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## Mission Problems, Mission Decisions

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# Vignettes

*Missions can be usefully dealt with in a theoretical manner, as several of the articles in this issue do to good effect. But in the end, missions essentially and above all has to do with what happens on the ground, as the servants of the gospel interact with persons and their groups and cultures. Thus we are featuring four anecdotes, which we are calling "Vignettes from the Field." The reader will notice that two of them have to do with missions to desperately disadvantaged children; we make no apology for this seeming imbalance, since around the world children are the most vulnerable and exploited of "the least of these."*



## Children's Day with Nobody's Child

James W. Crisfield

Once I left the asphalt, it was a slow, bumpy ride down the dirt road. A recent rain shower held the dust down to a minimum. I reached the gate and turned right, entering the drug rehab center called "Projecto Vida em Cristo" ("Project: Life in Christ"). Leandro, whom I had brought here two and a half weeks earlier, greeted me warmly. He was doing very well and was excited to tell of his progress. I soon left him with his mother, grandfather, brother, and sister. They had much to celebrate on this "Children's Day."

I went into the large house where the fifteen or so recovering addicts live. Some of the residents sat watching the evangelical film *The*

*Cross and the Switchblade*. I greeted them and then went through another door into a large room with some ten bunk beds. I was in search of Sidney (see-gee-NAY).

Sidney recently turned fourteen years old. He is trying to overcome his addiction to crack. He was born to a single mom, the product of her promiscuity. She didn't especially want him, so he was raised by an uncle and his wife, who already had an older daughter. It just never worked out: so many fights. He spent more and more time on the streets, learning the lessons it teaches, until he was hooked by this drug that does not discriminate on the basis of age, sex, or tough circumstances in life. It

destroys anyone and everyone it can. Finally, the uncle shipped him off to this rehab center—and then told him the family wanted nothing more to do with him.

I found Sidney sitting on the edge of his bed, his head low, nearly between his knees. He had a bad case of aching heart. No wonder! It's hard to celebrate Children's Day when nobody wants you to be his or her child, when nobody loves you. Imagine being fourteen and all alone in the world, knowing that there is no one on the face of the earth who wants you. Sidney dreams of finding his biological mother, whom he has never met. He holds on to the hope that if he can just find her, she will

find it in her heart to love him. Surely there is someone in this world who will love me, he thinks. But after fourteen years with zero contact—and she could have seen him if she had wished—this is likely nothing more than a sad fantasy destined to disappoint.

Every Sunday is visiting day at the rehab center. At 2 P.M., cars arrive; parents get out and hug their children, encourage them and tell them how proud they are, bring them simple presents, and let them know they have a home to return to when they are better. Brothers and sisters run up to them, squeezing them tight with big hugs, so happy for the reunion. Sidney's last visit was two and a half months ago, his second week here, when his uncle told him he didn't ever want to see him again. Since then, every Sunday at 2 P.M. Sidney goes into the sleeping quarters and lies down, trying to block out what have become the loneliest hours of his life.

I took Sidney a New Testament that Sunday. He is not yet a Christian, but he was thrilled to receive a gift. And a hug. As I gave it to him, I said, "Happy Children's Day." I was rewarded with a sudden surprised smile—the kind that crosses your face only when you are feeling special. You see, I know the Father

who does love Sidney. And the Father has a Son who wants more than anything to be Sidney's brother. And he has a servant who could not leave Sidney that day with a simple "Poor guy, God bless you!" I told Sidney I would be part of his family as long as he wished. On Sundays at 2 P.M., Sidney will have a visitor. I will take him out for pizza. And I'll tell him how proud I am of him. We'll spend Sunday afternoons talking about whatever he wishes. And when I leave, he'll know I'm coming back.

I don't know how long Sidney will want me as part of his family. But I do know that God does not abandon those he loves, and so I will not abandon Sidney. He needs to see the love of the heavenly Father reflected in the unconditional and unswerving commitment of his servants.

To be fourteen, all alone, a fourth-grade dropout, and recovering from crack cocaine addiction does not give you the best of prospects for the future. It's going to be a battle.

But no fourteen-year-old should ever go into battle alone. There are too many Sidneys around us. It is a shameful scandal in a world where so many claim to know Christ.

We need to let the Sidneys of the world into our lives. In so doing, we

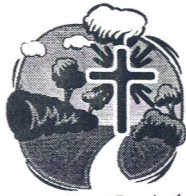
just might let Christ dwell in our hearts. "Asking Jesus into our hearts" is one thing; letting him stay is quite another.

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Eph 3:14–19 NIV)

Perhaps it is in loving as Christ loved that we discover the dimensions of his love. Christ loves the Sidneys of this world. Can you find it in your heart to love them too?

**JAMES W. CRISFIELD** is a missionary of the Christian Missionary Fellowship in Campinas, Brazil, where he ministers to abandoned street children.

*There are too many Sidneys around us. It is a shameful scandal in a world where so many claim to know Christ.*



## Mission Problems, Mission Decisions

Charles Coulston

The youth room at Nairobi Church of Christ Eastleigh is a workshop. Bible school materials are prepared, lessons practiced, dramas planned. The walls are gray and the tables are seaspray green. This table is not level; it rocks sideways when someone leans on it. Gathered around the table are Mbuvi, Alfayo, Jackton, Alphonse, Boni, Henry, Solo, Kamau, Charles, Darlene, Maina, and Chege. The focus of today's meeting is the case of Maina and Chege. These two young men lived on the streets of Nairobi for years but are now part of "Made in the Streets," the church's ministry to young people who sleep in the alleyways and *chokora* bases of the slums.

Life on the streets is "not as easy as you might think," in the words of one street youth. While many children and youth enter the streets because it seems an easier life—there is food; it is free and glamorous—it turns out to be a life-and-death struggle and a trap for the future. To survive they eat garbage, collect items such as glass and metal for recycling, steal, and beg. When small, they are good beggars and may receive as much daily as an employed person. This contributes to the number of street kids. As they get older, they are not as well received

by well-wishers, and they usually turn to stealing and robbery. When they are caught, they may be killed by a mob, or the police may put them in jail, where treatment is not soft. They may be charged with robbery with violence, which carries a death penalty.

Maina and Chege have been part of "Made in the Streets" for eight months. They are well established in the school, with Maina already studying auto mechanics. They live in one of the small apartments the program has secured for the students in the slums. This week they saw an old friend with whom Maina went to school before becoming a street kid. They went together to Huruma and into a bar. The "friend" bought them several beers as they talked. When they returned late at night to the apartment, they fought and destroyed a lantern and other items. Now they face a disciplinary committee made up of the staff of the street ministry.

Mbuvi was a street kid before he came to the church. He was brought by Sammy, the first kid in the Eastleigh church. He was given a temporary job at KCITI, the church's computer and electronics college, because an American gave money to hire seven street kids. He proved to be a good worker and became involved with preparing Bible class

materials in the youth room. On the street he had been an accomplished thief who was never caught. He sold drugs in a local high school. When he was introduced to Jesus, he never looked back. Now he sings with a group of young men, and when he sings, "He helped me to stop, stop doing those things," he is quite serious.

Alfayo, Jackton, and Alphonse grew up in nuclear families. Henry's parents were divorced years ago, and Kamau's mother left the family and moved to Mombasa in his preteen years. Boni lived with his grandmother for years after his mother died. Kamau often says, in reference to living on the street, "It could have been me," as his father was often without work. Today these young men will "sit in judgment" on two street youths.

Charles begins the roundtable conversation with Maina and Chege by asking, "Why are you here?" Chege begins to blame others for his predicament, while Maina simply says, "To ask for forgiveness." As the young men are asked to tell the story and staff members ask questions and talk to them, it becomes apparent that the primary task of the meeting is to help Maina and Chege own responsibility for their actions. When they are asked to step outside while the staff

talks, Charles sets out the options that seem most likely and asks the group to talk about their feelings and what they want to do. The options are (1) to dismiss the two completely with no return, (2) to set some discipline and allow them to continue in school, (3) to forgive them with no restrictions and allow them to continue, or (4) to suspend them from school for a period of time.

Mbuvi begins by saying, "I don't want to lose them." Alphonse wants to set a limit on the number of chances they have, especially since Chege has caused trouble in the apartment before. Kamau says their attitudes are very different, as Maina has accepted responsibility, while Chege is "messed up." Boni, with his tender heart, says, "We need to love them." Darlene states that they need to experience discipline or they are unlikely to pay attention. Alfayo recommends that we spend more time with them, that all of us go there more at night to be with these two

specifically.

After the discussion, a group decision is made with the following provisions: (1) Mbuvi and Kamau will be "big brothers" to Chege and spend extra time with him. Charles and Henry will take time to encourage Maina. (2) The school has a limit on its tolerance. If these two drink again, they will be suspended from school for one week, but will still be allowed to come to church and to the church's Saturday ministry. (3) Chege will be required to serve the landlord in some way for disturbing the peace in the neighborhood, while Maina will have his privilege of working at the school for pay on off days suspended. (4) We will not give up on them.

The mission field is a fertile ground for church life. It is also often chaotic, as new Christians with very little training and experience are asked to shoulder the burden of church life. They need to be taught in principle and in action how to handle

priorities and problems in church life. A principle was followed in the case of Maina and Chege that led to good results; that principle can be summarized as follows: A missionary does not work in a foreign land in order to exercise leadership, but to bring up leaders who understand the value of working together. Thus a missionary must not make decisions himself/herself. It is his/her task to train others in decision making, and particularly in making decisions together. Ten people will make a wiser and more compassionate decision than one. A single person, whether the missionary or someone else, will err in excessive compassion or excessive discipline. Together, a group will achieve a balanced viewpoint.

**CHARLES and DARLENE COULSTON** serve with a group of Kenyan young people in developing ministries and training for street children and youth in Nairobi, Kenya.



## *A Lesson From Maasailand*

Greg Johnson

When we first went to Maasailand, my wife, Becky, and I lived in tents as we studied Maasai language and culture. We had spent several years preparing ourselves in credible educational institutions to be God's people cross-culturally. As we studied language and culture, one of

my goals was to identify key leaders within the communities we were targeting. These men were respected, able to speak in traditional meetings, and had a following of other people because of their natural leadership abilities. One such leader was a man named Tuta Olokkumum. However, Tuta had one major problem: he was

quickly developing a drinking problem and was on the way to becoming an alcoholic.

Struggling with alcohol, he was destroying his life by selling off animals to support his habit of drinking *chang'a*, a form of distilled corn liquor, or "white lightning," extremely dangerous because it is so

strong. Twice I was called over to see if I could help because Tuta had drunk so much that he'd almost killed himself. Once, while I was standing with a group of elders, Tuta stumbled over to where we stood, babbling unintelligibly because he was so drunk. A sudden breeze came up and knocked him down. Tuta was drinking uncontrollably, his family was beginning to go hungry, and his esteem in the community was going down rapidly!

After one of his serious drinking binges, I felt the Lord leading me to go talk to him. I felt God was telling me, "Now is the time; Tuta Olokkumum will listen!" By that time I spoke Maasai and had spent many months developing a relationship with Tuta that gave me the right to speak. With a skeptical heart, I went over to his village and found him sober. I have to admit I hadn't expected to see him sober! I told him that the teaching I was bringing to the area was new, yet good news. Yes, the Maasai knew God, but they didn't know the about his Son, Yesu (Jesus). Tuta had drawn conclusions, had made assumptions about the teaching, but had never attended a single lesson. How could he possibly know whether the teaching was good or bad for Maasai? I shared with him that he was killing not only himself but his family as well. I went on to explain that when he died from drinking, the family would slowly die of hunger and lack of clothing, in despair because he had drunk up all his worldly resources. I drove home

the point that there was one way and only one way to escape a certain death and have release from being "tied by drink." The way was through the "One" I was teaching about, the Son of God. Surprisingly, Tuta listened and even thanked me for coming—although in truth, I didn't expect any change.

A couple of days later, shy and embarrassed, Tuta came to a lesson I was teaching, and he has never looked back. To my knowledge, he's never had another drink. Today Tuta is a powerful leader in the Maasai church. He has witnessed to hundreds, and I have no idea how many are in God's kingdom because of Tuta's witness. He leads singing and preaches as well as anyone I know in any culture. His walk with the Lord through hard times has always inspired me. Over the years, the bond Tuta and I developed and the sense of confidence we shared was so strong that we confessed our sins to each other. I didn't have to be the perfect unblemished missionary around Tuta. In times that I was frustrated, needed ideas in ministry, or had sins to confess, Tuta ministered to me through Scripture, godly wisdom, and compassion. Two sons are now following in his footsteps, and both are emerging leaders gifted in singing and preaching. From a hopeless drunk to a friend, brother, and leader of God's people, Tuta is God's warrior in Maasailand.

There are a couple of principles I'd like to share. First, prayer, patience, and perseverance are

essential. After he had been identified as a leader, it took over two years for Tuta to convert. Over a long period of time, many prayers were offered up for him. God's ambassadors must have a dedicated prayer life backed by patience and perseverance. Second, we must be sensitive to God's leading. The messenger must be tuned to God's initiatives and be ready to respond when God directs. When God calls, we must not be too tired, too goal oriented, too program based, or too busy doing great things for him that we miss his call to action. Many, many times, my goals have been changed, whole areas of Maasailand have been opened up to the gospel, and the direction of my work has shifted because of God's impulse within my soul to change course, to see an individual, or to just plain wait. Of course, there are no shortcuts; contextually appropriate theology, missiology, and methodologies are essential tools to our task. However, theology, missiology, and methods can be only as effective as the messenger's response to God's leading. In other words, a good strategy is to prepare ourselves with the tools needed to be good ambassadors for God, to see where God is going, and to go with him.

**GREG JOHNSON**, after serving twenty years among the Maasai of Kenya under Christian Missionary Fellowship, has recently taken up for C.M.F. responsibility in the U.S. for new thrusts in ethnic ministries and bivocational missions.

*Theology, missiology, and methods can be only as effective as the messenger's response to God's leading.*



## *The Power of the "Broken" and the "Unknown"*

*Larry James*

I delivered the eulogy at a dear friend's memorial service two months ago. People packed the small, upstairs, inner-city sanctuary. Folding chairs lined up wall-to-wall, front-to-back. The audience provided a rich study in diversity. Black, brown, white, young, old, poor, well-off—the crowd reminded me of a cross-section slice of the city my late friend had loved so much.

His name was Ed. He spent most of his life living hard, chasing women, running cons, and doing and dealing drugs. He knew the inside of prison. He knew racism. He knew the pain of broken relationships, disappointed children, and violence. He knew addiction most intimately. Ed could "do" hair! He enjoyed the reputation of an accomplished stylist. He died of brain cancer.

Most people would dismiss Ed as a lost life—a person racked by needs and empty of positive capacity. Unknown, powerless, and broken, he would be judged by most a failure with nothing much to offer anyone.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. When I first met Ed about four years ago, he volunteered in the inner-city center I managed. Ed stepped up as one of our very first community leaders. He helped transform our outreach center from a place of charity to an outpost of community and hope. Most days Ed

spent his time walking back and forth between our building and Narcotics Anonymous Central, then located just down the block. He literally dragged volunteer after volunteer into our community center, most of them recovering addicts who needed to contribute. These friends filled the seats of the sanctuary the day of his memorial service. But Ed touched the "rich cats," too. Addicts from well-to-do suburban enclaves like University Park, Plano, and Richardson counted on him as their friend and mentor in recovery. Ed connected the mental health/recovery community to our beleaguered neighborhood. Ed perfected the fine art of networking, but with him the process always focused on lifting people out of the pit.

Person by person, well over twenty of them, they stepped to the podium to share memories and gratitude concerning Ed's influence in their lives. One man I will never forget. Tall, well-dressed, articulate, and engaged at the heart level, this gentleman told of the day he had stood at the intersection of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X Boulevards trying to decide which way to go with his life. Just out of prison with no money, no job, and little hope—then, he told the funeral audience, "*Eddie drove up with a white guy in a Cadillac and told me*

*to get in. He said he would take me to a place of life, not death.*" As he spoke, tears welled up in my eyes and a lump rose in my throat. I had been the "white guy." The Cadillac was my father's, borrowed when my car had broken down. Now here he stood—doing well, employed, full of purpose and hope. What a reunion we enjoyed after the service!

Yes, Ed was largely "unknown." For sure, Ed's life was tough, and not all of his decisions served him or his family very well. Ed eagerly, and with little reserve, admitted his failures. He found himself and his God before his journey ended. And he made a huge difference in his world. He taught me many lessons. The one I remember today is simple: *Everyone has something to offer for the good of the community.* No one should be written off before his or her script ends. Everyone deserves to be taken seriously. No one can claim perfection. Everyone matters. To give up on a person is to take a tragic, very wrong turn. Thankfully, our small (but growing) inner-city church enjoyed the good sense and spiritual maturity to allow Ed to find his place in our midst on his own terms.

Thanks, Ed. Your life mattered to me and to so many others.

**LARRY JAMES** is executive director of the Greater Dallas Community of Churches.