

## THE RELEVANCE OR IRRELEVANCE OF INNOVATIVE MINISTRY STRATEGIES

2009 ARLM Conference Seminar – by Chuck Clayton

Why do you do what you do in ministry? Most of us who find our way into Resort Missions are folks who march to a different drum beat. We like to color outside the lines, think outside the box, to be creative, innovate. We have stayed in the “system” and have great respect for the traditional, institutional church; but we chafe at being consumed by buildings, programs, and committee meetings and such. We want to make a difference, without the constraints of tradition.

And yet, after even the most innovative ministry is around for awhile, it has the tendency to take on its own traditions, structure and way of doing things. What once was innovative and cutting edge becomes “the way we’ve always done it.” And, when new locations for ministry open up, there is a tendency to look to what the veterans or the successful ministries are doing. Too often attempts are made to replicate these in this new place. Don’t get me wrong. There is no sense trying to reinvent the wheel. But what once was innovation can quickly become tradition. We have seen this in local church ministry. What was called contemporary worship 10 or 15 years ago, has now, in many places, become a new traditional way of doing worship.

So, why do you do what you do? Just what is your purpose for what you do in resort missions?

Earlier in October, I took a ten mile hike. This wasn’t my first 10 mile hike. That probably happened when I was around 13, to satisfy a requirement for the First Class Boy Scout badge. There have been a lot of 10 mile hikes since then – through the hills around Ocala, Missouri, up and down numerous mountain trails in Colorado, Wyoming and California, and even a stint on the Appalachian Trail. All or most of these hikes were for good and pleasant purposes: personal enjoyment, hunting elk or deer, training to be a wilderness guide, training others to be wilderness guides, leading Christian High adventure trips. But my recent trip had no such enjoyable purpose. But it definitely had an important purpose.

You see, the day before I took that hike I had driven to our local ski area, Dodge Ridge, to pick up my skis that had been tuned up for the upcoming season. While I was out and about, I decided to fulfill my wife’s request that I get a new garage door opener. The garage door company is about 11 miles further down the mountain from our house above Sonora. On getting to the company facility, I found a sign that reported they were out of the office and wouldn’t be back for another 45 minutes. I didn’t want to wait; but it had warmed up since I left the

ski area, so I decided to take my sweatshirt off. To do so, I put my cap, my prescription sunglasses, the dysfunctional garage door opener and my cell phone on the roof of my Subaru Forester, making the distinct note not to drive off with any of those items on the roof. The sweat shirt went to the back seat, roof items were gathered and I drove off. When I got home – the cap on my head, the sunglasses on my nose, and the garage door opener and cell phone – were nowhere in the car. I realized I had in fact left them on the roof – a definite manifestation of senioritis. So I drove back to the garage door company – certain the phone and opener would be in the parking lot – or at least on the side of the driveway out of the parking lot. Not a chance. Slowly I began to drive home, looking for the smashed remains in the road or off to the side. No way. Then 10 ½ miles back, in the middle of the road, I found the garage door opener, not smashed; but, no cell phone.

That is why the next morning, I drove back to the garage door company and began my 10 mile + hike. I walked up one side of the road for a mile, then back on the other to the car; moved the car and repeated the process. I searched through ditches, weed patches and litter. Oh, I did find cell phones – two of them and part of another; but none of this accomplished the purpose for taking that hike. But make no mistake. I knew what I was doing and why I was doing it.

The purpose of that story is not to concede that I have become a senile, old guy who can't keep track of his stuff; nor to impress you that I can still, at 72, hike 10 miles. I engaged in that exercise on purpose and for a clearly understood purpose: to find my cell phone.

Each of you is involved in a ministry that is unique, creative, non-traditional and probably innovative. Over the years you have developed a strong network with other resort ministers. You pick up on what the veterans have done or are now doing. You likely have tried to adapt some of their ministry approaches in your setting. But do you have a strong and clear understanding of the purpose for what you do?

To attempt resort ministry without a clearly understood purpose is like taking a 10 mile hike on gimpy legs for no good reason, except maybe to enjoy the scenery.

One place to begin is to consider the difference between RESORT MISSIONS and RESORT MINISTRY. Those of you who knew me back when are aware that was a touchy subject at the old Home Mission Board. I've come to accept that both concepts are valid, provided they are interactive. I would suggest that you can't really have a valid ministry without a clear mission.

Let me digress for a moment. I am not talking about a written "mission statement". About 10 years ago, with the popularity of Rick Warren's Book The

Purpose Driven Church, lots of folks were writing purpose statements for their local church or ministry. That may be helpful, but they can become an exercise in futility – no matter how great they sound – if they don't really express the heart and soul of your entities reason for being. What really is your PURPOSE? What really is your MISSION?

Let me suggest some possible reasons for the existence of a resort ministry. See if you can identify your purpose for being: (be honest with yourself)

Our Purpose is primarily:

- To introduce people to Jesus
- To disciple believers to become more like Jesus
- To demonstrate God's love to hurting people
- To provide a Christian/Baptist presence in our resort setting
- To provide wholesome, alternative activities for people in our resort setting
- To provide a place for church youth and others to have a positive experience in service

Are any, some, or all of these valid purposes for investing your life in such a ministry?

I would suggest that **MISSIONS** implies being sent [hopefully by God] to an unevangelized culture or people group that is different than the one the missionary has roots in. And that it is for the purpose of introducing that population to the person of Jesus and to a personal relationship with Him, so that those who trust and follow Him might become a part of His kingdom.

On the other hand, **MINISTRY** implies intentional acts of service, given in love, which demonstrate and reflect the minister's relationship with Jesus and extends His grace and love to those who receive the ministry. **Ministry** is Faith in Action, verbal and non verbal witness. **Ministry** is extended to fellow believers and those who do not have a relationship with Jesus alike. Of course, in a resort setting, ministry to believers who are in crisis is appropriate. That's what we do as members of God's family. But that is NOT our primary mission. Ministry in Missions is primarily a vehicle of God's love to those who are not related to Him, but which He might use to draw them to Jesus. It is the cup of cold water given in Jesus' name.

I don't think many of us would deny that resort settings are populated by people groups and secular cultures that give little attention to God. Certainly there often are vibrant Christians living in, working in and enjoying the setting. But our mission is not to establish holy huddles of refuge for them, but to enlist and equip them to be fellow agents of mission in that place.

If we are on **MISSION**, our primary target must be those for whom Jesus died, but have not yet come to know Him and receive His love and grace.

Who then are the people groups, the lifestyle groups, the culture groups that are in your resort setting? Have you intentionally identified them? The larger the resort population, the more diverse the population groups will be. Disney World or Yosemite will undoubtedly have a greater diversification than Toledo Bend or Sun Valley Idaho. But even in smaller or regional resort settings there will be more than one people group.

Some ways of distinguishing people groups might include:

Residents / Seasonal/ Periodic/ Tourist  
Secular antichristian: Secular indifferent /Religious non Christian /  
Nominal churchgoers/ Growing believers /Sold out disciples of  
Jesus  
Senior adults /Midlife adults (boomers) /Mature singles /Growing  
families /Young families /Young singles /Teens–youth/ Children  
Regional Caucasian (which region) /American ethnic (which ethnicity) /  
International (define).  
Secular liberal /Religious liberal /Secular conservative /Religious  
conservative

The ministry you design must fit the targeted people or cultural group in your setting. It doesn't make sense to adopt a ministry that is working in another resort setting if the target groups don't match. It doesn't make sense to keep doing the same ministry activity if it no longer connects with the present population. It doesn't make sense to keep doing a ministry activity because the staff enjoys or is comfortable doing it, if it isn't connecting with the resort population.

The ministry activity should seek to accomplish the mission purpose and fit the people, cultural or lifestyle group to which it is extended. Hopefully these tools of ministry are creative, innovative and fresh. We likely have more freedom in this respect than our brothers who serve in local churches, but we can become stale and traditional too.

Perhaps the most critical issue in all this is the personal relationship of the Resort Mission's leaders with Jesus. Staff and volunteers will seldom rise above the spiritual level of the leaders. It is not enough to give lip service to "depending on the Lord". Above all else the leaders must model a genuine walk with and dependence on his or her relationship with Jesus. If we seek to introduce people in our resort setting to Jesus and help them to grow to become like Him, then the leaders must themselves be in such a personal relationship and growing in that relationship. We all go through spiritual crises

in our walk and particularly in ministry. Those difficult times do not disqualify us from leadership or service, but they provide opportunities to model absolute trust and dependence on the God who loves us and is working out the best for us without qualification. If our ultimate purpose is to introduce people to Jesus and love them into a growing relationship with God, then we have to be in that relationship ourselves – even when things are not going well from our perspective.

I would not presume to offer a cookie cutter method for sustaining such a relationship. Christian writers have produced a great number of resources to assist, both classical and contemporary. I can only suggest some handles that have helped me, none of which are extraordinary.

I personally must spend time alone with God every day. I confess I badly neglected this during much of my career ministry. But I finally made it as much of a personal discipline as my daily jog (when I could jog) and have developed it ever since. I read a section from a Christian Classic to begin my time. Then I read a section of Old and New Testament scripture daily, seeking to read through the Bible yearly in a fresh translation. On the basis of this input, I then journal a short paragraph each day. Confession and repentance seems to come naturally for me in this. All of the reading and writing take no more than 30 minutes. Then I silently pray – with the major emphasis on praise and intercession for those that God has laid on my heart. I have found this part of my time expands as my circle of influence grows; but it is some of the best time I have with God.

It takes discipline, but doesn't anything that has value? Jogging, walking or physical exercise requires discipline. Weight control requires discipline. Reading and knowledge expansion requires discipline. Moral integrity requires discipline. I may mess up and slip into self indulgence in any of these ways, but I will only stay fit when I forgive myself and climb back on the wagon.

How can we hope to have a clear understanding of God's purpose for our ministry if we are not in regular, personal, intimate relationship with Him. We can do a lot of innovative stuff, creative stuff, even religious stuff on our own. But all it is – is stuff, unless the Lord who loves us and has called us to walk with Him is leading our adventure with Him.