

Looking at Missions from  
Their Side, Not Ours  
by Steve Saint

I hate to ever put my car on a lift! It exposes the underside which is dirty and greasy, and not intended for public display. I guess that is why I have avoided the Jiffy Lube trend. You take your car and drive right over someone's head. Under the guise of changing your oil, this stranger begins to call out a grocery list of repairs that need attention.

As the car's owner I am forced to discredit this stranger's recommendations. "Sure the c.v. Boot is torn; if I put on another one, it will tear too. So what if the exhaust pipe is about to fall off; it has probably been that way for years, and it can surely hang on a bit longer." Once in a while, however, the mechanic will make an observation that I don't dare to ignore; something like, "your tie rod ends are badly worn, and you could lose control of your steering any time now."

I have grown up in missions. I thought I had been pretty well exposed to all of its aspects over the years. I have known many very committed and effective missionaries. I have also seen the inevitable impostors. I've watched the battles between the conservative groups and the more charismatic newcomers. I've done my time on furlough display. I've spent years supporting missions financially as a business man. I've tried to raise interest in this largely unfinished mandate. My wife, four children and I have also had the wonderful opportunity to serve as missionaries for short periods of time in South America and Africa.

In spite of all of this exposure, I was oblivious to the major limitation in my missionary experiences. I had always looked at the missionary movement from the missionary side of the fence. I'm not sure I even considered that there was another side; but there is! It is a lot like evaluating our car's mechanical condition by evaluating its paint condition and the cleanliness of its interior.

Those things have value, but they will never tell us that our ball joints are shot, jeopardizing our directional control.

My chance to look at missions from the other side of the fence came as a total surprise to me. My Aunt Rachel, who has lived with the Huaorani tribe since shortly after they killed my father, Nate, and four of his friends, died in 1994. I went down to help the Huaorani bury her. Some of the Huao that I had known since I was a boy asked me to bring my family to come live with them. I declined. They persisted. I made excuses. They insisted. This small tribe has been lavished with attention for forty years. I couldn't imagine that I could do anything for them that other, more capable missionaries hadn't already done. When I tried to explain this to them diplomatically, they became exasperated with me. Old grandmother Dawa shook her finger in my face and announced to everyone present that I wasn't listening. Then she addressed me in a scolding manner that only grandmothers can get away with, (without being speared in the old days) and informed me that they were not asking me to be a missionary to them. They just wanted me to come and live with them; to be part of them. Without realizing it, I was taking my first look at the missionary vehicle from the underside. I was beginning what has become a long and painful journey to "the other side of the fence" that separates the missionary's perspective from that of the indigenous people.

I don't want to carry the analogy too far, but allow me to continue this far: there is a lot of dirt and grime hanging on this "mission machine" that we don't see from the topside! Some of the areas that first became evident as needing attention were things like discrimination against the indigenous people because of their lower technical know-how, segregation between the mission and indigenous community based on financial and personal habits, and a definite class structure based on cultural conformity to a predominantly upper class western norm.

These problems are a perpetual challenge that have taxed generations of missionaries. They need attention, but aren't life threatening in themselves. As I become accustomed to looking at missions from the underside, (there's not nearly as many shiny surfaces down here, but some ingenious mechanisms) I saw one area that makes this vehicle "unsafe at any speed": Dependency.

Dependency can't vie with some of the other blemishes that dot the face of missions today. Open bigotry and bias is certainly nastier and more obvious. I stood in a hanger one day with several foreigners, a couple of Ecuadorian nationals, and one Huaorani elder. A late first-term missionary stopped in to see what we were doing. In good Ecuadorian fashion, he made a round of the hanger shaking hands and greeting all present; all but one that is. When he got to the Huaorani elder, this young missionary reached right across him to shake the hand of one of the last expatriates present. He never even acknowledged this brother's presence. Worse still, none of the nationals or missionaries present seemed to notice. Two visitors on their first missions excursion were the only ones to take offense, and later questioned me on what, to them, was open and flagrant discrimination. I was humiliated, embarrassed, and even a bit angry. But those of us who were offended, including my Huaorani brother, recovered.

By contrast, let's take a look at a less emotional issue with much more serious implications, one that doesn't fire the emotions like discrimination does, but creates the much more deadly outcome of dependency. For years, all Huaorani school houses and the other few public buildings have been built by "low-tech" contractors from outside the tribe. Looking for ways for the Huaorani to be able to make money so they can afford machetes, axes, salt, medicines, and other imported goods, (without having to leave home to work for oil companies, with numerous negative implications) it occurred to us to ask for the contracts to build the schools and other public buildings.

I thought we had a foot in the door because a veteran missionary in our area controls much of the school funding and carried a good bit of influence where he doesn't have unilateral say. When I approached him about it, he informed me that the Huaorani were incapable of making boards or building houses with them. (He didn't realize that they had just helped me build my rustic but very functional jungle home. He surely didn't know that they had gone on to build a clinic with little help from me. Then several of the men got together and built a complete home with no input at all from me; all built with boards cut freehand with a chainsaw I had loaned them, but which they operated and maintained.)

Before I had a chance to point out that they had already proved that they could do this type of work, he dug the hole deeper. "Not only can't they build board structures, but they won't even take care of what we build for them." He went on to point out that the floor of the church building in the village where Aunt Rachel lived was rotting, and "the people" (Huaorani means "the people") wouldn't even fix it. I told him I would ask "the people" about it and get back to him.

When I asked the Huaorani in Tonampade why they didn't fix the church floor, they looked at me perplexed. "We don't have permission to work on the cowodie's (foreigner's) church. What if we fix it, they might get angry?" From their perspective, this church building funded, designed and built by "outsiders," belonged to the outsiders who built it. If they weren't trusted to make boards and build it, surely they wouldn't be deemed capable of making the boards to repair it. This incident was not as emotionally charged as that of open discrimination, but the people involved won't get over this one by forgiving and forgetting! To the best of my knowledge, the only "God's house" (church building) that any of the twenty-odd Huaorani villages built over the last decade (since outsiders built their board-walled and tin-roofed cathedral in Tonampade) was one temporary leaf shelter built in Tiwaeno for the introduction of the Huaorani New Testament.

Nothing we do in missions should preclude indigenous believers from shouldering their responsibility to be God's ambassadors in their Jerusalem.

I have to admit that when Ginny and I started living with the Huaorani, I already had a lifetime of experience observing indigenous dependency. My problem was that I hadn't noticed what I was seeing with rare exceptions. When we became subject to that dependency, however, living with the Huao as

one of them, I began to notice it in a hurry. When I have raised the subject and my growing conviction that this is a spiritually deadly mistake, I didn't expect my missionary friends to agree en mass. I did expect that I could at least open an honest debate on the subject. It seems naive, in hindsight, that I would have expected others to suddenly become aware of something that I had so long overlooked while considering myself to be sensitive and informed.

It makes me think of a book I read in college. The author, as I recall, was writing about discrimination against the Black community in North America. His observations were challenged by a member of the Black community. When the author offered his credentials, the Black man commented, "you'll never understand what it's like until you are 'Black Like Me.'" The author took the man's challenge and took medication that made his skin very dark. In that new condition he revisited the places and experiences that had formed his opinions. His book revealed that it does look different from the other side of the fence!

It is impossible that every missionary will have a unique opportunity as I have, to live as much a part of an indigenous culture as I have these last years. When the tribe was trying to define what my role should be, one old man spoke up and declared, "Your father is buried in our territory, your aunt is buried here and I say we should bury you here too." The other piquianani (old ones) heartily agreed. In Huaorani culture, one has standing where his ancestors, especially a father, is buried. I personally would have been more enthusiastic if "the people" had been a little more time specific about when they thought I should be buried out there.

This is my observation. You can't know how helpless, hopeless and useless it feels to have to depend on others to do what the Holy Spirit is motivating you to do, until you have experienced it yourself!

There is only One Mission for the church of Jesus Christ. That is to be the organism through which Christ manifests Himself on earth and the entity through which His free gift of eternal life is made known to every nation, tribe, tongue and people group. "Missions" is only one aspect of our church's one mission. The purpose of missions, is simply and only, to plant the Church of Christ where there is none. It isn't to be the church, or to control the church, or to serve the church; only to plant the church and nurture it until it is able to propagate, govern and support itself.

The greatest weakness I see in our North-American missionary effort today is that we are taking our role too far in too few places!

Missions are not unique in creating dependency out here in the Ecuadorian jungle. What is unique about missions, is that the oil companies, individuals and even the government have a great deal to gain from having people like the Huaorani depend on them. Missions have nothing of value to gain and everything to lose. We hear a great deal these days about the millions of people in the "10-40 Window" that have no Christian witness amongst themselves. The plea is being made that more workers are needed for the harvest. Without distracting at all from that, I would suggest that we must consider moving workers from places where their appropriate role was over, or should have been over, long ago.

I am going to step on toes whose owners I really don't want to offend, (including my dear Auntie Rachel's) but I believe this matter is worth the risk even if it only helps to get this critical issue on the table. When I came to live with the Huaorani after almost 40 years of missionary discipleship, they didn't even identify any tribal believers as elders. There were several men that the tribe more clearly identified as elders when I was in my mid teens than there were in my mid forties. This is a complex issue that won't be exhaustively covered here. It does little good to point out the problem without recommending solutions either. One of the greatest needs I see in missions today is to clarify not only what we are mandated to do, but also the limits to our mandate.

There is a great need in missions today to equip national / indigenous believers with the tools they

need (training, technology, industry, and a cheering squad) so they can take their rightful place of responsibility in building the churches that missions plant!

Unreached peoples like the Huaorani are struggling to maintain their culture and a sense of dignity against great odds. They need to know that we stand with them in their desire to reach the rest of their tribe with the Good News that has transformed their lives.

But we need to get out of their way and give them the chance to prove that they have the capability and the will to get the job done. Hidden peoples from "Jerusalem to Irian Jaya" are waiting to fulfill their role in God's Great Commission. If we could grasp the vision of what the Holy Spirit could do through them, we could move on to the hundreds of places where there are no indigenous believers, and missionaries are truly needed. Together, I believe we could break the bonds of dependence that the enemy has so capably used to keep indigenous believers passive and outsiders bogged down.