

Missionaries with Satellite TV

by Jason Ropp



It's interesting, I consider myself to be salt and light, yet tend to spend most of my time in seasoned settings and well lit rooms. I used to think it was my 'Christian duty' to be involved with any category of Christian culture that fit my age range, and a few that didn't. For a while I even attended a women's sewing circle, but that was when I was still wearing diapers.

To this day my nature is to pack my schedule full of Christian things: attending Christian concerts, youth groups, worship teams, planning committees, young adult groups, discipleship classes, Sunday evening services, Bible studies; spending time with Christian friends, and working at jobs with Christian employers. Given the multitude of culturally Christian opportunities, it isn't difficult to fill most of my time surrounded primarily by people who claim to follow Jesus. For a long time, this seemed like a noble goal.

I was thinking the other day about how a lot of people would be upset if they found out that the overseas missionaries they supported had satellite TV installed in their home. One might also be upset if the missionaries were spending all their time with other believers. A rage-inspiring email update might read: "We spent the night camped next to the village where the Zulu people live, holding a prayer service for them. Tomorrow we will be having brunch with the other missionaries, which we will follow up with a missionary Bible study. The Lord has been good. He has provided us with funds for a building where all us missionaries can hang out and have accountability groups and evangelism training seminars. Also, please keep us in your prayers as we try to put together a quality youth program. Times are tough. We can't seem to get enough youth

sponsors to chaperone the missionary kids on their next whitewater rafting trip. P.S. Satellite just got here. Here come Friday night American Idol parties!" I might redirect my donations toward getting my own satellite.

I often hear preachers say that we are supposed to think of ourselves as missionaries. I agree. If I am a missionary I should probably write an update letter: "Dear supporters. I've been here in Goshen for three years now. Thank you for your prayers, as this has been a wonderful time for me. I continue to be involved with the local expression of Jesus' body at Maple City Chapel. While I have experienced personal growth, my outreach with the natives in Goshen has found limited success, or effort for that matter. I tend to get busy doing things at the church, like playing in a band, and getting ready for a wedding. I have neglected the relationships I previously formed with neighbors. Life has been busy lately, as it is for us all."

I'll understand if you remove your financial and prayer support.

Ordering a side of fries is not enough.

A lot of things keep me from spending more time with people who don't know Jesus, but most of them come down to this: if I am not intentional about getting out of Christian circles and being a light in dark places, it is not going to happen.

Being intentional is difficult. I'm learning it requires me to actually do something. Courtney and I had the ball dropped into our lap last summer when our neighbors extended an open invitation to their Friday night fire ring.

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At first we had the time and made it regularly. As the temperature dropped and other Christian friends became more available, we made plans that kept us from cultivating relationships with our neighbors. It wasn't about the time, it was about the choices: we had plenty of Christian friends over for dinner that winter.

What we are missing?

It's really unfortunate that we don't dedicate more time to being outnumbered by unbelievers. From my experience we are really missing out on growth and opportunity.

To begin with, I think we are missing out on a strengthened faith that comes with living in contrast. I have often questioned my faith, even in intense Christian community, but strangely, as I've interacted with unbelievers I am more convinced that Jesus was who he said he was. I can't say I understand why this happens, I just know it does. I've had others nod when I mention this.

I think we are hurting ourselves by not living out what we are taking in. I have heard this behavior described as spiritual constipation. A Christian smorgasbord of information is available to us, but it is not possible to live it out if we spend all our time with believers. If we don't apply it, then what we are taking in is mostly a self-serving spirituality. Living as a minority among unbelievers forces us to turn our mental theology into practical application and service, something that seems to be verbally encouraged by many who would read this magazine. Intentionally forming meaningful relationships has helped me fight off what otherwise becomes a self-serving self-help faith.

Spending time with unbelievers on their turf, and allowing them to be themselves, helps us understand what it is that may keep them from accepting the gospel. I used to think that all unbelievers were belligerent agnostics who wallowed arrogantly in sin. Honestly, evangelism was easier that way. I could tell them what I assumed they were, then tell them how to fix themselves. Same problem, same answer. The problem is many are wounded—by something, or someone, or themselves—and while Jesus is the answer and the healer, the way someone may receive my words may be distorted by their past. If I tell a teenager abused by her dad that God wants to be her Father, she will probably hate God. Someone who grew up in a verbally conservative church with outwardly disgusting actions may understandably think that religion is a guise and a way for people to

control others. I may think I'm relaying a message clearly, but understanding their life story (which takes time) helps me better understand what they hear me say when I talk about Jesus.

Finally, it takes a long time for people to start following Jesus; this can seem like a lot of wasted time. I had a conversation once with the next-door neighbors. Nate, Chris, and a couple of their friends were out on the

porch for a smoke and a PBR. I was heading out the door for work, but stopped by their house to say hi. It was the fourth of July, so we started talking about fireworks. I mentioned that we didn't have good fireworks in Oregon. I threw out the Oregon joke: "You can kill yourself if you want, but it's illegal to blow your hand off." The next words

out of Chris' mouth were "What do you think God thinks about suicide? Don't you go to hell if you do that?" As naturally as I talked about fireworks, I said that sin is missing the mark, missing the desire of God's heart; it's something I do daily, but Jesus said it's not about doing everything perfectly, it's about having relationship with him. I told them that in the end, according to Jesus, it's about whether we know him or not. After I finished, someone talked about a friend of theirs who had a firecracker go off in their hand. We all laughed and moved on with the conversation. That conversation would not have happened if I hadn't spent many hours sitting outside talking about firecrackers and local land taxes. It definitely wouldn't have happened if I had spent all my good time with other followers of Jesus. And I'm pretty sure Chris wouldn't have asked that question if he were outnumbered five to one in a church building.

Writing this article is helping me realize the very simple things I should be doing a whole lot more of. Glancing over to my bookshelf I see the title *Out of the Saltshaker*. I'm tempted to make my next step be reading another book about evangelism and spending more time in prayer for my neighbors, maybe even inviting Christian friends over to discuss how I could best reach them. Those are good things, but instead, maybe I should invite my neighbors over for dinner or coffee. The fourth of July is coming up; maybe we could talk about fireworks **BB**

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