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The Catholic Physician In Service to Developing Countries*

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The Catholic physician has an excellent opportunity to implement life's needs by serving in one of the developing countries of the world. I have recently returned from Malawi, Central Africa, where I was in charge of a 170 bed mission hospital. This hospital served 148,000 people and, during much of my three and one-half year assignment, I was the only physician on the staff. I can assure you, therefore, that there was a physician shortage in at least one part of the world. If there is a normal population growth in the future associated with a relatively

slow growing economy, there it soon becomes apparent that the problem of inadequate health care will become even more critical in the future, and that the demand for physicians will increase with time. Not enough native born physicians are available to meet the demands presently facing these countries, especially in parts of Africa.

We, as Catholic physicians, in charity should respond to this need, not only by financial help but most importantly by personal service. Too often in the past, we have deferred our role as Christian missionaries to the religious. We have neglected to realize that all of us, as Christians, are inately missionaries and, as Christians should be witnesses to Christ in all parts of the world. We must be witnesses to all people. For the most of us this

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missionary spirit can best be expressed in the actions of our daily lives. As physicians, it is expressed through our skillful practice, our kindness and understanding, our reliability, our genuine concern for the sick. Such virtues, when shown to those who traditionally mistrust us are powerful examples for building a foundation for cooperation and trust. This Christ-like action is immediately evident and leaves a lasting impression. If the message of Christ is to be known, it will be by the example we give and not by the words we preach.

When put into practical terms this apostolic activity means that we should assist these newly emerging nations in all aspects of their development, not from a position of dominance, as we have in the past, but in a spirit of mutual trust and understanding. Since their independence, the terms of our service have already changed in many countries. These new governments, much more sensitive to the needs of the people and in firm control of the government agencies, are free now to invite those who will be most helpful in their development. In many countries, the tendency is to seek aid from only those organizations that confine their activity solely to preaching. Many of the new leaders realize that independence does not carry with it any guarantee of success, so they are most anxious to get the best help possible and to develop their countries quickly and on as broad a base as possible.

To serve well requires good preparation. One cannot go to such a country on a whim and ex-

pect to be successful; this applies especially to medicine. Before going, a physician should have a good idea of the spectrum of disease present in the area he is to serve and should acquire any surgical skills needed before leaving. Generally, a physician can be most useful if he goes to an area where there is a tradition of medical care and if he goes to an established hospital. In this way, he will have maximum opportunity to practice his art. One of the best ways to assure proper placement in an overseas assignment is to become associated with an organization that has experience in this field.

In addition to being professionally competent, it is necessary to have a proper spiritual preparation, not only to survive the crisis which inevitably arise, but also, to keep in focus the reasons for being there. Social blunders and personal misunderstandings are easier to overcome if a spirit of charity prevails.

There must also be a psychological preparation, since most of the interpersonal problems are related to stress. Initially, one greets his new cultural and work environment in a spirit of generous adjustment, but as time goes on, the culture is no longer stimulating, peers become too familiar, there is too much work, and not enough recreation. The small town mentality, which prevails in most missions becomes a burden, and unless you are prepared to meet this stress, your work stands a good chance of being severely hampered.

Knowing the local language makes a tremendous impression on the people; it shows them that you care enough to try to become part of them. For a physician, such a knowledge is absolutely essential for history taking. Without it, one would have to rely on interpreters which at best are poor substitutes. A good knowledge of local customs is also very helpful.

How much preparation is necessary? This will depend upon the type of preparation that is provided. Some organizations have a short intensive preparation in which all of the volunteers stay together with their families in a common environment for 3-4 months. In this period of time, there is sufficient stress to bring out any personality maladjustments and there is also time to complete the rest of the necessary preparations. Other organizations have a more prolonged period of preparation, up to a year in duration. In this situation, the volunteer has an outside job during his training and attends class at night and on week-ends. The disadvantage of this system is that there is little interpersonal stress such as would exist in an overseas assignment. All other parameters of preparation, however, are taken into consideration. During the time of training, immunizations and travel arrangements are made.

To be effective, a two to three year assignment is best, because it takes at least a year to become acquainted with the local diseases and their management. Shorter terms of service, for example three to six months, are less effective in satisfying the needs of the country

than are longer periods of service. Such shorter periods of service are particularly valuable to the individual volunteering because it creates in him an awareness for the need of such type of service. Once he has seen the need, he can bring back to his home country his enthusiasm for fulfilling the need.

There are several organizations in the United States that send volunteers to developing countries. Of the Catholic organizations, I am most familiar with the Mission Doctors Association of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. This is an organization that has had 10 years of experience in selecting and training physicians for overseas assignments. It is very closely associated with the Lay Mission Helpers of the Archdiocese. Their period of training lasts for approximately one year and takes place in Los Angeles. During this time, the doctor works locally and attends classes along with the Lay Mission Helpers. They have provided continuity of medical service in hospitals in Malawi and Rhodesia and are vigorously active in recruiting physicians for these posts. They make periodic visits to the mission posts and constantly evaluate the needs of the volunteer and the needs of the local area. They provide transport to and from the mission and will make provisions for family support. They have liaison with mission bishops and generally make agreements with the local bishop for support of the volunteer. As yet, there is not any possibility for career lay missionaries in the Church, but, hopefully, this will come in the

future. In any event, if one is seeking to go overseas, it would be wise to check with your organization to find out whether there is transportation provided for the trip over and back and if a living allowance is also provided. Your sending organization should have primary control over you during your assignment in order to insure that the terms of your contract are enforced.

Your service will be characterized by a very heavy work load and by many challenges. You will probably not accomplish all that you set out to do, but if you can by your good example engender a teaching, then you will have accomplished much and the time you serve, however long it may be, will be a source of satisfaction to you for the rest of your life.

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