

# URBANA'S ENDURING LEGACY: CHANGED LIVES



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Over the last 66 years, no other missions event has had so powerful an influence on the mobilization of students for cross-cultural involvement in missions as the Urbana student mission conventions sponsored by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. The list of people involved in the first “Urbana,” held in Toronto, Canada in 1946, includes history-making luminaries J. Christy Wilson and Ralph Winter, who worked together to recruit students from Princeton to

go to the first “Urbana.” Also among the 575 attendees from 151 schools at the 1946 conference were Jim Elliot, martyred in 1956 along with four others working to reach the Waodani people of Ecuador, and Elliot’s best friend, David Howard, who would go on to lead InterVarsity Missions and a number of the Urbana conventions. See our interview with David starting on page 15. The conference got its ultimate name when in 1948 the convention moved to the campus of the University of Illinois in the city of Champaign/Urbana. Starting in 2006, the Urbana conventions have been held in St. Louis.

On the occasion of the latest Urbana convention, Urbana 2012, held December 27-31 with over 16,000 people in attendance, we wanted to explore the history and impact of these conventions on the course of world evangelization. At Urbana 2012 alone, 4,224 people made decisions to serve at least two years in missions. This is an increase from 2,676 in 2009. Our own Perspectives on the World Christian Movement course, which is also one of the most powerful tools for mission mobilization, was birthed out of Ralph Winter’s reaction to an increase in the number of people signing the decision cards at Urbana 73. As David Howard says, “Missiologist Ralph D. Winter came to me after the conference, and had noted the change in attitude and interest. He was desperate to follow-up this fresh interest in world missions. By the summer of 1974 he had designed a two-week seminar for students, the Summer Institute of International Studies (SIIS) to explore the biblical basis, history, culture and strategy of missions. This was the precursor of the Perspectives course, which he produced and

unveiled at Urbana 1979.” (pages 10 and 16 this issue.) The Perspectives course now impacts over 7,000 students every year. Go to [www.perspectives.org](http://www.perspectives.org) to learn more.

I am also one of the fruits of Urbana. I was one of the 17,000 students who attended Urbana 1979. I had only been a believer for two years, and I had no clue what missions or the Great Commission was about, but I was part of an InterVarsity chapter on my college campus when they handed me an Urbana brochure. The decision to go was made much easier when my home church, which has faithfully supported my work with the U.S. Center for 23 years now, stepped forward to cover the cost of my attendance. How many more students like me could be mobilized into strategic mission involvement if more churches had the visionary foresight to sponsor their young people to go to Urbana?

At Urbana 79 speakers such as Elisabeth Elliot, John Stott, Luis Palau and Billy Graham opened up my understanding of God’s purposes in the world. I realized that the Great Commission applied to all who claimed the name of Jesus as their Savior. All of us have a role in proclaiming the kingdom of God to the ends of the earth. We just have to find out from God what role that is. David Howard had a similar revelation at his first Urbana in 1946. He says on page 14, “I remember that I was overwhelmingly impressed... that every Christian who has received the gospel is responsible for giving it to those people who don’t have it.” The major question is why do students like David Howard and myself have to go to an Urbana-like meeting in order to learn of God’s call to all believers to make disciples of all peoples?

## URBANA 2012 GETS IT RIGHT AND GETS RADICAL

Each time that one of the Urbana conventions comes along, people on the outside of InterVarsity, like myself, are tempted to wonder whether they will “get it right,” meaning, “Will Urbana have the right biblical focus on reaching the unreached? In the past we have been critical for a lack of focus on the remaining task and an apparent over-emphasis on social gospel outreach at some Urbanas. But this year it appears that they did a great job of striking the proper balance between proclaiming and demonstrating the gospel.

We were also thrilled to learn that David Platt had been invited to speak, and from all reports his message of making Jesus supreme in our lives and taking the gospel to the ends of the earth was well received. After David Platt spoke, the convention delegates rushed the bookstore and bought up all 4,000 copies of David's book *Radical*. See our interview with David starting on page 11. David's message to Urbana this year is the right message for all believers everywhere, not just the younger generation. He said, "We do not have time to waste our lives coasting out casual, comfortable Christianity. We have a master who demands radical sacrifice and we have a mission that warrants radical urgency.... Every passion, every gift, every skill He has given you, every bit of study you are getting is all for one purpose—to proclaim the kingdom of God to the ends of the earth."<sup>1</sup> He went on to say that the purpose of


our education and careers is "not to make it big and enjoy the stuff of this world." No, it is "for one purpose, the proclamation of the kingdom of God, the declaration of the glory of God to the ends of the earth."<sup>2</sup> You can view David's entire message to Urbana 2012 at [www.urbana.org/urbana-12/videos](http://www.urbana.org/urbana-12/videos). Scroll down to "Day 2 Evening" for David's message.

### AN ANSWERED PRAYER WITH GLOBAL IMPACT

In a letter written immediately following the first 1946 "Urbana" meeting in Toronto, conference director and InterVarsity General Secretary Stacey Woods wrote: "We are praying that this convention might be just the beginning of a mighty missionary movement on the part of thousands of Christian students throughout North America."<sup>3</sup> It is clear that God has answered Stacey Woods' prayer in ways far greater than what he or anyone else

could have imagined. But Urbana's future impact could be far greater than its historic accomplishments if it maintains the kind of focus we saw at Urbana '12.

### A NEW REGULAR COLUMN

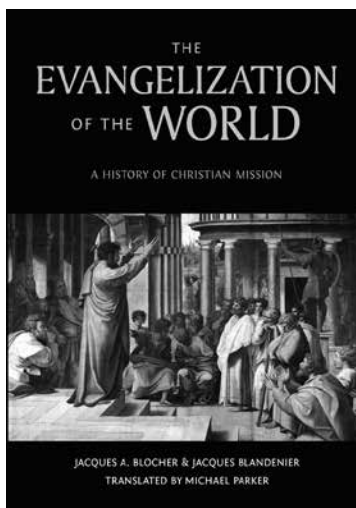
It is my pleasure to introduce a new regular column by Steve Smith called "Kingdom Kernels." You can read his first entry starting on page 33. As the author of *T4T: A Discipleship Re-Revolution*, Steve brings to *MF* a wealth of experience and a depth of insight to the topic of Church-Planting Movements. With Steve's help, in each issue of *MF* we will continue to explore what God is doing through these church-planting and discipleship movements and how we can help foster more of them. 

1. Platt, David, Message to Urbana 2012, Dec. 28, 2012, St. Louis, MO, <http://urbana.org/urbana-12/videos>
2. *ibid.*
3. Taken from <https://urbana.org/history>



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