

THE MISSIONARY, THE PROSTITUTES, AND THE COFFEE

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Brian Miller has a problem. He spent the last 20 years building one ministry after another, but circumstances have changed and now he has to figure out what to do next. His latest project is Casa Esther—a safe environment where homeless girls can get off the street. Most of them are involved in prostitution and many are pregnant. Because he is a missionary in Colombia, he began funding the girls' home with coffee sales to the United States. This was very profitable, largely because he sent the coffee back to the United States with short-term missionaries who bore the expense of shipping. He would buy bags of coffee for \$11.25, package them for pennies, and reap more than \$38.00 in profits that were exclusively dedicated to the girls' home. But COVID-19 destroyed his delivery system because short-term missionary teams were forced to stop traveling to Colombia. He still needs to fund this ministry as needs have not changed, but to do that, he must radically alter his delivery system or he will not be able to save these women and their children. What should he do?

PRESENT DAY

Brian Miller has a problem. In his quest to provide for the poor, he has started multiple ministries. He began his ministry by helping young boys get off of the streets. All of these boys were homeless, and most were hooked on drugs. More recently, he began a girls' home. Many of these girls were on drugs or involved in prostitution. A large percentage were pregnant and had nowhere to go.

Because he works in Medellin, Colombia, Miller used the resources within his reach to fund his work. For some time, he had been sending huge bags of Colombian coffee back to supporters in the United States with short term missionaries, but things have changed. COVID-19 brought on a world-wide pandemic that affected Columbians as much as every other part of the world. Medellin was under quarantine and air traffic ground to a halt.

The quarantine was a real problem because coffee sales funded 70% of the operating costs for the girl's home. Miller has overcome many setbacks as he

ministered to the downtrodden, but this obstacle may be too much unless he can get some help. With this most recent turn of events, it will be tough to keep this ministry going.

A CALL TO MINISTRY

In 1994, Miller was living in Charleston, West Virginia. He was a member of the Air National Guard, and he was working on his aeronautics degree, but his direction in life was about to radically change. That year, he took his first trip to Medellin where he worked with the Open Arms Foundation.

At the time, some 4,000 homeless children roamed the city streets. Many were on drugs and these children had nowhere to go. The Open Arms Foundation provided day programs for them and even a farm where some could go and live full time in order to get clean.

After the trip, all he could think about were the children. Six months later, he returned to Medellin, and he was certain that he felt a call to work with the street children. In total, he would visit Colombia on short-term mission trips seven times.

EARLY MINISTRY

Along the way, he met Katherine, a Colombian girl. She was a volunteer in the ministry. They met on his fourth trip, and he began to develop romantic feelings for her by his sixth trip. She came back to the United States with him on a fiancé visa, and they were married in December of 2002. He brought her to the United States, but his plan was to move back to Columbia to work full-time with the Open Arms Foundation.

In 2000, he enrolled in seminary at Regent University. By 2003, he completed a Master of Arts in Missiology with an emphasis in church planting. To pay for tuition, he taught at StoneBridge School, a classical Christian school in Chesapeake, Virginia where he taught Bible and Spanish.

By the spring of 2004, the drug wars in Colombia had created a large rural refugee population that fled to the city. He and Katherine moved back to Colombia where Miller took a role as the General Director of the Open Arms Foundation and Administrative Pastor of the Centro Open Arms Church. Here, he oversaw a homeless boys' home and a six month-old church plant to these refugees.

In 2008, Miller started a second refugee church-plant—Robledo Open Arms Church. Then, in 2010, he started a crisis pregnancy home. In 2012, he started a home for homeless girls, ages 6-18 years old. Then, in 2015, Miller started a third church plant in a rural community—the San Pedro Open Arms church.

FUNDING THE MINISTRY

Miller has been involved in a number of ministries including the Open Arms Foundation and several church plants. He taught at the local seminary, Seminario Biblica de Colombia, and he even helped to start a small seminary.

Miller is a serial social entrepreneur. His most recent ventures include Global Transformation Ministries and Casa Esther.

Like other missionaries, he had to “raise support” for his operations. When he first began, he would show a PowerPoint and describe his ministry to a small gathering at a church or in the home of a church member. He would describe what he did, the kids that he helped, and ask them to consider supporting his work. It is primarily how he funded his work since its inception.

It is a common practice for missionaries to “raise support” in the United States before they physically move to the country where they will work. A number of churches will each sponsor a percentage of the missionary’s activities and in return, they will receive updates on the missionary’s progress. In this way, church members extend their reach and the missionary is empowered to conduct his ministry.

Miller has received support from several churches in the United States for many years (primarily from churches in Georgia, Louisiana, Virginia, and West Virginia with smaller bases of support in Ohio, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Illinois), but support is declining even though his needs have increased.

Connections in the States weakened over time. Miller could either be at work in Colombia or in the United States on furlough, speaking to the churches that support him. As he explained, “I have friends in the states, but because I have been living overseas for so long, I don’t have the same, deep, intimate relationships with people that I used to have.” He went on to explain that last time he attended his home church—the church he attended as a child—hardly anyone recognized him. He was asked, “Is this your first time visiting?” multiple times on the day he came to speak. He concluded, “If your home church forgot who you are, it’s not good.”

A NEW CALLING

When his wife had medical issues, the Millers met medical professionals with whom they otherwise would not regularly interact. They found that though they led a number of these professionals to Christ, these professionals had a hard time interfacing with the impoverished at his refugee church. Professional men and women were reluctant to go to the sketchier parts of the city.

Miller had worked with street kids since he first came to Colombia, but now he saw a disconnect between the local residents and the poor of the city. He asked God, “How can we create a local community of believers who will minister to the poor and oppressed?”

In 2014, Miller says he felt called to a new ministry. As he explained:

In September, God gave us a vision to reach the influential so they would use their influence in Christ to impact the city at large. When I told my boss about the new vision he said he only had a vision for the impoverished. He had no desire to help anyone else.

After wrestling with this new call, he left the Open Arms Foundation and began Global Transformation Ministries. He assembled a new board in November 2014, so GTM would become an official entity. They conducted their first church service at Iglesia Transformacion Global in March 2015.

The girls’ home closed a year later. The founder of Open Arms was getting older, and he was seeking to make things easier, so he downsized the ministry after Miller left. Now he is only running the original boys program and two church plants.

Nevertheless, Miller was excited about his new direction in ministry. “In March of 2015,” he said, “we held our first church service with 20 professionals that God put in our path. That church plant now has 120 members and another 30 people on the fence trying to make their decision to follow Jesus.”

Miller continued to expand. In 2016, he started sexual abuse prevention programs and English-language programs in the local schools. Soon after, he also started a pastoral association for the churches in the area.

Miller has been very successful in building one ministry after another. Nevertheless, something was nagging at him. He started his church with a vision for local residents to minister to those less fortunate. They were actively engaging their community, but because the Open Arms Foundation closed the girls’ home, Miller felt a pressing need to open a new home for girls.

These girls were in desperate situations. They were homeless. Nearly all were on drugs and most turned to prostitution in order to make ends meet. A number were pregnant and they had nowhere to go and no one who loved them.

FUNDING THE NEW MINISTRY

The girls’ home would be expensive, but Miller believed that, “if God is in it, it will grow.” He echoed the words of the pioneering Missionary to China, J. Hudson

Taylor, who said that, “God's work done in God's way will never lack God's provision” (Taylor, 2012, p. 480)

Yet, Miller also knew that God wouldn't magically rain money from heaven. He would use other human beings to carry out His work. He saw it happen in the building of the girls' home.

He needed roughly \$200,000 US to build the home. He was only about \$10,000 into the fundraising process when a woman from Virginia Beach contacted him out of the blue and asked if he needed money for the girls' home. He started to ask for \$50 or \$100. She said she felt led to give \$150,000. Another church committed to give a quarter for every dollar that he raised. The girls' home was completed shortly thereafter.

Miller needed another stream of revenue to fund ongoing operations for the Girls' home, but he didn't know what he would do. He had always brought Colombian coffee to his friends in the US as gifts, but in 2013 he tried selling it for the first time.

“I honestly did not drink coffee and didn't know coffee,” he said. “I just wanted to make the most amount of profit. So when I visited the US, I brought the cheapest coffee ever and even sold a little bit.”

The cheapest coffee did not sell very well, but this sparked a thought in Miller's imagination. What if coffee could be used to fund his ministries?

Reflecting on his financial challenges, he said,

We used to have a child sponsorship program in Open Arms but as of about seven years ago when you presented to churches it was harder to get people to commit to a monthly donation. Crazy enough, they will commit to buy coffee each month to help the girls' home pretty easy, but they won't commit for a monthly donation.

By December 2017, building the girls' home became Miller's primary focus for fundraising, but funding was going to be a challenge. As he recalled,

We started promoting the girls' home and started selling really good coffee in the states. Our children from the school's ministry colored the bags and we promoted the coffee as the Colombians and Americans coming together to help build our girls' home. Every bag would put a brick on our home. Initially, the coffee was going to be the means to fund the construction. You know the rest of the story. Midway through 2018, we changed the flavor of the coffee once again and people fell more in love with the coffee! Then, in

December of 2018, I selected coffee that was darker roasted and even more people fell in love with coffee and that is the flavor that we have stuck with.

Miller had been product testing for some time. “On a side note,” he commented, “overall people from the South like their coffee smooth and the people from the North like it bitter.”

EXPANDING THE NEW MINISTRY

2018 was a big year. The girls’ home was being built. His new church plant, comprised mostly of professionals from all backgrounds mixed with common, hard-working people were side-by-side, ministering to the poor. Miller would go out on the streets to minister and over time, more and more of his congregants—mostly business people—began to join him. He was getting back to his roots and bringing his new congregation with him.

That same year, he completed a D.Min in theology. It had been a banner year and the future was promising.

In 2019, Miller opened Casa Esther. It means Esther’s home, named for Queen Esther in the Bible. Just as Esther was prepared for a year before being taken before the king (Esther 2:12; Esther 4:14), so these girls would be prepared for a productive life while they were in the home.

Casa Esther can accommodate about a dozen girls. This home has provided refuge for 10 young mothers. While they are at Esther’s Home, the girls learn a skill such as industrial sewing, cosmetology, and basic computer literacy so that they have the ability to support themselves. Miller is proud of the five that have graduated so far.

In addition, they have helped another 20 young mothers that didn’t need housing but needed assistance to deliver their babies. More importantly, his church members have been truly involved in the mother’s home, as have another 40 volunteers that are not part of the church.

There was only one downside; there was more need than money to support it. Presently, it costs about \$13.40 US to house and feed one girl each day. That is about \$400 US per month. He has been able to house six girls, but he has room at Casa Esther for 12 girls.

THE COFFEE

Miller has been selling Colombian coffee for about a year in order to fund Casa Esther. Miller’s coffee is not cheap; it costs about the same as Starbucks, but it is

great coffee, winning an award for coffee in Colombia. More importantly, the proceeds go to a great cause.

Miller calculated that, until recently, his coffee sales have brought in \$1,200 per month in profit—enough to fully fund three girls.

His supply chain was clever, and almost comical. He sent roasted coffee beans back to the United States with short-term missionary workers who come to work in one of his ministries. They carry 50 pounds of coffee in addition to their own baggage like drug mules—but without drugs—and for a worthy cause. Moreover, the short-term missionaries usually picked up any fees related to the extra baggage fares.

Normally, a short-term missions team has at least ten members and Miller will send back at least ten pieces of coffee luggage. These short-term missions teams would come to work with Miller in a variety of capacities including:

- Three medical clinics in impoverished communities in Medellin helping the homeless people and Venezuelan refugees
- One evangelism team to impact the streets, neighborhoods, and local schools
- Five teams to do work projects at the girls' home, conducting Vacation Bible Schools (VBS) in local schools, and training and teaching the girls and staff

The margins of this volunteer-subsidized supply-chain are fabulous. It costs Miller \$2.25 per half-pound bag to get the ground beans from the local coffee farmer. He then sells a minimum order of five half-pound bags for \$10.00 a piece for a total of \$50 (yielding \$38.75 in profit for the girls' home).

Presently he has six girls living in Casa Esther but he has the capacity to house twelve girls without having to build an addition to the home. About 70 percent of his funding for Casa Esther comes directly from coffee sales and *all* coffee sales are earmarked for the girls' home.

Miller's marketing processes are elementary. Every so often, he will ask his Facebook friends "Who wants more coffee?" (see Exhibits 1 and 2) and if anyone replies he will contact the closest volunteer distributor at one of his supporting churches and tell them how many bags to send and where to send it.

He has few operational controls. He is relying completely on his volunteers for financial integrity and he does not know how much coffee he has in inventory at any given time.

Of course, no one would expect Miller to know how to run, set up, and manage an international supply-chain. He has a seminary degree. He is a social entrepreneur; he is more concerned with rescuing those in danger than creating business systems. But these business systems can potentially help him help others, and helping others is what motivates Miller.

THE END TIMES

COVID-19 changed everything. In March, the COVID pandemic hit Colombia as hard as it hit other countries. The country was on lockdown for all but the most basic interactions. The church could only meet irregularly and when it could meet, only at 25% capacity.

For ten months, international travel was prohibited. While eight teams signed up to travel to Colombia in 2020, none of them came after the COVID lock-down.

Miller's unique coffee supply-chain is broken. In reality, it was always tenuous, but now he has 500 bags of coffee just sitting around with no one to bring them back to the United States. Shipping or mailing them is cost-prohibitive. Much of the profit would be consumed by transportation costs, and it takes far too long. He has sold the coffee to neighbors in Medellin, but locally he only makes a dollar per bag instead of \$7.75 per bag.

Miller may have struck gold with his coffee sales concept, but he has little idea how to set up a proper structure in order to sell his coffee efficiently. He has found himself in a catch-22. He knows that he can sell the coffee in order to fund the ministry, but selling the coffee is taking too much of his time. It is taking him away from his actual ministry and there are only so many hours in the day. On the other hand, if he sends the coffee through the mail, he barely generates profit. He needs an efficient system but he does not know where to start. What should he do?

References

Taylor, H. (2012). *The story of the China Inland Mission*. (Vol. 2). Forgotten books.

EXHIBIT 1



EXHIBIT 2



Brian Miller

November 4, 2019 · 🧑🏿🧑🏿

I have the best tasting coffee in the world.... when we drink our coffee we have the satisfaction knowing all profits go to starting and running our crisis pregnancy home. Who wants to order 5 bags of our organic colombian dark roast coffee? Only \$10 a bag...



You and 6 others

3 Comments

EXHIBIT 3

