

Remembering Don Richardson

June 23, 1935–December 23, 2018

Tribute to a Pioneer Missionary, Author & Great Commission Statesman

A runner all his life, missionary influencer and pace-setter Don Richardson completed his life's race in Orlando, Florida, ten months after his diagnosis with brain cancer.

The oldest of four boys, Don spent his early years in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. His father moved the family to Victoria, British Columbia, in the hopes of securing a more promising future for them, before his own death to Hodgkin's disease when Don was 11. Don's life direction was set as a teen when he gave his life to Christ at a 1952 Youth for Christ rally. He subsequently met Carol Joy Soderstrom while training for ministry at Prairie Bible Institute in Alberta. They were lovingly married for 43 years until her death in 2004.

In 1962, Don and Carol embarked with six-month-old Stephen on a missionary career in Netherlands New Guinea (now Papua, Indonesia) under the sponsorship of Regions Beyond Missionary Union (now World Team). They served for 15 years among the Sawi, a stone-age tribe of cannibal-headhunters who idealized treachery. Don and Carol planted churches, designed an alphabet, taught the Sawi to read, and translated the New Testament into their native tongue. In time, and with the involvement of several missionary co-workers, many of the Sawi came to Christ. The gospel replaced warring and headhunting with peace and good will.

In the early 1970s, Dr. Ralph Winter, then a professor at Fuller Seminary's School of World Mission, heard Don speak at a church service. "You've got to write a book," Ralph urged Don afterward. "I'll contact a publisher for you!"

Back in the jungles of Papua, Don documented the Gospel's breakthrough among the Sawi people in his first book *Peace Child* (Regal Books, 1974). Selected as a *Reader's Digest* condensed book upon publication, *Peace Child* immediately became a best seller. A similarly named companion film featuring Don and Carol quickly became a staple at mission conferences across North America.

Don's second book, *Lords of the Earth* (Regal Books, 1977), recounted the martyrdom of two missionary co-workers, a dramatic plane crash, and the discovery of yet another "redemptive analogy" – stone-encircled "places of refuge" – among the war-like Yali tribe.

Don's third book, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, documented how the concept of a supreme God has existed for centuries in hundreds of cultures around the world. The book soon became "required reading" in seminaries and Bible colleges. Christians worldwide were inspired afresh by the notion that God has "prepared the gospel for the world," and "the world for the gospel."

In 1977 Don began serving as World Team's minister-at-large, speaking at dozens of events each year in North America and worldwide. The Richardsons moved to Pasadena, CA, joining Ralph and Roberta Winter to assist in the founding of the U.S. Center for World Mission. With the emergence of the "Perspectives on the World Christian Movement" course, Don became a frequent contributing lecturer, a role he relished for 40 years.

Don was an ordained pastor and held an honorary doctorate of literature from Biola University. After Carol Joy's passing in 2004, Don eventually met and married Carol Joyce Abraham, with whom he moved to Orlando and enjoyed ongoing fruitful ministry.

Don's books and teachings have helped to shape missions discourse and influence two generations toward whole-hearted engagement in the Great Commission. Don's subsequent titles, including *Secrets of the Koran*, *Heaven Wins*, and *A Man from Another World* explore other arenas of theological and cosmological interest. A short inspirational film called *Never the Same* explores the ongoing impact of the gospel 50 years after Don and Carol's arrival among the Sawi people.

In addition to his public ministry, Don enjoyed painting scenes of tribal life in New Guinea, tournament chess, running, summiting 33 "fourteeners" (peaks rising above 14,000 feet), and spending time with his beloved family. Don's four children have also been involved in missions, three of them in Indonesia. Don's son Steve serves as President of Orlando-based Pioneers.

Don's memorial service, a memorial fund benefitting the next generation of Papuan church leaders and missionaries, and a fascinating trove of historical photos and tribal paintings can be viewed at a website provided by the family: peacechildlegacy.com.

I received my call to missions at Urbana '79, but it was the books and messages of Don Richardson that fanned the flames of my growing mission vision over the 10 years between my call and the start of my missions career with Frontier Ventures. His books fed and nurtured my understanding of the missionary task. Whenever I read Gen. 12:1-3, I think of Don and the wonderfully engaging way he had of connecting people to that promise made to Abraham and our responsibility today to bring the blessings of God to all peoples. No one this side of heaven can measure the tremendous impact that Don had in helping to launch and foster the frontier mission movement. He will be greatly missed.

—Rick Wood, Editor, *Mission Frontiers*

“I remember reading ‘*Eternity in Their Hearts*’ somewhere before we went to work in the Muslim world. Don’s approach to looking for what I would later call the fingerprints of God in other cultures was, for me, profoundly world-view altering. I know in his later years our views of how God might work among Muslims differed, but I remain deeply indebted and grateful to Don for many of my own missiological instincts. He shaped my ministry.”

—Dr. Kevin Higgins
General Director, Frontier Ventures 

« I have fought the good fight,
I have finished the race,
I have kept the faith.
2 Timothy 4:7 »

