

The Market and Missions

written by Bob Lupton; August 2002

This article exemplifies the potential for the integration of business and missions in a profitable, self-sustaining company that generates more resources for Kingdom work, while building the Kingdom within its operations. Bill is one of our developing partners at EC Institute.

Bill Mallory is a long-time friend and businessman. He built a successful marketing company which supplied Pier One-type home furnishings to retail outlets all over the U.S. For years he traveled throughout the Pacific rim negotiating contracts with local manufacturers in the Philippines, Thailand, China and points in between. He eventually decided that he could better control the supply and quality of products if he were to create his own manufacturing operation. He found a suitable location outside Cebu, a port town in one of the outlying Philippine Islands, where materials were accessible and labor was abundant and cheap. For the past six years, Bill and his wife Page have been living in Cebu, growing another successful business.

Bill Mallory is a man of principle. He has always tried to be ethical and just in his business dealings, a daunting challenge when dealing through middlemen in foreign cultures who broker the labor of peasants. With his own manufacturing operation, he could now ensure that workers were paid a fair wage for an honest day's work. He was delighted with the eagerness of his new workforce. They learned quickly and seemed genuinely grateful to have stable employment. Somewhat baffling, however, was their rate of absenteeism. Without notice and with distressing frequency, workers would not show up for work, sometimes for days at a time – a problem that wreaked havoc on his production schedule.

It was his wife, Page, as she monitored daily production activities, who first picked up on telltale symptoms that the workers were attempting to conceal - profuse sweating, pallid skin tone, uncontrollable shivering. A physician in Cebu informed Page that their meager diet of rice and fish, devoid of needed nutrients from fruits, vegetables and milk products, was leaving them vulnerable to a host of diseases. Many were coming to work sick, pushing themselves to the point of collapse, fearful that they might lose their precious jobs. A daily dose of multiple vitamins would prevent much of

their illness but even such rudimentary health care was inaccessible.

This was obviously an obstacle that a businessman could overcome. A deal with a pharmaceutical company to ship wholesale quantities of vitamins could supply one pill per day per worker at mere pennies per week, an expense easily absorbed into the cost of production. It was Bill's first attempt to provide health care for his workers. Page, like a concerned mother, began greeting employees as they arrived at work to offer them their daily pill. Absenteeism dropped dramatically. Bill reflects: Two years ago we started giving everyone that wanted them a vitamin/mineral pill daily. These are the ones that provide daily requirements of all the vitamins and minerals. We started by bringing them over in our bags but have since found ways to include them in sea freight shipments. Most of the workers take them and the factory doctor says he has seen a marked reduction in colds, respiratory illnesses, and high blood pressure in these two years.

Vitamins, as beneficial as they were, proved no remedy for the more serious diseases that sometimes attacked workers. With a growing confidence in the benevolence of the company owners, workers became more willing to tell Page when they were having a problem. Bill expresses it this way: Page roams the factory many times a day keeping track of orders and either she sees a worker with a problem or they come to her. She gives them money to see a doctor and when they bring back a prescription, she gives them money for the medicine. The amounts are small but the results big. For example she saw a fellow who looked pale and was having chills so she sent him to the doctor. He returned to say he had typhoid fever so she gave him money for medicine and made arrangements with his cousin to stay with him while sick. She also made arrangements for him to receive his pay. A few weeks later he returned and told her she saved his life, and she probably did. The cost for doctor and medicine was around \$50. She probably helps one or two a week. The cost is minimal but the results are major and the personal rewards to us are priceless.

Bill Mallory is a missionary. Not the traditional kind of missionary who packs his Bible, books and clothes in shipping barrels and flies off to an uncivilized land to preach the Gospel to un-reached tribes. Bill has backed into a new

paradigm for missions, a model far more holistic in scope and far-reaching in impact than contemporary mission practice, and one that costs far less than the average \$100,000 per year that US mission agencies spend to send one family abroad. As a Christian, Bill is concerned about far more than the profitability of his company and the attendant health of his workforce. Each one of his 400 workers has a name, a unique personality, and a purpose designed by the Creator. He realizes that apart from a personal encounter with the God who loves them, they will not know the fulfillment they were created to enjoy. So Bill has identified local believers, respected among their people, who have giftedness in teaching. He has supplied them with Bibles and Christian literature in their native tongue, encouraged them to begin Bible studies, and even funded the establishment of a church and an organizing pastor's salary. Both Bill and Page have done some teaching and worship-leading themselves but prefer to support indigenous leadership.

For years I have listened to speakers at missions conferences tell moving stories about people in distant lands who are longing to hear the life-changing message of the Gospel. And who could argue against proclaiming the Good News? But demonstrating the Good News through financial investment, sound business practice, ethical treatment of workers, and compassionate care for the sick has both eternal as well as temporal benefits that the spoken word alone is unlikely to yield. In Bill's words: Without the factory bringing in money, we couldn't be nearly as much help to these 400 workers and their families. They wouldn't be getting the Saturday morning Bible study, the vitamin/minerals, or the stability in their lives that lead to all of them becoming more mature. Men marry the women they have been living with, children are being sent to school, homes are being built, debts are being paid, bicycles and motorbikes are being bought, and everyone walks a little taller.

Leave it to a matter-of-fact businessperson to notice the inefficiencies and ineffectiveness of well-intentioned programs that unexamined tradition has perpetuated. Leave it to a pragmatic entrepreneur to devise solutions that create dignity-producing employment, enhance community well being, and ignite spiritual rebirth - and all the while making a decent living for himself. "Lead on, Bill!"