

How Did The Edinburgh 1980 Conference Come Into Being?

Ralph D. Winter

Editor's Note

The reason for presenting a highly condensed statement from something written back in 1980 is to illuminate the steps now being taken to call a similar meeting for 2004.

The original article, entitled "Precarious Milestones to 1980," was first published in the Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research, Vol. 4, No. 2, April 1980. It has recently been republished in IJFM 20:2 (April-June 2003).

A Southern Baptist missionary, Luther Copeland, as the outgoing President of the (U.S.) Association of Professors of Mission (APM) in June of 1972 made the original proposal as a part of his presidential address. This was out of the blue. But winds were stirring.

R. Pierce Beaver, surely one of the world's greatest historical misanthropologists, provided the organizing wisdom for a Consultation on Frontier Peoples in December of the same year. This could have underscored the value and feasibility of the Copeland proposal, pulling together as it did representatives of ninety United States missions of all stripes, and creating a solid book, *The Gospel and Frontier Peoples*. But it may have influenced the writer of this review more than anyone else.

In June of 1973, at the following meeting of the APM, the writer made a small presentation in effect "seconding" the Copeland proposal. There was still little noticeable response.

In June 1974, however, when the Association of Professors of Mission met at Wheaton, virtually everyone present participated in the Copeland led discussion, which developed a statement of a "Call" for the 1980 meeting. Here are the words:

It is suggested that a World Missionary Conference be convened in 1980 to confront contemporary issues in Christian world missions. The conference should be constituted by

persons committed to crosscultural missions, broadly representative of the missionary agencies of the various Christian traditions on a world basis.

A few days later at the International Congress on World Evangelization meeting at Lausanne, Switzerland, a group of about forty gathered in a side meeting to discuss the now public Call.

Copeland, in a 1973 article noted, "a programme of the [WCC] Commission on World Mission and Evangelism is inevitably limited by virtue of the fact that vast reaches of the missionary enterprise in terms of agencies and churches are not affiliated with CWME." The 1974 Call does not envision that kind of initiative but retains the 1910 reliance on the initiative of the mission agencies themselves.

In late 1975 a detailed summary of events going back to 1910, and an analysis of the 1974 Call, was the work of this writer, appearing in the April 1976 issue of *Missiology, an International Review*. The gist of this article is that the Call deliberately chooses the same name as the 1910 conference, and defines the same all-important uniqueness of its constituency: mission agency representatives, whether denominational or interdenominational.

In the fall of 1976 the writer (on an unrelated trip to Korea) was invited to the Hong Kong meeting of the Executive Committee of the Asia Mission Association, at which time those six key leaders present from all over Asia favorably discussed the 1974 Call and added some wisdom of their own, which became part of later plans, as we shall see below.

In 1977 both the World Council's Commission on World Mission and Evangelism and the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization (LCWE) decided to launch world level conferences in 1980. It was pointed out by the latter that the

1974 Call (employing the original name used in 1910 World Missionary Conference) could too easily become confused with the LCWE meeting unless it was changed. This was a helpful impetus, because the passage of time since 1910 had so extensively modified the meaning of the words "mission" and "missionary" that the use of the same title would no doubt have failed to carry forward the sharpened focus of the earlier conference. Thus "World Consultation on Frontier Missions" was finally adopted. But I am getting ahead of myself.

In 1978 the backing for the conference was still completely ad hoc. Suddenly, with the full momentum of the Lausanne Congress tradition behind the Pattaya meeting, and a full-time coordinator, David Howard, appointed, it became necessary on occasion to defend the very existence of the Edinburgh 1980 meeting. This has not been difficult. Edinburgh '80 (E80) and Pattaya '80 (P80) have different sponsorship, goals, and constituencies.

E80 is not sponsored by any previously existing organization. It enjoys the favor of a number of existing agencies, associations, commissions, and so forth, but is sponsored precisely by an ad hoc group of mission agencies, as was the 1910 meeting, and as defined in the 1974 Call. P80 is the successor to the Berlin 1966, Lausanne 1974, and LCWE sponsored series of meetings. Furthermore, the mission agencies convening E80 have established a credentials committee, which may under certain circumstances (see below) turn down missions expressing an interest in participating. By contrast, no one applies to P80, and individuals, not organizations, are invited.

P80 will involve a spectrum of scholars and leaders from both church and mission (as equals) and will concentrate on the identification of Unreached Peoples and Hidden

Peoples (*see Editor's Note) and the best strategies for reaching them.

E80 will be a conference of representatives, sent as delegates strictly from mission agencies, and the implementation of what is studied and strategized at P80 will be in order. The mission agencies, after all, must take the implementing lead in the actual development of plans (as contrasted to strategies) and the commitment of funds and personnel. Of twenty-two missions in Norway at this writing, only two have had any of their people invited to P80. All twenty two will be welcome at E80, and some of them can send more than one delegate, in proportion to their size.

Just as the LCWE regional committees themselves are primarily church, not mission, leaders, so the choice of P80 invitees is primarily in the hands of church, not mission, leaders. This does not mean that P80 will not invite any mission leaders. Furthermore, not all can be invited. For example, invitees related to only 12 mission agencies of the 100 in the United Kingdom will be going to Pattaya. All could apply for attendance at E80.

But rather than considering all these matters an unfortunate contrast, the writer would prefer to see them as a providential convergence. For P80 to stir up the church world about missionary frontiers is entirely complementary and foundational to the work of E80. In turn, E80 will allow the crosscultural outreach structures to further plan and deploy forces to new Unreached People groups, and can gratefully build on the new mood of outreach among the churches created by P80. If also the WCC-CWM sponsored meeting in May 1980 at Melbourne (M80) functions in somewhat the same way as P80, then we can see a great deal of good deriving from Copeland's 1972 proposal, his 1973 article, the 1974 Call, and the three nonconflicting meetings resulting: E80, P80, M80.

At this writing (late 1979) so many details have been settled with regard to Edinburgh 1980 that space does not allow for all the particulars. Precise organizational and theological "participation criteria" have been laid

down and specific goals and objectives have been developed. An elaborate set of committees has been defined, and different national and regional committees are forming and stepping forward to shoulder the various roles.

As might have been expected, the first initiative outside the United States was British, but the largest and most auspicious committee outside the United States is, at this date, in Korea. These same committees' representatives compose an International Council of Reference, which will function without actually meeting. A central office in Pasadena, California, established by the first regional committee to form, has a full-time office manager, Leiton Chinn, who has performed efficiently and sensitively from the moment his mission (ISI) offered his services.

E80 has chosen Edinburgh partially for historic reasons, but has turned away from any non-Western site primarily for reasons of economics. The overall cost of convening a world meeting, especially when there is still a slight majority of mission agency headquarters in the West, is smaller for a gathering somewhere near the Frankfurt-Geneva-London triangle, and in the case of this meeting, as befits mission societies, expenses are definitely to be minimized. A travel pool will "level" all travel costs, everyone ending up paying approximately the same amount. This way those coming from a great distance will be aided by a sizable fund created by a substantial registration fee that will not only cover consultation expenses but provide financial assistance to those coming from a distance. One of the early decisions of the first committee in Pasadena, made in consultation with the host leaders in Scotland, was to define the conference as Protestant Evangelical and, in addition, to adopt verbatim a statement drawn for the discussion of the Executive Meeting of the Asia Mission Association in Hong Kong, in a section called "Theological Criteria for Participation." Added also was the phrase "agencies that are in agreement with the tenets of the Statements of Belief of the IFMA or the EFMA or the Lausanne Covenant."

The first of six objectives of E80 speaks of, and centers the conference upon, "the world's 'Hidden Peoples': those cultural and linguistic sub-groups, urban or rural, for whom there is as yet no indigenous community of believing Christians able to evangelize their own people."

For many people this kind of meeting is "out of due time." It seems anachronistic precisely because of the extensive trend in the past thirty years to the belief that, now that there are churches overseas, the mission agency structure itself is no longer needed.

To be sure, for a few rare people the situation is rather different: it is a case where Western missions need to be sensitive to the rise of Third World missions, and for this rare group it is reassuring that E80 welcomes mission societies from all parts of the world.

But for a considerably larger group of people, and for a still different reason, it is also startling to see such a meeting promoted this late in history. The conscientious opinion of people in this large group is that pioneer mission societies are no longer needed, and that church departments or councils that lend interchurch workers are all that are needed.

Such observers have not yet recognized the fact that fully 80 percent of all nonChristians live in subsocieties in which there is not yet an indigenous church tradition to which workers can be sent, and that to reach into these 16,750 remaining pockets will require mission agencies from somewhere employing essentially pioneer missionary techniques, not normal, culturally near-neighbor outreach evangelism.

Fortunately for the 1980 WCFM, enough agencies have in fact discovered the "new" world of Hidden Peoples (*see Editor's Note), long invisible to the average outsiders who tend not to take subtle cultural differences seriously. Pattaya 1980 will throw a great deal of light on the subject; perhaps Melbourne 1980 will as well. Edinburgh 1980 can be the ideal complement: to clarify the key administrative decisions that will move from facts, strategies, and dreams to plans, bold moves, and realities. ☉

* in 1982 these terms were agreed on as synonymous