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STORM Co: An introduction to adventure in service

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Abstract

STORM Company is a short-term mission adventure. It is based on five foundations which present a radical example of Christianity in action. STORM Co teams are trained for service. They enter a community and ask for a place to stay and a job to do. Team members volunteer their own time and finance; they commit to strict discipline and hard work. Their goal is to live out the legacy of service modelled by Jesus Christ.

The story

In 1992, a group of senior high school students from Brisbane, Australia, spoke of 'doing something' with their faith. They didn't have enough money or time to prepare for an overseas mission trip, but they wanted to do something adventurous for God. They were dedicated to serving Jesus and inspired

by the Holy Spirit, but when they looked around they noticed that they were doing nothing practical to express their faith. Their chaplain felt the same. He called them 'fat Christians; fed to the point of bursting with Christianity, but not 'doing' anything to make it real.

So together they came up with a simple concept—to go to a small town somewhere in the outback and see what they could do to help out, practically and spiritually. Over the phone the pastor, in Moree (NSW), offered a place to stay. So they saved up some money, prepared some games, drama and music, loaded up the cars and drove west, calling themselves the 'SWAMP team' (Students with a Mission and Purpose). The Swamp team spent ten busy days meeting adults and children, cooking, performing and helping people in whatever they could find to do. They camped

1 STORM Co
building reno-
vation project
[Photo: Mark Craig]

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together in a church hall, and the group bonded closely. It was an adventure and it was fun. But Moree was outside of the church conference boundaries and the team couldn't get funding to go back there. Lawrens Adair, a veteran 'outback missionary' and president of the Adventist Aviation Association (AAA), recognised the spirit of service and adventure in these young people. He convinced them to go to a place where there was no SDA church, but where there was work to do. The town was Charleville, Qld, and this time the team wanted a new name. They liked the image of a storm refreshing the drought-stricken outback. So they called themselves 'STORM Company' and thought of an acronym—Service To Others Really Matters. The year was 1993.

Those first trips to Charleville began with community service projects done in cooperation with the city council. The local social services organisation needed help with vacation care, so the team put together a children's program for the mornings. The Salvation Army needed help with Sunday school, so the team was there too. From the local Scout group to the nursing home, to the prison camp, to the Uniting Church, the STORM Co team kept asking what was needed and kept finding things to do.

The community loved STORM Co. The teams went home changed and couldn't wait to go out again. Conference Youth Director Mel Lemke caught the vision of what was happening, and organised a trip to an aboriginal community. Other outback towns were added as young people told their stories, and teams multiplied. David Jack caught the vision and provided groundwork for STORM Co to work under the Adcare banner in Queensland.

Over the years, many of those early STORM Co team members moved to other places, and some of the leaders have been transferred to different positions. They took with them the adventure concept and the name. And STORM Co teams started working all over Australia and New Zealand.

In 1999, the South Pacific Division (SPD) responded to the grass roots growth of STORM Company. The SPD voted to form a stand-alone committee made up of interest holders from various departments to support the STORM Co movement in Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific. Thanks to the men and women who serve on that committee and to influential leaders in ministry areas, STORM Co teams are being recognised and supported.

The adventure continues.

Rationale

The first angel's message

The scriptural basis for the Adventist message is

found in Revelation 14:6-12 (The messages of the three angels). The message of the first angel (14:6) is to take the Gospel to the world. This is the first work of Christendom, to proclaim the message of Jesus by living it. Jesus himself gave the illustration of service to others as the identifying feature of his Kingdom. (See Matthew 25:31-45)

Christians are called to evangelism, but there must be a planting before there is a harvest. STORM Co is the initiative of a church prepared to reach beyond the 'castle walls' in order to build bridges to those around. It is a 'seed planting' ministry. It is the building of relationships through which the very life of Jesus can be seen in action.

STORM Co will build bridges and plant seeds. The harvest can follow, but it will be the work of another. STORM Co must retain an attitude of service without agenda, expectation, or limits. It is the unconditional display of the gospel of Jesus in action.

Rain in the storm

The name 'Storm' was chosen as a symbol of that which brings relief to a parched land. Storm clouds carry rain that refreshes communities and produces new life. Everyone knows when a storm arrives.

It is the intention of the STORM Co team to be like a refreshing storm.

Scripturally, rain represents the Holy Spirit, which is God's presence in people. God has rained down his love to all people and the act of the Christian is to be that rain to others (See Deut. 32:1-2, Isa. 45:8). God will use whatever it takes to communicate his word to this earth. STORM Co is to be used to plant the seed, and to bring refreshing rain that will allow it to grow (See Isa. 55:10-11).

When a trip fulfills the symbolism represented in the name 'STORM', the result is a true 'Adventure in Service'.

Mission statement

STORM Co's mission is to send teams of trained young people to work for, learn from, and encourage individual communities, sharing God's love by building bridges to all peoples through an adventure, in service to others.

The fulfillment of the mission statement is dependent upon five foundations. Each foundation statement expresses a characteristic of a STORM Co team, which is essential to a STORM Co mission trip.

In isolation, each foundation is nothing new or surprising. These principles are found in many areas of service. However, combined together, they form a radical approach to mission which challenges traditional religious activity. Furthermore, these principles form the basis for a 'servant' model of

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leadership, which is inherent in the development of STORM Co teams.

Foundations

1. No agenda—listen

To listen, really listen to another person, is the foundation of a relationship. We begin to show real love when we can respect another enough to listen to who they are. Then, perhaps, we can offer something that they need.

STORM Co teams enter a community with the express purpose of building a relationship with that community. A team will go first to listen, and then to serve.

‘Pre-trip’ contact and negotiation with the community to determine what *they* want and need is an essential part of a STORM Co trip. The concept of an adventure in discovering and meeting the needs of others embodies the essence of STORM Company. This means that there can be no ‘hidden agenda’. We cannot prescribe a program or a service project that will meet the needs of all people. Each community is different, as is each individual. A STORM Co team is committed to seek and understand the unique history, culture, and needs of a community. They then match the skills and resources of the team to the identified needs, in order to serve.

This attitude is modelled after the ministry of Jesus who followed the guidance of His Heavenly Father. As he travelled, Jesus would arrive at a place and first meet the needs of the people, whatever they were.

The Apostle John tells of two encounters—one with Nicodemus and one with the Woman at the Well (John 3; 4). He treated each person differently,

because he knew each particular need.

Because a team enters a community with this attitude of ‘no agenda’, and endeavours to reach all areas of the community, the STORM Co trip becomes an adventure. By its very nature, the trip cannot be predictable. This attitude of being receptive to the needs of the community and to the direction of God sets this adventure apart as a radical mission concept.

2. No expectations—serve

STORM Co teams commit to service. They will work for a community and learn from them. Their goal is to *serve* without compensation. When a team serves the community, they show that they are serious about their mission. A STORM Co team will work for a community using whatever gifts and resources they have available.

A STORM Co team will also seek to *learn* from the community. The cultural exchange and life experience that team members gain for themselves is a valuable part of the STORM Co trip. By learning to listen and serve, team members learn some of the most valuable secrets of life. Jesus turned the world upside down with His radical concept of servant leadership. The service of a STORM Co team in the community is an attempt to follow in His footsteps.

‘No expectations’ also means that teams do not seek to ‘convert’ or to gain repayment for any STORM Co activity. This radical concept sets STORM Co apart from many church or religious endeavours. The concept of ‘no expectations’ may seem difficult for us as Christians who have been given a commission to ‘*go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them ...*’ (Matt. 28:19-20). However, STORM Co teams live that commission

“Everyone knows when a storm arrives”

[Photography: Mark Craig]



by pointing people to Christian resources already available in their community.

In STORM Co, all evangelism is on a personal level. Team members are encouraged to share their testimony, and people who experience a conversion are guided toward a community church family of their choice—not the STORM Co team, or one specific denomination over another.

3. No walls—encourage

Jesus cautioned us about creating ‘walls’ by judging the experience of another follower of Christ. We must remain true to the message given to us, and at the same time support our brothers and sisters in faith.

‘Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand’ (Matthew 12:25).

STORM Co teams are committed to support Christianity above denominational barriers. They have a mandate to encourage others in their walk with God.

Also, because STORM Co is a bridge building ministry, a vital goal of the team is to support the work of all Christian groups within the community. It is the responsibility of the STORM Co team to visit these groups in order to encourage them in their ministry. STORM Co will seek to find common ground with all those who acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus Christ. There must be no ‘dividing walls’ for a STORM Co team that intends to be spiritual refreshment to the community it visits.

Encouragement to local Christians

This is perhaps one of the more ‘radical’ aspects of STORM Co. There will almost always be a group of Christians within a community, and often there are many denominations. The commitment to encourage local Christians has more value to the STORM Co trip than simply a ‘pat on the back’ for the local churches. The first question many in the community will ask (even if it is only in their minds) is: ‘What do they want?’ If STORM Co is identified with a particular local church, then regardless of the true intent of the team, the question will already be answered in many minds. It is important that a STORM Co team be committed to building bridges to the *whole* community. When the ‘unchurched’ members of the community see that the team can rise above the passionate boundaries of denomination, then respect is gained in the wider community.

When a STORM Co team enters a community, one of the significant impacts is that team members become ‘role models’ for the children and youth of the community. When team members are seen

supporting and participating in the activities of local church groups, then the image of that church group tends to be raised in the minds of the children, and there is potential for more participation.

Just a note of caution about ‘imposing’ upon a church group: Remember that denominational barriers can be very sensitive issues. Ask permission before you visit a meeting, and treat any invitation to participate as a privilege. The worship of Christian groups must be treated with the utmost respect.

4. No limits—return

STORM Co teams maintain a relationship with the community. Their goal is to *return* and be an outgoing, positive influence in the community. A STORM Co trip is not a ‘once only’ mission. The long-term success of STORM Co comes when a community recognises that a team is interested in, and committed to service by returning for another program the following year. A STORM Co team will not put a ‘limit’ on the friendship they build with that town, or on the potential of the Holy Spirit to bring about change in that place.

No one can guarantee what will happen in the future, and it would be wrong to build expectations that a team may not be able to fulfill. But, it is important for each team to ‘build bridges’ to as many areas of the community as possible, and to seek to maintain those bridges in the future.

Return trips to the community

The goal of building a relationship will begin on the very first exploratory visit to the community, but it won’t end with the first trip. Often towns are ‘overwhelmed’ by the first STORM Co team visit, but it is on the return trips and the consistent, on-going service attitude toward the town, that real friendships begin to form. This is the real value of STORM Co. To ‘win’ an entire community through unconditional service and ‘love’ in the most practical sense—this is a noble ambition, and one, which can be achieved only with persistent determination.

Once relationships are built, the community will remember the team and the impression that they made. Each trip will build upon the previous one, and team members who return will be amazed at the difference that those short periods of time spent in a community will make.

I have been amazed at the response of children when we return to a community! The most vivid example for me was in an aboriginal community in western Queensland. After leading initial trips to this town, I had been away from the town for more than two years; a friend and I dropped in on the community for a brief visit. It was night-time, and I had a different car than before. We drove once

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around the town first, and then parked near the town centre. Before we could get out of the car, there were half a dozen children waiting to ask us where the rest of the team was! They knew my name and wanted a STORM Co team back in town. I was astounded by their affection and the fond memories they had of previous teams' visits.

5. No fear—worship

STORM Co teams are built through *worship*. They will not be afraid to stand for their God as they serve in the Community. *‘Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship’* (Romans 12:1).

A STORM Co team is not afraid to declare its stand for the cause of Jesus Christ. The team will retain its focus through daily worship together—a time of dedication, commitment, team building and encouragement that provides the base for all that happens on a trip. When the foundation of a team is ‘established’ in worship, the action of the team becomes an extension of that relationship with God.

On every STORM Co trip, the Evil One will attack. Hardships, danger and conflict are to be expected. By its nature, the STORM Co trip will make contact with both the ‘best’ and the ‘worst’ areas of a community. This association exposes the team to every force found there. When those troublesome times come, the battle must be won by a team joined together in the worship of their God. There is no need to fear the trouble that Satan may cause. If God is for us, then who can be against us?

Team worship

STORM Co teams have their foundation and survival in group worship. It is often a powerful time when change takes place within the team. This time must not be compromised or rushed for any reason. The preparation of team worships should be thorough and taken as a privilege and serious responsibility. Evening worship is the opportunity for the team to be confronted with the reality of God’s power and presence for that particular time and place. It is crucial to team success.

In concluding this introduction to service adventure, here is some valuable parting advice: the success of STORM Co is not the ‘program’, or the technology, or the skills of the team. Success is embedded in an attitude; that radical attitude of Jesus that first seeks to understand a need, and then unselfishly gives in order to meet the need.

On a trip I took last year I heard a comment from a team member that impressed me. He said, ‘I

can’t believe that these kids watch everything I do. Imagine what our lives would be like if we lived with this intensity every day!’ TEACH

Endnote

* The Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) is an independent agency established for the specific purposes of individual and community development, as well as disaster relief in the developing world. As an internationally recognised non-government organisation, ADRA fulfills this primary directive of its charter without regard to ethnic, political, or religious association.

Postscript

Readers who wish to know more about STORM Co, and perhaps join in the service adventure, may read of the program’s impact on community and church, and learn how to plan, organise, and implement a STORM Co service adventure in the author’s book: Unser, K. (2001) *STORM Co guide book—adventure in service*. Wahroonga, NSW: South Pacific Division of the SDA Church.

1 Working on a building renovation project on a STORM Co trip

[Photography: Mark Craig]

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