

Editorial Comment



Two Hundred Years of Pursuing God's Heart for All Peoples

Rick Wood, Editor, *Mission Frontiers*

With this special bicentennial issue of *MF* we celebrate not only 200 years of mission society sending of missionaries, but also the efforts by thousands of missionaries over the centuries who have worked tirelessly to discover the strategies and methods that God uses to establish and grow his Church in every tribe and tongue.

It is easy for us in our time to look back and think that we have learned so much and we are doing things so much better than they did “way back when.” But this process of learning from our mistakes is not a straight line of progress. In many ways we still have a lot to learn from the pioneer leaders in missions, such as William Carey or Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson, who developed the idea of establishing indigenous churches that are self-supporting, self-governing and self-reproducing. We still struggle today to implement the great thinking of these pioneers from long ago. Even when we identify mistakes that we have made in the past, we still struggle not to fall back into them, and while the majority of missionaries may have learned from some past mistakes, there will always be those newcomers who never got the message that the methods they are employing today have continually failed over the last 200 years. In our efforts to grow Christ’s kingdom we manage to make new mistakes that our forefathers in the faith may never have envisioned. *MF* seeks to keep these setbacks from happening as much as possible by letting you know in each issue what others are learning and discovering about what God uses to grow His kingdom quickly and effectively.

Even with this uneven record of progress, we must never lose heart in striving to improve what we are doing and to discover God’s ways of establishing and growing His kingdom. In this spirit, we present a number of respected leaders who give us their insights into what we have learned and the mistakes we have made in more recent times.

We start off on page 18 with an article written by Ralph Winter in 2007 in which he gives his own insightful overview of the mistakes the Western Church has made in the hope that others will learn from them and not repeat them. Other leaders give us their insights starting on page 22. Robby Butler provides some of the most important strategic insights in this issue in his article starting on page 25. If we do not learn how to turn the average believer into a disciple-maker, it will be very difficult indeed to bring access to the gospel to every person. We will talk more about this in an upcoming issue.

So What Have We Learned in 200 Years of Doing Missions?

Here are my own thoughts. Feel free to send me your own. Today we have a far superior understanding of the unfinished task of missions than ever before. When Judson and his friends set out in 1812, their understanding of world religions and culture was extremely limited. At first they did not know the difference between a Hindu and a Muslim. The early missionaries believed as some still do today that their job was to establish a Western church like they had back home. In large part today, most missionaries understand that their job is rather to make the gospel indigenous to each people and not to transplant Western cultural forms.

It’s About Going Cross-Culturally to Peoples

Thanks to the efforts of missiologists like Donald McGavran, Ralph Winter and others, we have learned that we must cross cultural and linguistic barriers to get the gospel into every unreached people group. This means establishing indigenous, reproducing churches that are effectively equipping all believers to be disciple-makers and church planters so that a Church-Planting Movement develops in every people. This is the commission that Jesus gave to us in Matthew 28:19-20, and we have no excuse in our day for not completing it.

We have come to recognize that at its heart missions is no longer primarily about crossing geographical barriers, as it was in Judson’s day, but rather crossing the barriers of the heart and mind—those barriers of culture, language and understanding. One of the most important mission strategies in our time is to reach out to the unreached peoples in our midst. In His sovereign plan God has brought the unreached peoples to where we live. He has brought Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim people groups to our neighborhoods. These peoples, if reached, could significantly impact those same people groups wherever they exist around the world. Judson was willing to travel around the world to reach the unreached of his day. The question for us: are we willing to cross the street to reach the unreached of our time?

Finding Unreached Peoples Wherever They Live

The level of information on the world, its peoples and populations available to Judson and his friends was also very limited. Today with the growth in computer and

satellite technology we are on the verge of knowing the church-planting status of every people group and community on earth. David Taylor reported in our Nov.-Dec. 2011 issue on page 26, "Global databases of habitats (cities, towns and villages) now exist for over three million communities. Surveys to determine the status of evangelism and church-planting have been completed for almost fifty countries and 350,000 communities." In the not-too-distant future, we will have all the information we need to deploy missionaries to go to all the peoples and communities that still need a Church-Planting Movement.

It Is Now a Global Mission Force

One of the most significant accomplishments over the last 200 years is that the mission fields of the world have become the bases for sending missionaries. Africa, Asia and Latin America, while still needing to begin church-planting efforts among the unreached peoples in their midst, have also become a major force in world evangelization. The followers of Jesus Christ are no longer primarily located in Europe and North America, as it was in Judson's day, and it is no longer just the responsibility of believers from the West to be on mission with God. Every believer from every people is now part of God's family business of proclaiming His glory in all the earth to every people. The potential workforce for God's Kingdom has grown dramatically in 200 years, as has the potential for bringing the gospel to every tribe and tongue.

We Can Complete the Task of Reaching All Peoples

In Judson's day, it was likely not physically possible to complete world evangelization. There were simply too many obstacles in terms of distance, knowledge and manpower. Today it is a far different story. We have all the resources we need to bring the gospel to every people. We have a good grasp of the scope of the task and more than enough money and potential manpower to establish a Church-Planting Movement in every people. The only thing we lack is the vision and commitment to do so—something that was a huge problem in Judson's day as well. f

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