

Strategizing to Reach the Unreached

The Rise and Fall of the IMC—and Today

Some observations on the gravest transition in mission cooperative structure in the 20th Century

by *Ralph D. Winter*

The International Missionary Council (IMC), during most of its 40 year history, contributed more to the understanding and progress of the missionary task than any other organization in history.

What was it? How did it come into being? What parallels might there be today? What did it do right or wrong? How did it mutate into something quite different—as the result of success?! Why was it phased out? What can we learn today from its experience that may be helpful at the beginning of a new century? Are we now building on a similar, and major new push to the ends of the earth? Questions like these cry out for answers.

Since the Norwegian Missionary Council played a unique role in this drama, much as it is playing in the present meeting—the Global Evangelization Roundtable of 1999—a skeletal account of these questions may be of interest.

What follows here is exceedingly brief, written between sessions, written purely from memory without access to literature, and intended to concentrate on the dynamics of the development and demise of the IMC rather than to try to record all the names and dates and details of this fascinating, intricate, and significant story.

The IMC: What Was It?

The IMC was one of several valuable outcomes of the famous World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910—the jewel of the Student Volunteer Movement. The Continuing Committee of the 1910 meeting did not formally generate the International Missionary Council until 1921 due to the massive confusion that erupted in the First World War. But between 1910 and 1921 the CC did sponsor many of the *functions* of the later-to-be IMC, as well as sponsor the valuable chronicle begun in 1914 under the name, *International Review of Missions (IRM)*—note the presence of an “s” ending the final word.

The IRM was many years later renamed the *International Review of Mission*, that is, without its final “s,” roughly at the time the IMC passed over to the World Council of Churches. This tiny change of spelling was considered to be of weighty importance, signifying the transition from the sending of missionaries in various “missions” to the situation where the national churches of every land were now in place and “mission” was now to be conducted by the churches themselves. This concept essentially

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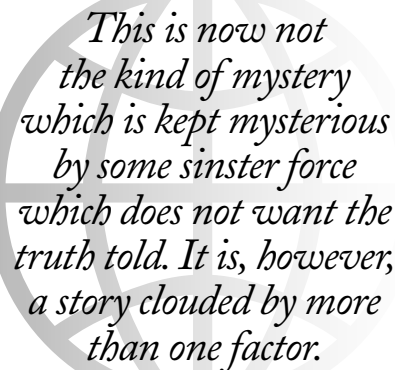
legislated against mission-sending organizations in general, replacing their work with the normal evangelistic activity of the various existing national churches. This fine idea for the locations where national churches existed inevitably ignored by-passed peoples not yet possessing a church movement within them and relevant to them, and tended to the concept of political boundaries being more important than ethnic boundaries. For example, the (pompous) name “The Church of Pakistan” represented a much despised minority group, not the 97% of the Muslim population. Nevertheless, an eminent scholar of missions, R. Pierce Beaver wrote a small book entitled *From Missions to Mission* which essentially announced a new era—which in fact would blind people’s eyes to the frontiers beyond those ethnic groups which by that date (1962) already possessed their own church movement.

The membership of the IMC originally consisted of a few of the many mission agencies which had gathered in 1910. However, it did not continue for long as a council of mission agencies but became a council of councils—a council of the various national-level councils (networks) of mission agencies. One of the “great” accomplishments of Mott in his own eyes was to catalyze the establishment of 22 councils of missions in the various countries receiving missionaries.

It is crucial to note that from the start the national-level councils were of two basically different kinds. Some of them, as in the *mission-sending* countries of the West, were like the Norwegian Missionary Council, that is, they were councils of representatives of *sending* missions based in the *sending* country. The second type of council arose in the *receiving* countries, the majority of them (including the famous “Twenty Two” councils Mott catalyzed in the *missionary-receiving* countries) consisted of gatherings of expatriate field executives of most of the missions originating in the Western countries.

Thus, for example, the National Christian Council of India, was originally composed entirely of executives of mission agencies sending missionaries to India from the Western sending countries.

This fundamental difference between the Western and non-Western councils of the IMC will help to explain the totally unexpected development which later led to the unchallengeable rationale for the IMC itself to be transformed into a far less influential mere appendage to the World Council of Churches. The irony here is that the WCC itself came



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into being long after the IMC was founded, and largely because of the work and existence of the IMC. The writer is particularly well acquainted with this curious and unanticipated transformation due to being asked by the editors of the WCC’s *International Review of Mission* to write up the story of the final meeting of the IMC where the decision was made to yield to that fateful transition into the World Council (Winter 1962).

At that final meeting in Ghana not just the Norwegian Missionary Council strongly resisted the move. So did the British and German councils in the West. But I am getting ahead of myself.

What Did the IMC Do?

The IMC became a nerve center of global mission intelligence. Kenneth Scott Latourette, on behalf of the IMC, for most of the history of the *International Review of Missions* (hereafter the IRM), contributed an annual summary of global missionary advance, usually in the January issue.

The IMC also engineered the global network of “comity” agreements, which insured that the several incoming mission agencies in each

of the non-Western territories not overlap each other, except perhaps in the major cities. Thus, when China closed, the Conservative Baptist Foreign Mission Society (now CBI) politely and routinely consulted the IMC and its relevant members concerning the relocation of CBFMS missionaries from mainland China to Taiwan—an area which had been outside of its own earlier “comity” territory.

The massive global shake-up following World War I occasioned one of the earliest contributions of the IMC, at which time friendly societies within the global fellowship of mission agencies in the IMC had to try to take temporary care of the fields which had been occupied prior to that war by German missions. Indeed William Richey Hogg’s definitive treatment of the history of the IMC (which does not include its final years) pours out the story of an ocean of good works performed by the nerve center constituted by the IMC (Hogg, *Ecumenical Foundations*, Harper & Brothers, 1952).

The Mysterious Mutation of the IMC

This is now not the kind of mystery which is kept mysterious by some sinister force which does not want the truth told. It is, however, a story that is clouded by more than one factor. The emergence into the mission scene of liberal theology was only one factor, and secondary at that. True, Hocking’s famous *Rethinking Missions* report sent a shock wave throughout the global mission community which in turn then built distrust of global level entities and such “external” studies of the mission movement. Why was liberal theology not the largest factor?

The major, truly irreversible factor—to which the Great Commission Roundtable kind of network may be exposed—was the decision, wise or unwise, in one field council after another, to invite the emerging national *church* leaders to become voting members at the meetings of these otherwise *mission* field councils. This development was hard to oppose

because it was entirely reasonable in one sense. The “Younger Churches” were, after all, the apple of the eye of the Western missions, the result of painful, sacrificial and often outstanding mission work. There seemed to be every reason to include these emerging church leaders, and to invite them to sit down in the strategic sessions of the various councils that had been formed in the receiving countries, councils mostly called “National Christian Councils.” The hope often was that a single unified national church would result from the various mission agencies’ efforts. Presbyterian missionaries, for example, uniformly urged that to happen. And it did happen in the Philippines, Thailand, India, Guatemala, etc.

So far so good, but over a period of years without anyone anticipating, much less planning, the development, those national *church* leaders grew more and more numerous such that in the various NCCs they eventually gained the majority vote and tended in one way or another to ask the original (mission) sending agencies to step back and perhaps not even vote at all!

The mission agencies were often quite willing for this to happen. It was, in a way, a sign of success—that the church would increase and the mission agencies would decrease. It was a glorious transition, from mission to church. But in the euphoria, few apparently noticed that this did not take into account the effect within the countries upon bypassed, minority or majority ethnic people groups—toward which the “national” churches often still possessed built-in resistance and deep animosity.

However, in this way these 22 councils of expatriate mission leaders were thus irresistibly transmuted into councils of church leaders, and this took place long before the need for mission leaders was over—before all the ethnic groups were penetrated. Furthermore, the creation of cross-cultural mission outreach on the part of the national churches was virtually never even envisioned. (The CMA in the Philippines, however is a rare example where it did happen.)

Curiously, by failing to envision that mission structural development would

eventually begin to be devised and supervised by the national churches themselves (that is, in developing what are now often called “Third World Missions”) they made it impossible in advance for those emerging agencies to have any fellowship, association, or council to join! Why? Because all of the National Christian Councils (starting out as mission agency forums) had now become National Councils of Churches, with little evangelistic interest and even less understanding or interest in cross-cultural mission. Furthermore, they sometimes tended still to consider themselves receivers, not givers, to that extent.

This ominous transition to church councils did not happen suddenly. Had all of the “Younger Church” leaders appeared all at once it is very possible that someone would have proposed, then and there, that this new category of non-missionary leaders form their own, separate Council of Churches rather than take over a council composed of *mission* entities.

Alas, for lots of understandable reasons this did not happen. Having admitted a few church leaders fairly early on, courtesy alone may have impeded clear thinking as their number gradually increased.

In any case, one by one all of the “twenty two” National Christian Councils gradually evolved into what were in most cases finally actually renamed National Councils of *Churches*. What a transformation!

Now, it is true that India did not rename its council—to this day it is the National Christian Council of India and not yet called a “National Council of *Churches*” even though *that is what it is*. It did not change its name but it decisively changed its *function* in 1947 by ruling out formal participation (voting) of all foreign mission executives and inadvertently even ruled out the participation of the already-emerging “third world” type of mission agency in India itself, such as the two mission-sending agencies Bishop Azariah had founded even before 1910!).

Notice that the more recently developed Evangelical Fellowship of India

(EFI), the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand (EFT), the Evangelical Fellowship of Asia (EFA), and the World Evangelical Fellowship itself are all “mixed” councils, which combine church leadership and a few of the leaders of so-called parachurch agencies. But, the dominant force is usually constituted by the church leaders.

A major difference between these two kinds of structures and leaders, church and mission, is not that church leaders are necessarily less committed to evangelism and missions than the mission leaders (after all, the missions produced the churches in the first place), but that the constituencies of the church leaders eventually include a vast number of people who may have merely grown up in the church and are not necessarily mission and evangelism minded people. By contrast, the members of the mission agencies (the foreign missionaries) have made an additional, separate decision to follow Christ as full-time workers. Usually they are so highly committed that, compared to pastors who stay home, all they ask is living expenses varying with the size of their families. They don’t receive a salary varying with a measure of the output of their work—such as the number or size of their congregations. That is, pastors of big churches tend to have bigger salaries, while missionaries involved in bigger work do not get paid any more. (Reason? In mission work any extra money is used to send more missionaries not expand the salaries of existing missionaries).

What Should Have Happened?

Obviously the welcomed rise of the non-Western churches wrecked the IMCs’ original function—to facilitate the strategic comparison of notes between mission leaders. Was that something that could have been avoided? It may be theoretical to look back and say what should have happened. However, it is instructive to note that there are a few basic, seemingly essential functions which every country might well need, and even anticipate the need of.

A case study might be the surge of mission efforts of all kinds into

the suddenly opened country of Mongolia. From early times the missionaries for the most part found ways to meet together to pray and fellowship. Also, in a different setting they also met to compare notes strategically. In the first case we have a foreshadowing of what is often called an “Intermission Fellowship.” In the latter case we have what Mott and Co. called National Christian Councils.

In the case of Mongolia the brilliant Interdev “Strategic Partnership” movement soon firmed up the kind of in-coming (or “expatriate”) mission collaboration in a helpful way. But, in addition, I understand, the need for emerging *church* leaders to meet together was foreseen and the presence and extension into Mongolia of the World Evangelical Fellowship was *also* encouraged. This then allowed for three kinds of meetings; 1) meetings of expatriate missionaries for fellowship; 2) meetings of expatriate missionaries for strategic planning and 3) meetings of emerging church leaders. Theoretically, there will need also to be 4) meetings of Mongolian mission sending entities, similar to IMA in India or NEMA in Nigeria. There is not yet a meeting of the latter kind designed to bring together the “Third World” kind of Mongolian outreach in cross-cultural mission, although hopefully that will soon be contemplated!

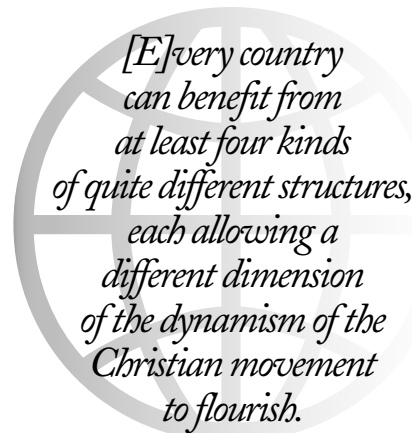
Four Structures!

Thus, we can generalize that every country can benefit from at least four kinds of quite different structures, each allowing a different dimension of the dynamism of the Christian movement to flourish.

To summarize:

1. It has been clear that the incoming (expatriate) missionary constituency can be nourished and edified by annual fellowship meetings. These, as mentioned, have been called “Intermission Meetings” and they tend to invite annually a famous pastor from one or the other of the missionaries’ home countries to come and minister for a week or a few days both to acquaint a leader from home

with the field realities, and also for the missionaries to regain something of the culture loss which foreign missionaries commonly undergo.



2. In the early years we can readily see the value also of the incoming mission leaders from abroad meeting together—not for fellowship but to prevent overlap, to compare notes and instruct each other, perhaps to arrange for joint language study programs, medical work, etc.—the early NCC type of meeting. With the demise of the IMC, such meetings all but disappeared until the emergence of the somewhat different “Strategic Partnerships” Interdev has been assisting into being. Meetings of the early IMC type took place in both China and in India at the country level, even before the 1910 meeting. Those meetings then inspired Mott and functioned as a model for him and others as they conceived the unique features of the 1910 global meeting. This famous meeting for the first time did the same thing at the world level, that is, brought together *mission executives* (not *church leaders*), and delegates not invitees.

3. It is obvious, as both the world-level structures like the WCC and the WEF manifest, and structures like the national-level NAE-USA, EFT (Thailand) and EFI (India) portray, that there is real value in church leaders in each country gathering together, for reasons partially similar to those of the mission leaders. These structures are sometimes called Councils of Churches or Alliances, and, more recently, Fellowships (such as the

Evangelical Fellowship of India, the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand, etc.) although the latter, a bit confusingly, have tried from their inception to embrace more than church entities. Indeed, as with the NCCs in Mott’s day, in most cases these church fellowships emerged as initiatives of incoming missionaries.

4. Historically more recent and highly desirable is the valuable fellowship of leaders of the outgoing or so-called “indigenous” missions of a given country, agencies which may work cross-culturally both within their own multi-ethnic countries and/or beyond national borders. These agencies are often involved, also confusingly, with both what could be called simply mono-cultural *evangelistic* thrusts (where a church is expanding within the same cultural tradition) and true cross-cultural *mission* efforts which require the workers to learn a new language and become involved in culture shock and the inevitable mistakes where work is begun within a distinctly different culture. Examples of this kind of a structure are the Norwegian Missionary Council, as well as the IFMA and the EFMA in the United States and the marvelous India Missions Association in India.

Note, then, that we have now listed four different kinds of valuable structures. No one of them can effectively take the place of the other. And they ought not be too closely coordinated or merged, either. It would be unfortunate if any of them assumed the necessity of dominating or replacing one or more of the others.

Furthermore, these are not the only helpful structures. We could note the value of many other kinds of meetings, such as those of Christian school administrators or missiology professors. In their case as well, one cannot substitute for the other.

The Global Level

The number 2 and 4 types of meetings have a special value when they become regional or global, for the simple reason that many mission efforts are relatively isolated from other workers in other cultures.

Thus, they sometimes fumble the ball because they have nothing radically different to which to compare their strategies. Facilitating missionaries at work in disparate countries to compare notes has been one of the most valuable functions performed by a school like Fuller's School of World Mission, though that is not probably as conscious a function there as it should be.

Other than the 1910 meeting and the 1980 meeting (which attracted delegates from almost 50 Third World mission agencies, one third of the total), there was, very briefly, in Pretoria, the time when AD2000 people allowed for a mission executives' track as one of ten or so "tracks." That was good. Toward the end of that meeting I encouraged a huddle including Luis Bush, Jerry Rankin, Avery Willis and a few others to discuss on-going mission-executive relationships at the global level, as did actually happen there in the parallel PAD track (Presidents and Academic Deans of seminaries), *but this plea was not acted upon.*

This kind of global mission-to-mission contact is, however, a potential value of the Missions Commission of the WEF, which has matured significantly over the years since the WEF appointed Bill Taylor as head. However, in all its earlier years the people appointed to this "Missions Commission" were predominantly church leaders without mission experience or responsibility. This could happen again depending on whom the WEF appoints. By contrast, the (USA) National Association of Evangelicals would not think of "appointing" the head of its related EFMA which Paul McKaughan heads.

Thus far, furthermore, the WEF Missions Commission has never convened a world level meeting to which mission agencies could send their own choice of delegates. Participants have always been selected and invited by the commission itself. This procedure is drastically different from either 1910 or 1980, and can be compared to a house party or even a Jesus Seminar.

The Third World Missions Association has, like the Asia Missions Asso-

ciation, had a hard time getting going. The last meeting of the TWMA in Kyoto resorted to church sources for support to the extent that the entire program virtually was converted over

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to a meeting primarily of relevance to church people.

One reason both the TWMA and the AMA have had trouble is the unfortunate fact that many church leaders in the Third World, especially Korea, believe so strongly in the congregational structure that they see no place for the Pauline missionary band or modern mission society, which structure, historically, has been the means of breakthrough to most pioneer fields.

Another reason for the slowness to see the relevance of global interaction of mission leaders is the Protestant parallel to the Catholic trend: the Roman Catholic church has now defined out of existence all former mission territories on the face of the earth; bishops—not mission agencies—are now in charge. Protestants have not worked things out quite as formally, but there is a strong push, mainly coming from the World Council of Churches, to believe that all mission territories on the face of the earth are now in at least the "backyard" of some church movement or other in the same country.

This strident emphasis on "Partnership" is partly based on the assumption that you cannot go to Pakistan to reach the Muslims there without "partnering" with one of the national church movements there, such as The Church of Pakistan or one of the Presbyterian denominations in Pakistan. But note two things: The Church of Pakistan is not part of WEF, and neither are, to my knowledge, the various Presbyterian Churches of Pakistan, but 2) even if these churches were WEF-related, their constituencies are not Muslim in background but Hindu and tribal

in cultural tradition! Thus, these churches are distinctly not the right ones to partner in outreach to Muslims, and we even endanger their people if we try to get them involved.

The same would be true if outside agencies were to try to "partner" with Egypt's four million Christians in outreach to Egypt's Muslim population or with Iraq's half-million Christians in outreach to the Kurds in the north.

Robert Blincoe's book on the history of missions to the Kurds points out how during two centuries Protestants spent the lives of 500 missionaries and \$500 million dollars entirely in vain by trying to reach the Kurds via the Christian enclaves among them.

Phillip Butler's *Interdev* has to a great extent taken up the slack of more formally called meetings of mission leaders, such as the early NCCs of the IMC's career, and has performed one of the most significant roles in late 20th century missions, with even greater possibilities in this century. His efforts here at Hurdahl, Norway [in the inception of what is now the Great Commission Roundtable] will be hampered if they do not result in a networking of mission structures at the global level which is similar to their regional partnerships, in effect, not overshadowed by either the WEF constituency or any non-mission body, including the Lausanne group. The latter has always focused (with great success) on winning *church* leaders to evangelism not as much in facilitating the strategic interaction of *mission* leaders.

A great strength in Butler's approach is that it has not been tied to any particular theological or church-related constituency. This factor has allowed it to informally achieve fellowship and collaboration between groups that back home in Western church life simply do not talk to each other at all.

Singapore '02 Addendum

Wednesday evening, October 30, 2002

It is clear here at S'02 that there is great interest in a global connectivity and fellowship between various mission sending structures at least of the "frontier active" type. Yet this marvelous group here can hardly mandate the existence of such a structure. That structure must both be founded and operated by the mission structures that choose to be involved. Once formed it will have to decide its functions and internal structure, its means of support and also choose between formal or loose affiliation with the other many global bodies.

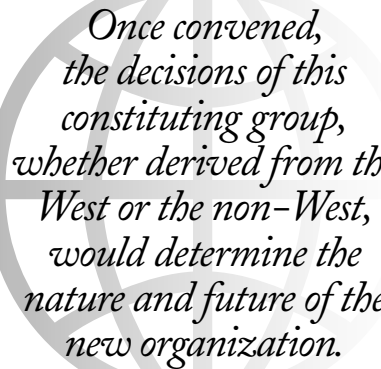
It would seem clear that tying in formally with any other global body will inevitably hamper its efforts. It will have its own credentials committee which will maintain certain doctrinal and logistical standards for all mission structures which officially participate, such as, for example, agencies with Evangelical theology which intend to send truly cross-cultural missionaries to unreached peoples and have been in existence for at least three years, etc.

Such an office could routinely plan global meetings of this kind, undoubtedly with the help of organizations like Interdev, could interface with the WEA Missions Commission, the Lausanne Committee, the Global Network of Centres for World Mission, the various EFA, EFI, EFTs, etc.

It would not attempt to tell member agencies how to work but it would endeavor to perform the cross-fertilization of good ideas, etc. It could revive (under a different name) the function of the longstanding *International Review of Missions* as its official journal. Basically, it would provide an on-going forum for frontier-active mission structures to meet as equals no matter in what part of the globe they were born. This has not existed since the IMC attempted to go in that direction long before substantial non-Western mission structures existed. Now is the time!

Here for example are some thoughts on how it might be structured:

It would need to relate foundationally to frontier-active mission agencies, but also to national and regional associations of mission agencies (such as IMA, NEMA, AMA, IFMA, EFMA, etc.).



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It could have a general council consisting of delegates from all member (frontier-active) mission agencies as well as a "senate" of delegates from all member associations of mission agencies. Representatives from both constituting an executive committee.

As mentioned it could edit a journal comparable in function to the IMC's *International Review of Missions* (speaking of its 1914 to 1961 period).

And, of course, it could catalyze regional and global level gatherings of any of these commissions or combinations thereof as well as a full assembly every so many years.

*Written on the way home from
Singapore:*

As the result of a group-process activity at the conference several dozen suggestions came from the S'02 participants. They were grouped together and then even the major categories were ranked in terms of how much favor they received. The very first major category was comprised of six specific points. A seventh very similar point was found in the second-most-favored major category. These seven are listed on page 12 and thus not repeated here.

However, these statements from the S'02 conference would seem to be a substantial confirmation of the idea of interested mission agencies taking the initiative and sending out a "call."

This is how I see what will happen after that call goes out. Any and all agencies fitting the category will be welcome to send delegates to a founding meeting. Once that founding meeting is convened, the decisions of this constituting group, whether derived from the West or the non-West, will determine the nature and future of the new organization. The organization will, of course, have no more of an external mandate than does the Lausanne Committee, the WEA, etc. What it does and however effectively it does its work will be the basis on which other mission agencies will decide to join or not. The same will be true for the affiliation of national and regional existing bodies.

However, the overarching reason for such a "new thing" is the simple fact that in order to do the job handed to us by God in His Word, we must take into account at least two basic urgencies:

- 1) We must be able to harvest the gifts and insights of all parts of the globe without any geographic or political priorities. There must be a forum at which all agencies are equals.
- 2) We must be able to work with the thousands of ethnic groups which are no longer confined to a particular location but are found all across the world, especially in both the Western and non-Western worlds. The precious new insight we now possess about taking peoples seriously as ethnic and cultural groups demands that we seriously follow them wherever they go.

No existing entity routinely enables mission agencies to meet and compare notes and work together as equals in this way on the world level. **IJFM**