

PREPARING TO LEAVE THE FIELD

A grievous problem for missionaries is the task of deciding when and how to leave a place of work on the mission field. The following is my testimony of how the Mitchell family left full time work in the city of Florence Italy after years of effort there planting a church and equipping it to go ahead with the work after our absence.

When Howard Bybee and I left the U.S. in 1950 to work in Italy, very little study had been made as to how to go about missionary work. It was pretty much "get your Bible and go!" Note the following:

A. The state of missionary preparation:

1. There were no missions courses offered in our church related schools of which I was aware, except a one unit class in oriental missions taught by J.M. McCaleb at Pepperdine College. The curriculum involved his recounting his adventures after fifty years of service in Japan. I enjoyed the course!
2. I had never heard the words, "working funds" – our working fund was to be our own contributions from our salary.
3. It was thought all that was needed was a dedicated Christian who was willing to go.
4. Those who went tended to stay on the field for a long time with very rare visits home.
5. A visit from a sponsoring church member was rare, and missionaries thought people coming to survey the work were spending good money that could better be used by the missionary. In my full time work in Italy, no one every visited from my supporting church.
6. To my knowledge there was little or no sharing of information among missionaries, so for the most part we learned by our own experience rather than from the experience of others.

B. I'm thankful for the change that has occurred as all of our schools feature missions preparation today.

1. It did not come easily...older missionaries tended to be defensive and resistant.

2. I'm thankful for pioneers who stood in the gap: George Benson, George Gurganus, and Wyndell Broom, to name a few.

3. I am thankful for the flow of information and the means of sharing that typify our mission work today, although I think an over emphasis on autonomy sometimes blinds us to access of information that would often save us time, painful mistakes and money.

4. However, we may be risking an over dependence on "parachurch" organizations which eventually may not differ much from a missionary society. We may also risk the end result of thinking that well thought out programs can just be put on automatic.

5. Outreach work must still be seen as involving persons getting out of their offices to be in peoples homes and in other ways be constantly in contact, one on one, with people, loving them and giving them our time.

C. My worked included Milan, Frascati, Rome, and Sicily in 1950 to 1952 before returning to the U.S. to marry Frankie. Frankie and I moved to Florence in 1953 accompanied for a brief period by Howard and Doris Bybee. Shortly after they left, Maxine and L.V. Pfeifer (my sister and brother-law), arrived and aided greatly in getting things started before they continued to Bologna to begin the church there. We had no plan either as to how to begin the work, nor how to get it ready for us to leave. We just went believing God would open doors to those who are out knocking on doors.

1. Beginning proved to be easy. We started with an open house on Sunday afternoons to which we invited everyone we met...we showed documentaries of parks and other places of interest in the U.S. provided by the United States Information Service. We then asked our guests questions about Italy, and answered their questions about ourselves. Of course we served refreshments too. Next, we opened a free English school with 70 students. After a few meetings we offered a Bible study opportunity to those who wanted to stay after English class. About half did, and in a short period of time seven were baptized into Christ. At the end of the course, we advertised a second session and begin enrolling students only to be interrupted by the police with a threat of arrest if we taught further free English without getting permission from the Minister of Education in the central government. I applied and two years latter got a "no" response. That really made no difference because at that point we had more contacts than we could keep up with. In December of 1960 we left four congregations in Tuscany: Pistoia, Prato, Florence, and Arezzo. We were greatly assisted by the Joe and Jean Gibbs family which in 1958 moved to Florence to

head up a Bible training school which demanded a parallel vocational training in the university or in technical schools. Our purpose was to develop self-supporting workers in the Italian church.

2. Our departure plan included the following:

a. Business meetings from the very beginning with converts who sharing in decision making.

b. From the beginning we planned activities that brought the members together in a social way so they would learn to love and trust each other. This was something very different from anything ever experienced in the Catholic State Church.

b. We set aside one contribution per month toward the eventual acquisition of a meeting place. Years later the church bought their present building paying in part from this fund, an additional portion was given by U.S. churches and the remainder was borrowed and repaid monthly by the Florence church until the debt was liquidated.

c. We offered training classes in preaching and teaching for men. The week before we left, six of our men gave a meeting for the public with one of them speaking each evening. They proved to be very capable as in Italy talking is an art!

d. We arranged for a church in the U.S. to support an Italian preacher with the agreement by the church in Florence that they would begin by supplying 1/10th of the support and increase their contribution by that amount each year until all of the support would be coming from the Italian church. In the meantime, funds from the U.S. were to be sent to the Florence church so the Italian preacher would be answerable to them rather than to the funding church in the U.S. Unfortunately, this became a failed plan due to claimed unfaithfulness on the part of the Italian preacher. However, to this day I am convinced that this was a proper way to go about avoiding perennial funding coming from outside Italy. I will add that the church in Florence has carried on its own work with local talent since that early experience. There have been other missionaries from the U.S. that periodically have spent time working with the Florence church, but they have not had a full-time Italian worker since what was described above. They have had an American worker with them for a number of years now that is supported by the Italian church.

e. We left physically, but remained spiritually and in our hearts. In the succeeding years, we have returned almost every year for meetings or campaigns. In addition we have aided in planting two Christian University programs in Florence which kept us in Florence where we could be self-supporting missionaries for many years. We have also worked with the above mentioned Bybees in developing a program in Florence called Avanti Italia (go ahead Italy), for recent U.S. college graduates who for two years evangelize by teaching free English classes using a modern translation of the Bible in English as a text. Many baptisms have come as a result of this program. Today Italy has a good number of U.S. missionaries who went through this two program program and later returned for a longer stay.

f. In my experience, the fact that we have left is more bearable to the new converts when through letters, e-mail, and visits, we continue our contact with them.

Carl Mitchell