

Missions in the Third Millennium by Stan Guthrie

Note: The following is from the book by the same title as this article. The author, Stan Guthrie, is now with Christianity Today magazine and is the former editor of Evangelical Missionary Quarterly and World Pulse. In his book, Mr. Guthrie highlights characteristics and challenges of modern day missions.

The vitality that marks the most dynamically missionary churches is today most readily observed in the great continents of Africa, Asia, and South America. That this should be so is not surprising, since Christianity has seldom, if ever, remained healthy and vigorous within rich, dominant societies. The North American component of the global Christian missionary force is, accordingly, a steadily diminishing proportion of the whole. In 1900 there were an estimated 16,000 missionaries, most of these from Europe, Great Britain, and North America. Today, the total number is some 420,000, with a mere 12-15 percent of these hailing from Western lands. In 1900, the total number of distinct and organizationally separate denominational bodies in the world stood at 1,880. Today the estimate stands at more than 30,000, a majority of these outside of North America and Europe. Some 4,000 people groups in the world have no viable Christian witness, according to missions statistician David Barrett. There are an estimated 1.556 billion people in the world who have never heard the Gospel. The number of people born in the non-Christian world grows by 129,000 a day, or 47 million a year. Clearly, if fulfilling the Great Commission depends on seeing that everyone hears, it is nowhere near completion.

Roger Hedlund, a missionary with CB International in Madras, India, states, "Americans are especially vulnerable to an appeal that says, 'Give us your dollars, but not your sons and daughters.' If we do that, missionary vision will die within a generation, and the dollars will also (eventually) stop." There are more than enough needs and challenges to keep every Christian busy for a lifetime. For example, by the year 2010, about 23 million children in the 15 sub-Saharan countries (Africa) hardest hit by AIDS will have lost their mothers or both parents. Tens of thousands of people die annually in natural disasters. There is no lack of need - just a lack of will.

William Carey used many means in four decades of difficult ministry in India. In his diary he wrote, "I feel that it is good to commit my soul, my body, and my all, into the hands of God. Then the world appears little, the promises great, and God an all-sufficient portion." His motto remains an inspiration: "Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God." While much has been made of US missionary dropouts, the problem is worldwide. The non-Western missions movement is much better known for sending people out than for keeping them on the field. During the Brazilian National Missions Congress in October 1993, participants were stunned to hear that of the 5,400 missionaries sent out in the previous five years, the vast majority had returned within a year. Worse, about 90 percent other returnees did not go back. A Colombian missions leader has estimated that 40 percent of all Latin American missionaries return from their assignments early and discouraged because of a lack of training, a lack of on-field pastoral support, and a lack of finances.

Women have always been the backbone of the missionary effort. Mary Slessor in Nigeria, Rosalind Goforth in India, Gladys Aylward in China, Helen Roseveare in the Congo, Rachel Saint in Ecuador, Betty Stain in China, Lillas Trotter with Muslims, and Joy Ridderhof with Gospel Recordings are just the better known women who have served in God's world outreach. Countless others have served just as faithfully, but less conspicuously. Women will continue providing their incalculable contributions in the third millennium, just as they did in the first two.

Approximately 4,600 languages still have no portion of the Scriptures. Wycliffe Bible Translators estimates that if translation efforts continue at their current pace, it will take another 100 to 150 years to provide some Scripture in every language that needs it. A complicating factor, however, is that 2 billion of the people in the world cannot read the language they speak, and so literacy efforts must be added to many translation projects.

2.6 billion people in 547 languages have seen the Jesus film, an increase of 404 languages in a decade. However, it is no panacea. "These tools are wonderful when they are used as bridges to presenting the Gospel and seeds for planting the Gospel, but when they are seen as ends in themselves, they diminish severely the crucial human element in evangelism and discipleship," notes Paul Borthwick of Development Associates International.

Perhaps the latest global evangelization plans should be compared to the prolonged air attacks that pounded Saddam Hussein's military during the Gulf War: necessary, but not sufficient. The ground troops still had to go in and put their lives on the line in Iraq. The same holds true on the missions front. Radio, the Jesus film, prayer, Bible translation, and strategizing about the unreached are all good and needed tasks. However, they are no substitute for the man or woman willing to fight the daily spiritual battle in the trenches, risking life, limb, and honor to glorify God's name among the nations.

While everyone from secularists to Islamists almost always welcomes good works, doing them in the name of Jesus is another matter, and proclaiming the message of the cross is another matter still. Peter and John were not hauled before the Sanhedrin because they healed a disabled beggar, but because they were preaching about Jesus. Peter boldly told the religious leaders, "If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed" (Acts 4:9-10).

By the middle of the century, the World Council of Churches (WCC) under the influence of theological liberalism had basically capitulated on the issue. Mission was defined not as preaching about the substitutionary death of Christ as payment for sins and the necessity of personal faith in Him, but as doing a host of other good and worthwhile activities. One problem is the ever-present temptation to soft-pedal the preaching of the Gospel in order to keep development programs and community relationships going. While ideally, Christians should do both physical and spiritual ministry, sometimes priorities must be made. The priority of Jesus was not giving people physical bread but spiritual bread. When the crowds came to him clamoring for food, the Lord gave them a sermon instead (John 6).

Patrick Johnstone reported in Operation World that the globalization of the Gospel has been remarkable in the 20th century, particularly in the latter half. In 1960, an estimated 58 percent of the world's Christians were Westerners; in 1990, just 38 percent were. Latin America's evangelical presence has exploded from a mere 200,000 or 300,000 in 1900 to tens of millions. Today, about one-third of the earth's approximately 6 billion people are Christians at least in name. They are present in nearly every nation state. Most of the growth is coming in the former mission fields of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. From 1960 to 1990, the number of evangelicals in the West grew from 57.7 million to 95.9 million, while evangelicals outside the West multiplied from 29 million to 208 million.

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ tells the disciples, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14). After the Resurrection, he commissions them to reach beyond the Jews and "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19). The Bible assures us that at the end of history there will be "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before and in front of the Lamb" (Rev. 7:9).

Addressing 400 Christian leaders from 90 organizations and 54 countries, British evangelical churchman John R. W. Stott said at the September 1999 International Consultation on Discipleship that many parts of the global church are characterized by superficiality. "In some places the church is growing strongly, but even there the problem is that of growth without depth," he said. "In short, the church lacks proper discipleship."

If discipleship means being able to live for Christ in the world but not of it, Stott has a point. Pedro Moreno offers the example of Latin America. "In Latin America there is a great religious revival, but it's not having a social, economic, or political impact," Moreno said. "It's mostly a religious phenomenon at this point. It's not changing the laws or the structures or the mentality." Moreno says that Christians must learn to "externalize" their revivals into the larger societies around them if they are to allay suspicion and paranoia about evangelicalism.

Africa, perhaps the most "Christian" of any continent, is too often mired in poverty, tribal hatreds, AIDS, and corrupt governments. "Where are the millions of Christians?" asked David Zac Niringiye, a Ugandan leader of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students, to which Intervarsity Christian Fellowship belongs. "They are in business, politics, medicine, but how come there is no impact?"

Paul Borthwick, who works with a leader-training agency, says discipleship is key to completing the Great Commission. "Make disciples, not converts," he advises. "We have emphasized the making of evangelical-experience converts, which has at times resulted in an anemic church and nominal disciples. We need to take Jesus' command seriously - making holistic disciples rather than presenting a cheap gospel which implies that 'praying a prayer' is all it takes to be a follower of Christ." While technology enables Christians to transmit their message to wider audiences, it does not necessarily guarantee that the message will be understood, or that the messengers will remain the same.

The world's estimated 719 million Hindus have long been objects of missionary concern. William Carey, the so-called "father of modern missions," began his ministry among the Hindus of India two centuries ago. Today, the Christian presence in India could be characterized as a mile wide and an inch deep. While every one of the country's 600 districts has a Christian presence, only about a fourth of its 28,000 postal regions have a Protestant pastor, church, or missionary. Only a third of India's 219 languages possess any portion of Christian Scripture. Only 1 percent of the country, despite nearly 2 millennia of Christian presence, would call itself evangelical.

On the other hand, great strides are being made across North Africa. In fact, the church, basically stamped out for over a millennium, is being resurrected. Arab World Ministries reports stunning growth in the church among Muslim populations. Two decades ago in Mauritania, there were no known believers or church groups. In 1999 there were around 100 Christians in 4 or 5 groups. Morocco has gone from 300 believers in 8 to 10 groups two decades ago to 900 in 20 to 25 groups today. Algeria, site of a civil war that has killed tens of thousands of people, has seen the church grow from 1,200 believers in 12 to 18 church groups to 12,000 Christians in 60 to 80 groups. Tunisia has grown from 30 believers in two or three groups to 150 in five or six groups.

The danger is that many who have been sprinting toward what they see as the finish line may give up with the realization that they are in a grueling marathon. Such disobedience, however, would not only belittle Christ, who bought our salvation on the cross, but also mock the bravery of all who have gone before us in centuries past to share the Gospel.