma is more likely on the mission field.

This being so, when crisis or trauma strikes, there is nothing more helpful than having loving friends and co-workers wrapped around you. Whether the crisis involves the accidental injury of a spouse, rape, robbery, beating, kidnap, attempted murder or any other critical incident, having loving hands and caring souls wrapped around you, embracing and sharing suffering as only committed and beloved people can, is invaluable.

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Here are ten situations that have happened to missionaries on the field. Take a few moments and imagine the difference in how you would likely progress through each of these traumas, and what difference it would make *with, vs. without*, a loving community of supportive friends:

- Civil war erupts. You and your family must hunker down in a building for a week, as bullets fly, food and water run out, and the nearby dead begin to stink.
- Political winds suddenly change and you and your family must run for your lives, leaving breakfast on the table, fleeing to get out of the country before being shot.
- A motor vehicle accident critically injures one of your children.
- Your wife or daughter is sexually assaulted.
- Your children are beat-up on the way home from school by indigenous teen punks.
- Your son is arrested for drug possession and the local government gives you two days to move your family from that nation or your son will be imprisoned.
- Your spouse suddenly becomes ill and dies before medical treatment can be reached.
- You and your family contract malaria and are sick for several months.
- Your newborn has a disorder that soaks up the family's time, energy and resources.
- Your family is robbed at gunpoint, your lives threatened.

Having a team of loving people care for one immediately after any of these traumas could make the difference in whether they sink into shock, question God, and leave the field altogether, or heal and grow through the pain of the trauma thereby becoming a more effective missionary.

We are not predicting that any of these things will happen to you. But we're leading you to ponder some deep things. Psychiatrist and former missionary, Dr. Frauke Schaefer writes, "The level of social support as well as the perception of organizational support during and after a crisis affects one's coping ability and overall resilience."⁷ Close friends wrapping themselves around one soon after a trauma can provide situational stabilization, emotional decompression, critical resources, wisdom, prayer, encouragement, comfort and protection. This is part of your job to create. Task number Three is aimed at leading you to think through this issue.

Task Three

Think of some trauma that you know happened, either to yourself or to someone you know.

1. What kinds of resources were immediately needed by the person in this crisis?

2. What people-resources were immediately available to the person in this crisis?

3. Name three things that would be important if you or your family experienced trauma – how are these three items related to friends "being there" for you?

Reason #4 ~ Healing After Crisis

It was a raw windy late-winter Minnesota day in March, 1959. A group of 20 somber relatives gathered around a freshly dug grave as a casket was lowered into the frozen ground. Inside was my father. I was 13 — my mother was 35. She asked the gathered group to join hands and sing a hymn we all knew by heart:

*Bless 't be the tie that binds, our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.
Before our Father's throne, we pour our ardent prayers;
Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one, our comforts and our cares.
We share each other's woes, our mutual burdens bear;
And often for each other flows the sympathizing tear.
When we asunder part, it gives us inward pain;
But we shall still be joined in heart, and hope to meet again.*



Pain doesn't end when the last shovel of dirt is thrown onto a grave. Sometimes reality doesn't even begin to sink in at that moment. Months later the sound of a car door closing would draw me to the window, to check and see if perhaps dad hadn't come home after all, ending this nightmare. Two years later I saw a man walking downtown Winnipeg and chased him down because from the rear he looked just like dad: same body, coat, hat, hair, gait. But the face turned out to be different. Reality can come slowly, especially when it's traumatic.



There are times in which no one but a trained professional may be able to help a severely traumatized person. However, *more often than not a team of loving friends or co-workers can be of enormous benefit in post-incident processing and healing.* Most crises do not require trained CISM trauma teams. But close friends can be even more effective in helping wounded souls heal.

Having close attachment and trust *prior* to a critical incident provides a bridge across which one may walk in their journey toward wholeness. One's support system becomes the brick and mortar of these healing bridges, providing encouragement and hope essential to coping and rebuilding. Missionary and therapist Karen Carr writes, "Missionaries who proactively build community will find their personal resilience growing as well as the community resilience, which ultimately leads to biblical caregiving in times of trauma."⁸

Emotional healing from trauma can be somewhat like an athlete recovering after getting his "bell rung" in a football game. I've stood on the sideline with other players as they repeated the same questions: "What quarter is it?" "What position do I play?" "Who are we playing?" A few years ago these moments were seen as incidental to the game, perhaps a bit funny. They're now recognized as serious injuries, as traumatized brains attempt to regain normal function.

It's often similar recovering from trauma as the same questions are repeatedly asked, reflecting a mind staggered by traumatic realities. Being able to process these struggles with trusted friends begins to help the mind emerge from chaos. A friend's tears say, "I love you and ache for you." A long hug says, "You're not alone." Prayer helps draw the wounded soul to the heart of God. Loving pursuit by co-workers helps overcome shame, avoidance, hyper-vigilance which may

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result from the trauma. The resources of friendships lift loads which otherwise were crushing and unmanageable, providing resilience and hope.

So it was with Helen and Bill, home on furlough for the first time since going to the field. Suddenly Bill was very sick and was rushed to the hospital. Scores of people prayed for him. Some of their team gathered with Helen at the hospital. But in four days Bill was dead. They'd only been married six years. Both had felt God's call to the mission field. Now what?

Helen's friends continued keeping their arms around her. She knew she wasn't alone; love was pouring from all around. Soon she began pondering returning to the field as a single woman. Before returning, she recruited a few new friends to join her on the field. She's now back in service, where her team speaks of her as "our much beloved Helen."

Most traumas can be successfully waded through with the gracious attendance and caring support of friends and loved ones. Healing after crisis is *far more effective* when surrounded by caring team-mates.

Task Four

How does one heal after being physically or emotionally wounded, and how is healing related to relationships?

Name three ways a team may function as "Jesus with skin on" for a wounded or grieving team-mate:

Reason #5 ~ Synergy Whups

The concept of "synergy" may be reduced to a mathematical equation: $1 + 1 = 3$. It's the notion that when two or more people become involved in a task, the level of creativity and potential solutions grows exponentially. Synergy only happens within teams.



For example, the U.S. Army Materiel Command (AMC) identifies its workforce as being composed of Soldiers, Civilian employees, and Contractors ~ three distinct entities each with its own identities, goals and structures. The AMC writes, "We...realize synergy through shared responsibilities to provide the best opportunities for our (soldiers)."⁹

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Synergy happens when a corporate CEO gathers his top research, product development, marketing and production personnel, with the company’s largest buyers, for balloon-floating discussions. The collective input of teams always exceeds the ability of individuals in gathering wisdom and ginning up creative solutions. The creativity of synergy “whups” solo effort.

“Wiki” has landed. Many corporate giants of our era have learned that collaboration and shared power is far more effective than even the most robust individual effort. The “Open Source Ecosystem” has arrived in which, for example, powerhouse Proctor & Gamble invites *the whole world* to offer solutions to R&D challenges. In previous generations, corporations held their R&D close to the vest, lest some competitor steal their information or come up with better solutions. Today, they use synergy.

The effectiveness of team effort is easy to see. Isn’t that the essence of the entire Church Planting Movement philosophy? Whether one uses “CPM” or “DMM,” it involves people working together and launching churches, that launch churches, without theological and leadership overlays, each with unique worship styles, sans seminary-trained pastors.

Any needed structure within these “Wiki churches” is provided by the Word and Spirit of God. It’s through teaming that the Holy Spirit is able to aim and energize the myriad gifts that He built into each member (see Rom. 12:6; I Cor. 12:4-30; Eph. 4:11-13). With each new member on a team the potential for synergy increases geometrically.

Task Five

Acme Corporation manufactures widgets. It has two sales divisions, each with ten sales personnel. Division A sales staff are instructed to work *individually* to sell widgets. Division B is instructed to work as a *team* to sell widgets. Which Division will likely sell more, and why? Can you think of at least three reasons:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

How are the three reasons you identified above, similar to what a team would do in the field when planting churches?

Reason #6 ~ Teaming Is Biblical



King Solomon wrote the following text, often used in wedding ceremonies for obvious reasons: *Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone?*

Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. Eccl. 4:9-12 (NIV).

Being a missionary sometimes involves serving in remote places. Being part of a “team” can sometimes seem challenging, when one’s closest “team-mates” live hours away. Yet as teams, we recognize that we are indeed one another’s helpers. There are times when it takes more effort and creativity to remain closely attached. There are times when those “above” us on a flow-chart, may be weaker than we are, and we may be called upon to help encourage and lift them up for a season. The question of teaming and attachment is vital within GGF. We are not just a loose confederation of solo-players. We intend to be one another’s helpers, just as the Early Church did this.

Christ was always accompanied by the Twelve, plus several others.

When Christ sent out the seventy disciples, he paired them two by two.

In Paul’s first missionary journey he took Barnabas, John Mark and Luke.

In his second he took Silas, Timothy and Luke.

In this third, Timothy, Erastus, Gaius, Aristarchus, Timothy, Secundus, Tychicus, Trophimus.

The point: Teaming is Biblical.

Task Six

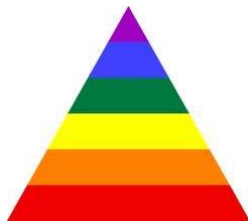
We may not be responsible for each other’s performance of specific missionary tasks. But we are called to “be there” for one another, in ways that *only we* can be there. Here are four reasons why “teaming” is critical to missionary work. Ponder these. Then see if you can add six more:

1. Accountability
2. Strategizing for greater effectiveness
3. Support during difficult challenges, or seasons
4. Prayer
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Reason #7 ~ Christian Teams Can Model Servant Community

If we want new believers to see Christian community, the best way to teach it is through relationships. When Christ washed the feet of the disciples he did it to embody the “new normal” of relational functioning within his Kingdom, and did it *during* the Last Supper as the disciples argued [again] about which of them was considered to be greatest (Lk. 22:24).

Not long thereafter, religious persecution drove the disciples to the far reaches of the Roman Empire. It was not Christian theology that won the Roman Empire to Christ. Rather, it was *how the disciples lived* that led Tertullian to comment, “See how they love one another.” Without relationships, the word “love” is a platitude. The *application* of Christ’s love is best seen within community. Here are two triangles to provide a metaphor.



In “normal” organizational structure the CEO is at the top (purple). Then come VPs, Directors, Regional leaders, Sales personnel, and at the bottom, Customers. This is how most organizations are structured, which explains why the disciples were arguing during the Last Supper. It was a scramble to the top, for special privileges and power. So Christ inverted the triangle, to model the “new normal” in his Kingdom.



The Servant Leader model inverts the power triangle. Everyone from bottom to top is aimed at serving and empowering those *above* them. *The issue causing many Christian organizations frequent problems, is the misuse of power plus its concomitants of pride, territory and rights.* In the “Christian” model the “team leader” (purple) is the head servant (Lk. 22:27). This means that within GGF the “home office” exists to serve the field team, as the field team exists to *model Christ* to unreached people-groups. Christ’s model was that of one who served. Ours must be the same.

This inverted leadership model, the “Servant Leader Model,” has been written about widely and has been adopted by such luminary organizations as S.W. Airlines, the U.S. Armed Services, Starbucks, Marriott International, Whole Foods, Nordstrom, Walmart and scores of others.

Task Seven

How do you envision yourself on the mission field, living this biblical model? _____

Here are three servant-related questions for you to ponder:

1. If you could write your own epitaph for your gravestone, what would it say?

2. When you lose your servant focus, what’s the most noticeable trait others see in you?

3. What’s the most *distasteful* aspect of servanthood to you personally?

Reason #8 ~ The Gift of Accountability

Jerry Rice is the greatest wide receiver in the history of the NFL. His stats say it all: 1,549 receptions ~ 22,895 yards ~ 14.8 yards average carry ~ 197 T.D.s. But he was probably not the most gifted athlete to ever play the position. That title likely would go to Randy Moss. An athlete gifted almost beyond words, Moss had the capacity to become the Michael Jordan of football. Moss holds the NFL single-season T.D. reception record for a rookie (17 in 1998). But Rice is listed as all-time best. Why?

Moss needed an accountability partner ~ someone whom he respected, who could challenge him to play up to his potential. He needed someone to speak into his life when he needed it, which was often. He never let anyone be that person, so Moss is just another guy who played the position well but got traded around a lot because nobody wanted to put up with him: Vikings, Raiders, Patriots, Vikings again, Titans, 49ers.

Accountability partners are a blessing from God, *if* we're mature enough to have one and wise enough to allow them to truly speak into our lives. They don't need to be world class thinkers or spiritual giants. They just need to be mature believers who know us well, pray for us regularly, and are able to speak with wisdom into our lives.

A person might even have two such partners. Or, if they just can't find one they could be part of a small group of people like a "team." One thing is for sure: *The more isolated from in-depth, honest, open relationships we keep ourselves, the more dangerous we are to ourselves and to those around us, and the greater potential playground we become for the Enemy of God.*

We were born for relationship. The Trinity itself speaks to relationships ~ ***"Let us make man in our image, in our likeness..."*** (*Gen. 1:26 ~ NIV*). Most therapists know that one of the most significant red flags in clients, is relational isolation. In my own practice if I'm dealing with a suicidal person, or someone addicted to pornography, or a multiple-divorcee, or a host of other major life problems, one first area of enquiry has to do with the number and quality of attachments the person has. Although anyone can make mistakes, in 40+ years of being a pastor I've almost never run into a person who is closely attached, deeply known and well loved, open and honest with their spouse, who has an accountability partner or two, yet is really screwed up. It just almost never happens. But relational isolation regularly leads to many serious problems.



Attachment isn't just about having some magical number of people around you. It's about vulnerability, honesty, openness, being real, sharing your deep stuff with someone in addition to your spouse ~ a same-sex buddy who knows you deeply, whom you trust and allow to speak honestly into your life.

To catch a glimpse of the power of attachment, consider two related facts: **1)** The average American male has zero (-0-) such relationships; and **2)** pornography and sex addiction is running *rampant* within the male U.S. population, with between 50 – 70% of *all* American males wrestling with it. Gosh, do you think there's a correlation? And the first step in healing involves, guess what ~ open confession and trust with one or two other people who function as accountability partners, to whom the addicted person will "confess" openly, on a

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daily basis. The Apostle James wrote, “*Confess your sins to each other, and pray for each other, so that you may be healed*” (Jas. 5:16 ~ NIV). That’s the power of attachment. What Satan offers in lieu of attachment and accountability, is secrecy, addiction and shame.

Having an accountability relationship is a blessing. It *frees the soul* from secrecy. It challenges arrogance and pride. The Apostle Paul longed for the day when he would “...*know even as I am known*” (I Cor. 13:12).

Not everyone is able to handle the responsibility of knowledge of others’ areas of weakness and sin. The good news is that since God wishes for us to have this level of openness and honesty, it’s something we can pray for and trust that He will provide. Accountability partners build character and maturity.

Task Eight

In ten words or less, answer each of the following questions:

1. How are secrecy and isolation linked to pride and arrogance?

2. What does Satan accomplish in our lives through use of secrecy and isolation?

3. Why do most Christians stay as far away as possible from the biblical instructions to “confess our sins to one another” (James 5:16).

4. Why is confession powerful and freeing?

5. How might having an accountability partner, and practicing confession, affect both the spiritual freedom and effectiveness of a missionary?

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3. Nelsen, H. (1980). "Religious transmission versus religious formation: Preadolescent-parent interaction," in, *The Sociological Quarterly*, 21(2), 207-218.
4. www.barna.org/barna-update/article/21-transformation/252-barna-survey-examines-changes-in-worldview-among-christians-over-the-past-13-years
5. Theme song to TV series, "Cheers."
Source: <http://www.lyricsondemand.com/tvthemes/cheerslyrics.html>

Wouldn't you like to get away? Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came. You wanna be where you can see, our troubles are all the same. You wanna be where everybody knows your name.

You wanna go where people know, people are all the same, you wanna go where everybody knows your name.

Making your way in the world today takes everything you've got; taking a break from all your worries sure would help a lot. Wouldn't you like to get away? (chorus)

All those night when you've got no lights, the check is in the mail; and your little angel hung the cat up by its tail; and your third fiancée didn't show. (chorus)

Roll out of bed, Mr. Coffee's dead; the morning's looking bright; and your shrink ran off to Europe, and didn't even write; and your husband wants to be a girl. (chorus)

6. Schaefer, F. and Schaefer, C. (eds.), 2012. *Trauma & Resilience*. Condeo Press.
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