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# Reflections on the Missionary Scene in the 1980's

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*John Wallis*

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At the 1910 Edinburgh conference of missionary leaders, John Mott urged delegates to reach the world with the gospel 'in this our generation.' In 1980 a similar conference was convened. This time the initiative was largely from men like Ralph Winter of the US Centre for World Mission in Pasadena, California, and backed by the Mission Advance Research Centre, a division of World Vision.

The North American missionary scene was filled with references to unreached peoples or hidden peoples, groups still waiting to hear the gospel for the first time who were either distant geographically or remote demographically. There was a fresh call to go either to the outbacks or the ghettos. Overnight, groups like Frontiers led by Greg Livingstone were ablaze with the old pioneer spirit. British evangelical missionary leaders were conspicuous by their absence at this second Edinburgh conference. The North American fervour received a cool reception. There were some arguably good reasons for this, but there was also a measure of confusion about the British camp. Everyone agreed you can neither turn the clock back nor presume to go it alone in missionary endeavour in the 1980's. The purpose of world mission is the raising up of the church and, in most countries of the world, partnership with the national church is more fitting than proliferation of well-meaning, para-church organisations. But the issue bugging Ralph Winter and many others was the unequal distribution of Christian workers which had created a situation where a small minority were truly pioneering with the gospel. It was easy, of course, to justify the deployment of every individual missionary and to make a case for the need in their own situation.

The decade of the 80's has now passed and it is interesting that it concluded with an equally momentous missionary conference in Singapore, the **AD 2000 Consultation**. Once again the computers were in action and the data even more specific, focusing the possibility of completing the task of bringing the gospel to every people group by the end of the century. Once again there was an element of frustration with the supposed triumphalism of the platform and a sense of manipulation. This may have been a feature, but then we are all prone to do the same when given the platform.

The issue of the disparate distribution of workers and resources emerged again. Real sacrifices had to be accepted to change the drift of missionary endeavour. The missionary task was calling for fresh definition. What is the prime task of the missionary? What do we understand by apostleship? When is a missionary society no longer a missionary society? No-one, of course, is supposing that you can dismantle everything and start again. But when many in Africa, Asia and Latin America are just starting as part of a new emerging missions movement, so that

some talk of the third wave of missionary advance with tones of throwing off endemic Western paternalism, all the issues are up for grabs.

Noisily bubbling away in the background throughout the decade was neo-pentecostalism. This world of Christian fervour and expansion had a different vocabulary. The talk was all about renewal, charismata, kingdom, authority, signs and wonders. It spread like wildfire across the continents, as ideas are apt to do, thanks to the ease of communication and travel. An event in New York becomes a movement in Singapore after what seems like only days. This is our experience in the global village. It is no longer possible to live in a vacuum of ideas without catastrophic events overtaking the leadership. Witness the crumbling of communism in Eastern Europe. The neo-pentecostalism was immediately attractive to thousands of people and not all of it thanks to the Holy Spirit. The new phenomena were much discussed, and many Christians concluded that whether they were the 1st Century charismata or not, they were phenomena used by God as channels of blessing. After all, why should we suppose that our creator God should repeat himself? Is he not more likely to provide 20th century charismata for a 20th century church?

During the 1980's the two worlds began to interact both outside and inside the missionary societies. It was not without considerable stress, but there emerged a new theme that will tax mission leaders through the 1990's. It may even prove to be the cutting edge for the final thrust to the year 2000. That theme was the **kingdom of God**. Suddenly the teaching of Jesus rather than the teaching of Paul became the focus. Not that we were back in the old debate about whose teaching was more authentic. But Paul's missionary endeavours were now being viewed through the lenses of Jesus' kingdom teaching. Just how is a missionary meant to pioneer, after all? We thought we knew the answer to that long ago. Surely he was called to preach the gospel and demonstrate the love of God by acts of charity. But now we are surrounded by calls for power evangelism, signs and wonders, bringing in the kingdom with authority. The old George Eldon Ladd emphasis on justice and peace, concern for the poor and oppressed, suddenly marries the John Wimber emphasis on delivering the captives. In a world where poverty and oppression are still the lot of millions, the appeal to be part of a liberation movement is powerful. When convinced evangelicals like Dr Samuel Escobar do not write off Liberation Theology emphases, but rather challenge us to think through our response to the poor, in a brief decade evangelicals are having to decide all over again not only whether the missionary movement is for pioneers alone, but how those pioneers go to work for Jesus. How does the kingdom of God on earth come in? Perhaps there is more to it than we have supposed?

As if that is not enough, suddenly old-time missionaries discover that *missionary* is a dirty word. For one thing, more than 75% of the nations in our world will not hear of granting a missionary a visa. For another, there have been sufficient Western insensitivity and inability to acknowledge both the maturity of the churches overseas and the poverty of the churches in Western Europe, to make the invitations to come over and help us both fewer and more guarded. Add to that the dramatic change in European demography and the desire of many governments to

keep the peace by adopting an increasingly secular stance decrying proselytisation, and the missionary, especially the Christian missionary it seems, is *persona non grata*.

The end result is that missionary societies are less easily identified at the end of the 1980's, dropping from their titles all reference to *missionary* and even *Christian*, and presenting themselves more as service agencies. Workers now are usually professionals with good evangelistic skills up their sleeves. In reality of course no-one is fooled by this strategy, but most governments can live with the face-lift. It has, however, had the desired effect of turning missionary societies full circle, for many such professionals are among the most daring of pioneers in today's evangelistic outreach of the church. There is no denying its fruitfulness as stories from many countries provide eloquent testimony. The stories are too sensitive for print but they are guaranteed to inspire a fresh wave of pioneers going to the unreached and hidden peoples of our world. There is little doubt that the kingdom of God is coming among ethnic groups for years neglected. There is no doubt that in due season that kingdom will break surface with unexpected force to change the scene beyond all recognition.

Writing in 1990 it is easy to be euphoric but as a believer in a Sovereign God and with some knowledge of the persistent missionary endeavours and courageous witness of the church in Eastern Europe, the heaven has surely risen and overnight the prophecies of the Old Testament read more dramatically. Not that the church, of course, by its missionary outreach is seeking a kingdom that can be shaken but one that is unshakable. The 1980's have raised possibilities that are new yet as old as the Scriptures which, if grasped should ensure more extensive growth for the church worldwide in the 1990's. But I have a sneaking suspicion that evangelical Christians will not be mature enough to handle the tensions evident in the debates about pioneering, power-encountering, poor-honouring, and professional-ministering. I hope I am proved wrong, but change is just too stressful for some of us.

*After working with the Overseas Missionary Fellowship in Korea, the Rev John A Wallis became the UK Home Director of the mission. In December 1989 he moved to The Hague to become chaplain of the English American Episcopal Church there.*

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The *unreached* are the two billion who may never have heard of Jesus as Saviour, and are not within reach of Christians of their own people. There are some 2,000 peoples or nationalities in which there is not yet a vital, indigenous church movement. We find it helpful to think of them as belonging to smaller *people groups* which perceive themselves as having an affinity with each other (eg a common culture, language, home or occupation)... There are now about 12,000 such unreached people groups within the 2,000 larger peoples, so that the task is not impossible. Yet at present only 7% of all missionaries are engaged in this kind of outreach, while the remaining 93% are working in the already evangelized half of the world. If this imbalance is to be redressed, a strategic redeployment of personnel will be necessary.

*Manila Manifesto, para (11)*

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