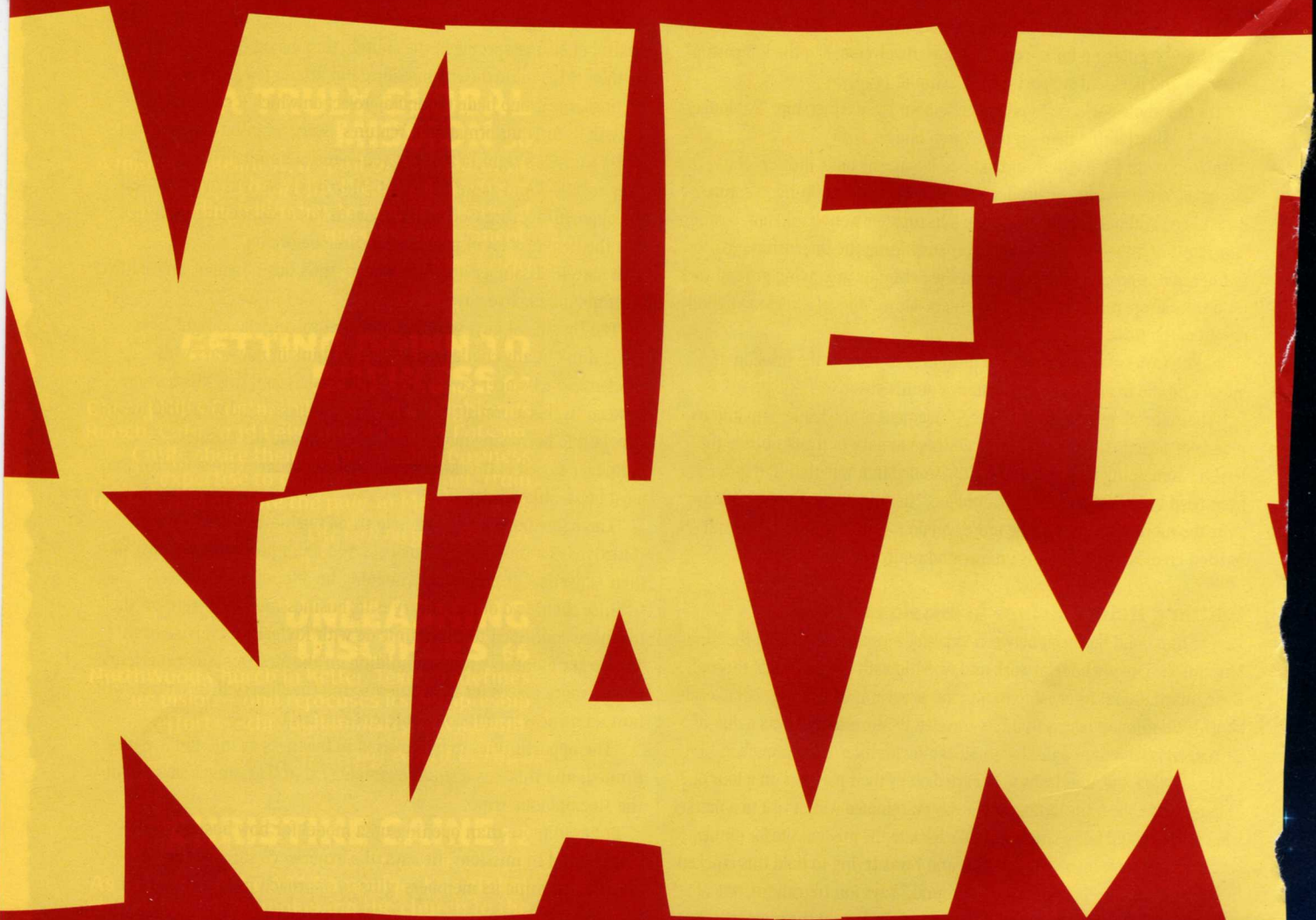


TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH



Unleashing Disciples

By Kami L. Rice

A Keller, Texas, church redefines its vision through ministry in Vietnam.

Before joining NorthWood Church in Keller, Texas, in 2007 and 2009, respectively, both Jessica Jernigan and Vicky Scott had participated in mission trips with their previous churches. And both had a love for international travel. So it was no surprise when the two women were quick to attend informational sessions about NorthWood's ongoing work in Vietnam and upcoming trips to the developing Southeast Asian nation.

Jernigan, a life skills teacher for students with special needs, first traveled with NorthWood in 2009 as part of a team leading a special education conference at the University of Hanoi. Last summer, she returned to Vietnam to help with the sixth annual conference, co-leading a session.

Scott's expertise lies in a different domain; she earned her master's degree in business administration and currently works as a senior information technology leader for a major American firm. When she learned that NorthWood was launching micro-finance work among rural communities in Vietnam, she sensed she was uniquely equipped to assist. Since her initial trip in fall 2008, Scott has traveled to Vietnam twice a year, working in Hanoi with Hanoi Young Business Association and Hanoi Network of Entrepreneurial Women and initiating poverty alleviation work among Vietnam's rural ethnic poor. She and others at NorthWood also hosted 10 businesspeople from the two organizations for a U.S. business study tour last spring.

But though Jernigan and Scott are building relationships in Hanoi and using their skills to engage in the domains of society, they are cognizant that open evangelism is not permitted in Vietnam. While NorthWood teams are honest about their Christian identity and why they are working in Vietnam, they also comply with government prohibitions on proselytizing.

"That's what took me a while to get used to: 'Oh wait, we can't even talk about Jesus unless someone asks us?'" Jernigan admits. "It's been a struggle for me, but that's their law, and we need to respect that. I've had to learn it's not only about sharing the Gospel, it's about meeting their need in the moment."

While these are not your typical mission trips, Scott says she feels called—instead of obligated—to participate. "I love playing a small part in bringing God's kingdom to Vietnam. I had never felt uniquely called to paint churches or lead backyard Bible schools, so my tendency

was to contribute financially and let someone else go," she says.

Scott's response to her calling is exactly what NorthWood Founding and Senior Pastor Bob Roberts aims to stir up in his central Texas congregation. "Our church is a platform to mobilize our members to fulfill their missional call," he explains. Often churches don't strategically

mobilize volunteers, neglecting to consider their specific gifts and skill sets. Instead, Roberts asks, "How do we help the person in the pew be the missionary that participates in the work of God's kingdom?"

"Doing global engagement is the No. 1 tool of discipleship," he says. "I've rarely seen a person go into the mountains outside Hanoi and not be changed. It redefines the level of discipleship in your church."

And because people are sent out, discipleship bends outward. This external focus, both local and global, drew Scott and her family to NorthWood, she says. Jernigan stayed at NorthWood partly because

of the church's local outreach to children with special needs.



The Strategy in the Pews

NorthWood's relationship with Vietnam began in 1995 when Roberts led a local surgeon, Bob Perot, to Christ. Soon after, Perot told Roberts he felt God calling him to return to Vietnam—he was shot down there three times as a pilot during the Vietnam War—to serve the local people.

Initially, Roberts wasn't supportive. "My dad had buried a lot of soldiers as a pastor, so I didn't have a high regard for Vietnam," he explains, describing growing up near Sheppard Air Force Base in Wichita Falls, Texas, as a fourth-grader looking up to the soldiers who visited their home every Sunday, many of whom didn't make it home from the war. However, about a week after he learned of his friend's interest in Vietnam, Roberts received a call from people offering to pay his way for him to join them on a trip to Southeast Asia with a stop in Vietnam.

"I felt that was an unusual God thing," he says, "so I went, and my heart was captured." Next, Roberts, Perot and another doctor traveled to Hanoi, went to the city's largest medical hospital, met with the director and volunteered to help. They were put to work. For about three years, Roberts says, the church "slugged it out in the mud" in Vietnam, traveling there with teams but not really knowing what to do.

Then two NorthWood families unable to travel to Vietnam, yet search-



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ing for a way to engage, came up with the idea of hosting Vietnamese students through a secular student-exchange organization. Roberts didn't share their excitement, fearing that if the students came to church with the families—which they ended up doing faithfully—it could compromise the church's work in Vietnam.

But instead of closing doors to the religiously sensitive country, the student exchange swung them wide open for the church when a Vietnamese student became a Christian at NorthWood and asked to be baptized. Knowing baptism of a Vietnamese student required parental permission, Roberts jumped on a plane to meet the student's parents and quickly discovered they were leaders in the country. Through these first students and the more than 70 others who have followed—many of whom have parents with leadership roles in Vietnam—NorthWood has gained the governmental access that has facilitated the church's investment there.

"[Hosting] was the best thing [the families] could have done," Roberts admits. "I was wrong."

Reflecting on how much his church's relationship with Vietnam has been directed by attendees' obedience to what they feel God has put on their hearts, Roberts says, "I don't even come up with the strategy anymore. Here's what's huge: The strategy is sitting in our pews."

These days the vision casting for NorthWood's relationship with Vietnam happens quite organically. It is part of the new-member class, and the congregation often hears stories from people traveling to and from the country. In the last 15 years, NorthWood has seen more than half of its 2,500 attendees—as well as people outside the church—engage in Vietnam and other areas around the globe the church is now involved with. "Each year, 10 percent more go," Roberts says, adding that the median age of the congregation is 29.

21st Century Missions With 18th Century Methods

"We now live in a connected world like never before, so the opportunity is greater than ever before," Roberts says. "The core question is: How do we communicate in a global age where nothing is private anymore and where local and global run together?" Roberts and his congregation use the term "glocal" to capture the reality of interconnectedness defining our cultural moment.

Fulfilling the Great Commission requires all of the body of Christ to get up on their feet. "Missionary work is the call of the entire church, not just of professional missionaries," Roberts says. "[The church as a whole] is trying to do 21st century missions with 18th century methodology. The way we're doing missions now will never complete the Great Commission. We've made missions a job description. We don't have enough missionaries and pastors to do the work of the Great Commission, but the church does have enough disciples if it will just mobilize them."

An understanding that the Great Commission is part of discipleship affords people like Jernigan and Scott unique and effective opportunities to use their talents to serve the kingdom. "I feel like I am able to truly utilize the gifts and abilities that God has given me to glorify Him both in Vietnam and at home," Scott says. "Since my work in Vietnam is fairly unusual, I get asked about it frequently by my co-workers, the Vietnamese women who do my nails and even casual acquaintances

who have heard about my trips. It has opened the door for many discussions about why I work there. I've found that when it's obvious you put legs to your faith, people are much more eager to listen. It has allowed me to share my faith in ways that would not previously have been possible and has, hopefully, allowed me to demonstrate the love of God to people at home."

The natural connection between what is happening at home and abroad spotlights the reality of glocalization. "With my Vietnamese businesswomen friends, I've listened to them remark on the great relationship I have with my husband and how we hold hands or otherwise casually show our love for each other, something that is apparently not common in Vietnam," Scott says, describing the observations of Vietnamese delegations that have visited NorthWood. "I've heard one of the businessmen say that in Texas he learned how a man should treat his wife. I've seen the women walk through the halls of our church with tears in their eyes, finding it difficult to believe that all of the people caring for and teaching the children are volunteers. I've heard them talk about how wonderful it is that our children are being taught to love people and how much their children need this."

Jernigan also has fused her work in the States with her passion for Vietnamese children with special needs and their families. The country's religious tradition leads families to think these children are punishment for something they've done. Jernigan wants to help them see otherwise. "Hopefully, they see our love for kids with special needs and see that it's not a bad thing to have a child with special needs; it's a huge blessing," she says.

A New Conversation for Missions

NorthWood's committed work in Vietnam led to more obvious impacts on the country's religious climate when Vietnamese officials requested Roberts' input as the country began addressing religious freedom issues during its bid to join the World Trade Organization.

"We work with the gatekeepers of society, and they know I'm a Christian," Roberts says. "These guys are intrigued by what our church is doing." Churches don't realize, "if they would serve as disciples in the community, as people ask questions, they'll have ample opportunity to share their faith."

NorthWood will host its first-ever Global Faith Forum Nov. 11-13, featuring influential speakers of various faiths and breakout sessions allowing attendees to converse with such guests as young Muslims and communists from around the world. The goal of the forum, Roberts says, is to help evangelicals enter conversations with leaders of other faiths.

"We've got to move from a conversation among ourselves about how to reach the world to a conversation with the world about what's going on, what are the needs, what roles can Christians play, and how can we serve you," he explains. "Theologically, we have irreconcilable differences, but the best of all the faiths means we must be able to work together." ✱

ONLINE: Glocal.net (Bob Roberts' blog); NorthWoodChurch.org; GlobalFaithForum.org