

# Starting from Scratch: Confessions of a Freshman Missionary



## **Starting from Scratch: Confessions of a Freshman Missionary**

By Jeremiah Campbell

Have you ever started a ministry from scratch only to see it fall on its face? Have you ever invested your heart and soul into a ministry only to see it fizzle into nearly nothing? I am sure you have, and know the frustrating feelings and disappointments that accompany such experiences.

I contemplated what to write for this, my first article for ACLAME. My first inclination was to write a scholarly article since the target audience consists of missionary educators with advanced degrees and years of experience. Yet as I prayed about what I, a freshman missionary, have to contribute, I felt the Lord direct me to something more personal and practical. Something I have experienced in the past, and am experiencing now as a missionary educator – the struggle of starting ministry from scratch.

My wife and I began a campus ministry in 2011 in Cochabamba, Bolivia. After a fruitful beginning and much help from a Chi Alpha missions team, our ministry consisted of nearly sixty students interested in leading small groups. My wife and I worked tirelessly to develop the ministry from scratch. Excitement grew as we came to the end of our first year on the mission's field; but disappointment was not far off. Within six months of starting our new ministry it nearly fizzled into nothing. Eventually we learned many lessons and were able to successfully develop the ministry into a national department with the national church, and run by national pastors; but the road was not easy.

The main issue that initially caused so much struggle for our campus ministry revolved around our personal vision without contextualizing to the local needs. We never connected with local pastors, so our ministry was never supported by the local church, or regional leadership. We also tried to implement campus ministry from our experience of Chi Alpha in the U.S. All of these issues lead to problems that greatly limited or damaged our ministry. Once we learned to reach out to pastors of local churches and area leaders first with the vision of the ministry, and also learned to contextualize it to the Bolivian university and church contexts, the ministry rapidly grew, so much so that it became a national department after successfully launching it in other cities.

In the last year we have begun to repeat a similar experience of starting a new ministry from scratch by launching Global University Bolivia. My confession is that there are times that I seem to experience *déjà vu* with similar struggles to get this new ministry off the ground. For those of us in educational ministry, this struggle is not only possible, but probable as well. I am by no means an expert on this subject. I

write as someone who has gone through this experience and is going through it again. In this article I share some practical lessons that I have learned in this process and hope they may be a blessing and a help for other missionary educators as well.

### **Lessons from the School of Hard Knocks:**

#### **We must all have an entrepreneur's heart.**

National pastors in the Latin America and Caribbean region consistently seek out resources from missionaries. When I initially encountered this great need, my first inclination was the shotgun approach. I attempted to throw all kinds of resources their way hoping to solve their problem. However, I soon realized the shotgun method is rarely effective, especially in a long-term view.

When we encounter a need, we must be strategic in our goals and specific in our need. Like a successful entrepreneur, we must see the proverbial forest for more than the trees, create an action plan, test it, and put it into motion. Often times, that plan does not succeed in the beginning, but that does not negate the potential or the need. Thomas Edison went through thousands of failed attempts when working on the lightbulb. Similarly, we may fail many times before implementing a strategy to successfully develop ministers. The Apostle Paul gives us encouragement as a missionary and an educator to the Corinthian church as he closes his first letter to them. "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (15:58).

Entrepreneur is a French word that literally means "to undertake" something. We, as missionary educators, begin our ministry by undertaking a huge task, a task that James warns us to not take lightly. "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (Jas. 3:1). Yet we undertake it regardless because we know that the need is great, and the investment in training current and future ministers in the Latin America and Caribbean region will reap rich dividends for the Kingdom of God. An entrepreneur always sees the potential outcome of his investment. May we do the same.

I have struggled many times investing in ministers at different levels of education. There have been times that I have fallen on my face; times my strategy to launch the ministry has failed miserably, and many times that I have wanted to give up for something that was easier. However, I will not give up, I will never surrender because the harvest is great, because the workers are few, because the call is strong, and because I can see, taste and feel the potential outcome of this great investment as a missionary educator. We must ask ourselves from time-to-time, "How many people get to have the opportunity to sincerely impact or change a culture, generation, nation, or continent?" Do you see the forest for more than the trees?

#### **We never truly start something from nothing.**

It is interesting to think that as missionary educators, we never truly start something from nothing. First of all, we have the Holy Spirit to empower us to complete an impossible task in the Great Commission (Mt. 28:19-20; Mk. 16:15-18; Ac. 1:8). We also have the backing of an amazing missionary agency that is full of diverse resources to equip us. I don't know if I could ever imagine working as a missionary educator where I would have to create all of my curriculum from scratch. Thirdly we have each other as a resource. This magazine alone, countless social media groups, and the ability to connect at a moment's notice is an amazing resource. We possess the ability to have instant responses to difficult questions, needs, or other resources. Finally, we have wonderful nationals in the countries we serve; men and women ministers who work tirelessly alongside of us for the same reasons, with the same call, and the same passions.

#### **The moral of the story.**

There may be times that we feel like we are starting from scratch, times we fail, and times we feel alone; however, none of those reasons can outweigh the beauty of the investment and potential that we have to be a part of changing and impacting Latin America and the Caribbean for the Lord. As a freshman missionary with a term as a missionary associate and now at the end of my first appointed term, I begin to realize these truths. I have fallen, as I am sure you have, many times. I have felt like a

failure, and have had to start from, what felt like, scratch. Yet I am learning to be patient, rely on the Lord and the many other resources at our disposal, to work as a team with other missionaries and nationals, and to be patient.

For those of you who, like me, are just starting this amazing journey in missions, I pray that this article is a blessing to you, that you know you are not alone. For those of you who are veterans, I pray that this article is also a blessing to you, that you never lose your passion, that your heart does not become calloused in the struggles, and that you continue to remember why you began this incredible path.