

Book Review

God's New Envoys: A Bold Strategy for Penetrating "Closed Countries"

By Frank Underhill

God's New Envoys: A Bold Strategy for Penetrating "Closed Countries", by Tetsunao Yamamori. Portland: Multnomah Press, 1987. 190 pp., \$7.95.

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When the twenty-first century begins, an estimated 83% of the world's non-Christian population will reside in countries closed to traditional missionary approaches."

A book that begins with the above statement might be an unfounded distraction from the mainstream of frontier missions literature—or perhaps it has an impact on everything that has been written to date. Because of this, I called Dr. Tetsunao Yamamori and arranged to meet with him when he returned from a recent trip to Africa. This review is based on my reading and our discussion.

For thirty years Yamamori has been a student of church growth and missions, and in this book the strands of his previous writings are woven into a significant new synthesis. He believes this is the most important book he has written, and, while admitting its possible weaknesses, he is committed to its basic arguments. His particular hope is that discussion generated by God's New Envoys will have significant impact on the Singapore '89 conference to be sponsored by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization.

SUMMARY

Following a brief discussion of the mission mandate, Yamamori presents several pages of data to support the "83%" projection of his opening statement. In light of the serious limitations on traditional missionary access, he proposes a new breed of missionaries, whom he calls "God's New Envoys" (GNE's). Their unique mandate is ". . . to reach the growing number of non-Christians who are out of reach of traditional missionary efforts" (p. 56). Much more than "tentmakers," GNE's are distinguished from traditional missionaries not only by financial support, but also by training and strategy.

Among four major groups involved in world evangelization, GNE's are, according to Yamamori, the newest and smallest. The other three include traditional missionaries, full-time Christian workers, and witnessing Christian laity. GNE's will be recruited from pre-, mid-, and post-career sources. They will be uniquely prepared professionally, biblically, and missiologically. They must not only be flexible, but also spiritually, emotionally, and physically resilient.

Yamamori suggests a four-part measurement of openness to identify areas where GNE strategy is appropriate. Countries with an "hospitality index" (the inverse of government restrictiveness) of less than five out of ten are the targets for GNE's. Other indexes include conversion rate, receptivity and the need for development. In restricted-access areas where conversion rates are high, GNE's should be deployed to participate in evangelism and discipling opportunities. Where there is receptivity to the Gospel, GNE's may be the only opportunity for a personal explanation of the gospel message among unreached people groups who live under restrictive governments. Windows of opportunity for GNE's include job openings and potential relief and development projects in Third World countries.

Yamamori is careful to point out, however, that where the hospitality index is high, i.e., where governments are not opposed to open evangelistic methods, the most efficient workers are traditional missionaries. The population explosion in these areas means there is an ever-increasing need for traditional missionaries in a “harvest mode.” In contrast, GNE’s will focus their efforts in a “preparation mode” where their jobs or relief and development projects provide opportunities for personal witness.

Two chapters in the middle of the book are devoted to a significant subset of GNE’s—Christian relief and development workers. Based on statistics showing the need for relief work, Yamamori argues for “symbiotic ministries” that combine evangelism and social action. This is especially strategic in restricted-access situations where physical needs are acute. He also provides a thorough review of the biblical basis for this type of ministry. In short, Yamamori believes that the “battle over evangelism versus social action in the Church’s mission is both wasteful and unnecessary” (p. 131). In restricted-access situations “symbiotic ministry” is imperative.

The book concludes with helpful information and guidance for those readers who are moving toward restricted-access ministry. Lists of activities and institutions for training and placement begin to outline a practical path toward involvement. A limited bibliography concludes the book.

SIGNIFICANCE

The International Journal of Frontier Missions is devoted to intergenerational, international, and interdisciplinary discussion of the personal devotion and organizational structures required to provide “A Church for every People by the Year 2000.” It is in light of these distinctives that I would like to propose the potential significance of God’s New Envoys.

The IJFM seeks to promote intergenerational dialogue between senior and junior mission leaders. The effort to harness wisdom and experience to future potential must be informed by a sober assessment of change in the world. Drawing from the old and the new, senior and junior leaders should consider the impact of issues Yamamori raises. Where past methods are applicable, they must be deployed with expertise; where restrictive change has made some methods obsolete, both generations must work together humbly to seek access to and effectiveness among the world’s unreached peoples.

The IJFM seeks to cultivate an international fraternity of thought in the development of frontier missiology. Of the 100,000 GNE’s proposed by Yamamori, half may come from outside the United States (p. 58). International involvement in defining strategies for restricted-access areas will be essential.

Implementing workable models for multinational teams will press the worldwide Body of Christ into closer cooperation under the most challenging situations. New Testament principles for relating among poor and rich, slave and free, Jew and Greek, male and female, and clergy and laity will be refined under new fire. The powder keg of North-South relations will heighten the stakes for success or failure as international Christians work together for God’s glory in the heart of Satan’s kingdom.

The IJFM seeks to highlight the need to maintain, renew, and create mission agencies as vehicles for frontier missions. Implementation of Yamamori’s GNE strategies within existing traditional mission agencies will require change. Among the areas requiring restructuring and development are finances, nonformal relations to maintain security, prayer support systems, and channels of accountability. In some situations, the implementation of GNE strategies may

complement the expansion of traditional missionary work in nearby non-restricted areas. In others, new structures must be formed to focus on particular ways and means of doing frontier missions in restricted-access countries.

The IJFM seeks to encourage multidimensional and interdisciplinary studies. By definition GNE strategies will bring multidimensional and interdisciplinary approaches to the task of world evangelization. The combination of biblical, missiological, intercultural, and professional or business skills requires a “symbiotic” or wholistic approach. Discussions of this potential must be informed by a wide range of expertise in order to make the most of every ministry opportunity .

The IJFM seeks to foster spiritual devotion as well as intellectual growth. Yamamori writes with a tone of devotion and commitment. The personal challenge for those seeking occupational access is great. GNE’s will require deep reservoirs of faith and hope in order to “. . . go up against some of the world’s most awesome police states, entering its most inaccessible lands, and facing some of its most devastating perils of physical torture and disease” (p. 87). Without a profound and lively spiritual fervor, the trials of restricted-access missions will erode and destroy the soul.

The IJFM seeks to advocate “A Church for Every People by the Year 2000.” Yamamori’s “83%” projection assumes the task will be uncompleted by the year 2000. Regardless of the target date, the issues of restricted access must be seriously confronted by all who believe closure is a reasonable goal within our generation. We must not allow zeal for our ultimate objective to obscure the harsh realities that stand in our path. Instead, we should prayerfully discuss and implement bold new strategies such as those suggested by Yamamori if we expect to see progress among the resistant unreached peoples of our time.

LIMITATIONS

The book is not without limitations. The rush to print in order to adequately anticipate Singapore ‘89 may have resulted in the sacrifice of some thoroughness.

Definitions

In my discussion with Dr. Yamamori I asked him about problems of terminology. He admitted that perhaps he should have worked harder at defining the difference between “God’s New Envoys” and “tentmakers.” In order to discuss pressing issues more efficiently, there is need for clear agreement on a set of terms that will describe the potential range currently implied by “tentmaker,” “GNE,” and other labels applied to those involved in restricted-access missions.

Research

The charts and maps used to describe the problem of restricted access are impressive. Upon examination, however, the categories appear to need some modification. The crucial impact that this information could have on the present and future implementation of mission strategies makes it imperative that others proceed with a more careful delineation of the extent and nature of restrictions on traditional missions among unreached peoples. Without further work in this area, weakness in the research that underlies Yamamori’s reasoning could undermine his central arguments and limit progress toward the adjustments needed to address restricted-access missions. Key officials within traditional missions will probably be reluctant to implement radical change without more reliable data.

Relief and Development Emphasis

Unfortunately, it will be easy for the casual reader to misinterpret the focus of the book due to the lengthy section on the rationale and opportunities for relief and development work. What in fact is a discussion of a significant subset of GNE’s can be misconstrued as the primary emphasis. Yamamori’s current role as director of Food for the Hungry lends further support to this misunderstanding. Although relief and development ministry is a critical element of the

overall GNE strategy, it would have been better to present material on this subject as an integral part of the general arguments.

CONCLUSION

This book will not fall short of its purpose if we cannot agree with all that Yamamori proposes. Rather, it will fail if we ignore its call to significant discussion of a radical reorientation to the task of world evangelization. Anyone who is seriously involved in methodologies or strategies for reaching the unreached will want to evaluate God's New Envoys personally.

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