

# Stories and Reflections: God's People in Mission



**Rob Weingartner**



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# HUMBLED



My first trip to Africa was in 1995. I traveled with a team representing the PC(USA) General Assembly Council in global partner consultations. We traveled to what was then Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo. My first lesson came quickly. I asked a colleague what time the meeting started, and he told me it started tomorrow. Everyone I asked said “Tomorrow.” What I came to understand was that it was important that everyone be present. Given the challenges of travel and weather and other circumstances, everyone knew that the right time to begin the meeting would be after the participants arrived. And that is when we met. I began to realize that I was in a culture where relationships are seen to be as significant as the work. In fact, one might say the relationships were the most important work. An African friend told me later, “You Americans have the clocks, but we have the time.”

I must confess that the meeting was frustrating for me. The identified needs of the African partners were great. At the same time, the budget of our denomination for supporting partners’ work was shrinking. Their churches were growing, but many of our churches were dying. It was hard for me to see how we could arrive at a good solution. We were trying to allow our partner church to share their priorities in a

context where everything seemed critical – need upon need. At one point Pastor Tshimunugu, the senior church leader, declared, “Why don’t you just tell us what you are willing to fund so we can know what to ask for?” Prayer and patient listening were the order of the day.

Getting to the second consultation was an adventure. First, there was a jam-packed flight from Kinshasa to Kananga, an official church welcome, and a big meal. We were right at the geographical heart of Africa, and I found my heart and my dreams lifted by the beautiful singing of choirs who raised their voices in praise to God throughout the night. Visiting several other church ministries at Kananga meant we got a late start towards the Conference Center at Lake Munkamba.

It was an eventful drive in our Land Cruisers. Two stops by soldiers, a flat tire, routes that were barely passable, and the most spectacular, if unkind, thunderstorm as we crossed rutted savannah, which left us stuck in the mud. One could tell the relative roles of the church leaders by who got out first to work on this problem. Finally, we all were out in the rain and mud. Thankfully, our lead vehicle realized something was wrong and returned to pull us out.

When we finally reached the camp, a 40-mile trip that took about six hours, I must admit that I was exhausted and a bit cranky. I wasn’t hungry, at least not for goat (which I’ve since grown to love), African chicken (once they hatch they never stop running), caterpillars, or the ubiquitous orange soda pop. I just asked permission to be shown to my bed. I was delighted that one of the missionaries had procured new mattresses and linens for the guests. I was less excited upon realizing this was the cabin in which a missionary some years before had encountered a 16-foot snake. Nevertheless, my head soon hit the pillow.

And then I heard it. There was shuffling outside of my window. Someone was leaning up against the outside of the cottage. I heard in muted tones whispers in a language I could not understand. The whispers and movement continued, and I am embarrassed to say that my imagination got the better of me. I was afraid, realizing that the others were too far down the lakeshore to hear me if I cried out.

I had been told that the nearest telephone was hundreds of miles away. Trust and fear played ping pong in my mind. Exhausted, I spoke a prayer something like this: “Lord, I think I’m here because you want me to be. I trust you to get me through the night and see me home. Amen.” I fell asleep.

I woke a bit after sunrise to the sight of beautiful Lake Munkamba. Boys were on the water in their dugout canoes fishing. Graceful palm trees punctuated the lakeshore. It was simply stunning. Behind the lake house where my bedroom was, I found a 10 x 10 square-foot cement block outbuilding and learned that the family of seven who were living there had fled from their home because of rebels who were terrorizing their region. They lost three other children along the way as they sought safety. And I learned that the sound that I had heard outside my window during the night was the father who had stayed awake to watch over me and to keep me safe. I don’t know whether I felt more chastened or humbled.

I had decided after visiting Zaire, I would travel to Kenya and Malawi, assuming that it would be my only trip to Africa. I returned from the trip deeply impressed by the pastors and church leaders, the church women and men, and others whom I met along the way. Pastors were often responsible for fifteen preaching points or more. Without romanticizing their lives or their faith, I had a profound sense these were people from whom I needed to learn about what it means to follow Jesus. And it became a passion of mine, trying to connect our churches here with the church around the world.

When The Outreach Foundation called upon me to serve the board and staff as executive director in 2002, I was ready to say yes. After eighteen years in this ministry, I am still learning from dear brothers and sisters in Christ in other cultures and contexts. I still often find myself chastened and humbled.

# LAST SUNDAY



Last Sunday, five times more Presbyterians worshiped in Korea than in the United States.

More Presbyterians worshiped in Ghana than in Scotland.

More Presbyterians gathered to worship in Mexico than in the United States.

The Presbyterian Church of East Africa opened four new worship sites.

Perhaps the most Presbyterian place in the world is Mizoram Synod in India, an Indian state east of Bangladesh. There are 1,100,000 people in the state of Mizoram and more than 600,000 are Presbyterians. This church goes back to a remarkable revival in Wales more than a century ago when churches in Wales sent missionaries around the world. The gospel took root among the Mizo people. It is telling that several years ago Mizo Christians went to Wales as missionaries.

By most counts, the church in China (including the registered and unregistered churches) is growing numerically faster than the church has ever grown at any time in any place. While Chinese Christians see themselves as a post-denominational church, many have deep Presbyterian roots.

Back in 1837, when the first Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions was established, 80% of the world's Christians lived in Europe and North America. Today, more than two-thirds live in Africa, South America, Asia, and Oceania.

Last Sunday, the most commonly used instrument in Christian worship was the drum.

The majority of the worship services around the world were led by a layman or a laywoman.

Andrew Walls, mission historian at the University of Edinburgh, writes, "Perhaps the most striking single feature of Christianity today is the fact that the church now looks more like that great multitude whom none can number, drawn from all tribes and kindreds, people and tongues, than ever before in its history."

It is easy to get discouraged about the church, particularly the church here in the West, yet what an exciting time it is to be alive receiving and bearing witness to the Gospel!

"Look at the nations, and see! Be astonished! Be astounded! For a work is being done in your days that you would not believe if you were told."

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Habakkuk 1:5

# A WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT



As I travel across the United States and share stories about the breathtaking growth of the church around the world, I am often asked the same question: “Why is the church growing in so many other places but not here?”

Several summers ago, I posed the first part of that question to a group of Presbyterian leaders in the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus. Mekane Yesus means “House of Jesus.” Sixty years ago the denomination had 50,000 members. Today, the EECMY, comprised of Presbyterian and Lutheran synods, has more than 9 million members. They are working together on a plan to share the Gospel with 30 million people and have formed an International Mission Society as they send missionaries to serve in other countries.

The Western Wollega Bethel Synod leaders pointed to ten reasons for their growth, explanations that I find to be very useful as I think about what it means to for us to be faithful in God’s mission. The first thing that they said was that it is a work of the Holy Spirit. “I can see that,” I said, “but what does that work look like in your congregations?” They shared these further thoughts with me.

“It is a work of the Holy Spirit!”

“People say to us, ‘Because you are poor, you pray a lot.’”

“We intentionally involve the youth in the life and mission of the church. When youth are equipped for ministry, they can reach their friends.”

“Many church members participate in our ministries.”

“We have suffered much persecution. Without it, we would have been more careless.”

“We hold to our motto of holistic service: evangelism, education, and health.”

“People see the power of God, the power of healing, and changed lives.”

“Our people like to worship. It is a part of our culture.”

“Church is a freeing place where people can honestly express thoughts and feelings that they cannot express in other places.”

“The church engages people in development activities that help them to make practical changes that improve their lives.”

In my experience, the growing global church often demonstrates these characteristics, each an expression of the biblical truth that we are each called to be Christ’s witnesses. Our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world believe that there is only one thing to do with good news and that is to share it with others!

What one believes does matter, and our openness to change makes a difference. Latin American church leader Luis Bush writes that as we look across the world today, the churches that are most rapidly declining, numerically, tend to be those who are flexible in their theological convictions but rigid in their methodologies and relatively closed to innovation with regard to ministry and mission structures, worship practices, etc.

What we rely upon also matters. Too often, we trust in ourselves, in our history and our wealth, and our technology. This is very different from the context in which new Christian communities are arising

around the world. Retired Presbyterian missionary and scholar Paul Pierson describes them this way: “Often they are born in situations of poverty, persecution, and corruption in which the Gospel is heard as incredible Good News, a word of hope and meaning to people who have lacked both. And usually, they grow in contexts where the world-view is much more similar to that of the Bible than that of the post-enlightenment West. That is, they take seriously the powerful work of God today and the victory of Jesus Christ over evil and death.”

These days there is much talk in Presbyterian churches about being “missional.” There is so much talk about it that I find myself remembering historian Stephen Neill’s caveat that if everything is mission, then nothing is mission. But what I see in the growing global church, in places like Ethiopia, China, and Cuba, is a church that is truly missional, communities of God’s people who define themselves and organize their lives around their real purpose of being agents of God’s mission in the world. As Jesus said, they are his witnesses “in Jerusalem and all Judea, in Samaria and to the ends of the earth.”

May God grant to us eyes to see anew what he is doing in the world, lives that are open to the power of his Spirit, humble hearts to learn from our brothers and sisters in other cultures, hands and feet that are ready to join in Kingdom work and lips that speak good words for Jesus.

# WHAT DOES A REAL CHURCH DO?



Samuel Austin Moffett was educated at Hanover College and McCormick Theological Seminary. He arrived in Korea in 1890, appointed as a missionary by the Presbyterian Church. After several trips to the northern part of the country, he decided to take up his work in Pyongyang, becoming the first Protestant missionary to take up long-term residence in inland Korea.

He faced much opposition and many difficulties. He was shunned and slandered and spat upon. On one occasion a group of young men even tried to stone him.

But Moffett remained steadfast, focused upon preaching and founding schools. In due time, the seminary he founded, Presbyterian Theological Seminary, had its first graduating class of seven Korean students. They graduated with a profound sense of gratitude and a desire to honor God, not out of a sense of self-importance but with a sense of the importance of this moment in the life of their new church.

“We’re the leaders of a new church in Korea,” they realized. By God’s grace, they would chart their church’s course. This led them to ask a question: “What does a real church do?”

As Koreans are wont to do, they went away on a retreat together up on a mountain to discern God's leading through a time of discerning prayer. And they decided that they would themselves send out a missionary because that's what "real churches" do. They reach out beyond themselves to show and share the Gospel.

But who would go? As one, the group turned to a young man named Rhee Gipoong. "You will go!" they said.

"I'm willing to go," he said. "But why me?"

"Because you were the leader of the group that tried to stone Dr. Moffett!" they replied.

Rhee took up work in China that brought him face to face with some of the same persecution that Moffett had faced, work that is still bearing fruit today.

When Moffett first reached Pyongyang, there was not a Christian to be found. By the time he retired as a missionary, there were over 1,000 churches in the area.

But perhaps his greater legacy is a Christian community – the church in Korea – that now sends more missionaries out into the world than any other except the U.S. They may surpass us soon. I have met Koreans in Congo and Kenya, India and Cuba, Ethiopia and China, Russia, and every other place I have gone. They understand what I heard Dr. Moffett's son, Samuel Hugh Moffett, himself a missionary and educator, affirm: "Evangelism is not a part of the Gospel; it is the heart of the Gospel."

# WHERE GOD WANTED MERCEDES



If spunk is a spiritual gift, Mercedes Cardenas in Sabanilla, Cuba, received a double portion. A Presbyterian lay preacher in the Cuban town of Juan G. Gomez (familiarily called Sabanilla), Mercedes, slender and small at 87 years of age, has been a formidable force for the Gospel in her Presbyterian congregation since she was four years old. Many have observed that the impact of the Presbyterian Reformed Church in Cuba has been disproportionate to its relatively small size. That's true of Mercedes, too.

Sabanilla is a town of about 5,000 people. At the church, Mercedes has seen pastors and seminarians come and go down through the years. She was ordained as an elder in 1952 and even attended seminary for two years, but she didn't feel called to pastoral ministry. She finished two other degrees. When the Revolution came and the majority of the pastors left the country or joined the Revolution, Mercedes was one of the faithful who would gather for worship even if no one else did. She remained committed to Christ and to serving others in his name.

Still serving on the Session that now leads this small congregation of 32 members, Mercedes is the driving force behind an outreach program that feeds 50 people every Sunday, serving many who are infirm, addicted, mentally challenged, or alone. “God has wanted me to be here,” Mercedes affirms, “to help other people.” So the church members carry in the food each week (and water because their current building has none), and their guests balance plates on their knees in the tiny sanctuary. And throughout the week, the members find other ways to encourage and help their neighbors.

I met Mercedes in 2015 with an Outreach group. We all were amazed by Mercedes’ energy and joy, her love for the church, and her commitment to serving her community in ways that make God’s love concrete in the lives of others. She took our breath away; she inspired us.

Mercedes is the Spanish word for “mercies.” Thank you, Lord, for showing your mercy so clearly through the life and faith of this remarkable woman.

"The church is the church only when it exists for others... The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving."

---

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, written in prison in 1944

# HUDSON TAYLOR



In 1870, after the death of two children and sending his two remaining children back to England, after the death of a newborn and the death of his wife, in the midst of rebellion and war, Hudson Taylor wrote from China, “We did not come to China because the missionary work here was either safe or easy, but because He had called us. We did not enter upon our present positions under a guarantee of human protection, but relying on the promise of His presence. The accidents of ease or difficulty, of man’s approval or disapproval, in no wise affect our duty. Should circumstances arise involving us in what may seem special danger, we shall have grace, I trust, to manifest the depth and reality of our confidence in Him, and by faithfulness to our call to prove we are followers of the Good Shepherd who did not flee from death itself...”

At a conference sponsored by The Outreach Foundation in 2005, Rev. Maqsood Kamil from Pakistan reminded those who gathered of the great risks taken and the great commitment demonstrated by missionaries who shipped their belongings to the other side of the world in a casket, assuming that is the way they would return home.

Not many of us are called to sacrifice so much as Hudson Taylor. I certainly have not been. Yet the account of his commitment does bring to my mind at least a few questions. How might my witness to the Gospel change in the places where God has put me if comfort were not so all-important? And what is the connection between trust and a willingness to take risks for Christ's sake? Where do you think Taylor's trust came from? How can I stand with those who are suffering?

"God's work done in God's way will  
never lack God's supply."

"God isn't looking for people of great  
faith, but for individuals ready to  
follow him."

---

Hudson Taylor

# FULLY ENGAGED



One of my favorite photographs is this one taken of a new believer being baptized by the pastor in Nizhnevartovsk, Russia. Our partners there are Russian Baptists and they often follow the Orthodox pattern of baptizing new believers around their Easter celebration, which, depending upon how the calendar falls, may require some effort to find enough water for an immersion. They are, after all, Baptists. There is a saying in the Russian Baptist churches: “A man must always be ready to preach, to pray, or to die.”

The thing I like about this photograph is that this new believer will likely never confuse following Jesus with his own comfort. But I often do. I forget that running through Jesus’ words of welcome and comfort, underneath all his promises, is a startling call. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me! (Mark 8:34)

# EQUIPPING THE SAINTS



Early in my ministry, we welcomed to our offices a woman in her early 40's who has become a good friend of The Outreach Foundation. Rev. Li Mei Lan is pastor of the Nangang Church in Harbin, China. Like all of the churches in China, it was closed during the Cultural Revolution. The church reopened in 1980 and quickly had 500 members. She became pastor in 1986, and the growth continued. When I met Li Mei, the congregation had 6,000 members and she was the only pastor. "How do you do that?" I asked her. "I don't," she replied and went on to describe how she had worked with others to train 300 lay leaders who carry significant ministry responsibilities. When I next saw her a few years later, she had gotten an associate pastor – and another church with 3,000 members. Her husband is also a pastor; he serves another large congregation in Harbin.

The situation in China is complex, but it is simply breathtaking to see what God is doing. The first time I was in Beijing at the end of a Sunday morning service, just before the benediction, the pastor

made an announcement that I had never before heard. “If you want to stay for the next service,” he instructed, “go outside and get in line.” After the service, the 1,500 or so people in the sanctuary filed out one side of the church, and 1,500 people waiting outside filed in. They repeat that three times on Sunday. Every Sunday. The church in China may be growing faster than the church has ever grown at any time in any place.



A few summers ago I traveled to China with a group of seminary students. Pastor Joseph, who comes from a Christian family, welcomed us to Chongyi Christian Church in Hangzhou (shown on previous page). With an average Sunday attendance of 9,000, the sanctuary seats 6,500. There are five pastors, five teachers, and three administrators – who undergird and equip 1,900 volunteers who actively carry out the ministries of the congregation. They rent space from a neighboring office building on Sundays to accommodate the growing Sunday school program with over 700 students. The Chongyi Church celebrated the baptisms of 800 new believers that year. Whenever the church is at worship, a prayer group meets in a prayer room directly under the pulpit to pray. And they have a prayer ministry that includes 1,300 people and ensures that someone is praying for the congregation and its mission at all times.

When we visited a church in Ningbo, a deacon gave us a tour and talked about the history of the church that had been founded by two women, Sunday school teachers from England. We were moved

to see the commitment of the congregation to discipleship. In the fellowship hall, we visited a class of 200 people. As is typical, they will attend weekly classes on the Christian faith for a full year before receiving baptism. In the corner of the hall, we noticed a stack of mats. Lots of them. “Do you have an exercise program?” one of the students asked. “No,” the deacon replied. “Those are for our prayer meetings.”

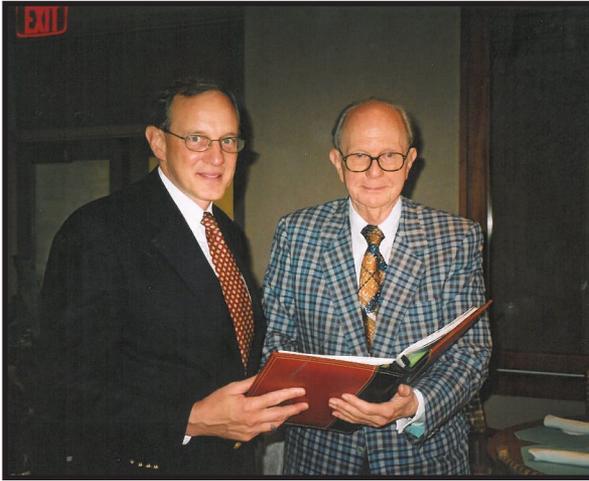
This is a challenging time for the church in China as believers in many of the provinces are experiencing more pressure. Religious groups generally are experiencing renewed government opposition. A Chinese pastor once told me, “Don’t pray that we will have no persecution. Pray that we will be found faithful.”

“The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”

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Ephesians 4:11-13

# MAKING TENTS



At my first Outreach Foundation board meeting, I met Dr. Alex E. Booth, Jr., whose name I had often heard in Zaire. A businessman from West Virginia and trustee of The Outreach Foundation, he was widely known for his support of mission in Africa.

I was at the meeting to be examined for the executive director position, and the trustees were peppering me with questions. One asked me how I would approach a wealthy member of a congregation for a gift. I don't remember my exact reply. All I remember is Alex saying out loud, "That's the wrong answer!" He could be very intimidating. He was a student of the Apostle Paul and his missionary methods. To quote Paul, Alex did not suffer fools gladly. But he loved God's mission in Africa.

When he was a young boy, Alex's great-grandmother often prayed in his presence that the Lord would make him a pastor or send him to Africa as a missionary. Dr. Alex Booth would grow up and go to Africa many times, and the impact that Alex has had through

mission work there would astonish his great-grandmother. In a letter to African church leaders a few years before his death, Alex wrote, “The first trip I made to Africa was to visit the church that was built with funds left in a small legacy from my great-grandmother. While on this initial trip to Africa, I fell in love with not only Africa, but also its people.”

For many years, Dr. Booth was the primary supporter of the Presbyterian Evangelism and Church Growth in Africa program, which built or repaired scores of churches, manses, schools, and seminaries in seventeen African countries; trained church leaders in evangelism and special ministries to enable church growth; printed church school and other Christian materials; and supported national evangelists. Since 2003, through partnerships made possible through The Outreach Foundation, he has funded the Booth Leadership Initiative and Booth Africa Mission programs.

There is much that could be shared about Alex’s generosity and character, but I want to share just two things about him.

First, before he became a wealthy man and before his commitment to Africa, Alex made a commitment to the Lord. He resolved that he would give away at least half of his income and wealth, and he did.

Secondly, Alex was determined to apply his understanding of both the Bible and business in order to be effective in what he undertook. One thing he noticed about Paul was that he had vocational skills. Although Paul sometimes received financial support, his ongoing ministry didn’t depend upon it because he had skills as a tentmaker. He could practice his trade. Rightly discerning an opportunity in our day, Alex worked closely with Outreach and church leaders in many different African countries to develop “tentmaker evangelist” programs that were shaped around the particular needs in each place. The evangelists have received extra training in agriculture, animal husbandry, small business entrepreneurship, service professions, or mechanical programs. Thus, they can support themselves and remain in ministry even when the church’s ability to compensate them falls short.

I think of James in Maasai land who learned to make houses, Grace in Kenya who augmented her modest salary by raising rabbits, and Thomas in Ethiopia who expanded his teff farm and goat herd. There were scores more whom I met and thousands who received training and modest grants to begin.

One synod in Ethiopia creatively gave a cow to each evangelist, along with training about keeping cows. Immediately, a family's nutrition improved because of the milk, and they could usually sell some, too. The evangelist would give the first-calf that was born to their cow back to the presbytery to be given to another church worker to start the process again. The subsequent calves (often another eight or nine) became a family business. Brilliant! I met several cows named "Alex" in Ethiopia.

I came to love Alex Booth and to love his vision for the church in Africa. It is reasonable to think that his work there touched millions of people. Alex died in August 2017 with his loving wife Katherine at his side. I am so thankful that she and her family remain committed to the work in Africa through the Booth Family Foundation.

# HASSANE’S TESTIMONY



In the fall of 2002, I had the privilege of meeting the Rev. Hassane Dan Karame, General Secretary of The Evangelical Church of Niger, whom I would later visit in his native Niger.

Before sharing his testimony, Hassane brought greetings from the 6,000 Christians in Niger. He said that from 1920 to 1960 there were 25 Christian families in Niger; from 1960 to 1990 the total rose to 3,000 Christians; and from 1990 to now the total has risen to 6,000 Christians. He added that Niger is less than 1% Christian and 99% Muslim. Niger is ranked near the bottom of the UN Human Development Index. He said that it is easy for Niger Christians to witness to Muslims because all of the Christians are from Muslim backgrounds. He noted that, “Even Muslims want to turn over the education of their children to Christians, so there are good relations and the door is really open for the Gospel.”

Here is the story he told. At the age of three, Hassane began memorizing the Koran. His father’s plan was for him eventually to replace him on the Islamic leadership council in their town. As a youth, Hassane earned a scholarship to a prestigious school. And there, among the 800 students, he found himself ashamed of their lack of devotion to Islam.

Few students came to the mosque where Hassane shared in leading the prayers. So he started offering leadership conferences at the school. At one of the conferences one day, he asked the students a question about the prophets. The answers he got were disappointing, and he became more discouraged. About to answer the question himself, he noticed that one of the three Christians at the school raised his hand. Hassane was happy because he thought that the student was going to use the opportunity to become Muslim. The student replied, “No, I am going to explain the prophets.”

He stood up and talked about the prophets, answering the question with great skill. Hassane’s disappointment became anger as he heard this eloquent answer from a Christian who was not supposed to know more than Muslims.

Later, Hassane decided to find out how he learned so much about the prophets, and the student told him he had learned it from the Christian book. Hassane’s Muslim teachers had told him, “If you meet a Christian, don’t read their black book.” So he had been warned.

“This book, is it a black one?” The student answered, “Yes.” And despite the warnings he had received, Hassane secretly at night began reading the Bible and did so for two years to know more about the prophets so he could be the best teacher.

As he read, two verses in Ephesians 2:8-9 demanded his attention:

*For by grace you have been saved through faith;  
and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God -  
not because of works, lest any man should boast.*

He asked the mosque’s Koranic teacher, “You know about all that I am doing – I’m leading at the mosque, preaching, counseling ... What about salvation? What about my salvation?”

He said, “I don’t know if you can be elected to heaven!”

“Something’s wrong!” Hassane replied. “You know all I’m doing in the Mosque, and yet you cannot assure me of salvation?”

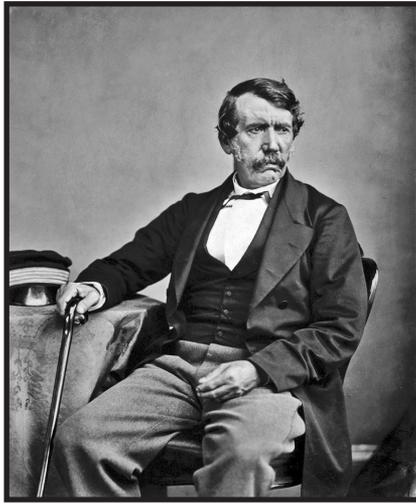
He went back to my house and decided to give his life to Christ who was able to assure him of everlasting life.

When his father learned about his decision, he convened the Islamic Council, which he led at the time, and the council voted to put Hassane to death by stoning. But perhaps because Hassane's father was its leader, the council reconvened later and changed their decision.

Instead, he would leave home and go 700 kilometers away. They told Hassane's twin brother to go with him to convince him to return to Islam (although Hassane did not know that was his assignment). He stayed with Hassane for ten years, and he didn't know why he stayed. But one day, Hassane's twin came to him and said, "I think I'm a Christian." They went and told their father.

Today, his brother and several others from that council are elders in Hassane's church. And the work of witnessing to the Gospel continues, particularly through the church's schools that are serving their neighbors.

# DR. LIVINGSTONE, I PRESUME



When I was a child, the first time I remember taking notice of missionaries was one Saturday afternoon watching television. Some of you will recall “Stanley and Livingstone,” a 1939 American adventure film starring Spencer Tracy as Stanley. It is loosely based on the true story of Welsh reporter Sir Henry Morton Stanley’s quest to find Dr. David Livingstone, a Scottish pioneer Christian missionary with the London Missionary Society, a missionary presumed lost in Africa. They finally met on November 10, 1871. Since watching the movie, I have been blessed to visit where Livingstone was born and where he died. Livingstone checked all the boxes of what we imagined a missionary should look like. The gaunt figure dressed in khakis living far from home with indigenous peoples eating strange food and fighting disease in places that were hard to pronounce.

Stanley’s search across the continent of Africa for David Livingstone was finally successful, and you’ll remember Stanley’s great line from the film, “Dr. Livingstone, I presume.”

You may not know that Dr. Livingstone was discouraged about the fruitfulness of his work. It is true that he did not see many converts; however, he made a huge difference in the life of African peoples.

For many, he was a hero. He bitterly attacked British policy in Africa. He defended the rights of Africans in the fight for their lands. He labored tirelessly against the slave trade. While describing the slave trade in East Africa in his journal, he wrote, “To overdraw its evil is a simple impossibility,”

When David Livingstone died in Zambia in May 1873, faithful African friends, at great risk to themselves, carried Livingstone’s body more than 1,000 miles to Dar es Salaam so that it might be sent back to England. For them, it was unthinkable to bury a man they so respected away from the land of his forefathers. His funeral was held in Westminster Abbey.

But they buried his heart in Africa. They did so, for it was to Africa that his heart belonged ever since he landed on her shores thirty-two years before. His heart was buried in the land, among the people, he loved. They dug a hole over a meter deep under a big Mulva tree, and his heart was reverently laid to rest in a tin box that had formerly held flour. A Christian burial service was led by one of his African friends.

As I think about Livingstone’s life and death, a question comes to mind. To whom does my heart belong? Where, at least figuratively, will it be appropriate to bury my heart?

# MEN OF JOURNEY



As I wrote above, I used to think that missionaries were people who wore funny clothes and served in places with names that are difficult to pronounce. There are still missionaries who fit that description serving around the world in wonderful ways. But now when I think of missionaries, I also think of a group of men who live at the Lois M. DeBerry Special Needs Facility. That's a fancy name for a very plain looking Tennessee state prison just outside of Nashville.

For a number of years, a group of men from First Presbyterian Church, Nashville, have been going to the prison every Wednesday night, joining with a group of prisoners in Bible study, sharing, and prayer. They talk about what it means to live for Jesus Christ on the inside and on the outside, and if you asked the men, you'd be hard-pressed to tell which group has been more richly blessed by this relationship.

A number of years ago, David Wood, one of the Presbyterians and a trustee of The Outreach Foundation, shared that he was going to travel to southern Africa, and the prisoners encouraged him to bring

back a report about all that he did and saw. The African-American prisoners, especially, were interested in his journey. And a report was easy to share because also on the Outreach trip were a producer/cameraman and a reporter from Nashville's CBS affiliate.

After his return, David showed the prisoners videotape from the trip, including stories about the plight of orphans and vulnerable children in Africa, kids living in the sewers of Harare, Zimbabwe, and in the bush of Zambia. It is a huge problem made worse by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The prisoners were stunned. Their silence was broken by a prisoner named John, a man who was in prison for having committed an infamous murder near Nashville. John stood and said, "Men, we have it better than those kids do. Seeing this, I can't sit still. We need to do something to help them." You see, in spite of what they had done, Jesus has gotten hold of these men's hearts in a beautiful way.

The prisoners, who earned 35 cents an hour working in the laundry and the mailroom and in their other jobs around the prison started saving money. They thought they might raise \$50. But they talked to other prisoners and some family members, and they raised \$800! They sent the funds through The Outreach Foundation to Elder Munjongo Namuyamba for a wonderful ministry with orphans he led in Siavonga, Zambia.

Elder Munjongo couldn't believe that a group of prisoners was helping to care for his children there in Africa. He sent back by email an effusive note of thanks to the prisoners (who rarely get thanked or praised for anything). The men were so encouraged that they sent word back to Munjongo asking what else he needed. He sent word back that he needed a dormitory for girls. It would cost \$12,000.

When the prisoners heard that, again they were stunned into silence. It might as well have been \$12 million. But again it was John who finally stood to speak. "Men," he said, "There is no way that we can raise \$12,000. But God can do it!"

So the men set about talking to other prisoners, their friends, and family. They printed up brochures and called themselves Men of Journey because even though they are in prison now they are on a journey with Jesus. When I next visited the Namumu Orphanage and School in Zambia, I stood in the dormitory that these prisoners built! They exceeded their goal, and they have raised funds for work with at-risk children here in Nashville.

It is an amazing thing how God, in his grace, allowed these men to reach through prison bars and across an ocean to bless vulnerable children in Jesus' name.

It was my privilege to be at the prison a couple of years ago when Elder Munjongo visited Nashville. He wanted to see the prisoners to thank them personally. I still remember how he greeted them, "My fellow prisoners." They embraced and wept and prayed together to the amazing God who has united their hearts and lives in such a wonderful way.

If the Men of Journey could visit with you, I know what they would say. "Don't sell yourselves short! Because if God can use a bunch of men in a Tennessee prison to be a blessing to others, men like us who wear the clothes that they are issued and who eat the food that they are served, who come and go when they are told, some of whom may never again know the freedom of this world – if God can do such a thing through us – just imagine what God can do through YOU!"

By way of an update, John was released on parole, and a number of other prisoners have served their sentences. But some of the group remain in prison. In 2020, we are still receiving gifts for God's mission through the Tennessee Department of Corrections.

# WHAT WILLIAM CAREY UNDERSTOOD



He had not yet gone to India. He was not yet known as the Father of Modern Mission. The year was 1792 and William Carey was a young English pastor, a linguist, and a cobbler, a man filled with passion for the Gospel. At a time when the church had turned inward upon itself, Carey had the powerful conviction that Jesus' Great Commission - in which he sent his followers out into the world to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them - was for followers of Jesus in every age.

The story is told that one day, standing before a gathering of pastors, Carey pleaded his case until a crusty old minister in the back shouted over him. "Young man, sit down. When it pleases the good Lord Almighty to convert the heathen, he'll do it without your help and mine."

Carey was silenced for the moment, but his essay "An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens" led to the founding of the Baptist Missionary Society. He would go to India and his faithfulness to the call of Christ would be a seed for new life in the church and for God's mission to the world.

Carey's detractor missed a lot. The man was so anxious to protect the sovereignty of God he missed the clear teaching of God's Word and a fundamental lesson of Christian history. It is precisely with your participation and mine that God desires to be at work. There is no Plan B.

It is at once both a fantastic and frightening truth that God's mission in the world involves people like us, but it does. Fantastic because it is hard to believe that the God of the universe would choose to disclose his glory and grace through such imperfect vessels as you and as me. Frightening, at times, because of the cost and the challenge that come with seeking truly to live for Christ in the world, worshipping him alone amidst the host of altars raised about us.

If Carey were here, I think he might encourage us with his best-known quotation: "Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God."

"God is pursuing with omnipotent passion a worldwide purpose of gathering joyful worshipers for himself from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. He has an inexhaustible enthusiasm for the supremacy of his name among the nations. Therefore, let us bring our affections into line with His, and, for the sake of his name, let us renounce the quest for worldly comforts and join his global purpose."

---

John Piper

# TOUCHED BY AN UNTOUCHABLE



Not long after I came to The Outreach Foundation, I had the opportunity to spend three weeks in India visiting places where God is at work in some amazing ways. There has been a movement to Christ among those known as Bhangis, more than one million new believers at the time of my visit.

The Bhangis are the lowest of the Untouchables or Dalits, below all the castes. While it is officially illegal, the caste system still has a powerful hold on Indian social relationships. The Bhangis' lot is written in the ancient Hindu Laws of Manu. They are to clean up the feces of their neighbors and the streets. They wear the cast-off clothing of the dead and eat the day-old food of their neighbors. And they only have one name because everyone knows the animals only have one name. It is religiously reinforced bondage. (Though many dispute the plight of the Bhangis, they are well-described in the June 2006 *National Geographic* magazine).

As the Bhangis are coming to faith in Christ, they commit to be baptized, to send their children to school, and to find a new way to make a living. The school piece is a challenge because most of the schools don't accept their children. So they are building their own

schools. We did visit one school that admitted Bhangi children, the Rakha Girls School, an old Presbyterian mission school now run by the Church of North India.

When we arrived at the school, the students were waiting for us in the gymnasium. They had prepared a program of songs and dance, scripture lessons, and testimonies. After the program, we walked across the old campus on worn brick sidewalks. While we were walking something or someone brushed against me, and I realized a young girl wanted to take my hand. She said, “My name is Neetu. What is your name?” It took my breath away. The little school girl’s English was greater than my nonexistent Hindi. We walked along smiling at each other until we reached the dining hall where she went over to join her friends and I went to sit with the principal and the VIPs. I caught her eye a couple of times, and she and her friends giggled.

I very much doubt that she pondered the meaning of our brief encounter or even remembers that I was there, but I will never forget it. I will never forget the young girl who had been told by the world that she was worthless, that she was good for nothing, that she was an untouchable, who found in Christ the sense of self-worth to reach out and take my hand.

What amazing things can come to a life, to a community, or even a people when they hear the Lord say, “The God who loves every one of his children wants to be in touch with you.”

# NEW LIFE AT 100



One of our partners in God's mission for many years was the Bihar Outreach Network. Bihar is the poorest and most corrupt state in India, 80% rural and 80% illiterate. It is a place that used to be called the graveyard of missions.

But God is doing a work there, particularly among those who are often called Untouchables, or Dalits, those who are below caste and who live as outcasts in their society.

In 2002, I traveled with Harold Kurtz and Bill Young to the Fatua District outside of Patna where we met a young pastor named Dinanath. As is typical in so many places around the world where the church is growing by leaps and bounds, at that time he was responsible for 62 village churches.

He travels from village to village, visiting the churches as he is able and helping to equip the evangelists and church leaders for their ministry. When he does visit a church, there are often new believers to be baptized. At the time of my visit, he had baptized 1,110 new believers in five years.

Late one evening we visited a village church, and after a prayer service on the roof of a modest home, we went with the church to a large pond outside the town. A 100-year-old man had declared his faith and was ready for baptism. We gathered beside the shore as he and the pastor walked down into the water. I supposed that it had been a while since he bent down that way, and we weren't quite sure that he was going to make it back up, but he did! There was a group of kids not far away, and when the man emerged from the water they cheered. The pastor motioned to them to be quiet, to be respectful. But I have to confess, I wanted to cheer too!

What an amazing thing. This man who for a century had been told by the world that he was nothing, worth nothing, good for nothing, found in Jesus Christ new hope and purpose. I will never forget his smile. I will never forget his joy. I will never forget the privilege of being with him.

"God is pursuing with omnipotent passion a worldwide purpose of gathering joyful worshipers for himself from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. He has an inexhaustible enthusiasm for the supremacy of his name among the nations. Therefore, let us bring our affections into line with His, and, for the sake of his name, let us renounce the quest for worldly comforts and join his global purpose."

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John Piper

# WALK ACROSS THE STREET



For more than a decade the Hattie Casey Elementary School had sat just south of Covenant Presbyterian Church on Ridgewood Road in Jackson, Mississippi. Right across the street, one might have observed, but not on the church's map. That was until about ten years ago. At a time when the congregation was getting more involved in the world, particularly in Honduras and Kenya, folks began wondering about how God might have them serve their nearer neighbors, too.

Elder Boyd Shaw, a retired physician, started thinking about the school, and one day he walked across the street to introduce himself to the principal, Dr. Cole. She welcomed him into her office and asked, "How may I help you, Dr. Shaw?"

"Oh," said Shaw, "That is what I have come to ask you. I am an elder at the church across the street, and I have come to see if there are any ways that we can help you and the school!"

Tears began welling up in Principal Cole's eyes. No one had ever stopped by to ask that before.

It was the beginning of a meaningful relationship between Covenant and Casey Elementary that has grown over the years. It began with cleaning and painting and tending to the landscaping, then preparing gift baskets for the teachers and partnering as Book Buddies and tutors.

Our participation in God's mission, serving in ways that make his love concrete in others' lives, may not take us to India or Africa. The Lord may just invite us to cross the street.

“The vision of the people of God as a fellowship of disciples who have been transformed by the power of the gospel and who live in a way that challenges the values of the world is a vision rooted in the New Testament practice and teaching on mission. The church is called to be an instrument of God for mission, a missionary people, a community of transformed people who live as a new fellowship, a sign of the reign of God at work in the midst of human history.”

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Samuel Escobar, *The New Global Mission*

# A DIFFERENT KIND OF PASTOR; A DIFFERENT KIND OF CHURCH



Roy Soto is a pastor and a friend of mine who serves in Fraijanes, a small town in the mountains above Costa Rica's capital and about 10 km from the Poas Volcano. He pastors the congregation Comunidad Cristiana Shalom. When Roy was growing up as a young man, he rebelled against his father who was a rather rigid Pentecostal pastor, and Roy left the church. He did well in business and was on a career track with a good company when God interrupted his plans. He started feeling promptings of faith and a call back to the church, but not the church that he had left. He began studies at the seminary, and there, a different understanding of the church began to take shape. Roy came to believe that the church does not exist for its own sake, but rather for the sake of the Kingdom of God. He was convinced that the church is an instrument of God's mission, not an end in and of itself. He wanted to lead a church that lived out in practical ways the love of God about which they spoke.

When Roy graduated from seminary, he and his wife, along with another couple, began to pray about where God would have them serve. With open minds and hearts, they sensed that God was calling them to the town of Fraijanes. They went to the town, found a place to live, and then Roy went to see the town leaders. He explained who they were and that they had come to serve and to be of help to those who lived in the town. It was not a place where Protestants were particularly welcome. One of the leaders said harshly, “I think that you would only be good for carrying away our garbage.”

And that’s what they did for a year, Roy and the others. They collected the town’s garbage for a year. Then they went back to the town leaders and asked them how else they might serve?

They found all kinds of things to do. They began building bus stops to shield the workers from the rain as they waited to be shuttled up and down the mountain to their jobs. They found ways of serving the young people in the town through a soccer club and the elderly through a fellowship and feeding program. And when a young man was killed when hit by a car at a funeral on the narrow main road in front of the Catholic church, Roy and his growing congregation, now 600 members, built the Catholic church a small parking lot.

This growth has come as a result of their vision for ministry and mission: “To reveal the Kingdom of God and his Justice in our community and where he allows us, using every resource – spiritual, human and material – that he puts into our hands.”

In a region of traditional churches that focus on the inward activities of church members and what happens inside the four walls of the church building, Roy and his team are continually discovering concrete ways to reach out and serve others in ways that share and show God’s love. They provide local employment through a restaurant and a small farm.

It is really quite a remarkable thing. Today the Catholic priest says to members of his parish, “I really don’t want you to become Protestants, but if you do, you must join Roy’s church.”

It is quite a remarkable thing, a congregation that lives out its mission purpose every day, a church that knows it exists for the sake of others.

It is about as fundamental a principle as one finds in God's Word. We see it clearly in God's call to Abram, and it resounds down through the scriptures from Genesis to Revelation. We are blessed to be a blessing!

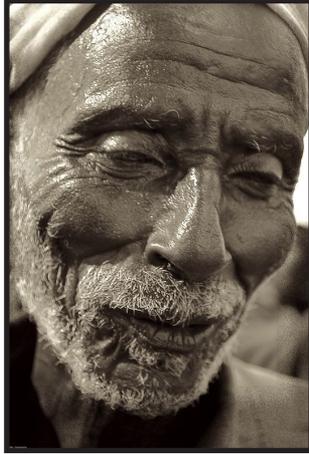
Roy has helped me to understand the difference between a church-centered mission and a Kingdom-centered church. And through a vibrant teaching ministry, Roy is sharing this vision with hundreds of pastors in Costa Rica and beyond.

"Kingdom people seek first the Kingdom of God and its justice; church people often put church work above concerns of justice, mercy and truth. Church people think about how to get people into the church; Kingdom people think about how to get the church into the world. Church people worry that the world might change the church; Kingdom people work to see the church change the world."

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Howard Snyder, *Liberating the Church*

# AND OUR CHILDREN SHALL LEAD US



Once when I was visiting Mizan Teferi in southern Ethiopia, I saw a sight that puzzled me. An elderly man, so typical of Ethiopia, with a distinguished look and military bearing, with a scruffy beard and raincoat the same color as the dirt all around, was walking through the bustling center of town. What made it unusual was that he was holding the end of a stick that stuck out in front of him.

What I saw when he moved through the crowd was someone holding the other end of the stick, a boy ten or twelve years old. I realized that the boy was leading the old man and upon a closer look that the elderly man was blind. He depended upon the boy, perhaps his grandson, to find his way.

I instantly thought of how the church in the West is struggling to find its way, which is not easy for us to admit. But we need help from our brothers and sisters. Near the end of his book *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, Darrell Guder writes,

“We need to let Christian brothers and sisters from other cultures, other parts of the worldwide church, engage with us in our discipline of reflection and contrition.”

There is much for us to be contrite about. A good place to begin is to admit that we do not see everything clearly, that we need to receive humbly the gifts of the diverse people of God who are called to live as the body of Christ in the world.

“The Gospel is like a seed, and you have to sow it. When you sow the seed of the Gospel in Palestine, a plant that can be called Palestinian Christianity grows. When you sow it in Rome, a plant of Roman Christianity grows. You sow the Gospel in Great Britain and you get British Christianity. The seed of the Gospel is later brought to America, and a plant grows of American Christianity. Now, when missionaries come to out lands they brought not only the seed of the Gospel, but their own plant of Christianity, flower pot included! So, what we have to do is to break the flower pot, take out the seed of the Gospel, sow it in our own cultural soil, and let our own version of Christianity grow.”

---

D. T. Niles; Sri Lankan mission leader

# FATHER VLADIMIR AND HIS CHILDREN



They were originally from Moscow. Vladimir and his wife Olga were discouraged by the corruption that came with the new openness in Russia. They longed for a simpler life close to the earth and grounded in their Orthodox faith and Russian folk traditions. Though they both had studied at a leading medical school, they left that program and moved to the north. Olga taught and Vladimir made fine hand-made guitars. They were in a rural setting but still felt unsettled. They decided to move with their growing family to the tiny village of Davydovo, 125 miles north of Moscow. They saw the impact of alcoholism on the families and the children in the village, and gave themselves to restoring the church and renewing ministries to members of the community. They knew that the primary problems that the community faced were spiritual.

It was 1935 when the communists closed the Russian Orthodox Church in Davydovo and forbid the liturgy and any kind of ministry or outreach. Over the decades, the decaying structure was used to store farm products, to house a movie theater and dance club. By the

time of the 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union, the roof had collapsed and trees grew inside the old walls of the cathedral. With faith, hard work, and the encouragement of friends, the outside of the church was restored and the winter chapel, a smaller worship space than the sanctuary, was renovated so that worship could again be conducted, lifting up praises to the Lord.

Vladimir went to the church authorities and told them that the church was ready. They needed a priest. “You will be the priest!” he was told. And a new ministry began.

Father Vladimir and Olga share a beautiful sense of hospitality, and many of the ministries developed out of the people that the Lord brought their way. The ministries of the church now include a kindergarten and nursery school, providing both education and refuge from the dysfunction of an alcoholic community, and a home for boys who do not have parents who can care for them. In the village and surrounding countryside, the community brings youths and families together in an extraordinary summer camp for special needs children and their families. It is a summer camping program infused with the love of Jesus Christ.

To receive and serve these “special families” for the glory of God, the campers, parents (usually mothers), and volunteers are brought together in a special community, usually two sessions for three weeks each. Last year, more than 100 were present at the same time, including more than 20 special families. The children and their parents are richly blessed by the experience of community that they find in Davydovo, something that often is lacking at home. Participants pitch in with chores, join in camp activities, and share in worship each morning and evening. There are games, crafts, hikes, dramas and music, therapy with dogs and horses, and undergirding it all is the community’s daily worship.

The community has also restored an old Soviet kolhoz (collective farm) to operate a farm and dairy that provide support for the congregation’s ministries and jobs for individuals in need, including some who have found their way to Davydovo through a homeless ministry in Moscow. Father Vladimir is also developing vocational

ministries that will serve special needs adults who lack opportunities for meaningful work. The community is now completing its first communal home for adults with special needs. The Lord is at work in Davydovo in beautiful ways!

Leo Tolstoy has a short story entitled “The Three Questions,” in which a king poses these questions: “When is the best time to do things? Who is the most important one? What is the right thing to do?”

After a long search, he finds his answers in the wisdom of a hermit. “Remember then: there is only one time that is important - Now! It is the most important time because it is the only time when we have any power. The most important man is he with whom you are, for no man knows whether he will ever have dealings with anyone else; and the right thing to do, the most important affair, to do him good because for that purpose alone was man sent into this life!”

Where charity and love are, there God is.  
The love of Christ has gathered us into one.  
Let us exult, and in Him be joyful.  
Let us fear and let us love the living God.  
And from a sincere heart let us love each other.

---

from the Latin text: *Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est.*

# TEACHERS COME IN DIFFERENT SHAPES AND SIZES



In 2012, I was granted a sabbatical, and at the center of the time, my wife Terry and I traveled to Davydovo, 125 miles north of Moscow, to serve at their camp for special families for three weeks. We were not sure what we would be doing, but we hoped that we could be useful. Father Vladimir said that just our willingness to serve would be an important example.

It was hard. I had never spent much time with special needs children and found their needs overwhelming. As a school nurse, Terry had lots of experience with children, but she keenly felt the communication barrier. Not surprisingly, her love for the kids, quick smile, and willingness to try anything brought most of the barriers down.

I was soon told, “Your mission is to be Vasya’s helper.” Vasya was a remarkable 10 ½-year-old boy with cerebral palsy. In addition to speaking Russian, he was fluent in English and was learning Czech. He had a fondness for quoting English poets, and his favorite entertainer was the Greek singer Stratos Dionisiou. For the most part,

my role was pushing Vasya from place to place in his wheelchair and helping him participate in the activities of the camp - crafts, music and drama, work assignments, and time for free play and bathroom stops. It was physically exhausting. My Parkinson's diagnosis had come two years before and my physical limitations were becoming very evident, along with my stubbornness.

Vasya had a deep love for the liturgy of the Orthodox Church, which is taken from the Great Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom. I had with me a copy of the liturgy with the Greek, Russian and English versions in parallel. When I gave it to Vasya to keep, I thought he might levitate right out of his chair. I don't think that I have ever seen a simple gift elicit such excitement and joy!

Looking back, Terry and I think of our time in Davydovo as one of the best, hardest things that we have ever done.

We discovered that one can survive on mostly potatoes, borscht, and raw garlic. We saw the challenges that the mothers faced, their fear about what was ahead for their children, and Father Vladimir's pastoral care for them. We witnessed the restorative power of a community, and the gift of the liturgy which drew all the participants together to worship at the beginning and end of each day. We felt the love of babushkas (grandmothers) whose weariness never eclipsed their stolid devotion to others. We saw in Father Vladimir and Olga what can happen if you view those who pass your way as a divine appointment. We experienced a community of faith that existed for the sake of others. And I learned from a child that receiving help is not a sign of weakness. Moreover, I began to understand that Jesus' invitation to enter his peace that passes understanding means that it is OK not to have all the answers.

# WHAT NEXT?



It had been an exciting and positive weekend visit with a large congregation in Eastern Pennsylvania. On Saturday, I led a retreat for church officers in which we looked at God’s mission in the world and the church’s place in that mission. I met informally with the mission committee for dinner that evening. On Sunday, I preached twice on the missional purpose of the church. My texts were Genesis 12:1-3 and Revelation 7:9-12. During Sunday school, I spoke about ways that God was at work through Presbyterian partners around the world. It was a full weekend, and there seemed to be great interest on the part of the congregation and its leaders.

As I often do when I speak to churches, I asserted that a key question that every church answers, either intentionally or unwittingly, is “For whose sake do we exist?”

Too many churches, especially in the West, behave as though they exist primarily for the sake of themselves.

After the weekend, I had trouble connecting with the pastor and other leaders. Our infrequent contacts finally broke down. Nothing. Crickets.

Imagine my surprise when that pastor called about three years later and said, “Well, we have done it. What comes next?”

What had they done? They had reshaped and refocused every ministry and program and committee of the church around an understanding that the church exists for the sake of others. Every aspect of the congregation’s life had at its heart a commitment to bring glory to God by welcoming and reaching out to serve those who were not a part of the congregation.

We talked about what might come next. The congregation’s leaders felt a special burden for understanding poverty from a biblical point of view, so on a subsequent visit with the church that is what we explored together.

No matter where our congregation is in its understanding and living out of God’s mission, these are great questions to give our full attention. How can God reshape the life of our community so that we are focused on sharing the good news with others? And what next?

# BIBLES FROM HEAVEN



This story was related to me by Alexei Borisovich Teleus, the pastor of the Evangelical Christian Baptist Church in Noyabrsk, Siberia. He was also senior presbyter of the Yamal District of the Evangelical Christian Baptist Union in Russia. I preached at his church in Noyabrsk on January 22, 2006. Alexei is a big bear of a man who walked around with his coat open! Alexei told me that it is not officially cold until it reaches 40-below. It did.

More than two decades ago (Alexei thought it was 1998 or 1999) a hungry Nenets fisherman left the town of Ceaxa on the Yamal Peninsula, far to the north in Russia. The Nenets are hunters, fishermen, and reindeer-breeders who live on the Siberian tundra. Culturally, they are similar to Eskimos or Laplanders. At a time when these people were facing a food shortage, the man went looking for food. He went looking for fish, and he prayed to the god of his people, NUM, asking him for a sign.

Not long after he finished his prayer, a Gideon Bible fell from the sky and landed near him beside the water. He forgot about the fishing and went back into town with the Bible saying, "I have received a sign." Today, he is part of a church comprised of Nenets Christians.

What the villager did not know was that a helicopter had flown from Salekhard the day he got his sign. In the helicopter were two government officials, bringing relief aid to needy locales. As they flew, they sorted through their cargo. One said to the other, “The cans of food are good. This dried meat will be useful. But what do we need with these books?” And he began throwing Gideon Bibles out the window.

As I think about this amazing course of events, I remember that Christians had paid to have those Bibles printed, paid to have them shipped to Siberia, and prayed that God’s Word would find good soil in the hearts of the Nenets people. Interestingly, the word that the Nenets use to describe the place where they live can be translated as “the ends of the earth.”

God can use our ordinary acts of Christian obedience in extraordinary ways.

"The Word became flesh and blood,  
and moved into the neighborhood.  
We saw the glory with our own eyes,  
the one-of-a-kind glory,  
like Father, like Son,  
Generous inside and out,  
true from start to finish.

John pointed him out and called, “This is the One! The One I told you was coming after me but in fact was ahead of me. He has always been ahead of me, has always had the first word.”

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John 1:14-15, The Message

# DISAPPOINTMENT GOD'S APPOINTMENT



In 1858, the Illinois legislature - using an obscure statute - sent Stephen A. Douglas to the U.S. Senate instead of Abraham Lincoln, although Lincoln had won the popular vote. When a sympathetic friend asked Lincoln how he felt, he said, “Like the boy who stubbed his toe: I am too big to cry and too badly hurt to laugh.” Perhaps you know the feeling.

I think of the Apostle Paul traveling with Silas and Timothy. Luke writes in Acts 16:6 that they were “forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.”

What may have confused Paul is clear to us because we can read ahead and see that God is drawing Paul and the proclamation of the gospel to Europe. But as this is unfolding, Paul and his friends were surely confused and disappointed in the moment. Perhaps you know the feeling.

A young man named Smith did. The year was 1920. The scene was the examining board for selecting missionaries. Standing before the board was a young man, a Presbyterian named Oswald Smith. One dream dominated his heart. He wanted to be a missionary. Over and over again, he prayed, “Lord, I want to go as a missionary for you. Open a door of service for me.”

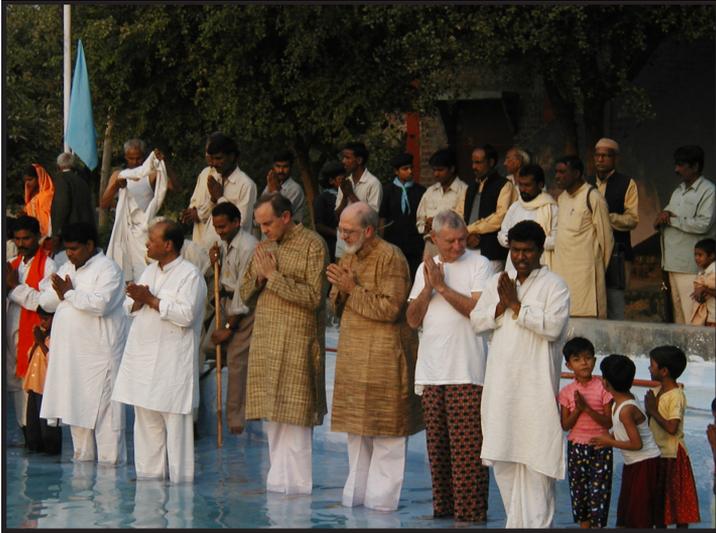
Now, at last, his prayer would be answered. When the examination was over, the board turned Oswald Smith down. He did not meet their qualifications. He failed the test. Smith had set his direction, but now life gave him a detour. He was crushed. What would he do?

What he did was pray. He took his confusion to the Lord in prayer. And as Oswald Smith prayed, God planted another idea in his heart. If he could not go as a missionary, he would build a church that could send out missionaries. And that is what he did. Smith, who was considered too frail to be a missionary, made a commitment. “If I can’t go myself, I will send someone else.”

Smith founded and pastored The People’s Church in Toronto, Canada, a congregation that sent out more missionaries than any other church at that time. For Smith, his disappointment became God’s appointment, a powerful new avenue for impacting the world for Jesus in ways that Oswald could not have conceived.

I have found this to be true in my life as well. What I experience as disappointment can be God’s appointment. A few years before coming to Outreach, I applied for a position that I really wanted. It seemed to me to be the perfect platform for service given my gifts, experience, and passions. But I was not chosen. It was a great disappointment to me. But because I was not chosen for that position I was available when The Outreach Foundation invited me to become their executive director a few years later. Of course, God knew what he was doing. Serving The Outreach Foundation has been for me a joy and a privilege and a perfect fit!

# THEOLOGY IN THE MISSION CONTEXT



Why is it so important for us to build relationships with brothers and sisters in other contexts? In part because without those relationships, we can assume that our experience and understanding of the good news are normative for all peoples. My friend the late Harold Kurtz describes our need for Christians in other parts of the world this way:

“I believe firmly that there can be no true theology produced in one culture, one race, one sex, one nation. Our reformers went astray in their arrogance about the quality of their own culture. We deceive ourselves when we think we can do true theology while remaining in our comfortable cultural environment. Theology of the Gospel cannot be truth unless it is formed and lived out in the mission context, unless it is understood to be for the whole world, for every tribe and tongue and people. If we don’t do our theology in the context of the world, it will be flawed. It will not deal biblically or

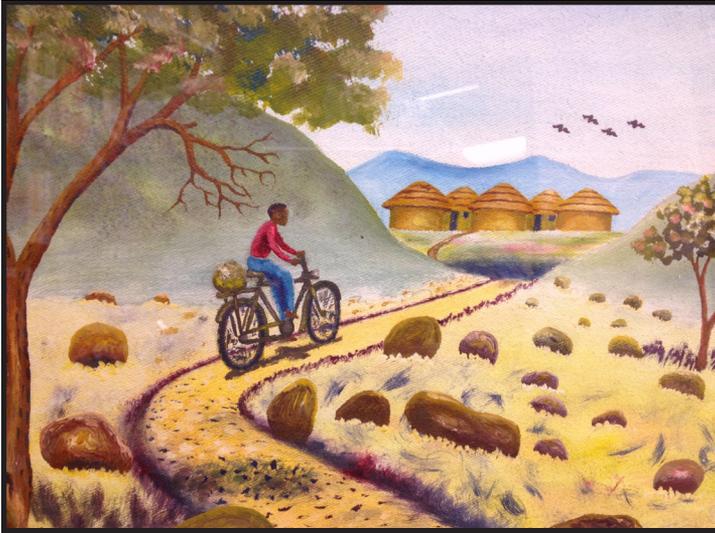
realistically with many of the most important issues of our day of justice, racism, war, ethics, sexism, ecology, oppression, freedom. And most importantly, it cannot wrestle honestly with the true meaning of the reign of God on earth as Jesus envisioned it for us.”

Now, I understand that these are not easy words to hear. I remember the year that Harold stood for election as moderator of the General Assembly. He spoke about the amazing growth of the global church, and commissioners were thrilled. And he spoke about the need for us to listen to the witness and reproof of these non-Western believers, and it seemed that the assembly was uncertain and afraid.

We are in the situation now of a majority non-Christian West and majority non-Western Christianity. One of the reasons that Outreach trips have been transformational for so many is because they have afforded participants with the opportunity to experience true humility in the presence of the faith and faithfulness of God’s people and allowed us to gain insights into ways we have conflated American culture and Kingdom values.

The great Sri Lankan church mission leader D.T. Niles put it this way: “The gospel is unsafe in any culture without a witness to the gospel from outside that culture.”

# DO YOU KNOW WHAT WE NEED?



Several years ago I accompanied an Outreach team on its visit to a small village in Tete Province, Mozambique, named Khanga. We had visited a number of villages. Each stop was special despite the fact that all the visits were similarly structured. Smiling, singing church members would come out to meet our vehicles and lead us to the village. We were welcomed with more smiles and joyful songs and then made our way to the church for a time of worship. There were joyful offerings to the Lord, and often gifts for our team - sugar cane, bananas, chickens, even a goat. (You could always tell which visitors had grown up on a farm by the way they held a chicken.) Khanga was part of a holistic evangelistic mission effort we have supported for more than a decade. After the worship service, a brief history of our relationship, and a description of the challenges the village and church were facing, we would go on a walking tour of the village.

As our group was visiting with the congregation and preparing to leave, one of the church elders caught my eye across the village clearing. Unswerving, he marched straight up to me and asked, “Do you know what we need?”

I could see what they needed all around me – a roof on the school, food for the children whose bellies bore the signs of malnutrition, staff members for the health clinic that stood empty, water so that the women and children didn’t have to go to the river. They needed everything! Tentatively, I replied, “What do you need?”

“A bicycle!” he said. “If we had a bicycle, our evangelist could go farther to tell people about Jesus.”

And that is how the church grows, in Tete Province and in so many places around the world. An evangelist from one village will go to the next village. He will find the best shade tree in the middle of the village and sit there in the afternoon telling stories of Jesus. Sometimes the evangelist will show the Jesus Film. After a time, the stories will become a Bible study, and in turn, the Bible study will become a worship service. They will gather first under the tree, then in a grass shelter. They’ll move to a small structure made of sticks and mud, and even before they bake the bricks for a more permanent building, their evangelist will reach out to the next village.

We did get a bicycle for Khanga, and our team worked with them to address their other needs. The ministry in Tete continues, and lives are being changed with bicycles and Bibles and boreholes as the people do the only thing that there is to do with good news. They share it!

On the wall of my study at home hangs a painting of a man riding his bicycle towards a village that one can see in the distance. It was a gift to me from Outreach trustees who have been deeply involved in the work in Tete. One might imagine the painting captures a moment in time. I prefer to think of it more dynamically. The man, the church, is always going to the next village because there is only one thing to do with good news.

## WHEN DID WE VISIT YOU IN PRISON?



For nearly a decade women of the Presbyterian Church in Kirkuk, Iraq, led by the pastor's wife, Mayada, have engaged in a ministry to women in prison. Most of the women are in prison for prostitution or theft. Their families don't help them, and they won't even mention them because of the shame they feel.

The most important thing that the visitors from the church do is to show up, to care. The church teams also take toiletries, undergarments, and feminine products to the women, and they take them towels. The towels have been embroidered with the words "God loves you," a two-word phrase in Arabic. Two words that don't appear in the Koran. Two words they'll never hear at the mosque.

During one visit, the Presbyterians noticed that one of the prisoners had taken empty cigarette packs and fastened them to the wall of her cell in the shape of a cross. When asked what that meant to her,

she explained, “You come to us and talk to us about God’s love and about your hope in Jesus. You shared with us that the cross is the source of mercy. We want to have that hope!”

Though smaller than it once was, the congregation in Kirkuk is working in other ways too, to live out the love of God that they speak about. Their radio ministry (operating with the permission of the Iraqi government) broadcasts round-the-clock programming that reaches ½ million people in Arabic, Aramaic, Turkmen, and English. When U.S. troops were there, our Iraqi brothers and sisters were evangelizing Americans!

This congregation pastored by Haitham Jazrawi has become known as a place of help and hope. They are bearing witness to Christ in the face of unimaginable pressure. At one point, when ISIS had forced many to flee the Nineveh Plain, there were 17 families with 72 persons living on the church compound and the church was caring for hundreds of others. The church was active in distributing food to their non-Christian neighbors. 95% of the students in the preschool and kindergarten are non-Christians. The Kirkuk congregation clearly understands that they are not there for the sake of themselves.

The believers’ faithful service brings to mind words of our Lord, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16)

# THOU ANOINTEST MY HEAD . . . FOREVER



When Marilyn Borst joined our Outreach team in 2009, she brought with her deep relationships in the Middle East. This opened ministry opportunities for us with new partners, including the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon. Since the war in Syria broke out nearly nine years ago, we have come alongside thousands of Presbyterians in that country, ministering to their congregations and joining in partnership with them to serve their neighbors in Christ's name. In turn, they have focused our prayers, shaped our discipleship, and guided our generosity.

Each of the leaders in this remarkable church is an example of faith and faithfulness. A dear friend of Outreach is Pastor Ibrahim Nseir, the pastor of the National Presbyterian Church of Aleppo, Syria. In 2012 as war came to Aleppo, many members of the church decided to flee the city. In the war years, the church would go from 500 members to 80. Reverend Ibrahim and his wife Tami committed

themselves to remain in Aleppo with their three children to be the church. At that time he stated, “It is worth the risk to make the statement the church is still here.”

They stayed to preserve a witness to the Gospel in their city and beyond. They remained after the church was partially destroyed by shells. They remained in the face of threats and after a bomb was placed in their home (thankfully disarmed by government forces). They remained after the church was completely destroyed by bombs. They gathered for worship in a fifth-floor walkup apartment, and saw attendance increase 50% in the worst years of the war. Church members worked together providing food and clothes to those in need, whatever their faith. When they received word of displaced Syrians in warehouses outside the city, they organized teams of Presbyterians who went to care for them. When they found water on the land for their new church building, they began distributing it to their neighbors. The ministry continued growing even before the new building was completed with the Synod’s help.

During an Outreach visit in 2019, our team visited the new sanctuary and visited a building across the street that the congregation is transforming into a clinic to serve those in need. We also visited the site of the destroyed church with Pastor Ibrahim and several of his elders. As we walked the grounds, Pastor Ibrahim found a piece of broken marble in which a phrase from Psalm 23 was carved in Arabic: “THOU ANOINTEST MY HEAD . . . FOREVER.” It came from a large plaque that had hung on the sanctuary wall behind the pulpit of the church opposite a plaque of The Lord’s Prayer, both hidden for five years under the rubble of the destroyed sanctuary. This piece was the only one they had ever found.

That evening, we joined the congregation gathered for worship in their new sanctuary, full to overflowing. Finding the portion from Psalm 23 had so obviously heartened and moved Pastor Ibrahim Nseir, we were surprised by what came next. Reflecting upon our deep relationships and the psalm’s message of comfort, assurance, and the hope for lasting peace, Rev. Ibrahim presented me with the engraved marble piece on behalf of Outreach and affirmed, “This is your church.”

I was speechless and asked Marilyn to speak a word of thanks. But a prayer of Jesus broke through my racing thoughts and overwhelming emotions: “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (John 17:20-21)

By God’s grace, Jesus’ prayer is being answered around the globe through our partnerships.

Where charity and love are, there God is.  
Therefore, whensoever we are gathered as one:  
Lest we in mind be divided, let us beware.  
Let cease malicious quarrels, let strife give way.  
And in the midst of us be Christ our God.

# IS IT REAL?



One day during my final year of seminary in Pittsburgh, I was walking along a street near the school, and an object in the joint of the sidewalk caught my eye. I bent down and discovered that it was a brilliant cut, clear gemstone. Questions flooded my mind. Who had lost it? How would I find them? If I didn't find them, would it cover my tuition? Then, more soberly, is it real?

As Presbyterians who trace our theological heritage back to John Calvin and the Reformation, we are part of a tradition that has wrestled with the question, "How do you recognize a real church?"

Drawing upon the work of John Calvin and his followers, Presbyterians down through the centuries have affirmed that real churches are characterized by certain marks. Calvin wrote that where one finds the Word of God purely preached and heard, and where the sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution, there a true church exists. The Reformed churches in the Low Countries

and Scotland added a third mark – church discipline uprightly ministered, as God’s Word prescribes.

These marks of the church are still helpful as we seek to be faithful, but I want to suggest to you today that the time has come to add another mark: MISSION. The Reformation church was mostly preoccupied with its internal life, and for the most part, one was either Catholic, Lutheran, or Reformed, depending largely upon the faith of one’s king or queen. There wasn’t much of a vision for reaching out to those who were not Christians.

But were he around today, seeing the world as it is today and seeing the church as it is today, I think that Calvin might agree to the addition. To be a real church is to accept that we are SENT into the world in Jesus’ name to share and show the Gospel as we bear witness to him.

The Lord puts it this way in his first appearance to the disciples following his resurrection: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” (John 20:21)

As I travel across the United States, I am thankful that I encounter Presbyterians and others who are discovering that mission is central to the identity of the church because it is central to the identity and purposes of our God.

Mission is at the heart of what it means to be the church. We are SENT into the world in Jesus’ name. You are sent. Mission is not something that God created in order to give us something to do. Rather, the God who is in mission to the world has called the church into existence to participate in his eternal plan to gather up all things in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 1:10)

The church is rediscovering that when we affirm that “every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” – that’s how Paul puts it in Philippians – we are at the same time unpacking our own purpose. We are people who are called together in order to be empowered and equipped and sent out into the world to bear witness to the Gospel in word and deed.

To be honest about it, too often Presbyterians have enjoyed the assurance of salvation through God's gift of new life in Christ while ignoring Christ's command that we live for him in the world. Too often, it feels as though we're just another brand in the religious marketplace, a purveyor of religious goods and services, and not one that is doing very well.

Richard Halverson, former chaplain to the U.S. Senate, says this about the changing character of the church: "In the beginning, the Church was a fellowship of men and women who centered their lives on the living Christ. They had a personal and vital relationship to the Lord. It transformed them and the world around them. Then the Church moved to Greece, and it became a philosophy. Later it moved to Rome, and it became an institution. Next, it moved to Europe, and it became a culture. Finally, it moved to America, and it became an enterprise."

Halverson adds: "We've got far too many enterprises and too few fellowships."

Do you remember how the first words Jesus spoke to the disciples connected discipleship and mission? "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." (Mark 1:16-17) Do you recall Jesus' last words to the disciples? The final words he spoke before ascending into heaven? "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and all Judea, in Samaria and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

You see, it is not so much that the church has a mission as it is that the missionary God has a church! And our involvement in God's mission is not primarily about getting the world into the church; it is about getting the church into the world.

Incidentally, the stone I found was a beautiful cubic zirconia. I still keep it as a reminder that things are not always what they appear to be. May our churches, by God's grace, be found to be the real thing!

# THE FRIENDLIEST CHURCH IN TOWN



The occasion of my brother's wedding brought our family together in a central Kansas town of about 15,000 people. I was pastoring a church at the time, and as was my pattern, I turned the Sunday away from my own congregation into a kind of busman's holiday, visiting different congregations to see what other churches were doing to equip their members and to send them out into the world.

As I parked and entered the First Presbyterian Church, I noticed a sign outside the door that boasted, "The Friendliest Church in Town." I am glad that I went to that church because I would have not wanted to be at a less friendly one. Not a single person, with the exception of the usher who handed me a worship bulletin, spoke to me.

Oh, the people did seem friendly enough - to one another. Admittedly, I am not the warmest, most outgoing fellow, but something had broken down between the placement of that sign and the reality on Sunday morning, at least in the experience of this visitor. It is easy to reach out to friends. It is harder to reach out to someone we do not know.

In writing and speaking about the church, some mission leaders differentiate between ATTRACTIVE churches and MISSIONAL churches. Most of the emphasis these days is on being missional congregations, those that are prepared, positioned, and empowered to move out into the neighborhood and world to share and show the love of God in Christ Jesus. I firmly believe that moving out captures the deep purpose of the church.

Nevertheless, there is something to be said for being attractive, offering worship, discipleship, and fellowship opportunities that are engaging and welcoming. I am reminded of an old curmudgeon in one of the churches I served who told me, "If I don't want to be friendly, you cannot make me!" And he is right. Yet Hebrews 13:2 encourages us, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." I Peter 4:9 is even more direct. "Show hospitality to one another without grumbling."

# THE WHOLE GOSPEL



It is a part of The Outreach Foundation's calling to invite Christians, particularly Presbyterians, to move beyond denominational boundaries and issues that may divide them to find common cause in God's mission. Of course, to do this effectively requires basic agreement about the person and work of Christ. If there isn't a unity in Christ, it is hard to find agreement on what God's mission is.

I think that I gained some insight into these matters through our work over many years with the Presbyterian Reformed Church in Cuba. What I discovered as we helped congregations develop relationships with the Cuban church is that there were a number of large Presbyterian congregations who here in the States would never be found working with each other. But they would go to Cuba and work with the same partners and ministries there, sometimes even the same congregations.

There seem to be at least a couple of reasons for this. In the first place, I think that we are generally more open to theological

differences when they are expressed across cultural differences. We are less demanding of global partners that they adopt our theological agendas. We know that the Global Church is different, and we know that we've misbehaved in the past foisting our culture, and even imposing our theological idiosyncrasies, on believers from other contexts and cultures.

But there is another reason for the openness that I have observed, the Cuban church's sound theology. Cuban Christians and others from Latin America often speak of *misión integral*; we might say integral mission. This approach to God's mission affirms that evangelism, deeds of compassion, and action for justice are all integral expressions of the believers' witness to the Gospel. So, while more conservative congregations can get excited about Cuban congregations' evangelism and outreach efforts, and more progressive U.S. congregations are happy to engage in the Cuban churches' work for justice, we forget that spiritual engagement and social engagement are both commended in Scripture, and modeled and taught by Jesus.

As our U.S. Presbyterian denominations continue in practice to bifurcate and trifurcate the Gospel, and argue about whether proclamation, or compassion, or justice are more important, we would do well to learn from the church in the global South. The work of witness is not word or deed. It is word and deed.

# HOLY GROUND



Many times in my journeys I have had the feeling that I was standing on holy ground, that God was revealing himself and his character, often through people who allowed us to share in their lives. A trip to Rwanda provided such a moment.

The realities of the genocide in 1994 are undeniable, if unfathomable. While the world largely stood by, over one million Tutsi and moderate Hutu were brutally killed in one hundred days, leaving behind hundreds of thousands of orphans, widows, widowers, and people with disabilities. We visited the Kigali Genocide Memorial where thousands were buried and also the Pastors' Genocide Memorial, which pays tribute to 41 Presbyterian pastors and lay leaders who were killed and buried there.

The stories of what people experienced are horrific, and many people are still traumatized.

Rev. Jerome Bizimana walked into that space where anger and grief and hatred reside, inviting those whose lives have been violated and those who perpetrated violence to seek reconciliation and healing. President of Remera Presbytery, Pastor Jerome received special training and has created a reconciliation ministry that has opened a new path for many in the church inside and outside of Rwanda.

He formed what are called “Light Groups” to facilitate deep levels of personal, spiritual, and communal healing. The group we visited was made up of both perpetrators and survivors of the genocide. They sit next to each other. They eat together. They celebrate the weddings of each other’s kids. They worship together. One of the survivors spoke of the pain and difficulty involved in forgiving the man who stood in front of her as we met. He had killed her husband and her child. We heard other stories from those who were either forgiven or forgivers. We were overwhelmed. As one of my colleagues wrote, “It was almost too beautiful and painful for the human brain and heart to process.”

This was holy ground, a place at the foot of the cross where perpetrator and victim could each find healing in the name of Jesus and by the grace of God.

They are “Christ’s Light” according to Pastor Jerome, referring to Matthew 5: “You are the light of the world... Let your light shine before others, so they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

# I COULD NEVER SAY THIS



I have seen in Egypt how a church's response to violence can be a powerful witness to the Gospel.

The First Presbyterian Church in Mallawi, Egypt was built in 1868, and is now pastored by Rev. Medhat. This large congregation is known for long pastorates - two of the pastors served the congregation for 56 years each - and active outreach ministries through off-site Sunday Schools, revival days, clinics, and meetings for study and fellowship for all age groups.

But on August 16, 2013, the church was completely burned during a night of terror that saw 68 churches, ministry offices, and Christian bookstores burned across Egypt. The Christians were being blamed for some of the nation's political turmoil. Just before the fire and as the building burned, the attackers stole most anything of value and broke everything else. It was heartbreaking for the congregation, but through it all they have remained ambassadors of grace, staying focused on their mission and not retaliating. Building upon

discussions among different Christian leaders, the believers in Egypt have deliberately responded to violence with forgiveness. Their steadfastness in this has been a powerful witness to the Gospel.

In the case of Mallawi, the government directed the army to assist with rebuilding the sanctuary. Now, the members of the church themselves are rebuilding the seven-story ministry building beside the sanctuary.

In Genesis, Joseph asserted when his brothers knelt before him in Egypt, “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good.” I asked if any good had come out of all this terror and trouble. “Yes,” Pastor Medhat replied, “The church really needed to be demolished and rebuilt, and we were having trouble getting the permissions!”

Reaching out was and is a critical component of the congregation’s recovery from the violence and loss they endured. At a time when relations with the church’s Muslim neighbors were very strained, the church initiated peacemaking conversations that drew people together in families’ homes to restore friendships. The Presbyterians took the initiative to extend grace even to those they knew had wronged them. The Presbyterians prepared meals for their Muslim neighbors during Ramadan. Moreover, this remarkable congregation serves 300 children through their Kids’ Club and reaches out to support 1,100 families through its Love Ministry.

This is an extraordinary time of openness for the Egyptian Church, including the 400,000 Presbyterians and their 400 congregations. Many of them are constructing large buildings. They don’t know how long this window will stay open, so they build not primarily for themselves but for future generations. When our Outreach teams visit Egypt, we are challenged by the believers’ commitment to sharing the Gospel in a complicated context, and inspired by the faith of those whom we met, many of whom still face pressure and persecution. Amidst all this, the Presbyterian Synod of the Nile is expanding its ministry of sending their own missionaries to other countries.

The same graciousness was evident on national Egyptian TV following Palm Sunday 2017 when the forgiveness shown by a Coptic Christian woman to her husband's killers rendered an Egyptian news anchor speechless. Samira Fahmi's husband Naseem was one of the victims of the Palm Sunday bombings which targeted St. Mark's Cathedral in Alexandria. Appearing on Egypt's ONTV, she said during an interview of those who killed her husband, "I ask the Lord to forgive them and let them try to think... May God forgive you and we also forgive you. Believe me, I forgive you."

This response left the Muslim news anchor Amr Adeeb temporarily stunned back in the studio. When he regained his composure, he said, "Egyptian Christians are made of steel... Egyptian Christians for hundreds of years are bearing many atrocities and disasters. The Egyptian Christian deeply loves his country... How great is this amount of forgiveness you have. If it was my father, I could never say this... These people are made from a different substance."

The attack on St Mark's Cathedral killed 17 people, including Samira's husband. Jesus said to his disciples, "When you are persecuted," not "If you are persecuted." We have much to learn from the believers in Egypt and elsewhere about trust and faith.

# THE GREAT ENDS OF THE CHURCH



I think it was the church historian Jaroslav Pelikan who made the distinction between tradition, understood as the living faith of dead people, and traditionalism, the dead faith of living people. While I am confident that denominational affiliation is not a matter of salvation, for my part, I am pleased to be a Presbyterian and a part of the Reformed tradition. Those who have gone before us have a lot to contribute to our understanding of the church and God’s mission. Our theology, which emphasizes God’s sovereignty, and our polity, which affirms that God can work through the discernment of the community and the decisions of representative bodies, suit me well. I love so much in our tradition.

For example, I love the “Great Ends of the Church.” Now, these ends are not gridiron all-stars from Westminster or Presbyterian College. They are statements of the church’s purpose set down in 1910 by the United Presbyterian Church of North America, a particularly mission-focused predecessor Presbyterian denomination which

was also responsible for birthing the New Wilmington Mission Conference. This is how they framed them. The great ends of the Church are:

the proclamation of the Gospel for the salvation of humankind;

the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God;

the maintenance of divine worship;

the preservation of the truth;

the promotion of social righteousness; and

the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

I love this statement for the way that it focuses on the church's responsibility to and for those outside the church while at the same time acknowledging that there are aspects of the church's inner life that need attention. I love the way that these "great ends" describe a balanced witness of proclamation, compassion, and work for social righteousness. And I love the way that the final great end sums up the rest of them by reminding us that when the world looks at our life together as Jesus' followers, it should catch a glimpse of what God intends for all humankind. We are called to be exhibitionists showing God's goodness and glory and grace!

# THE CHARACTER OF THE CHURCH'S COMPASSION



A decade ago, six jihadists with a group called the Islamic State of Iraq attacked an Assyrian Catholic Church in Baghdad. During Sunday evening Mass on October 31, 2010, they began killing the worshipers. Hours later Iraqi army commandos stormed the church, inducing the jihadis to detonate their suicide vests. Fifty-eight worshipers, priests, policemen, and bystanders were killed and seventy-eight were wounded or maimed.

Word of the attack spread quickly and churches around the country wondered if this was an isolated incident or part of a widespread attack on the churches.

In Basra, a couple of hundred miles to the south where one of the three Iraqi Presbyterian congregations is located, Dr. Zuhair Fathallah, an elder in the church, went with another church leader to see if their church building was secure. Zuhair recounts, “By the time we reached the church, it was surrounded by armed Muslim men who said, ‘Go home. We will protect the church.’”

Amazing! Who were these men?

They were fathers of the children in the church's preschool and kindergarten. Nearly all of the students in the school come from Muslim families. These fathers so valued the Presbyterian Church's ministry with their children and they had experienced such a quality of compassion from the congregation for their families, that at a time when the church might be under threat, they turned out to protect it.

As I think about the Basra congregation and its commitment to share and show the love of Jesus, I thank God for the example of these partners whose compassion for their neighbors has found such creative expression. They are teaching me what it means truly to live for the sake of others.

"Let my heart be broken with the things  
that break God's heart."

---

Bob Pierce, World Vision founder

## SOME EXCUSES WE HAVE HEARD



Through the years my colleagues and I have heard lots of reasons that pastors and congregations cannot participate in God's mission.

"After we are stronger as a congregation, then we'll be able to be active in mission."

"I have to complete my D.Min. and don't have the time to lead in this area now."

"We are in the middle of a capital campaign and don't want to distract our members."

"It is either cut our mission giving or eliminate programs or staff."

"Our church is too small to make a difference."

"It is hard for us to talk about Jesus, so we just focus on doing good."

"There is so much need right here at home."

"Didn't Jesus say that the poor would always be with us? It is just too overwhelming."

“We got burned by a major partner who lost our trust. We’re just not up for it again.”

“Isn’t the work finished? Hasn’t the Gospel reached every nation?”

“I thought missionaries were instruments of colonialism and we stopped all that stuff.”

“We’ve ‘done’ Mexico for years and our people need a break.”

“Now is just not a good time.”

The late Marj Carpenter was a renowned Texas journalist and a passionate advocate for Presbyterian mission. She was also a trustee emerita of The Outreach Foundation and former moderator of the PC(USA).

In her book *To the Ends of the Earth*, Marj describes how she had been in Cameroon for that church’s 125th-anniversary celebration in 1989. She realized that the founding year being marked by the celebration, 1864, was in the middle of our nation’s Civil War. The Presbyterian Church had split North and South in 1861 as the country was caught up in the war.

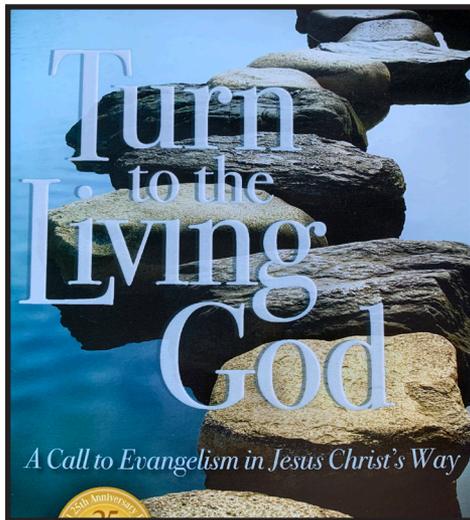
When she returned from her trip, Marj looked up the 1864 minutes of the General Assemblies of both the Northern and Southern churches to see what she would find. A few years ago, I looked up each assembly’s minutes myself.

The Northern Church’s “Foreign Missions Report” affirms, “The world is watching us in our travail to see if we’re serious about the global mission and the Great Commission.” The minutes go on to name the three missionaries that were opening the mission field in the Cameroons.

In the 1864 “Minutes of the General Assembly” of The Presbyterian Church of the Confederacy, the “Foreign Missions Report” reads: “Our backs are to the wall and our homes are being burned and our churches destroyed, but we must send another missionary to Brazil.”

And they did.

# TURN TO THE LIVING GOD



In 1991, the PC(USA) General Assembly approved a resolution for implementation in the church entitled “Turn to the Living God: A Call to Evangelism in Jesus Christ’s Way.” It is a wonderful statement. Jeff Ritchie, Outreach’s longtime associate director, served with the writing team. Jeff’s successor at Outreach, Juan Sarmiento, led the effort to have the statement reprinted on its 25th anniversary. It is a statement well worth taking the time to read.

The resolution helpfully frames our participation in God’s mission, beginning with a call to repentance.

The first section affirms that evangelism has its source in the Trinity. God purposes that there be a human community that enjoys God’s presence, reflects God’s character, demonstrates God’s love, shares God’s passion for justice, and cares for God’s earth. This divine purpose has been marred by the fact of human sinfulness. But in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor. 5:19). Those who turn to Christ in repentance and faith are reconciled with God, and they, in turn, are sent into the world to continue Christ’s

reconciling work. The Holy Spirit empowers and equips the church in its mission of inviting people from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages (Rev. 7:9), to turn to the living God.

As the body of Christ, the church is called not only to make the deeds of Christ visible, but also to make the word of Christ audible. We are called to develop an evangelistic attitude that compels us to cross boundaries, and sends us out in faith to tell all peoples about God's love revealed in Jesus. That witness includes inviting others to yield their lives to him.

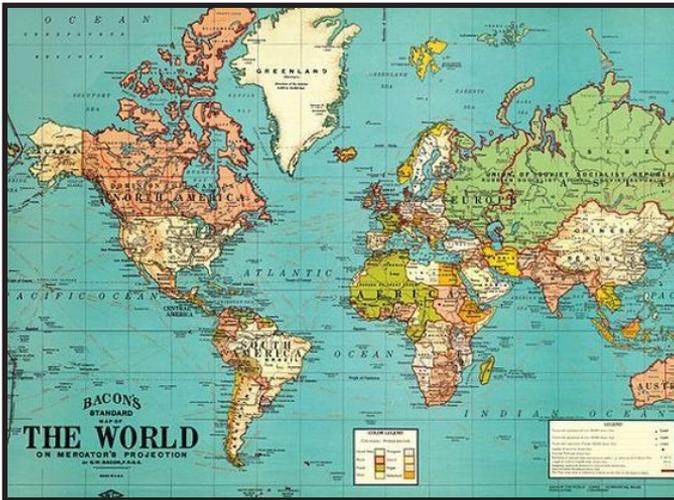
I suspect that what often stifles our witness as Christians is the fact that we have lost a sense of the priority and preciousness of the Gospel. We have lost any sense of there being good news that we cannot help but share with others. We have lost touch with the radical character of the grace of God. And in such a case, the place we must begin is repentance.

"True mission is the weakest and least impressive human activity imaginable. [This weakness] is a necessary precondition for any authentic mission... The church is not made up of spiritual giants; only broken men and women can lead others to the cross."

---

David Bosch, *Spirituality of the Road*

# GETTING A NEW MAP



As a child, I was always impressed by the fact that modest Denmark, just slightly larger by area than Tennessee, controlled the huge territory of Greenland. Greenland was even bigger than the continent of Africa! At least it was on the map that I used as a child.

In order to represent the globe on a flat map, one has to make compromises. In the case of the Mercator projection map which I used in school, the size of the northern hemisphere is greatly exaggerated. This map, drawn by a Flemish mapmaker in 1569, was useful for navigation; however, the fact that it was still being used in classrooms four hundred years later meant that generations of children grew up with a skewed view of the world we live in. In fact, one could fit about fourteen Greenlands onto the continent of Africa. In fact, South America is nearly as large as North America.

New maps have been developed that can do a better job of teaching us about the world. I remember seeing a map on the wall of a presbytery office in Harare, Zimbabwe, that disoriented me. Actually, it reoriented me depicting as it did the southern hemisphere at the

top of the map. The Peters projection map represents the relative size of countries accurately. Other newer maps can teach us to think about the world in new ways.

New maps invite us to consider whether or not we are willing to set aside old maps, both those that are geographical and those that are our mental “maps” that shape how we think. An old map described mission as being from the west to the rest, from the haves to the have nots, from folks like us to folks like them.

Can you open a new map that depicts the world of mission differently? What would it mean to think of mission not as a one-way flow of resources but as a sharing of gifts between members of Jesus’ global family, building up the church for God’s mission?

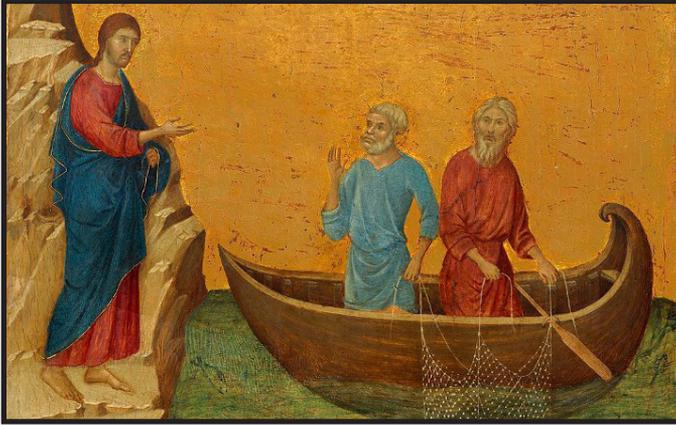
We tend to think of ourselves in the West as the center of all things Christian. Can you picture a map that reminds us that when Jesus said that his disciples would be his witnesses in Jerusalem and all Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, we are at the end of the earth?

How might our map need to be modified in light of Paul Borthwick’s observation that the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Nigeria had by 2012 already planted 500 churches across North America?

How might our mission map need to be changed if it is true that it is more likely that a ten-year-old girl in Kenya understands the Gospel than a ten-year-old in the United States? How might our map need updating to reflect that most of the world’s new Christians are poor, often displaced, and frequently persecuted?

This is one of the reasons that The Outreach Foundation loves to take people out into the world to see how God is at work through the global church. Experiencing the Gospel taking root among God’s people in a different cultural context can help us to see things and understand things in new ways. In many ways, we are still at the end of the earth. And sometimes our brothers and sisters in Christ can help us to see how our maps can be updated.

# OFF BALANCE



The Gospels make it clear that Jesus had a way of throwing people off balance – living by his own set of values that challenged the prevailing ideas about God, and the position and power of the religious authorities.

He would say things like, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you... He who would be greatest among you must become the servant of all... God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son... I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me.”

They couldn’t contain Jesus in their religious boxes. They couldn’t keep him inside the lines. They couldn’t even keep him on the home team’s turf.

He’d take off to Tyre and Sidon or the Decapolis with its Gentiles. Once Jesus took the disciples to Caesarea Philippi at the base of Mt. Hermon, a place given over to the worship of Caesar and the god Pan. It was there that he asked the twelve disciples who people said that he was. Then the more penetrating question came: “Who do you say that I am?”

Jesus was always moving through the conventional barriers, speaking to those at society's margins, spending time with those who knew that they were sinners and those who did not, challenging those who had reduced God to something manageable. He was always reaching through customary cultural expectations to demonstrate what the Kingdom and grace are all about, reaching out to disclose the very character of God.

He reached out to all saying, "You matter because you are created in the image and likeness of God. God loves you. Listen to my words for in them you will find life and hope. Receive me and be at peace."

Dear friends, there is nothing that we can do to make God love us more. There is nothing that we can do to make God love us less. As we give ourselves to him in faith, we are freed by the grace of God from the burden of saving ourselves. Good news, indeed.

"Missionary zeal does not grow out of intellectual beliefs, nor out of theological arguments, but out of love."

---

Roland Allen

# FLIGHT TO NOWHERE



Like some of you, I spent a good bit of time in airplanes. My work with The Outreach Foundation has taken me to 34 countries and 45 states. A few years ago, I read in a London newspaper about an Indian Airlines engineer named Bahadur Chand Gupta who, following his retirement, decided to try to make some money offering airplane rides. He figured that in a poor country such as India, where 99% of the population has never experienced air travel but many are interested in flying, he might be able to set up a little business. He bought an old, broken down Airbus 300, and moved it to a field outside New Delhi. Each Saturday morning, scores of people come to ride on his plane.

Gupta sits in the cockpit. His wife leads the team of flight attendants. They use a battery-powered portable PA system to give the pre-flight safety instructions. After they take off and reach cruising altitude, his wife and the others serve in-flight refreshments from tea carts. They often encounter turbulence, and have to hurriedly re-fasten their seatbelts. Before landing, the passengers hear the obligatory announcement about returning seatbacks and tray tables to their full, upright, and locked positions. And they land.

Yet what you need to be aware of is that the plane is missing a wing and a tail section, and never gets off the ground. The article quoted a young teacher named Jasmine, and I mean not to make fun of her, who said after the flight, “It was much more beautiful than I ever imagined.” But just imagine if she had really flown! Imagine if she had actually felt what it is like to climb into the sky, if she had been able to look down upon her village from 10,000 feet.

For me, that plane has become a kind of metaphor for the church. So often God’s people get focused on themselves, and forget that we are called to be out in the world proclaiming good news to those who desperately long for it, binding up the broken and the broken-hearted, laboring for justice, displaying God’s glory and grace. We have been blessed to be a blessing. Too often, instead of soaring on the winds of God’s Spirit, we go through the motions, sitting broken a few meters off the ground, pretending.

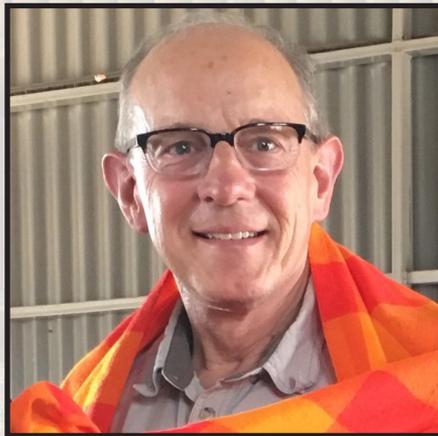
The truth is that we are all a bit broken, and we do forget that we have been blessed to be a blessing. But know this friends, YOU ARE SENT. That is why God brings us together, to equip us to live in the world in ways that disclose his glory and grace. I hope that you know that God can use you as he can use no one else, your passion and gifts, your experience and your networks, the things that thrill you and the things that frighten you. He sends you to the places where you live and shop and study and work and play so that you can share his love. He sends you to speak a word of hope to a world that is broken and afraid, to bind up the wounded, to love those who know not love, to care for those in need, to give and serve in ways that bless, to show his love and tell of his amazing grace.

In Acts 4, we read that the religious authorities ordered Peter and John not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But the disciples answered them, “Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

May the Lord fill each one of us with such an overflowing love.



## Stories and Reflections: God's People in Mission



**Rob Weingartner** served as executive director of **The Outreach Foundation** from 2002-2020. Prior to that he pastored congregations in Indiana and Ohio for twenty years. Rob can be reached at [robweingartner57@gmail.com](mailto:robweingartner57@gmail.com).

The mission of The Outreach Foundation is connecting Presbyterians in long-term, cross-cultural partnerships in order to build the church's capacity to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. For more information about Outreach please visit [www.theoutreachfoundation.org](http://www.theoutreachfoundation.org).