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Ralph D. Winter



Dear Reader,

The Asian tsunami—which *no one* could have stopped—is radically different from the Darfur genocide happening right now in a bleak corner of Sudan—which *could* be stopped.

Darfur is far worse than the turmoil and tragedy in either Indonesia or Iraq, for Darfur is the scene of “two million homeless, hungry and traumatized people,” to borrow a line from the moving portrayal by Susan Sutton (pp. 8-13).

Yet the whole world is rushing to help out with what happened *suddenly* in Asia. This is so human. If a problem builds *slowly*, humans tend not to react. How horrible!

The Subtle, Deadly Peril of What Goes *Slowly* Wrong!

Much of this issue of MF depicts developments that have gone terribly wrong—*slowly*—but have been hardly noticed.

Let’s first note two examples of the bizarre phenomenon of human blindness to slow and harmful processes.

- 1. *Darfur*. Things have gone terribly wrong in Sudan for so long that it is hard for the world to react appropriately and effectively any longer. The world has become accustomed to ignoring Sudan.
2. *Oil*. Even before 2010 the oil shortage will be so serious that it will present one of the largest crises in all human history. Yet we go on guzzling petroleum fuels as if they were not fast running out.

Just think, every day we have so

many huge planes in the air filled with heavy Americans that we need to spend a million gallons of additional jet fuel *per day* due to increased obesity in the last ten years (*Berkeley Wellness Letter*, Feb. '05). That’s just the *increase!* What is the *total* used per day?

Though the prices of fossil fuels continue to skyrocket, we can’t even plant, harvest or process food without that source of energy.

We blindly continue to consume so much oil that the entire resources of the Alaskan Prudhoe field would be saved *in one year* if U.S. cars got *one more mile per gallon*. Yet instead, at the very moment when fossil fuels are getting dangerously low, we have moved madly to millions of top-heavy, gas-guzzling SUVs! And now China is also scavenging the earth for petroleum resources to fuel its mighty industrial explosion.

Are humans taking this all into account? No!

Okay, these are illustrations of peril appearing *slowly*. What about our article on “house churches” in this issue? What does that have to do with slow peril?

House Churches to the Rescue

Actually, the trend to house churches is a phenomenon which runs counter to the long and slow drift of American churches away from extended families. The American church today is strikingly more and more a place for family fragments, and even seeks to *replace* natural families!

The New Testament “church” was a worshipping household like that of Cornelius, Lydia, or Crispus, and was called an *eklesia*, a word that does not mean what we understand “church” to mean.

What happened to us (*slowly*)?

Families can be “small groups”, but small groups cannot readily become families.

Modern age-stratified, highly specialized society has become Satan’s Weapon of Mass Destruction of the family—precisely where worship and accountability are supposed to be primary! The church has mindlessly followed the world’s pattern: a family driving up to a church door is instantly chopped into pieces.

Our lengthened school system also snatches our children away. Far worse, it isolates the generations. Over 300 years it has (*slowly*) gone from three years of schooling (as with Harvard in its first century—students without previous schooling) to 17 years of incarceration today. Whatever the merits of that long tunnel of isolation from adult responsibilities, such a system postpones marriage and in so doing pries apart the generations so that grandparents are really old. (We no longer see grandparents in their 30s!)

That means that little Johnny will *never see his father obeying his own father*. Three- and four-generation households, which once joined churches together, and had family-level worship, are now almost universally reduced to “nuclear” families (e.g. family fragments). The grandparent generation is no longer a stabilizing factor, divorce has skyrocketed, wives are abused, children go wrong, etc.

This happened slowly, over 300 years. Thus, today we are blind to what has happened — but must deal with the consequences.

Missionaries to the Rescue?

Those of us who have lived overseas, where most societies have not yet been “Westernized” and stacked against normal marriage age, may be among the only ones who can even perceive—much less unravel—the reality of this tragedy.

Small Groups Instead?

Unfortunately, many congregations today have the idea that getting people into small groups is all that is necessary. However, extended families can be small groups, but small groups cannot readily become extended families.

Pastors, frantic to do more than preach generalities to crowds on Sunday, may hope to get most of their congregations into small groups. Sure, those



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family fragments out there in the pews desperately need to rise above their individualism and isolation. Thus, a non-family, artificial small group is better than nothing.

In such churches you may never hear a word about what could and should go on at the family level. I myself, in Evangelical churches all my life, have never heard a sermon on how or why families ought to have family devotions.

But it is clearly better – as well as more important – to make every real family a small group than to try to make small groups into artificial families.

No book I know is a better family handbook than the truly marvelous book by Stephen Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Families*. Next best is the one (we republished) by an Asbury Seminary professor, Dr.

Donald Joy, *Risk-Proofing Your Family*. (See page 20 to order.)

Yes, House Churches to the Rescue!

All over the world it is gradually becoming clear that you can build a big church out of small groups, but big churches without families remaining intact aren't worth much.

Last I heard, the most famous large church (in Korea) had 800,000 members meeting in 21 auditoriums and 15 identical services a week. But the secret was that behind all this once-a-week celebration were 52,000 (!) neighborhood fellowships mainly based on extended families.

The house church phenomenon could be revolutionary. It just may be that the most valuable gift missions can give back to the American church is a renewed sense of the family as God intended it to be. 🌐

The Impossible Challenge

We're pleased to announce that finally the 480-page (8.5 x 11) reprint of the first four harrowing years behind this bulletin, *Mission Frontiers*, is now truly available. Entitled *The Impossible Challenge*, this volume sums up the first two incredible years of this project and then gives month-by-month accounts of the next four. Over 400 pictures had to be specially scanned and many other labors invested.

The volume will now be sent directly from the printer in St. Louis to all who have already provided their addresses.

For additional copies or copies for additional people, send \$12 per copy to Betty Leung, 1539 E. Howard Street, Pasadena, CA, 91104. Or, phone her with a credit-card order at 626-296-7501.

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