

From the Front Lines of Faith Under Fire



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As I am writing this, Marybeth and I are in Thailand where I am teaching at a conference for 200 American Medical Missionaries from all across Asia. **I wish you could be here.** What a privilege to serve those who are on the front lines in the battles against darkness. We are meeting physicians who serve in mission hospitals, medical schools and clinics in places like China, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. They work in cultures that are often hostile to Christianity, and they have to be careful how they carry themselves. Evangelism consists of slowly earning trust, one on one, as they provide medical care to people hungry for healing, until God provides an opportune moment for them to share the gospel as an explanation of their motives.

I am one of about 30 faculty members from the states who have come as volunteers to provide continuing medical education so these missionary physicians can keep their skills and American licenses current. This conference is in its 26th year under sponsorship of the Christian Medical and Dental Associations. They alternate between Thailand and Kenya each year. As one of the only non-physicians on the faculty, my role is to wear three hats. I'm presenting three lectures and discussions on leadership and relational challenges within mission organizations, and one on learning to live with sorrow. I'm also playing the bass as part of the worship team. Marybeth and I are also getting acquainted with missionaries around mealtime conversations, encouraging them, being compassionate listeners, and just giving them a taste of home. There are about 500 people here all together, including about 140 children, and organized programs are available for missionary children and spouses as well as top-flight medical lectures for the physicians.

There are so many impressions we're taking away from this experience. We're impressed at the deep, deep sense of calling these people have. It's one thing to go on short-term mission trips and return home to a predictable and familiar environment. It's altogether different to leave home and deliberately place yourself in a culture that is not only unfamiliar, but often hostile. Bangladesh, for example, was described as having 140 million people in crowded conditions, and is a breeding ground for terrorists. The island of Java in Indonesia is about the size of Alabama, but has 120 million people in crowded and impoverished conditions. Thailand is 99% Buddhist, despite 100 years of the work of Christian missionaries. Most of the physicians at this conference are in the prime of their lives, raising their families in these environments out of a profound sense of calling.

I'm also impressed at the breadth and depth of medical experience they bring to the field. These physicians are among the brightest and best-trained physicians the U.S. has produced. They bring highly qualified surgical and medical skills in all specialties, and end up providing the full range of medical care to their patients. It's just as common for surgeons to treat malaria as it is for internists to surgically correct broken bones. The specialty lines get blurred very quickly when people are hurting and physicians see opportunities to show the love of Christ through medical care.

It is so humbling to hear their stories and to play a small part in God's plan for sharing the gospel in this part of the world. Before we left, someone expressed admiration that we were going to such an "exotic" location for mission service. Hearing

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their stories brings many adjectives to mind, but exotic is not one of them. Better descriptions might include words like hostile, uncomfortable, extreme, sacrificial, and painful. But their reasons for being here and their reasons for staying include equally strong descriptions: dedicated, called, enriched, and fulfilled. These people re-define faith under fire, and I, for one, will be forever changed by their witness.