



7 Ways to Waste Your Life in Missions

God can do amazing things through people who are not prepared and are completely unqualified. If He couldn't, we would all be in trouble. None of us is ever really ready for the challenges that go with serving the mission of God.

That said, planning not to prepare is unwise. Sadly, 71% of missionaries come home prematurely with unrealized dreams and broken hearts for preventable reasons. Then they have to struggle with guilt, shame, and fear on top of feeling like they wasted part of their life and other people's money and time.

Here are a few of the bad decisions people routinely make in the urgency to get to the field.

1. Skip training.

Working cross-culturally is complex and much harder than you expect. Passion will get you there, but it won't keep you there or make you effective. Everything you think you know and all your skills will fail you in another culture if you haven't prepared to understand how to be Jesus' person in a foreign context.

While you can't learn all the concepts and develop all the skills you need before you go, you can learn how to learn them. You can get help separating your culture from your faith. You can develop the framework for your work before you go. That alone can keep you from being overwhelmed and discouraged beyond the ability to function.

2. Leave before getting adequate funding in place.

Someone will no doubt tell you that it's urgent to go and you should trust God to provide after you arrive. That sounds pious and God has done that at times. However, there are far more stories of missionaries who go to the field too soon without adequate funds to live and do their work. And who cratered under the financial pressure and family resentment that followed. Trust God to supply. But, count the cost and plan well.

Don't leave until you have the means to do what you are called to do. It's like what Jesus said about a man building a tower: If you don't have enough to finish the job and go ahead, you'll end up looking and feeling foolish, and no one will benefit (see Luke 14:28).

3. Go at it alone.

We all love to read about the mission trips of Paul and are amazed at all he did. But our American individualism blinds us to miss his teammates. In truth, Paul NEVER worked alone. He started as a side-kick to Barnabas and always worked at part of a team including a host of people who are mentioned in Acts and his letters. Jesus didn't work alone. He gathered a group of 12. He had an inner circle of three. He sent His disciples out two by two. He formed communities everywhere He went. The Jesus way is not a solitary path.

Cross-cultural missions is hard. It is too much to do alone. You need others. You need help modeling the way of Jesus. You don't have all the skills or perspective the mission will require. You need teammates with you. You need a church with deep buy-in to your vision, mission, and well-being behind you. Don't go at it by yourself. It rarely turns out well.

4. Go without a strategy.

If you want to represent Jesus in another country and just model the Kingdom of God before others without a clear objective, that is wonderful. But you need to do it on your own money. Go get a job in another country or fund yourself. That is an honorable choice.

However, if you are going to raise money from others, you are there to do a job and you need to have a plan that is developed by people who have some idea of how to do it. If you think that plan will emerge on the field without you having some idea how to do it before you go, you are likely deceiving yourself and hiding your unwillingness to prepare. How will you assess the potential plans that will come to you on the field? Does God lead? Yes. Does He give us all the plan before we go? No. But, learning how to pray, how to listen, and how to plan is essential.

Dwight D. Eisenhower once said, "In preparing for battle, I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable." The same is true in missions. Whatever plan you develop before you arrive will be inadequate. But the process of developing a plan with the help of those who have experience and knowledge in mission strategy is essential.

5. Take an American strategy to another country.

If you haven't prepared well and learned to understand the difference between the culture and the Gospel, you will take an American model of church to cultures where it does not fit. One African said that American missionaries in the past did not bring the Gospel seed but brought potted plants and tried to make them grow in a place where the soil and climate did not suit them.

You need to strip down the Gospel to its essential element and trust that God will enable local people to read the Bible and hear the Spirit guide them into developing churches that fit their context without copying American models. Too often we have planted mule churches. A mule is a hybrid animal that comes from mating a horse and a donkey. Mules are powerful animals, but they are

sterile. They can't reproduce. When we take American church models to other cultures, we create hybrid churches. Often, they die quickly. Some are powerful for one generation—as long as they have foreign leadership and funding. But they rarely reproduce.

The key is discerning the Gospel from your culture and making sure you facilitate an encounter between Jesus and people in other countries. Then train them to listen to Jesus and obey the Scriptures in their context so that what is produced fits the location where it finds itself so it can reproduce.

6. Build around on your unique skills and resources.

The quickest way to get a crowd together and produce a church is to leverage your unique skills and draw people to you and your plans. That is also the best way to sabotage a church long term.

If the mission is built around you, your skills, and the resources you bring, it will only thrive while you are there and it will never grow beyond you.

7. Don't invest in leader development.

If you want your time as a missionary to count beyond your life in country, you have to develop local leaders. Everyone can see this, but not everyone does it. Why not? Because it is faster and easier to do things yourself. Because you can do it better. Because investing in leader development can be frustrating and break your heart. Because working through others means you lose control and you lose a sense of accomplishment. Because working yourself out of a job means your reason for being present shrinks and you worry that your donors will drop you if they don't think you are essential. Those are just a few of the reasons missionaries can sabotage their own work and see it all fall apart when they leave.