



YWAM'S TRANSFORMATION:

From Short-Term Missions to Discipling Nations

DEBRA BUENTING

“We’re a mission organization that is traditional in every sense,” declared Loren Cunningham in a television special celebrating the birth of YWAM. Cunningham was attempting to paint Youth With A Mission—which he had started nineteen years earlier—as a credible Christian ministry. However, his mission was anything but traditional, as its very purpose was to construct a new model. YWAM recruited young people (most of whom had no formal university education) as well as non-Westerners, and formed a highly decentralized and innovative movement. YWAM would grow to become one of the largest Christian movements in the world, attracting many thousands of students and missionaries, both part-time and full-time, united by shared ethos and vision. The mission would emerge from and reflect the spiritual roots of the founder himself.

Loren Cunningham was the son of two Assemblies of God itinerant preachers. His mother had grown up on the road, living and traveling in a covered wagon



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and then a truck, crisscrossing the American south with her parents holding revivals and planting churches. His father had grown up in foster homes because Loren’s granddad—widowed with five children—had answered the call to become a traveling preacher to save souls. He had turned down an opportunity to pursue an engineering degree, in order to serve the Lord because it was considered a higher calling. Loren himself was only thirteen when he felt God calling him to, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15 KJV). This New Testament passage was to become the mantra of the mission he would found.

Wanting to channel the enthusiasm and uncomplicated faith of young people, Cunningham started Youth With A Mission in 1960 with the idea of mobilizing young people on short-term mission trips. Despite his ordination by the Assemblies of God, his untraditional ideas were met with considerable criticism as denominational leaders pointed out problems with his plan to send young, inexperienced youth from many denominations, overseas. Despite opposition, Cunningham recruited high school and college students to give up their weekends and summer holidays to go on evangelistic outreaches in the U.S. and Canada, the Caribbean, Latin America, and the South Pacific. These young “YWAMers,” as they were called, would talk to people about God in their homes, on the street, and in special evangelistic meetings. In a 1969 book about YWAM, *Journey with the Followers*, the ministry was described as, “an interdenominational movement of young people organized for the sole purpose of reaching this generation with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”



However, despite a clear goal of going and preaching, the first YWAM outreach was actually more practical in nature. Cunningham recruited two twenty-one-year-olds to go to Liberia, in Africa, to help build a road through the jungle to a leper colony. The young men also transported U.S. government donations and shared their testimonies as they traveled with resident missionaries to neighboring villages.

During an evangelistic outreach to The Bahamas in the summer of 1964, Hurricane Cleo killed over a hundred residents and left thousands of others homeless. Cunningham had a revelation, as described in his book, *Is That Really You God?*

I realized that many of us were in danger of not stressing properly one major part of the Gospel message. Jesus told us there were two important things to do. One was to love God with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength—teaching people to do—that is evangelism. The other command was to love our neighbor as ourselves—to take care of people, as much as is in our power to do. These were the two sides of the same Gospel; loving God and loving neighbor. The two should be almost indistinguishable—so linked that it would be hard to tell them apart.

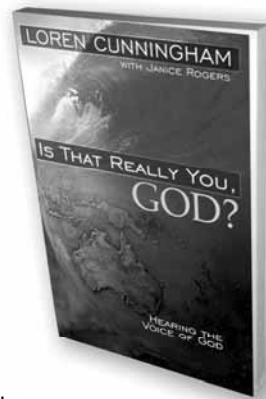
During the 1960s YWAM's staff consisted of a few dozen volunteers who had raised their own financial support, a policy that is still practiced today. Real growth did not come until YWAM began its School of Evangelism in 1969. Cunningham's short-term, non-formal education model was innovative and served as an alternative to the years of formal schooling mandated by most missionary agencies. The first class included several key figures who would become the first generation of YWAM leaders.

The 1970s: A Decade of Discipling

The 1970s brought an emphasis on discipleship courses, short-term outreaches, and establishing operating locations all over the world. Cunningham was gifted in recruiting young missionaries. The theme of "going" was emphasized in a message he preached entitled, "Go Means a Change of Location." "God says go," he would preach, "whether it's across the street or across the world." The theme continued in 1985 with the publication of *Go*, a coffee table-style book of photographs of YWAMers involved in ministry that coincided with the mission's twenty-fifth anniversary. It also contained basic information about the mission and listed

operating locations. This was followed by the annual publication of the *Go Manual*, which continues to serve as an annual directory of international YWAM training and ministry opportunities. "Go Festival" recruiting events were held on several continents and "Go Teams" served as YWAM's shortest mission outreaches.

A subtle shift occurred in the mid-1970s in the name of the entry-level training course required of all long-term staff. The School of Evangelism (SOE) was replaced by the Discipleship Training School (DTS). The new name accurately reflected the mission's training emphasis during that decade.



In 1978 YWAM started a non-formal university in Hawaii called Pacific and Asia Christian University (PACU), later renamed University of the Nations (U of N), which included nonformal training programs at YWAM centers around the world. The U of N was to be a missions-oriented university dedicated to fulfilling the Great Commission. The formation of colleges was to reflect a message Loren had developed in the mid-1970s.

His *Seven Ways to Change a Nation* became *Seven Mind-Molders* and eventually *The Spheres of Influence*. The seven were: church, family, media, government, education, business, and the arts. Today the corresponding U of N colleges are identified as: Christian Ministries, Counseling and Healthcare, Communication, Humanities and International Studies, Education, Science and Technology, and The Arts. Several U of N centers eventually started to serve the mission with additional resources, including Community Development, Environmental and Stewardship Resources, and Field Ministry Internships.



The 1980s: A Decade of Mercy Ministries and New Frontiers

In the 1980s, YWAM was a loosely organized yet vision-filled movement of mostly twenty- and thirty-somethings that had concentrated its efforts on evangelism and training. A high priority was placed on individual and team guidance, a belief in hearing God's voice through personal and corporate revelation. When news of the refugee crisis in Southeast Asia flooded the press in the late 1970s and early 1980s, YWAMers were moved with compassion.

Cunningham said at the time that YWAM had been meeting human needs in 150 nations for more

than nineteen years. “But,” he said, “God is calling us to do it in a new level because the need is greater, because of a new level of refugees ready to receive the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world.”¹ Certainly the publicity surrounding the refugee crisis became a wake-up call to the ministry that, as a whole, had previously suffered from little social consciousness. Despite short periods of fasting and prayer for the poor of India, it was the first time many YWAMers had seriously grappled with the issue of poverty and a Christian response.

YWAM Relief Services was born in 1979 and became a highly publicized ministry in the 1980s. Because guidance, obedience, sacrifice, and flexibility were values already instilled in the mission, YWAM was able to quickly rally workers to staff refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodian border. Doing new things in new ways had been part of YWAM’s history, so learning to work with refugees was viewed as a new and exciting challenge. YWAMers collaborated with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to distribute food and clothing, administer medical and dental services, provide primary education and vocational training, and offer banking and postal services in refugee camps. YWAM also established Bible studies and churches, and offered counseling to victims of war and abuse.

YWAMers worked in Southeast Asian refugee camps until they closed in 1995. While continuing work in that region, they also responded to crisis situations in other places including Ethiopia, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq, and regions devastated by the 2004 tsunami.

Another compassion ministry called Mother’s Choice was opened in Hong Kong to give unwed mothers (often ostracized by their families) a place to stay during their pregnancy. It quickly became a refuge for the mothers’ babies as well as for children who had become wards of the state. A few years later, a similar ministry called Mother’s Love was started in China.

Although YWAM had not released formal statements or papers, it had been a signatory to the 1974 Lausanne Covenant, which included a section on Christian Social Responsibility. YWAM also affirmed the 1981 Christian Magna Carta, and the 1988 Manila Covenant, the latter of which affirmed “the Lordship of Christ over every sphere of life,” and expressed a commitment “to love people in both word and deed” and to “perform acts of mercy so that men and women will embrace the truth of the Gospel.”

The 1990s: More Integrated Thinking

By the 1990s, some of the more influential ministries in YWAM were Frontier Missions and Strategic Missions, which were at least partly influenced by the church-planting emphasis of the U.S. Center for World Mission, and by pressure from more traditional mission agencies. YWAM’s Frontier Missions described itself as “A movement within YWAM that focuses on church planting among the least evangelized peoples of the world.”²

Because of the focus on church planting among unreached people groups, there had been some tension surrounding some Frontier Missions (FM) efforts that were not directly related to evangelism and personal discipleship. However, at times YWAM Frontier Missions workers were convinced that meeting physical and other needs is a valuable component of demonstrating the gospel. As a former YWAMer involved in holistic work stated, “You can’t try to do evangelism in India, for example, without being faced with overwhelming physical needs and the incredible sense that word without deed is not truly life giving.”³

While YWAM Strategic Frontiers (SF) also planted churches, it differentiated itself from FM in two main ways, by working: (1) closely with the Western church in forming strategic alliances with indigenous churches; and (2) to empower indigenous churches to transform all aspects of life. SF took its cue from the U.S. Center that planting churches is a key first step to societal transformation.

At the same time, YWAM Mercy Ministries (MMI) began to shift its focus from short-term relief to long-term development goals. In the 1990s, MMI staff began to grapple with strategic solutions to human poverty and to voice these concerns to the mission at large.

At a 1990 Mercy Ministries conference, a covenant was drafted and several key issues were discussed. They included integrating approaches to relief and



LOREN CUNNINGHAM AND RALPH WINTER



development, trends for the 1990s, and focusing on unreached peoples. MMI was starting to understand the rest of their “Go!” mandate, which appears more completely in the Matthew reference than in Mark’s. “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and *teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you*” (Matt. 28: 19–20, italics added). This is what David Moberg had described in his 1972 book, *The Great Reversal*:

Too many Christians have failed to recognize the full import of the Great Commission of Jesus Christ. They emphasize the evangelistic and missionary commands of its first three instructions (to go, make disciples, and baptize them), but they totally overlook the fourth, “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20). It is here that Christian social concern lies.

YWAM’s University of the Nations began to champion holistic ministry by inviting church leaders to address Christian holism, often referred to as “community development.” In U of N courses and workshops, Darrow Miller of Food for the Hungry shared his perspectives on world hunger, explaining some of the less obvious reasons for poverty and proposing a biblical response.

Miller published a book in 1999 titled *Discipling Nations: The Power of Truth to Transform Cultures*. The book was endorsed by Loren Cunningham, who wrote, “Darrow Miller points the way to the frontiers of the 21st century for all who are committed to the Great Commission. *Discipling Nations* is a ‘must’ for mission leaders.” The idea of discipling nations became a vital element of YWAM rhetoric in the late 1990s and into the new century.

Several YWAMers also began forming theologies of discipling nations and spread them through articles and teachings. Landa Cope’s study, teaching series, and book *The Old Testament Template: Relearning to Disciple Nations God’s Way* underscored the need to understand and teach biblical principles for the domains outlined by Cunningham in the 1970s. Cope stressed the church’s responsibility to imple-

ment and teach them at individual and corporate levels.

The New Millennium

As YWAM entered the new millennium, a more holistic worldview began to exponentially permeate the rhetoric and ministry. The 2004 tsunami catapulted Mercy Ministries to yet another level as they sought to bring short-term relief and long-term development and recovery into predominantly Buddhist and Muslim regions. Long- and short-term teams worked in cleanup and rebuild-

ing as well as counseling, providing kid-safe zones such as preschools and daycare centers, sponsoring community support programs, and aiding with livelihood restoration. In other regions, they continue to “meet the felt needs of individuals and communities, children at risk, refugees and those living on the edge of survival in both crisis and long term development situations.”⁷⁴

The publication of the book, *His Kingdom Come: An Integrated Approach to Discipling the Nations and Fulfilling the Great Commission*, was an effort to continue fueling a movement that understands and embraces Jesus’ mandate to “go and disciple nations.” (see page 29 in this issue of *Mission Frontiers* for comments on this book by Ralph Winter). In 2001, “Transforming Cultures through Kingdom Thinking” was the title of the YWAM North American Leaders Conference in 2001, with Darrow Miller as the sole speaker. Unlike colonial and paternalistic models of the past, the philosophy behind “kingdom thinking” is to enable people to “achieve all that God has for them.” In other words, it is to help individuals and nations realize biblical transformation at every level. There is growing comfort with the phrase “the kingdom of God,” one that evangelicals came to avoid because of ties to the social gospel during the Great Reversal.

Used increasingly in the mission, “kingdom of God” terminology describes a theology that seeks to transform nations using the entire Bible. YWAM International Chairman Jim Stier wrote in a 2001 article:

we must preach both the gospel of salvation and the gospel of the Kingdom of God. [But] The Kingdom doesn’t exist without personal salvation. To teach a type of personal salvation that doesn’t produce integrity, compassion, and social involvement is to reduce the gospel to a mere ticket to heaven.... Many times you can only bring substantial and lasting help to individuals by changing the whole community or nation at the level of its collective conscience and values.... We need to show them the life of Christ in the way we love one another, the way we live, relate to one another, and

do business. This will eventually effect society's institutions, laws, and attitude.⁵

At the time of this publication, YWAM has more than 16,000 staff at some 1,100 operating locations in more than 170 countries. The idea of discipling nations seems to be slowly moving from a wake-up call to bona fide holistic ministry in various parts of the world. Terms such as “business as mission” and “global response” are increasingly used as YWAMers talk about their ministry expressions. Voice for the Voiceless is a prayer initiative to draw attention to gender injustice. YWAM is increasingly involved in HIV/AIDS, both raising awareness of the issue and working with orphans and others who have been affected. However, despite all these efforts in business, working for justice, and other compassion ministries, there is still much work to be done.

YWAM is currently working on a statement of what discipling the nations and realizing the Kingdom might look like. We are also thinking about what discipling the nations is not. It is not about using power to make the world into what the Church wants it to be. It is not about forcing conversion on the world's peoples. For this reason, the current discussion has nothing to do with liberation or dominion theology. Advancing the Kingdom is not about advancing Western culture and theologies. God loves all nations and cultures. It will take all nations and cultures to paint an accurate picture of who God is and what God's Kingdom will look like. It is not political. It does not equal all American “ideals” like the “American dream.”

Reconnecting

When we look at history, we see the Church originally had a sense that God cared about and was involved in every aspect of life. Christians were leaders in science, the arts, education and many other fields. Catholic monks carried their missionary message throughout Europe, encouraging converts to develop every aspect of their lives, from private devotion to academic scholarship.⁶ Martin Luther believed that the work of monks and priests was no more holy in the sight of God than the efforts of “the rustic laborer in the field or the woman going about her household tasks, but that all works are measured before God by faith alone.”⁷ He fought vigorously for the education of poor children and low-interest loans for workers. William Carey brought the gospel to India, translating the Bible into several languages and dialects. He also founded a university, an Agricultural and Horticultural Society, and a savings bank; published dictionaries and books on grammar and botany; fought for the conservation of forests; and

openly resisted the cultural tradition of widow burning.⁸ William Wilberforce worked with the British Parliament to abolish slavery and helped found the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Puritans, Pietists, Moravians and Methodists fed and clothed the poor, established schools, and fought for social issues such as the rights of women and slaves.⁹ William and Catherine Booth, who started The Salvation Army, met both physical and spiritual needs of the poor, addicted and otherwise “undesirable” populations. And Martin Luther King, Jr. “led a social movement that confronted systemic evil—the evil of racism—and made national policy makers end legal segregation and the denial of black peoples’ right to vote.”¹⁰ His efforts moved a nation towards racial equality.

Along with many Christians of the new millennium, the YWAM movement is realizing that it does not have to choose between the salvation of individuals and the redemption of society. Its workers are reconnecting with the reality that the kingdom of God is a central theme of the Bible that invites all people of faith to work toward shalom, and help reverse the Great Reversal. ¶

Endnotes

- 1 Paul Martinson, “The Development of Leadership in Youth With A Mission: A Study in a Contemporary Mission's History, Leadership Development and Current Leadership Challenges,” (Unpublished manuscript, 1996).
- 2 “What is Frontier Missions?” March 15, 2001, www.ywamfm.org/frontier.html (accessed July 8, 2004).
- 3 Steve Goode, personal communication, April 27, 2001.
- 4 B. Boorujuy and J. Bull, *Faces of the Poor: YWAM Thailand*, video (Amsterdam: ProclamaMedia Productions, 1989).
- 5 Jim Stier, “Disciple all Nations: God's Character Demands It,” *The International YWAMer* (June 2001), www.ywam.org/articles/article.asp?AID=96 (accessed April 20, 2007).
- 6 Pierson, P.E. “Missions and Community Development: A Historical Perspective,” in Elliston, E.J. (Ed.). (1989). *Christian Relief and Development: Developing Workers for Effective Ministry*. Dallas, TX: Word, pp. 7–22.
- 7 Selected writings of Martin Luther available online from books.google.com.
- 8 See Mangalwadi, V. & Mangalwadi, R. (1999). *The Legacy of William Carey: A Model for the Transformation of a Culture*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.
- 9 Pierson, P. E., pp. 7–22.
- 10 Mike Miller, Personal communication, January 27, 2009. Miller has extensive experience in confronting systemic social ills by helping organize communities into “people of power.” He is the author of an upcoming book (September 2009) titled, *A Community Organizer's Tale: People of Power in San Francisco*. Heyday Books.