

**Queen's University Belfast**

**A Theological Reflection on the 'RED box' project  
of the South American Mission Society in Salta,  
Northern Argentina.**

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*For Romona,*

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## Introduction

In my experience, missionary involvement in a context so foreign to ones own can on the one hand, dash your sunny expectations and on the other delight you with love for the place and it's people. Such at least can be said of my 6 week visit to Argentina 'Land of the Silver' where I was hosted by Cecilia Valdiviezo in the northern city of Salta in order to serve and research alongside her work with the South American Mission Society Ireland. Cecilia, a local Salteño is the project co-ordinator of the 'RED box' project. This involves:

- 1 Developing youth-work in the local church and outreach through an orphanage and school.
- 2 Enabling and training both local and western volunteers.
- 3 Overseeing the soup kitchen that provides meals for 80 children every weekend.
- 4 Facilitating an educational sponsorship program connecting individual students in Salta to congregations in Ireland.
- 5 Supporting and hosting 'Beyond the Norm' short-term teams and individuals travelling from Ireland to Argentina to serve.

Cecilia maintains her theological training with part time study through an Argentine College. Furthermore she travels to Ireland each year, so that the RED box team in Ireland can reflect, discuss and prepare the project together.

This year she will be escorting Pamela Gomez, the first young Argentine leader, to travel to Ireland through the RED box project where she will serve and gain language skills as well as experience and training in ministry.

Although hindered by my weak articulation of Castellano, the local Spanish language, my summer's participation in the project included youth work in the project's partner Church 'El Redentor', as well as volunteering at the local soup kitchen, relationship building and conversational English to help local language students. At the same time I was given the opportunity to read, interview English speakers, journal and present a questionnaire to the church youth group for research purposes.

This assignment is a reflection of the theology in practice of the RED box project in Salta. The initial chapter will give a contextual outline of mission in Argentina. Chapters 2-4 will look at the defining objectives of the RED box project, specifically: Relational, Educational and Developmental mission. Outlining their importance in a scriptural understanding of the holistic mission of God and his Church, I will discuss how each of these work in practice in the Argentine context. A further chapter looks at some of the broader implications of practical theology in the South American, Liberationist context.

The language barrier was a significant hindrance to the scope and depth of my investigation, as I couldn't necessarily ask the questions I wanted of many

individuals. Furthermore my research is narrowed by the subjectivity of my short 6 weeks experience. In the case of critical evaluation of the project I write, therefore, as a novice to the greater experience and judgement of scholars and practitioners. Renowned Peruvian scholar Samuel Escobar has lamented that, in the context of Latin America 'so many years of preaching against theological reflection as if it were, by itself, opposed to church growth, have left their mark...' SAMS acknowledges that theological reflection is crucial in all missionary work:

'Without reflection we are in danger of creating God in our own culture-bound image and becoming paralysed in our ineffectiveness.'

It is hoped that this research will become a resource for present and future RED box participants, informing and encouraging them to think and about what, how and why they do mission in Salta.

In conclusion this piece will highlight the main strength of the RED box project being it's devotion to local, innovative mission in Salta. Their partnership with the local church, orphanage and school is very important for that reason. Even more so their employment of a local project co-ordinator in Cecilia Valdiviezo shows their commitment to the Salteños ownership of the RED box.

My research title correctly recognises that:

'Mission outreach that does not persistently aim at 'handing over' to local leaders in good time, avoiding early or late exit, to shoulder responsibilities for the continuation of the project will be a costly mistake to avoid at all costs.'

According to my experience, SAMS Ireland expresses a strong and innovative relationship of mutual dependence between the churches in Ireland and Argentina. Instead of their being a handing over of the Gospel, through people and initiatives from one country and culture to another, missionaries are being sent in both directions and it would be more apt to describe participants on both sides of the Atlantic as holding hands across an ocean by learning to appreciate and rely on each other. Following the disintegration of colonialism, the Western Church has come to value more the lessons we can receive from a closer relationship with the third world. Thus SAMS is rising to the 21<sup>st</sup> century challenge that:

'Missionaries should flow ever more freely from and to all six continents in a spirit of humble service.'

## Chapter 1

### Socio-historical and political context

Argentina is the second largest country in Latin America. Stretching 3,700km from North to South it's geography ranges vastly from the Western Andes bordering Chile to the sub-tropical Eastern regions next to Brazil. The country can boast of rich agricultural plains of the Pampas, and the oil-rich plateau of Southern Patagonia. Since establishment by Spain as part of the Viceroyalty of the Rio de la Plata in 1776 the country's demographics have been a mixture of indigenous Amerindians and European whites. Traditionally the whites have been the ruling class or oligarchy while indigenous people have been the marginalized working class. Unfortunately a certain amount of racism lingers on even today. Following revolution in early 19<sup>th</sup> century the colony became officially independent from Spain on the 9<sup>th</sup> July 1816. Unfortunately since then her history and politics have been characterised by instability, civil war and totalitarianism not least of which the left-wing rule of Peron 1946-1955, 1973-1974. The darkest days in Argentine history were those that followed the 'Dirty War' under the *junta militia*:

'In 1976, the Argentine military overthrew the government of Isabel Peron and undertook a campaign against all people labelled as subversives, who were thought to form the social base for a violent leftist insurgency...Tactics included "Death squads", Forced disappearances, Torture, Child Stealing, and Ideological persecution.'

Stability came with president Alfonsín in 1983. However in 2001 Argentina suffered a severe economic depression (see Figure. 1) the GDP declined rapidly, prices rose and employment fell dramatically.

Figure 1.

The country is hoped to now be on the road to a stable economic recovery, under the governing of the Peronist 'Judicialist Party' and their President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.

Argentina has in recent decades witnessed a boom in urbanisation for example the northern city of Salta, in which the RED box project is based, has a population of over 1,000,000. Unfortunately it is in cities like Salta where in a climate of political disillusionment, and financial worry, the children of poverty suffer most visibly.

### Religion

Roman Catholicism is, like in the rest Latin America, the official state religion of Argentina. Currently the population in Argentina is described as up to 85% Roman Catholic and 8% Protestant with a small number of Jews. Historically Christendom and conquest came to the South America together in the 16<sup>th</sup> century but unfortunately this anticultural approach to mission didn't enter into dialogue with tribal religions.

This form of Catholicism emphasised conversion as sacramental and not holistic and has contributed to a shallow and widespread nominalism across the continent, as Gutiérrez has critiqued: 'The fundamental task undertaken is baptizing: the whole continent is baptized. But Christianity does not sink deep roots in Latin America.' Whilst it is not appropriate to point the finger at history or denominations, this hindsight underlines the importance of meaningful contextualization and humble service in our mission in South America.

Traditionally the Roman Catholic faith was financially linked to the political structures and ruling classes in South America. In-fact Argentina today is one of only Latino countries in which the Roman Catholic Church is constitutionally 'sustained' by the state. As recently as 2007 a Roman Catholic priest was tried for conspiring with the military in the 1970s 'Dirty War' and it is arguably these moral and political failures that contribute to an increasing disillusionment with the Roman Catholic faith.

Protestantism first migrated to Argentina between 1810 and 1850 in the form of British Anglicans, Scottish Presbyterians, Italian Waldensians, German Lutheran and Dutch Reformed communities. But these separatist communities did not initiate much notable missionary work. Over the past 55 years, urban areas have seen considerable growth in the Protestant churches, especially Pentecostals and arguably more dialogue could be shared between all these traditions. There is a certain amount of denominational ignorance or uneasiness between the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant churches.

On one occasion we were not allowed to distribute event flyers at a private school because the teacher didn't think that the parents of the Roman Catholic children would appreciate it. But at the same time some of the teenagers that the RED box works with testify how their relationship with God began in the Roman Catholic Church where they either now remain or, for a variety of reasons have moved to an Evangelical Church. In most experiences regardless, the welcoming spirit of Latin Americans transcends religious boundaries:

'During the years that I lived in Latin America I have never once had someone from a Roman Catholic background ask me about Pope John Paul's 1992 reflections. Yet I was invited to birthday parties, funerals, weddings and everything else that happens in the life of a local community.'

It is important to recognise that even if plagued with problems of nominalism and sacramentalism, the Roman Catholic faith of the local Argentine people is their reference point to the Gospel. If with any good form of contextualization, we look at individuals and institutions through the eyes of Christ we can recognise the presence of Christ in that culture. The RED box project lives out this incultration through dialogue and friendship with Roman Catholic individuals and families. In order to maintain a partnership between Ireland and South America, SAMS Ireland encourages its Irish volunteers to learn about and appreciate Roman Catholicism in its Latino context. This is especially important for Irish volunteers coming from a background of cultural, political tensions along a sectarian divide. Therefore it is helpful to note three key aspects of Latin American Roman Catholicism:

- 1 A strong belief in miracles. For example on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September the province of Salta celebrate the festival 'Santo Cristo del Milagro' to remember how God ceased a devastating earthquake in 1692, in response to the prayers of the citizens and the procession of Cathedral statues.
- 2 God's concern for and identification with the burdens of the poor. For example: Scriptural emphases on God's release of the captive Jews, the oppressed, and the poor.
- 3 Strong presentation of the crucifixion, but not the resurrection, of Christ.

## **Chapter 2**

### A Biblical Basis for Relational mission

God himself exists in community: a Trinitarian relationship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Man was created in 'God's image' in a community, we were therefore intended for relationship with God and each other. The 'Fall' had holistic consequences as 'relationships are broken, stewardship is affected, and God's ownership is ignored or usurped. (Gen 3:1-10).' Interestingly in Genesis 11, God observed men of all nations collaborating to construct the tower of Babel, they seemed to be working well together. But without reliance on a relationship with God this would have lead to pride and self-sufficiency, therefore God scattered them across the world into different tribes, tongues and cultures.

Relationship with God in creation and redemption always comes first and no project is possible among men without the involvement of God. This point is made clear to a SAMS Ireland volunteer entering a strange culture and having difficulty working across different languages. It reminds us of our humble reliance on God during any enterprise. God created a covenant relationship with Israel beginning with Abraham and throughout the Old Testament revealed how he could bring peace in human relationships and redeem Israel's sinfulness through the prophets.

God's ultimate reconciliation to humanity was accomplished through the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ who came, relating to man as a man. He broke the barrier between earth and heaven by overcoming the curses of sin and death. Jesus modelled relationships of humble service and forgiveness both through friendship with his 12 disciples. Furthermore when relating to people, he crossed cultural and social boundaries to contextualize the Gospel, for example, he explained the truth of his Messiahship to a Samaritan woman from a perspective she could understand. The Holy Spirit's presence among the Early Church inspired relational discipleship and evangelism in a peaceful community. Although the call to repentance and reconciliation with God is an individual imperative, it is most completely expressed and fulfilled in Christian community, symbolised as one body. Finally eschatological hope includes the final restoration of God's relationship as King of creation over his people.

### Relational mission as expressed in the RED box

Relationships are not a part or segment of the RED box project that can be separated from other aims and activities rather they are the glue or baseline value that holds every other work together. Relationships are formed as one serves another, for a Western volunteer who arrived expecting to serve in Salta therefore it is surprising to find oneself so heavily dependent on the service, hospitality, guidance and translation of other people. This is rather a humbling experience and soon topples any presuppositions or prejudices that our local friends may need us more than we need them. Henri Nouwen reflected on how his own initial uselessness as a foreign missionary in Bolivia made him feel vulnerable yet loved: 'One of the most rewarding aspects of living in a strange land is the experience of being loved not for what we can do, but for who we are.' This reveals something significant about relationships in mission being based on grace and inherent personal worth rather than work accomplished or project success, a trap so many in ministry and mission can fall into.

In spite of difficulties, the language barrier between Irish volunteers and the local people brought two benefits. Firstly it made one value the patient care, protection and translation of your local friends. Secondly, conversation with people in basic Spanish often revolved around finding common or different words for things in both Spanish and English.

This reminds you of our commonality with some people that, at first glance seemed so very different.

As well as that, language and other cultural barriers teach you a lot about different ways of expressing ourselves. Appreciation and understanding of other people are the building blocks for contextualization. For example, different languages, cultures, and personal experiences influence how we express our faith. Ergo, for me to understand the Roman Catholic faith of a family friend in Argentina I needed to strip away cultural associations with the word 'Catholic' inherited from my own Northern Irish situation. As Geoff Hamilton, again, cautions, '...we need to be very careful when we talk about cultural expressions versus religious expressions of life.'

To recognise and remove cultural blinkers when on mission in Latin America is very worthwhile but at the same time, the cultural, social and personal factors in the forming of our own faith is what helps us relate to the gospel and know it to be real. It is our epistemological framework. In *Models of Contextual Theology* Steven Bevans describes this as a transcendent view of the Gospel. He explains the relationship between 'Experiences of the Past' (Scripture, Tradition) and 'Experiences of the Present' (Experience, Culture, social location and social change) being like the twin blades on a pair of scissors. Our personal and cultural experiences of God relate to Scripture and Tradition because the gospel transcends the time, space and culture gap between us and the original readers.

If Longeran is correct that 'Genuine objectivity is the fruit of authentic subjectivity.' Then when two people experience an authentic, subjective experience of or conversion to Jesus Christ, then even though they experience and express their faith in a very different ways, they share the same gospel because the gospel is by nature both objective and transcendent. When working with Marie in the Limache community soup kitchen, she and I could relate to each other's genuine love for God and the children there, even though she recited the Rosary aloud while I sat and said a different prayer of thanks into myself. We share a common faith and relationship with God that, at the same time as being deeply personal, is objective and transcendent.

### South American Community

Latin American culture, compared to that of the UK and USA is arguably better at relational mission because of their community spirit. This seemed evident, for example, in the bustling rapport between all generations and individuals in the 'El Redentor' church, and the congregation's customary sing song '*Bienvenido*' to every visitor and new believer in the church. Often in Argentina for financial and personal reasons, extended families will live together and children in a large family learn quickly how to help raise their younger siblings. Tolerance through suffering also seems a lot stronger in Latino culture. This arguably has origins in indigenous ancestry, as Maurice Sinclair praised the unique qualities of the Mataco or *Wichi* tribe in Northern Argentina he included how, 'The Mataco

powers of self-control are shown too in their patient endurance and tolerance of pain.’ Argentine Christians hold a close affinity between their personal trials and Christ’s own struggles. One cold night a group of our friends stood at a freezing cold bus stop for the ‘*colectivo*’ that would only come once an hour. As the time wore on, the Westerners among us grew impatient, irritable, and despairing whilst our Argentine friend Vicky stayed upbeat. She was in fact waiting with us at our bus stop for up to an hour, without complaint before she would then set out in the direction of her own home. Although an anecdotal example, in the time that I have known Vicky, her Christological understanding of selflessness and perseverance in suffering seemed connected to her own deep faith that Christ is helping her with life’s difficulties. In addition to that the fellowship among close friends at church, bearing each other’s burdens was an important experience for Vicky. As iron sharpens iron, these two elements of past Christian teaching and her present experiences shape who she is and how inspirationally Christ shines in her life.

In conclusion relationships are about whom we are created and redeemed to be and how we connect with one another. The Gospel and relationships transcend cultural barriers and help us to love and serve.

## Chapter 3

### Educational mission in Biblical and Missionary History

Education was inherently valuable in the Judaic tradition, and subsequently in the Christian Church. The Torah commanded Jews to impress the Law on their children not just by oral teaching but also by having symbols of the Law in every aspect of their lives. Wisdom in Old Testament literature did not divide the intellectual from the moral, nor did it value theory over practice: 'The sages did not deal in theory but in practice: they focused not on abstract problems but on concrete examples...'

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ gave his followers the Great Commission that has been the mandate for all modern missions:

'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'

Some biblical scholars such as Robert Culver have pointed out that given the sentence structure of the original Greek verbs, the command to 'go' is not as important as 'make disciples' or 'teach'.

Therefore in terms of mission it does not so much matter where you one goes or stays but how you make disciples, and that is by teaching them a faith in God that applies to their head, heart and hands.

Father of the Modern missionary movement William Carey initiated a tradition of educational mission as a means to conversion. In 1819 he established the Serampore College in India and ever since then educational mission has been a key value in worldwide Evangelical mission. Furthermore, as the English language rose to be the international language of commerce in the twentieth Century, teachers of the English language have become increasingly valuable in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Subsequently linguistic education in the postcolonial era is being provided by missionary organizations ‘...in response to demand rather than imposed by a foreign power.’ This highlights one of the great strengths in the consistent connection between English speakers from Northern Ireland and Spanish speakers in Argentina. There are countless young adults in Salta training in languages, business and tourism that appreciate help with conversational and written English. This is one of the major roles of volunteers with the RED box and there is scope for further opportunities here.

#### Educational Mission in the RED box

The RED box helps students with their academic studies in school or university and in their discipleship.

Financial sponsorships for college, university or church run courses are available for young people in Salta through the RED box. Connections with the Irish churches are strengthened by regular updates about the individual students they are supporting. Practical discipleship grows through informal situations and friendships as well as Youth Meetings, Bible Studies, Church retreats and team outreach projects in the community.

### Theological Education

It is important also for project co-ordinator Cecilia Valdiviezo to maintain her own education and theological training. This is of incomparable value to both herself and the work she does for SAMS: theological reflection can further deepen the ministry she does and be shared among other practitioners and scholars. Therefore Cecilia is currently enrolled in a course with an Argentine Open University. Although she is supported in doing this, it is a weekly challenge to find the time and space to complete her work and Cecilia could benefit a lot from a stronger support network with the possibility of delegating tasks and responsibilities to other local leaders or volunteers.

### Educating the Volunteers

Participating in the RED box is a unique, eye opening experience for young adults travelling from their own Irish context.

It is a steep learning curve as they overcome language difficulties and grapple with cultural clashes not least of all the lifestyle differences between the affluent UK and the third world. Therefore a significant part of the Educational objective of the RED box is teaching these volunteers, this in turn has an effect on their home mission in Ireland as well. This exemplifies the nature of global mission in the twenty first century that sees the mission of the Gospel flowing in both directions.

## **Chapter 4**

### A Theological basis for Developmental mission

According to Scripture development is part and parcel with God's creative and redemptive providence. Sadly however sin in general and specifically that of envy and greed distorts development opportunities into injustice. Man in accordance with his 'imago Dei' was created to grow and develop: 'It is within man's nature to be creatively engaged in development, because that activity is part of God's nature too.' However man's tendency since Cain's killing of Abel has been to envy his brother. In a desire for autonomy from God we like to think that growth, development and peace has come from our own hands and capability, and not the provision of God. Subsequently competitiveness and greed leads to an oppression of the poor as lamented and preached against by the prophets. The link between sin, injustice and poverty is timeless and every bit relevant today as, 'Complacent materialism is linked with gross injustice.'

If the Great Commission was to be preached to the 'whole of creation.' Then just as God's redemption is Good News for man's relationship with God then it is Good News for the created world, including the land and its agriculture, the people in their community, society and politics, the poor and global economy. Development and healing were physical and personal signs of God's promised spiritual redemption in both Testaments: what the people most deeply desired in their suffering, God used as a sign to give them what they most needed, salvation. For example, the exiles would be restored to the lands of Israel and the Jews under enemy occupation were promised an eternal king. Jesus' miracles in John's gospel were signs or '*semia*' for individuals and crowds that he was not just the solution to their grief, hunger, or poverty but the eternal Messiah. Contextualization of the Gospel therefore has a relationship with the practical needs of people. In meeting peoples' needs we highlight God's compassionate intervention in their lives. Paul gives us the most significant example in the New Testament of contextualizing the message of Christ among the Gentile philosophers, he put it into a language and rhetoric that they could relate to .The Moravian Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf advised just such an approach to his missionaries in Greenland. The missionaries had had the difficulty of explaining the biblical significance of Christ as the 'lamb' and 'sacrifice' when sheep didn't exist on Greenland and the indigenous religion had no concept of sacrifices. Count Zinzendorf responded:

'The brothers (working) among the heathen will sometimes have to think: Dear Paul! As you spoke such and so in your day, so (today) I speak thus and so. If a needle is the greatest need of the heathen, then we shall call the saviour a needle.'

This adaptation or indigenisation of the gospel to immediate needs of the culture is what Bevans' calls an 'anthropological model' for contextual mission and as a missionary organisation from the first world working to support local mission in the third world, SAMS will always have to address the anthropological need for development in Latin America. Ted Ward defined development as 'an inclusive process in which the physical and social needs of persons and groups are given attention alongside their spiritual needs.' And indeed Scripture seems to hold the two together. However to say that physical needs and spiritual needs go hand in hand is one thing, to say that they are fundamentally the same thing, would be another. Therefore we arrive at the great discussion surrounding holistic mission of social action versus evangelism. And in the Latin American context it subsequently draws out the difference between developmental mission and Liberation Theology.

Young people and their families in Salta have many needs especially since the recent, severe economic depression, as Cecilia commented, 'since 2001 my people have learnt to use the verb 'need' instead of 'want' and I think that since that then we as Christians have more of a job to do.'

The job of the RED box therefore oversees and funds the soup kitchen being run by teams in the local church that provides meals for 80 children once a week. They also facilitate a 'Happy Hour' kids club in the local orphanage, where - I was surprised to learn - many children live not because their parents have died, but because their family literally cannot afford to feed or keep them. Evidently, severe economic needs contribute to the relational and educational needs of these kids who very rarely receive one on one attention or encouragement, and run so enthusiastically down the entrance lane of the orphanage every week to greet the church volunteers.

If development is a form of fulfilling a persons' potential then emotional and spiritual encouragement through games, affection and a song about Jesus is developing the childrens' self esteem and hopes for the future. Indeed the same development occurs within the volunteer who learns and grows by the blessed receiving of love from a laughing nine year old child clinging to their shoulders.

### An incarnational premis

These projects of SAMS are based on the desire to 'live "incarnationally"' in that we are to live as Jesus did and love people as he did. By feeding and blessing children in Salta we hope to some degree to incarnate Christ who miraculously fed the 5,000 men, or welcomed the little ones in his arms at the end of a long day.

Our incarnation of meeting physical needs signpost the way to a spiritual reconciliation to God their Father. If we are to look at the compassion of Christ, and Yahweh's treatment of the beloved nation Israel we see that believing or obeying were not a prerequisite for receiving or belonging. Jesus Christ healed ten lepers as an act of compassion and as a sign to who He was, even though only one of the ten was to return and follow Him. Therefore even if the RED box were omnipotent enough to foresee who would respond to God through their projects and who wouldn't, they would continue to feed, welcome and love all people they can in accordance with Christ's teaching on love.

#### Defining holistic mission

In allusion to John Stott who said that mission is, 'Everything the church is sent into the world to do.' Douglas Mc Connell has said that 'Holistic mission is the commitment to all that the church is called to do, which includes the Great Commission (Mt 28:18-20) and the Great Commandment (Mt 22:37-40).' But Hesselgrave has cautioned that 'incarnational' methods of developmental mission inspired by Jn 18:20, 20:12, and Lk 4:18-20 have overtaken the tasks of proclaiming, baptizing and making disciples as commanded in the Great Commission. He says that the motivation to 'be Jesus' for people is not the task that either the past and present apostles have been sent into the world to do.

He describes this as a shift in global missionary thinking from the Matthean commission to an over-exaggerated, Johannine, emphasis on servant evangelism, this subsequently turns social development into a distraction from the main focus: 'The Great Commandment neither completes the Great Commission, nor competes with it.' Firstly, our motivation for and expression of mission oughtn't to come from any one proof text, not even Matthew 28, rather we should consider the whole Bible. Secondly, true biblical holism recognises that there is no division in God's kingdom between the physical and spiritual realities of creation. As Myers has responded to Hesselgrave:

'Holistic mission is a frame for mission that refuses the dichotomy between material and spiritual, between evangelism and social action, between loving God and loving neighbour. Holistic mission is the life of Christians passionately pursuing their relationship with God by seeking to be more like Christ, and who, because of their life in Christ, are passionately sharing the good news that through Christ anyone can be restored to a living relationship with God and can learn to love not only their neighbour but their enemy.'

Cecilia and the RED box project recognises both imperatives and in making a similar point as James 2:14-26 she says:

'The spiritual need should be our main concern but we also need to bear in mind the other needs they have, I can't talk about God's love and care to a child when I know that the last time he was fed was the day before and he doesn't know if today he will have something to eat.'

A child literally cannot learn, develop or grow in their faith with any long-term effect if malnourished and weak on a day-to-day basis.

However Hesselgrave's argument does challenge the RED box to reflect: have the programs of developmental social action, distracted them from the commission to proclaim, baptise and make disciples? In my experience, the answer would be no. For project co-ordinator Cecilia the relationship between work and the spreading of the gospel is paramount. Prayer, group Bible study and 1:1 discipleship as well as participation in church and parachurch events are all very central to her activity and vision. Outreach programs such as visits to the local children's hospital or orphanage have a developmental impact on not just the children but all of the church youth group that are actively serving, praying, performing or teaching the children. Teenagers on the fringes of the local church society are accepted and treated as warmly as those who belong before they necessary believe and their faith is subsequently affirmed. The RED box project owes a lot to its partnership with the local church for helping them maintain good missionary practice in the context of community. The Church's key values as inherited from the conservative, pietistic movement of Protestant mission, include Biblical preaching and teaching, prayer and evangelism. In this context and with the input of the RED box, the youth group has grown from 3 to 30 in one year. Whilst numbers are not the best guideline and certainly not boasted about, there is vibrancy about the faith and lifestyle of these young adults that is contagious. For example: to celebrate Argentina's 'Children's Day' in mid august, the local church, including the RED box team organised an outreach event for the community.

Whilst many physical, emotional and social needs were met through the songs and games, the gifts being given and food provided, the motivation was strongly evangelistic and the event culminated in a musical production telling the story of Christ.

### Communicating the Gospel without a word.

For a non-Spanish speaking volunteer with the RED box, verbal evangelism is clearly somewhat challenging. One can neither understand nor communicate with non-English speaking Argentines. Thus although the physical acts of Christ were not the full story of the Messiahs' redemption, physical acts of service are the only 'sign language' with which a mute foreigner can use to convey the Gospel. Mopping floors, washing cups, breaking sticks, holding babies, making posters were all necessary, everyday acts that we could offer to benefit the local community and its development, in every sense of the word. Significantly this highlights how crucial the partnership that exists with the local mission. If the emphasis of the mission were on the social action of individuals and teams that could not speak the local language, their work would be a lot less effective. Or if the project was based on Spanish speaking people coming into Salta and operating in isolation from the local Church, it would be ineffective also. Mission in Salta is under the ownership of God and his Church in that city, the presence of SAMS Ireland in Argentina is to support local mission and not compete with it.

When partnered with the local church and other organizations and under the coordination of Cecilia the RED box project seems to achieve the best balance between social action and evangelism.

### The tension of excessive social needs

Having reached our previous conclusion it would be somewhat naïve to consider that there is no tension between physical and spiritual need. Hesselgrave's sobering conclusion, warns us that:

'We can feed some of the hungry but we cannot feed the whole world...We can support the rights of some disenfranchised people, but we cannot enfranchise the whole world. But we can evangelise the whole world, and no one will do it if we do not.'

The RED box project realised this when in its very first week the soup kitchen program was over-subscribed by 20 names of hungry children more than they could afford to help. The severe need in Salta both for evangelism and social needs combine with the visionary gifts of RED box leaders to create compassion and a great concern to help as effectively as possible. However both evangelistic zeal and urgent pragmatism can lead to a hyper-active development and church program. Compassion and concern can lead to a detrimental burn-out unless balanced with the realism of Hesselgrave's comments.

Furthermore as a generation of missionaries in a world of vastly expanding needs, we all ought to take onboard the reality that neither can we do it all at once, nor does God require us to.

## Chapter 5

### Praxis

Much of the following discussion on missiological praxis has direct relevance to the tensions that exist in developmental mission. But given its more philosophical and political dimensions we will look at it separately. Praxis is the term given to practical theology that stresses the importance of an active faith. According to praxis, faith is not only symbolised or verified by our actions, rather our actions are the very substance of faith. This leaves no discretion for believing one thing and doing another because what we do is what we most honestly believe. Such an idea can be found in Scripture and Christian tradition. The Old Testament prophets called for faith to be put into action, worship of God meant treating people justly otherwise it was meaningless. Jesus Christ not only *preached* the Good News in fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets but he *accomplished* it in his miraculous life, death and resurrection. Exhortations of the New Testament were to not only hear the Gospel but to do it. Church Fathers Tertullian and Origen had seen theology as a legal and academic exercise but

Ireneus of Lyon championed the unity between Christian thought and Christian action or in other words, practical theology. In the modern era praxis has been influenced by two factors, firstly rationalism characterised by Descartes, Kant and later Barth who said that 'only the doer of the word is the true hearer,'. Secondly the political philosophy of Paulo Friere and Karl Marx whose famous dictum was 'philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.' Influenced by Karl Marx, Liberationists have argued that true theology is expressed when the church sees itself and its mission as agents of social change.

Bevans has defined the praxis model of contextual theology as '...reflected-upon action and acted-upon reflection – both rolled into one.' This sounds a lot like the formula taught by SAMS Ireland that:

Through the RED box project SAMS Irelands is seeking to be constantly reflecting upon their actions and acting upon their reflections in order to learn and develop their missionary practice. Therefore we can describe the organisations approach as a praxis model for contextual theology in Argentina. However there is a point of departure between a theology of praxis and one of liberation.

### Liberation Theology

Gutierrez had said that sin is present in the economic structures and political systems of Latin America.

Therefore salvation meant liberation for the oppressed poor through the church's involvement in political protest and even arguably violent revolution. Stott was alarmed in 1975 to note the rapid and radical shift from salvation as - 'a personal deliverance from sin by faith as a result of the proclamation of the gospel.' - to being defined as economic, political, social and personal 'humanization'. Salvation through Gods' kingdom is not literally the same as political liberation, although the former may bring about the latter. SAMS in partnership with the local church does not contextualize the Gospel in such a reductive way and rightly so. Whilst they adopt a praxis point of view, their actions and reflections are less about reforming social structures and more about individual people. For example: the personal salvation of the next-door neighbour, a gift of food for a family of 14, educational sponsorship for a handful of capable and ambitious young adults etc.

Sin and corruption are a reality or at least widely perceived reality in Argentine politics on a national and local level. I heard this from both Western missionaries and local people. For example, 2007 was election year and a lot of work was rapidly and ostentatiously put into development programs such as new housing, and refurbishment of the city hospital. However these projects - often ineffective and over-budget - were likely a veneer for money laundering or skimming personal profits for political leaders: real development for the citizens is not as valuable a priority as getting re-elected and wealthy.

Unfortunately these problems are predominantly met with cynicism or political and social apathy instead of a motivation for change. Perhaps for the average Argentine having experienced decades of revolution, totalitarianism and instability a 'little bit' of democratic corruption isn't deemed worth protesting about.

The response of SAMS to this political environment is to not get involved, they recognise that as a foreign missionary organization they can claim neither accurate judgement of a foreign government nor the authority to voice any cry for dramatic social change. However sad and frustrating this is a wise and realistic response. Local Church leaders therefore express their role in social and political change by exhorting the Church community in moral character, the Protestant work ethic, and in prayer for the government.

SAMS and its partner church in Salta seem therefore to tackle sin and its results, such as poverty and suffering, on a personal level with individuals and families. But is this the best way? And is it not by ignoring bigger dimensions of systemic sin and national issues of under development, really condoning the status quo? This is the difference between what Padilla calls 'micro ethics' and 'macro ethics'. Take for example the issue of illegal drugs in Salta. One day this summer, whilst driving through the beautiful countryside region of *Valles Calchaquíes* our team passed the remote landing strip of the provinces' Governor.

It is common knowledge according to my salteño friends that the private runway is aptly situated for drug smuggling across the Bolivian border. The next day I am with my friend Erica a twenty something mother of 3 living in the Limache neighbourhood. She is pregnant and addicted to drugs. The RED box team can befriend and help her and her children on a micro scale, and they pray hopefully that she would be set free from her addiction, but what about the illegal drug trafficking that is causing the situation and her family's suffering? It is a problem with no easy solution. To ask whether Christ was a Saviour who focused on the individual or a social revolutionary is an important question, especially in South America. History has taught us that social change in accordance with God's salvation plan is not achieved through assimilation with Marxist ideology. In light of that, Sinclair has argued from the Argentine perspective: 'Christians do not contribute to politics by moving to the political extremes, but by being better Christians.'

Being as up close and personal as the RED box project is with the ordinary people of Salta, they cannot be unaware of the wider social issues such as unemployment, drug trafficking, struggling public health service etc. And it is imperative that they keep themselves informed, interested and vocalising a Christian response to them. In the mean time, Jesus Christ cared for the individual, and this method of relational, educational and developmental mission is good and effective.

## **Conclusion**

Overall there are few suggestions to be made with regard to improvement of the RED box project in Salta, bearing in mind that it is difficult to judge the impact of an initiative that is so young, having started only 2 years previously.

The organisations' objectives of Relational, Educational and Developmental mission are theologically sound and being put into good effect. But further reflection is always needed from leaders and volunteers alike.

Whilst the experience of climbing over the language barrier can have many benefits for the volunteer and their host community, the shepherding and translating for each individual is not the most efficacious use of Cecilia's time and resources and it would be better if future volunteers had at least a basic grasp of the local Castellano language. Perhaps SAMS Ireland ought to become either more discriminating of or facilitating for non-Spanish speaking volunteers wishing to travel to Argentina.

Additionally, further support and space would ideally become available for Cecilia to study and pursue her own vocation. Part of this will hopefully emerge from her ability to delegate tasks to the new committee of youth leader volunteers, and the training that Pamela Gomez will gain on placement in Northern Ireland.

The greatest strength is found in the relationships of the project. Close personal friendships as well as a working partnership with the local mission in Salta is of mutual benefit to the missionary task in both Argentina and Ireland. It is inspiring to think of the RED box an innovative expression of mission being generated between South America and Ireland. But even surpassing that is the encouragement that: 'The Holy Spirit has developed a new missionary awareness in Latin America.'