

Strategizing to Reach the Unreached

The Omega Connection

by Malcolm Hunter

One of the few advantages of growing old is the benefit of long-range hindsight. We can look back over our lives and see what progress we have made towards our life goals but also our mistakes and weaknesses. Wisdom comes in when we can learn from those mistakes and allow God to use more of our strengths.

With long-range hindsight and a bit of that wisdom we can also see what things are truly important in this world—things worth living for and even to die for. After 40 exciting and wonderfully satisfying years I am more than ever convinced that the only thing worth dying for is to please the one who died for us and by fulfilling the purpose He left us to finish on this earth. I used to think this was just to preach the gospel to every tribe and nation. That is where we start but it is much more than that.

When God called me into overseas service it was through a Chinese pastor speaking in my home church in England. I was in engineering training and loving it. Suddenly, I no longer cared about designing the finest automated widget making machine in the world, I wanted to go out into that world and find the most far out people least likely to hear the gospel and give them their chance to hear of God's love for them. This was how God spoke to me through that Chinese Pastor. "How many times have you heard the gospel?" he asked. "Was it 3,000 or 4,000 times," I was asking myself when he asked his second question, "Don't you ever get tired of hearing it?" Well, yes I had to admit I did, having become something of a "gospel gourmet," critiquing each message and often criticizing the delivery. "If so," he continued, "you are probably one of those who are meant to go and tell people who will never hear unless we do something about that inequality of opportunity." From that time on I was a pushover for Missions, raring to go as soon as I could finish my five years engineering training. The only question was where to go. At that time I could go to nearly anywhere in the world as a professional engineer, except China!

It is a good measure of the progress made in missions that nowadays we have to look much more closely at the world as we know it to find people groups who are still truly unreached. There may be some places where we feel that they have not heard the Word as taught in our seminary, or do not worship in the

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way that we do in our denomination, but God seems to have a rather wider entrance to His Kingdom than we understand.

The most important lesson I have learned over these last 40 years is the sheer genius of the Church as God designed it. The gospel is indeed the starting point but if presented in an appropriate manner it will produce that most brilliant jewel of all His creative power: the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, we may see all the spots and wrinkles that are so obvious, but it is the Church that Christ loves, and for which He gave Himself. In our individualistic western mindset we like to rejoice in the truth that if “I was the only sinner in the world Christ would have died for me.” That is certainly true but He had something much bigger in mind, He chose me to be part of His most precious possession, a holy people that one day He will present to His Father as His spotless bride. Even the giants of faith named in Hebrews 11 could “only be made perfect together with us,” the Church.

One way in which I see the genius of the Church is in its amazing ability to adapt to any culture or socio-economic system. I have experienced the same supernatural joy of worship in many wonderfully diverse examples of the Christian Church, from the most solemn cathedrals and “high churches” of old England to the wildly exuberant expression in the “lowest” and least educated gatherings of believers, bursting out of the largest grass hut they could build for a church. This is the most fascinating subject for a cross-cultural missionary to explore: What will the Church look like that is appropriate and therefore attractive to the people amongst whom he or she is working? After more than 30 years of living amongst nomadic people it fascinates me more than ever.

Another lesson I have learned from practical experience is that when the indigenous Christian Church is properly established it is the most power-

ful agent for culturally appropriate change in any society. I went overseas as a mechanical engineer, but soon found that the real need was for water supplies, clinic building and especially toilets! After five years in Ethiopia I realized that there is no end to the number of toilets needed in Africa, or clinics and clean water supplies. Building the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ is the greatest “project” on earth to which any man or woman could ever devote their life.

The Church is God’s masterpiece of creation but He has determined that only men and women can be the means of its fulfillment. I often wish that He had given that task to angels. There would have been no delay, disobedience, disunity or dysentery. As it is, because He has entrusted this great commission to humans, we are still wondering, 2000 years later, whether we can or we could, we should or we must! I am sure the angels would have finished the job within the first few weeks, when the population of the world was so much smaller.

The corollary of this essential transforming effect of the Church is that any activity by foreign agencies claiming to be Christian which does not have the end goal of planting the culturally appropriate Church will be missing God’s best, and His greatest blessing. Relief and Development work which does not integrate the preaching of the gospel and the planting of the Church where it is not yet established, can be serving the enemy’s purpose by diverting the resources of God’s people away from His priorities. Satan knows that when the gospel of the Kingdom has been preached in all the world as a witness to every ethnic group, then the end shall come—meaning his end also! He does not mind how many sick people we try to take care of or how many starving villages we rescue from famine as long we do not take the time and trouble to present the gospel in such an appropriate way that a healthy indigenous church will emerge from the chaos.

He cannot stop enthusiastic Christians from wanting to do good works so he gets them so busy taking care of social problems that they are side-tracked from God’s priority. I speak as one who has engaged in lots of famine relief and social programs, only to find over and over again by painful experience that without the Church there is no lasting agent for change in that society. Development without the gospel and the Church only produces fatter, healthier, smarter sinners with a greater capacity to commit smarter sins!

There are many secular agencies and well meaning agnostics who will give generously to human need but would never dream of giving to evangelism and church planting. It behooves Christian people who believe in the transforming power of the gospel to give according to their faith in Jesus, the Saviour of the world, who alone can change people and societies to be all that He meant them to be when they are truly free. The Church is God’s highest ideal for the most transformed and liberated society within any people group. Whatever the level of education it will contain all the power of His Holy Spirit to keep on growing and reproducing itself, even extending over cross-cultural boundaries.

The growth and virility of the indigenous church is not dependent on the amount of Christian education they have received but on what they do with the little they have learned. I have seen several situations where the first believers knew nothing but the name of Jesus but as soon as they started to pray in that name, God gave them His Holy Spirit who began the process of change from within the individual believer and his society. The knowledge of what is right and what is wrong for any society is clearly not determined by the level of their theological education. God appears able and willing to give special revelations of truth to new believers in the pre-literate stage of the Church that for various reasons seem to diminish once the scriptures are available.

God obviously expects missionaries to translate and present His word in the language of the people but he has shown many times that His church need not be delayed in ‘taking off’ until bible translation is completed. Some of the most powerful examples of church

growth occur long before the scriptures become available in that language group. Conversely, few would argue that some of the sickest examples of the Church are found amongst the most literate and theologically erudite people.

The Church is the Agent and Object of all God's Activity on Earth

This is another major conclusion I have reached after my 40 years of joyful involvement. All the events of history past and in the future go according to God's sovereign purposes but all of them are to facilitate His plans for the Church. Even the apparent tragedies and horrific persecutions that He allows Satan to hurl against the Church, God eventually turns to the greater blessing and purifying of His people. Only a distorted view of God that believes He is there to make us rich and comfortable will fail to see that out of those apparent tragedies come the strongest Christian churches.

If anyone questions the view that the Church is God's top priority we have only to look at the sheer malevolence of Satan in trying to attack it. If he cannot destroy it he will do his diabolical best to divert and divide it. No secular agency or political party has ever had to endure the suffering of the people of God. No political movement has paid the price in martyrdom that the Church has paid throughout the ages and continues to pay to this day around the world. Even the present terrorist threat to the supposed Christian West that ironically has largely forgotten the Church comes from Muslim fanatics who believe that they are attacking Christianity, determined to destroy the Church of Jesus Christ. The seething hatred of militant Muslims that has already caused so much chaos and misery in America reveals the depth of the bitter antagonism of the Evil one. The object of his hatred is the Church primarily because that is the object of all God's activity on earth. The spread of the Church throughout the world is the agenda for history and the only factor determining its termination. Satan knows Matthew 24:14 as well as any of us; in fact, I believe he takes it a lot more seriously than most Christians.

I never cease to be amazed at the games people play in their churches but miss the main purpose of the Church—to be the means of bearing the light of the gospel to all peoples and bringing Him glory through the Church. Like Isaiah's description of the failure of his people in chapter 26 verse 18 “We have not brought salvation to the earth; we have not given birth to people of the world.” Too often, the Church has fallen into the same condition as is also described in that verse, “We were with child, we writhed in pain, but we gave birth to wind.” What a pathetic failure to perform—all wind and no reproduction!



Even more amazing to me is the weird aberration of Christian Missions that some modern and well-endowed churches are pursuing now that they have discovered how interesting world travel can be. How many millions are spent in sending short-term enthusiasts overseas to visit the “mission field” and come back to their churches as “veterans and experts?” There used to be a reasonable rate of return for all the effort and expense incurred, with a significant number of those short termers coming back long-term but the latest figures indicate less than 1% are signing on for more than the next short-term tour. Some of those 1% would probably have joined anyway without the short-term “trial run.”

Even some pastors are getting into the game with all expenses paid as they go out to give third-world churches the benefit of their education and experience in preaching to Western congregations. Thankfully the Holy Spirit can still bless the Word if faithfully preached, however irrelevant the illustrations may be. The

real damage comes if the pastor returns to his church and wants to revamp the whole missions program.

The latest trendy missions strategy seems to be partnerships with national churches. This involves even more expense as large groups from the various partners visit each other and ministerial exchanges and music teams circle the globe in the interest of cross-cultural edification. The fact that the partner churches must of necessity be able to speak English and preferably sing nicely too means that those churches will inevitably be the most advanced and educated in any developing country. This mutual exchange can certainly be beneficial, especially when the American Church provides a gift of several hundred thousand dollars to enable the partner church to build yet another huge building in a city where there are already dozens of foreign-funded huge churches. The fact that the Big Brother church sees no problem in pouring money into buildings illustrates how great is the need for some elementary church planting principles to be understood by the donor church. If someone had read Roland Allen's “Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours,” written more than 80 years ago, they would probably have understood why with the best intentions they violated one of the basic principles of indigenous church growth.

The real issue in any church's missions effort is not how much money is spent, but what difference it makes to the advance of the Kingdom. Partnerships are not bad; they can be very stimulating to the saints. But what about the places where there is no church? If that mission's effort does not lead to the unreached, it can be just the latest attempt by the Enemy to divert the resources and energies of a much-blessed church that could have seriously challenged his last strongholds. Satan is making desperate struggles to prevent the global spread of the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ; maybe his last struggles as the number of people groups remaining unreached is falling before the advance of what can be called “intelligent missions.” We can expect him to do his devilish best to attack the Church as the Agent that God has chosen to fulfill His purposes on earth by bringing confusion into what that purpose is.

T*his is what I call “God’s dilemma.” He has the most difficult part of His global plan to finish with the most delicate bunch of disciples to do it.*

Viewed from the elevated perspective of a pulpit in California or the UK, a visit to a typical village in Sudan or India may give the visitor a great sense of purpose that we must help those poor suffering people who were so kind to us. The fact that there may be several other aid agencies and denominational churches already established there does not strike the visitor as anything unusual as that is how things are back home with churches on every street corner. The gifts of a pastor constrain him to want to build up churches and make them “run smoother.” I believe it is the role and gift of a missionary to see beyond those churches to the places where there is no church and what the “well-oiled” ones could do to be the Agent for change.

This brings me to the last major observation I would like to make from my pilgrimage in Church and Mission to the unreached nomadic peoples. One reason that local churches give for wanting to get more directly involved in missions is the high cost and negative experiences they have had working with the traditional Mission Agencies. This is all too often true as the Agencies become bigger and bigger and can give the impression that all they want from the local church is their money. The Agency would also like to recruit the occasional candidate that they can sign up and thereafter leave to the Mission to deploy wherever they see best. The Agency promises to look after the young missionary until, sadly, but again all too often, he or she comes back to the local church, bruised, battered and very discouraged. It is true that modern missionary support costs a lot and the failure rate makes the business-minded member of the Church Mission Committee raise even more questions about the cost effectiveness working through agencies.

There are of course problems on both sides with Mission Agencies blaming the high cost and dropout rates on the sort of candidates that the churches are sending them. The local churches respond that the Agencies should pre-

pare the new candidates better before accepting them and look after them better when they get out to the field. I am most aware of the latter problem as my wife served as personnel administrator for a large mission during our last few years in Ethiopia. She spent much of her time trying to nursemaid the new missionaries. She is much more gracious and patient than I am but even she was heard to mutter that we might be twice as effective if we had half as many missionaries on the field. I ought to add that she said this after a phone call at two o’clock on a Sunday afternoon from a young missionary wife reporting that their toilet was blocked! Seriously, we have to recognize that there are no easy answers to the problem of how to find the right caliber of potential missionaries needed to tackle the challenge of the remaining unreached people groups. This is no easy challenge!

Here is the harsh reality of the contemporary missionary scene. First, the remaining unreached peoples are unreached because they are the most difficult to get to. The difficulty may come from political or religious opposition, geographical isolation, climatological discomfort or more recently, remoteness from e-mail service. I often tell my nomad friends who have become Muslims only in the last 100 years that if they had only lived in areas more congenial for foreign missionaries they might have been believers by now instead of being swallowed into Islam. Westerners do not like to live in deserts! This is why all the tropical islands with palm trees waving on the beach were long ago evangelized and cities like Nairobi where there are lots of fresh vegetables and good restaurants have more than 5,000 protestant missionaries living there.

This is what I call “God’s dilemma”. He has the most difficult part of His global plan to finish with the most delicate bunch of disciples to do it. A hundred years ago most people volunteering for missionary service were quite prepared to die, some even

packing their outfit in boxes the right size for a coffin. Thank God that expectation is no longer prevalent due largely to vast improvements in health care and travel. Now many western workers fly back home to have their babies or even celebrate a birthday! The unfortunate consequence of this “rapid return” mentality is that if things are not going well you can always bail out. You can be sure that the Devil will do his diabolical best to make things go wrong. If you return home with some exotic-sounding disease like schistosomiasis or cholera you will be given a hero’s welcome, even though these are now easily treated.

The second major obstacle I see to the completion of what may be described as intelligent cross-cultural ministry is the present confusion in many churches about what is meant by Missions. Besides the large number of churches who have no real interest in Missions, there are many evangelical ones that have fine Mission statements taken straight from Mathew 28. There is often a text as you go out of the door or their parking lot saying “You are now entering the Mission Field.” This is of course is provided with every best intention to get their members to share their faith but it seriously confuses evangelism at home and cross-culturally. If Missions means anything outside the church car park then who would want to go to some far away place with a rotten climate and no electricity.

The third item on the harsh reality list are those Mission Agencies already alluded to. These have undoubtedly been the primary means God has used to extend His Kingdom. Where the mainline churches and denominations failed to take their responsibility seriously, God raised up hundreds of men with vision to found Interdenominational or Faith Missions. Mighty faith and great sacrifice by hundreds of thousands of men women and children served to advance the Kingdom of God.” Unfortunately, as happens in nearly all organizations, secular or religious, the original vision is lost when the administrators take over and the maintenance or expansion of the organization becomes an end in itself. Administrators do not like taking risks, they are liable to rock

the boat or foul up the smooth running machine they have set up. Risk-minimizing becomes important, offering "the best care from the womb to the tomb". The reason given is that if you want to attract more recruits you have got to offer them the sort of incentives that young people expect today. What a long way we have come from the "means" that God has used to extend His Kingdom over the last 200 years since William Carey wrote the book on this subject and lived it!

There is one other final obstacle and cause for confusion that I have seen in missionaries and their agencies. When has their task been completed, meaning when should they plan to pull out? I believe this should be as soon as the National Church is ready to take over the task of continuing cross-cultural evangelism. This may be well before we think that they are properly organized or taught. I have seen too many situations where the young churches are growing well and the missionary is rejoicing in the blessing God is giving. He enjoys Bible teaching so he builds a nice Bible School and settles down to develop his gift and write encouraging prayer letters to his supporters. At this point he and his agency can easily fall into the comfort trap and

fail to prepare for a strategic exit. If missionaries or their agencies do not demonstrate to the emerging churches their cross-cultural calling then they are falling short in the responsibility to build balanced and dynamic churches with an on-going vision for reaching those without Christ. Why should we expect National Christians to do any more than their missionary mentors are demonstrating—not just teaching in the classroom?

There is nothing more motivating in cross cultural ministry than when a missionary has built good relations and credibility with National Christians and then says, "let's go together to those people over there who have never had a chance to hear the gospel." This is passing on his or her missionary calling and vision to the emerging Church. The motivation may come from a doctor as well as a Bible School teacher but the result has been proven repeatedly to lead to the most fruitful and fulfilling partnership in the gospel.

The Omega Connection

So what would I like to see happen on the wider missionary scene that could enable us to get on with the task Jesus gave us and thereby hasten His return? I suggest the Omega Connection as one

means towards that end. It would not be another organization and certainly no more administrators. The Omega Connection could arise from individuals and agencies that are only interested in the unreached peoples. I do not understand why so many Christians like to belong to Alpha groups or the First Church of such and such. I suggest that it would surely be more biblical as well as more missiologically strategic to have an Omega part of the body that is focused only on the last and least likely ethnic groups to become members of that body. The connection may be almost entirely an electronic one but there are so many computer savvy young people coming on stream that this may be all that is needed to make the connection work. With the imminent advent of satellite connectivity there will soon be no excuse for modern missionaries to ignore the claims of the most distant desert nomads or the tribes hidden deepest in the jungle.

This can easily be dismissed as a wishful dream but Joel tells us that it is OK for old men to dream dreams. I leave it to the young men to catch the vision and work out the details. I just know that God delights to bless all our efforts when we keep His first things first. **IJFM**

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