

Missionaries Endure Jungle Training Program to Evangelize Unreached People Groups

Eighteen IMB missionaries and their kids watched with mixed emotions as the twin-prop plane took off from the jungle airstrip, headed back to the city.

As they stood surrounded by wide rivers and miles of dense Amazon rain forest on all sides, reality began to sink in. They were on their own.

The group trudged through mud and stifling heat, loaded down with children, suitcases and boxes of supplies, before arriving at the camp—a row of simple wooden cabins beside a river—that would be their home for the next month.

The missionaries—some new, some veterans—were the first group to arrive at IMB's new jungle training center, designed to help missionaries learn to live and work in tough rural places.

Donny Barger, an IMB missionary and trainer who helped start the camp, said the program will better prepare missionaries going to work among the nearly 230 unengaged, unreached people groups living in isolated places throughout the Americas. That's 230 people groups that are less than 2 percent evangelical Christian and who have no one seeking to reach them with the gospel.

"One of the things we hear most often from missionaries after they complete their first term is, 'I really wish someone would have helped me understand what it was really going to be like going into an indigenous area,'" Barger said. "And

sometimes [lack of preparation] causes you to make big mistakes with your people group that takes you a long time to get out of.”

As the older kids set off to explore their new surroundings, the confused adults began learning how to set up a home in the jungle, asking basic questions such as “Where will we sleep?” “Is the river safe to swim in?” “What is for dinner?”

The learning process had begun.

Going in blind

Before arriving, the trainees had been given very limited information about the upcoming experience. They didn’t know what they’d eat or what they’d live in. Cooking options, bathroom facilities, sleeping arrangements and clean water sources were all mysteries.

One trainee, Lisa Williams*, had an even more pressing concern as she gazed warily at the river flowing directly beside her cabin. With four children between the ages of 1 and 6, such close proximity to fast-moving water made her uneasy.

“I didn’t come in with a lot of expectations, because I didn’t know what to expect,” she said. “I didn’t know what our housing would be. I just had to be flexible and lower my expectations.”

Barger said going in unprepared was a planned part of the experience.

“If you tell them everything, it really isn’t as good a learning experience,” he explained. “Sometimes it’s good to not have all the answers and to think through how you’re going to respond. It’s good to let people discover that on their own.”

The tough stuff

For the next month, trainees lived in a closely packed community with few modern luxuries. There was no Internet or phone access. Generator-powered electricity was available only for a couple hours – most evenings. Food selection was limited to a hodge-podge of non-refrigerated goods from a small local store, accessible only by canoe every few days. Indoor running water was precious, and the nearby river served as the community bathtub, washing machine, food disposal and transportation route.

Despite the challenges, trainers emphasized that the goal was to teach, not torture.

For more than a decade, IMB missionary Jake Johnson* has lived in the Amazonian community where the camp was built. He and his wife, Tanya*, now use their expertise in jungle living to teach other missionaries how to thrive in difficult places.

“This is not about roughing it,” Johnson told the trainees when they arrived. “This is to help you and your family figure out what needs you’re going to have to live comfortably in a remote setting. It’s about figuring out what you’re going to do in this situation.

“All the things we do out here, we want you to be able to reproduce that where you go, and give you ideas on how to build things and do things that are going to make it easier on you.”

The trainees soon learned how to collect rainwater in barrels and pump it into their homes. They – and their children – also quickly discovered how to avoid the huge thorn trees that lurked beneath the muddy river water, waiting for a bare misplaced foot.

Meat was scarce and a friendly competition soon arose over who could catch the biggest piranha or wolf fish for dinner. Killing scorpions and tarantulas became routine, and it was understood that privacy and silence didn’t exist during waking

hours.

Learning what's important

While braving the environment, the missionaries attended sessions on sharing the Gospel with indigenous peoples. They also studied some of the most common obstacles missionaries face in rural cultures steeped in animism and witchcraft. Experienced missionaries gave tips on being a strong, godly family in isolated places.

The group practiced learning difficult, non-written languages. Participants learned to tell simple Bible stories to those who can't read, and each family developed evangelism plans for their specific people group.

Each day's schedule also included times for personal devotion, reflection and prayer.

"We're spending a lot of time focusing on personal devotions," Barger said. "While we have people in a close community with no electricity, no Internet or phone, no television or anything, we're able to disconnect them and give them some solitude."

Amidst the chaos of parenting four small children in the jungle, Williams was able to break away for some one-on-one time with God. She said this habit strengthened her spiritual life throughout the training.

"Probably my biggest takeaway from the [training] has been in my prayer life," she said. "I think that's probably the biggest thing –knowing that as we're leaving here and going to our people group, we need to be right with God. We need to be walking in the Spirit."

Over the course of four weeks, the trainees fell into a practiced, if not necessarily comfortable, jungle routine. While the first day saw a group of nervous newbies, the group

that sat by the airstrip a month later, joking about their unforgettable experience as they waited for their ride home, was dramatically different: They were more creative cooks, better fishermen and semi-professional bug-killers. They were experts in navigating muddy terrain by touch and flashlight. More importantly, they were better Bible-storytellers, language learners and prayer warriors with established plans for reaching their people group with the Gospel.

Discover some of the unreached people groups in the Americas and how you and your church can pray for them.

At this same remote location in the Amazon Basin, IMB leaders in the Americas will hold training sessions several times a year to prepare more missionaries for work among unreached people groups. To find out how you can be involved in reaching the lost in the Americas and across the globe, visit .

**Name changed*