

The Runway is Short

by Andy Michaels

"If the wind isn't blowing in the right direction, the planes can't take off or land." Spoken a week earlier by a missionary, these words echoed in my mind as I pondered gravity from my economy-class seat. In a big way, this observation of Tegucigalpa airport's unsettlingly short runways applied to my efforts to do God's work.

I had just spent the last two stifling hot weeks tucked away in a stuffy office in the small town of Siguatepeque, Honduras. More often than not, we flushed the office toilet with a coffee can full of water saved from the last time running water was available.

Though you wouldn't be able to tell from the outside, lives were changed at this office. Mine, in particular. Before we get to that, though, let's back up a bit.

In 1997 I moved from the Midwest to the East Coast. My head was full of dreams and not much else; I was eager to start my shiny new job as a good corporate citizen. Those were good days, full of learning new technologies and dragging a century-old business culture kicking and screaming toward the future.

Life was good. Until it wasn't.

I knew there was something missing after four years of struggling and getting little to no results. There had to be more to this existence than working the 9 to 5 job and playing on the weekends, but it eluded me. There were days when I couldn't bear having the life sucked out of me by the corporate machine. The idea of another year of spending more time writing presentations on what we could be doing instead of actually doing it felt like prison. I began searching my soul and eventually found myself at the foot of the cross, asking if I really believed the story.

The past decade of my life, until that point, surely answered, "No". I then decided it was time to come back to God, and say "Yes" to Jesus, or whatever you want to call it (cue the church camp music).

"Let's see," I wondered, "how could I put my renewed faith, my nerdiness, and my experience together to serve God?" I could certainly go build houses, dig wells, or work in an orphanage; those are all great callings that take real dedication and - ooh! shiny! You see, I have this problem: Anything more technologically advanced than a brick positively fascinates me. I guess that's how I ended up in the technology field in the first place, but that's another story.

Anyway, I set to work trying to marry my penchant for technology with my faith in Jesus. Fast-forward about year and a handful of failed attempts at creating some community outreach programs. I couldn't understand why I was hitting such resistance trying to create something good and serve God while doing it. Bewildered, I stopped trying and did some more soul-searching. My search led me to Michael Kuo. He founded Synergy Ministries, an outlet for those who are called to serve by contributing to missions with their business and technology skills and expertise, which aren't traditionally associated with missions. I got in touch with Michael only to learn that the ministry was on hiatus, which didn't surprise me in light of my circumstances (or track record).

A few months later, I received a call from Michael; he asked if I would be interested in going to Honduras. Without hesitation, I accepted. The roller coaster ride that followed can only be described as providential. People joined the team. People left the team. But in the end we wound up with the perfect team. Some were techies. Some had finance experience while others focused on children's ministry. At the last minute, we got someone who was fluent in Spanish.

The departure date for Honduras arrived quickly. After some funny-if-it-had-happened-to-someone-else antics involving live typhoid cultures and malaria pills the size of New Jersey, we were on our way. Amidst the frantic preparation, I came to realize that I had been on a very short runway, fully fueled, engines running and ready to take off for a long time. But this opportunity was the wind blowing in the right direction. This is what would allow me to finally take off. I truly felt that this was exactly where God wanted me at that point in time.

Despite that feeling, I was still uncertain that there existed a true need for technology and business services in global ministry. Would we be able to provide something useful to this ministry? Would we be wasting the ministry's time, creating tools that they wouldn't use, or worse, slow them down? My doubts were eased by the warm, welcoming smiles and faithfulness of our hosts. At some point, between continually wiping sweat from my eyes and writing a program to remove entries from QuickBooks, I realized something important. Not only was this work needed, but it could play a critical role in the long-term survival of ministries all over the world.

God was using us to make these operations more efficient, allowing them to spend more time reaching out to the people they served. The less they had to worry about the quirks of computer software, the more impact they could have on their community. Given the choice of downloading and installing driver software or doing outreach, I'd like to think that most people would rather spend time with other people.

What we accomplished in Honduras changed my perspective on missions.; how we accomplished it changed my faith.

Still, I left Honduras unsatisfied. I knew that what we had done was like throwing a pebble into the Grand Canyon., but I did leave Honduras with a vision. I wanted to see ministries take advantage of the benefits of technology and good business practices. I wanted to see more of God's people serving with gifts and skills that were once considered out of place. So, when Michael asked me to join Synergy as a volunteer staff member, I again accepted without hesitation.

Andy Michaels is current the Executive Director of Synergy Ministries and also serves on the Board of Directors.