

Editorial: Illusory Progress in Finishing the Task

Unless we change direction, we are likely to end up where we are headed.

—Chinese proverb

One hundred years ago a preponderance of world evangelization plans was circulating through the voice of books, articles, sermons, pamphlets, and other means. Pastors, missionaries, laypeople, students, and women all played a significant role in the dissemination of this information. The church seemed to have all it needed to evangelize the world by the end of the century. The 1890's held forth the promise of much fruit and a universal harvest. Yet when 1900 arrived the goals which seemed so within reach in 1890 were just as distant.

Therefore as we approach another end of century—with the added mystique of an end of millennium—it seemed appropriate to reproduce a few of these plans for this issue of the *IJFM*. They represent the thinking, vision, and passion of fine Christian men and women who sincerely believed that they could be the final generation of humans with unevangelized peoples in their midst. Between their day and ours much ground has been covered. We have been sobered by two World Wars and numerous others. We have been chastised for cultural imperialism. We have seen the power of the emerging third-world church and its missions. Our Christian fraternity is now far more global than that of 100 years ago. We also have the added advantage of learning from the experience of numerous groups promoting global causes other than world evangelization.

Goals for the environment as a model

Take, for example, the environmentalists. On Earth Day, April 22, 1970, a great deal of excitement was generated by the idea that something could be done to save our dying planet. Unfortunately, the days and weeks, then years since this meeting showed the true colors of many of those who were initially excited by the possibilities. When all is said and done, not much was done. On the twentieth anniversary of Earth Day this April it was apparent that substantial progress (of the type that will solve problems) had

not been made in those twenty years though public awareness is definitely on the rise. Environmentalists are now trying to capitalize on this surge of interest but they are not holding their breaths and they know that nothing short of honest commitment will get mankind out of the mess it's gotten itself into.

We too can look back on many conferences on world evangelization—whether London 1888, Edinburgh 1910, Berlin 1966, Lausanne 1974, or Edinburgh 1980, Singapore 1989, San Antonio 1989, Lausanne II 1989—and see much enthusiasm at the time of the events. Conference after conference promises to deliver world evangelization. All the resources are there, the men and women ready to go, all the information at hand... one *kairos* moment after another. But each time, when the excitement dies down, the honest commitment to go to the unreached is only taken up by the "fanatical few". Even in the last twenty years, with computers and awesome communication technology, we still fall far short of where we should be. The church's awareness of the unfinished task does seem, however, to be on the rise. But if you watch the situation carefully you won't be convinced that enough momentum is going in the direction of the unevangelized.

Do we have the same problem?

Thus the same thing that plagues the environmentalists now plagues us. Are they enjoying more success than we are? Thousands are beginning to conserve energy, buy environmentally sound products, and recycle cans, bottles and paper. Only time will tell if this momentum leads to solving some of the difficult problems we face.

The aim of the earth day celebrants (and anyone else concerned about the environment) is to save the planet and thus save others and themselves. The Christian church is attempting to spread the good news to those who have never heard, thus saving others and themselves. Therefore both environmentalists and Great Commission Christians are dealing with people who feel they will get by fine without the added pressure of a conscience (or at

least that's what they think). To make matters worse many have convinced themselves that they have nothing to gain by caring for others. That makes it doubly tough for someone to find meaning either in *50 ways to save the planet* or in *Finishing the unfinished task*.

Illusions of progress

Lester Brown, director of the World Watch Institute, introduces us to a far more subtle danger in his editorial "The Illusion of Progress" from *The State of the World 1990*. Our planet has seen enormous gains in world food output and global economic product since mid-century. Technological advances are increasing yields. It seems like we may have our problems licked in a few short years. Yet during that same period the world lost nearly one fifth of its topsoil from croplands, a fifth of its tropical rain forests, and tens of thousands of plant and animal species. Thus economic performance has had dire environmental consequences. What can be done? 1989 was the year many of these issues moved into the political arena. But Lester Brown soberly concludes, "Unfortunately, rising political awareness has not yet translated into policies that will reverse the deteriorating situation."

How far will awareness take us?

Are we in the same dilemma? In the last 20 years have we created a massive amount of talk and awareness about the unreached peoples without seeing the necessary policy changes in mission agencies and churches? Are we creating an illusion of progress in relation to finishing the task of world evangelization? Some progress has been made in the last 20 years but at the present rate how soon will we reach the final goal of an evangelized world?

We have to ask ourselves these difficult questions whenever we are dealing with important issues. Environmentalists ask "What influence will increased public awareness have on the environment?" Great Commission Christians ask "What will the churches and missions do with new-found information on the unreached peoples?" Without answers to these questions we can't seriously pursue our goals.

Isn't one hundred years a long time?

The sobering fact facing us today is that in many ways little has changed in one hundred years. Neglected fields of the world are still neglected. If we are honest with ourselves we see that Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists have received relatively little attention in the past 600 years. In a move to shield ourselves from blame, many of us now consider these peoples resistant instead of neglected. That relieves us of a great deal of responsibility.

Are Muslims really resistant?

We, however, are not allowed the luxury of consigning the fate of Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist peoples (or other unreached peoples) to a "resistant" category. Even today a little creative energy in outreach to these peoples paints an entirely different picture. "Bill and Jane" (pseudonyms) point out just how far we may have to go to give Muslims a true picture of what it means for them to become followers of Jesus without abandoning their culture. What makes this approach controversial or revolutionary is not that it is new. Examples of contextualization of the gospel among foreign peoples are legion both in the Bible and in history. What is unique about this approach is how little has been attempted in our day to help Muslims accept Christ apart from Western culture (or any other culture besides their own). Bill and Jane here accurately pinpoint cultural baggage that tends to get incorporated into new churches. One need not accept every step they have taken but their spirit should be emulated by every missionary to the Muslims: "I am here to help your people find Jesus in the midst of your people and your way of doing things." After all, that is what Jesus had

in mind when he sent his disciples out to disciple all peoples.

Who does God use to spread his love?

Another problem we encounter is our narrow-mindedness—our inability to see just who God can use to pass on the blessing to the next people. If we don't fall prey to the view that only a particular denomination or mission has the whole truth then we just as easily claim national superiority stating either that affluent Westerners make the best missionaries or that third world missionaries are all that is needed to evangelize huge pockets of the unevangelized. Yet even the briefest look at the historical development of Christianity shows just how broad God's perspective is.

To strengthen that thesis we offer you a compelling look into the life of Nikolai Il'minskii, the great lay Orthodox missionary to the Kazan Tatars and other ethnic groups of what is now Soviet Asia. Il'minskii was working among the Tatars about the same time J. Hudson Taylor was getting the China Inland Mission going. Had the two men met they would have found much in common. Il'minskii worked for many years on behalf of the non-Russians and was able to give them considerable help in their understanding of Christ. Ironically some of these groups are now listed as unreached peoples since new efforts are needed among them.

What do we have to give today?

Finally, at the risk of repeating the past, we look at the resources present in the church today. These are not potential resources—they actually exist. The sad fact is that they are used almost exclusively on ourselves.

If the Earl of Shaftsbury thought the church could evangelize the globe fifty times over given its resources in 1860, where does that leave us today? Surely we must be able to evangelize it one thousand times over. Oddly enough, one doesn't hear much talk like that today. Is it our preoccupation with ourselves that draws us away from serious thinking on world evangelization? Or have we lost our ability to turn away from ourselves long enough to help those who will never have a chance unless we do?

Making a step toward real progress

I wish I knew the answers to these questions. Many of us feel a distinct responsibility and burden to speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves. We know that deep in our hearts most of us do care about those who have never heard. But, perhaps, like our concern for global warming, we just don't know what to do about it.

A good place to start is to encourage mission agencies to put people among the least evangelized instead of only responding to requests from peoples that have already been reached. Only then will policy begin to match our enthusiasm for the concept. To help you with that step we will publish a list of the least evangelized peoples in the October 1990 issue of this journal.

We can certainly reach all the peoples in the world by the year 2000 if we put into practice what we know to be true. Otherwise that goal may be as illusive as it was 100 years ago.

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June 1990

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