

Lecture 16

Post-World War II: The Expansion of New Missions

1. The Decline and Fall of the IMC

The International Missionary Council was formed as a direct result of the 1910 World Missionary Conference, which itself was the first in history on the world level of its kind. It was uniquely a conference of specifically missionaries and missionary executives.

As a direct result of this conference, the International Missionary Council came into being in 1921, delayed by World War I, but following efforts of John R. Mott, in one of his most impressive accomplishments—setting in motion what eventually became 22 “National Christian Councils” in the mission lands. These councils brought together all the missionaries from whatever agencies were at work in those countries.

An unexpected result of this new “council of councils” was that over the next several decades, national churches were being planted which began to produce impressive leaders, which is good. However, once that happened extensively it then seemed reasonable for these church leaders to be included in the meetings of these various National Christian Councils which had earlier been purely about missions.

That in turn led gradually for these National Christian Councils to change their names and their functions to National Councils of Churches. India had one of the largest such councils and actually did not change its name, but did change its function when, in 1945, on the encouragement of mission executives who were present, it voted that expatriate mission leaders could no longer vote. From that point on, to vote you had to be a national church leader. This was happily understood as desirable nationalization.

However, depending on your perspective, this was a great achievement when all of these councils became church councils, but it unintentionally maimed fatally the mission focus of the parent body, the International

Missionary Council. Although the Western country councils were still mission agency executives, the delegates from the 22 overseas councils gradually and inevitably became exclusively church leaders. In 1958 at Ghana the IMC voted to merge with the World Council of Churches, and the idea of seeing things at a global level through the eyes of mission executives was no more.

This cursory summary will at least give you an idea of why there needed to be another 1910 type conference in 1980 and why, though in vain, that conference attempted to establish another world level structure representing mission agencies. That world level structure did not come into being until 2005, being essentially an outcome of “Singapore 2002,” a conference convened specifically to maintain momentum in the Unreached Peoples sphere. The new organization was called the Global Network of Mission Structures, as will be mentioned below.

2. Post WWII Surges in “Service Missions”

A second unexpected event of monumental proportions followed the Second World War. As with all wars, it was a great tragedy, but good things do come out of tragedies, on occasion. It was as if we collected up enough money to send 11 million of our people on a world tour rubbing their faces in heretofore almost unknown mission work in the Pacific Islands, where, for example, the Japanese would never have been routed had not 75% of the island people been Christians who identified with the countries which had sent them missionaries.

Then, in the first 5 years after the war, the returning war-enlightened service personnel formed 150 new mission agencies. This surge of new agencies would have constituted a new era in our analysis of the three

eras, had they dealt with some new frontier of mission, such as the bypassed “unreached peoples” which have more recently been stressed.

Although the GIs didn’t start a new era, they started a huge new push into the world of missions of the US population. You might say that WWII was perhaps the greatest surge in mission awareness even beyond the Student Volunteer Movement half a century earlier. The unique feature of these 150 new missions was their stress on technical services to existing mission agencies. The former military personnel had gained skills in radio, flying planes, printing, managing, and making tough decisions, and the new missions reflected these technical skills.

3. The Changing Structures of Global Missions

The “Service Missions.” First there were, as just mentioned, these new service agencies emphasizing radio, planes, literature, child evangelism, etc. We could add relief and development agencies as well, whose concerns were spurred by the direct contact of GIs with conditions in foreign lands.

Internationalized missions. Secondly, there were the many agencies which, one by one, puzzled their way through the transformation from a national agency serving internationally, to a truly “internationalized agency” which drew from more than one country and in some cases, forthrightly drew overseas national leaders into membership.

These mutations were not at all simple. There is no book on how to internationalize a national agency serving internationally, unfortunately. But by the year 2000, dozens of missions had added the word “international” to their name. That word used in that way, however, has no precise technical significance. It usually simply means that other western countries are collaborating in support of the new “internationalized” agency. In some cases, as with the Overseas Missionary Fellowship, more and more non-western personnel are becoming members.

Third World missions. Another new structure of missions, regrettably new, because it should have been attempted long ago, is the idea of the overseas national churches themselves forming their own mission sending structures. These are sometimes called “Third

World Missions.” Probably the major exception to the rule that none of the western missions ever thought of such a thing, or initiated such structures is the case of the Christian and Missionary Alliance and its work in South East Asia. There, but nowhere else in their global outreach, they made sure that their planted national churches always had a mission department, such that missionaries going from the Philippines under the CMA would be sponsored and supported by CMA churches in the Philippines, not by the CMA headquarters in the United States.

4. Focus on Peoples and Ethnic Groups

The biggest change in strategic perspective in the twentieth century was an outgrowth of the impact of the thinking of Donald McGavran, a third generation missionary to India, for whom the invisible barriers of culture (not just language) had become visible and all-important. He figured that once even a lone individual from one group had become a Christian, that person should not be encouraged to join the existing church of another group, but should be perceived as a “bridge of God” back into his own group. Thus, the very fact that someone within a group had, for the first time, gained an understanding of the gospel was an event much more strategic than the fact that one more person followed Christ in a group where many were already Christians. Why? Because now a whole new group suddenly would become penetrable.

His specific application of this insight was, however, almost exclusively that of detecting people in the back rows of a church (which he would call a “conglomerate church”) and taking advantage of that “bridge of God” into a new compartment of society which heretofore was sealed off by cultural barriers.

My take from this insight was that if such invisible barriers of culture were as important as McGavran made them out to be, then all such sealed off groups which had no converts at all were in really bad shape and deserved special attention. At first McGavran was very reluctant about this new emphasis on what became called “unreached peoples.” He wanted to be sure agencies did not overlook any existing “bridge of God” in their concern to start from scratch with new groups. In hindsight it is obvious that both concerns were valid and, within a very short time, McGavran

got on board with the unreached peoples movement. So did many other agencies that now became indebted to his original insight about the strategic importance of cultural barriers.

Unfortunately, however, now and then, someone may consider the idea of “homogeneous churches” a form of racism. But one man’s racism is another man’s freedom of self-determination. There is certainly nothing racist about people finding it easier to speak their own language and enjoying the benefits of mutual recognition of cultural traditions. The very idea of “black power,” “brown power,” and other types of cultural pride serve to underscore the truth of McGavran’s position.

5. The Lausanne Movement, the WEA, the GCR and the GNMS

In the wake of the breakdown of the IMC, Carl F. H. Henry, one of the most prominent Evangelical theologians, whose wife was the daughter of a missionary to Cameroon, persuaded Billy Graham to go with him in sponsoring a world-level congress on evangelism in Berlin in 1966. This turned out to be so successful that a second, larger one, with a greater emphasis on missions, was convened in 1974 in Switzerland in the city of Lausanne.

The International Congress on World Evangelization at Lausanne was far more influential. About 20% of its participants represented cross-cultural mission outreach. Widely known and respected is the Lausanne Covenant which was drafted by John R. Stott and formulated in final form by a committee during the congress itself.

The Lausanne Covenant has a substantial section on missions. But it talks somewhat as if the whole thing has been pretty much of a failure and is still up against virtually hopeless odds. In a later Lausanne sponsored conference in the Philippines in 1987, the Manila Manifesto had a much more significant section on missions. Incorporating direct input from people at the USCWM, John R. Stott was again the chief drafter.

A key feature of the Lausanne movement—and there have been many regional Lausanne conferences across the years—has been its inclusiveness when compared to the meetings of the World Evangelical Fellowship (now called the World Evangelical Alliance). The WEA has all along been dominated by denomina-

tions as members, which match up to the WEA’s very explicit statement of faith. The Lausanne movement takes in local churches and individuals, no matter what their denominational relationships might be. At a Lausanne-sponsored meeting it would be easy to run into a representative of the “Lord’s Army” (a movement of 500,000 in Rumania), or a member of the Lutheran Church of Latvia, even though such Christian leaders would never appear at a WEA meeting, and, in reverse, the WEA would be unheard of in such circles.

A second feature of the Lausanne Movement is that, true to its origin, it consistently includes church leaders, even high officials in older, pre-Evangelical churches, with the idea of evangelizing them on the subject of evangelism.

Back in 1974 my talk was censored before the meeting, eliminating any use of the word “mission.” I had to use the title “Cross Cultural Evangelism: The Highest Priority.” I had to convert my M-1, M-2, M-3 codes to E-1, E-2, E-3, thus exchanging the word “mission” for “evangelism.” I understand that Billy Graham feels that he can escape some governmental opposition by talking solely about evangelism as the initiative of citizens within a country and not referring to organizations, like missions, that seek to influence from the outside. He has a point, but of course, his logic then depends solely upon people already existing in the country or within a people group who are willing and able to evangelize. That is, this approach depends totally on previous mission work, so that it can hardly take the place of pioneer mission work. In the case of Unreached Peoples, note, there have not yet been any previous missions.

The Norwegian Missionary Council was always one of the strong forces in the IMC, and when the latter became assimilated into the World Council of Churches it was, along with other western mission agency councils and associations, left somewhat high and dry. In fact, some thinkers arrived at the conclusion that, due to the widespread growth of overseas churches in virtually every country, mission sending structures were now completely out of date, and thus, agencies such as the Norwegian Missionary Council were dinosaurs we could do without.

This perspective has merit in all cases where national churches already exist. But now, widely, the nations of the world are no longer conceived of as the countries of the world, but rather are conceived of as the roughly

24,000 peoples of the world. As a result, traditional mission perspective is now again back in favor, and in fact, is clearly impelling in view of the serious possibility that current overseas churches might ignore the very existence of minority or even majority populations that are outside the spheres of those existing churches.

Indeed, the ethnic tensions within countries are not minor but major factors in mission strategy. It is entirely understandable and yet entirely unreasonable to suppose that a church movement within one ethnic group in a country will automatically reach out effectively to other ethnic groups when those groups are, as is often the case, centuries-old enemies. Indeed, the anthropological dictum that “the closest are furthest” holds true with dire effect in the majority of all cases of ethnic near-neighbors. For example, a Navaho evangelist would be more welcome among the Norwegian Laplanders than would Norwegians living nearby, who might resent or be resented by the Laplanders. Similarly, a Canadian missionary would tend to be more welcome among the Zuni Indians of Arizona than a white citizen from Phoenix.

These realities help us to understand why mission strategy is not always intuitively obvious. They also explain why it is that just sending money around the world to people who are then supposed to evangelize their near-neighbors is unwise more often than not. It also explains why short-termers who don't tie into long-term missionaries already on the field are unlikely to do more than get for themselves valuable cross-cultural experience, their real contribution to missions being of little value or perhaps even harmful.

Finally, the very complexity of mission strategy helps us understand why local churches are unlikely to be

successful in sending their own missionaries without sending them through existing veteran agencies that have bumped into many of the unexpected features of field strategy.

But back to the Norwegian Missionary Council. Left high and dry by the demise of the International Mission Council, it took the initiative to form what later developed into the Great Commission Round Table. The process was set in motion in a meeting hosted in Hurdahl, Norway by the Norwegian Missionary Council, composed of representatives of the AD 2000 Movement, the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, the World Evangelical Fellowship, and the Billy Graham Association. Representatives of all but the latter met again several times and there now exists a global level “round table” of these key entities. Mission executives as such are not prominent, but the GCRT was consulted in the formation of the Global Network of Mission Structures (GNMS), and gave its blessing.

The GNMS itself was founded in Amsterdam in April of 2005 in a meeting intentionally small. About thirty representative mission leaders from the entire world voted to establish an office, in Malaysia it turned out, to coordinate further discussion. A corporation was later formed and the outlook is now very positive.

There are many national and regional associations of mission agencies. They can, and do, confer about matters concerning their territories. However, only a global entity can best track migrating peoples which today go all over the world. Since it is usually true that a given group can be more easily reached in one location than in another, it is one of the crucial tasks of the GNMS to do that.