

Developing Aptitude for Mission Participation

1. Develop a Willingness to be “Teachable” (*John Calvin*)

Sheldon Kopp says “even a stone can be a teacher.”¹ If we are willing to learn, there is nothing, literally nothing, in God’s creation that cannot be a teacher for us: a stone, a flower, a poor widow looking for a coin. Recall Jesus’ words when the Pharisees challenged him on his entry into Jerusalem. He said if the crowds were silent, “the stones would shout out” (Luke 19:40). In the Sermon on the Mount he pointed to the waving grasses and said, “Consider the lilies of the field . . .” (Matthew 6:28). Later, when asked about God, he said God was like a woman who having lost a coin would search for it until she found it (Luke 15:8–10). Wisdom “cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance to the city gates she speaks” (Proverbs 1:20–21). As God’s people, we are to be teachable: willing to learn. We are to go, not armed with answers, but disarmed, vulnerable, open, ready to let go of our assumptions and to leave behind our already formed opinions.

2. Practice Dialogue as a Primary Form of Interaction

Dialogue: dia = across; logue = word(s)

Discuss: dis = apart; cuss = shake

Dialogue is when words move across the spaces between—that is, between contexts, between cultures, between places, between people. Dialogue is different from discussion. To dis-cuss is to shake apart, cut apart, or scatter. Dialogue brings things together.

There are two kinds of dialogue that may lead us toward transformation.

■ Your Story and the Stories You Hear

The first is learning to let your own story dialogue with the story of the people you meet and the places you go. Muriel Rukeyser says: “The universe is made of stories.” The more you are in touch with your own story, with your own wounds, with your own desires, with your own mysteries, with your own questions, with your own joys, with your own life experience, the more you have available to connect with other people’s stories and life experience. This does not necessarily mean sharing your story at every turn. It may not mean sharing it at all. To do

1. Sheldon Kopp, *Even a Stone Can Be a Teacher: Learning and Growing from the Experiences of Everyday Life* (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1985), p. ix.

so may not be appropriate. But to know what it is to lose one's house, because your own house has burned, means there may be feelings available that allow you to stand in sympathy with another who has lost a house. Indeed, remaining silent and hearing their story may help to heal your own hurt. Where appropriate, sharing your story may also make a healing connection with another person, either within the travel group or with someone the group meets.

■ Connections to God's Story

The second kind of dialogue is the dialogue of your story with God's story. In the immediate experience of the trip, in the midst of your story happening in the now, there may come a revelation because you are able to connect your story and God's story. Here is an account of such an experience which arrived on a Christmas card from Dare Cox, a participant in a trip to South Africa.

The Christ child came to me this year on a cool November night in Cape Town, South Africa. With a group of friends, I walked up the hill to St. Paul's guest house from the restaurant where we had had a sumptuous East Indian meal. We carried Styrofoam containers of "too much" food which, unasked for, the waiter had thrust in our hands as we left. It was our last evening in Africa and we had reminisced over our journey and laughed a bit and wept a bit too. As we walked, laughing in the darkness, we were silenced by a cry—unmistakable—the sound of a very new baby. It came from a narrow alley where we could see silhouetted in a dim light a woman cradling it in her arms. She sat huddled in a pile of something, perhaps cardboard, that seemed to give some shelter. A man stood beside her. "Jesus," I cried out. It rushed past my lips, both curse and prayer. And also recognition. It was indeed Jesus, lying in his mother's arms, making tiny cries in the night, his father standing watch.²

Dare was able within the moment to make the connection between the lively Word of Scripture and the Living Word of God in the present. When we can recognize the Scripture story in this way, as interacting with our own lives on a daily basis, it comes alive for us in new ways. We come alive in new ways. We move, as if in a dance, from the Story, to our immediate experience of it, to response to it. But we have to be listening—to God's Story, to our story, to the story of others with whom we interact. We have to be in dialogue.

2. Used with permission of Dare Cox.

3. Practice Disciplines of the Spirit

Spiritual disciplines are intended to “teach” us. We are disciples of Christ. A disciple is one willing to learn; a discipline is a way of learning. Spiritual disciplines are intended to teach us how to live more fully in the Spirit of God and in the community of the Christ. For travelers, out of their home context, the disciplines help ground the experience. As with any “big event,” like running a marathon, it is essential to “exercise” and “practice” before the event begins. No one would try to run 26.2 miles without training. Practice these disciplines, engage in these exercises, not only on the trip itself, but as preparation for the trip.

■ Prayer

William Temple said: “Prayer increases the volume of love in the world.”³ Prayer changes us. Prayer opens us to God. Prayer opens us to the world. Prayer opens us to each other. Prayer may also change the world, but first it changes us. It softens the hardened and crusty places. It strengthens the timid and uncertain places. It reduces hatred and violence. It increases compassion.

As a traveler, you may encounter places where hatred and violence have “gathered” in a place and settled there with such lingering presence that you can feel their power even months or years after an event. Then, the ability to pray together may be the only response, to call on God’s love in the midst of that manifestation of the worst of human nature, of gathered “evil.” For instance, standing by a mass grave in Croatia, a travel/study group simply formed a circle, held hands, and stood together in silent prayer. When words were spoken emerging from the silence, they prayed for healing for the loved ones of the victims and for the perpetrators of the violence. To pray with this wholeness, encompassing both the wounded and the wounders, is to pray with God for healing. It is to take into ourselves the “breadth and length and height and depth” (Ephesians 3:18) of God’s love. It is to be enfolded in the great embrace of God.

■ Community

David Spangler says: “Community is the deeper reality within which I move and have my being. It is one of the names of God. Community is the gift of myself that I give in endless participation with my world.”⁴

3. As quoted in Anne Broyles, *Ways of Justice, Ways of Prayer: Words to Sustain the Spirit* (Washington, DC: Methodist Federation for Social Action, 1993).

4. As quoted in Corinne McLaughlin and David Davidson *Builders of the Dawn: Community Lifestyles in a Changing World* (Shutesbury, MA: Sirius Publishing, 1986), p. 9.

Community is more than just being a member of a group. Community involves engagement with one another at a deep level. It requires vulnerability. It develops intimacy. A group can exist without either engagement or vulnerability. It can avoid intimacy and shy away from sharing those things that lead to intimacy: questions, wonderments, bewilderments, ponderings, wounds, dreams, hopes, failures, struggles. There is very little to bind a group together. The members of a community, however, are bound together in love for one another that rises from sharing the ups and downs of life, the mysteries that seem unsolvable, the pain that seems unbearable, and the hurts that seem unhealable.

No matter the type of mission trip, it is important to form a community. Often during a trip, participants may discover that in hearing other persons' stories, their own is called forth. Having a community in which to share assists participants on their journeys. Participants who are having their first experience in a different culture may confront their own culture with new and critical eyes. When companions think through new awarenesses together, they support one another's stretching of self and soul.

■ Attentiveness

Nelle Morton says: "Maybe 'journey' is not so much a journey ahead, or a journey into space, but a journey into presence. The farthest place on earth is the journey into the presence of the nearest person to you."⁵

Most North Americans have grown up in the world of the 30-second commercial, the 30-minute sitcom, the instant microwave, the rapid response of e-mail. Attentiveness takes time: more than 30 seconds; sometimes more than 30 minutes. Attentiveness is not possible if "instant" is the only time frame in our vocabulary. Attentiveness is not possible if waiting for a response is not within our repertoire of relationship. To be attentive requires a willingness to watch slowly, to keep oneself awake as if waiting for the first signs of dawn, to continue to be present to an idea, a person, or a situation as an act of love. It is an aptitude for listening that allows us to really hear what is being said in another's story, an aptitude for speaking with careful seeking of truth in the telling of one's own story, an aptitude for silence that grants persons room to respond.

The experience of travel to another culture often makes us aware of how fast we move in the United States. Slowing down is difficult for some people. In Merida, Mexico, a group building a playground for the Down's Syndrome Institute, waited two hours for a bus to take

5. Nelle Morton, *The Journey Is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985). As quoted in Tom Hampson and Loretta Whalen, *Tales of the Heart: Affective Approaches to Global Education* (New York: Friendship Press, 1991).

them to small villages for a weekend as guests in local homes. In order not to carry anger about North American expectations into the next experience, they had to remember to be attentive to the moment, to let waiting be its own learning. Another form of attentiveness is necessary as we meet many people in a day. There is a tendency to lose the initial interest and eagerness to listen and hear. To practice attentiveness on a trip is to remain alert and available to persons whom we meet, ever anticipating that it may be that person who has something we in particular need to hear. If we have “fallen asleep,” tuned out, gone blank like the screen of a computer at rest, we may miss a gift.

■ Nonviolent Speech

Gerard VanderHaar says: “Something significant is at stake whenever we talk.”⁶

The violence in the world that causes so much pain has many levels. Its most clear manifestation is in outright war and physical assault, whether that produces injury or death. Violence, however, begins long before the outward actions of physical harm. One of the initial stages is verbal violence, both the use of words that intend to wound and words that validate violence as acceptable in our world. It may be informative to simply watch your everyday speech for a day, to listen to yourself talk. How often do you say things that could wound another, intentionally or in jest? How often do you use militaristic language to express yourself? For instance, it is sometimes said that we are “targeting” a particular cause. “Target,” however, is the way we find an object in order to kill it. Other forms of violent speech have to do with words, phrases, references that perpetuate oppression or prejudice.

On a trip that is intended to promote healing and peace, the discipline of nonviolent speech seems only appropriate. It became clear on a trip to the Middle East that even the term “Middle East” revealed a perspective of the world and assumptions about our place as “Westerners” in the makeup of the world community. Learning always to say Israel and Palestine in referring to the areas in which Palestinians and Israelis live was important for the travelers. To use the term Palestinian National Authority, rather than the Israeli reference to the Palestinian Authority, was also important. When we are sensitive to language issues in general and in particular, two things happen. We honor those whom we visit by using the preferred vocabulary hewn from their experience, and our own awareness is jolted in a way that allows us to learn about local perspective from the use of language.

Language structures reality. Language also reveals who we are and what we think. Most of the time, we really do mean what we say. Our willingness to examine and discipline our speech is both a confessional activity and an opportunity for spiritual growth as people of God.

6. Gerard A. Vanderhaar, *Active Nonviolence: A Way of Personal Peace* (Mystic, CN: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991), p. 24.

■ Life Review

Wendy C. Schwartz says: “To find the way to make peace with ourselves and to offer it to others, both spiritually and politically, is the most important kind of learning. To accept our abilities and our limitations, and the differences of others, this is the contentment that gives life its highest value. It frees us to grow without restraint and to settle without pressure.”⁷

Life review is also known as “daily examen.” It may also be called a kind of confession. It is the practice of looking at one’s life at some point in each day and assessing how far what we have done and been is from both where we would like to be and where God would like us to be. It is the practice of acknowledging truthfully who we are, complete with flaws and foibles, complete with talents and gifts to share. It is a way of becoming whole, of finding peace in ourselves. When we are truly willing to say who we really are, there is nothing to hide—from ourselves or from others. We are free to grow because we don’t waste time and energy on covering up mistakes, pretending to be who we are not, putting on a false front. When we can let go of the past on a daily basis and embrace the future on a daily basis, we find a flow of forgiveness that allows us to start fresh each day and continue on the journey.

On a trip like the one you will take, there may be times when you and those in the group are confronted with your own complicity in the problems you encounter. You may need to “make confession,” individually or corporately to acknowledge the complicity. Confession or acknowledgement will allow you to move into a more creative frame of mind in which you may be able to discern the nature of your partnership with God and the action you need to engage in for change. To “make confession” is not just to say what is wrong. Its original intent was “to reveal” the self, not only to acknowledge what we would like to change, but also to claim our “aha” experiences and the gifts we have been given to develop along life’s way.

■ Benevolent Glancing

“Mother Teresa, is there something that ordinary people can do to make the world better?”

“Yes. Smile at one another.”⁸

Benevolent glancing, also known as “seeing through peaceful eyes,” is akin to the Benedictine vow of hospitality. Everyone who comes to a Benedictine monastery is received as if she or he were the Christ. The Benedictine practice of holy hospitality flows from Matthew 25:31–46 (“When did we see you . . . ?). To meet each person as if he or she were

7. As quoted in Tom Hampson and Loretta Whalen, *Tales of the Heart: Affective Approaches to Global Education* (New York: Friendship Press, 1991).

8. As quoted in Anne Broyles, ed., *Ways of Justice, Ways of Peace: Words to Sustain the Spirit* (Washington, DC: Methodist Federation for Social Action, 1993).

the Christ is to welcome stranger and friend alike as someone who may reveal God to us.

“Benevolent glancing” or “seeing through peaceful eyes” is practiced in other cultures and religious traditions as well. It is a holy hospitality not bound by geography and not dependent on actually greeting a person who comes to visit. You may practice it anywhere there are people: on the street, in a grocery store, on a bus. Gently glance at the people who pass you on the sidewalk, with whom you stand in line, or with whom you inhabit a particular public place, and silently bless them. The blessing may be an inaudible standard phrase you speak in your heart such as “I bless you with God’s peace.” Or it may simply be an “intention” as you encounter persons in the daily routines of life, a thought that surrounds them with God’s peace, joy, love, and hope as you pass or wait or share space. In some cultures it is not appropriate to make eye contact. In some places it may be dangerous to make eye contact with someone. Eye contact is not required for benevolent glancing, nor is it the purpose of the practice. The intent is to “take in” the stranger, to acknowledge our “inter-being” and connection with all people. By doing this, we affirm that we are sisters and brothers in the human family and are inextricably linked in the love of God.

■ Reading the Morning Headlines with a Prayer

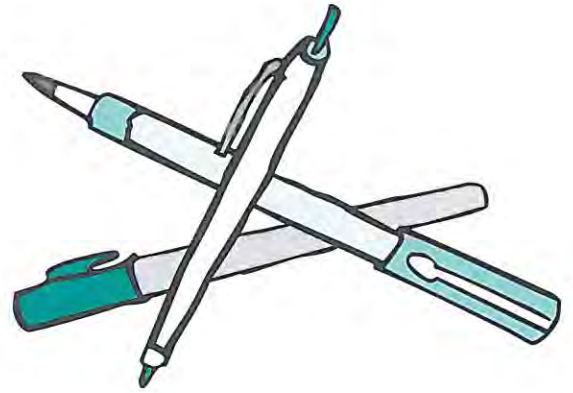
Some years ago Richard Avery and Donald Marsh wrote a song and included the phrase “reading the morning headlines with a prayer.”⁹ It is a concept they borrowed from theologian Karl Barth, who said that as Christians we should have the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Now, of course, we need to add the radio, the television, and the Internet to the list of sources for news of our world. The point is, however, that we need to pray for the world daily. One way to do that is to “read the morning headlines with a prayer.” Each day check the newspaper for stories about the place(s) you will be visiting. As you learn about the country or situation or people, pray for them. You may pray generally for the healing and well-being of the people and place, or you may pray specifically that something happen; for example you could pray for a negotiation process that would bring stability and peace in Northern Ireland.



9. From “When You Least Expect Him,” by Richard Avery and Donald Marsh, in *Songs for the Easter People* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing, 1972).

■ Journal Writing

In preparation for the trip you may want to reflect on why you are going on this particular trip or why you have sought out this experience. Some people are natural writers and already keep a journal. If you are one of these, you may want to select a special notebook to record your thoughts regarding the trip. Maybe you have never tried writing a journal or diary. Maybe you dislike writing or find blank paper intimidating. Maybe you've never written anything just for yourself, only assignments for others. Take courage and give journaling a try just for the short term of the trip. There are no requirements. You put down whatever you want, to suit yourself, and nobody else has to see it. Here are some hints for getting started.



■ *A Little Practice*

Set aside a quiet time and place, and try to write a little bit each day. You are practicing for the trip. You might begin by taking one question a day from "Questions for Journal Reflection," below, and writing a response. Make it short or long. No need to use complete sentences. You may write individual words, make a list, doodle a picture, or create some other representation of your response. If you can't get into the questions, write about some thought you had about the trip—a hope, a fear, a question of your own, how you are getting ready for the trip, or even a to-do list. There is no "right" way, no "wrong" way. You are free to develop your own style. Do what is helpful and meaningful for you.

■ *The Short Report*

Pick one person to whom to send a postcard each day with the "short version" of the day—details or impressions, descriptive or reflective. Having someone to write to can help focus the writing as well as the day's events. You can then collect the postcards from the friend or family member when you get home. Or write a postcard a day to yourself. What fun to read one's own words, addressed to oneself, and to recall in flashback fashion a particular day of the trip.

■ Questions for Journal Reflection

- When did I first begin to think about this trip? What was the initial attraction to making this “pilgrimage”?
- Why to this place? What is there about this particular place, people, or situation that connects with my life story?
- What feelings of anticipation do I notice as I prepare myself for this experience? Fear? Excitement? Uncertainty? Determination? A mix of feelings?
- What do I expect to give as a participant on this trip? What do I expect to receive from the experience?
- What one thing do I not want to miss as I go through this experience? (This may be an event, an encounter, a place to experience, a question to ponder . . . or something else.)
- How does going on this trip fit into my ongoing spiritual journey?
- Do I have a sense of God’s presence in the decision to go, the preparation, the anticipation?
- Are there things I know will be difficult for me on the trip (emotionally, physically, intellectually, or spiritually)? How will I find support for doing those difficult things before, during, or after the trip?
- How do my family and friends feel about my going on this trip, having this experience?
- Is there one person here at home with whom I could covenant to “companion” me on this journey? To encourage me, challenge me, support me, pray for me, receive my reports and listen to my stories when I return in a way that will assist me in noting my own growth and making commitments in response to the experience?
- To whom do I feel “accountable” for my experience?
- What are the questions I am taking with me? (You may want to ask one question a day in your journal as a way of “priming the pump” for the trip. Such sacred curiosity whets the appetite and prepares us to receive the most from the experience.)

■ Questions for “Going Deeper”

- What is your deepest desire for this trip?
- What is your greatest fear about coming on this trip?
- Who among your friends or family will be most interested in your experience on this trip and why?
- What is it you had to give up in order to come to make this journey (what is the hidden cost of this trip for you)?
- What are you most looking forward to on the trip and why? (This may be a place or a person or an experience or simply getting away from home for a time.)
- What is the one word you would use to talk about your preparation for this trip and why?
- Of the material you have read as background for the trip, what has touched you most and why?