

Going the Distance

Missionary Philip Smethurst believes God wants young adults to embrace the challenges of missionary adventure.

Philip Smethurst knew he was a man on a mission after his conversion as a teen in South Africa. The founder of Overland Missions, an apostolic ministry that resembles a Christian version of the TV show Survivor, wanted to be a missionary, but he was required at age 18 to serve in the military for two years.

As a vehicle commander over a mortar group, Smethurst fought in war-torn Angola, but he still longed to be involved in missions when his military service was over. But leaders of his full-gospel congregation shunned Smethurst's youthful exuberance, telling him he was too green.

Instead of being embittered, he submitted himself to the tutelage of Leon van Rooyen, a South African minister who led Smethurst to Christ. Smethurst shared with his mentor his desire to preach the gospel in southern and central Africa and beyond, with nothing more than a Bible, backpack and sleeping bag.

With van Rooyen's blessings, he sold nearly everything he owned for his first trip. He was 21 and had the equivalent of only about \$50 as he hitchhiked through three countries asking to speak at churches. Smethurst remembers being allowed to preach for a week at a church in Kariba, Zimbabwe, even though he didn't have a formal invitation.

"The church had just gone through a split," Smethurst, now 34, recalls. "By the end of the week, the church had come back together. I taught them who we are in Christ and the significance of redemption in our lives.

"They thanked me, hugged me and wept when I left. It reminded

me of the apostle Paul leaving the church leaders in Ephesus. I felt like I was in the book of Acts. My life had significance within the church structure and the purpose of God.”

Smethurst says the experience enabled him to see the potential in all young adults of the church. God also showed him a vision of the world turning on its axis and spoke to him from Psalms 2:8, which says, “Ask of Me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession” (NIV).

“Inheritance and possessions mean a lot to a young adult,” says Smethurst, who has never attended Bible school or seminary. “God solved the need for me to have possessions and inheritance. Possessions were now people, and inheritance was now the nations.”

Gary Montecalvo, 49, senior pastor of Word of Life Christian Church in Merritt Island, Florida, where Smethurst attends, says the young missionary has a “go anywhere, do anything attitude for the gospel.”

“He’s such an extreme visionary,” says Montecalvo, who has known Smethurst for eight years. Smethurst moved to the United States in the early 1990s.

“He goes beyond what most people think and do. You listen to him talk about Overland Missions, and you’ll say, ‘Where is this guy coming from?’

“But I believe he has the ability to instill that vision in young adults. In America, we’re so used to thinking within the box. Phil doesn’t limit himself to that.”

Leslie Leman, who traveled the world for two years with Smethurst when they both were 21-year-old itinerant preachers, says his friend “has what it takes to make a difference in modern missions” and is “a leader for this generation.”

"Philip is a 21st century example of African missionary David Livingstone, who he admires and often quotes," says Leman, 34, who owns an award-winning bed and breakfast inn in upstate New York. "He's such a go-getter that he doesn't mind going underneath an overland truck to fix an oil leak or meet with the president of a country and pray with his wife."

Leman, an Australia citizen who met Smethurst 12 years ago after completing Bible school, says Overland Missions is an extension of Smethurst's personality.

"He is an adventurer and a missionary," says Leman, who was best man in Smethurst's wedding. "He's not into big cities and bright lights. He's into going to the small villages and meeting the people who have not been ministered to. His attitude is a lot of people can't go to the big crusades. He realizes that we need to go to them with the gospel. We can't expect them to come to us."

Smethurst, though, says he wasn't interested in being married because he wanted to dedicate his life to missions work. However, that changed when in 1997 he met Sharon, the woman he would marry.

"I thought my life was too peculiar, but then I discovered she was also peculiar," Smethurst says. The two married in 1999. "She shared the same passion for missions and ministry. We're twins."

The couple had their first child in August. Their baby girl, Sahara, was born just weeks after Sharon, 32, returned from a five-week Overland Amazon expedition. They expect to make adjustments with the new family addition, but they don't see giving up God's call to send out "young apostles" to the nations.

"Our lives will change with the baby, but our purpose for the gospel can't change," says Philip, who expects to take their child down the Amazon River next summer for Overland's annual

journey into the region. "It won't mean less trips. It means we will have to buy more mosquito repellent because getting malaria is the main threat to a child in the Third World."