

How Big's Your Footprint?

Fourteen years ago when we left for Thailand to work with the Palaung and other hilltribes our goals were to:

- One, try to help them help themselves
- And two, share the Good News the best way we could

But why did we go to the other side of the world in the first place?

Like most other missionary types, we felt a call – a certain oughtness – to go. We basically had a weird, God-directed desire to work cross-culturally as agents of positive change.

After all, we felt that we had been blessed in many ways and that we were in the position to share from our own society's wealth.

And what did we find over there?

That many of people in Thailand did indeed lack access to important social and economic resources such as adequate income, land, water and citizenship.

And that a great many were also affected by spiritual issues including addiction, hopelessness, injustice and fractured families.

We also found a means to offer holistic ministry among the hilltribes. In other words, we developed a way to respond to a complex blend of social, spiritual and physical need. Through UHDP (our development project), we and a team of Thai hilltribe partners could offer ministry related to:

- Sustainable agriculture, especially for those lacking access to resources such as adequate farmland, water and forest products.
- Human rights issues such as documentation and citizenship for the stateless, land rights and the empowerment of women.
- Micro-finance to enable those on the margins of society to access funds to invest in cottage enterprises.
- All the while seeking to be a witness for Christ in everything we do.

What else did we discover? Well, against a mirror of Thai hilltribe society we became better aware of our own image – one that reflects our own society in many ways. And that image began to trouble us.

As we share a bit about our own process of self-discovery we have a confession... in many ways we've come up short as incarnational missionaries. O.K, to cut ourselves a little slack, we did move to another country, learn to speak, read and write 1.5 languages. We've made a lot of Thai and hilltribe friends. We eat an awful lot of Thai food. Still, we haven't exactly gone native.

In Chiang Mai we live in a roomy house with three bedrooms and as many baths. It's electrified and we watch CNN. We access 1.5 vehicles on a daily basis. We have a maid. If we want it,

there's Pizza Hut, McDonalds and Baskin Robbins. Our boys go to an international school and speak lousy Thai. Enough self-flagellation, but you get the idea.

We went over there to be agents of change but it didn't take long to realize that we were in major need of change ourselves. For example, Ellen sometimes reminds me that there are some things I'm going to have to change as an individual, like biting my nails. Even more change is needed as a family, such as eliminating our excessive use of plastic shopping bags. But we're not letting you guys off the hook either. After having spent 14 years among people quite different from us, we're convinced that our own society is need of major change, or else we're all sunk.

This is what we mean. Back when we lived in the little northern Thai town of Fang, we were in the only western family around. So we stood out like a sore thumb. One thing I noticed early on was the amount of garbage we produced compared to everyone in the neighborhood. Not that we were messy. Our home and garden were always neat...hey, we have a maid. In fact, many of our neighbors could use a citation for littering (to be honest, they have no qualms about throwing a plastic wrapper wherever they please). But we're not talking about neatness. We're talking about the sheer volume of waste that our household produced, including packaging material from our frequent purchases in the town of Chiang Mai, broken toys, discarded household items...you get the picture.

In comparison, our neighbors had practically no garbage. Why? Because they weren't the consumers we were. They bought much less and used much less. Of course they eat, but they eat locally produced foods bought from the neighborhood market or things grown in their own gardens. And that's not just because they were poorer than us. They're basically more self-sufficient and less consumptive. Therefore, they leave much less of a footprint on this besieged earth than you and I.

So I began comparing our electricity usage with that of our friends and neighbors. \$100 a month for us, \$10 for a wealthier Thai neighbor and maybe \$2 for a hilltribe friend (that is if they have electricity). Why? The fridge, our TV, the computers, freezer, outdoor/indoor lights, AC (which we use sparingly), and on and on. What do the neighbors have? Maybe a TV, a small fridge, a CD player or radio, a fan and a few lights. Are they happy with so little? They seem to be.

And there's the water bill. For 3-4 loads of laundry a day, 1-2 showers for 5-7 people per day in our household in a addition to countless toilet flushes, watering the garden, etc., etc, we can run about \$20-30 a month. Our neighbors? More like \$3-5.

Gasoline. Don't get us started. We use a mini-mini van for daily errands (about 20 miles a day minimum). Add in the occasional use of a 1996 Toyota 4WD for our ministry and airplane fuel to get us from there to here. So how many tons of carbon does our family produce compared to a Palaung family who walk or bike wherever they go?

Folks, our incarnational shortfall boils down to one word...consumption. And no matter how many vegetables Rick tries to grow in our garden or how many home cooked meals I make we're still very much consumers and we still continue to reflect the consumeristic ways of our society (which probably includes you).

Here's a few stats to chew on:

- Roughly 20% of the world is considered wealthy or developed (including the US, Europe, Japan and Australia/New Zealand).
- The other 2/3rds is considered the developing world.
- Of the 2/3rds world, 1/3 is considered middle income – still poor, still developing, but much better off than the poorest 1/3. These middle income countries include Mexico, Brazil, Costa Rica, Thailand, Indonesia, The Philippines and China as well as a few African countries such as Morocco, Botswana and South Africa. We Americans often disparagingly call them the Third World, but they're more accurately referred to as the Second World.
- The poorest 1/3 (the so called Third World) includes most of Sub-Saharan Africa, Haiti, Burma, Cambodia and Laos. Most people in these countries live in grinding poverty (1-2 dollars a day or less) and have access to very few public services. Many of these nations are considered failed states.
- It's estimated that the richest 20% of the world (including us) consumes about 80% of the world's resources.
- Americans, making up about 2.5% of the world's population, consume approximately 25% of the world's resources. 25%!
- The average American consumes 25 times more stuff than an individual living in a developing country.

So let's be honest with ourselves. Even if a few of these stats are off by 5%, such obvious disparity ought to cause deep concern. Not only do they reflect our society's questionable priorities but also a level of overall greed. And not only does our extreme consumerism raise concerns, but also the accompanying environmental impact.

We might as well face it. Overall, we're addicted to convenience and comfort. We're accustomed to having it our way, anytime, anyplace. And our best friend, the market, tells us time and time again exactly what we need. It assures us that if we're not already successes, then we're destined to be so and we're entitled to the best. Never mind the rest of the world.

And even if we're more humble than that, we still don't want to walk, we don't want to be hot and we don't want to be cold. We don't want to take the bus and we don't want to wait. We're Americans.

Recently while raising the windows in our son William's bedroom he protested, "Dad, we're in America. We sleep with the air on here."

So what's the answer? Getting everyone else in the world up to our level of consumption? Everyone having AC? It's just not possible. Not the eliminating poverty part. But the myth that everyone ought to be able to live like the contemporary American.

I've heard it said that if every person in China uses the same proportion of resources that we do (which they're striving to do) then we'll need four more earths. Obviously, there aren't enough

resources for that kind of consumption. Plus, consider the potential amount of carbon that would be pumped into our already dangerously carbonated atmosphere.

You may be asking, “What’s all this got to do with me?” Well, we’re operating from two assumptions; (1) that most of you are Americans (or western) and therefore we are jointly responsible for this disparity of consumption and the related ecological consequences (in other words the mess we’re making), and (2) that most of you are Christians.

But we want to focus more on the second assumption, because both the consumption issue and accompanying ecological disaster are going to require a Kingdom of God response.

And you may also be thinking, “What kind of missionary sermon is this?” Well, our stance is that all followers of Christ are called to be missionaries; those who share the Good News of the Kingdom of God. Most of you have been called to live and work incarnationally as missionary followers of Christ here in _____. That being the case, the basis of our missionary efforts, wherever we may be, is to “love the Lord God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ (Matt. 22:37-39).

Some questions we must begin asking ourselves include, “Who are our neighbors?” and, “Are we doing any harm to them?” In other words, is there any element of our collective lifestyle that’s hurting others around this world (or even ourselves)? Are there negative consequences related to our society’s high level of consumption? Does this result in others having less? Does the production or disposal of the goods and by-products we use so much of have ecological consequences?

We hate to bear so much bad news, but we’ve been walking around our global neighborhood a bit and we’ve gotten to know some of the neighbors. Fact is, a lot of them have been talking and they’d like to have a word. It’s not just that we’ve got the biggest house on the global block with lots and lots of stuff (cars filling the driveway and parked out on the street right up to the huts of our impoverished neighbors across the road). But they’re also beginning to complain about all our trash and emissions. Plus, they noticed that we’ve got that oil addiction problem. That worries them. In fact, they resent that we always seem to be insisting on having our way lately. We’ve even been accused of bullying.

Actually, the reality of our image should come as no shock. Even the president acknowledged our country’s addiction to oil. But think of the consequences of this addiction; unsustainable, polluting energy that is altering the world’s climate and that’s already endangering billions, most of whom are the world’s poorest. Only with record high energy prices have we begun to adjust our consumption habits. So much more is needed, not just for the sake of our pocket books but for the sake of God’s creation, including all humanity.

James 2:15-17 says “Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”

Ours is a faith of action, not complacency. We're compelled to respond to God's amazing love, as the old hymn asks, "How can it be that Christ my God wouldst die for me?" We respond to our neighbor in need. Remember Matt. 25:37-38? "Then the righteous answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?"

What was the King's response? "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

Regarding the obligation of followers of Christ concerning creation care, David Gushee, a Christian ethics professor at McAfee Seminary in Atlanta writes:

I believe that when Christian disciples discover that we have been participating in sin, we are mandated to repent. We are required (and should be eager) to figure out what we have been doing wrong, why we have done it, and how to change our ways so that we don't do it anymore. I believe that the kinds of creation-care efforts that many of us are involved in represent an aspect of Christian discipleship.

In Thailand, we have worked for years to encourage upland farmers to conserve their precious soil, to stop burning fields and to plant a bio-diverse mixture of trees and other crops to supplement food and income as well as to sequester carbon. We speak often of the need for improved farm sustainability and the continued care of God's creation.

Yet how hypocritical I've been while driving polluting vehicles needlessly, especially when I could have biked, walked or taken the bus. I know I've made a big deal to hilltribe farmers about conserving God's resources when our family's nice meal at a restaurant that night cost more than a Palaung family's entire monthly income.

So what right do I have to attempt to share the Good News to others if I ignore their need and frugality in comparison to my contribution to the rampant consumption and waste that's being perpetrated by my own society?

Slowly, we have come to realize that our collective lifestyles and daily habits now require close scrutiny. What we eat, drink, take shelter in and drive must become a spiritual issue. As a recent Christian campaign reminded many of us, it's not only about "What Would Jesus Do?" but also about "What Would Jesus Drive?" Some difficult choices are in order.

But we're not here this Sunday to tell you to buy a Prius or to commute to work by carpool or by Vespa. These matters are between you and God. But if we're to be relevant witnesses for Christ, many of us must begin considering downsizing our lifestyles. It's a great opportunity to echo John the Baptist's desire, "He (that is Christ) must increase, but I must decrease." We need to consider the size of the footprints we've been leaving behind.

Earlier this year, Pope Benedict XVI criticized a world with luxury for a few and poverty for many and called for moderate lifestyles to ensure fair distribution of wealth amid a scramble for natural resources. Along these lines, Acts 4:32 is intriguing, especially now, as we read of the believers in the early church who “were one in heart and mind.” And that “no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.”

Perhaps when we meet again, we’ll all have stories to share regarding adventures in reducing, reusing and recycling for Christ. Maybe your household and congregation are already considering how to be a local “green” beacon.

And perhaps a much needed downsizing will result in a windfall of sorts, some of which you might consider investing in the work of CBF Global Missions in extending God’s love in Thailand, Africa, the US and the rest of the world. After all, we’re pilgrims in the same journey and we’re committed to making much needed changes in our lifestyle as well.

So we promise you that we’ll continue to lessen the size of our footprint as well so that in terms of consumption, equity and waste, we and our poorest global neighbors can meet somewhere in the middle for the Glory of God.