

Finishing the Task: The Vision of the ISFM

■ What is the most urgent task facing the Body of Christ today? Is it church growth? What about our felt needs? And what about our vision, the vision of members of the International Society of Frontier Missiology? Probing questions indeed, all of which need to be answered in order to finish the task which remains. The following address given at the annual meeting of the ISFM helps us to focus on these important issues.

By Greg H. Parsons

Introduction

Recently I heard about evangelists who had been shot in Peru. I realized after reading a press-release that I had met one of these men and had personally heard his testimony of his witness to his people, the Quechua. He told how the Indians of the highlands of South America have suffered greatly for hundreds of years. And since Protestantism entered Latin America a century ago, the evangelical Indians have doubly suffered. As he told his story, my heart went out to this man and his family, and I imagined with pain what it must have been like to suffer for the Lord through many generations. He had been the lead translator for the Ayacucho Quechua Bible. While returning to Ayacucho from a visit with believers in a remote Quechua village he was killed by "El Sendero Luminoso," the deadly Shining Path revolutionaries of Peru.

News of his martyrdom brought me to tears, not merely for his family and those who had been directly ministered to by him, but for the church in the U.S. Just before reading of his death, I had been involved in some discussions at church about the frustrations and pressures committed Christians here at home were facing. By contrast to this brother in Peru, however, those pressures seemed terribly trivial. And I asked myself: where is the church in its warfare against evil? Where is the church that years ago sent missionaries to disciple this man and his family, but perhaps failed to adequately support his ministry in prayer? Where is the church that all too often doesn't even have a clue that this type of thing goes on, much less tries to understand the ministry of a man so different from us in culture, yet, like us, so in love with the Lord?

Certainly we don't know all that God expected to accomplish in allowing this dear brother to be violently killed. I

learned that thousands came to his funeral and thousands more witnessed the funeral procession. But his martyrdom has renewed my heart and brought deeper commitment to do what is necessary to motivate the church to finish the job of evangelizing all the peoples of the world even by the year 2000.

Yet it gives me cause to reflect. I remember just how I, myself, responded to the news when I first heard it. Once I realized that this was a man I knew, my reactions toward the incident changed radically. I wasn't just reading another press-release about some distant Christians who were suffering. I wondered, do we need to feel or see things firsthand to know they are real? How often we are "touched" by this or that ministry, but allow only those we know to become our concern. It is only natural to respond to needs that are near to us or felt by us rather than to others which are perhaps more critical but about which we are less informed. One may be more urgent than the other, but the problem arises when we are so taken up with things close at hand, whether it's ministry or just day-to-day struggles, so that we cannot see what is the most urgent of all.

I am reminded of a ministry that began about the same time as the one with which I serve. That ministry is as well known as any other in our country. It helps families in their relationships with each other, how to discipline and guide their children, and what to expect at every stage of a child's life. Tens of thousands get their various publications, and over a million receive their main publication. The difference between the response of the evangelical public to their ministry and ours is, among other things, that they are meeting a felt need. By contrast, those of us directly involved in the mission industry ask people to reach out beyond their

own world to a world often so different and so hidden from their eyes (in part by the secular and Christian media's portrayal) that they find it hard to believe what we tell them.

In 1964 the late Donald McGavran started the School of World Mission and Institute of Church Growth at Fuller Theological Seminary. Since then, two separate strands have resulted from his emphases there. Peter Wagner picked up the emphasis on church growth which seeks to answer the question, "What makes the church GROW where it is?" Ralph Winter, on the other hand, was burdened by his emphasis on *panta ta ethne*, and insistently asks, "What makes the church GO where it isn't?" One strand—church growth—will, with the Lord's blessing, happen after the other succeeds. But, generally, the church cannot go where it isn't unless someone (a Christian missionary) from some church somewhere starts the process by establishing a beachhead in that unreached people group or culture—the second strand. The missionary's work there in that culture is not done until the church is established and becomes a strong, evangelizing indigenous church movement, with all the ramifications of that involvement. To be sure, church growth is very popular. Every pastor wants and needs his church to grow. Some of my seminary classmates continually seek further training from the experience of rapidly growing churches, hoping thereby to produce the same results in their own. But what exactly do we mean by "church"—the church long established within a culture that needs to grow, either locally or by multiplication, or do we mean the church that still needs to be established within a culture before it can begin to grow numerically, organically, spiritually or in any other way?

With all the emphases flooding our churches and missions today, the cru-

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cial question is: how do we as a Society keep ourselves on the frontier mission track? As I see it, in addition to the crucial givens—namely, prayer, and deeper spiritual commitment, if not full blown revival—three things must happen to keep us on track: 1) our vision must be clarified; 2) we must be careful how we communicate the vision; and 3) we must be personally and organizationally committed to that vision.

Clarity of the Vision of a Church for Every People by the Year 2000

Quite commonly in our local churches today we are bombarded by issues from every side. I'm told by my church to write my congressman or several TV stations or advertisers about the declining morals in our land. I'm encouraged to get involved in marches, "sit-downs" or "pray-ins" for this or against that. And, of course, I'm told to get behind this particular ministry of the church or that special focus of my friend...

The so-called vision of the church is so broad and general—not to mention huge and seemingly un-doable—that I can easily resign myself to doing nothing. Rarely if ever does anyone help us to see how all these concerns fit into God's overall plans.

Then we come to missions—that word that some try not to use because of its colonial connotations—and we get no further clarity. "Missions" can mean everything from Christian college students playing soccer in Mexico, to handing out tracts at the airport, to rebuilding a burned-out structure in riot-torn Los Angeles, to whatever happens to come to the missions committee for funding.

Sometimes the issues aren't any clearer even for the ones who are supposed to be leading the charge in the local church. What is the vision we are trying to communicate? All these good ministries may be necessary steps toward an overall goal and may contribute to the training of future frontier missionaries. But if we continue to stress them, calling each sociological concern a legitimate aspect of our mission goal, we will continue to give an unclear message to the church.

In other words, if our vision of what missions is doesn't get any clearer, agencies and denominations will not be able to lead as much as they have in the past. How we plan and act through our different ministries will shape how people respond to our leadership in the future.

What is the goal? In general terms, the clear biblical goal is to make God's name known in all the earth. The more specific terms, however, which are used

in the Bible speak of nations, peoples, tribes, families, tongues, etc. (see Gen. 12, Rev. 5 and 7, etc.). Although we are not told in the Scriptures exactly what those terms mean we will need to leave it to greater men than I to develop what they believe are the best definitions for these terms. Yet though definitions for these terms may be off slightly in this way or that, or they may need to be further refined here or there, they were agreed upon by a wide spectrum of missions executives at a meeting sponsored by the Lausanne Committee and chaired by Wade Coggins and Ed Dayton in 1982. They are the best available to date.

First, we have their simple and by now familiar definition for peoples, the biblical word *ethne*. It is the largest group of people within which the gospel can spread without encountering barriers of culture or language.

Second, since we know that the Lord in the past has worked to spread the message about Himself through the church, we next begin to talk about the necessity of the presence of the church in a given culture or people group. Thus their definition for an unreached group is made in terms of the existence and need for a viable, indigenous, evangelizing church movement in that culture. The one key indicator is the presence or absence of a church. Therefore we hasten to add that for a people to be "reached" does not mean that all the members, or even the majority of that culture are Christians. It only means that all of them now have access to the true gospel by means of a viable local indigenous Christian witness.

Once we see the need to establish the church in order for the gospel to be able to spread in a given culture, it follows that we need to establish a church in each culture or group. It is not enough to extract converts from their unreached culture and plug them into the church of another culture. Most cross-cultural missionaries clearly recognize that every culture needs an indigenous church of its own in order to effectively evangelize that entire culture "to the fringes," to use McGavran's term.

We surely must also admit that unless and until the church is planted within every culture, we have not fulfilled the biblical mission mandate of discipling every tribe, tongue, people and nation. Revelation 5 and 7 remind us that representatives from all these will be in heaven. It may also be true that other things need to be done, but certainly this is the minimum.

Therefore the question we are forced to ask ourselves is, which is most strategic? Is it to evangelize a million more

additional white middle-class Americans, and in the process save a few, or to establish the church in an unreached tribe of 1000 or less, giving those individuals previously hidden from the gospel access to it? Is it not true that no matter what we do in our culture, or in any other "Christian" reached culture, our job as Christians and the Church is not done until that tribe, and all other tribes, can also hear? We can reach 100 million Russians through the Commission and other efforts—and we should! But unless someone moves out in "frontier missions efforts" to the 130 plus major ethnic groups in the former USSR, we will not be any closer to fulfilling the biblical mission mandate. Too often, from our United States cultural perspective, we look for quantity as a sign of God's blessing. It is also easier to raise funds for things of which the average person in the pew is aware. One would hope we can see both the millions from that large group as well as the few (at least) from the smaller groups come to our Lord, but we must pursue every group, not just the large or easy ones. We are forced on the basis of biblical revelation to hold as a high priority the establishment of a church where it has not been planted before.

Beyond this the ISFM has the additional dimension as part of its purpose: the focus of the year 2000. Time and space does not allow the inclusion of even some of the events of the last few months or even years. It seems that God is working in accelerated and amazing ways. Yet we don't believe God must finish the task by the year 2000, nor that—humanly speaking—it is possible. But we do believe He can do it, we do believe it is possible, and we do believe it is a helpful focus that has and will continue to catalyze the prayers and plans of Christian ministries.

Communication of the Vision

This point leads us to the second: how we communicate the vision to others. Some feel all this detail gets lost "in the pew." I find that whenever I try to explain what I have just said in simple terms, those listening have not been confused but, rather, get motivated. I admit that to explain definitions, vision, etc., all may seem a bit complicated at first, and we may have to do it more than once. But by stating and restating as simply as possible, I find that those to whom I speak not only begin to understand but really become excited about finishing the task which remains.

Back in 1982 while I was raising support to join the staff of the U.S. Center for World Mission, I used an overhead with two parallel flashlights with over-

lapping beams to describe the distinctions I have just made. I had already mentioned what the Bible has to say about our mission and noted some of the detail about the current work-force available in this process. I pointed out the fact that 85-90% of the resources allocated for missions goes to mission projects where the church is already strong (one flashlight beam) and the remaining 10-15% goes to the frontiers (the overlapping beam of the other flashlight).

In showing this overhead, I noted that we were not suggesting that the missionaries working where the church is strong are working in the wrong places, but rather that we need a whole new recruiting effort to send an equal amount of missionaries to the unreached frontiers (the rest of the beam of the second flashlight).

We have seen quite an increase in missionaries going out in the last ten years—many of them from non-Western or Two-Thirds World missions. The national church's involvement in missions to the unreached is the great new energizing event of our day. No longer can they be called "daughter" churches; they have truly become "mother" sending churches themselves to many peoples around the world.

Generally speaking, those cultures which are still unreached, which constitute what we call the frontiers, reside in areas where it is very difficult to live and work, much less to penetrate with the gospel. This is easily verified by glancing at the Hindu and Buddhist religious blocs, just to mention two groups. For a missionary who has been imbedded in another culture, perhaps in a reached one, and then ask him to move to an unreached group, no matter how near, is like tearing him or her away from his family. Often, our organization has stated that missionaries should not necessarily move from a reached to an unreached people, nor that all new workers should go only to unreached peoples. What we have said is that those missionaries (new and old) which are living and working in a well-established church in a reached culture should be mobilizing as they work: that is, they need to disciple the believers they work with, imparting mission vision to them, challenging them to become pioneer missionaries to the final frontiers.

In response to the challenge of the unreached, some churches have set as their highest priority the sending of church planting missionaries to unreached peo-

ples. In spite of what some may assume, some of us who are immersed in the vision of unreached peoples actually often insist that it would be far more strategic for us to support missionaries, wherever they may be, who are mobilizing others to the frontiers.

Neither of these options, however, causes us the concern that we see in a pattern which all too often repeats itself throughout the United States as well as around the world. I speak of the tendency for the established church to spend much more on its own nurture than on its extension. The massive amount that goes to serving ourselves in the local church is frightening. How do we deal with the inequities of focus and funding when so little, it seems, goes to frontier ministries, or even to missions in general.

We say that every church needs mission as a part of its ministry. We really believe that the local church will not be balanced and healthy unless it is reach-

A cause of great concern... is a pattern which all too often repeats itself in the United States as well as around the world... the tendency for the established church to spend much more on its own nurture than on its extension.

ing out beyond its own ministries that will benefit itself and its near neighbors. To be sure not all pastors agree with this view, as we well know. Just less than a month ago, one of our staff was in a meeting of pastors. During a conference break-time session, they were talking about how to reach their cities in the U.S. for Christ. Since part of the purpose statement of the organizers of that meeting was "a church for every people," our staff member felt that certainly a part of that discussion should be how to establish a church in each of the unreached peoples. Others did not agree. In fact, one of the pastors in the group gently and kindly told him that he could understand his vision since he was part of an organization that focused on this, but that he should refrain from trying to make his passion a part of everyone else's. Yet if our vision to see every people have a viable church is truly a biblical one, then shouldn't every Christian have the same passion—even if they don't apply it directly in their own vocational choice?

At times, however, I think that we "mission types" are guilty also in helping to create fuzzy missions thinking

and promotion. Some of the terminology we have used over the years has helped foster this miscommunication. "Overseas" makes us think of ships and to conclude, of course, that missions is only outside our boarders. Just try to raise support for working with the Kurds in Tennessee! "Foreign fields" makes us think of country boundaries and location rather than culture and language distinctions. Even words like "lost" can be misused and lead to confusion and a lack of clarity. Most of those we consider lost don't themselves feel lost. There will always be "lost" people in any culture (due to new births and the like), and the church must reach out in evangelism to them. But we must not forget the need for frontier missions in all our work to reach the lost, wherever they may be. Lostness is not as important as the concept of access to the gospel when it comes to mission thinking and planning. Any church in the world can reach out in evangelism (though it may need prodding). But many of them don't. That is why missions and missionaries end up doing inter-church mission work in areas where the church should be on its own. Even worse is when the church is openly hostile to the unreached group(s) around them.

Yet another area of miscommunication is in our mission publications and productions. How is it that every ministry that needs prayer or finances is called "one of the neediest areas of the world?" If we continue to talk in such general terms, that can apply to all non-Christians, cities, regions—including my pagan white American neighbor or the man on the street in Calcutta—then we will continue to see more and more committed Christians without clear missions thinking. Increasingly we will see Christians and churches set their own agendas and plans. This brings me to the final point.

Personal and Organizational Commitment to the Vision

The bottom line is, *whose passion is this?* We can complain about one aspect or another of the focus on the frontiers—but it finally comes down to a biblical bottom line basis and perspective. The Scriptures never tell us to pray for the lost. We are told to pray to the Lord to send out workers (laborers, Matt. 9:38). We are told to pray for those serving in ministry (Col. 4:2-6). We see in Paul's life and in the book of Acts a pattern of discipling that establishes a church, moves leadership into place and

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fairly quickly moves on. Sure, he continues to keep tabs on them, writing to them, correcting them, etc., but Paul is always driven by the Holy Spirit to move on to new areas (Rom. 15:19b-25).

Of course, Paul didn't have the challenge of having to learn difficult languages and cultures everywhere he went as we have today, especially when ministering to the unreached peoples. Perhaps his apostolic gifts made it easier for him. Perhaps it was his desire to get things established and God's Word grounded in the lives of the believers before the wolves came in to try to scatter the flock.

No matter what we may argue, he certainly had the passion and drive. We must see and experience a new infusion of that same passion and drive today. I'm sure that often people come to you, as they do to me, with great visions and plans for their lives and ministry. They want our stamp of approval, and they seek our "covering" over their "calling." Regularly we find people who want us to bless their vision. Yet calling individuals to a vision greater than their own must be part of our recruiting. We can let them participate in the process, but ultimately we have to draw a line with what the Scriptures say about the priority of making His name known among the nations. By simply blessing a person's ministry plans, we may actually derail the working of the Lord in his life. As mission executives and church leaders, we may have bought into the standard textbook thinking about Baby Boomers or Busters which says that we need to let them work through their own role with hands-on participation and help fulfill their lives. By proceeding in this way, we are keeping them from the fullness of ministry they might have by following in the footsteps and leadership of people who have walked with Jesus for two to five times as long.

Let me illustrate. During seminary I worked with a college group at a church in Dallas. One of the girls from that group later married, and she and her husband joined Wycliffe Bible Translators. He is a pilot. After going through orientation, they didn't know whether they would go to South America, Africa or Asia. Two or three countries in various parts of the world were possible options. But it was up to the mission to decide.

To me that makes a great deal of

sense. Otherwise, young recruits, seeking a role that would fit their own life goals, might readily overlook vital ministries which later they might realize fulfilled their vision perhaps even more perfectly than the one they would have chosen. History gives us countless examples.

But how can a personnel secretary deal with the Boomer/Buster insistence that the Lord is leading them? Would Paul have felt any concern at all for "career fulfillment" in his life or with those whom he worked with side-by-side? Agencies like Wycliffe that refuse to let the candidates determine the direction on their own (or with the statement that they are being "led by the Lord") are the missions that have deployable troops. By contrast, the local church isn't designed to have this kind of authority over its members. Perhaps that is why churches have not been able to "follow-through" with mission ministries they can't manage near the home base.

I will never forget the time Loren Cunningham, founder of Youth With A Mission, spoke to our staff. In a mission that prides itself in spawning ministries, Loren noted that his first response to a young person who believed God had spoken to him about a ministry in which he wanted to be involved was, "I doubt it." He insisted that God would have to confirm that guidance through other people and in other ways. He had a long list which he followed to check that person's sense of calling.

Often, even with those who feel a call to needy areas of the world (by which they usually mean outside our own borders) the person involved can be misled. They feel pulled to the needs that are obvious to them and thus feel they are in "God's will." We need to be sure that people know about the unreached peoples of the world so that they will be informed and pray about this priority (at least they can't say that they were uninformed).

It is unfortunate, though, because while God has called some into ministries of various sorts, He also wants many of these people and ministries to be harnessed to work together and to have a focus that is broader than their own limited perspective. Frequently what we see as individuals is limited to where we have been and how we view our own culture.

Conclusion

I believe that the call of the frontiers is a vision that catalyzes both young people and experienced missionaries! I don't know how many times we have heard from missionaries that have taken our Perspectives course that it has radically changed their lives. We do not challenge them to change missions or assignments, but to begin to mobilize the national churches right where they are.

We, also, may become weary of constantly calling the church to new vision. But I trust that our familiarity with the task of closure—of working to complete the Great Commission and discipling *panta ta ethne*—does not make us so weary that we fail to think clearly about the frontiers and how to get there. I am sure that Satan would love to see that type of response.

I guess this is what I mean most of all when I speak of our personal commitment to the vision. Our lives should parallel that of J. Hudson Taylor. One backer of traditional missions, who resented "a new mission" coming into being, threatened Taylor with the words, "If you send young people into the interior of China, their blood will be upon your shoulders." Taylor was truly stunned by this. How could he proceed? He went down to the beach at Brighton to pray. As he walked the beach and prayed it seemed that God Himself finally spoke, saying; "*Hudson, you are not sending missionaries to the inland of China, I am!*"

The Creator of the Universe, our Father in Heaven, is still the Commander of the forces today. His orders haven't changed and we must keep the focus as clear as Jesus made it. We may not be able to define all the terms as well as we would like for every situation. But we must keep the focus on the goal of discipling every tribe, people, tongue and nation until the job is done regardless what well-meaning Christians and others would say to the contrary. ■

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