File: 2010/case study MMP

INTRODUCTION

Hi, I’m Stewart De Boer; in the next few pages allow me to show, through a case study, a segment of my life. As it applies to my ministry, it may help you to formulate a plan for your life.

As I look into my past, I’ve learned that I did not just evolve, I brought in circumstances and events from my past; there were precedents that directed me to where I am today. I will quickly paint in the highlights of my earlier days, events that stand out as being benchmarks: roads taken and habits formed that took me to Manila and engaged me in holistic ministries. It all started in India where I spent the first twelve years of my life.

The reason for being in India at that early age was my father’s calling to be, as a missionary, the president of a mission college. Here I learned patience, isolation and independence through the difficult months of illness. Each year I contracted malaria, and in my eighth year was infected with erysipelas that had me hospitalized and put on the critical list. I missed school, and in my infectious state quarantined and confined to bed. It was during these years of isolation that I learned to overcome major obstacles. My father was constantly away on mission work, I hardly saw him and then he suddenly died at the young age of 44 at the prime time of his career. We stayed on the field for two years, but my mother decided to return to the States because of financial constraints and other factors. This uprooted me from the Indian culture; all of my friends were gone. After returning to the States we moved from place to place five times in a single year. This affected my social life, my school grades and spiritual/emotional strengths. Looking back, however, I can think of no greater adverse condition than experiencing a breakdown in the stability of our home. Dad had died, leaving us in India. My mother was left to care for two children. To support us she became an underwriter for an insurance company that took her out in sales from early morning to late at night; my sister and I were alone and cared for the house, doing the laundering, cleaning and cooking. We had little money; I took on a paper route to earn for clothes and necessities. It was these years in high school that I spent alone on my paper route, instead of socializing with classmates or engaged in sports I would be found, rain or snow delivering papers.

I had saved money and after graduating from high school invested it in a ten month school of photography in New York City. After graduating from that course, I was left with little money, and no job. I heard of the army college program. With no money for college, I enlisted in the army to meet my financial needs and for the GI college program that entitled me for a scholarship after I successfully served in the military. The army gave me my very first full-time job and taught me self-reliance and self-discipline. As a photographer I was given important assignments. I wanted to earn extra money so took on, after duty hours, the photo concession for the Post Exchange. This taught me the commercial side of business.

After my time in the army and discharged, I had no clear cut call to prepare for the mission field. A professional photographer saw my work and invited me to partner with him. He was mature, well established and desired to expand his business. I worked with him for a summer and we got along very well. But a decision I made was to decline the offer of a partnership with him; instead I enrolled in college. It hurt him terribly and many enticements to partner with him almost persuaded me to forego college and get in to photography. I found fulfillment in photography; I cannot explain it, but for the first time I felt really called to the mission field, return to India and serve the Lord. Breaking up a strong relationship, turning back on a photography profession and enrolling in college was a difficult step, but I reluctantly put my past aside and stepped into a brand new future of uncertainty.

This was a momentous decision. My family was scattered to the winds. My sister was married and living in Pennsylvania, my brother, married with a family, was into developing his own career, and my mother was involved in pursuing her own career at the age of thirty-five by earning her own college degree in Massachusetts. After graduation my mother was given the directorship of a YWCA in New York State. As I look back, I credit the decisions and circumstances leading up to my choice to go to college as providential. I did not feel God’s hand on my shoulder, nor did I have a total picture of where this all would lead me. I did not make this a matter of prayer, nor did I look to others for guidance. Opportunity arose to either go to college or establish a career in photography; I chose college. It was not until my fourth year of college, that studying in seminary became an option. A seminary degree gave me the option of becoming either a chaplain in the US army or a missionary to India.

Now may be the right time to introduce my first wife, Helene, into the picture. We met right after I was discharged from the army, while I was going to photography school in New York City. I knew no one. We met on the bus that took her to her public elementary school where she taught second grade; and took me into my NYC photography school. She invited me to her church and to help her in her Vacation Bible School class. I would talk with her of my plans and options. She was a good listener in helping me to discern where my future lay. Three years later we were married. It was my third year in college. She had a big part in my going to Seminary. While I was studying in seminary, she worked in the library as secretary for the librarian. Helene was a large part of my life and influenced me in many of my career decisions. Few are as fortunate as I to have a helpmate and advisor from before college to many career changes that took us around the globe and in to so many opportunities.

In my last year of seminary, inquiries were made to be sent as a missionary to South India. I was accepted and arrangements made to serve in the same geographical location where I lived as a boy. It was in the 1950’s during many of the political changes that we applied for a visa. The visa was denied. Helene and I accepted this and assumed God had other plans for us. We explored the military chaplaincy. As we applied we learned that the quota for army chaplains had been met, but the navy was still open so we applied, filled out the application and given every reason to believe I would be commissioned in the navy. A week before graduation from seminary we received word from the navy that I was denied because I did not have 20/20 vision. It was Friday afternoon that we received word from the navy. I was devastated when I told Helene. In a calm way Helene prayed about it and then told me to call the Pentagon. I found every sound excuse not to bother the Chief of Chaplains office, but her persistency prevailed and I called to learn that they had just received word of cancellation, but I could never meet the deadline, it would take too long to fill out and process all of the papers. When I told them that the navy had all of our papers and could transfer them they said if I could come to Washington, get the navy papers on Monday there might be time. We boarded a bus from Boston, successfully transferred all papers and I was sworn in before the deadline.

Now we move forward 20 years, I’ve retired from the military chaplaincy and once again been accepted by a mission to serve in India only to be denied an Indian visa. We took another option; serve as missionaries to the Philippines. This we accepted; it opened up a new career pattern which took me into doctoral studies in the University of the Philippines and out into the academic world of administrating a graduate seminary and teaching courses in the fields of counseling and administration. Pivotal in determining where my future lay was the opportunity to be the Philippine director of an international mission. Choices were given to continue to be president of an international seminary or move in to administrating a mission. The model of my father had a deep influence; my father, as a missionary in India chose to develop a strong national body to administrate the college where he was president, turn the college over to nationals; while he remained as a part of the faculty teaching in the classroom. I chose that option; I resigned as president, and stayed on the faculty, expanding my influence in the classroom.

I’m not sure how that would have played out with my father because he died soon after turning over the college to nationals. I stepped out of his shoes; I resigned from the administrative role I held and continued teaching as my father did, but I went one step further. It changed my life. I resigned from the mission to develop a ministry among the poor. I saw poverty and asked how we can put together a plan that would address the issues of Isaiah 53? It was a lonely feeling; millions were hurting; trying to fix it was too great for me or anyone else. This was a work for schools, clinics, job agencies and churches to unite together. I wanted to do more, I did not want to look back on my life and feel unfulfilled. I wanted to make a difference, but how?

The opportunity arose when a retired chaplain, whom I served with in the army, came to visit his son who was in the US Air force stationed at Clark Air Base. He and I talked about how we could minister to the poor. Before he returned to the States we agreed on his helping raise funds and I would look for a program he could fund. The base chaplain gathered some of his congregation to explore what could be done. The result was to rent a house off base and work with the Social Welfare in setting up an orphanage we called Sunshine Home. About two months into the program we learned of difficulties with working with the local people (hiring friends, misappropriation of funds, government legal problems.) Also, the base personnel could not sustain responsibility and I lived in Manila, two hours away. The project was closed, but the idea to continue caused me to look for other options.

I gathered friends around to explore options. A member of our exploratory group, Eli Formeliza, was the husband of our librarian and the pastor of a church in a depressed area. He suggested we open a preschool for the children in his church.

I emailed John Lindvall to get his input and thoughts about soliciting donors for a preschool project. The interest of the personnel in Clark had dissipated, so I dissolved that temporary relationship and terminated all the legal work of pursuing an orphanage.

Chaplain Lindvall recruited his grown son and daughter to open up a mission in California to receive donations for our preschool project. He incorporated a mission with the Securities and Exchange Commission and called it Mission Ministries. We gathered a board and engaged Fin as secretary. Organizationally we were prepared, we had funds, we had the preschool, and we had a board. I continued to teach in the seminary and directed the fledgling ministry we started. We opened a preschool, funded it and left it alone to operate.

This is the way we operated for the first year; no supervision. The second school year opened with the same structures. I came to the realization that I had started a ministry in which I knew nothing about. So I took a firmer look at the school, its operations and in doing so discovered several irregularities, parents were not supporting the school and there were some financial wrongdoings. I had no option but to close the school down. The responsibility rested squarely on my shoulders. I had no one else to blame but myself. I was looking at my own career options, I had left two career positions, director of a mission, president of a seminary, only to find myself in a position in which I was ill qualified, ill prepared and foolishly extended promises to John Lindvall to open and fund a ministry that was having serious difficulties.

I was the titular head of the mission, but left much of the operational matters to unqualified and untrustworthy persons. In fact, the operations people were given the same powers as myself in the handling of personnel and finances. To be honest, I did not want to be bothered with day-to-day operational details. In other words I was ill prepared to undertake what Chaplain Lindvall desired.

I seriously resolved in my mind to disengage and close down the mission. We had not formerly incorporated; we just picked a name to reflect the US name – Mission Ministries. I believed I was not ready, and I should have anticipated the financial difficulties, and the inexperience of those we engaged in to open the school.

I did not close the idea of opening preschools. I was unwilling to admit defeat; I did not want to let Chaplain Lindvall down; nor loose the opportunity to do what was badly needed. So for nearly a year we floundered, until we were introduced to Corrie Acorda (my future wife) and Chona Domingo. These two persons turned the ministry around. Chona was the one who made it happen, she opened our first real school and was their teacher. She brought credibility to the operations. Mission Ministries Philippines’ (MMP) through Corrie’s networking abilities opened up new areas for ministry through preschools.

Mission Ministries Philippines, Inc.

MMP was incorporated as a non-government organization. Its mission was to open preschools and help them become successful schools in poor communities. MMP did not own the schools, they showed churches and other NGO’s how they could incorporate their own schools to do the job. MMP’s role was to train preschool administrators and teachers to open up and be involved in the educating of their children in disadvantaged areas using their own resources and personnel. MMP defined their role as helping other communities open their own preschools, rather than MMP erecting one big preschool and running it. It was not until years later that we generated our funds, using our own personnel and resources; instead we relied on the funding of Chaplain Lindvall’s donors in the United States.

We feared financial problems would arise when we considered expanding our operations to ten new preschools a year. We asked if we were not too aggressive in undertaking such a responsibility. It would require additional personnel and funding. We carefully recruited one person for teaching and hired a secretary to take Fin’s place when she married and started a family. Funds came in and we were relieved to see we were able to meet our budget. We never experienced the financial squeeze others were experiencing in their first years of startup.

Organization

We never fleshed out our organization with a formal board, president, financial officer and office manager. Instead our staff, who were the hands on operators, took on multiple roles, became the board who made the policy to conform to the needs of the organization.

In a few years we were able to define ourselves more accurately. Personnel, came and went, some left to set up their own organization, others to teach, one whom we scholarshipped resigned and accepted a position abroad. Three of our staff stayed and remain with us: The finance, officer who retired and gave the slot to her daughter, our office manager whom we scholarshipped, and our over-all director who taught in our first incorporated school and whom we scholarshipped. Corrie is President and acts as consultant, policy endorser and oversees operations. I have never been in the organization and serve as the bridge between the Philippine organization and US donors and seen as the founder.

This arrangement has served well the operations, comptroller, and planning, legal and administrative functions. Operations has been in the hands of Aida who coordinates all office transactions. Chona is in charge of the training and coaching of teachers and serves as advisors to the schools on administrative matters. Marvie handles government and financial matters. She controls the budget, banking, billing, collections, and purchases.

The planning and projection of our future endeavors is handled jointly, engaging the staff, Corrie and I, with decisions arrived at by consensus, with the final say or veto by Corrie.

Legal is outsourced calling in Atty. Raineer who has worked with us pro bono.

Functional Responsibilities

As mentioned, MMP has developed a very close relationship with members of the staff and constantly call in our preschool administrators for consultation. For example, the salaries are discussed among staff and consensus is arrived at. How we will invest the retirement fund is arrived at by discussing and reaching an agreement. Selecting partners is a common task.

The operations department has five basic functions. The first is to see to the smooth relationship between MMP and our partners; to anticipate operational problems and follow up on our commitments. The second function is to oversee the collection of funds for services and supplies received. The third function is to oversee the quality and information of the web site. The fourth function is the care of the equipment and the ordering of supplies. The fifth function is to see all bills are paid on time.

The financial department handles the purchasing of all contracts with purchasing and contracts with partner schools. The finance department handles all financial relationships with government and banks. Other activities of the department include the overseeing accounting, billing and collection, annual budget and monitoring expenditures to keep under the income received.

We do not have a planning department, however, each of us are constantly looking for change. We make several area studies, pinpoint communities and organizations where we could be involved, and project fund requirements and disbursements. Actual year-to-year budgeting is done by the finance office.

The administration is primarily the responsibility of our director of the preschool programs, giving Chona a prime responsibility of outsourcing and hiring. The actual employment and determination of salary rates based on academic background, years of experience and prevailing rates of existing personnel. Most hiring is done on an outsource, part-time basis.

The MMP Officers

Stewart W. De Boer is the founder of the organization, he is an American citizen. He chose to develop an organization that would help the disadvantaged and elected to do this by developing a team. As an entrepreneur he organized the ministry to be directed and run by national administrators and staff.

Lorisa (Corrie) Acorda De Boer is the President and deeply involved in the policy making of the organization. She has had considerable experience in putting teams together and networking with churches and organization to enlarge the breadth of MMP’s preschools to more than 500 in the past twenty years. She is an expert in community development and drawing parents of the students into useful persons in the community.

Chona Domingo is the MMP Director and oversees the early childhood development programs. MMP in its early days had a director who hired Chona to be the teacher of our first preschool. When the director resigned, Chona stepped into that position. Chona was one of our scholars, graduating with a master in education from the University of the Philippines. Her strength is her commitment to the poor; she has invested her life in serving the poor through her educational preschool passion, expertise and personality skills with children and their parents.

The operations manager, Aida Aquino was given a college scholarship and upon graduation came into the organization full time. She has abilities in computers, office management, is very presentable in representing MMP through working with teachers and parents in their needs of assistance.

Marvilyn Aquino is our financial director. Her field is business and accounting with studies in CPA. She is well qualified to work with BIR, the budget, and making of personnel contracts. She joined MMP upon the retirement of her mother from that position.

Friction areas

Years ago we experienced friction areas among our staff and with our parents as customers in the areas of collecting tuition, payment for seminars and work book publications. The parents and the schools had the wrong idea that we did not need their money and this gave them the license to procrastinate or even write off their financial obligation. For the first five years we did not take seriously collections and even advanced credit to those who had not previously paid for their financial obligations. We had more than one million in non-receivables. Recently we made the decision not to extend credit; we would require each recipient of our services or publications to pay for the services up front and for those of those who had run up debt; we would not serve them until they had met their obligation. The results are positive. Our services and publications are valued and needed. Customers are paying up; slowly we are getting the bad debts cleaned up and customers are saving so they can renew their orders.

MMP allowed loans to staff for emergencies or other reasons. No policy was made. Friction arose when some would get a loan and another would be denied the full amount when requested. Tension has eased; we put the request for a loan to the whole staff, and let them decide.

At times we would engage staff most of whom were well qualified, but after working with them we discovered their personality did not fit into our life style or core objectives. In some cases they would want to stay on, and we allowed this even when it brought up discord within our small knit compatible staff. On two occasions we eased them out through one strategy or another. We discovered the hard way it is easy to get highly skilled people who are an asset to our program but their personality disrupted the solidarity and closeness of what we had spent time to build into a team.

Becoming donor financially independent

MMP was called in to being to minister to poor disadvantaged families. We were empowered by donors from the America to help churches in the Philippines to set up preschools in poor communities. For nearly thirty years we relied on foreign donors to meet our goal of opening ten new schools a year. This worked well, preschools were formed, teachers were trained, and hundreds of preschool children were taught. There came a time when we noticed that “donor fatigue” was setting in; donors were getting old, some were losing their commitment. The number of dependable donors was declining. I suggested we take the role of financing our own program. We explored the possibilities of raising our own support, not by soliciting from foundations and individuals, but from our own industry earn our own way. It was at this time I heard that Asian Institute of Management was offering the degree: Masters in Entrepreneurship in Social Development. The requirement for graduation required that the student bring about change and improvement in his or her organization. I enrolled and set as my graduation goal requirement that in seven years MMP would become independent of foreign or local funding for operations.

Having made this commitment, the next question was how to be independent of relying on outside funds. We explored different options: franchising school canteens, opening a school offering teachers seminars in preschool education, and others, but none fit into our personality. The project we finally chose was to author and publish workbooks and teacher manuals.

The first thing we discovered was we lacked the funds to find the writers and the funds to print and sell the workbooks and teacher guidelines. We needed a grant; but before we asked for a grant we needed a plan. The plan evolved into this. Writers would come from interested faculty from the University of the Philippines, the artist came through a referral, and bids from printers provided the publication. A proposal/business plan was written and submitted to several foundations; one responded and we were on the way to publishing.

All did not go smoothly, some of the staff felt that we should not get into business; business was not ministry, God would provide the funds through traditional ways. Some of the staff was not trained in business and outsourcing technical and marketing people was not within their competency. All of that said, this was the right choice. Our donor base declined, but the profits from our publishing kept us in the black and expanding our influence and services. Net profit has allowed us to expand our offerings and serve a broader base.