

"YWAM and the frontiers: A Short-term agency takes the Long Look"

By Todd Johnson

A relatively new phenomenon in the missions movement of the past three centuries is the short-term mission. In the days of William Carey, or even as late as the middle of the twentieth century, it was not practical for a candidate to go overseas for a six-month period since many early pioneer missionaries took that long or longer to travel to the field. For this reason, the short-term mission movement grew proportionately with advancements in travel technology. Before 1960, though many people went out on mission trips that were shorter than two years, it was not until the jet-age that the short-term missions movement began to experience measurable growth.

One short-term mission organization that emerged was Youth With A Mission (YWAM). In 1960, Loren Cunningham founded YWAM with the vision of giving young people a positive, short-term exposure to missions and evangelism. American young people with no qualifications or experience were challenged to leave their hometowns and share the gospel in other lands.

By 1969, YWAM had moved its headquarters to Europe, thus giving itself more exposure to the Middle East and Africa. In a few short years, there were YWAM workers in Asia, South America, Australia, and New Zealand, soon occupying every continent. YWAM grew exponentially so that today there are nearly 4000 full-time staff equally distributed in three major regions: the Americas, Europe/Africa, and Pacific/Asia. Over the last 25 years, the basic purpose of YWAM has been to give young people experience in dynamic cross-cultural missions and evangelism.

YWAM meets the Frontiers

The history of the frontier missions movement *within* YWAM began in 1979 when Kalafi Moala, a Tongan member of YWAM's international council, sat under the teaching of Dr. Ralph Winter, founder and director of the U.S. Center for World Mission. Moala felt that although he had heard about "hidden peoples" before, Dr. Winter "grasped the lens of my camera and brought the fuzzy concepts into sharp focus". From that moment on, Moala began to tirelessly encourage YWAM in the direction of frontier missions and significant events began occurring in rapid succession. Leaders in Amsterdam, Lausanne, Bangkok, and other locations began catching the vision for the frontiers. Ed Dayton and Don Richardson met with international YWAM leaders in Chiang Mai, Thailand and spent a week challenging them to aim their efforts more strategically toward the frontiers. Over the next few years, YWAM leaders continued to be influenced by "frontier visionaries" including Theodore Williams, Dr. Tom Brewster, and George Patterson. By the beginning of 1984, there were YWAM leaders and workers on all seven continents committed to reaching the unreached peoples.

By 1984 Moala was holding the title of Pacific and Asia Regional Director and looking for practical ways to reach the unreached in Asia. Primarily based on his desire to strategically focus on this task, he called a meeting for several leaders who had expressed a commitment to the frontiers. Out of this meeting came the much-needed momentum in YWAM for church-planting among unreached peoples. A coalition of like-minded leaders called Frontier Peoples Project (FPP) was also formed as a result of this meeting. Simultaneously, YWAM workers in several countries anxious to be involved in church-planting voiced their need for support and resources. FPP has taken on the responsibility of facilitating their efforts, as well as opening up new fields for ministry to unreached peoples. Representatives met again recently to solidify goals and to check their progress in relation to frontier missions.

An international short-term mission agency faces particular challenges when seriously considering church-planting among unreached peoples. How this organization makes an impact on

the unreached peoples of the world remains to be seen, but the specific lessons it learns in the attempt will undoubtedly be helpful to others in similar circumstances.

Words Take on a New Meaning

As the concept of church-planting among unreached peoples gains popularity, terminology within YWAM must be clarified. The precise meaning of "church-planting", "long-term", or "unreached peoples" can be crucial when goals and strategies are laid out. For example, if five years ago you asked a YWAM worker to make a long-term commitment, he might have favorably responded by committing himself to a project for one or possibly two years. Commitments longer than that were quite rare. In that light, "short-term" is defined as two weeks to six months. On the other hand, traditional mission agencies have always considered "short-term" to mean one or two years. Settling these types of discrepancies will result in a common understanding among mission groups which is essential as YWAM becomes more involved in long-term work.

Short-term missionaries must learn to think like long-termers when considering a long-term commitment. For example, short-term missions do not generally emphasize language learning. There simply isn't sufficient time to learn a language well enough to communicate the gospel if one is only going to be somewhere for two to six months. One must rely on nationals or interpreters. Frontier missions, however, necessitates a greater commitment. Generally, language-learning consumes at least the first year. As a result, YWAM workers expecting to do long-term frontier missions work are now taking language-learning more seriously.

Development of Schools

Training schools including the School of Evangelism (SOE) and the Discipleship Training School (DTS) have provided a great boost to the effectiveness of YWAM workers around the world. These programs tend to be short, practical, high-intensity packages that prepare the worker for short-term ministry. In the past few years intermediate schools have been started that infuse "frontier vision" into the hearts of students. Today, with many bases directing resources to the frontiers, new training programs are being developed with an aim toward equipping YWAM workers for church-planting. These new programs are longer than the DTS or SOE and upon completion they require a longer commitment to a subsequent project. One notable program is the School of Missions (SOM) in Amsterdam which focuses on reaching unreached peoples in major cities. A YWAM model for ministry to ethnic groups in a urban setting already exists in Amsterdam, and the SOM is attempting to duplicate this effort in other cities. Kalafi Moala's home base in Yokohama, Japan will be the site of the first training school in YWAM devoted exclusively to church-planting among unreached peoples.

The curriculum of the new frontier missions schools includes cultural anthropology, language-learning techniques, documentation skills, the history of missions, and many similar subjects. Principles taught in the lectures are designed to be directly applied in ethnic communities nearby. From the outset of the program, the student feels responsible to use the knowledge he gains in everyday, practical ways. In some of these programs, students take only the first third of the course in their homeland and the remaining two-thirds is spent among an unreached people group. Other programs take place entirely overseas.

After successfully completing the program, the "graduate" makes a specified commitment to a particular people. He is expected to have an acceptable level of understanding about the task that lies before him but he is encouraged to continue studying *while he is involved in church-planting*. This on-going education can continue for years, as the worker balances work and study while enriching his ministry as a frontier missionary. Subjects during this time may include Bible,

theology, advanced culture study, history, comparative religions, and other subjects directly applicable to the task of church-planting.

Another significant development in YWAM's educational preparation for the frontiers is the growing number of YWAM workers studying at reputable "missions" universities. Several are presently attending the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary to enrich their understanding of the church-planting venture. Many others have taken the "Perspectives on the World Christian Movement" course now being offered at a hundred locations. This course will soon be offered within YWAM to widen the perspective of the long-term workers. There are also YWAM workers studying at universities around the world in order to better prepare themselves for the task at hand.

Strengths Gained Over the Years

Over the last two decades, YWAM has developed some strengths that will undoubtedly aid in church-planting. One of these is the emphasis placed on prayer and intercession throughout the DTS and SOE programs. From the very day someone enters YWAM, he is encouraged to spend regular times in prayer and taught to listen to God's voice. These skills, when developed, aid the worker in sensitively communicating the gospel cross-culturally. YWAM workers are also taught to pray for the countries of the world and at some bases, unreached people groups are prayed for daily.

Another strength stems from YWAM's international character. Converts from outreaches have been recruited and young people in non-Western countries have been mobilized to such a degree that the percentage of non-Western workers in YWAM is fast approaching the 50% mark. In several countries the number of full-time YWAM expatriates is less than one in ten of the total. International YWAM leaders have set a goal of non-Western workers exceeding 60% of the total number of YWAM workers by the year 1990. As the non-Western world takes on more responsibility in frontier missions, perhaps it is no coincidence that God chose Moala, a non-Westerner, to lead YWAM into the frontiers.

Living a simple lifestyle has been emphasized in YWAM since its inception. This factor is partially responsible for the rapid increase of non-western workers in YWAM as it provides a relatively easy entry for those with lower support. Beyond this, it also reduces the disparity between Western workers and their third world counterparts, whether they be Christian nationals or the non-Christians they are trying to reach.

Potential Obstacles

YWAM's community lifestyle is a strength in connection with short-term projects; however, it may be an obstacle in long-term situations. YWAM workers live in warm, vibrant communities where an attitude of worship and right relationships is upheld. Short-term workers have the security of knowing that there is a large fellowship they can return to for encouragement. In many YWAM locations the communities are very large with 100 or more workers. Although this pattern of large communities nurturing short-term workers has proven itself an effectual means of outreach, it may have to be modified for church-planting situations. In many countries, frontier missions require smaller teams in order to give Christian outreach a lower profile. Those YWAMers who may have grown dependent on the large base model will probably find the transition to small *permanent* teams difficult. On the other hand, many of the lessons learned in a community setting can be applied in a small team context.

Another potential obstacle stems from YWAM's youthfulness. YWAM's entry into the realm of church-planting could be compared to diversification in a business. Essentially, YWAM is offering a new product, church-planting, to a new customer, unreached peoples. Inexperience

makes diversification risky. YWAM is indeed taking a risk. But some older mission agencies have survived these risks and therefore have much to offer short-term agencies interested in long-term work among unreached peoples. Success depends on how willing the older agencies are to give advice and how anxious the younger agencies are to receive it. This apprentice-relationship can remove many of the uncertainties inherent in the transition YWAM presently faces. YWAM's hope for fruitful ministry rests in entering an unprecedented era of collaboration with other missions.

Conclusion

In the past, its leaders believed that YWAM as a whole could philosophically embrace the vision for the frontiers. But today it seems unlikely that every YWAM worker will be included in the focus on the frontiers. Frontier Peoples Project was founded with the understanding that it would be one of many strategic arms of YWAM. Nonetheless, it has become apparent that this venture will fail without strong support from within YWAM and the greater body of Christ. The degree to which people are motivated to give, pray and enthusiastically support frontier missions will decide the future of the movement, both within and without YWAM.

Youth With A Mission is in an infant stage in its relationship to frontier missions. As a short-term agency it faces particular challenges in its attempt to be directly involved in long-term outreach to unreached peoples. How the early stages of development progress will inevitably determine the future of YWAM in frontier missions. Collaboration with other missions and national movements will play a critical role. The training of workers and their strategic placement are also determinants of success. Prayer will open doors and bring many unreached peoples into the kingdom, but perhaps the most essential factor is how whole-heartedly the opportunity itself is embraced by YWAM. For this vision belongs in the heart of God Himself and His unswerving purpose for the nations cannot fail.

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