

SECOND OPINION: A tangible 'bold' mission thrust

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Years ago, I did Southern Baptist home-missions work in Paducah, Ky. At the beginning of my sojourn there, I received a small hand mirror, which came in a glossy case embossed with the Baptist motto of the moment—"Bold Mission Thrust." An arrow that bore those words pointed toward the world into which we, as home missionaries, were expected to go and make a difference.

Maybe I did. I do know the two other interns worked hard that summer among the children of the inner city. But the summer flew by, and soon we'd returned to our regular lives. I remember being too busy to wonder, and soon way led on to way.

But were the lives of those children quantifiably different?

I've been wondering because I've recently been reading some work by Kyle Potter, who observes that today's average American suburbanite needs to feel his or her work is accomplishing something great, that his or her efforts are making a difference. If this is not the case, Potter writes, these persons become restless—ready to move on to new ground and new enterprises.

In fact, we see this demand for immediate results in practically every aspect of our lives—sports, business, entertainment and even ministries. If it's going to happen, it had better happen now. Too many other options are available to tarry long.

But there are, of course, serious repercussions. I am no economist, but I wonder how much of the current financial crisis is the result of the

abandonment of delayed gratification. Why settle for a small “starter house,” for instance, when easy credit makes a McMansion immediately available?

It seems paradoxical, but—while we demand immediate gratification—we also know in our bones that we cheat ourselves out of something vital by demanding the quick fix. For example, a recent meeting in our community on support for “local food” attracted a standing-room-only crowd. Of course, “local” food has to be waited for. You can’t eat it before it’s ready, and you can’t have the same thing year-round. But the time and effort involved does make a difference.

Christian formation is a laborious process involving a lot of hard work and a lot of time. So much of the assumptions and strategies of church starts today don’t begin with this idea in place. For example, it is commonplace wisdom that the best way to increase the membership of a denomination is to plant new churches. And I’ve seen a good bit of statistical evidence to support this.

To the extent that the new-church starts mean going where people are, they are certainly admirable. The danger is they represent the continual restarting (as opposed to the renewal) of community. Untethered to the past, the new congregation is able to create itself. The temptation is to pursue significance in numbers and in religious experience, rather than obedience and faithfulness over the long haul.

Such faithfulness involves the ability to wait and trust, and even to be willing to suffer. Such virtues cannot be developed in an instant. We may feel we do not have time—and perhaps we do not—but God does have time. God has given us all the time we need to live lives of faithfulness in the places where we are. This is because our time is not simply ours, but the way God makes us part of what he is doing in the world. Instead of having to look for the quick fix or the better worship experience (for example, the

ancient Israelites' golden calf), we are freed to trust that God is present and at work where we already are.

Of course, this might be difficult to see. Only after many, many years did the Israelites come to see more fully God's providential calling to them as a people—and, even then, younger generations easily forgot.

One of the many gifts, in fact, the elderly can give the church is the gift of memory and perspective. They are capable of taking the longer view, of seeing everything doesn't have to happen right now.

Theologian Ephraim Radner states one of the most evangelical things Christians today can do is remain in the particular churches and communities where they are, even in the midst of brokenness, weakness and unfaithfulness. This is because dwelling in life's contradictions and brokenness witnesses to the cross of Christ. Such cruciform witness makes the Body of Christ more visible for the world. This is the kind of bold mission we need today.

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