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Academia as Missions: Our Adventures in Romania

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Academia as Missions: Our Adventures in Romania

By Dr. Michael S. Jones,
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Many college students struggle to choose a major, to select a career path, to find their “calling.”¹ I was such a student. I became a Christian shortly before entering college and almost from the beginning had a desire to serve God vocationally. However, I didn’t know how I could best do so: Should I prepare for the pastorate, to be a missionary or evangelist, to become a teacher, or something else? As my studies progressed, several things gradually became clear, including that I was much better at teaching than preaching and that I had a strong interest in missions, which seemed (and seems) like the greatest need. How these two truths could be combined in ministry remained an unanswered question for quite some time.

My bachelor’s degree in church ministries was followed by a Master of Divinity and then an MA in philosophy. Finally I had found the subjects that I seemed best suited to study and teach: philosophy, theology, and the intersection of the two. Thus I enrolled in a PhD program in philosophy of religion. My career path was pointing toward academia – and I was largely satisfied with that. But what about missions? My burden for overseas ministry had not dissipated, but neither had the haze surrounding how an academic could also be a missionary.

It was during my PhD studies that God shined the light that began to cut through this fog. The seminary where I had earned my MDiv offered to me the opportunity to teach an intensive at their extension in Romania. My home church offered to help underwrite the cost of travel, so in the fall of 1998 I took my first missions trip and taught my first post-secondary class at the same time.



1. Here I am using the term “calling” in the popular sense of a vocation that makes good use of one’s gifts and talents and leads to a useful and fulfilling life rather than the more theological sense of a special message from God to enter into a specific field of work or ministry. With regard to the latter, while there are many examples in the Bible of people who received special revelation from God directing them to specific ministries, receiving such a “call” does not seem to be a prerequisite for entering the ministry. On the contrary, the New Testament seems to view engagement in ministry as the norm for Christians.

It was a wonderful experience. Academically it was very rewarding: I was very warmly received by my Romanian students, who were intensely interested in studying theology. Spiritually, I found the Romanian Christians to be very genuine, very committed, and very involved. Culturally I found that we had more in common than I expected, and yet there were enough significant differences to make the trip a fairly intense intercultural experience. Remnants of communism, the Romanian language, Eastern European food, and a significantly lower economic standard of living combined to ensure that I felt as if I was on the other side of the world.



I realized that I didn't need a special message from God to serve in a particular ministry or country – God was guiding me silently but effectively to a ministry for which I was well equipped and a need that no one else was filling. So I determined to make Romania my special ministry. I began by studying Romanian and researching Romania. I read about Romania's history, looked into Romanian theological trends, and began to research Romanian philosophers. Doing the latter I discovered Lucian Blaga, a fascinating but little-known philosopher who had been suppressed by the communist regime that took control of Romania after WWII.² I petitioned to write my PhD dissertation about Blaga, and (after much prayer on my part) the petition was approved. I returned to Romania the following summer to do preliminary research. Then I applied for a grant from the

2. For an introduction to Blaga, see <http://www.iep.utm.edu/lucian-blaga/>.

Fulbright Commission of the U.S. Department of State so that I could spend a year in Romania conducting dissertation research. God blessed and I received the grant.



The Fulbright grant enabled my family and me to live in Romania for a year, and then we used savings and a grant from my university to extend our stay another nine months. During this time I mastered the language, wrote much of my dissertation,³ taught courses at the state university where Blaga had taught (<http://www.ubbcluj.ro/en/>), and developed relationships with Romanian Christians. My wife and kids learned the language too, and my wife taught English at an orphanage.

Eventually we returned to the U.S. so that I could finish my PhD. Then I was hired to teach at Liberty University. That did not end our work in Romania, though – not by any means! We continue to support Romanian workers and missionaries, we fellowship with Romanians in Lynchburg and the Romanian students on campus, we travel to Romania for conferences and to teach intensives, and in 2014-15 God blessed us with a second Fulbright grant.

Thanks to this grant I was able to spend last year teaching philosophy at the flagship Romanian university in Bucharest, the capital.⁴ It was another great experience. I was invited to speak in universities all over the country, I collaborated with Romanian scholars, I spoke at conferences, and I published articles in Romanian journals. Meanwhile my wife was researching her EdD dissertation on the integration of Roma children into the Romanian public school system. We also worked in several churches, including the church that houses the seminary extension where I first

3. This dissertation has since been transformed into a book, *The Metaphysics of Religion: Lucian Blaga and Contemporary Philosophy* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 2006), <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781611473346/The-Metaphysics-of-Religion-Lucian-Blaga-and-Contemporary-Philosophy>.

4. The University of Bucharest (<http://www.unibuc.ro/e/>) was founded in 1864; it celebrated its 150th birthday while we were there. The Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Bucharest is by far the largest philosophy program in the country, having over 600 students and offering degrees from the undergraduate level up to the PhD (<http://filosofie.unibuc.ro/>). Our year teaching in Bucharest was also made possible by the support of Liberty University, which generously permitted me to take a year off from my work in Lynchburg while at the same time making up the difference between my usual salary and the amount provided by the Fulbright grant. In addition to teaching philosophy classes I was also working on translating one of Lucian Blaga's many volumes of philosophy into English.

taught theology and a church that is pastored by a student from my first theology class. We also formed strong relationships with American missionaries working in Romania.



Now we are working on a plan to return to Romania every summer to continue our work with those missionaries. Through LU Send⁵ we are organizing a three-week student trip that will run from May 20 through June 12. It will combine a three-credit general education requirement (THEO201) with ministry and intercultural experiences. This is one of the most exciting things that I've been involved with at LU. It perfectly combines academics and missions and will be a truly great experience for any LU student who is interested in having a taste of serving God overseas and who has not yet taken THEO201 (which is a required course for all students).

There are several lessons that the reader could take away from this short account of our experiences in Romania. The first is that if you have a strong desire to serve, God will honor that

5. [Http://www.liberty.edu/lusend/index.cfm?PID=32920](http://www.liberty.edu/lusend/index.cfm?PID=32920).

desire. Ask God to use you and guide you to where you can be used best – and in the meantime make sure that you are using the gifts that He has given to you right where you are.



The second lesson is that there are grant opportunities – like the Fulbright grant, but not limited to the Fulbright grant – that can help cover the cost of overseas travel, research, and education. For those specifically interested in the Fulbright program, more information can be found at www.cies.org. The chair of the Fulbright committee on our campus is Dr. Edna Udobong, eudobong3@liberty.edu.

The third lesson – if I may call it that – is that this summer there will be a very special opportunity to see Romania for yourself, guided by an LU professor and his wife, both of whom have lived and ministered in Romania. Here I'm talking about our three-week intensive/ministry trip this May. Mornings will be devoted to classes, afternoons will be spent working with Romanian churches, and weekends will be spent visiting castles and the like. If you'd like to know more about this opportunity, please write to me at msjones2@liberty.edu.

I wish every American could have the experience of living overseas. It is transformative! Our lives are richer in many ways due to our time in Romania. It has made us multi-cultural and multi-lingual, it has deepened us intellectually and spiritually, and it has opened more doors for ministry than we can possibly walk through!

