

Missions and the Millennium Bug

The vast majority of Y2K concerns address the American situation. If any nation is going to be prepared for Y2K, it will be America. If any national church is going to have the resources to ride out potential disruptions, it will be the American church. But what about developing countries? Many of their infrastructures are barely holding on as it is. What about churches in those countries? Many are already enduring persecution and poverty. Above all, what about missions in the Two Thirds World? In this article the authors present us the missions side of the equation.

By Jason Mandryck

By now most of you have undoubtedly heard a lot about the Millennium Bug. Articles addressing it have appeared in most Christian magazines. You know what it is, why it happened, and what might cause it to go wrong. Perhaps you're tired of hearing about it and wish the problem would go away. Well, businesses and governments undoubtedly feel the same way. But they have significantly more assets that they need to protect. So they are acting to prevent themselves from being caught holding the bag. Read this excerpt from one WECer's travel insurance.

General exclusions:

You are NOT covered for claims arising out of:

- Your suicide or attempted suicide
- Bloodsports
- Your taking part in civil commotions or riots of any kind
- Any loss, damage, expense or indemnity... that is caused by the failure of any computer hardware or software or other electrical equipment to recognise or process any date as the true calendar date or to function correctly beyond that date.

In plain English, "we won't cover you if you have a death wish, do something incredibly stupid, or if the Millennium Bug causes problems."

What about Missions?

What actions are we as Missions and missionaries taking to ensure that we are not left holding the bag? There are tens of thousands of articles on Y2K issues: technological, financial, philosophical, industrial, ethical, legal, and so on. There are even many resources for concerned Christians.

But the vast majority of these resources address American congregations who can afford to buy survivalist equipment and set thousands of dollars aside for contingency plans. If any nation is going to be prepared for Y2K, it will be America. If any national church is going to have the resources to ride out potential disruptions, it will be the American church.

What about developing countries? Many of their infrastructures are barely holding on as it is. What about churches in those countries? Many are already enduring persecution and poverty.

What about faith missions operating in the Two Thirds World? Many are unprepared for the shock that may await them.

How to Prepare

Fortunately, most field missionaries are a flexible lot. They are used to intermittent power, bureaucratic delays, and inconsistent availability of

consumer goods. So then, what's the problem? Here is a list of essential issues that NEED to be addressed well before that historic day.

Technological Concerns

Computer Hardware. The entire Y2K issue is computer derived. From mainframe supercomputers to personal PC's the issue is the same. As most of you know, due to a 1950's programming trick to save precious storage space and memory in the data, year dates were entered as 2 digits instead of 4 digits (75 instead of 1975). When the new year comes, computers everywhere will see 1/1/00 as 1/1/1900. What you need to do is ensure that your PC will work when the year turns over. Regardless of your computer's age, you need to check your system. You can do this by contacting your supplier, or by acquiring a program that diagnoses your system for you. There are many places where these can be acquired; Tantra's ClokTest is one of them, available for free at www.pcadvisor.co.uk.

If your system needs attention, it could be one of several problems. You may merely need to manually change the system data on January 1st. If you have an older machine you may need

to get a BIOS upgrade, or replace your BIOS chip altogether. There are other ways of circumventing this problem, but they often create as many hassles as they solve. In a worst case scenario, you may need to replace your PC altogether, or trundle along with wrong dates. Depending upon your use of your PC, this latter scenario could be simply a minor irritation.

Computer Software. This is another issue altogether. Basically, software falls into three categories.

A. *Legacy software:* coded and compiled by individual programmers specifically for companies and organizations. The vast majority of you do not use this kind of software; if you do it is unlikely that the software involves date-based calculations. If it does, you may have a serious problem on your hands. "Norton 2000" is a software package that will evaluate your legacy software for Y2K readiness, among others.

B. *Old vendor software:* DOS-based or Windows 3.1 (16-bit) software. Vendors are generally not upgrading these applications for Y2K compliance, so you may have to upgrade. You can check you software's compliance at www.vendor2000.com

C. *New vendor software:* 32-bit (Windows 95 and newer) software. These are almost entirely free of complications due to Y2K issues. The exception is that of storing year dates: different applications have different pivot dates (the watershed year in determining whether a 2 digit year is assumed to be in the 1900's or 2000's).

Travel Concerns

The chances that planes will fall out of the sky on January 1, 2000 are very slim for 2 reasons. Even a Y2K bug foul-up does not just drop a plane straight into the ground. There are still pilots trained to fly their air-

craft in emergencies. Also, if airlines are not confident of the safety of their aircraft, they will not fly at all. Traveling with airlines based out of developing countries will be more of a risk than travelling with the leading global airlines.

Air travel will be more expensive if you are travelling over the New Year, because the airlines are wringing that extra bit of money out of fliers due to the potential risks involved to them. It

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is advisable not to fly late in December or in January if you can avoid it. There is no guarantee of trouble, but there is no guarantee that things will run smoothly, either.

If you are based in the Two Thirds World, it would be wise to look into travel options across the country, regarding potential evacuation scenarios.

Communications

This is a tricky one. The telecommunications infrastructure is fragile as it is, and due to the rapid exchange of calls and information it is especially vulnerable to the Y2K bug. In some countries the lack of capital to upgrade and "de-bug" their systems has caused them to be regarded as dangers to the other countries' systems. Nations in southern Africa and eastern Asia (and elsewhere) may find themselves cut off from international telephone exchanges merely because

of the potential risks they pose to the "safe" countries. In other words, if you live in the Two Thirds World, there is a distinct possibility that your ability to place international calls may be put on hold! This problem, of course, would also affect the transmission of e-mail and faxes.

What to do in this situation? Make preparations to be self-sufficient for some time, but also look into communications alternatives. Two suggestions were the bus/bush taxi system for forwarding correspondence, and possibly being able to access a telephone at places where it is more likely to stay online (government officials, the post office, etc.).

Even the experts cannot be sure what is actually going to happen. The mass media will be keeping a very watchful eye on proceedings, so keep an ear to the ground. As things develop, you will need to stay informed, most particularly concerning if and how your own local area is affected.

Money Matters

The Y2K scenarios run the gamut of predictions regarding economics from a negligible blip to a return to a barter and precious metal based economy. A greater threat is that of economic depression due to disruptions and the stockpiling of goods. A recession or depression may well trigger inflation, devaluing currencies in many countries. What should missionaries do?

Support from Sending Base. Some WEC sending bases are already planning to send to their workers two months of support in December 1999. This is in anticipation of headaches on both the home and field ends. Thank goodness that most of us do not have to contend with financial and accounting software! It is probably advisable to receive an extra month or two of support at the end of

1999, if that is at all possible. Contact your sending base to find out what they're planning to do regarding this issue.

Cash on hand. This issue is another prickly one. It is better to have at least several days' worth of cash on hand, perhaps more. It is also advisable to have this cash safely on hand well before December 31st. There are several reasons for this; the foremost being that cash will still enable you to make purchases, even if the banks are down, the credit lines are down, and the power is out. Many of us function on debit or credit cards. There is only a small chance that such transactions will be significantly disrupted in the West, but it is best to be prepared for such possibilities.

Many analysts fear that a cash run on the banks will precipitate a greater financial crisis than the bug itself. Even if that only happens in the USA, it will impact all of us. But we owe nothing to the global banking empires! Set some money aside each month henceforth rather than doing a massive withdrawal nearer the date. Bite the bullet now to prevent more pain later. A widespread inflationary depression would devalue your money regardless of where it is kept, so it is better to have it on hand than devaluing in the bank.

Savings accounts. Three pieces of advice here: First, read the fine print of your financial accounts. This includes pension plans, mutual funds, chequing accounts, and every other form of monetary deposit. Can you withdraw all your money at any time? How does the bank ensure the safety of its customers' deposits? Second, contact the institutions that use your money and ask them what they are doing to prevent Y2K-related problems from affecting them. Are they Year 2000 compliant? When will they be? Finally, and most importantly,

GET IT ON PAPER! IT being your financial status. Keep copies of bank statements and every other financial record or transaction. Continue keeping them until later into next year. Several banks are already claiming that they are or will be Y2K compliant. But a few bits of paper now could potentially save you from many headaches later on.

Basic Supplies

Some Christians are planning to go into survivalist mode, i.e., stock up with 6 months' worth of basic supplies including guns and bullets) There is sufficient interest in solar panels, gold coins, and dried foodstuffs to keep suppliers almost consistently out of inventory. On the oppo-

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site extreme, others are ignoring the issue entirely.

Many of us spend hundreds of pounds (dollars) every year on insurance for our cars, homes, bodies, teeth, and even our lives. Surely it is wise to spend some money insuring against something that is far more likely to happen, that is, a temporary breakdown in social services and conveniences. The USA government is telling its citizens to prepare for Y2K as if it were a hurricane (a couple of days of sitting tight). But if even a significant minority (20%) of the West were to prepare for a week or more,

the storehouses would empty VERY quickly and precipitate a more immediate crisis. For those not in the West, a store of basic necessities for a longer period, say, two to three weeks, would be more advisable.

Medicine. If you take prescription medicine or prophylactics, then it would be wise to acquire a few months' supply well in advance, and for as long as the treatments remain useable. If your work involves medical supplies and equipment, then the same advice holds true but in greater importance. The most you can really do is stock up on supplies.

Food and water stores. Who doesn't use food and water? In many places, it is just not feasible to stock up with more than a couple of days' food and water supply. But where it is possible, it is definitely advisable to have at least a few days' worth of staples stored up - staples that don't require power to prevent spoilage! If the worst-case scenario occurs, no amount of food will be enough; the more you store away, the greater a target you become for other hungry people. But wise storage of food and water may enable you to have a very tangible witness to others as you feed them in Christ's name (think Joseph). Food and water are things you are going to consume regardless, so store them away!

Fuel, light and power. This section could be termed miscellaneous items. Things that immediately come to mind are batteries, cooking gas bottles, a full tank of petrol (gasoline), candles, kerosene, decent flashlights, and so on. Each person's context will require different preparation. Plan to cope with a possible shortage by being self-sufficient for a few days in the West (celebrate the New Year with a full tank of petrol!). In the Two Thirds World, 3-4 weeks of complications in these areas is entirely possible, and therefore missionaries should

be prepared to be self-sufficient for a longer period of time.

Language Issues

If your skills in the local or trade language are not sufficient to cope readily in such times of crisis, then you should consider planning on being at home for a month or more on either side of the millenium. In the event of serious problems, such inability to communicate clearly (and quickly) will only pose a threat to yourself, your family, and your mission.

Sending bases should seriously consider whether or not to send new workers to fields in the Two Thirds World in the second half of 1999. Is it wise to expose vulnerable new recruits to unnecessary risk?

Faith Factors

The issue of faith is perhaps more important than any of the above. It is important that we recognise that the millennium is a celebration first and foremost of 2000 years of God's faithfulness and Christ's gift to us. The extra attention given to the year by the Y2K bug should spur us on to proclaim this more boldly.

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Apocalyptic doomsayers. Some elements of the Western media have tried to paint Christianity as a Millennially-obsessed apocalyptic loonie-bin. This is most likely a non-factor elsewhere, but we must assure people that our response to the New Year is positive and faith based, and not tainted with end times inaccuracies based around a date errantly set by a monk centuries ago. There are Christians out there misrepresenting Christ in this way. Don't allow yourself to be numbered among them.

Have answers ready. Understand the issues surrounding Y2K. But more importantly, "be prepared in season and out of season". "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." (1 Peter 3:15). There may be many distressed and desperate people early next year—people who will want to know the hope that we have!

Be ready to share with those in need. If you choose to prepare yourselves for shortages of services and goods, then prepare to share. Those with stockpiles may have three options: defend it by force, have it taken away by force, or share it willingly. Even if your stores consist of a single meal or a few batteries, such concern for our neighbours in times of crisis may go a long way in winning them to Christ, a treasure far greater than any stash of materials.

Therefore, know ahead of time what you are prepared to give away without protest. In the Two Thirds World, be mentally prepared for possible hostile demands for your stores of food and fuel. Are you prepared to give up your painstakingly crafted plans in the face of angry or upset visitors? What about your children? What do you owe them? One strategy is to mentally "give" a store of supplies to your children, kept hidden or cached, so that in the face of

demands, you may surrender your own supplies but keep a clear conscience about withholding that which you've "given" to your family.

Conclusion

In conclusion I present five brief observations:

Be aware! Understand the issues involved in Y2K. Why are the banks so vital? What about consumer confidence? How will my PC be affected? How did this happen in the first place?

Be ready! What you can prepare for, do so. Don't be like the foolish virgins who were caught outside.

Be relaxed! You cannot prevent 99% of potential Y2K disruptions in society and your life from actually occurring. Prepare for what you can, leave the rest in God's hands.

Be humble! The ONLY certainty about the Y2K bug's impact is uncertainty! Nobody knows exactly what will go wrong or how badly it will strike.

Be faithful! What we ARE certain of is our Lord. He is unchanging, ever faithful, and with us always. Regardless of what happens, He will never abandon or forsake us. After the crisis passes and the smoke clears we still have an unevangelized world to reach! May the Lord prepare us to do this task and do it well.



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