

Chapter 4

Leaning On Christ; Leading Like Christ

by Mike Sohm

Before the Ebola outbreak in Guinea, some rural villages persecuted Christians. Thousands died from Ebola, and the impact on their families and villages was overwhelming.

Once the outbreak was under control, a local pastor initiated a five-part response to help families and villages, starting with bringing formal condolences to those who had lost family members. He asked fellow Christians to go with him to speak with the village leaders. The Christians were afraid at first but soon decided to go. When they told the village leaders why they were there, one stood up, saying, “Even though I have had a death in my family, no one had come to give condolences, and now these Christians whom we persecuted and whose building we had burnt down have come to give us condolences.”

This was such a testimony to the other leaders that they asked the Christians for forgiveness and insisted on going to the next village with them. This act of love and kindness opened the door for the gospel message in these Muslim villages.

Beginnings

Growing up in a small farming community in southern Minnesota shaped my values and aspirations. Hard work, honesty, respect for those in authority, attending church, and caring for others were modelled for me and emphasized by my parents and teachers. My parents, Monica and Elwin Sohm, were hard-working, religious people who had grown up on farms. Dad went into the air force, and Mom worked in a small city. After their marriage, Dad worked many odd jobs to make ends meet, and Mom stayed home to care for us five children.

Mom was a staunch Roman Catholic; for me, this meant going to catechism class, confession, and mass every week. I became an altar boy in elementary school and served under different priests. One was



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kind; others were gruff and grumpy, shaping my views of the Catholic Church.

My hometown of Cleveland, Minnesota, had a population of 500. You knew everyone, and they knew you. When you did something wrong at your friend's house, his mother would discipline you, call your mother, and she would discipline you again when you got home. There was little to do other than sports, working on local farms, and getting into trouble. I excelled at two of the three. I enjoyed sports the most—baseball all spring and summer, football in the fall, and basketball in the winter. Coaches had a significant influence on my life.

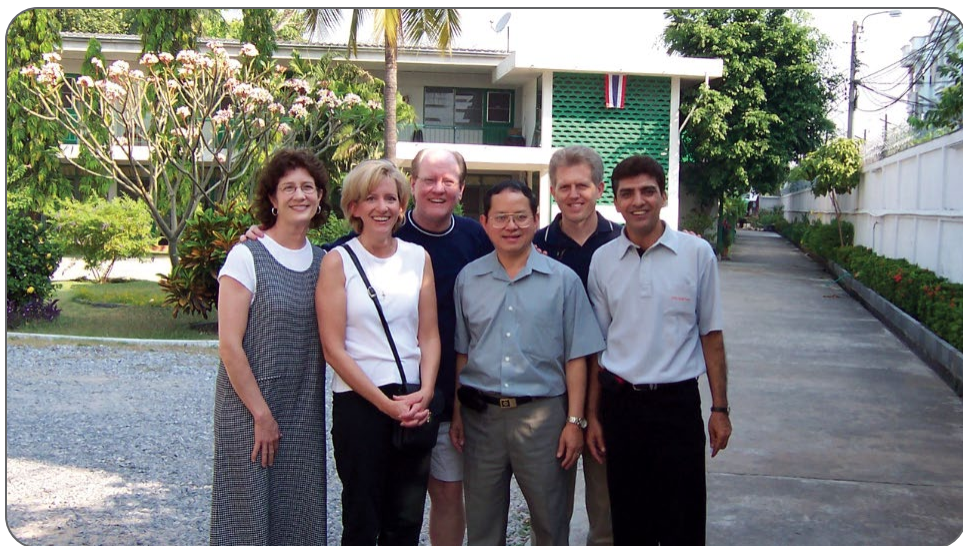
I believed in God, Jesus, and other basic teachings of the Bible. However, I thought I had to earn my salvation by doing good things and going to confession and mass each week. By my early teens, I was pretty certain I was in deep trouble with God.

When I was sixteen, the teacher of our religious instruction class took us all to see a Billy Graham film. I identified with some of the characters and felt some conviction of sin. However, when asked if I wanted to accept Christ as my Saviour, I firmly said, "No!" God sent another person into my life a year later to present God's plan of salvation, and again, my answer was "No." God, who relentlessly pursues us, sent one more person to me following high school graduation at the job where I worked that summer.

I worked in a factory to make money to attend Minnesota State University (MSU) at Mankato in the fall. One day a man named Joe came to work alongside me. He lived a life quite different from everyone I knew. As a former gymnast, he was strong, worked hard, laughed easily, and was a good listener. When asked serious questions, he almost always quoted the Bible to support his answer. Overall, Joe was completely honest about his life and the ups and downs he had experienced.

His life intrigued me so much that I asked about reading the Bible, and he directed me to the Gospel of John. I read a few paragraphs at night, and we would discuss it over lunch the next day. When I came to John 5:24 and saw you could know with certainty you had eternal life, I was shocked and asked Joe if the offer was true. With his affirmation, I put my faith in Christ that evening.

The fall semester started the following week. Joe was a leader in the Navigator student ministry at my campus. For the next two years, he mentored and discipled me, connecting me with other believers, teaching me how to pray, study the Bible, share my faith, etc. As a result, I also became involved in the Navigator student ministry.



Mike (back row, right) and Nancy (front row, left) with friends in Thailand, 2016

Family

I have been richly blessed in finding Nancy, marrying her over 40 years ago. We met while involved with the Navigator student ministry at MSU. Although shy, she was genuine and very determined in her faith, such as when she helped to smuggle Bibles into former Soviet Bloc countries.

Our relationship grew over the months, and we soon became engaged and were married a week after Nancy graduated and three months before attending seminary in Regina, Saskatchewan. Our three years at Canadian Theological Seminary (CTS) were transformational and foundational. Faculty, staff, and students all invested generously in our lives. Our first son Caleb was born in our final year at CTS.

We now have three adult sons, a daughter-in-law, and two grandchildren.

Preparation for Service

A Navigator staff member at MSU gathered us every Saturday morning to study the Bible and pray for missionaries. He had a three-inch stack of prayer letters that he would pass out to the sixty students to read and then pray for each request. This was my first exposure to missions.

While in college, God gave me a heart for international students, and I had

the privilege of leading a student from Iran to Christ. At the same time, I began attending a local Alliance church and was influenced to consider missions through the annual mission's conference. This led me to apply for Alliance Youth Corp, a short-term mission opportunity of The Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA), during my junior year at MSU. I was accepted and spent that summer in Thailand with Compassion and Mercy Associates (CAMA), the relief and development arm of the C&MA.

During the summer, I served Hmong refugees who escaped Laos. I worked with Sean Campbell,¹ a student from Canadian Bible College and a missionary kid who had grown up in Thailand. He relentlessly encouraged me to attend CTS after completing my undergraduate degree.

The Hmong refugees we served had come across the Mekong River the night before, and we saw and heard first-hand the suffering caused by the ongoing war in Laos. Toward the end of the summer, we visited Alliance missionaries in other locations to gain some exposure to church planting. During one of those visits, I yielded myself to the Lord for future service. I told the Lord I would return to Thailand and serve in any way, but not with CAMA in relief work—it was just too hard.

In the fall, the Lord spoke to me during a missionary conference calling me to serve overseas. Wanting to serve with the C&MA, I knew that Nancy and I would need further training at a C&MA seminary which led us to CTS.

Key People Who Impacted My Life

I recently counted over twenty individuals God used as mentors to influence me at key moments. Let me mention a few. My call to missionary service came through Joe Arthur, a missionary to the Philippines. He spoke at my church and extended an invitation to respond to God's call to missions, to which I responded with a 'yes.'

I am incredibly grateful for the professors who taught, exhorted, affirmed, and encouraged me first as a believer and then as one called to serve. The example, teaching, and encouragement of Doctors Arnold Cook, Al Cramer, Sam Stoesz, and Dale Herendeen were especially timely and impactful.

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1 He later went on to work with CAMA in Asia for a few years and then with Samaritan's Purse for much of his career.

Events Leading up to our First Term in Thailand

Following graduation, we moved to Burnaby, British Columbia, for home service at Brentwood Park Alliance Church. Our senior pastor, Arden Adrian, was a fantastic mentor, pouring into my life in ways that continue to bear fruit today. The congregation welcomed us warmly, and it was a key time in our development as individuals and future missionaries.

Our second child, Katie, was born in Burnaby. We were in the early stages of preparing to leave Brentwood Park for our first term in Thailand. Tragically, the night before we were going to pack our missionary barrels, three-month-old Katie died in her sleep. The following days were a blur, but I remember the loving care we experienced from the church family. Her death changed us in ways we would not understand until years later, and it opened doors of ministry we could not have anticipated.

We returned to Minnesota to spend time with our families before leaving for Thailand in August. While we had studied and served with the Alliance in Canada, we were required to serve with the C&MA in the U.S. under Alliance Missions (AM).

In 1984, we travelled with five other new workers to Thailand, and they quickly became friends and colleagues. However, shortly after we arrived, we experienced something I could not have imagined or anticipated, almost bringing our missionary career to an abrupt end. However, it also shaped the kind of person and leader I would become.

Instead of showing compassion and understanding, some of our leaders insisted we focus on learning Thai and not think about Katie. Later, with the gracious intervention of our regional director, we were able to work through our grief and forgive those who wounded us. We completed the two-year language study program and received our first assignment to Khon Kaen.

Khon Kaen in NE Thailand was where we served on a church planting team. We learned so much from our team leaders, Glenn and Sheila Lewis, and our Thai team members. I also had regular involvement with smaller rural churches in our province. They were older churches having been planted among those who had contracted leprosy. While not everyone had leprosy, the physical deformities we saw made it obvious which people had suffered from this disease. Leprosy limited what they could do, and the general public often ostracized them. Yet these believers were some of the most joyful people I have ever met, lovingly proclaiming the gospel message to their communities. Having grown up in a farming community myself, I felt an affinity with these men and women, who were primarily farmers living out their faith in rural settings.

The call of God was strong, clear, and often repeated when I had doubts about

continuing as a missionary. The lostness of the Thai people and the prevalent spiritual darkness were concrete reminders of the need to present the good news of Jesus Christ. However, my understanding of the impact of sin and the power of the gospel message was inadequate for what I saw daily.

I attended a three-day training on holistic ministry in NE Thailand. As a result, I began to study biblical holism with a growing understanding of how sin had broken every relationship—with God, others, ourselves, and creation. God’s love not only restores broken relationships but the whole person as well. This understanding of sin and the power of Christ reframed how I saw missions and missionary service.

Also, God gave us our second son, Joshua, during our first term.

Second Term Abbreviated

Our first home assignment was full with the birth of our third son Daniel, two eight-week missionary tours, and additional coursework. We anticipated serving on a church planting team upon our return. Imagine my surprise when the regional director (RD) called me and asked if I would consider being the field director (FD). It is unusual to ask someone just returning for their second term to step into this role, but the field needed to be updated. I said “Yes,” and the next two years were some of the most wonderful and challenging years I have experienced. The RD allowed me to handpick my leadership team, and I chose a mix of newer and older missionaries, men and women, and one from the Philippines. They were a delight to work with during those two years. We strove to create greater unity around a shared vision for the future work of the C&MA in Thailand.

There were some hard things to face; the hardest was sending our second grader to boarding school in Penang, Malaysia. I vividly remember trips to the airport and putting him on a plane with other children to go to boarding school each semester.

There were other challenges to face as a new and young FD. Upon arrival, I learned of a moral issue requiring me to lead a formal investigation. The Lord was with me each step, blessing me with wisdom, favour, and courage.

I was just about to complete my second year as FD when I received a call from the newly elected VP of Alliance Missions in the U.S., Peter Nanfelt. He asked me to consider becoming a regional director for the Asia/Pacific Region. Again, I was shocked, stating I would pray about it. My wife was not keen on going, but through God’s grace, and further discussion with Peter, we agreed to the role.

I was often overwhelmed and out of my depth as a young leader. Yet, as an FD with a supportive leadership team, the role was challenging and rewarding. Any

confidence I had as a leader vanished when we returned to the USA mid-term to step into the role of RD for the Asia/Pacific Region in 1991.

An 11-Year Third Term

Our family was adjusting to life back in the States, and I was adjusting to a very different kind of work environment and a new team. While I had a clear role, Nancy's role as a missionary ended abruptly. The wives of other regional directors formed a tight-knit support group while we served in Colorado Springs.

What did I learn in those eleven years as an RD? First, humility or humiliation – you choose. When you are in way over your head, it is best to admit this to God and your boss. Pretending will only get you into trouble. To accentuate this point, I often worked with FDs who were older than me, creating awkward moments.

Second, the line between a strong work ethic and workaholism is very thin. I often crossed the line, which almost destroyed me as a leader and seriously impacted my family.

The Arrow Leadership program and understanding how adults learn profoundly impacted me. My Arrow mentor helped me apply and internalize what I had been learning. He helped me be honest with who I was as a person and leader and what this could look like in daily practice. This launched me on the path to becoming a coaching leader who saw potential in others and looked to see where God was at work in a person, a team, or a field and affirm and encourage them to keep moving forward. Those two years changed the trajectory of my life and leadership style.

Assistant Vice President (AVP)

In 1991, Bob Fetherlin, the new VP for Alliance Missions (AM), launched a plan to have all RDs reside in the region they served. This had been my desire for years, and when I pursued it earlier, the answer had always been “no.” It was over a decade later, and with three teenage sons, moving back overseas was not a good choice. But because this plan involved expanding the role of the AVP, I was asked if I would become the second AVP working alongside David Kennedy – a seasoned leader in AM.

Again, I needed to be more prepared for this more significant role, but the Lord made it clear that I should say “yes.” For the next four years, I benefited from working closely with David and serving RDs in Asia and Latin America. I was also given the freedom to develop a personal growth and development plan for missionaries and a process to review our work in fields every five years. This

collaborative effort with missionaries taught me a great deal about missionary life and the life cycle of missionary work and produced two practical tools that served missionaries well in the following years.

Looking back on the four years in this role, I am grateful for the opportunity to lead at a higher level and gain a more extensive perspective on mission work. One lesson which stands out is how you can easily do the right thing in the wrong way. North American missionaries had worked in much of Latin America and a few locations in Asia for nearly 100 years. The national churches were strong, established, and able to do all they needed to do without the involvement of international workers (IWs) from other countries. At least, this was the conclusion we had come to, which led to the decision to close many fields and downsize others.

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This process was painful, made more so by the national churches' lack of input and interaction. They often recognized the need for us to reduce the number of IWs and could have helped with the pace and approach of reducing our size to bring our work to a close. This was important because, in most situations, it involved a transition from an IW leading a ministry to a national church leader leading that same ministry. More frequent dialogue with the national churches could have improved the process. It still would have been painful, but the relationship with those churches in the future would have been healthier.

From Alliance Missions to Higher Education

After twenty-two years of serving with Alliance Missions, I knew I needed a change. I was exhausted and felt I had little more to offer.

An invitation to serve at Crown College in Minnesota fit my need. The newly elected president of Crown College, Rick Mann, extended an offer for me to serve as the Executive VP, working closely with him and the cabinet as well as giving oversight to Operations and Human Resources. The learning curve was steep, but the people I worked with were professional, supportive, and helpful during my service at Crown College from 2006-2013. I treasure the relationships forged during those years and the work we accomplished together.

During this same time, the Director of CAMA Services, Phil Skellie, made it known that he would be retiring from his role in a year. So, I began to think and pray about applying for the position in the organization where I began my service with the Alliance as a student volunteer in Thailand.

Initiating not Responding

Up until this time, I had always been asked if I would consider specific leadership roles. This time, however, I initiated the application process for a position I had prayed about for a couple of years. This process was more rigorous than anticipated, pushing me to clarify my thinking about relief and development. I realized I had been on a journey of becoming more developmental as a leader and committed to serving the whole person. It also highlighted for me that what I did not know far exceeded what I did know.

The CAMA Board appointed me as the new director in 2013, and I served for the next nine years before retiring in 2022. Leading CAMA and working closely with my leadership team has been one of the most rewarding things I have had the privilege of doing. Experiences, training, and key relationships prepared me in unique ways to serve in my role.

Despite the pressures of leadership, I remained committed to the development of the person over policy. I also began a journey with the board and my leadership team to embark on a culture change to become more developmental.

The two-year process of developing our mission, vision, values, and strategy map was the vehicle helping to shape and reinforce culture change. There had been a lot of things going well with CAMA, and I merely adopted and reinforced those values and practices.

But there were also areas where we needed to change to move forward.

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Turning Points and Crossroads

Understanding Biblical Holism

I attended a three-day holistic ministry seminar in my second term, including church planting, sustainable farming, and ethnomusicology. Shortly afterwards, I attended a one-day workshop on biblical holism by World Vision. These two experiences created a desire and a vision for holistic ministry in Thailand. I also began to understand the false dichotomy between the proclamation of the Gospel (word) and the demonstration of the Gospel (deeds).

Multicultural Ministry

Thailand had missionaries from seven different nations representing different cultures and world views. Close personal interaction with colleagues from different cultures helped me to see my own ethnocentrism and adopt the position of being a

learner who was willing to look at things from the viewpoint of a different culture. A few years later, I served on the Alliance World Fellowship regional committee for Asia and again worked with mature and wise leaders from other nations. This was a rich and sometimes humbling experience as an American. I am so grateful for those leaders who encouraged and admonished me as a younger leader.

Coaching

My experience with the Arrow Leadership program in my forties led me to pursue training as a coach and invest in others as a coaching leader. It was transformative and catalytic for me. I have been trained in three somewhat different approaches and have coached over thirty younger leaders. These experiences have provided some of the most fulfilling ministry involvement in my career. One clear impact on how I lead is that I have become more collaborative and less directive as a leader, choosing to develop others as I have shared my authority with them.

Failures and Mistakes

Making mistakes and failure are givens in leadership. How you respond to them determines whether you will learn and grow or repeat the mistakes later. I learned how taking responsibility for my errors, apologizing, and doing what is possible to repair the damage is very important. I also had to accept that my failures were only final if I wanted them to be.

Helping People in Crisis

Disaster management has taught me a great deal about a major disaster's impact on people and the powerful impact a local church can have in serving those same people. As CAMA director, I had general oversight and some direct involvement in responding to major disasters in the United States. Hurricanes, tornados, floods, and forest fires are overwhelming and unpredictable, but the response and recovery follow a more predictable pattern. One of my best investments was a three-day disaster management seminar from the Humanitarian Disaster Institute at Wheaton College. The knowledge I gained there helped me to come alongside pastors and district leaders leading the response to disasters in their communities.

Seeing local churches compassionately engage with their communities following a disaster and hearing of the response to their ministry will make you weep. Hearts, once hard, even angry at Christians, become soft, open, and welcoming.

Community Development Done Well

Travelling to many parts of the globe, I have witnessed first-hand the



Celebrating the opening of a demonstration/
training farm led by a remarkable local leader

powerful impact of well-designed and implemented programs to help vulnerable people. For example, one program in West Africa helps vulnerable young girls gain life and job skills and hear the Gospel in a safe location. All of these begin by building relationships and affirming people as valuable. These low-cost, relational programs make a lasting impact on these girls.

Loss of Loved Ones, Friends, and Colleagues

Biblical truth, family, close friends, and community can help you to grieve and cope with these losses, but you are eventually alone with your thoughts and feelings. Losing people close to you changes you in ways not understood at the moment. Each of these losses helped me to weep with those who weep, but it also deepened my conviction about my hope in Christ and the need to share it with more people. The death of those who did not know Christ was the most disturbing.

Pain

Serving as a missionary or missionary leader includes a lot of pain, sorrow, disappointment, and discouragement. Some of the things that happened were unavoidable; those are the times you cry out to God for grace to endure. Some of the pain resulted from my pride or were made worse by it. As a young leader, I too often thought things were about me, which only accentuated the pain from conflict or misunderstanding. Often these situations are not about you, but we are still called to enter into the grief and frustration of those we serve.

Why God?

One of the more difficult and sad losses I had to work through was the death of a young staff member in Thailand. An aneurysm in his spinal column burst, leaving him paralyzed and unable to breathe without a respirator. Watana was a sweet, full of life, eager-to-serve, and fun person in the office. He came from a Christian home in NE Thailand, where his parents were some of the first to believe.

I remember hearing that Watana was in the hospital and in serious condition.

So I travelled to the city where he was, and Boyd Hannold, another missionary, and I spent the last few days of his life with him and his parents.

At one point, the doctor told me he would not recover. I asked him if he would tell the parents, and he said, “No, I want you to tell them.” I remember the look on their faces as I conveyed the sad news. Watana died shortly after; Boyd and I were involved in the funeral and burial service. The depth of sorrow and the contrast between those who have hope in Christ and those who do not have hope could not have been starker. While I rejoiced in knowing Watana was with Christ, I was mad at God for a few months over the loss of such a wonderful young man who died too young.

Fulfilling the Great Commission

As a college student, I shared the Gospel with many students. I was drawn to connect with international students, mainly from Taiwan and Iran. I disciplined those who came to faith in Christ and encouraged them to share their faith with others.

As a leader, organizing and planning are areas of strength where I have invested for Kingdom advancement. Three specific initiatives come to mind. First, as an RD, I was tasked with developing a personal growth plan for all our IWS. I did this with a team of eight workers. The tool we produced continues to be used today.

A second initiative was to develop a methodology to evaluate our work in specific countries. The hoped-for results were awareness, agreement, and direction for future plans. Again, the tool developed continues to be used. Lastly, modelling, emphasizing, and putting resources behind coaching initiatives have helped many missionary leaders to grow more intentionally in areas of need.

As a missionary leader at different levels, I was regularly involved in evangelism. Still, I think my investment in the lives of team leaders, field leaders, and regional leaders had the greatest impact on Kingdom advancement. They were the ones who planted churches, trained pastors, implemented successful community development projects, and responded to major disasters. In most of these situations, I played the role of second fiddle.

There is a long list of people who need to be acknowledged for things I have been given credit for doing. Some examples:

Still, I think my investment in the lives of team leaders, field leaders, and regional leaders had the greatest impact on Kingdom advancement.

- **Entering Mongolia** in the mid-1990s began with the passionate and relentless urging from Joon Ho Lim, a missionary serving in the Philippines. I got behind him as the RD, and he and his wife launched our work in Mongolia.
- **Re-entering China** in teams was a collaborative decision in which I played a part. While it got off to a rocky start, the decision was timely and fruitful. Credit for implementation goes to Jim Malone, who coordinated and led this new team approach to ministry.
- **Establishing a partnership with major house church networks in China** to train cross-cultural workers came from another missionary whose knowledge, insights, and relationships led to creating something unique which continues to this day. For security reasons, the name of the individual who shaped this partnership cannot be named.
- **Entering South Asia directly and in partnership** came at the urging of CAMA staff, who saw a need and had a trusted relationship with local leaders. I simply got behind them.
- **Responding effectively to disasters in Asia, Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, and North America** is due in large part to the quick initiative of CAMA staff members and the sacrificial leadership and service of local pastors and other local believers.
- **Leading CAMA Services through a process to integrate into Alliance Missions** after operating in a semi-autonomous way for over a decade was the most challenging leadership task I have had, which I pray will yield unity and synergy and advance God's Kingdom.

Regular Patterns for Nurturing Your Relationship with God

Over the years, I have developed daily, weekly, quarterly, and bi-annual disciplines.

- **Daily**, I meditate on a verse or short passage, take a posture of listening for 10-15 minutes, journal, and pray for those on my list for the day. I have often incorporated music, primarily hymns.
- **Weekly**, I do two things. First, I read over my plan and look honestly at how the past week has gone and where I need to give some attention in the week ahead. Then, later in the day, I begin my weekly Sabbath, which has morphed over the years from a "day off" to something quieter and more contemplative. When I travel, I often have to carve out a half-day somewhere to be quiet, read, reflect, and often take a nap.

- **Quarterly**, I would review my activity, how I used my time and my overall well-being. For example, I often saw a link between a lack of rest or inconsistency in spiritual disciplines and an increase in stress. Extensive travel with not enough downtime also had a negative impact on overall well-being and relationships at home.
- **At least twice each year**, I would take a two-day retreat to be quiet, take long walks, pray, rest, read my Bible and do something in the area of spiritual formation.

Some Lessons Learned

- God, in His providence, has provided local people with local resources to solve local problems.
- Partnership is the preferred path when you can agree on a common outcome.
- The people most changed by our work are us.
- Abandon your preconceived ideas of what is needed as well as your solutions to problems, and you are off to a good start.
- Be careful not to rob someone of their dignity by doing things for them when they could do with just a small amount of help or knowledge.
- Prioritize developing people even as you implement projects, and you will not be disappointed.
- Failure is guaranteed—commit to learning from it and not letting it define you.
- Compassion will not sustain you in the long term; you must know that you are there in response to Christ's call to serve others.
- Since sin has holistically affected our relationship with God, one another, ourselves, and creation, our solutions must be holistic. Therefore, the only answer to the world's brokenness is the Gospel being fully expressed in both word and deed.
- Choose to prioritize and invest in people over programs.
- Find joy in championing the ideas and initiatives of others.
- Develop emotional resilience – you will need it.
- Practice and deepen your spiritual disciplines – daily, weekly, annually.
- Commit to life-long learning, growth, and development.