

**“My life should count for something;”
Finishers use experience to serve the Lord**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

LAM News Service

Miami, FL (LAMNS)--“Forty is a bit late to be starting a second language,” jokes LAM missionary Gary Shogren, “It took me a good year to learn how to ‘trill’ my r’s!”

Learning a new language may be a special challenge for missionaries who are called to the field later in life, but there are many rewards that compensate for that struggle. “I arrived with a number of years of experience already behind me and my PhD long completed,” reflects Gary who teaches Biblical studies at the LAM-related ESEPA seminary in San Jose, Costa Rica.

Gary’s reaction is typical of many who are part of the “Finishers,” a growing phenomenon among U.S. mission agencies that encourages adults 40 and over to consider missionary service as a second or third career.

Finishers bring years of training and experience to service on the mission field. “We will be the healthiest and best educated generation of empty-nesters ever,” says Nelson Malwitz, Director of the Connecticut-based Finishers Project. “This generation is skilled and resourced with a multitude of talents. We can either give them to Jesus to lay up in Heaven or lose them.”

While listing separation from children and grandchildren and the struggle with language as major problems, most Finishers are enthusiastic about what the change in their focus and life has meant to them. “The job that I was doing was interesting and important, but it had no eternal value,” says Pat Talbot, a missionary now stationed in Gibraltar with HCJB World Radio. “When I became a Christian, I wanted my life to count for something in God’s economy.” Pat was Distributor Sales Manager for Inco Alloys International, Inc., before moving to Ecuador with his mission.

Charlie Burt, an LAM missionary working with street children in Tijuana, Mexico, agrees. “I had the sense that I wanted to be in on what God was doing. I wanted my life to count for something bigger than my own career.” Charlie, from Minneapolis, Minnesota, served in the military for three years and then worked as a mechanical drafter with Seagate Technology for 24 years.

The move to the mission field in a person’s 40’s or 50’s often comes long after a commitment was made to missionary service. “Shortly after I became a Christian (in my 20’s) I was introduced to missions,” remembers Sandy Burt. “When I heard missionaries talk, I knew that I wanted to do that. I felt that was what God was calling me to, but I felt it would happen when my children were older.”

For some, the reasons for a delay are economic. While LAMer Carol Morton says she sensed God’s call to mission work when she was a child, she didn’t act on it until she was

52. “I was caught up in the world of education, money, family,” she says. But later, after marrying husband Chuck in 1993, she says, “I felt it was time to join God’s work. I was disenchanted with power and wealth and the procurement of it.”

Others say they felt no rush. Gary Shogren served as a pastor and as a seminary professor for 11 years before signing up for formal missionary service. “I’m convinced that the delay was not of my doing, but of the Lord’s direction. A former pastor told me long ago that it was a good idea to gain some broad experience in ministry before going out as a missionary.”

Still others just didn’t make a Christian commitment until later in life. Reflecting on his wife’s acceptance of the Lord in her 20’s, Charlie Burt jokes, “When I was in my twenties, I *was* the mission field.”

Making the decision to leave family and friends and what is familiar is quite difficult. “It is one thing applying to become missionaries,” says Carol Morton’s husband, Chuck. “It is quite another to actually receive the call and make the decision to give up two very high paying jobs, a very comfortable lifestyle and consider moving far away from one’s children and grandchildren.” Carol was the Administrator for a large law firm and Chuck was the Vice President and Manager for a large high-tech corporation in New Orleans where he had worked for 17 years. “But, we both came to the conclusion that if this was what God wanted us to do, then we must go and He would provide for our needs and deal with our feelings regarding leaving and missing our family.”

Family issues are important. “We did not consider the impact that grandchildren would have on us,” reflects Charlie Burt. “Not being near our family is by far the hardest thing for us.”

Pat Talbot agrees that being so far from family is a disadvantage, however there are other benefits to serving as a missionary. “Most people would say that I have given up a high paying job and a secure home, but we have gained so much,” he says. “I can understand why men and women my age (65) don’t leave their home and community; it is tough. But God asks it of me, so I trust.

“The greatest blessing is the comfort of knowing this is the Lord’s will for our lives and we are doing His will,” says Brent Garzelli who is raising support to serve in Costa Rica with LAM after what he calls a 22-year process. “Theologically and pragmatically, we have learned that there is no word “retirement” in God’s dictionary. I want to serve the Lord until the day He takes me home.”

The Latin America Mission works in partnership with churches and Christian agencies throughout Latin America and supports missionaries and projects in many Latin countries as well as in Spain. LAM is seeking to place new missionaries throughout the region. The U.S. headquarters can be reached at Latin America Mission, Box 52-7900, Miami, FL 33152, by e-mail at info@lam.org, or by calling 1-800-275-8410. The mission’s web site

may be found at <http://www.lam.org>. LAM's Canadian office is at 3075 Ridgeway Drive, Unit 14, Mississauga, ON L5L 5M6.

Related web sites

www.lam.org

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SIDEBAR

“Finishers have the heart to serve,” says Guillermo Novoa, an LAM missionary who recently attended a Finisher’s conference.

Guillermo was referring to the aspiration of many people over 40 to serve the Lord with their skills and experiences. That desire has been formally incorporated into the work of a nation-wide organization called The Finishers (www.finishers.org) that works with older adults who want to complete their careers working for the Lord.

“Finishers bring a mature background in Christ, a firm financial footing (80% have pensions or savings and do not need to raise support), experience in ministry and professional skills to their desire for service,” Guillermo reports. “Not only that, they are ‘empty nesters,’ so the issue of schooling and relocating children is not important.”

By far, experts are finding that Finishers want most to work with Children-at-Risk, Guillermo says. Following that, older adults are seeking positions in administration, medical fields and agricultural development projects, teaching the Bible, opportunities to use technology skills and teaching in missionary schools.

The following is just a sample of the many positions available for Finishers with LAM:

- Church planting in Brazil
- Strategic Planner in Honduras
- Children’s Workers, Colombia, Perú, Ecuador, Venezuela, Guatemala, México
- Administrator for a Children’s home in Mexico
- House Mother in Mexico
- Auto mechanic, Electrician, Carpenter in Colombia
- Missionary Kid’s teacher in Costa Rica, Colombia and Mexico (English speaking)
- ESL Teacher in Colombia, Peru
- Maintenance Director for Mexican camp
- Seminary Professor, many locations
- Teaching handcrafts to women in Costa Rica
- Librarian in Argentina
- Secretary in Venezuela, Mexico, Spain
- Grant Writer, California
- Graphic Designer, Mexico

- Construction Superintendent at a Children's home in Mexico (short or long-term)
- Nurse, Costa Rica, Venezuela

For information on Missionary service, write to Latin America Mission, Box 52-7900, Miami, FL 33152 or to info@lam.org.

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