

Organizing a University or College Mission

Roger Mitchell

this article was published in IFES Review, April 1980

I. INTRODUCTION

A. What is meant by a mission?

Cod's people are always involved in mission, either well, or not so well. It is one of their defining characteristics, for Jesus said, 'As the Father sent me, even so I send you.' (in 20:21] A university or college 'mission' is a period of special evangelistic activity, a means of focusing and magnifying the normal life of a Christian group in order to make a greater impact on the life of the college with the good news, with the express intention of winning men and women for Christ.

So the decision to organize a university or college mission cannot really add a new dimension to the life of the Christian Fellowship. It is a quantitative development of the Christian witness in that place, and cannot be expected to be any more successful in quality than the existing life of the group. What a mission can do is to intensify the CF's awareness and commitment to its true calling and orientation. This will of course only be a good thing, and a pattern of regular missions, mini-missions, and evangelistic weekends is an excellent format for a CF's life over a three or four-year period.

The aim of this article is to suggest how a full scale university mission might be organized. In some places the existing Christian group will be too small to attempt anything but a modest version of some of the strategies and ideas presented. In other places the political situation may prohibit the kind of free expression of the good news which we enjoy in the UK. Nonetheless, at least something may be relevant and possible.

There may be other places where preconceived ideas about 'a mission' need to be overcome. For them it is perhaps necessary to re-emphasize that we are not suggesting that a mission can be the panacea for the ills of a group, nor that it is a team of outsiders coming in to do a job that Christian students are failing to do. The kind of mission that this article is advocating develops and builds on the Christian witness of an existing student group.

B. Mission strategy

In speaking of mission strategy I am making two assumptions:

i. Cod has a strategy

This is clear from the repeated statements of Scripture that Jesus appeared at the 'full' or 'proper' time (cf Eph 1:16, Titus 3, 1 Pet 1:20 etc). The case has been made in other places (cf Michael Green 'Evangelism Then and Now' I/P 1979). Jesus Himself worked strategically in order that the good news might be heard and understood.

He was strategic about the time and place of His work: the gospel records emphasize His sensitivity to the right festival, day or hour, and Luke shows especially His sensitivity to place (cf Lk 4:14, 9:51-53, 19:11).

He was strategic about people: He chose 12 particular disciples whom He trained as they worked with Him (Mk 3:13-19).

He was strategic about prayer: in fact His work was obviously structured around specific prayer times (cf especially Lk chs 4-11).

All this underlines the importance of strategy in these areas while engaged in Cod's work, and therefore for us in those particular expressions of Cod¹'s work which we are calling missions. We shall consider these three strategic areas under the headings of PREPARATION, PEOPLE, and PRAYER.

ii. We need to evangelise in the same way that Jesus did

As well as being the content of the evangel, Jesus is also the pattern for evangelism. The latter insight has two important implications for mission planning; the first reminds us that the good news is more than words. It includes the accompanying incarnation of those words, which bears witness to them (in 14:10-12). This cannot be achieved suddenly in a week's mission.' An increasingly Christ-like, loving, serving fellowship is a crucial pre-requisite for a mission. Therefore mission preparation needs to train students in Christian maturity as much as it needs to provide them with practised expertise in communicating the gospel verbally. The second implication is that the verbal communication of the gospel, which can more easily be compassed in a week or so, needs to be of the same scope as Jesus himself covered.

There are three particular ways in which the gospel writers describe Jesus' verbal witness to the good news. He heralded or proclaimed, He taught, and He talked or spoke. University and college missions in the UK have tended to develop a strategy for communicating the good news on three levels which correspond to these. I shall call them opportunities for public proclamation, opportunities to teach the good news and opportunities to talk about and discuss the good news. We shall consider these three ways of making the good news known under the heading PROCLAMATION.

2. PREPARATION

The initial decision to hold a mission must rest with the student leaders themselves. Others (such as local Christian leaders or staff members of the national evangelical student movement) may be able to advise, however The necessary preparation falls into three categories: timing, structures, training.

A. Gauging the right time

There are two sets of factors to consider: the spiritual state of the group, and the contextual factors of the college or university.

i. The spiritual factors

Jesus chose 12. A committed working nucleus of at least 12 and preferably many more is essential before starting to plan a mission. Planning needs to get going sometime between nine and 18 months in advance. Even before this, a period of prayer and an attempt to arrive at real unanimity, at least among the

leadership of the group, is an important prerequisite before the final decision is made to proceed.

ii. The contextual factors

It is obviously best to choose the optimum time possible in the academic year, keeping away from the beginnings and ends of terms or semesters, examination periods and other major events of college life.

B. Getting the right structures

A committee separate from that in charge of running the whole Christian fellowship will almost certainly be needed if the administration of the mission is to be a success. There will be letters to write, rooms to book, strategic planning to be thought about, decisions to be made and disseminated, prayer information to be sent out, a budget planned and finances generated (a mission can cost anything from 1,000-3,000 US dollars) Such a committee will need to be made up of members of the Christian group, and meet each week for planning from the start. Ideally the members need to be mature Christians, or at least committed and enthusiastic.'

However, it is important to overlap the committee with the leadership of the Christian fellowship as a whole, or, in larger groups where this may not be possible because of the work load, to make sure that there is continual liaison between the leadership of the group and the mission organizing committee. This is necessary to avoid the twin possibilities that either the mission will be given low priority and be left as just another event outside the central life of the group as a whole; or that the mission committee will become a law to themselves without reference to the rest of the Christians on whose behalf they are organizing the mission. These two dangers have led to the entirely unnecessary downfall of several missions. One way of avoiding them is to invite a small group of post-graduates or Christian academic staff to act in an advisory capacity. The planning committee can then meet with them occasionally to discuss plans. This had the added advantage of providing a respected back-up group for the mission activities should occasion require it.

C. Giving the right training

The introduction has already laboured the point that a mission is the intensification of the normal life of a Christian student group. It will readily be seen that the kind of training necessary is not essentially different from the training that any Christian student group needs. What will change is the urgency with which training needs are approached. A goal has been set and the Christians need to grow as much as possible in that time. The preparatory programme of Bible teaching, group Bible study, practical evangelism and service is best organized as part of the ongoing programme of the group. Experience shows that crucial areas for emphasis are the nature and content of the good news; the need to overcome an exclusive or ghetto mentality among the Christians; practical help in 'getting inside the non-Christian's shoes' with sympathy and understanding (role play and drama can help with this); basic apologetics covering the relevant current objections to the gospel, and simple guidelines for leading an interested person to Christ. Most of these training resources will not be available within the group, and the help of literature and older Christians with more experience and expertise will need to be drawn on. Six books have proved particularly helpful in this respect:

Basic Christianity, John Stott, IVP (Available in many languages)

That's a good question, Roger Forster and Paul Marston, Kingsway (UK) and Tyndale Press (USA)

Evangelism Then and Now, Michael Green, IVP

How to Give Away your Faith, Paul Little, IVP

Out of the Saltshaker, Rebecca Manley Pippert, IVP

How to Share Jesus, Isabelo Magalit, IVCF-Philippines

As far as inviting older, more experienced Christian help in training is concerned, it is important to use at least some of the same people who will be helping with the mission itself (see section 3). This helps build relationships of trust and acceptance well in advance and avoids the danger that the Christian group will wait until the mission is almost over before allowing such relationships to consolidate. It is a good idea to arrange a pre-mission training camp or house party a few months (at the most) before the mission, to which the main outside helpers can be invited.

3. PEOPLE

Cod is personal and desires personal relationships. The need for repentance, the possibility of forgiveness and restoration are intensely personal. Yet the full experience and expression of this personal relationship with Cod is only realizable on a corporate basis. We come to know and love Cod with and through other people. This balance is clear throughout Scripture (cf Lk 10:25-28, in 13:34-35, in 17:22-23). Three things relevant to the organization of a mission ensue from this: the right kind of outside people are needed to help lead the mission; the individual members of the Christian group need to be as fully mobilised and involved as possible; and a really personal, caring attitude to the non-Christians in the college needs to be expressed in every aspect of mission planning.

A. Outside help

Any outsiders invited to help with the mission should have a known gift for personal evangelism among students and be prepared to work in a team relationship with relatively inexperienced student leaders. We have not encountered any problems with college authorities in the UK in inviting outside help, as long as the initiative comes from the Christian group within the college and the mission events are genuinely organized and led by students. The situation will obviously vary from place to place, but outside help is an enormous advantage when those concerned are fully committed to the aims and objectives of the mission and the Christian fellowship as a whole, and come to work in a supportive role alongside the students.

An experienced evangelist able to teach the good news in a way relevant to students is the first crucial helper to find. (In Britain the main speaker is traditionally known as the 'missioner', while other helpers are called 'assistant missioners'.) It is very important to invite someone with the right qualifications for the job. An able preacher, gifted at relating the gospel within the student context and well proved at helping men and women to move from outside to inside the kingdom of Cod, is essential. The balance needs to be preserved between a simple direct approach and an appreciation of the intellectual and

social issues involved. If possible this missionary should himself have had first-hand experience of student life, and of course his character and reputation must be excellent. It is well worth going to considerable lengths to get hold of the right person for the job. Ideally, the missionary will be able to liaise with the mission committee from the start and work alongside them and the leadership of the Christian fellowship during the actual mission, providing with them the overall leadership focus of the mission (see section 5B).

Depending on the size both of the active nucleus of the Christian fellowship, and of the student body as a whole, up to 30 or more assistant missionaries could be invited to help. Many of them will need a gift to cover their time and expenses. Of course the average Christian fellowship could not cope with anything like this, either numerically or financially, and five or six might be the maximum. The function of each of these helpers is to work with groups of a dozen or so Christian students in a student residence or faculty, meeting as many of their personal friends and acquaintances as possible, both informally and in small, semi-spontaneously organized meetings (see section 5C). They are also invaluable in following up contacts made during other main events of the mission (see section 5A & B). It is a good idea to choose some who are gifted in music, drama or open air work, and, of course, the majority should have an academic background themselves and be able to relate the gospel to their own field of study when required.

B. Mobilising the individual members of the Christian fellowship

If the group consists of a committed nucleus of more than 15 or so, it ought already to be breaking down into smaller units of not more than 12 for prayer, Bible study and evangelism. If this is not happening, it needs serious consideration, whether or not a mission is in view. It is only in small working units that everyone can begin to work out their own personal responsibility and involvement in God's work. With a mission in view it is imperative that the Christian fellowship divides into cells of 7-12 people who will take prayer, planning and organisational responsibilities for local mission events in the student residence, faculty or geographical area to which they relate. (Just which of these divisions provides the best structure in which cells can work, will vary from place to place.)

The leadership of these groups is obviously crucial. The leader needs to be someone committed to the development of the whole group as a functioning cell, and does not necessarily need to be an obvious leadership 'personality'. It is important that the individual members of each cell understand their responsibility and loyalty both to the group as a whole and to the cells in which they find their own particular personal expression and involvement. During the mission the larger group will be the obvious context for the main evangelistic teaching meetings, the small cell for more informal conversation and discussion. As we have seen already, the smaller group will be the main level of operation for the assistant missionaries.

Experience has shown that the small cell group, when it is given definite responsibilities, will succeed in mobilising the individual students to personal involvement in the mission. The members of the group will begin to respond personally to encouragements to fulfil their individual responsibilities to the mission in terms of prayer, personal witness and financial support.

C. Attitudes to non-Christians

One of the most striking aspects of Jesus' witness to the good news was His love for people. He always treated them as valuable in their own right despite their sin (cf in 4:7-9, Mk 10:21).

Sometimes evangelism becomes obsessed with strategy, statistics and results in a mechanistic way which subtly undermines the good news. Strategy is vital, but we are fishers of men, not things; (Mk 1:17). Everything about the mission must make this clear. Open-air demonstrations must not be unnecessarily alienating; evangelistic meetings planned with the non-Christian in mind and not in the form of a religious service including hymns and prayers which it would be embarrassing and hypocritical to expect them to take part in. The literature used will need to emphasise Cod's love and forgiveness for the repentant like Jesus did, and not focus immediately on hell and judgement. The message must not be compromised or watered down of course; that would be equally dehumanising. Above all the whole operation needs to be personal, to be seen to expose the Christians to scrutiny and the demands of individual loving involvement in the lives of non-Christians. This is how the apostle Paul so often described his work (cf 2 Cor 4:5, 1 Thess 2:8). Ours must aim for the same quality.

4. PRAYER

The central importance of prayer at a time of mission can hardly be over-estimated. Yet during the actual mission period the days will be extremely busy and the times when students are free to pray will often be the best times for evangelism too. So much of the prayer in-put will need to be in the period before the mission. Nonetheless, a prayer strategy for the actual mission is also important.

A. Prayer in preparation for a mission

This falls into three categories: individual prayer, corporate prayer and back-up prayer from wider supporters of the Christian fellowship and the mission.

i. The individual prayer life of the Christians

This will almost certainly need deepening by the provision of specific goals and objectives for faith. It is vital to encourage each Christian student prayerfully to select two or three of his or her non-Christian friends and make them special targets of prayer long before the mission. This will have the added advantage of highlighting the need to make such friendships if they do not already exist. Praying together in pairs in some kind of partnership scheme helps individuals to discipline themselves to pray regularly for these friends.

ii. The corporate prayer life of the fellowship

In some groups only a few pray aloud and there is little sense of the spiritual battle which Cod involves us in through prayer. Occasionally dividing the prayer meeting up into groups of three or four, while keeping them all together in one room, helps encourage more to pray and will soon have repercussions in the larger group prayer times. As the mission approaches, days or half-nights of prayer with specific topics associated with the mission will provide the scope for a real prayer burden for the mission to develop. In the longer times of group prayer a sensitive, worshipful interspersing of prayer with praise and singing

helps to encourage faith and concentration.

iii. The wider prayer back-up

Whenever Cod's people make a conscious commitment to move on with Cod in the work of His kingdom, the devil opposes them as actively as he can (cf Mk 1:21-24, Acts 16:16-18, Eph 6:12-18). It is very important to get as much prayer back-up as possible, beyond the input of the Christian students themselves. A regular prayer letter to the churches of group members whose home is in another place, to past group members and to sympathetic local churches will help facilitate this. Where possible face-to-face contact should be made with potential prayer supporters. Some of these people may also become motivated to support the mission financially and develop a real long-term interest in the ongoing life of the group and student work in general.

B. Prayer during the mission

As has been said already, many of the Christian students will find it difficult to attend set prayer times during the mission if they are adequately involved in reaching their friends or bringing them to the different activities, although one hopes that informal prayer times will happen quite naturally. However it should be possible for the Christians to meet, either corporately or in the small cell groups (see section 3B), early in the mornings before classes.

For the visiting team of helpers it will be easier. They will be available during the day when most students have classes and the work of the mission is quieter. It is a major part of the mission prayer strategy for them to arrange a regular daily prayer time - usually during the morning - when they can meet with as many of the student leaders as possible to share briefly from Cod's word, review mission progress and share confidentially the names of interested students. If possible, a good hour should be spent in prayer for these, concentrating more and more as the week progresses on the individuals in whom God's Spirit is obviously working. It is very exciting to see how prayer plays its part in the battle for souls at these times. Many Christian groups find the experience revolutionises their prayer life.

5. PROCLAMATION

As we considered in the introduction (section 1Bii), the main purpose of a mission is to give verbal witness to the good news. Experience has shown that this can scarcely be done well in less than a week, but that a longer period of intense activity is difficult to sustain. The task of the mission week is to communicate the good news in a biblical and culturally relevant way. This will, as I suggested, involve us in three crucial methods of verbal witness: public proclamation, teaching the good news, and informal conversation and discussion.

A. Public proclamation

There is a danger in pressing too fine a distinction between heralding, teaching and talking the good news. Often the Creek words are used more or less interchangeably. Nevertheless the distinction is practically useful. Jesus' public proclamations are generally on a fairly short, to the point, mass communication level (cf Mk 1:14-15, Lk 8:1, 9:1, in 7:37).

There are many ways in which this kind of witness to Christ can be given. Open

air preaching, if possible using street theatre or an arresting visual aid, is as effective and biblical as any, as long as the aim is to attract and not alienate the hearers. They may reject our message, but should not be too put off by the ways we communicate it. Constructively provocative leaflets, briefly applying the good news to topical issues; short interviews on university TV or radio; articles in student newspapers, are further possibilities, depending on your circumstances. However, if it is at all possible, Scripture (gospels, Bible portions) should be distributed to every student in the college. If good Christian musicians or singers are available it may be possible to obtain permission to use them to herald the good news in eating places, bars, common rooms and so on. A book table displaying gospels and other relevant evangelistic books provides an excellent centre of attraction. Where students from other language groups are present in a university it is good to provide gospels and other literature in their language.

Experience shows that the effect of proclaiming the good news in these ways is to draw attention to the life and message of the Christians, to challenge non-Christians in a way that they can follow up if they wish. Very importantly, it is also an exercise of real faith by the Christians that this is God's world and that He will Himself apply His word to the hearts of men and women. The outcome of these activities is felt in the overall work of the mission far beyond the immediate situation of proclamation. Where it is missing there will often be a real sense of failure to get to grips with the spiritual battle in the college.

B. Teaching the gospel

Teaching was the central focus of Jesus' verbal witness to the good news, and so must be of ours. Once people showed real interest and were prepared to listen, Jesus taught them. The sermons on the mount and the plain are obvious examples, but there are many others. Teaching evangelism is in any case particularly suited to student missions where students have lots of questions, secular presuppositions to reconsider, and are used to following a lecture style of presentation that lasts nearly an hour.

The ideal is a set of talks, one a day throughout the mission, which will together give a comprehensive coverage of the gospel in a way relevant to the students, and yet be individually self-contained for those who may only attend once. These talks should be given by the main missionary, who has been chosen for this job. If possible, the talks should be held in the same centrally accessible place each day, at a time at which the greatest number of students could reasonably be expected to attend. Titles for the talks need to be interesting and informative so that they can be used to promote the meetings in the best way the situation allows, during the weeks preceding the mission. A successful method in the UK has been to use an attractive series of posters. Small handouts advertising the meetings should be sent to as many students as possible in the weeks immediately preceding the mission, and personal invitation cards need to be printed for the members of the Christian fellowship to use to invite their friends. The most realistic way of getting non-Christians to these meetings is to make it clear to the Christian students that they must bring them personally.

These daily teaching meetings need to be made attractive and enjoyable, incorporating good music and drama as long as it fits the theme of the talk to be given. Coed planning is essential to ensure this. However, the largest part of the meeting should be the talk. We have found in the UK that a low-key approach to the matter of challenging students to commitment is appropriate, inviting interested students to remain in a place allocated when the meeting is

finishing, where they can hear briefly how to accept Christ and can receive suitable literature. This may vary in different cultures, but great sensitivity needs to be taken to ensure that any kind of appeal fits the good news and the audience.

It is a good idea to supply some kind of refreshments after the meeting so that interested students are encouraged to stay and talk. Where possible, small informal meetings in nearby student homes and residences should be laid on for friendship and discussion to develop further.

C. Informal opportunities for friendship and discussion

This is an extremely important area of verbal witness. Many people who are apparently converted as a direct result of hearing the gospel taught would never have considered coming to the main meetings unless they had been 'warmed up' through attending an informal meeting. Of course many informal opportunities for sharing the gospel happen without organization. But experience shows that it is absolutely vital to get Christian students to arrange encounters between the assistant missionaries and their friends. This provides easy openings for talk about the gospel that would not otherwise arise. These encounters can fairly easily be engendered in two ways:

i. Introduction to friends

Non-Christian friends must have at least some openness to the gospel or they would never tolerate their Christian friend in whom Jesus lives. But it is difficult for Christian students to maintain a long term relationship with non-Christians without either pushing their friend too hard, or failing to challenge them hard enough. The presence of a slightly more experienced worker, whose sole reason for being in the college is to share Christ, allows for a discussion to be started relatively swiftly about the good news, which the Christian student can take up later if they or their friend wish. Often these conversations lead to conversions later in the week or year. However the introductions do need to be made. A Christian student can either bring the helper along to the place where he or she eats with friends, or alternatively invite a friend back to a room or apartment.

ii. Informal organized meetings

These are extremely effective forms of evangelism. The ingredients are simple: a room, preferably the residence of a Christian student; some form of socially acceptable excuse for coming, usually light refreshments of an interesting kind; and a lead-in to discussion about the good news. The latter can be in the form of a brief testimony or a Christian filmstrip such as those available for English speakers through Scripture Union (eg The Champion, We're Only Human, or Number One). It is probably best if this part is handled by an assistant missionary. Invitations should be given to enough non-Christians to get together about 12 people including three or four Christians at the most. The Christian content of the meeting should be made as clear as the socially acceptable part.

B. POST-MISSION

At the end of an effective mission the Christian fellowship will be in an exciting stage in its life. There will be a number of new Christians, many warm contacts and a growing number of enthusiastically motivated (although tired) Christians. The immediate period after a mission is also a difficult one. On the one hand the group must settle down to a less intense level of Christian life and activity,

on the other hand the valuable momentum must not be lost. It is tragically possible to lose many of the gains of a mission unless the ongoing situation is taken really seriously. The mark of a really successful mission is that it is followed by a time of really fruitful reaping, with students coming to Christ regularly in the weeks and months that follow.

The way ahead can best be considered under two heads:

A. Follow-up

Wherever possible all newly professing Christians need to be followed up on a one-to-one basis, if possible for at least the rest of the term or semester. An older Christian student, preferably one who is already a friend, needs to meet for an hour or more each week for prayer and basic Bible study with each new convert. The relationship should be one of learning together and the aim to develop a daily relationship with God, rather than theological sophistication. For help with the latter it is a good idea for the Christian fellowship to provide a brief basic reading list of books which will help the new convert relate the gospel to all areas of life, including his or her studies.

Contacts who are not yet committed Christians will fit better into a series of evangelistic small group Bible studies arranged for the purpose. Others will not be ready for either of these suggestions, but still need friendship, regular contact, and above all persevering prayer.

B. Integration

This is necessary on two levels:

i. People

As well as being 'followed up' it is important that new Christians (and probably some 'old' ones who have discovered the Christian fellowship during the mission) should be integrated into the ongoing life of the group. Not only do they need to be informed about group activities on the small and large scale, but a real effort needs to be made to ensure that they are warmly welcomed into the life of the fellowship, and that the content of meetings is suited to their needs. The attempt should be made to avoid as much cliquishness and 'in' talk as possible.

ii. Learning experiences

During the mission the Christian group will have learnt a great deal about its strengths and weaknesses, and about the possibilities for student evangelism. It is essential that the leadership of the group spend time in reflection and review, and set new goals for the future. It will be helpful if they can get experienced help in doing this from a staff-worker or similar person. If possible their conclusions and decisions should be written down. This will help with future planning for further evangelistic activities and the ongoing life of the group generally.

An evangelist, Roger Mitchell has been involved in some 30 university Missions in Britain during recent years. He and his wife, Sue, together with their two children have just arrived in Fiji where they will be serving as IFES staff with the University of the South Pacific Christian Fellowship.