

A note from LOMS Missionaries, James & Christel Neuendorf

A Miraculous Catch

I bet that you recently had to learn a new way of doing something you have always done.

Last Sunday our text was the calling of Simon the fisherman, to be a fisher of men. I love this story. Peter starts and ends as a fisherman. The Lord gives us a radical new task, and then we discover that He has trained us for the task long before we knew how He would use us. He takes away our old jobs, and gives us our new jobs, but they often look suspiciously similar to our old ones. Somehow the same but radically different.

Back at Concordia Ann Arbor, I felt that I had two opposite passions that I had to choose between; an interest and talent in journalism and media, and a desire to serve on the foreign mission-field. Back then, this seemed like an irreconcilable paradox, until one day, one of Christel's friends found a recruitment posting for a missionary who would do multi-media work from the field. Eventually, after getting married and a few other steps, we ended up in Panama where my role was to use my skills in media for the sake of the Gospel. Some of you have supported us since all the way back then!

I loved it, and learned a ton by producing videos, web-content etc. We even made some short films and did some big evangelism videos and other creative projects in different fields, in places like Peru, in Spain etc. I did everything from radio, photos, video, news writing, to drama and graphic design. I had to learn how to do almost everything without a crew, or most of the usual tools. I set up livestreaming studios and produced films on shoestring budgets. I focused on solving problems like getting materials out to people in remote and difficult locations, under less than ideal circumstances of internet etc. It was the ultimate school of convergence journalism.

Prayers:

- Virtual VBS
- Continuing of rebuilding the church on Calle Salud
- Visitation

Over time however, I eventually had more and more opportunities to serve on the other end of the spectrum, to visit and care for people in a lay role that was providing support for pastors as an evangelist. The call of pastoral ministry was strong enough that over a rather complex path I ended up completing seminary and leaving media-work behind. I've kept photography as a hobby, but figured my production days were at an end, a phase of my life that had been formative but which I had moved on from.

During the earthquake response, when the communication team showed up, I thought about my old role and how glad I was that instead of being behind the camera reporting on the story, I was able to focus on being a pastor, being with people and speaking the Gospel to them. Just an old-fashioned paper book in my hands and a face to face conversation. The other role was important but serving as a church planter is where I am really fulfilling my calling!

Oh, the irony that is a global pandemic in the 21st century! Our local restrictions have been severe. No visits, no gatherings! Absolutely no "face to face!"

Under the restrictions, to be a pastor and effectively speak to and care for your flock and to reach the lost, you must now use cameras, microphones, non-linear editing software, word processors and text layout software, the tools of a journalist and a filmmaker. Because of the restrictions we are under, most of my ministry right now must be done through mailed written material, video broadcasts, and audio productions. Not that I know anything about that...

It was an odd feeling to download the latest free versions of the heavy-duty software I was used to using in my previous work at the beginning of the pandemic. I watched fellow pastors and church-leaders scramble to learn the ropes, but it was all very familiar to me, the idea of being a one-person video production studio from script to broadcast and everything in between had been my life for 7 years. We once made a short film on top of a volcano in Peru, I could handle church services from home and some classes.

In a sense, I thought, "didn't I just put these nets down?" But that's just it! The Lord doesn't ask us to set aside our previous calling entirely but transforms every aspect of our natural calling until it is completely focused on His purposes. The message needs to get out, by any means necessary. He reconciles what we might consider to be incompatible interests into a singular vocation, to make Him known to the world!

At least for now, pastoral ministry and church planting in Puerto Rico looks a lot like convergence journalism. I wrote and produced 3 short films for our virtual VBS with the talents of our awesome team, a project which has been going extremely well. Twice a week we air a pastoral talk show on the Gospel of Mark, a video lecture series for an English Bible Study outreach, and I'm working on a daily bible verse vlog. Our services are all livestreamed. We've had some success getting devotions out on the radio through Lutheran Hour on a local station. If I had not spent literally years learning keyboard shortcuts, editing techniques, and solving similar problems, there is absolutely no way we could be as productive and aggressive as we have been able to be with our pandemic response.

I know a lot of people have been struggling to find their stride, and I don't want to sound as though things have been easy for us either, but rather to reflect on the fact that the Lord has given us vocations which are focused on the Gospel, and that He has given them to us far in advance for moments such as these. Your background probably isn't convergence journalism, but I am confident that the gifts that you have are exactly what is called for in the mission God has for you.

There is real joy in discovering that the latest challenge is something you have been training for all along. God has been shaping you for a purpose. He is even doing this right now! Have you discovered your vocation being used by the Lord for his singular purpose of calling the lost to the hope of the Gospel of Jesus?

Peter didn't expect to be called to put down the nets in the deep part of the lake, especially after he had set them down, cleaned them and put them away. But now they are full to bursting with fish!

We are receiving great responses from a growing number of interested people. In fact, we identified almost 200 households here in Ponce that have responded to our various outreach activities and have begun sending bi-monthly pastoral and evangelistic letters to their homes. We are waiting anxiously for the doors to open a crack wider so that we can begin visits and in-person ministry again.

Please pray for wisdom and guidance as we earnestly seek the way to haul this catch into the boat!



Virtual VBS is on it's way. It's been a great adventure and we are looking forward to sharing with you more in July how everything turns out!

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