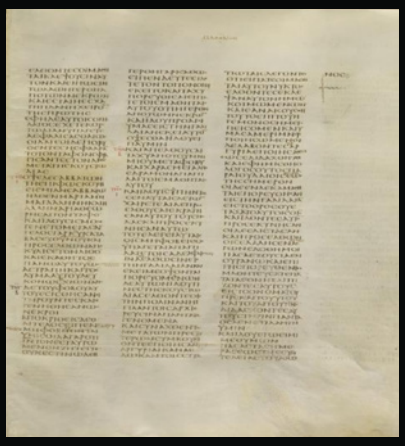
Vol. 16 No. 1 January–April 2021

Mission Round Table

The OMF Journal for Reflective Practitioners



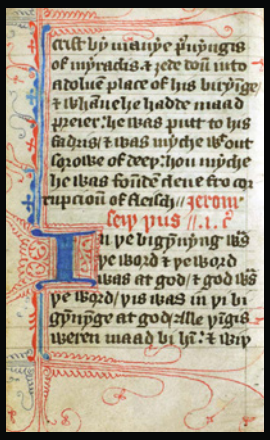
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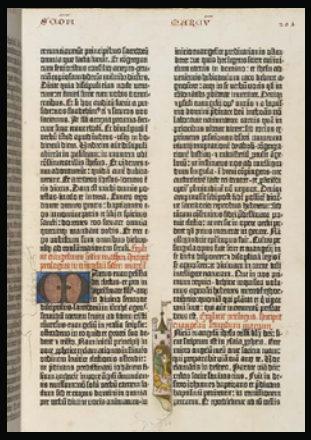
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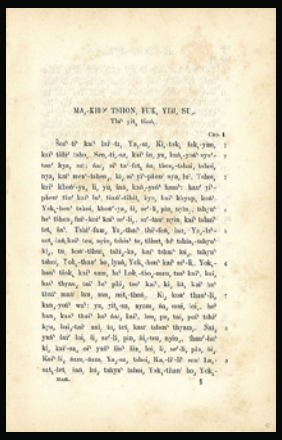
Book of Kells, Latin, Folio 29r, ca. 800, Trinity College Library, Dublin, Incipit to the Gospel of Matthew



Wycliffe Bible, English, late 14th century, John 1:1–3



Gutenberg Bible, Latin, ca. 1455, Vol. 2, Folio 207, end of Matthew and beginning of Mark



Basel Missionary Society Gospel of Mark, Hakka (Lepsius Romanization), 1874, Mark 1:1–9



Shan Bible app, text © 2002, United Bible Society, produced by OMF International, Matthew 1:1–5



Thai Deaf Bible, Wycliffe Bible Translators USA

Innovation and Mission

Sharing the Good News in a New Age

MCI (P) 057/03/2021

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Photo credits: The photos on the cover show how the spread of the gospel, linked with the development of technology, produced some enormous innovations that have made the Bible accessible to people all around the world. Whereas the Hebrew Bible had been available to Jews on scrolls, Christians adopted the new codex form of book—with individual pages all bound together along one edge—for the Bible and other literature. This innovation was more compact than the scroll, and simplified the arrangement of biblical books and looking up specific passages. Though all early Bibles were handwritten, the change from writing solely in uncials—capital letters—to minuscules—lower-case letters—speeded up reproduction and made them cheaper to produce. As people from other countries turned to Christ, translations were made into other languages, so that, before Johannes Gutenberg's revolutionary invention of the printing press, God's word was available in at least twenty-five or thirty different languages. Gutenberg's press not only paved the way for the Renaissance, Reformation, and Age of Enlightenment, it provided the technology for printing whole Bibles or portions (such as the Hakka Gospel of Mark) in more than two thousand different languages. More recent technologies have

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The editorial content of *Mission Round Table* reflects the opinions of the various authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the views of OMF International (IHQ) Ltd.

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Editorial

Walter McConnell

"Oh sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth!" (Ps 96:1)

"Is there a thing of which it is said, 'See, this is new'? It has been already in the ages before us." (Eccl 1:10)

"Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Isa 43:19)

"Thus says the LORD: 'Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.'" (Jer 6:16)

Christian workers feel a continual tension between the desires to attempt something new for God and to remain true to tradition. Some are driven by the new, the innovative, the *cool*. Others remain tied to the traditional, the tried, the *true*. As the verses above remind us, we can be tempted to search through our scriptural grab bags to find ideas that match our personal leanings without considering the immediate or wider context. This common (mis)use of Scripture to promote our own ends needs to be corrected. The Bible doesn't exist to support ideas we have derived from other sources but to attune us to what God has to say to us and to the world.

This issue of *Mission Round Table* examines and evaluates some common ideas regarding innovation found in mission circles today. The opening articles set the context for the discussion. In the first, I argue that anyone who promotes innovation needs to think deeply about the meaning of the term, the different ways in which it can be experienced and passed on, and the fact that it is tied to tradition in inextricable and astonishing ways. Examples of innovative ministries from the history of CIM/OMF give us a perspective from which to examine modern calls for innovation and demonstrate that doing something new isn't always popular, and while it may be the right way forward, there is no guarantee that it is. We also learn that very few things promoted as such are truly innovative. Perhaps our old friend Qohelet from Ecclesiastes knew something when he said that "there is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl 1:9).

The second article calls our attention to the culture of an organization that promotes or stalls innovation. And though many examples of innovation can be identified from CIM/OMF history, some younger members have felt that the Fellowship is not open to new approaches. What, we are asked, has caused this disconnect? Part of the answer is that we need to understand what can and cannot be accomplished within the culture of an organization and to produce safe spaces in which curious minds can have the courage to ask questions about what can be done.

Scattered throughout the issue, a number of current and past field leaders report on innovations they are acquainted with. David Eastwood condenses seventy years of OMF work in Taiwan to highlight a series of innovative ministries, some of which were useful for a time but then either turned over to local Christians or dropped. Andrew Goodman rightly reminds us that all thinking about innovation should be motivated by a clear recognition that people are lost without Christ and that all ministry—new or old—needs to be centered on glorifying God by making disciples for Jesus. Ulrich Kohler challenges us to question our motives for pursuing innovation and reminds us that we should only pursue new ministries that sharpen our ability to share the good news. He then gives examples of ministries developed in Thailand that do just that. Ian Prescott steps back a couple of decades to recount OMF's start in missional business that began with reading about the possibilities, experimenting with various approaches, reflecting on things learned through experience and as local laws changed, and designing policies to facilitate future ministry in this area.

Adding to field leaders' reflections about innovation, this issue features field workers who have stepped out in new directions and an area representative who has been surprised by the new things God has done during the COVID pandemic. Building upon her medical contacts and relationship with a national church leader, Sarah Hoskins developed a strategic ministry to people nearing the end of their lives that has now been turned over to local Christians. Despite the negative publicity that has impacted orphanage ministries around the world, AY straightens the picture a bit to help us see what can happen when Christians care for some of the least powerful in society—particularly orphans who are not "true orphans." After serving in Japan for many years, Dale Viljoen developed a unique ministry that has allowed him to "marry" about 1800 Japanese couples, provide them with Christian teaching on marriage, and follow them up every year. He and his wife Karen run Café COEN as a place for people to connect, enjoy a delicious meal, and encounter the gospel in a very natural way. COVID-19 has shown Nathaniel Jennings how to involve people in mission training online and enlist short termers to engage East Asians who live in Northern Ireland.

While OMF's church planting ministry to Akha people in Northern Thailand has been fairly conventional, our final articles about this ongoing work interact with a survey that was recently conducted and reveal findings that give both church planters and others reason to ask deeper questions of people in their settings about how God worked among them in the past and continues to work today. Sometimes it is the questions we don't ask that are the most important. Perhaps there is room for innovation in our thinking here.

Continued from p.2

made it possible to add Bible apps to smart phones and other electronic devices and the development of video Bibles that bring God's words of love and truth to people who communicate mainly through various sign languages. As this issue of *Mission Round Table* demonstrates, missional innovations go far beyond the production and dissemination of Scripture. It becomes the task of missionaries from every age to discern which innovations God would have them develop in order to bring his never changing word to a continually changing world.

Christian Mission and Innovation:

The Experience of CIM/OMF in History, the Present, and the Future

Walter McConnell



Walter directs OMF International's Mission Research Department. An American, he has previously served in Taiwan as a church planter and theological educator, taught Old Testament at Singapore Bible College where he also directed the Ichthus Centre for Biblical and Theological Research, and served as pastor at the Belfast Chinese Christian Church.

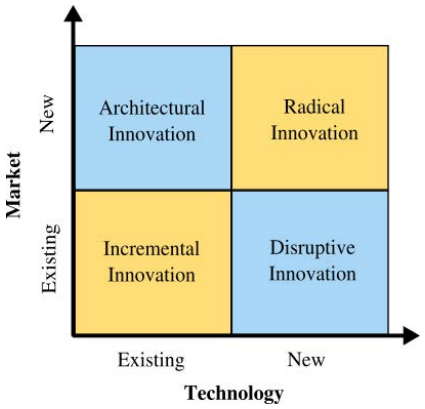
Introduction

In 2020, OMF's International Leadership Team was challenged to consider the state of innovation within the Fellowship in order to help members see that new ideas don't have to come from the top down and that no one should expect it to. Rather, all members should feel free to innovate if it would enhance their ministry. Where the changes in today's world require a change in the way we do ministry, we should welcome and promote the necessary changes. The focus on change prompted the writer of a paper promoting innovation to quote the aphorism commonly attributed to Heraclitus: "Change is the only constant in life."[1] To do ministry in today's changing world, we need to be ready for change, look for ways to change, and promote change. In other words, we need to be innovative.

But just what is innovation?[2] The more one looks into the subject, the more one discovers just how difficult it is to come up with a satisfactory explanation. Julia Kylliäinen rightly says that "Innovation can be a confusing topic because there are so many different kinds of innovations out there and everyone seems to use the term differently."[3] As used in the business world, innovation is the implementation of new processes, services, or products with the goal of increasing revenue and thus expanding the company. At times, innovation springs from the adoption of new technologies, marketing strategies, or the application of an already existing technology to a new product or procedure. When applied to products, innovation can result in their becoming more desirable due to an improvement in quality, performance, ease of use, or aesthetics. Services may become more widely available or streamlined for easier use. A process may be speeded up or quality-control enhanced.

It should be clear that innovation effects things in different ways. This is true for business and, as we will see, for mission.

To help us visualize some basic types of innovation that companies frequently describe, the accompanying diagram introduces four types that relate to the market and technology: incremental, disruptive, architectural, and radical.[4]



The most common type of innovation—*incremental innovation*—will likely use existing technology or processes to add features or services that will benefit those who use the product. Incremental innovations can be highlighted in advertisements that proclaim a product to be "new, improved, better than ever." In mission terms, incremental innovations might include new evangelistic or discipleship literature, a new sermon or Bible study, and improving our grasp of the language and culture so as to better communicate the gospel.

Another type—*disruptive innovation*—is seen as one company making use of new technology or processes in order to engage their current market, and though it may be more expensive or less user friendly than older ways, it eventually disrupts the market by proving better than the old ways.[5] Though this understanding of disruptive innovation is popular, the standard way of understanding it is to see it as smaller companies challenging more established firms by focusing on a less-lucrative segment of the market or consumers who aren't being served and then upping their game (and their profitability) until the major organizations are forced to respond

due to the disruption caused to their business.[6] The classic example is the way Xerox lost market share to Canon and other latecomers that produced personal copiers that were far smaller and cheaper than those made by the company that invented the first photo copier.

Missiologically, a disruptive innovation would be like what happened more than half a century ago when a number of new mission agencies were intentionally founded to send and disciple short-term workers. At the time, many established mission societies either ignored these groups or viewed them positively as a spawning ground for new workers. However, as these organizations grew and started sending out their own long-term missionaries, many of the older groups felt the disruption caused by this innovation and began to add short-term and training programs to their ministries.

The third type of innovation is *architectural innovation*. This is the use of existing products, technology, and methods that are linked together in a new way so that the "architecture" changes. Henderson and Clark illustrate the difference by comparing the change from a ceiling fan to a desk fan. Both use the same parts—switch, motor, fan blades—but they are put together in a new way. Applied to mission, this would be like taking the gospel to a new language group, or producing digital Bibles that can be passed on by Bluetooth. It would also include the transition from printed material to websites and social media in order to communicate with supporters and mobilize new members.

The fourth type is *radical innovation*. This comes about when new components are linked together in a new way to create something that was previously unknown. Industrial examples include the invention of airplanes, the transistor, and the silicon chip. From a missional point of view, the worship of the man Jesus as God was clearly a radical innovation. For an organization like OMF that has focused on bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ to East Asian people, a radical innovation might be something like training Africans to develop theological education programs in Latin America, producing Greek and Hebrew phone apps for Bible translators, or developing social welfare programs that intentionally exclude any reference to the gospel. But while innovations such as these may move us beyond our current mission and vision statements, it would be far worse if we innovated in a way that would have moved the Apostle Paul to call the result the preaching of a "different gospel" (2 Cor 11:4; Gal 1:6). So, while radical innovations may be possible, they may not be viable.

This brief introduction to innovation is enough to show just how complex the topic can be. Even so, it makes it clear that innovation pertains to the development of new products or ways of doing things that bring change through the use of new technology or processes or through applying standard technology or processes in a new way. It also makes it clear that most of these changes will be incremental, involving gradual steps along the path of improving a product or process.

The reference to change brings us back to the quote: "Change is the only constant in life." Like so many other things, this idea ascribed to the Greek philosopher needs to be understood in context. And those who have studied Heraclitus inform us that these words cannot be found in any of his extant works but are surmised from what others wrote about him. What is clear is that his ideas about constancy and change were not written so much to emphasize that everything is continuously in flux, but that "some things stay the same only by changing."[7] He thus never conceived that change might negate that which was constant or that there should be change simply for the sake of change. Rather, he believed that "One kind of long-lasting material reality exists by virtue of constant turnover in its constituent matter."[8] Like a river that only remains a river as its water moves along in ever-varying currents or a human who continues to be human due to the process of metabolism and aging in his body, all things remain what they are through change.

In many ways, this is not unlike the Chinese concept of 常變—"permanence and change"—or 生生不息—"there is no end to growth and change." Innovation can only take place in the context where stability is maintained through necessary change. That this was known to both Greek and Chinese sages highlights the reality that change is neither something to fear nor something to grasp after. It's an ongoing reality in our world that is ever changing and yet ever the same. And though we are sometimes informed that our age is characterized by rapid change that was unknown in former days, our ancient philosophers remind us that this is just an illusion. The interplay between constancy and change has always existed and always will.

This is true in philosophy, and it is true for Christian mission. An organic interplay exists between constancy—the way things are according to history, guiding principles, and practice—and change—the way things need to be applied in specific circumstances. Over the past couple of decades, two Duke University professors have introduced the concept of "traditioned innovation."[9] This is a recognition that organizations will change over time, but that the changes are anchored in tradition. As Gregory Jones, who coined the term, argues, institutions "do not need radical change. The task of transformative leadership is not simply to 'lead change.' Transformative leaders know what to preserve as well as what to change."[10] And as his colleague Kavin Rowe adds, "Traditioned innovation is a way of thinking and living that points toward the future in light of the past, a habit of being that requires both a deep fidelity to the tradition that has borne us to the present and a radical openness to the innovations that will carry us forward."[11] Constancy and change. Tradition and innovation. These are basic concepts that go together and should guide a mission and its members as they pursue innovation that is grounded in Christian and organizational history.

What is innovation in mission?

If innovation takes place in the context of constancy and change, what is the constant for mission and what kind of change can we expect? A discussion of a topic as broad as this could identify multiple constants. For simplicity, however, we will list two—the gospel of Jesus Christ and the organizational mission, vision, and values. Both of these are foundational if we are to continue to be who we are. And yet, both of these can be experienced and passed on in different ways. This is where "change" comes into play. As we come to know the gospel and live it out, and as we serve as members of an organization, we will of necessity innovate as we encounter new circumstances. We must be clear that whatever change may be needed, the gospel remains the gospel. This is why radical innovation is a very limited option. Whatever changes result from our developing or adopting new processes, services, and ministries, they cannot depart from this constant any more than water can leave the river and remain the river.

The astute reader will notice that I did not say that whatever changes may be needed, the organization remains the organization. While the Christian gospel is unalterable, a mission agency can—and arguably must—undergo change. The history of CIM/OMF is a prime example. When all foreign missionaries were required to leave China in the early 1950s, the organization was left with the choices of changing or going out of existence. Similar things have happened to other agencies that have, in the light of changes around them, modified their focus of ministry, amalgamated with other organizations, or ceased functioning. It is, therefore, possible that the mission, vision, and values of the organization may need to be changed or refocused, though this should not take place without a deep level of reflection and much prayer.

If a mission agency is to continue to exist, it must innovate when it encounters new circumstances. This could be a change in target group, change in political situation on the field or at home, change in available technologies, or something else. There is, therefore, a sense in which innovation is not something that is sought for the sake of being innovative, but adopted or adapted according to the circumstances faced.

It is important to realize that as innovation is a response to on-the-ground realities, it cannot be legislated or even anticipated to any degree. It frequently works on an *ad hoc* basis, so that while one innovation may impact generations of missionaries, another may have an extremely short lifespan and be limited to a very narrow geographical area, cultural milieu, or religious context. Furthermore, an innovation can never negate the constant that makes the mission what it is. From the perspective of evangelical missions, recognizing the fact that many Asians find the exclusiveness of Christianity unacceptable does not mean it is innovative to suggest that we should introduce Jesus as *one* of *many* ways to God. From the perspective of Christian tradition, that remains heresy. The constant must remain constant while we adjust to new situations. In this case, the issue is how we can explain that the man Jesus is the one true God.

It is also critical to grasp that due to the nature of change, innovation can run in a couple of different directions. We can most easily identify with the need to create a new ministry or way of doing ministry that hasn't been done before or hasn't been done in a particular place or with a particular people. Thus, opening a leprosarium, establishing a theological college, starting a café where one can "gossip the gospel," or promoting personal hygiene to the inner-city poor can be innovative at a given time and place.

Even so, in many places, the growth of the church and the development of society mean that foreign missionaries are no longer needed to do certain types of work. Some jobs are rightly passed on to local Christians and the focus of other ministries narrowed to reflect changes in need.[12] It is, therefore, innovative to establish and run a publishing house to print Christian literature for a local market. It is also innovative to pass the running of this house into the hands of local Christians. It is similarly innovative to reach out to diasporic communities with the gospel, to turn outreach to diasporic communities over to local diasporic communities, and to focus one's ministry on foreigners who are planning to return to their country of birth. In each of these cases, the need and the available workers prompt the response. This can all be seen from the more than 150 years of history of CIM/OMF.

Examples of innovation from CIM/OMF history

Though many people think of the mission in terms of tradition and stability, the characteristics of "permanence and change" have always been present. The China Inland Mission, we must remember, was the child of an innovative individual who looked for ways to serve God that hadn't been done before. James Hudson Taylor felt compelled to share the gospel in China almost from the time he expressed a true faith in Christ. While he was still in England, he learned all that he could about that far-off land. The writings of Charles Gutzlaff particularly provided him with ideas that were, from the perspective of other missionaries, overly innovative. By adopting them, Taylor was often derided.[13] Gutzlaff's influence prompted him to join a new mission society—the China Evangelisation Society—that others rejected as being "a peculiar trans-denominational innovation."[14] This reminds us that innovation is, rightly or wrongly, not always appreciated. Straying from conventional wisdom and practice, Taylor arrived in China without qualifications and unordained.



Women pioneers in the CIM. From top left: Grace Stott, MaryJane Bowyer, Louise Desgraz; middle row (from left): Anna Crickmay, Jennie Faulding, Celia Horne; bottom (from left): Emily Snow, Elisabeth Wilson, Fanny Rossier. From Marshall Broomhall, *The Jubilee Story of the China Inland Mission* (London: Morgan & Scott and CIM, 1915).

From his early days, he sought to do the impossible by taking the gospel beyond the treaty ports where foreigners were allowed to live, and working in the interior of the country where it had seldom if ever been heard. He further dared to dress in Chinese clothes. Many of these innovations, and more, Taylor had learned from the influence of men like Gutzlaff, Walter Medhurst, William Burns, and others, though they were roundly rejected by other leading missionaries of the time. This is particularly true of his aim to become a Chinese to the Chinese by adopting their language, dress, and customs and engaging in itinerant evangelism.

Back in England, after the failure of the China Evangelisation Society, Taylor innovated by developing the first major example of what would become known as a "faith mission." This new organization—the China Inland Mission—would be interdenominational and international from its inception and, as it developed, would ask no one but God for monetary support. This was not the only thing that set it apart from other agencies. The CIM would also accept new missionaries who came from working-class backgrounds, with the belief and desire that they would be more able to understand the needs of working-class Chinese and bring them the gospel. He also sought single women to

take the gospel to women who could not be approached by foreign men, and sent them to far-off districts for ministry. All of these innovations drew mixed reviews from other mission agencies in China and churches in England and elsewhere. And some of them—including the deportment of some of his uneducated workers and his escorting of single women from place to place—would cause misunderstanding and trouble in future years.

It is important to see that while Taylor is often credited for bringing many innovations to missions, he was indebted to others for many of the ideas, though he proved successful in developing and using them. It is also important to understand that some of his innovations were not as successful as others and that he could be flexible with regard to the implementation of his practices. For instance, though much is made of his dressing like a Chinese and requiring CIM missionaries who went inland to do the same, members who worked in the treaty ports were not under the same obligation, since the Chinese who lived in those centers were used to foreigners wearing foreign clothes and they might find it strange for a foreigner to wear local clothes. Like other innovations, the on-the-ground needs impacted the response.

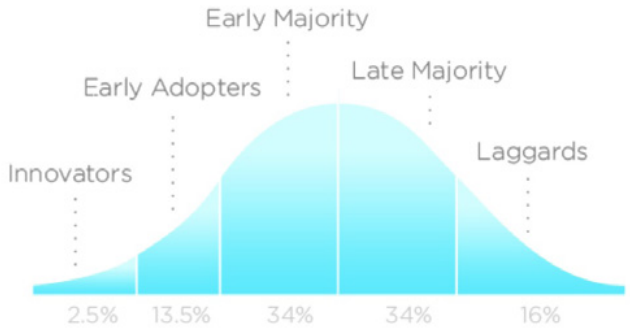
Much more could be said about the kinds of innovation that arose in the early days of the mission.[15] However, it should be noted that after all missionaries were required to withdraw from China, another major innovation was essential for the organization to remain in operation. The degrees to which this was needed—for an organization founded to reach inland China to develop into the Overseas Missionary Fellowship and take the gospel, first to "Overseas Chinese" in nearby countries and tribal groups with links to China, and then to the peoples of other nations in South East Asia—were many and cannot be underestimated.[16] Although the earlier emphasis on itinerant evangelism, church planting, theological education, and medical mission continued, innovations were shaped by where and to whom these constants were carried out. Many missionaries who had given their lives to learn Chinese language, culture, and religion were now required to learn new (even multiple) languages, cultures, and religions for the sake of the gospel. In many cases, the "inland" focus of the organization remained despite the new direction, as missionaries went to areas and peoples in various countries where gospel witness was either weak or non-existent.

Examples of innovation from recent times

In years since the "reluctant exodus," OMF has innovated by establishing home councils in many East Asian countries and welcoming members from them.[17] Other innovations have come as the organization sought open doors in a number of "creative access nations" where Christians with expertise in medicine, business, education, and other fields could work, while "traditional missionaries" were unable to enter. As East Asians relocated to other places on the globe, OMF began to focus on international students and diasporic populations.

Some innovations in ministry came in the wake of popular understanding of how mission should be done. For instance, the 1970s and 1980s saw a huge rise in "people group" thinking and the desire to identify and reach out to every group.[18] While the definition of a "people group" often links people ethnically and linguistically, the term is, at times, stretched to focus on people who were socially or economically related.[19] Some OMF missionaries in Taiwan and Hong Kong in the 1980s identified taxi drivers as a people group and specifically engaged them with the gospel. In the 1990s, Christians in many countries promoted the "March for Jesus" and were joined by missionaries. Others engaged in spiritual mapping projects and "taking our cities for God" campaigns. While each of these activities may have been considered innovative at the time, many of them—though clearly not the "people group" thinking—have virtually, if not entirely, disappeared. This should not surprise us. And while questions should often be raised before someone suggests or instigates an innovative way of ministry, this does not mean that all attempts should be quashed.

Our overview of innovation within CIM/OMF makes it clear that, in many cases, new ways of ministry were not so much created as adapted in line with new situations and ideas concerning how mission could or should be done. Sometimes, the ministries were only innovative as far as Fellowship members were concerned, as others were already using them. The same situation is seen today as many members have engaged in ministries they find new but are not to missions in general. True innovators and true innovations, it should be noted, are extremely rare. But innovations gain traction as they spread to other people who adopt them or apply them to new situations. This has led to a major theory regarding the diffusion of innovation. The initial ideas were developed in 1962 by Everett M. Rogers in his book *Diffusion of Innovation*, which is now in its fifth edition. Rogers states that "*Diffusion* is the process in which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among members of a social system."[20] It happens as people learn about an innovation over time, consider whether to adopt it or not, and inform others about it. As more people adopt the innovation, social change occurs.



INNOVATION ADOPTION LIFECYCLE

Rogers's development of this idea is illustrated by a bell curve in which he distinguishes between innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards.[21] What these categories indicate is that while a small minority of people are truly innovative, the ideas they develop will be adopted and disseminated by some fairly rapidly, by others in the more distant future, and much more slowly by the rest. In mission terms, Donald McGavran and Ralph Winter were the innovators of the "people group" concept. Not long after hearing about the idea, a few missionaries got excited about it and started to promote it. Over time, a great many more picked up the idea and started to use it until it became a major foundation stone of evangelical mission.

The acceptance or rejection of missional innovations are less likely to be connected to their theological or biblical bases or effectiveness in the field than to how well the concept is communicated and disseminated within a particular social network.

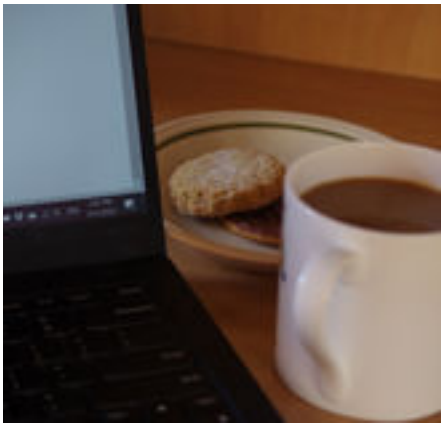
And though this one caught on, some other innovations didn't attract a very large following or didn't last very long.

We should note two important things at this point. First, there is not necessarily a direct relationship between the quality of an innovation and its diffusion. Indeed, Rogers begins his book describing an innovation that would have done wonders for the health of rural villagers in Peru that failed miserably, mainly because the person who was trying to promote it focused on the benefits of the innovation instead of connecting with the social networks in the village that were necessary for it to be accepted.[22] Similarly, the acceptance or rejection of missional innovations are less likely to be connected to their theological or biblical bases or effectiveness in the field than to how well the concept is communicated and disseminated within a particular social network. This is true whether the network is a bunch of evangelical missionaries or a national, regional, or ethnic group of people. Due to lack of diffusion, some very good innovations will quickly evaporate while poorer ones will succeed as they are picked up through social networks and passed on. This highlights the need to examine all missional innovations in the light of Scripture, culture, and time and to make sure that they are disseminated through appropriate channels.

The second point is that much of what we think of as innovation is not truly innovative. Rather, it is the diffusion of someone else's innovative idea or method. Far from being a negative assessment about innovation in mission, this should actually be recognized as one of its most positive aspects. When properly diffused through social networks, innovations spread and have far-reaching impact. It is for this reason that something that was innovative, say ten or twenty years ago, can still be considered innovative as it is applied today to a new context.

Let me illustrate what I mean. Since the rise of COVID-19, many missionaries have started using Zoom, Skype, and other online platforms to teach courses, run church services, do training, and visit people. Though many have considered this innovative, it is anything but new. As early as 2007, I received pastoral counselling and taught Bible college lectures on international Skype calls, and I am sure I was not the first to do so. While the extent of online ministry may have increased greatly, the only real innovation pertains to the people and places involved.

Undeniably, the almost worldwide lock down accompanying COVID-19 has changed the way society operates and how we do Christian ministry. Many have had to shift their workplace from an office to home with the extensive social and resource challenges that this brings. (And let's not forget the newfound freedom many have discovered.) Meetings have gone from being face-to-face to onscreen. While staring at a rectangular light source all day long has serious drawbacks, it has made it possible for people to get together who could not meet in person. Zoom coffee breaks unite people separated by great distances. Prayer meetings and virtual



training can stretch across a city or nation or around the world. While this can make it possible for more to attend, it can also make it possible for some to hide among the postage stamp-sized pictures arrayed across everyone's devices. I recently taught a class to students in a different country who, due to poor internet connections, turned off their videos and audio with the result that I spent many hours of class time talking to black boxes on my screen. Positively, however, the needs experienced in the world at this time have opened doors for some missionaries to work with country leaders to develop research and practices that will help them deal with the pandemic.

Suggestions for future innovation

Highlighting innovations from the past is extremely helpful as we face the future and consider the kind of innovations that might lie ahead. The dramatic slowdown of worldwide travel during the past year has changed a lot of what we do and how we do it.[23] It also demonstrates just how much innovation can come in response to changing situations that cannot be anticipated. This section will mention a number of areas where recent changes require innovation.

Current workers. The outbreak of COVID-19 has seriously impacted the way mission is done. Many overseas Christian workers have found themselves "stuck" in their home or a third country waiting to return to countries where they served.[24] Others have had to put off returning home due to closed travel routes or the fear that they might not be able to return to the field. This has forced many to ask serious questions about what they should be doing and for how long. Some will undoubtedly be lost to the work force. Others will need to change the course of their ministry or how and where they do it. Some workers have been able to carry on their ministries through an online platform with all the associated benefits and drawbacks. This is a particularly good possibility for teachers of many subjects and at various levels. Moving Bible studies online has kept many going, and has made it possible for people who had not attended for some time or had moved to a different city or country to attend. Online seminary courses can make it possible for someone to teach a subject in a country where it would not have been possible otherwise. Some workers who remain at home may be able to join a ministry serving diasporic members of their original focus people who are living in these workers' home countries. In addition to helping those in need, it may also enable the workers to maintain or even improve their language and cultural skills. Others may be able to upgrade their education, whether this pertains to their vocational/business field, biblical/theological courses, or something else. As will be seen later in this issue, one couple who run a café were able to

maintain relationships with frequent customers during lockdown by engaging them through online discussions.

New workers. The difficulties faced by veteran workers are also being experienced by new workers who are unable to move to the countries where they believed God was leading them for service. After spending so long preparing to move overseas, what can they do when the doors to travel are shut? Some could start by doing what they would do upon arriving in their new country by taking language classes and/or working with diasporic people right where they are. Classes could be taken at a local university or taken online from a language institute in the target country. There was a time when new OMF workers started language study in Singapore following their orientation course. This old practice may be an innovative way for new workers to learn a language in today's world.

The disruptions that have kept new workers from moving might give them an opportunity to develop other skills that will help them serve overseas. Some may be able to study in order to improve their biblical/theological, business, or vocational knowledge and skills. Others should be encouraged to see the interruption as an opportunity to get more work or ministry experience that will be amply paid back later. As with experienced workers who are not able to return to their country of ministry, new workers may be able to join teams working with diasporic people, both to get to know them better and enhance their ministry skills.

Another innovative move that some new workers (particularly those from Asian countries) could take advantage of would be to minister with field missionaries in their home countries. This would allow them to build relationships with missionaries serving nearby and gain vital experience in doing evangelism and church planting without having to cross cultures and learn a new language. In addition to benefiting the new worker, it would strengthen church planting teams and other ministries. It should be appreciated that Hudson Taylor used a similar strategy when he sent CIM candidates to do evangelism in inner-city London or Glasgow. Not only did this give them practical experience in gospel ministry, it also provided an opportunity for mission leaders to evaluate their Christian lives and fitness for overseas work.

Short-term mission. The spread of COVID-19 curtailed many short-term trips in 2020 and will do the same in 2021 and probably beyond. As long as countries restrict those who can enter and require a ten- to fourteen-day quarantine (sometimes in a government assigned facility at the individual's expense) along with two or more negative COVID-19 PCR tests before entering, it will be difficult to plan for short-term opportunities abroad.

How can we innovate in such a climate?[25] One possibility is to allow short-termers to work within their home countries. This could include outreach to foreigners who live there or focusing on reaching out to their own people in partnership with long-term workers who are there. Like having new workers serve on local church-planting teams before going overseas, this would be a great way for short-termers to get to understand Christian mission while working in their own language and culture and for mission leaders to see if they have the skills needed for long-term ministry.

Some short-termers might be able to help with office tasks at a mission center that lacks manpower to do certain jobs (presuming that the office remains open). OMF Singapore has provided an opportunity for a short-termer to help with various projects in the International Center archives. Not only is he performing a job that wouldn't have been done otherwise, he is also gaining valuable skills, and, all the while, learning more about the history and practice of the mission. Bible college students in other countries who were not able to do a placement overseas are doing similar jobs at various home offices and on the ground. Short-term placements of this type should not be seen as an inferior experience in getting people involved at the present time, but as something that could (and should) continue.

Much of what we think of as innovation is not truly innovative. Rather, it is the diffusion of someone else's innovative idea or method.

Associate organizations. When Hudson Taylor founded the CIM, it did not take long before the innovations he promoted became known to people in other lands who wanted to join the organization. In the end, more than a dozen different associate missions were started that worked with the CIM in one way or another.[26] The fact that many of these associate missions were based in non-English speaking countries reminds us that similar arrangements are still possible. Mission organizations from non-English speaking countries could work on the field under OMF's mission, vision, values, and beliefs, but maintain strong ties with churches and a sending organization at home. And in the same way that the CIM designated some parts of China for Swedish, Norwegian, or German speakers to work, similar arrangements could be made in some fields today. Building strong ties with associate organizations could enable a broader participation in the work while freeing some from the necessity of learning English in order to join OMF.

Conclusion

The challenge of responding to change in the world around us while holding fast to our tradition is ever before us. Clearly, the way forward is not to insist on unbending conformity. Neither is it to advocate, much less legislate, unbridled innovation. Even so, as the history of CIM/OMF shows, innovation frequently springs from the heart of a person who is looking for ways to serve God and minister to people in the context of the now. What is the need? What is possible? What gifts do I have that can be used toward that end? These are extremely important questions that need to be worked through as we think out and implement innovative measures to reach people with the gospel of Jesus Christ and disciple them in the faith. As we do so, let us take courage that even though "Achieving and maintaining a culture of innovation and creativity in the context of missions brings with it significant leadership challenges," it "also holds the promise of greater effectiveness as we leverage the changes around us for God's glory."[27] Let us face the challenges of our day by exercising regular and innovative means as we glorify God by sharing the good news of Jesus Christ in all its fullness with East Asia's people. **MRT**

[1] Melissa Chan, "Pursuing Innovation within OMF," 3 September 2020, unpublished paper.
[2] Some writers distinguish innovation from invention. Invention, they say, is the creation of a product or process for the first time and innovation is the improvement of a product or process that already exists. Others link invention to discoveries in the natural and biological sciences and say that innovations come through discoveries in social sciences, industrial engineering, and business. Such attempts try to make unnecessary distinctions between overlapping categories.
[3] Julia Kylliäinen, "Types of Innovation – The Ultimate Guide with Definitions and Examples," Viima (4 October 2019), https://www.viima.com/blog/types-of-innovation (accessed 11 March 2021). In her article, Kylliäinen outlines a number of ways people speak of innovation to demonstrate that this isn't a term to be bantered around thoughtlessly.
[4] Jorge Lopez, "Types of Innovation," *Constant Contact Tech Blog* (blog), https://techblog.constantcontact.com/software-development/types-of-innovation/ (accessed 22 October 2020). These ideas are a development of those found in the seminal paper on innovation by Rebecca Henderson and Kim Clark, "Architectural Innovation: The Reconfiguration of Existing Product Technologies and the Failure of Established Firms," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (March 1990): 9–30, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/200465578_Architectural_Innovation_The_Reconfiguration_of_Existing_Product_Technologies_and_the_Failure_of_Established_Firms (accessed 30 April 2021). In Henderson and Clark's original two-dimensional model, the axes do not represent change in technology and market, but changes in "core concepts"—i.e., technology—and the links between core concepts and components—i.e., the parts that work together in the product. For example, a change of core concepts in a desk phone would see mechanical and analog parts replaced by electronic and digital parts. Even so, the components and function of the product could remain the same. Henderson and Clark call this a "modular innovation". (This term goes into the same quadrant as "disruptive innovation" in Lopez's diagram, though the idea is somewhat different as it doesn't center on marketing.)
Though reducing innovation to four categories simplifies our examination of the topic, they do not do it justice. As Mario Coccia points out in an important working paper on the subject, literature on economics can use one term to refer to different types of innovation and different terms to refer to one type of innovation. He also introduces a number of other categories of innovation that are discussed in management and technological literature that go beyond the four mentioned here. Mario Coccia, "Classifications of Innovations: Survey and Future Directions," Ceris-CNR, W.P. N° 2, 2006, http://www.ceris.cnr.it/ceris/workingpaper/2006/WP_2_06_COCCIA_NEW.pdf (accessed 5 April 2021). See also, Kylliäinen, "Types of Innovation."
[5] So, Lopez, "Types of Innovation."
[6] Disruptive innovation was first mentioned in Joseph L. Bower and Clayton M. Christiansen, "Disruptive Technologies: Catching the Wave," *Harvard Business Review* (January-February 1995), https://hbr.org/1995/01/disruptive-technologies-catching-the-wave (accessed 11 March 2021). A later article on the subject states that "too many people who speak of 'disruption' have not read a serious book or article on the subject. Too frequently, they use the term loosely to invoke the concept of innovation in support of whatever it is they wish to do." Clayton M. Christiansen, Michael E. Raynor, and Rory McDonald, "What is Disruptive Innovation?," *Harvard Business Review* (December 2015): 44–53, https://hbr.org/2015/12/what-is-disruptive-innovation (accessed 10 March 2021). This reminder is equally as important for missional innovators as for those in business or technology.
[7] See Daniel W. Graham, "Heraclitus," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heraclitus/#Flu (accessed 17 February 2021).
[8] Graham, "Heraclitus."
[9] See L. Gregory Jones, "Traditioned Innovation," Faith and Leadership (19 January 2009), https://faithandleadership.com/content/traditioned-innovation (accessed 15 March 2021), C. Kavin Rowe, "Traditioned Innovation: A Biblical Way of Thinking," Faith and Leadership (16 March 2009), https://faithandleadership.com/traditioned-innovation-biblical-way-thinking (accessed 15 March 2021). I thank Patrick Fung for introducing me to the concept.
[10] Jones, "Traditioned Innovation."
[11] Rowe, "Traditioned Innovation."
[12] This was recognized early on by Hudson Taylor who, in a famous passage from a letter to his wife in 1873, wrote, "I look on foreign missionaries as the scaffolding round a rising building; the sooner it can be dispensed with the better—or rather, the sooner it can be transferred to other places, to serve the same temporary purpose." Dr. and Mrs. Howard Taylor, *Hudson Taylor and the China Inland Mission: The Growth of a Work of God* (London: CIM, 1918), 232.
[13] For a brief introduction to Gutzlaff and his work, see A. J. Broomhall, *The Shaping of Modern China: Hudson Taylor's Life and Legacy* (Carlisle: Piquant, 2005), 1:3–5, 74–78.
[14] Broomhall, *The Shaping of Modern China*, 1:413. For a list of mission societies that were founded by or greatly influenced by Gutzlaff, see Broomhall, *The Shaping of Modern China*, Appendix XIII.
[15] For more on these issues, see Daniel W. Bacon, *From Faith to Faith: The Influence of Hudson Taylor on the Faith Missions Movement* (Singapore: OMF, 1984) and Klaus Fiedler, *The Story of Faith Missions* (Oxford: Regnum Lynx, 1994).
[16] See David A. Huntley, "The Withdrawal of the China Inland Mission from China and their Redeployment to the New Fields in East Asia" (PhD dissertation, University of Liverpool, 2002).
[17] See Koyuki Sami, "How Indigenous are the OMF Asian Home Councils? Tracing the History of their Establishment," *Mission Round Table* 14, no. 3 (September-December 2019): 4–11, https://omf.org/blog/2019/11/29/how-indigenous-are-the-omf-asian-home-councils/ (accessed 30 April 2021).
[18] The term "people group," along with "hidden peoples" became popular after the 1974 Lausanne Conference on Evangelism where Ralph Winter, Donald McGavren, Alan Tippett, and Peter Wagner read papers and led workshops on "church growth."
[19] Many have traced the "people group" concept to the Greek *panta ta ethnē* found in Matthew 28:19, where Jesus tells his disciples to "make disciples of *all the nations*." Recent attempts to do this include "What is a People Group?," The Traveling Team, http://www.thetravelingteam.org/articles/what-is-a-people-group (accessed 16 March 2021) and Jacob Westland, "Unreached Peoples: Has Everyone Already heard the Gospel?," Pioneers Europe, https://www.pioneerseurope.org/en/Stories/Unreached-Peoples (accessed 17 March 2021). See also John Piper, "Unreached Peoples: The Unique and Primary Goal of Missions," Desiring God (1 January 1991), https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/unreached-peoples (accessed 16 March 2021). Piper supports the concept though he recognizes the difficulty of defining "people group" when he indicates that three missiologists identify 8,900, 17,000, and 24,000 different people groups. But instead of addressing the discrepancy, he concludes: "It seems to me that each mission agency will have to decide what working definition of 'people group' and 'unreached people' they will use, and then base their strategy on it." If those who are positive about using the term are so far apart in their understanding of what it means, it is of very little practical use beyond stating the obvious that many different groups of people can be found in the world. For a rebuttal of the idea that the biblical term *panta ta ethnē* refers to the "people groups" in a modern sociological sense, see Darren Carlson and Elliot Clark, "The Three Words that Changed Missions Strategy—And Why We might be Wrong," The Gospel Coalition (11 September 2019), https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/misleading-words-missions-strategy-unreached-people-groups/ (accessed 16 March 2021). A more robust examination can be found in Peter T. Lee and James Sung-Hwan Park, "Beyond People Group Thinking: A Critical Re-evaluation of Unreached People Groups," *Missiology* 46, no. 3 (May 2018): 212–25, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325427651_Beyond_people_group_thinking_A_critical_reevaluation_of_unreached_people_groups (accessed 30 April 2021).
[20] Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovation*, 5th ed. (New York: Free Press, 2003), 5. Italics original.
[21] A graph of Everett Rogers's Technology Adoption Lifecycle model, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:DiffusionOfInnovation.png (accessed 29 April 2021), CC BY 2.5, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5>, via Wikimedia Commons.
[22] Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovation*, 1–5.
[23] A perhaps unexpected result of this change that should be evaluated when considering future meetings and international ministry has been the lessening of travel expenses and the CO2 emissions. There is a very real sense in which online mission can be clean mission.
[24] The December 2020 issue of *Christianity Today* included some feature articles on the subject that indicate the different ways in which people were impacted. Rebecca Hopkins, "When the Coronavirus Interrupted Expat Life, *Christianity Today* (December 2020): 34–39, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/december/covid19-expats-missionary-international-life-emergency.html (accessed 18 March 2021), and Cara Meredith, "The Teacher who Chose to Stay," *Christianity Today* (December 2020): 40–43, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/december/mercy-ship-senegal-teacher-covid19-calling-ministry.html (accessed 18 March 2021). The same issue also introduces a couple of excitingly innovative missional outreaches.
[25] Though it is a slightly different issue, this change could provide an opportunity to reassess short-term programs in order to evaluate how they fulfill our mission and vision, and the extent to which they are effective.
[26] The first of these were The Quaker (Friends) Foreign Mission (May 1884) and the (Methodist) Bible Christian Mission (August 1884). Others came from mainland Europe. See Broomhall, *The Shaping of Modern China*, Appendix XXXVI for a table listing all the groups and the years in which they became associated with CIM. For more information on the associate missions, see Broomhall, *The Shaping of Modern China*, 2:532–36. It should be noted that the term "associate" has held different meanings at different times during the history of CIM/OMF. At one point, it referred to those undergoing a "period of probation before becoming a full member of the Mission." Broomhall, *The Shaping of Modern China*, 2:183. At other times, it was used for mission organizations that were independent of but worked with the CIM. As Broomhall describes the relationship: "In China individual associates were all but members of the CIM, adhering to its principles and practice, while in their homelands the organisations were independent of each other." Broomhall, *The Shaping of Modern China*, 2:498. The term could also be used to refer to individuals who were independent of the mission but shared values and ministries. Some of these same people were later classified as "friends of OMF".
[27] Larry B. Jones, "Must-Haves for Innovation in Missions (Part One)," *The Exchange with Ed Stetzer* (blog), 9 April 2017, https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2017/march/must-haves-for-innovation-in-missions.html (accessed 16 February 2021).

A First Look at the Culture of Innovation within OMF

RC

Introduction

By quickly browsing recent business journals and similar sources, one will notice the topic of innovation coming up over and over again. While this topic was already trending pre-pandemic, the current global situation due to COVID-19 has not dampened the conversation, as companies and organizations, large and small, strive to remain agile and relevant. So, is innovation just something for consultants and CEOs? Is there any relevance for mission organizations such as OMF? Moreover, how does a mission organization with over 150 years of history and tradition engage with innovation? This paper seeks to take a brief look into the need to innovate, what it means to us, and why it is important. In addition, as an organization that is in the process of soul-searching and reimagining, what is our culture as it relates to innovation? How is it experienced—both positively and negatively? Finally, what lessons can we learn from the business world and others in mission, and how can we apply all of this in order to be an organization that creates, supports, and sustains a culture of innovation as we strive to achieve our purpose?

Is innovation important for a mission organization?

Businesses innovate to remain relevant, efficient, and effective, to keep their investors financially viable, to retain or enhance their market share, and to maintain reasonable employee retention. As a mission organization that does not exist for profit, are we exempt from those factors? Is innovation irrelevant to our work? While we don't seek out innovation in order to be market leaders or gain market domination, innovation does help us carry out our vision—to see the good news of Jesus Christ in all its fullness brought to East Asia's people—in the best way possible. Innovation is, therefore, not an end in itself, and should not be idealized as something that we seek to attain for the sake of it, or to stay on trend. But neither is it something to be avoided, or criticized for fear of being seen as "too secular" or as disregarding our history or heritage.

Our very history, in fact, has shown that innovation has brought us opportunities and taken us places that we would not have gone if we'd followed the path we were initially travelling. Historically, we've seen that many times innovations have been prompted by external factors and have led to some very large changes to our organization and its strategy.[1] Yet, despite this, recent conversations that international leaders have held with some younger



David Huntley at work in the Recording Center in Singapore. It was one of the contributing studios in strategic points throughout East Asia, each using local Christian talent to record programs in various languages on tape that were posted to Manila for broadcast to a wide area throughout Asia. The equipment belonged to the Far East Broadcasting Company while operations were in the hands of a local committee of Christians, with whom Huntley worked. *The Millions*, British edition (January-February 1964): 10.

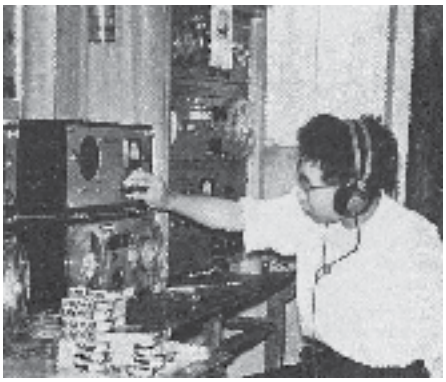


Minka Hanskamp and Anne Wilding in Thailand, using a hospital bed "sound proofed" as a recording studio. *East Asia Millions*, British edition (November 1973): 106. Minka, together with Margaret Morgan, served tirelessly as missionary nurses in southern Thailand. They had a special burden for those with leprosy. Their ministry involved cutting away rotten flesh, treating ulcerated sores, and washing many leprous feet.

In the 1960s and 1970s, OMF, Mennonite missionaries, and the Evangelical Alliance Mission in northern Japan sponsored a weekly evangelistic broadcast for the Hokkaido and north Honshu region. The program was recorded in the Pacific Broadcasting Association studio in Tokyo and its cost was met by the missionaries and the local churches.



Radio Pastor Akira Hatori in the studio of Pacific Broadcasting Association. PBA photo in *East Asia Millions*, British edition (November 1971): 104.



Staff at the studio of PBA where Pastor Hatori recorded programs. *East Asia Millions*, British edition (July-August 1967): 65.



"Dear Pastor Hatori . . ." The postman delivers listeners' letters to the follow-up office of PBA. PBA photo in *East Asia Millions*, British edition (September 1971): 77.

colleagues and leaders indicate that there may currently be a sense among certain groups that we are not very open to change. Despite our organization's leadership expressing a desire that we try new things—the early seasons of the Reimagine initiative being key examples—there is still a perception that our organizational culture is not receptive to innovation. Whether this perception is real or only perceived, it still raises the question: how do we go about encouraging innovation?

The pursuit of innovation should be held in balance, and not seen as the main or only ideal. What we are looking at here, instead of making innovation a priority, is developing a stance of being open to innovation when the situation requires it, and encouraging (not discouraging) the innovative and inquisitive approach and attitude to challenges.

An initial look at our culture

The Reimagine initiative and the COVID-19 pandemic sparked conversations within OMF's International Leadership Team (ILT) that were supplemented by the input of colleagues from around the Fellowship. These conversations have brought to light insights into various issues—such as the feelings of colleagues around the fellowship from non-Western backgrounds—exposed generational gaps within the fellowship, and demonstrated our response to the current pandemic as individual centers and as an organization. Many of these led to the same place—the need to challenge our organizational culture. Another significant thought arising from these conversations was to consider developing an "innovation hub" along with smaller innovation groups that rally around a shared interest.[2] Rather than providing a quick response, the ILT wanted to go deeper and give more consideration to what our actual culture is with regard to innovation. It was felt that it would be more important to understand this before moving forward, rather than proceeding with another new project. The following is an initial look into innovation and culture within OMF.

That innovation is a positive thing is not disputed by the leadership of OMF and is, in fact, a value that is widely encouraged. A look around the organization also shows that a fair amount of innovation has been done. However, experience "on the ground" shows that the perception of OMF by some is that it is slow to innovate, react, or go "outside" of the handbook. It should be noted that some people assume things that aren't usually done are "outside" the handbook even when they are actually permitted by the handbook.

As a result of ILT's desire for a deeper look, a pilot survey was conducted which included the following:

- What do you perceive to be the culture of our organization with respect to innovation?
- What is a time you've seen innovation happen and what was in place to allow that to happen?
- AND/OR What is a time you've seen innovation knocked back and why do you think it was? What was the outcome and what were the responses to the outcome?

What follows are some of the responses:

- "Don't want to subvert but it feels sometimes like our hands are tied by rules, we don't know where they come from."
- "Loud voices are the ones that get noticed."
- "Even though we talk about it, at the end of the day we still 'do things the way they've always been done,' whether that's convenient or whether it's pragmatic."
- "We were able to get the chance at what we wanted to try only when someone approached our leader, begging them to not 'quench our young, unbridled enthusiasm.' We ended up with a fruitful and informative mobilization platform."
- "When we started something new, I didn't want to consult with Fellowship Services, as I thought they'd tell me what to do. I was pleasantly surprised when we were told they were there to support."
- "I generally feel heard but sometimes can get shut down completely."
- "I sometimes want to try starting things, but I don't want to look like we are causing trouble or starting a revolution, I feel someone above would want to control it or shut us down."

Although this survey was small and merely scratched the surface, a cursory assessment indicates that there are those within the organization who feel that innovation is not approved, supported or, as suggested by the very reason for this study, not even

The pursuit of innovation should be held in balance, and not seen as the main or only ideal.

happening. And yet, if, as stated earlier, leadership is supportive of innovation, the question we must ask is: what is behind this disconnect? This is an issue for further investigation.

Some insights from external sources

While we are not a for-profit business, there are still things we can learn from the business world, where many organizations have had to answer the same questions about nurturing a culture in which innovation is embraced and not avoided. These, of course, should not be blindly accepted as relevant to us in our context. Even so, unpacking some lessons learned from the business world, as well as from others in the missions world, helps us see where some of our blind spots may be, and enables us to identify what we want our culture to be and begin to nurture such a culture.

Here are some notable learnings:

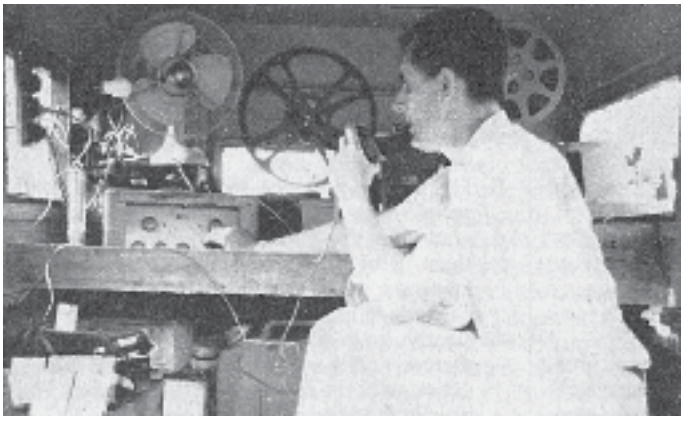
- **Cultural change can't be achieved through top-down mandate.**[3] Optimism, trust, and creativity cannot be dictated, but initiators and social movements help to mobilize these norms within organizations and societies. Giving people the resources (and permission) they need to shake things up can help change flourish where a mandate could not.
- **The importance of harnessing networks.**[4] It is essential to encourage people to think and explore beyond their own silo. Effective movement makers know how to leverage social networks. People are more apt to support something they have a stake in creating.
- **Cultural change will face resistance.**[5] It is a difficult journey that some will embrace and others won't.
- **Past failures become lessons for the future.**[6] Mistakes happen. Instead of never trying again, work out what went wrong and apply that when trying again.
- **PowerPoint presentations will sometimes inspire and sometimes another way will be needed.**[7] On discovering that keynote addresses were not enough to inspire, the company Intuit sought a different way to help their team innovate to find the best possible solutions. In the end, they created a group of innovation catalysts—or coaches—to journey with teams.
- **Safe spaces are vital.**[8] Watch for ways that team members may be made to feel afraid or unable to voice their thoughts. Leaders or dominant team members may be causing this without realizing it. People may feel a need to be protected if an idea they voice does not go according to plan. Signaling that it's safe to speak candidly, and giving time and space to those who are less comfortable speaking out—such as introverts and non-native English speakers—are also vital to helping people feel safe in speaking up.
- **Reward vulnerability rather than punish it.**[9] Leaders set the tone and create the vibe. When people express the "intellectual bravery" to disagree, they may feel that they are at risk of being punished. However, when they are rewarded for contributing without ridicule, safe spaces are created.
- **A moderate amount of friction is positive.**[10] Finding the places where resistance and friction are experienced will often reveal where the dominant organizational design and culture are working against natural movement. It is here where things may need to evolve. These are good places to start.
- **Risk is required to encourage a culture of creativity.**[11] Grace and permission to fail are required. As there is always a risk of pushback, we must learn to honor and respect those who push back. At the same time, we must avoid letting their hesitation to always stifle innovation.
- **Welcome questions and encourage openness.**[12] Ask questions and invite them. Take conversations beyond the organizational chart.
- **Work strategically with those who say "We could never do that here."**[13] Rules often become barriers, especially when the norms and processes just cannot change. Encourage the question "What if?"
- **Habits become idols.**[14] There are times when habits become rules. The danger comes when the habit becomes the idol.

Reflections

What can we take away from this? Here are some reflections on how we might apply these findings:

1. Innovation should not be seen as an end in and of itself. It is a mindset.

If it does not help us to better carry out our vision, mission, and values, efforts to innovate will distract us from our real goal. Innovation should be a mindset, a value, a way of remaining open to what God might be doing, challenging us in, or calling us to do that is different from what we have already been doing in the particular context. We can't structure innovation. Instead, we have to foster and cultivate it, embrace creativity and curiosity, and encourage learning and sharing. When innovation is a value that we recognize and validate, we empower our colleagues to try new things, ask questions, and discover new paths to follow. Rather than mandating innovation, creating a culture that makes innovation a permissible way to approach a challenge





Alex Smith, coordinator for evangelism, tests his equipment in the Landrover in Central Thailand. The Landrover provided a four to four-and-a-half-hour evangelistic program with films and taped messages. *East Asia Millions*, British edition (June 1972): 54.

Innovation should be a mindset, a value, a way of remaining open to what God might be doing, challenging us in, or calling us to do that is different from what we have already been doing in the particular context. ... We have to foster and cultivate it, embrace creativity and curiosity, and encourage learning and sharing.

allows it to grow organically and be carried out in order to solve a problem. From this perspective, the answer is not necessarily to create more structures. Rather, one part of the solution might be to take a closer look at the structures and networks we already have in order to both understand the obstacles to innovative thinking, and journey with individuals and small key groups to champion a more open way of thinking.

2. An innovation mindset embraces learning, even from mistakes and failure.

A mindset of innovation will inevitably result in some mistakes being made. Calculating risk can help minimize mistakes, but we musn't overlook the lessons and insights that mistakes allow us to learn.[15] How have big changes in the Fellowship come about in the past? A major factor has been external circumstances that forced the Fellowship to take risks and try something new. In those times, there was never a guarantee that no mistakes or failure would occur. Even so, there was a willingness to step out in faith and head in an uncharted direction. We would do well to learn from circumstances like these so that we can understand, especially in times of external pressure, what the attitudes and postures have been that have allowed changes—the tangible signs of innovation—to take place. What have been the values and beliefs—such as reliance on God and assurance in his leading—that have allowed the Fellowship to take its biggest, and sometimes most uncomfortable, steps in new directions? And what, on the other hand, are the times innovation has been knocked back in the fellowship? What was learned (or not learned) in those times? Some will argue that many failures or "disasters" have been averted by avoiding a "risky" innovative idea. There can be truth in this, and yet, it may also be equally true that a potential lesson has been lost.

3. The successes and failures of innovation must be well documented or important learning will be lost.

Much of what we know from the 1800s and early 1900s has been meticulously recorded. These days, while large-scale events or programs are documented, it is equally likely that the smaller stories and lessons around the Fellowship have either become absorbed into the culture in its own context or have become a lost lesson. While we need to take care that we are not directed only by our history, it is still important for the process of trial and error, success or repeated failure, and subsequent reflection to be documented and shared. This should not be in order to say that "We did this before and it failed, so don't try it again," but to allow us to learn from one another, see what God has been doing, and allow this shared learning to inspire further development.[16] Some examples where sharing knowledge and experience would be beneficial include planning a conference online, running virtual Serve Asia prayer journeys, developing apps, and running ministry apprenticeship programs. Many of these examples have been carried out recently, and yet, without knowledge sharing, this most likely has not only led to repetition of work, but also limited the ability for the inspiration and creativity that can come from sharing ideas. New projects, such as the online Communities of Purpose, could be good tools for helping people share knowledge. However, the question that must be asked is how we build a culture that loves to share what is learned, and seek knowledge from the experience of others.

4. Many innovations are not necessarily giant leaps, but small steps.

Many times, in the R&D world, just performing a minor tweak in something results in a new invention.[17] Sometimes, someone does not even realize they are doing something innovative until someone else sees it and reports it "up the chain." However, as it is not the innovation itself that is the goal, but the learning of a good, or maybe even better, way to do something, these things could easily be missed if we aren't looking around for what is being done differently that can also help others around the Fellowship. We must then walk the careful line between encouraging innovation and only recognizing big innovation. If we turn innovation into a big "project," we may well miss the small innovations that are happening right in front of us. How do we then encourage this "trying something" that may not be noticed and lauded as a huge innovation? How do we nurture and celebrate the curiosity and creativity of people around the fellowship?

5. Safe spaces must be created for innovation, especially for those who don't have organizational "power".

In addition to the previous point, we must recognize the courage it may require for a young, creative mind who works in a large organization steeped in history to try something new or say something unexpected.[18] Are our avenues of communication seen as safe enough, especially for younger, newer colleagues, and also colleagues from "minority" cultures—even those in leadership? It has already been observed that we need to "create safe communities, and facilitate members from non-dominant groups to be actively able to participate in discussions and decision-making."[19] Regardless of what leadership would like the culture to be, do people around the Fellowship experience being both encouraged and supported to try new things? Or, does the experience on the ground reflect a "do things by the book … or else" mentality? If the feeling is more negative than positive, where is it coming from, and at what stage of a colleague's journey is this perception arising?

6. Culture is defined from the very start of the journey.

What are the values that we nurture in our colleagues from the very outset, at the orientation course, or even through the candidate process? Is our very application process something that has created a culture of box-checking that closes off creativity? What would it look like for a

mindset of innovation, curiosity, and creativity to be introduced from those early stages, while still maintaining a firm homage to our history, heritage, traditions, and existing systems and treasuring what they teach us? How do we balance holding to our values and being open to new ways in which God may be working? The recent marketplace worker pilot project may be one example of how we are making some in-roads here, but how will the "system" hold up when it moves beyond the pilot project stage?



Conclusion

Understanding the culture of our organization with respect to innovation is an important step in seeing movement towards innovation and creativity, but it is just the beginning. Further exploration of innovation "petri dishes" or natural hubs, as well as barriers—perceived or real—will help paint a better picture for us, as will learning from other mission organizations. As we look to "solutions" to the question of innovation, we really must go beyond a three-step formula and instead take an honest look at our hearts, attitudes, and the ability of our culture to permit the diversity of our people—not only ethnically or generationally, but in our affinity or aversion to creativity, and our willingness or unwillingness to embrace the unknown—while remaining in step with our Lord, our Guide. Already, there is a sense that a key to empowering our colleagues to try new things for the sake of bringing the good news to East Asia's millions, is creating safe spaces and support for them as they navigate the current climate and changing conditions in the world and on the mission field. As we continue looking into how to do this, we must further understand cultural perceptions, as well as evaluate our systems, seek to make the best of existing networks, mutually share learning, and break down some of the communication barriers that have arisen. It takes courage to ask "What if …?" Whether innovation is crucial to the carrying out of our mission or not—for there is nothing new about the gospel we preach—it is certainly vital that a spirit of encouragement and gentle nurturing fills the environment into which new ideas, curious minds, and courageous questions can feel free to enter. **MRT**

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[1] See Walter McConnell's article "Christian Mission and Innovation: The Experience of CIM/OMF in History, the Present, and the Future" in this issue of *Mission Round Table*.
[2] Melissa Chan, "Pursuing Innovation within OMF," 3 September 2020, unpublished paper.
[3] Bryan Walker and Sarah A. Soule, "Changing Company Culture Requires a Movement, Not a Mandate," Harvard Business Review, 20 June 2017, https://hbr.org/2017/06/changing-company-culture-requires-a-movement-not-a-mandate (accessed 22 April 2021); "Upskilling 2.0: Business-led, People-powered, Results-driven: How Citizen-led Innovation Can Change a Workforce from the Inside Out," PwC, https://www.pwc.com/us/en/about-us/workforce-strategy.html (accessed 22 April 2021).
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[5] Gary P. Pisano, "The Hard Truth About Innovative Cultures," *Harvard Business Review* 97, no. 1 (January-February 2019): 62–71.
[6] Rosabeth Moss Kanter, "Innovation: The Classic Traps," in *HBR's 10 Must Reads on Innovation*, ed. Peter F. Drucker (Boston: Harvard Business Review, 2013), 103.
[7] Roger L. Martin, "The Innovation Catalysts," in *HBR's 10 Must Reads on Innovation*, 1–10.
[8] Walker and Soule, "Changing Company Culture"; Clark, "To Foster Innovation"; Michael Parke and Elad N. Sherf, "You Might Not Be Hearing Your Team's Best Ideas," Harvard Business Review, 4 June 2020, https://hbr.org/2020/06/you-might-not-be-hearing-your-teams-best-ideas (accessed 22 April 2021).
[9] Clark, "To Foster Innovation."
[10] Walker and Soule, "Changing Company Culture"; Douglas Holt, "Cultural Innovation: The Secret to Building Breakthrough Businesses," *Harvard Business Review* 98, no. 5 (September-October 2020): 106–115.
[11] Larry B. Jones, "Must Haves for Innovations in Mission (Part Two)," *The Exchange with Ed Stetzer* (blog), 16 April 2017, https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2017/april/must-haves-for-innovation-in-missions-part-two.html (accessed 22 April 2021).
[12] Zander Lurie, "How I Did It: SurveyMonkey's CEO on Creating a Culture of Curiosity," *Harvard Business Review* 97, no. 1 (January-February 2019): 35–39.
[13] Duncan Wardle, "How can You be more Innovative? Try the What-if Method," Quartz at Work, 19 August 2020, https://qz.com/work/1893755/how-can-you-spark-innovation-try-the-what-if-method/ (accessed 22 April 2021).
[14] Karl Vaters, "Innovation or Insistence," *Pivot* (blog), 27 February 2018, https://www.christianitytoday.com/karl-vaters/2018/february/innovation-or-insistence-reach-your-goal.html (accessed 22 April 2021).
[15] Kanter, "Innovation: The Classic Traps," 103.
[16] Kanter, "Innovation: The Classic Traps," 106–108.
[17] Kanter, "Innovation: The Classic Traps," 118–119.
[18] Walker and Soule, "Changing Company Culture"; Kanter, "Innovation: The Classic Traps," 111, 116.
[19] Sydney Witbooi, "Factors Hindering a Deeper Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in the Field Leadership of OMF," 16 October 2020, unpublished paper, 13.

Whether innovation is crucial to the carrying out of our mission or not—for there is nothing new about the gospel we preach—it is certainly vital that a spirit of encouragement and gentle nurturing fills the environment into which new ideas, curious minds, and courageous questions can feel free to enter.

Taiwan OMF:

Seventy Years of Innovation to Keep on Doing the Same Thing

David Eastwood



I have served with OMF in Taiwan for nearly three decades and the one thing that has been a constant during that time is that there are always changes. Missionaries are used to changes in housing—I have lived in three different cities in Taiwan—and changes in role—I have been a language student, church-based evangelist, team leader, and field director. The Taiwan field, however, has also seen significant changes in ministry focus during that time and with change has come innovation. After I became field director, I began digging into the field archives to try and understand the history of OMF's ministry here and it seemed to me that Taiwan has been a field that has undergone significant changes in ministry focus throughout the seventy years that the organization has worked here. Each change brought interesting new innovations as the latest generation of missionaries adapted to the new ministry challenges they were facing.

The early CIM missionary arrivals to Taiwan in 1952 had fled from China and came to Taiwan by invitation of Mr. and Mrs. James Dickson, veteran missionaries of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, who requested help reaching out to the large number of mainland refugees arriving on the island and secured the relevant visa invitations for the CIM. However, the move of CIM to Taiwan was by no means certain. In the May 1951 edition of *China's Millions*, it was announced: "Formosa. The CIM has no plans for undertaking work in this needy field, but commends to the prayers of God's people others who are preaching the Gospel on that island as well as the church there."[1]

At the time this was written, CIM missionary Ruth Nowack was already in Taiwan and Ellen Giebel, who had left China in February of that year, was asking for permission to go to Taiwan with sponsorship from Oriental Crusades.[2] By the time Gordon and Vera Dunn arrived in Taiwan in 1952 to be the first superintendent, both these ladies were teaching at the Kang Hua School for Girls in Tainan, Gordon Aldis had arrived and was living with a Chinese family he had known from the mainland, and Dr. Pauline Hamilton was working with a church in Taichung. Gordon Aldis suggested that the reluctance of the mission to formally send missionaries to Taiwan was because, "we still had a number of missionaries on the mainland and if it became known to the new communist government that we were officially sending CIM-ers to Taiwan it could well make things even more perilous for those still under communist control."[3] Clearly, while the leadership were carefully considering their options, the pioneering missionaries of CIM were already seeking opportunities to continue the ministries that they had been engaged in on the mainland.

Walter McConnell, in his article in this issue of *Mission Round Table*, points out that sometimes innovation is necessary, not in order to produce change, but in order to keep some things the same. I found his reference to "traditioned innovation", which recognizes "that organizations will change over time, but that the changes are anchored in tradition," helpful in thinking about the history of CIM/OMF in Taiwan, where we can see this has always been the case.[4]

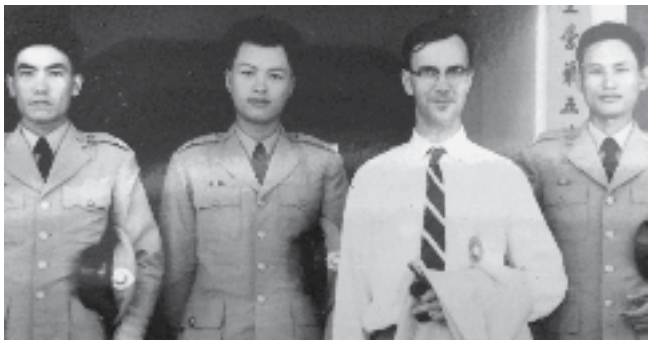
The 1950s—A new land and new methods

On arriving in Taiwan, CIM leadership decided to set up their initial headquarters in Tainan, the old capital that was no longer the seat of government or the place where most other missionaries were focused. Gordon Dunn, commenting on the reason for this choice, wrote:

> True to its historic roots CIM's vision was for the "interior." The capital, Taipei, was already being chosen as a centre by many other incoming groups. Tainan was viewed as the "interior" that needed evangelists and church upbuilders. Tainan was the tragic scene of mass crucifixions of earlier Christians, and the centre from which revival once broke out and spread rapidly.[5]

Fifty years later, as the Taiwan OMF Field Council considered the direction of the field in 2003, it was decided that God was leading us to focus on reaching out to the working class, who were the biggest unreached segment of Taiwan's society. It was noted: "There are many needs in Taiwan but the low number of Christians among the working classes combined with the paucity of outreach to this group of people leads us to feel that this is our "INLAND" upon which we as a mission should increasingly be focusing."[6]

At these two points in time and during the intervening fifty years, the strategy



Wes Milne with soldiers (1958)

and ministries of OMF in Taiwan changed numerous times. Even so, CIM/OMF missionaries made many significant ministry decisions based on the original concept that our mission was to go to the "inland" of China to reach those who were not being reached for the gospel. This value in OMF Taiwan is perhaps enhanced by the fact that in Taiwan, the Chinese name of the mission has not changed and we are still known as 內地會 (Nei Di Hui)—literally "the inland mission".

The new arrivals to Taiwan in the 1950s were faced with a challenging situation and a host of opportunities. They came themselves as refugees from the mainland and their familiarity with the culture and language and their common experience meant that they found it easier to minister among the almost two million mainland Chinese who had moved to the island. Though they had come to work with the Taiwanese Presbyterian Church, they quickly discovered that this church, dominated by Taiwanese language and culture, was not the best platform for reaching out to the mainlanders. They soon began to work with mainland Christians who were establishing branches of the denominations to which they had belonged in China. However, there were also new unique opportunities for ministry among their target community.

Outreach to Soldiers

A number of officers in the military were Christians and invited missionaries to come and minister to the young troops who were exiled from their home and families. Dunn comments that "Naturally there were many ex-soldiers in Chiang Kai Shek's regime now settling in Taiwan. Most had left families behind on the Mainland. Dispirited, discouraged, lonely, and unusually open to the Gospel such a milieu presented a unique challenge to many CIM/OMF missionaries already proficient in Mandarin."[7]

Literature Work

The Dunns note that CIM had learned "bitter lessons" from the communists in China, feeling that in terms of Christian literature "we had done too little too late."[8] A small bookshop was established in Tainan and, from it, missionaries loaded up their motorcycles with books to visit isolated churches. This led to the purchase of a small Mitsubishi van, imported from Japan, which was modified to become the bookmobile, the first mobile bookshop to operate in Taiwan for the distribution of Christian literature.

> Success greeted every appearance of the bookmobile at night markets, conferences and even local churches. Although it was gratifying to see young people snapping up the books, it was even more satisfying to have the pastors themselves stocking up their libraries with quality research and Bible study material. We knew much of this material would come out in the form of preaching later on, to be used of God in correcting error and building up his people in the truths of scripture.[9]

Bible schools

The Dunns had attended a ten-day Bible school while on furlough and saw how important such training would be for the spiritually hungry Mandarin-speaking churches in south Taiwan, many of which had no pastor. A class was set up and only six nervous students attended, but the next day twelve turned up. As the Dunns reported:

> One eager man who had been converted after coming as an exile to Taiwan, not only completed the course with credit, but at the end stood on the platform reciting word perfect the entire book of Ephesians from memory – and this in front of a peer audience ready to pounce on the slightest mistake. Immediately on returning home he started a Bible study in his home. By the end of the year it had grown to a church with a crude building put up by their own hands.[10]

The OMF missionaries continued to see this as a key ministry for the next fifteen years. Allen Swanson, a key researcher into the church in Taiwan in the seventies and eighties, in his analysis of later problems in the Taiwan church, shows how this innovation by OMF leadership was so necessary but sadly went against the trend of ministry training in Taiwan. As multiple Bible schools were later started by different denominations, Taiwan experienced a shift from churches where lay leaders played a key role in the running of the church to one in which "many struggling small congregations, hardly able to afford their own Pastor, were granted a subsidised pastor by the parent mission." This resulted in congregations assuming that all church work was to be done by paid pastors and that the pastors themselves were





Gordon Dunn and Mr. Huang with the bookmobile that brought Christian literature to many people (1968)

happy to assume the responsibility. Swanson comments that "Unskilled in lay training programs and often fearful less the laity 'usurp' authority, or even worse, preach the 'wrong doctrine', the pastors saw their own strong leadership as one sure way to secure a 'sound church', whether it continued to grow or not."[11]



Ellen Giebel with children (1958)

Moving towards the 1970s, Taiwan's society was going through enormous changes. The Mandarin-speaking churches were better established and the growing population was moving to the rapidly growing cities to work in the large industrial areas. Old methods of doing ministry that had worked well in a more rural setting were becoming less successful. According to Swanson:

> Over and over again the cry was heard, "What used to work does not work anymore". Some churches, however, began to recognize new fields of ministry. The Presbyterians began to study the rising industrial community and the needs of the rural and mountain churches. Student work began to take root with new national leadership offering promising new breakthroughs.[12]

The 1970s and 1980s—Changing society and changing strategies

Again, the OMF missionaries were challenged to shift their emphasis to ensure that their ministry was reaching the unreached. The student work, which was to be so successful in the seventies and beyond, was started by OMF Taiwan pioneers, such as Gordon Aldis and Vera Dunn in Taipei, Pauline Hamilton in Taichung, Dick Webster in Tainan, and Wes Milne in Kaohsiung. They discipled many of those who went on to become key leaders in the Taiwan church. Lily Snyder pioneered a unique ministry to the wives of government officials in Taipei.

Initially, the CIM/OMF missionaries were prevented from ministering to Taiwan's tribal people as they did not speak Mandarin. However, by the late 1950s some workers—notably Ellen Giebel—were training leaders and teaching in tribal Bible schools. Ellen would go on to serve for forty-one years in Taiwan with the main focus of her work being to minister to Taiwan's tribal churches. Dick Springer, writing in 1964 about work among the Amis tribe, said: "Besides the help needed in preaching and administration there remains ample opportunities in literacy work, leadership training and much more could be done medically."[13] In the seventies, a number of other OMF missionaries, including Bryan and Judy Dillon, began work among the tribal people. A survey conducted by OMF in 1971 concludes: "Apart from Mr. & Mrs. Bryan Dillon, there are no foreign missionaries working full time in any of the 98 churches in the three areas surveyed."[14] Clearly, there was scope for more workers to join this ministry.

The OMF missionaries saw new opportunities for pioneering ministry alongside local workers and were willing to move to new cities or remote parts of Taiwan, such as the East Coast, the far south, or even the Pescadore Islands (between Taiwan and China), in order to meet those needs. The Dunns, writing in 1987, claim that these pioneers were "blazing the trail for a continued flow of Gospel entrepreneurs such as those in Industrial Evangelism today."[15] Equally, as McConnell reminds us, innovation was also taking place as the workers turned ministries over to local Christians.[16] Student ministry was passed on to trained national leaders with a few missionaries remaining in support roles and new missionaries being trained by nationals. The Christian publishing houses and bookshops were entirely handed over to national leadership. This was in marked contrast to the approach of some denominational mission societies that had brought in and spent large amounts of money on properties and other material resources and found themselves reluctant to relinquish control to the hands of national leaders.

The Dunns' comment above on the pioneers is helpful. They clearly saw that the flexibility and willingness to try new things is what led to OMF Taiwan's next major shift in emphasis in the 1970s when OMF became increasingly aware of the mass movement of the population to the cities and the fact that around three-million young people were leaving poor rural homes to live in factory dormitories on the industrial estates. Some workers, such as Pauline Hamilton, switched from working among university students to working among problemed youth from the working class at this time.[17] Centres started to create Christian communities among these young people, many of whom were suffering serious emotional problems due to separation from their extended families.

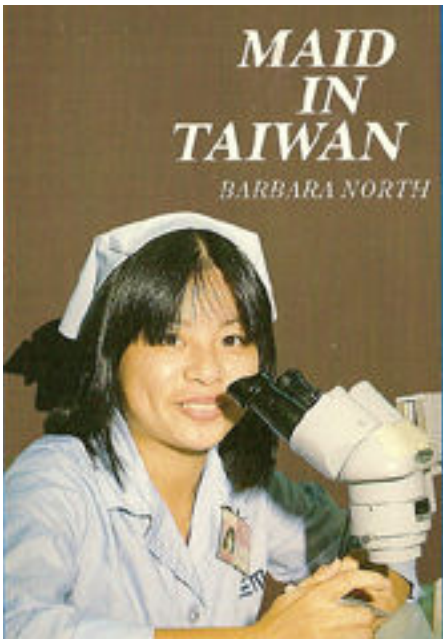
This work led to the establishment, in 1979, of the Taiwan Industrial Evangelical Fellowship (TIEF—工業福音團契). An OMF book, *Maid in Taiwan*, written by Barbara North in 1984, led to many new missionaries coming to Taiwan in the 1980s to work among the factory workers of Taiwan.[18] When I arrived in Taiwan in 1992, a number of field members were working closely with TIEF in outreach centers set up in key industrial areas around the island, but again society experienced a rapid change. Many Taiwanese-owned companies shifted production to mainland China to take advantage of cheaper labour costs and fewer regulations, and many of those that remained replaced their Taiwanese workforce with imported labour from Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam. TIEF, as an organisation, showed that it had inherited adaptability from its OMF roots and today their workers focus on reaching cross-culturally to these foreign labourers in the same centers that once focused on reaching Taiwanese.

The 1990s—A time of decline and innovation

Arriving in Taiwan in the early nineties, I had only been in language school a few months when the *Taiwan Missionary Quarterly* (*TMQ*) published an article by Ralph Winter, in which he called for missionaries to focus only on pioneering new fields.[19] He asked, "Is Taiwan still a mission field?" and his answer to the question was "no." He claimed that the work of evangelisation in Taiwan should be given to the national church and that

"no one can deny them the privilege of reaching their own people." It was rather depressing as a new arrival to hear a respected mission scholar saying that I should not be working in Taiwan. The Taiwan missionary community responded to the article with a full edition of *TMQ* in April 1993 entitled "Is Taiwan Still a Mission Field?" in which various veteran missionaries argued against Winters's point of view. But Winter was raising an important issue that had always been at the heart of the CIM/OMF vision. Given the growth of the church in Taiwan and that many ministries started by missionaries were now being successfully led by national Christian, was pioneering work still needed in Taiwan? For many mission organisations, the answer to that question seemed to be "no." During the 1990s, the number of missionaries in Taiwan dropped significantly, and some mission organisations withdrew completely. The number of OMF workers dropped from close to 100 at the start of the decade to around fifty by the close.

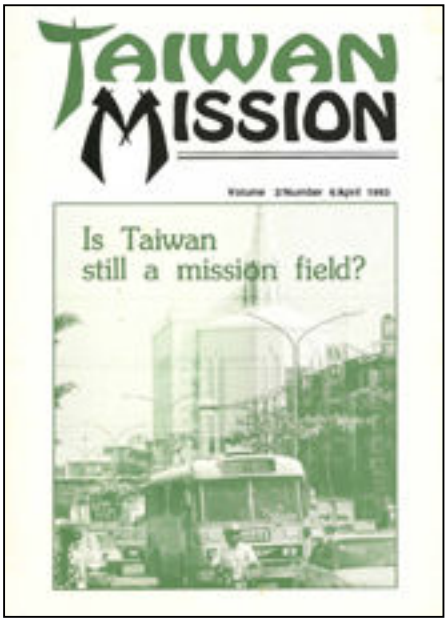
While many missionaries were working with existing churches and teaching in Bible colleges, some OMF workers continued to look for new areas of ministry. In Taipei, in 1990, OMFers Debbie Glick and Chris Hartley received permission from the Taiwan Field Council to "begin a shopfront ministry for inner-city dwellers" in the Wanhua district of Taipei, famous for being the red light district of the city, home to some of the most active temples, and a well known centre of gangster activity.[20] This ministry turned into The Spring (活水泉), a ministry to homeless people, which is still operating as an OMF ministry



under the local leadership of Rev. Wu Der Li (吳得力牧師). Ministry at the centre of Wanhua made OMF missionaries aware of the needs of the women in Wanhua working in the sex trade and led to a further work started by Tera van Twillert in 2005 known as the Pearl Family Garden (珍珠家園) that focused on these marginalised women.[21] In both cases, this was clearly a new initiative for the OMF missionaries even though ministry to homeless and prostitutes had been carried out in other countries. It took faith and vision for the field council at the time to grant permission for these pioneering lady missionaries to start such work in an area where many Taiwanese Christians were reluctant even to visit, and courage on behalf of those who took risks to show God's love to people whom society had cast aside.

Another missionary, Ina Van der Schyff—a nurse from South Africa—was concerned that there was a growing number of people contracting HIV in Taiwan, but that the Taiwan Government was not reporting many cases and little help was given to those with the disease. In 1992, she and some Taiwanese Christians began to visit AIDS patients in hospitals and realised that many had been abandoned by their families and, in other cases, the families did not know how to care for them. This led to the establishment of the Garden of Mercy Foundation (愛慈教育基金會) and, in September 2000, a hospice known as "The Home of Mercy" (恩典之家) where medical professionals and social workers could provide care for AIDS patients, support for their family, and train nurses and other professionals in working with HIV patients. Though OMF no longer has direct involvement with this organisation, it is an example of where, once again, OMF missionaries responded to a change in society that produced an obvious unreached group of people in need of the gospel.

Also in the 1990s, German missionary Elisabeth Weinmann began a church for shop workers and restaurant workers. However, she soon found contacts needing a place to live, a fact that led to OMF renting apartments to use as affordable dormitories where care could be given to some of these workers. Later, the ministry started a shop and restaurant to provide jobs for single mothers. The church today has multiple congregations, some meeting at 10:30 p.m. on Sunday night, as that is when many of the



congregation finish work. Small groups meet at McDonalds and KFC near to the workplace. Elisabeth plans to officially retire in 2021 and the work will be led by Rev. Ker Kai Yuan (柯凱元牧師), who was converted through this ministry. The ministry continues to be innovative, recently starting two small groups for workers and students from Myanmar that are living in Taipei.

The past twenty years—If at first you don't succeed!

By the time the Taiwan field officially decided to focus attention on the working class and marginalised in 2003, many field members were already engaged in this type of ministry. Perhaps the most difficult innovation for some older field members to accept was the willingness of the field council to allow members to begin church planting ministries without being linked to any particular existing denomination. Up to this point, on the field, it had practically been a point of principle that we were in Taiwan to work with or under local Christian leadership. Martin Symonds, writing in the April 1993 edition of TMQ mentioned above, made a very strong case against missionary-led churches, saying:

> The greatest drawback with missionaries starting their own church in Taiwan today is the needless perpetuation of the Westernness of the church. When we run our own show, it is we who make the rules and it is up to others to fit them. A Taiwanese who steps into the church we are planting has the uncomfortable feeling that he is leaving Taiwan and entering a different and unfamiliar world.[22]

So, was this innovation ten years later a positive change or a step backwards prompted by a desire to be in control? The answer to that question is probably "yes"!

OMF workers had seen very clearly how—even for Taiwanese middle-class Christians—reaching the working class of Taiwan was a cross-cultural challenge, and one that required new approaches to evangelism, discipleship, and church structure. So often, attempts to plant new churches in working-class areas floundered because the mother churches attempted to replicate their church model and culture in an area where the local people were very different from those of the mother church. Freed from following the approaches set out by existing denominations, the last eighteen years have seen a variety of innovations by Taiwan field missionaries. A host of approaches have been developed and used by OMF church-planting teams over the years, including gospel materials designed for use with working class,[23] Christian karaoke, Bible storying,[24] tea drinking evangelism, use of an "office" instead of a church building, ministry in local parks, after school classes, cycling and evangelism, puppets, barbecues, birthday parties for Jesus, co-operation with local schools, stalls in local night markets, mini concerts, classes on parenting, classes on dealing with depression, ministry to (and by) disabled people,[25] crafts, games nights, art and music therapy, and many others. Some of these have even been successful. A lot, however, have not seen many results but have helped us, as a field, to begin to understand some of the unique cultural challenges of reaching out to the working class and marginalised.

Thomas McIntyre, for example, describes how in his experience of planting a church among the working class of Sanhe district in Chiayi, some of the missionary assumptions about the model of church planting that would work best for the working class were, in fact, rejected by the people they were trying to reach. As he says: "We began our work thinking we would have a house church. But we quickly realized that Taiwanese people did not see this as a legitimate model, so much so that it was a stumbling block for them. 'Where's your church? What? You meet in a house? Are you a cult?' some would ask."[26]

In the same article, he describes the partnership that developed between the team of missionaries and the Chiayi Baptist Church and how much he learned from local Christians who came to help with outreach and Bible teaching due to their fluency in the language and cultural understanding. He notes that "Years later, we realized that not only had they been helping us, but we had helped them by modeling relational and creative evangelism. One Baptist worker even shared a testimony during his church's worship service of how the OMF missionaries had impacted his desire to reach out to his own people. The partnership had become mutually beneficial."[27]

It is important to realise that the changes in the early 2000s were driven by the desire of OMF workers to reach out effectively to those who were not being reached by existing methods rather than any desire to cease co-operating with the national church. Martin Symonds's warning against foreign missionaries going it alone was recognised very quickly as being apt by many of our teams who saw how much more effective our ministry could be when working with Taiwanese co-workers. This prompted us to take every opportunity to share our vision for the working class and seek to mobilise Taiwanese for this ministry. Key initiatives included working with the Lutheran seminary to teach extension classes on "reaching the working class," which have involved around twenty field members and Wu Der Li and Ker Kai Yuan mentioned above. In addition, a fund was set up to sponsor seminary students to be placed alongside OMF ministries for work experience so that they will understand the cross-cultural challenges of reaching out to the working class. With a growing awareness in Taiwan churches of the needs of this unreached segment of the population, it is hoped that the next few years could see new approaches to ministry that represent a greater co-operation between OMF and local workers.

In this very quick review of the work of CIM/OMF in Taiwan, we have seen that, driven by a desire to stay true to the perception of OMF as a mission that focuses on people who are not being reached with the gospel, field missionaries have had to constantly innovate by moving to new areas, addressing new people segments, and using new approaches in almost every decade. The desire of the missionaries themselves to be strategic and innovative was supported by the field leadership. It is worth considering how OMF leadership structures contributed to this process.

In the 1950s and 1960s, as the new fields outside of China were established, there was much competition for new workers between the fields. The placement of new joiners was decided by leadership in Singapore and candidates arrived for the long orientation course often without knowing which country they would be sent to. It is difficult to imagine such a situation today, but a higher level of institutional trust and a strong sense of being called to CIM/OMF as a mission meant that the leadership was entrusted with making important placement decisions. Correspondence between field leaders and Singapore often included specific requests for new missionaries to fulfil a particular need. It fell to the field council and field superintendent in Taiwan to argue the case for assigning new workers to the Taiwan field. It was much easier to make the case if the new worker was strategic in allowing the field to move into new areas or work among a new people and so the field leadership was generally supportive of new initiatives.

Moving into the 1970s to 1990s, increasingly people were joining the mission with a burden for particular fields. This often depended on them having heard about the work through books, articles, and presentations. Field leadership knew that new and innovative approaches that were seen as focused on reaching the least reached would be more likely to be promoted by the home sides and catch the attention of potential candidates. Again, the desire for new



Lucy Eastwood and Tim McCracken in night market ministry, Taiping (2007)

workers was also likely to make the field council more supportive of new initiatives. In the later 1990s though, the opening up of new fields and a perceived lack of strategic focus of the Taiwan field meant that there was a dearth of new workers to Taiwan and the field numbers dropped significantly.

For the last twenty years, OMF fields have played a much more active role in their own mobilisation. Video and social media produced by fields instantly declare the strategic focus of the field and make prayer supporters aware of innovative approaches. This sometimes happens even before the field leader hears about them! Candidates joining OMF not only want to find out about mentoring, training, language learning, and educational options, they also want to know that they are joining a mission that is doing significant and strategic ministry and is open to innovation. For the Taiwan field leadership, it is seen as a positive step when a field member approaches us to ask about trying something new and it is tempting to immediately think about the Facebook post and video on Vimeo that might result. There is, however, a strong awareness of the need to stay focused as a field and that is why McConnell's warning that we should not "advocate, much less legislate, unbridled innovation" is important.[28] Innovation needs to be focused on helping us as an organisation to fulfill the calling that God has given us, not simply to make us feel we are more at the "cutting edge" or to provide reasons to make more attractive mobilisation material.

Finally, as I consider the culture needed for the Taiwan field to continue to allow our missionaries the freedom to innovate, I feel that one of the values we have adopted as a field is important. In 2012, the field council adopted a set of values which includes the following:[29]

Boldness

Successful Christian ministry is characterized by a boldness from God (1 Thess 2:2, Phil 1:27–28). Like Timothy, we are called to avoid a 'spirit of timidity' (2 Tim 1:6–12). Boldness in Christian ministry is matched with personal humility as it is based upon: the power of God at work in us, not our own ability; the love of Christ which drives us, shunning pride and boasting (1 Cor13:14); and self-discipline, avoiding being driven by our emotions and desires, but instead focusing on the vision and mission to which Christ has called us. Our boldness will be characterized by 1. a willingness to pioneer new ministries, seeking to reach the hard places of Taiwan. 2. a willingness to be creative in ministry, trying new and untried methods. **Personal humility means we give ourselves and others permission to fail**, knowing that God teaches us through success and failure and that ultimately it is God who will grow His church (1 Cor 3:6). 3. a willingness to release control of ministries to others, including Taiwanese working-class believers, knowing that they too have the Spirit of God (1 John 2:20).

The important point is the interplay between boldness and humility. When we reject a culture of pride and success and accept that our results are in God's hands, it takes away the fear of failure that is so often a barrier to innovation. As field leadership, we encourage our workers to try new approaches and ministries even if we are not certain of their success. We use the wisdom and experience God has given us to help members make right decisions, but we also encourage them to realise that some of that wisdom and experience have come through things we tried that didn't succeed. I often remind our field members that even if something does not work out perfectly, they will learn and grow, the gospel will be shared, and perhaps God will do something new that we have not yet thought of.

It is impossible to know the exact changes that may occur in Taiwan's society over the next decade, but it is inevitable that if God keeps us working in Taiwan, innovation will be needed to ensure that OMF missionaries continue to focus on reaching whatever the equivalent of the "inland" is to which God called us as a mission in 1865. **MRT**

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[1] "The New Outreach," *China's Millions*, North American ed. (May 1951): 66.
[2] Letter from Ellen Giebel (in Taiwan), 12 August 1987, OMF Taiwan Field Archives. Oriental Crusades later changed its name to Overseas Crusades, OC International, and is now known as One Challenge.
[3] Letter from Gordon Aldis to Andrew Butler in Taiwan, 10 August 1987, OMF Taiwan Field Archives.
[4] See Walter McConnell's article "Christian Mission and Innovation: The Experience of CIM/OMF in History, the Present, and the Future" in this issue of *Mission Round Table*, 5.
[5] Gordon and Vera Dunn, "How OMF Began Work in Taiwan," September 1987, unpublished paper, 2, OMF Taiwan Field Archives. The crucifixion of Christians that he mentions occurred in 1662 at the end of the Dutch occupation of Taiwan. The rapid growth may be referring to the growth of the church following the initial ministry of Dr. James Maxwell, the first modern Protestant missionary to Taiwan who arrived in 1865.
[6] OMF Taiwan Field Council notes, 9–10 January 2003, OMF Taiwan Field Archives. The writer was present at these meetings.
[7] Gordon and Vera Dunn, "How OMF Began Work in Taiwan," 1.
[8] Gordon and Vera Dunn, "How OMF Began Work in Taiwan," 2.
[9] Gordon and Vera Dunn, "How OMF Began Work in Taiwan," 3.
[10] Gordon and Vera Dunn, "How OMF Began Work in Taiwan," 3.
[11] Allen J. Swanson, *The Church in Taiwan, Profile 1980: A Review of the Past, a Projection for the Future* (Pasadena: William Carey, 1981), 28.
[12] Swanson, *The Church in Taiwan*, 27.
[13] Memo from C. O. (Dick) Springer to E. E. Heimbach on tribal work in Taiwan, 30 September 1964, OMF Taiwan Field Archives.
[14] Bryan Dillon, "Evangelistic Opportunities Among the Tribes of Southern Taiwan – Survey 1971," OMF Taiwan Field Archives.
[15] Gordon and Vera Dunn, "How OMF Began Work in Taiwan," 4.
[16] McConnell, "Christian Mission and Innovation," 6.
[17] Some of this material regarding the 1970s to 1990s was previously prepared by the writer for a paper entitled "Social Care Practice from INGO in Taiwan—Case of OMF International (China Inland Mission)" for an international conference on social work at Asia University, Taiwan, 21 November 2019.
[18] Barbara North, *Maid in Taiwan* (Singapore: OMF, 1984).
[19] Ralph Winter, "The Mysterious Tension in Missions Today," *Taiwan Mission Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (October 1992): 32–3. Adapted from an article originally published in *Mission Frontiers* (January-February 1992), http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/archive/the-incredible-meaning-of-the-ad2000-movement (accessed 22 April 2021).
[20] OMF Taiwan Field Council Minutes, August 1990, OMF Taiwan Field Archives.
[21] See Tera van Twillert, "Our Journey in the Gospel with Women Working in the Wan-Hwa District," *Mission Round Table* 5, no. 1 (June 2009): 25–27, https://omf.org/blog/2021/04/17/mrt-our-journey-in-the-gospel-with-women-working-in-the-wan-hwa-district/ (accessed 22 April 2021).
[22] Martin Symonds, "Over and Out?" *Taiwan Mission Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (April 1993): 16–18.
[23] See David Eastwood, "Mini-Bibles," *Mission Round Table* 11, no. 1 (January 2016): 28–29, https://omf.org/blog/2020/04/21/mini-bibles/ (accessed 12 April 2021).
[24] See Christine Dillon, "A Journey Worth Taking," *Mission Round Table* 11, no. 1 (January 2016): 22–27, https://omf.org/blog/2020/04/21/a-journey-worth-taking/ (accessed 12 April 2021).
[25] See Yea-Hui Wang, "Viewing Disability from the Perspectives of Chinese Culture and Christian Beliefs," *Mission Round Table* 15, no. 2 (May-August 2020): 13–16; David Eastwood, "Interview with Yea-Hui Wang," *Mission Round Table* 15, no. 2 (May-August 2020): 17–19, https://omf.org/blog/2020/10/30/mission-round-table-vol-15-no-2-may-august-2020/ (accessed 12 April 2021).
[26] Thomas McIntyre, "Let the Nations be Partners! Pioneering and Partnering in the Plan of God," *Mission Round Table* 13, no. 3 (September-December 2018): 27, https://omf.org/blog/2018/12/13/let-the-nations-be-partners-pioneering-and-partnering-in-the-plan-of-god/ (accessed 12 April 2021).
[27] McIntyre, "Let the Nations be Partners!" 26.
[28] McConnell, "Christian Mission and Innovation," 9.
[29] OMF Taiwan Field Vision, Mission and Values, 2012. Emphasis original.

A Call to Innovate—Our Vision Demands It

Andrew Goodman



Andrew Goodman is from the UK and married to Shona, with whom he has worked amongst the Shan/Tai people for twenty-three years. The Shan/Tai mainly live in North Thailand, Southwest China, and Myanmar. Andrew has been involved in field leadership for several years.

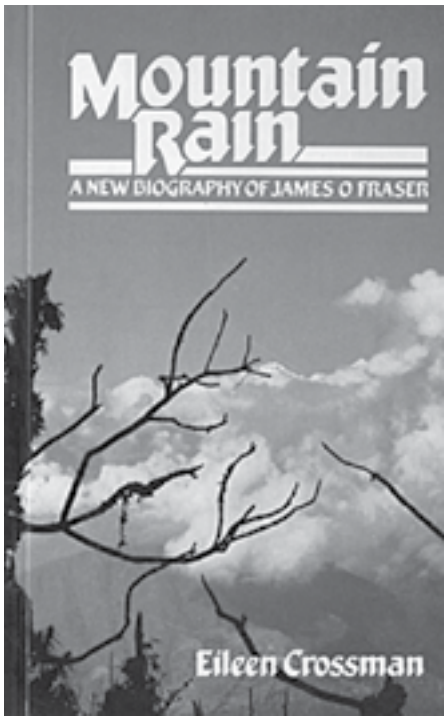
It was my first term, and I was at the Manorom Hospital Guest house in Central Thailand waiting for Shona to give birth to our son David. A retired South African missionary who had a reputation for expressing his forthright opinions said, "The problem with OMF is that they don't win enough souls!" I was slightly taken aback by his remark, but it sowed a seed of concern.

How much is a life worth?

In the Indigenous Biblical Church Movement (IBCM) trainings done in the Mekong Field, one of the modules taught is called the "gap analysis". It poses the question: "How many people in the people group you are focusing on will hear the gospel today?" This raises the question, "Do numbers matter?" In the Steven Spielberg movie *Schindler's List*, the question, "What is a life worth to you?" is posed by the concentration camp commandant to Schindler. The womanizing war profiteer becomes determined to save as many Jewish people from the gas chambers as possible. At the end of the film, Schindler is distraught by the thought that if only he had sold his car or his gold lapel pin, more people, whose lives had become so valuable to him, could have been saved.

This reminds me of the passage in *Mountain Rain* that records the conviction J. O. Fraser felt when he read the following words in a booklet he picked up at a time he was wrestling with a sense of priorities over how he should spend his life:

> If our Master returned today to find millions of people unevangelized, and looked, as of course He would look, to us for an explanation, I cannot imagine what explanation we should have to give.
>
> Of one thing I am certain—that most of the excuses we are accustomed to make with such good conscience *now*, we shall be wholly ashamed of *then*.[1]



At some of our IBCM trainings over the past few years, we have had an optional evening session during which participants spend time in prayer seeking the Lord and more of the presence of his Spirit in our lives and ministry. At one of these meetings, a Tai brother, who is a key worker with us and an experienced church planter, became overwhelmed by the sense of the lostness of his own people group. He was completely "undone" and the tears flowed as he pleaded for God's empowering and interceded on behalf of the Tai. As I witnessed my brother's response to the lost, I, too, became convicted of the need to be wholeheartedly consecrated to the vision that God has given us and to be willing to do whatever is needed in pursuit of God's call.

During the 150th anniversary celebrations of OMF, I listened to John Piper preach a sermon on the life of James Hudson Taylor. Piper describes the vision of OMF International as being "absolutely

audacious."[2] With an audacious, God-given vision, we need to be innovative, not to survive, and not for innovation's sake, but for the sake of the lost, for the sake of God's glory.

I believe that the mandate to innovate has been given to OMF members and has come to us over the years through our international leadership. Three recent initiatives have sought to foster a context wherein we feel free to step out in faith. "The Task Unfinished" is a recommitment to the least reached and unengaged peoples of East Asia. "The Reimagine Project" provides OMF with a way to rethink how to do mission, stemming from a desire to see the Fellowship become "fit for God's purpose" at this time in history. And "Beyond Borders" gives us an opportunity to respond to the reality that peoples migrate so that we are being led by the Lord to focus our vision for the peoples of East Asia beyond the confines of East Asia.

There are so many examples of times when I have seen innovation and creativity operating within our ministries:

- "Jonathan training"—an applied program that casts vision and equips cross-cultural workers to be involved in Church Multiplication Movements—encourages participants to seize the mandate to partner with other organisations in the pursuit of a shared vision. This has led to the proliferation of partnerships—informal and formal—across the ministries we are involved with.

- Strategy plans developed from the perspective that we should not ask "What can I do?" but "What needs to be done?" have helped order priorities.

With an audacious, God-given vision, we need to be innovative, not to survive, and not for innovation's sake, but for the sake of the lost, for the sake of God's glory.

- Drug rehab ministry and AIDS Care ministries have developed and had the freedom to respond to the local situations faced by our teams. This could be described as an integrated or integral approach, but perhaps such labels are unnecessary. What is important is that we are faithful to our vision and willing to flex our structures and ways of doing ministry in the pursuit of that vision.

- Discussions with local partners have led some to develop redemptive analogies and bring local idiom and poetry into the communication of the gospel.

- Missional Businesses and Social Enterprise initiatives have all been birthed as workers have sought to bring creativity to the context. Sometimes, an initiative is birthed and develops a vision of its own. That is why we need to evaluate all of our activities in the light of our vision. That need not be done in a narrow sense as there needs to be breadth and latitude in the range of activities. However, there is not necessarily anything wrong if an initiative comes from within our midst but leaves or outgrows the organisation at some point.

- Initiatives have been started in some of our hardest contexts, springing from a vision to engage Unengaged Unreached People Groups. They have become some of the best examples of partnerships involving expat missionaries, national church groupings, and near-culture Christians that have become embryonic indigenous mission movements to take the gospel to the least reached.

- Workers have been placed in challenging locations as a direct outworking of values and commitments, such as being willing to take risks or being willing to step forward when well-developed structures are not in place.

- Media strategies, radio, and social media have all been utilised to engage people. Some of these creative approaches have had our oldest members at the vanguard.

- The COVID-19 crisis has concentrated minds and forced us to try new things. Sermons and teaching typically limited to having audiences of fifty or a hundred have been watched by thousands.

If you have ever felt inhibited by organisational structure or sensed that you don't have permission to try new things, don't let yourself become negative or cynical. There are many examples of innovation and creativity being expressed across the fellowship. If, in your local centre, you feel that is not the case, you can point to examples in our history, in both the recent and distant past, and then feel free to "challenge the process" and innovate.

In partnership with others, some ministries have seen generational discipleship and church growth amongst several people groups leading to thousands of new believers. Let us press on in faith with little interest in which organisation, strategy, or missiological flavour gets the credit, but rather with a passionate concern that God gets all the glory. **MRT**



[1] Eileen Crossman, *Mountain Rain* (Sevenoaks: OMF, 1982), 3–4. Emphasis original.
[2] John Piper, "The Ministry of Hudson Taylor as Life in Christ," Desiring God 2014 Conference for Pastors, YouTube video, 1:12:16, posted by Desiring God, 8 February 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFC8zsKVvPc.

A Field Director's Musings about Innovation in OMF Thailand

Ulrich Kohler



Ulrich is a Swiss Mennonite, married to Renate, a German Lutheran. With their three sons, they presently live in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Joining OMF Thailand in 2001, they have been serving in church planting, regional leadership in Central Thailand, leadership training in various capacities, and, since 2016, as field director for OMF Thailand.

Companies need to constantly innovate, keeping their fingers on the pulse of the time, and ready to reinvent themselves to prevent the day coming when time has passed them by and their company and its products are left completely out of date. I come from an engineering background, so I vividly remember the Swiss engine manufacturer Mag Motoren being made obsolete in the 1980s by the more innovative, smaller, and reliable Honda engines. Or similarly, Land Rover, which, failing to see the writing on the wall, was completely overrun by the more innovative Mitsubishi Pajero. Examples abound of companies that had a great product and then started to rest on their laurels. In the end, their failure to invest in research, foster innovation, and develop new products led to their downfall.

We have all seen it happen. It is no wonder that most of us have a fundamental, though likely subconscious, conviction that innovation is crucial. We need to move on, we need to develop, and we need to change from where we are to something different as we enter the future. Most of the time, we are probably not even aware how that overall framework of thought influences us.

However, in recent years I have started to ponder about all of this. What seems so logical in the realm of software development, design, engineering, etc. does not always seem to be fully applicable to the church, or, as in our case, to a parachurch organization. The problem is, I am not even fully sure what makes me uneasy about this. It is just that sometimes I wonder whether we might improve and innovate ourselves to death? Some forms of innovation require a corresponding structural change in an organization along with the people who will populate it. And the question comes whether our innovation is fundamentally linked to our core mission or whether innovative ideas could also significantly distract from it.

What drives our desire for innovation? Is it purely to become sharper, more effective in achieving what we as OMF exist for? Our mission statement declares that "We share the good news of Jesus Christ in all its fullness with East Asia's peoples to the glory of God." Do our innovations help us attain that goal or not? Or is our innovation driven by external input like listening to members of the national church in a given country tell us what they think OMF should focus on? Or is our desire for innovation and change at times driven by the need for organizational relevance and popularity as perceived by the general Christian public? (Or even the secular public?) Or are we at times even driven by what C. S. Lewis calls that "horror of the Same Old Thing"? In his classic book *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis portrays the senior devil Screwtape instructing the junior devil Wormwood: "The horror of the Same Old Thing is one of the most valuable passions we have produced in the human heart—an endless source of heresies in religion, folly in counsel, infidelity in marriage, and inconstancy in friendship."[1]

I think that the fear of the "Same Old Thing" actually dwells deep inside most of us and produces a bias for something new and different, a bias against the old that we have had for a while. I am not suggesting that we should be a club of people patting ourselves on the back about how great we are doing and how the old stuff we have done is the *non plus ultra* and thus the way to continue forever and a day.

But we'd do well to remember that change is not necessarily progress. And neither is it automatically a good thing. Denzel Washington, in a graduation speech, once put it pointedly when he said, "never confuse movement with progress. Because you can run in place and not get anywhere."[2] Actually, that very quote is preceded by some other noteworthy comments.



Working on the Thai Bible Project

> have goals and understand that to achieve these goals you must apply discipline and consistency.… hard work works, working really hard is what successful people do. And in this text tweet, twerk world that you've grown up in remember just because you're doing a lot more doesn't mean you're getting a lot more done.[3]

What does that have to do with our topic here? Well, innovation is often triggered by a desire for change, a desire that might stem from dissatisfaction with the present situation and/or a vision of the position one would like to be in sometime in the future. Examples might include Land Rover getting back to being the market leader in the off-road vehicle business and OMF mobilizing 900 new workers in a five-year time frame. The question is whether the changes we apply or the actions we take to achieve the desired outcome will actually do the job. Or to use the words from above, "just because you're doing a lot more doesn't mean you're getting a lot more done."

Are the things we are hailing as innovative, exciting, and new in our organizational or ministry context really getting us where we want to end up? Do they sharpen us so that we are more effective in sharing "the good news of Jesus Christ in all its fullness with East Asia's peoples to the glory of God"?

These are things which must never change. And that is where every endeavor that has to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ is fundamentally different from the efforts of a company providing some product or service. It is astonishing how the concepts of remembering, keeping, and holding onto something are woven into Scripture. Developing that topic would require a separate article. Suffice it to say that it is worth reflecting on the degree to which an organization like ours falls under the same "innovate or die" law as a company producing a product.

Absolutely everything will change—indeed, must change—from a methodological or structural standpoint. Today, we don't handwrite every single gospel tract as was necessary a thousand years ago. To do so would be foolish and would neglect the opportunities the Lord gives us nowadays (for example, with the existence of digital media ministries). We are right to look at the context and adapt.

For several decades, OMF Thailand had a massive focus on leprosy ministry, at one point running three hospitals and many more clinics. Leprosy patients were cared for and, at the same time, the gospel was shared with them, their families, and their neighbors. But leprosy has virtually disappeared from Thailand and so has our focus on that area of ministry. Rightly so.

In recent years, OMF Thailand ministries have expanded in a number of different directions that we might label as being innovative. The development of "Project Paul"—a focused church planting training program that we continue to sharpen—was an innovative step to help OMF members become more effective in ministry. Based on that experience, we took it further and developed an adapted version in Thai. Another innovative move regarding our organizational administration entailed switching to a new software platform to process all our visas, work permits, and partnership MOUs. On the side of direct ministry to the Thai people, we have found that setting up our Digital Media Department was a positive development, and only regret that we did not start it ten years earlier. Major foci presently are Facebook postings, courses on the learnnn.com platform, and bringing The Bible Project into Thai. And we hope to continue expanding the digital media ministry significantly with online evangelistic campaigns, developing better pathways to connect initial online interest to solid mentoring online, and eventually linking to an "offline", physical, local church.

We continually seek ways to lovingly and effectively share the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ with Thai people. Everything we do—reaching rural people through an eye glasses ministry, sharing God's Word on Facebook,[4] providing crisis pregnancy care,[5] teaching and mentoring Bible college and seminary students,[6] reaching out to migrant factory workers, joining hands with and building up the national church,[7] providing online evangelistic courses,[8] coaching soccer,[9] taking the painstakingly slow route of building trust with urban poor communities,[10] fostering reproducible, evangelistic cells, reaching out to young people with adventure camps,[11] or simply sharing Bible stories consistently in our neighborhoods—must serve that one purpose of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ in all its



fullness with the Thai people to the glory of God. Whatever does not serve that purpose, we must terminate. It doesn't matter whether it is something that we have done for a long time or whether it is a trendy and seemingly innovative focus that keeps people busy but does not result in the gospel being shared. What we need to see happen is consistent, ongoing sharing of the good news, in whatever form that takes. This



is tough work. It needs perseverance and discipline. There is no church planting without blood, sweat, and tears. And no amount of innovation will change that.

Coming back to some of the questions asked above about what drives our desire for innovation, parachurch organizations may be motivated to innovate due to a strong, subconscious drive for self-preservation. Even so, if we are truly seeking the kingdom of God, our focus should never be on self-preservation. Neither should innovation focus on keeping a certain form or structure alive. Rather, it should be focused on getting a certain task accomplished.

One might argue that no task will get accomplished if there is no structure present. And to a certain extent, that is true. In all that God has created, life is tied to structure and form. However, throughout history, the Lord has used certain forms, certain vessels, for a given period of time. And then came a time when that vessel lost its significance and the Lord used different means. One example from history would be the monks and the monasteries. At one point, they were the main missionary workforce, the main carriers of the gospel, the center of theological thinking. It is probably fair to say that that is no longer the case. Was their demise a simple failure to sufficiently focus on innovation? I don't think so. Cataclysmic shifts happened that diminished the significance of that model. It is likely that no amount of innovation would have helped that model maintain its significance in a new era. And it doesn't matter whether it was the Lord who caused the cataclysmic changes to happen that necessitated new models or whether the Lord simply called people to adopt new models in response to the societal changes that were taking place.

It is very likely that, at some point, the era of parachurch mission organizations will come to an end and no amount of striving for innovation will change that. And why should we try to prevent that? Because we want to keep a certain model or a certain organization alive? If that was the case, we would have completely missed the point. Don't get me wrong, I neither wish that day to come soon nor do I think it is imminent.

But neither a drive for self-preservation nor the aim to gain attraction should govern our striving for innovation. Both are a dead end. Our innovation needs to lead to effective gospel proclamation. And as the book of Acts indicates, where gospel proclamation is effective, general attractiveness decreases. This is because, more often than not, gospel penetration will not be to the liking of society in general and thus will increase scorn and opposition.

Innovation must never be an end in itself. The fact is, the pursuit of innovation can be an indication of personal pride that I should be listened to because I am the person who is thinking outside the box. There is, however, no guarantee that out-of-the-box thinking will enhance the work. It is thus correct to say that to the extent we desire innovation no matter what the outcome—as long as it is outside the box and not just the "Same Old Thing"—we are surely headed toward another dead end.

At the end of the day, it is great if an organization fosters a climate in which people dare to try something new even if it might fail. I have always greatly appreciated the freedom I have had to do new things in my context in OMF Thailand. Even so, what truly matters is not that we do something new or that we perceive ourselves to be innovative, but that the good news is proclaimed, people turn to Christ, and fellowships of believers—*churches*, to use a biblical word that seems to be out of favor in some circles today—are established. The bottom line is that all our innovations should enable us to be more effective as "We share the good news of Jesus Christ in all its fullness with East Asia's peoples to the glory of God." **MRT**

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Innovating Integral Mission

Sarah Hoskins



Sarah served for ten years in an East Asian country. She is now part of the OMF Fellowship Services Evangelization Team, working as the Consultant for Integral Mission to enhance understanding of integral mission and encourage ministries that seek to both proclaim and demonstrate the good news of Jesus Christ. In 2019, she completed a master's degree in transformational development at All Nations Christian College in the UK.

It was early in my first term serving in Asia when I became aware that little practical or medical help was available in the country for people at the end of life. As I had been a family doctor in the UK, I easily made connections with medical professionals that allowed me to learn about local healthcare needs. As someone who is passionate about integral mission, I could see that this was not simply an opportunity to respond to a particular medical need, but a setting where God's kingdom might be seen and heard through both the loving witness of his people and lives transformed by the peace and hope of Jesus Christ.

As we were just forming as a country field, our relative lack of structure and close supervision gave me freedom to explore the possibility of doing something new. Our team was also considering how we could move from a focus on personal evangelism and individual discipleship towards partnering with national believers, serving the small but established and maturing church in the region. Two years later, a clearer question had formed: "Could the church be equipped to provide end-of-life care?" I was encouraged by teammates and leaders to see if this idea could be developed in some way.

I discussed with a senior national church leader the ways in which our team could serve the church and he advised us to "work behind" national colleagues. His concern was for both foreigners and nationals to avoid scrutiny in an atmosphere of restricted religious freedom. I kept this advice in mind as I talked with a local doctor who worked for the largest evangelical denomination about how we might work together to get churches involved in caring for people at the end of life. What eventually emerged was a four-day workshop designed to equip volunteers to provide end-of-life care in their local communities.

As we developed the training, I was able to contribute from my experience as a family doctor, but it was carefully designed with the intent that those who do not have a medical background are able to facilitate the training independently. The workshop includes role-plays, sharing experiences of caring for loved ones, and practical demonstrations. This is done with the aim of forming small teams of volunteers who can respond holistically to the needs of patients and families in their local communities.

We also hope for volunteers to develop a biblically based vision for integral mission and encourage their churches to grow in their holistic mission. Consequently, there are not only times of Bible teaching in the training but also inductive Bible study to explore and apply Jesus' model of compassionate care. We also discovered that whilst most participants were eager to evangelise, there was a need to discuss how to do this with appropriate sensitivity to the circumstances.

Our approach really does seek to "work behind" churches and, as a result, we only hear second-hand stories of the fruit of the volunteers' ministry. It is incredibly encouraging to hear of lives transformed by the good news of Jesus, however short or long those lives might be. It's also heart-breaking to learn of the challenges impoverished families face when they care for loved ones at home.

One group of volunteers decided they would visit patients in a large cancer hospital in their city. This proved to be surprisingly easy to do in spite of restrictions on religion in the country. They met Flower, a lady with advanced bowel cancer, and had the opportunity to share the good news with her. Flower eagerly accepted Jesus there and then! The group offered some practical support which enabled her to be at home with her family when she passed away. She passed away full of hope and peace, as she was certain of her future. The witness of Flower's hope-filled death had a powerful impact on her family and a few

of the volunteers attended some of the funeral meetings and continued to share Jesus and support the family in their grief.

I felt able to step away from my involvement in the ministry when a small group of women had clearly caught the vision and were ready to work together as trainers. Together, we have facilitated trainings in churches across the country and in several different people groups, and, since my departure from the country, they have organised more groups and felt able to make adaptations to the approach. I consider working alongside these amazing women to be the greatest blessing of my own involvement in this ministry. The COVID-19 pandemic has halted the training of further groups, but volunteers continue to visit and care for patients and support their families. We hope and pray for new opportunities in the future.

Throughout this journey, we have tried to be committed to prayer, supported by a faithful community of prayer partners across the world. Knowing that we have consistently brought our plans before the Lord has brought necessary assurance when facing both joys and challenges, and strengthened our belief that he is directing all things for his glory. We continue to have faith that God will extend his kingdom through the faithful witness of his people. We are hopeful that this integral mission approach will contribute to multiplying churches that have a passion to see communities transformed by the good news of Jesus Christ. **MRT**

From Darkness into His Wonderful Light

AY

AY is a medical doctor from Japan who has worked with needy young people in Southeast Asia for the past fourteen years. Her passion is to lead discovery Bible studies with young people so that their lives can be transformed as they encounter Jesus.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this:
to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. (James 1:27)

"Grace is holding teacher's purse!" This was announced at lunchtime when we were preparing for a Christmas event at our sewing project shop. I checked my purse, and found that a significant amount of money was missing. And this was not the first time.

Grace had been placed in an orphanage when she was two. When first found by someone in her neighborhood, she was extremely skinny and clearly malnourished. The director of the orphanage that took her in gave her special attention and loved her like her own child. Even so, Grace has had a very difficult time feeling like she is loved unconditionally. This is not an uncommon situation for "orphans" in this country.

Historically, orphans and children from poor families were sent to Buddhist monasteries where they were given a place to live and a basic education. Many received the added dignity of becoming a monk—a position of high status in their society. Since the late 1990s, Christian churches have also responded to the needs of these vulnerable children by opening orphanages.[1] At present, most orphanages in the country are run by either Buddhist monasteries or Christian churches and organizations. While the term "orphanage" is usually understood to refer to a home for children without parents, it is often used here as a means of raising funds from foreign donors, even though the children who live in them are not necessarily "true orphans". Indeed, only about one-third of the children living in Buddhist or Christian institutions are true orphans, while two-thirds have a parent or parents who have sent their children away for economic or other reasons. This reality has moved both the government and UNICEF to try to differentiate between orphanages and boarding schools, since true orphans and children with a parent or parents have different emotional and developmental needs.

Here, children can be sent to orphanages for a number of reasons. While some are sent after their parents have died, many more go after their parents divorce and neither is willing to care for them. This situation is a symptom that the bond between parents and children in this culture is very weak. Parents often perceive their children as having a distinct existence from their own. The standard Buddhist belief is that this misfortune happens to the child as a result of their karma. Sadly, this cultural trait is shared by many local Christians. For instance, when tribal Christians remarry, they often send their children to orphanages or care homes. In some cases, sending the child to live with extended family members can be far worse, as children in this situation are often treated as labourers and may not even be allowed to go to school.

Another reason for sending children to orphanages is the dislocation that takes place due to natural disasters, such as cyclones and earthquakes, or regional wars. Whether this is a temporary fix or continues for a long time, sending a child affected in this way to an orphanage may give them needed stability. Connected to this reason is the presence of grinding poverty. Many families—particularly in rural areas where the percentage living in poverty increases and fewer secondary schools are available—cannot afford to send their children to be educated beyond the primary level. Though schooling is meant to be free, many children from rural villages are unable to complete their primary education through fourth grade. And though the government has doubled the number of teachers in rural areas to level the playing field, some parents send their children to stay in hostels in cities so that they can continue secondary school.

This highlights a major reason why many children end up in orphanages—their parents want them to get a better

education. The quality of schools and educational opportunities in villages and major cities differ greatly. Many parents thus seize any opportunity to send their children to the city so they can obtain a better education. For this reason, many children enter an orphanage when they reach the ninth grade. If they are to have any chance of passing the university matriculation exam, they need to get a place in one of the better secondary schools. Even so, only about one-third of all children pass the exam. And though being sent to an orphanage is seen as a route to a better education, few will rise to the top.

Grace was a true orphan who had left school at Grade 8. At that time, she joined the sewing club that we had started about ten years ago to teach teenage girls from orphanages how to use a sewing machine so that they could develop some necessary skills to support themselves, learn to work with others, have access to good medical treatment, and get an opportunity to read and study the Bible. While Grace was very moody when she first joined us, we gradually saw a change come over her as she built up confidence in herself and in her work. Eventually, she became a full-time staff member.

In many ways, she seemed to be an example of the double blessing we see when girls grow in their sewing skills and consider what Jesus would have them do as they reflect on their personal lives. Orphanages and children's homes run by Christians usually have daily programs to teach the Bible. In this way, many children come to know of God's love. But since the cultural understanding is that "the teacher teaches and the student listens," personal interaction with Scripture is often weak. For this reason, we started a discovery Bible study for the girls to have a space to interact with Scripture in their daily lives. Grace seemed to enjoy studying the Bible to discover what God wants to tell us and share with others. She started to apply what she learned from her Bible study. During the health course, she came to ask me if she could serve coffee and snacks and she served our guests with joy. This is significant as those who grow up in children's homes usually need to be told what to do rather than taking initiative.

Along with the others who joined the club, Grace received income for her work. Much of this is earned as we sell the things they make at three shops in the city. The business side of the club is sustainable without outside financial support. Through her income, Grace was able to buy a smart phone. Though it was a sign that she was making progress in life, it also proved to be an impediment. This started when she found a boyfriend online. She was so thirsty to be loved that her desire to please her boyfriend led her to start stealing money.

At first, we prayed and kept silent about her. When she said, with tears running down her face, that she was sorry for stealing, we prayed to God for forgiveness. But within a month, we found our office cash and another girl's money had been stolen. Then, another girl saw her opening my purse again! This time, Grace denied it and blamed her friend instead.

As we pondered what to do, we wondered how many times we would need to forgive her? How many times should we give her another chance? She seems to know very well that what she is doing is wrong, and assumes we will forgive her again and again. I was about to say, "Enough is enough!" If she does not stop stealing now, she might end up going to jail. How can we get her to stop stealing from others?

As we considered what to do, we remembered Jesus' command to forgive seven times seventy times. We recalled that he came to save the sick, not the healthy! During our weekly Bible studies on Luke, we often encountered Jesus' unconditional forgiveness and grace for sinful people. If Jesus were here, what would he do with Grace? Forgiveness should be unconditional and not dependent upon whether she repents or not. We, however, prefer to forgive those who are likely to truly repent. We think forgiveness is something we give rather than an issue of our hearts. It is so easy for us to judge others. My heart is rigidly set to judge her because I feel she won't change. And while I know that, as a Christian, I am forgiven by God's grace, I feel that *this* is different. *She* must confess and show regret for what she has done.



Peter says, "but you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pet 2:9). Grace is a chosen person, a person who belongs to God. She is precious in his sight. He called her into his wonderful light. He loves her and called her. In the eyes of Jesus, she is already perfect without any black spots. As Jesus forgives her, he also forgives me. Jesus accepts me as a new creation. Although I am not worthy of him, he has given me his wonderful light.

I told her that what she had done was wrong and that though it hurt me and the other girls at the office, God loves her and forgives her. I gave her a week to stay at home to reflect on what she has done. I then told her to come back to work with us again when she was ready. Her "mother", the orphanage director, sent her to a village far from the city to help her by giving her space to pray. Until today, Grace has remained in the village as her mother thinks it is better for her. Early this year, Grace sent me a message: "Thank you teacher, for accepting me as I am." She is now working as a big sister to children at an orphanage in the village. Pray that she continues to know God's unconditional love for her. Pray that since we are called into his wonderful light, his light will lead her to repent and come back to him. Pray for inner healing from her early childhood trauma and that she truly comes to know God's love for her.

So many children grow up in children's homes. Whether they have no parents or come from broken families, they grow up without knowing a parent's love. Many people in the country and the international community criticize these institutions for being unsuitable places for children to grow up. In many ways, this is true. A 2011 UNICEF survey of a number of residential facilities in the country described inconsistency of care and a serious lack of record-keeping for each child throughout the system. It found that 90.5% of the facilities provided as many as two meals per day for the children. A mere 56% of the children were said to have enough clothing and only 68% had sufficient sleeping space. Of those who still had biological parents, relatives, or friends, only 20% percent of the children who know where their parents live can visit them, only 12% had been visited by a parent, and only 9.5% were given funds to maintain contact with their parents.

The problems with the system are demonstrably great. But where else could those children go? International adoption is not an option. Adoption locally is only possible when permission is given by the local authority and community. And though we know one pastor who arranges for Christian couples who don't have children to adopt orphans and regularly follows them up to ensure things are going well, this is far from common and is not well regulated.

Some suggest that children should be reunited with their families, and at least one organization tries to do this. While this suggestion seems to offer many benefits and it may be possible in some cases, it will not be an option for children whose parents have died and may be impossible for those who have been abandoned or are treated like servants by their relatives. And though it isn't the same as reuniting families, at least one orphanage director has tried to develop a type of care that unites a group of children into a family-styled unit where they can build up relationships and support one another. Another government approach addresses the fact that the problem is made worse by the lack of rural schools—by building primary schools in villages where there are no schools so that children do not need to be sent away. This solution would give children an opportunity to stay with their families at least until the age of ten when they complete Grade 4. And while this is a great idea, the needs are so extensive that many such schools would need to be built throughout the country.

Clearly, there is no instant fix. And while we don't think orphanages are the best places for children to grow up and we don't encourage people to start orphanages, they at least provide opportunities for an education that could give the children a chance for the future. This is where our work fits in. When I visited the country in 2004, my encounter with a six-year-old orphan moved me to return to serve full time with an organization founded by an American surgeon and a local professor to support children's homes, which had been increasing in numbers since the late 1990s. The motto of the organization comes from James 1:27, particularly its focus on orphans.

When the organization started, its main activity was to provide medical care for orphanages and children's homes. To support this work, they received funds from overseas and mediated its transfer to the children's homes. However, as the country has opened up in recent years, many homes are now able to receive foreign funds directly from donors. This has helped the organization to shift its role to providing more educational support, with a special focus on health care.

About 150 orphanages and children's homes around the major city are registered. These homes house an average of fifteen to twenty children, serving a total of 4500 children. Every six months to a year, a mobile medical team visits each home in order to carry out health checkups on the children, observe their living conditions, and build relationships with directors and children. We measure weight and height, and provide both medical and dental checkups and treatment. We also teach children basic sanitary skills, such as brushing teeth, washing hands, etc.

In addition to caring for the children's needs, we also provide a week-long health care course for teachers at orphanages. At the end of the course, they earn a certificate, are given a medicine box that contains first-aid supplies, and receive information on child psychology, nutrition, how to use medicine, how to treat children when they are sick, how to protect them from abuse, and much more. We also provide medical treatment and referral for children from orphanages and children's homes through the clinic and pharmacy located at our main office.

The project serves some extremely vulnerable children and makes a positive contribution to their lives. Not only do we follow up on their social and medical needs, we also give them an opportunity to learn about the love of Jesus and come to faith in him. Children's homes and orphanages have thus helped the Christian church in the country to grow. Children who come to faith in this environment can open doors to unreached people in the villages where they live or where they came from. Many of them attend church-run schools where they advance their education. Young people who lived in orphanages regularly bear testimony of their ability to serve the Lord in various capacities.

Even so, many children who grow up in orphanages and children's homes bear deep wounds. Those who were abandoned by their parents or otherwise feel that they were not loved sometimes confess that because they did not receive love from their parents or other family members, they are unable love others as the Bible tells us to. This reminds us of our need to pray that these children will truly experience God's love and learn their true identity in Christ as members of God's global and eternal family.

The children's backgrounds and daily lives also remind us of the sad fact that children are sometimes harmed in orphanages, including Christian ones. This is a major reason many international organizations have criticized orphanages. In many cases, the directors of Christian orphanages are pastors who are not trained to run such institutions and are so busy doing their other ministries and managing the homes that they have little time to care for the mental and spiritual needs of the children. We have also found that the children in some homes we regularly visited suffered from skin infections and malnutrition. When we asked the foreign sponsors if they would like us to monitor the situation, they failed to respond, despite the fact that they send money every month. Though perhaps made with the best of intentions, this kind of support can be very harmful to children and, given the lack of adequate oversight, should not be made.

Despite the difficulties and potential problems, there are still a great many children who need to be loved and cared for as they have no or only a little support from family, but remain precious to God. Due to the problems that they have faced throughout their lives, it takes a long time and much energy to build relationships with them and help them grow. These realities keep me going in my long-term ministry to support and love girls, like Grace, from this background. Their needs move me to train them to work at the clinic and sewing shop, to share with them the love of Jesus through Bible study and prayer, and to model Christian service. Pray with us that they might come to know the Father who loves and cares for them in a way their earthly fathers were unwilling or unable to do. Pray also that God will show you how you could demonstrate a pure and undefiled religion by visiting and caring for orphans and widows and whoever else might have physical and/or spiritual needs, whether they live near you or on the other side of the world. **MRT**

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[1] There was a time when churches were not allowed to register with the government, but Christians could register orphanages. This caused many churches to first start an orphanage and then add a church and a Christian school.

Moving Towards a More Fully Orbed Theology of "Being Jesus to Others"

Dale Viljoen



In his forty-third year in Japan, Dale Viljoen is the owner of Café COEN / COEN English in Sapporo and needs to read tons of Japanese tax books to keep up to date. He was sent out to Japan by OMF South Africa and now serves the COEN Bible Community with his second wife, Karen.

Growing in understanding

I was staying at the Cape Town YMCA in 1974 when I finally responded to Jesus' prompting to trust and follow him. The plaque on the desk of the YMCA director read, "It is better to burn out than to rust out for God." I took this slogan to heart, which resulted in overwork, lack of balance, depression, and a near-burnout experience halfway through my ministry in Japan.

My motives for serving God seemed good but came out of many false premises. "I want to work for Jesus, doing everything possible to present Jesus to Japanese people in Hakodate." Working *for* Jesus sounds good, but working *with* Jesus, allowing the Holy Spirit to guide each day, is much better! Jesus is not only involved in my work but in every part of my life. I try to not "make God the number one priority in my life." God should be *central* to all I do, not just on the top of my priority list. I continue to learn what it means to be in Christ so that ministry flows from a place of unity with the risen Saviour "who fills everything everywhere with his presence" (Eph 2:23, NLT).

It has taken years for low-self-esteem-me to begin to understand and comprehend that every person has intrinsic value, simply by being created in God's image and that our sins and faults do not diminish God's love for us. Listen to Brennan Manning:

> We unwittingly project onto God our own attitudes and feelings toward others. As Blaise Pascal wrote, "God made man in his own image and man returned the compliment." Thus, if we feel hateful towards ourselves, we assume that God feels hateful toward us.
>
> But we cannot assume that He feels about us the way we feel about ourselves—unless we love ourselves compassionately, intensely, and freely. In human form Jesus revealed to us what God is like. He exposed our projections for the idolatry that they are and gave us the way to become free of them. It takes a profound conversion to accept that God is relentlessly tender and compassionate toward us just as we are—not in spite of our sins and faults (that would not be total acceptance), but with them. Though God does not condone or sanction evil, He does not withhold his love because there is evil in us.[1]

This reality of God who created humankind in his image and who "so loved the world that he gave his only son" (John 3:16, NLT) opened the way for me to see others, not just as "inside" or "outside" the Kingdom, but as people—people of incredible value, who desire to be loved, understood, and appreciated. "There's a fundamental dignity inherent to being a human being. A nobility. A spark. A divine image."[2]

As Christian workers, we proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God. As Paul writes in Ephesians, "we will hold to the truth in love, becoming more and more in every way like Christ" (Eph 4:15, NLT). Truth is not a battering ram to win arguments or coerce others to believe. Truth and love go together, embedded in the love-relationship we have with Jesus as we become like him by the work of the Spirit (2 Cor 3:18).

I continue to be encouraged and challenged by Dallas Willard:

> Finding real truth is the point of reference we share with all human beings. No one can live without truth. Though we may disagree about which particular things are true or false, allegiance to truth—whatever the truth may be—permits us to stand alongside every person as honest fellow inquirers. Our attitude is therefore not one of "us and them," but of "we." And we are forever here to learn together, not only to teach.



> So, if at all possible . . . we "give our account" in an atmosphere of mutual inquiry animated by generous love. However firm we may be in our convictions, we do not become overbearing, contemptuous, hostile or defensive. We know that Jesus himself would not do so, because we cannot help people in that way. He had no need of it, nor do we. And in apologetics, as everywhere, he is our model and master. Our confidence is totally in him.[3]

Blessing others through wedding ministry

In my fourth term in Hokkaido, Japan, I seriously got into wedding ministry (while leading Otaru Evangelical Church). Since then, I have "married" about 1,800 couples and keep in touch with around 1,000 of them yearly through New Year's cards. When I first meet each couple, I ask if I might have their address to send them a Christmas gift (an easy-to-read Japanese book on marriage) that year. Only once has my request been refused.

My goal is not solely to "win souls for Christ" but to bless the couple, family, and friends, and to enter into the joy of the occasion. With Jesus' help, I can put the participants at ease and make the service memorable. This year, I received a New Year's card in which the wife wrote about how she remembered the service nineteen years ago and continues to read the Bible I gave them.

The connections are remarkable! Just these past three years, I discovered that five of the brides or grooms were born in the same hospital in Asahikawa as my eldest son. I meet people I have "married" in hospital waiting rooms, Sapporo ward offices, the airport, and other places.

The opportunities for pre-marital counselling allow me to give the couple tools to use for their marriage, based on my own experience and flowing from the Bible's wisdom. The context enables many couples to go deep, open their hearts, and share honestly things that the other person may be hearing for the first time. For most Japanese, the "outside—外" appearance is important, and the "inside—内" is seldom revealed.

Living as Christ's image bearers at Café COEN, Sapporo

The late How Chuang Chua, an OMF missionary from Singapore to Japan, challenged me when he said that "Listening Evangelism can be more important in Japan than Speaking Evangelism."

Two-and-a-half years ago (December 2018), Karen and I found ourselves on the crest of a Jesus-propelled wave, thrust into unknown waters. Unexpectedly, at the age of 63, God led me to start my own business to allow us to take over an integrated café, English, and Bible Community ministry that Evangelical Free workers, Mark and Athlee Bowman, had built up over eleven years.

The Bowmans had looked for years for someone to take over COEN so that they could retire. When we came onto the scene, announcements were in place that this café and English program would close four months later, on 31 March 2019.



While I was in South Africa on a mobilization trip, Karen had already visited the café. Immediately on my return to Sapporo (10 December), we saw the café in action and spoke to Mark Bowman. I was impressed, but thought this ministry was impossible for me. "If only I were fifteen years younger!" The rent alone was a quarter of a million yen (US $2,273) per month.

That night I could not sleep. The Shepherd was calling my name to follow him. A week later, we told the Bowmans that we would take over this ministry. I became the busiest I have ever been in my life. Each day is challenging but exciting.

The café has four tables that surround a long table in the middle of the room. At the end of this table, I am privileged to listen as three ladies naturally share some of their deep childhood wounds. The sixty to one hundred Japanese people who pass through this café each week are our parishioners, even though most do not yet acknowledge the love that God has for them.

The café is a つながりの場—a place to connect—where a retired quantum mechanics professor connects to an autistic younger man. Before COVID-19, patients from a nearby mental hospital came with their therapist to this "healthy and safe" café to enjoy a delicious lunch.

This COVID-19 period is challenging! We had to close for almost three months. Taking preventive measures to protect our customers is expensive and time-consuming. Short-term workers who are willing to help us and ready with visas have not been able to enter Japan. Despite this, we continue. God is faithful, and his provision—in often unexpected ways—is unbelievable. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, COEN was featured on a popular prime time local TV program, which has brought newcomers to the café.

Our customers encourage us when they say things like: "I love coming to this café most days of the week because I feel at peace and at home here." "I feel closer to God at COEN." "Karen is always smiling, even when she is busy."

We don't try and make Café COEN a happy place. We can't! The Holy Spirit, working in and through us, is changing us each day to be like Jesus, the Word. We seek to treat each person as uniquely created in God's

image, with respect and dignity. We try to listen well, to understand their point of view. We desire to be Jesus to each customer. Skye Jethani writes:

> Our calling as pastors is to rehabilitate, to give people back the dignity the world has taken away. This happens when we carry the presence of God into every room we enter and into every life we encounter, and there announce the good news that they are created in the image of God and are inherently worthy of love, and that God has revealed the extent of his love for them through Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension. This work of restoring dignity is always incarnate; it cannot be accomplished merely through systems, structures, or programs. Rehabilitation requires the present and mysterious mingling of humanity and divinity.
>
> To be a pastor is to represent the presence of God, who is present with others. It is to see people—full, embodied, messy, sinful, beautiful people—and to see them the way Jesus does, as creatures of unsurpassable worth. To be a pastor is to freely give what we possess, which is nothing the world values and yet is the most valuable thing in the world. The world values what is useful . . . but all we have is Jesus. To be a pastor is to say. "I have no silver or gold, but what I do have I give to you."[4]

The café is a "normal" café, not a Christian café; the English program is professional. The only "cross" in the café is the pattern of lights on the ceiling. The Bible Community meets on Sundays; there is a free "Discuss the Bible in English" hour on Wednesday afternoons.



From left: Dale, Karen, Celia, Keith, and Hiromi

What continues to amaze us is how Jesus gives us many opportunities to naturally speak of him, to testify to his daily work in our lives. The Apostle Peter writes, "in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience" (1 Pet 3:15–16, NLT).

The burden of "winning people for Christ" has changed to allowing Jesus to love and reach others through us. Our core concepts are:

1. Love Jesus (worship)
2. Jesus with Me (self-care)
3. Be Jesus to Others (reveal Jesus' love naturally).

"COEN" has several meanings:

- COEN is a "park" (公園) where one can relax and be refreshed [the café].
- COEN is COnnecting through ENglish [professional English teaching].
- CO is "light" (こう光); EN is "salt" (えん塩) [the Bible Community as salt and light].
- COEN is similar to the Hebrew for "priest" (כֹּהֵן). We stand as the conduit between God and the people he loves so much.

The COEN Lead Team is Dale and Karen Viljoen, Hiromi Takahashi, Keith and Celia Olson, and Christina Winrich. Dale is the overall leader. Karen is the café manager. Hiromi is our primary teacher. Keith, Celia, and Christina serve the Bible Community under the auspices of OMF International.

Final reflections

- It is all about Jesus. Jesus is central to our worship, our lives, our ministry, our play, our rest.
- Right now is when we are "effective" despite our age, depression, suffering, or the loss of a loved one.
- Jesus uses all of our experiences for good. There is continuity between the different stages of our lives.
- Be a life-long learner. Learn from all people, even those you disagree with or dislike.
- Get among people. Seek an incarnational ministry.
- God does the work of salvation. Yes, he works through us, but we do not have the right to use the gospel as a weapon. We witness and defend the faith with gentleness, in the likeness and manner of Jesus. **MRT**



The "cross" in the pattern of lights on the ceiling

[1] Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 19–20.
[2] Rob Bell, *Everything is Spiritual: Who We Are and What We're Doing Here* (New York: St. Martin's Essentials, 2020), 124.
[3] Dallas Willard, *The Allure of Gentleness: Defending the Faith in the Manner of Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 4.
[4] Skye Jethani, *Immeasurable: Reflections on the Soul of Ministry in the Age of Church, Inc.* (Chicago: Moody, 2017), 209–210.

Experiment—Learn—Reflect—Make Policy

Reflections on the Early Days of Missional Business in OMF

Ian C. H. Prescott



Dr. Ian Prescott has served in Asia for more than thirty years. He was OMF's International Director for Evangelization from 1996 to 2010, in which role he was responsible for overseeing OMF's field ministries across East Asia. He was particularly focused on the development of work in creative access contexts and was directly responsible as Field Director for work in a number of creative access nations. He is now based in the UK and focused on what God is doing through the international movement of East Asia's peoples.

Missional business is now as firmly established in OMF as it is in the wider missions world, and is one of the ways in which OMF engages in mission in East Asia. But it wasn't always like that. How did we get started on the journey?

The idea was introduced to OMF in many ways.

Entering the discussion

In the mid-1990s, while the "tent-making" movement had been around for a while, the emphasis was largely on engaging in mission from a self-supporting professional role.[1] At that time, OMF had been emphasizing the missionary track for Open Access Nations and was promoting the development of a professional track for Creative Access Nations. However, the idea of starting new businesses as a means to engage in mission was still a relatively early idea that was being discussed in mission circles and was beginning to be featured in magazine articles. As a result, some of our leaders and members were entering into the wider mission discussion. However, the first significant book on the topic was Suter and Gmür's slim volume *Business Power for God's Purposes*, which came out in 1997.[2] Though more books would follow, it would be a while before we had encyclopedic tomes like Johnson's 528-page *Business as Mission* that was published in 2009.[3]

As our focus on Creative Access Nations increased, our search for new ways for people to enter and stay in these countries intensified. Organizationally, teaching and NGO platforms were the ways that we were most naturally comfortable with. They also fitted with the openness of countries like China for "Foreign Experts" to support the "Four Modernizations." However, not everyone is cut out to be an English teacher or a development worker. Different platforms may provide opportunities to serve that fit a wider variety of people with more diverse experience and abilities. Different platforms also provide more diverse opportunities to engage and serve the people that we seek to reach.[4]

What countries are open to what kind of foreign workers also changes. For example, for a period, China was quite open to foreign assistance through NGOs. However, NGOs always have an agenda, and as China grew increasingly suspicious of them, the freedom for them to operate was steadily reduced. At the same time, encouraging new businesses fitted the national agenda. The motive for a business—making



Courtesy of TonCedar, toncedar.org

money—was well understood. As a result, businesses were often welcome and often given more freedom.

We began discussing the possibilities for businesses with our leaders. When OMF's field leaders came together for their annual East Asia Field Directors Consultation in 1998, one of the things they considered was "OMF and Business Entry Platforms." This was still a very new idea for many of them. Several years afterwards, someone who was there said,



Drying coffee beans

"I think most of us wondered what on earth you were talking about." However, these discussions helped open the door to allowing those in Creative Access situations to consider starting businesses.

Beginning to experiment

The next stage was to let people experiment. Workers were released to try this rather than directed as to how to do this. The result was much trial and innovation, so that, by 2007, our members were involved in at least twenty businesses in several countries across East Asia. Through the experimentation, we began to learn more about the demands and issues involved in starting and running businesses, and the things that we needed to address.

These are just a few:

- Missionaries often made naïve business people. For them to do it well, they needed a lot more help. And some were so ill-prepared that they should not have been allowed to do it all. However, few, if any, of our field leaders had experience that equipped them to adequately supervise this new direction.
- There were legal issues about using money donated to a charity or non-profit to start a business that we needed to understand better. Were activities in Asia putting those in the sending centres in legal jeopardy?
- There were questions about ownership and profit. If a business made a profit, whose was it? If it made a loss, whose problem was it? Who could or should be the legal owner and potentially sell a successful business?
- What was the missional contribution of a business? Was it just the provision of a visa or could it be much more?

One field—which probably more than any other prided themselves on being innovators and rule breakers—was one of the first to get involved in starting businesses. They were also the first to create a "Compliance Board" to exercise more oversight and control over those businesses.

Increasingly, it became clear that there were significant missional opportunities that could be best realized through running businesses. However, if we were called to do this, we needed to address the issues that were arising so that we did it well—in a way that honored God.

Setting support structures in place

In September 2007, both the Evangelization Council and the International Executive Council affirmed the need for a task force to look at how OMF should be involved in "Business and Mission." The brief covered "Theological/missiological/philosophical issues," "Strategic issues," "Regulatory issues," and "Practical issues."[5] Someone who had a passion for mission but whose life had been spent in the international business world was invited to lead it.

The result was a proposal "that OMF positively embrace business as a significant missional strategy that can contribute to OMF's mission and vision." Along with that were proposals for operating principles and structures for support.
This met with the warm approval of the International Executive Council and resulted in the creation of the Missional Business Support Unit, which could support people through the whole process of designing, starting, and running a business. It was also tasked with making sure that legal and financial issues were understood and addressed throughout.

We haven't finished. The structures that were proposed have continued to be changed and adjusted. Some of the businesses that have been started have prospered and others have failed. We are still encouraging innovation, still learning from the experience, still adjusting, and still trying to understand what God wants us to do and to do it in a God-honoring way. **MRT**

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[1] So, for example, J. Christy Wilson Jr's book *Today's Tentmakers* devotes a chapter to giving fourteen diverse examples of "Tentmakers Today," but the entrepreneurial business starter is entirely missing. The examples given are: An Army Doctor, A Christian Engineer, An Embassy Secretary, A Medical Couple, A Teacher of the Blind, The Prince of Peace Corps, An Air Force Colonel, A Nurse, A Christian Lawyer, An Oil Engineer, A Cattle Raiser, A Government Teacher, An Educator, A Mining Engineer. J. Christy Wilson Jr., *Today's Tentmakers: Self-Support: An Alternative Model for Worldwide Witness* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1979), 58–64.
[2] Heinz Suter and Marco Gmür, *Business Power for God's Purposes: Partnership with the Unreached* (Greng, Switzerland: VKG, 1997).
[3] C. Neal Johnson, *Business as Mission: A Comprehensive Guide to Theory and Practice* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009). See also "Business as Mission: A Survey of Recent Publications," *Mission Round Table* 3, no. 1 (April 2007): 26–27, https://omf.org/news-and-stories/-/news-and-stories/2021/6/21/business-as-mission-a-survey-of-recent-publications (accessed 21 June 2021).
[4] For further discussion of other aspect of identity and platform, see the author's "The Gospel and the Cross-cultural Gospel Messengers: Issues of Identity and Platform in Bringing the Good News," *Mission Round Table* 14, no. 3 (September 2019): 26–33, https://omf.org/blog/2019/11/29/the-gospel-and-the-cross-cultural-gospel-messengers/ (accessed 20 May 2021).
[5] OMF's Evangelization Council and OMF's International Executive Council, "Business and Mission Task Force Brief (January 2008)," unpublished paper.

Getting Out of God's Way:
Innovation During the Global Pandemic

Nathaniel Jennings



Before joining OMF International, Nathaniel Jennings lived and worked in Bangladesh for over fifteen years. He did his BA (Hons) in South Asian History at the University of London and later got his MTh through Queens University, with his dissertation on the church in Islamic contexts. For the past ten years, he has been living in Belfast with his wife Donna and children Micah (13) and Tabitha (10). At the moment, Nathaniel serves as OMF's Area Representative for Ireland.

The Father created life and order out of emptiness. The Son brought redemption and restoration through his own betrayal, public humiliation, and murder. The Holy Spirit emboldened and empowered Jesus' followers so they could overcome a state of confusion and fear. The good news was proclaimed and the church built as Word- and Spirit-filled men and women shared the hope they had found as they fled persecution. The mission of God continues today as the likes of my Bangladeshi believer friend Jibon and his wife Toruna tend to the sick and deliver food and essentials to the poor, whilst many others seek to minimize risk and seek self-preservation.

From the Bible and church history, right up until the present day, we see that the Lord works out his purposes in the midst of earthly crisis and turmoil. To be involved in his ongoing work in our own times and spaces, we have to be willing to look up and step out, even when all certainties and securities seem to be crumbling around us. As an OMF Area Representative in Northern Ireland, the arrival of the COVID-19 lockdowns meant seeing all my best made plans binned. We knew that God was still at work, but we had to be willing to adapt and be creative as we continued to seek to follow in the ways he was leading. When we were willing to do this, God surprised us by working and providing fruit in ways we would never have previously thought of.

As mission mobilizers, we have long prayed for a breakthrough in reaching out beyond our core, faithful community of supporters. The pandemic forced our events online. This was not what we wanted, but we came to see it as a chance not just to try to do what we had always done online, but an opportunity to be creative and try new ways of doing things. When we held our *NextGen Ireland: Mission without Borders* event, we used multilingual YouTube videos for worship and staged a quiz that all "attendees" could join through their devices. The whole event was designed to be interactive as folk were able to send us questions and comments and contributors joined us live from Singapore, Japan, and Cambodia. Fifty young adults joined from across the UK and Ireland and another 200 watched via Facebook and YouTube livestreams.

During the pandemic, we discovered a wonderful course developed in the States called *Momentum Yes*.[1] This program is ideally run over six ninety-minute sessions across six weeks. All necessary resources are free and available online. The content is delivered through a series of short, high-quality videos. These videos take the groups on a journey exploring the biblical basis for every believer being a witness, what this should look like for each of us, and how we can see disciples formed from every nation, whether they live on our doorsteps or on the other side of the globe. The materials and the format lend themselves perfectly to the online platform with sharing and discussions carried out using breakout rooms. So far, we have run two courses and have another in the pipeline. They have been greatly appreciated by participants from a variety of ages, stages, and backgrounds. At the end of the course, most made strong commitments to taking concrete steps toward greater engagement in mission.

My inability to facilitate people going to serve in East Asia—which has been the bread and butter of my role—has been extremely difficult. But it has been a great joy to journey with a local lad who decided to do something to keep the people of Japan—for whom he is deeply burdened—on his heart and mind whilst he waits to return to the country. Joshua worked out that the distance from his house in Northern Ireland to Japan is 8,441 miles and decided to walk that distance! He recently reported, "I have just passed the 500 mile mark, 546.6

being the exact figure—only another 7,894.4 left to go! The walk is doing its job. I'm still moving towards Japan. I get a few miles closer each day, and if God wills it, by the time I've completed this goal, I'll be able to go back."[2]

Whilst folk like Joshua have had to put their plans to go to East Asia on hold, we have been able to offer others virtual short-term mission opportunities in partnership with the OMF UK Diaspora Returnee Ministries field. Lizzie, a Bible college student from the south of England, was able to do a four-week placement alongside OMF workers in Manchester and Belfast. She took part in a weekly Zoom call with a group of four Belfast-based Chinese students, during which she got to play online games, share her testimony, and lead a Bible study. She spent time online, making one-to-one contact with three East Asian Christian ladies, listening to the joys and struggles they experienced while making Northern Ireland their home. She and they were much blessed by these conversations. Lizzie was also able to share at three online gatherings for local supporters and individuals interested in mission. Reflecting on these experiences, she then wrote a very helpful report on our online activities and made suggestions on how we might better engage with young adults like herself as they move forward in mission thinking and practice.[3]

The pandemic and all the uncertainty and anxiety that came with it were pretty crushing at first. However, as we let go of our own plans and reimagined how we might continue to work, what we have been able to do has been beyond our hopes and imagination. While it looks like restrictions are lifting and we may be able to go back to our old ways of working, we are not planning to do that. God has shown us new ways of working and new possibilities. Perhaps more than anything else, he has led us to a place where we are holding everything lightly, being willing to go with the flow in the light of our current circumstances, and trusting in God's leading and presence in the midst of uncertainty. Please pray that we can stay in this place. Our human natures want certainty and control, and yet, as we hand everything over to the Lord, he blesses us with fruit that surpasses anything we can ask for or imagine (Ephesians 3:20). **MRT**

[1] Momentum Yes, www.momentumyes.com (accessed 6 May 2021).
[2] For more information, see "How to Keep a Passion for Mission Alive: Walking to Japan," https://omf.org/uk/how-to-keep-a-passion-for-mission-alive-walking-to-japan/ (accessed on 6 May 2021).
[3] "Lizzie: my virtual mission placement with OMF (UK)," https://omf.org/uk/lizzie-my-virtual-mission-placement-with-omf-uk/ (accessed on 6 May 2021).

Continued from "Interview with Akha Leaders," p. 47

him. The headman just looked after the welfare of the villagers and connects with other people to maintain social welfare. The *dzoema*'s son would become a *dzoema*.

Did any village allow Christians to stay in their villages?

In the beginning, all had to leave if they did not follow the Akha Way. They had to live outside the village gate, though they could live close to the village. However, they were told that if any misfortune occurred in the village, the Christians would be blamed. So, generally, they would move far away. In some countries (like Burma and Thailand), there may be laws above the village laws that would be in effect. In Laos, at the present time, it is the village that decides whether someone can stay or not.

Did villagers from one village ever consult with other villages about responding to the Gospel?

Yes. In some cases, they saw that those who received Christianity gained benefits, such as hostels and education for their children.

Why did some Akha eventually want to become Christians when they knew they must leave the village?

They learned that even if they did not make sacrifices, the spirits would not harm them. They would not lose any animals for sacrifices. They would have the right to own their animals. In later years, when those (who were considering becoming Christians) saw that Christians lived a good life with no harm from the spirits, they understood that they could do so too.

[At this point, Kitsada asked a question:] I did not hear anyone say, "I came out from 'the Akha Way' because I believe in Jesus." Is that the case?

Then one of the evangelists instantly responded, "Yes, that is why we have a problem. Now, in the third generation, they want to become Christians without believing in Christ." [This is one of the great revelations of the whole interview. And it is very much tied to the following statement.] The norm was to become a Christian first and then believe afterwards.

Christians see twins as a double blessing. Some couples can't be sure they will not have twins, so they may think to themselves that if they decide to become Christians, they won't have to suffer the penalties of having twins.[1]

In summary, the first generation of Christian believers were generally tired of being harmed by the spirits or tired of making sacrifices.

How do you decide when someone is ready to be baptized?

Many people do not understand what it means to be a Christian. Even local pastors sometimes believe that if someone is not baptized, their name is not written in the book of heaven. So, people are threatened that they must be baptized in order to get their names written in heaven. Some will say, "I am still young. Not ready. Still want to do my own things. I must stop doing bad things after I get baptized." Some think that baptism can wash away sickness. It is well known that one's baptismal card gets one a discount at the Christian hospital.

Of course, there are those who understand and sincerely believe.

It is the responsibility of the local Christian leader to ask a person, "Do you believe in Jesus?" If they say that they do, then the local leader will tell the ordained pastor to come and perform the baptismal ceremony.

[1] This remark led to a long discussion about Akha customs relating to putting twins to death, only a few notes of which are recorded here. Traditionally, if a couple gave birth to twins, they would have to leave their village and go down and live near the river where people never go and sacrifice twelve pigs and many chickens and a dog and a goat. The goat would remove unclean things. They must wear clothes made from leaves. The dzoema would decide what sacrifice they must make and what day they must make it. The babies must be suffocated with ashes in order to keep them from crying. A trap device made from a banana trunk would need to be created with a trip lock that the dzoema would release to kill the babies. The parents would then have to put the corpses in the river and cover them with stones to make sure they were dead. They would then say that a banana trunk fell on the children and stones rolled over them.

The family line of a couple who gave birth to twins would be considered spoiled, so no one would want to marry into it. They would be called a "spoiled family". Even Christians would consider those family lines to be "spoiled".

Conversion Growth in Akha Churches

A Write Up by Neel Roberts of the Findings of a Survey Conducted by Asholi Akamu and Kitsada Chahae

Asholi Akamu



Asholi Akamu has worked among the Akha for eighteen years. An Indian (Mao) from Manipur, he has a BA from North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) in Shillong and a BDiv from Union Biblical Seminary in Pune, India.

Kitsada Chahae



Kitsada Chahae has been working with Akha Radio since 2011 and has been a pastor for three years. A Thai Akha, he graduated with a BTh from Master's College of Theology in Andra Pradesh, India.

Neel Roberts



Neel Roberts graduated from Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary in 1986. He works in the Mekong Region where he is involved in training emerging leaders from various ethnic backgrounds in cross-cultural service.

The reason for the study

In his 2008 doctoral thesis, "Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand," Marten Visser explained the results of sending a one-page questionnaire to a random sample of ninety-four ethnic Thai churches that all worshipers were to complete.[1] Instead of looking at just local church growth, the research focused on conversion church growth. A conversion growth rate for each church was calculated based upon the percentage of respondents who had become Christians in that church within the previous decade. After analyzing the data from the ninety-four churches and over three thousand respondents from throughout Thailand representing various Protestant traditions, he was able to give clear answers to the questions, "What kind of people become Christians?" and "What kind of churches attract non-believers?"[2] The answers he discovered can be found in his thesis.

Recognizing the value of his quantitative study of ethnic Thai churches in Thailand, in April 2015, OMF International decided to use Visser's model to research the growth of the church among other groups in East Asia. The Akha were among the groups selected for the survey.

The following report begins with the briefest background information about the Akha and then moves on to the method used to carry out the survey. The main body of the text consists of some of the findings of the survey, interspersed with some of Visser's initial speculations on the implications of those findings. In many cases, the survey researchers have added their insights to Visser's suggestions, usually with an introductory phrase like, "the reason for this is…" This led naturally to many new questions and we were privileged to be granted an interview with three Akha men who have spent decades serving as evangelists. Some of the informants' comments are included below.[3]

Background of Akha Christians

The Akha people originated in Yunnan Province of southwest China. They appear to have been, in some way, a breakaway group of the Hani people.[4] Over the last century, they have migrated southward. A total population of perhaps 700,000 Akha are now spread throughout eastern Myanmar, northern Thailand, northern Laos, northwest Vietnam, and Yunnan province.[5]

History

The Akha did not begin their migration into northern Thailand until the beginning of the twentieth century. The first Akha village there was established around 1903, and the second not until 1925.[6] Most of the Akha living in Thailand today are immigrants or children of people who fled from Myanmar (Burma) when the eastern hills became engulfed in the civil war that broke out in the middle of the twentieth century between the Burmese and the Shan people. A few, however, came from Laos.

Beliefs

Traditional Akha religion is a combination of animism and ancestor worship. A strong animistic ideology permeates their worldview. Fear of displeasing spirits is real. The *dzoema* (priest) plays a great role in performing rituals, including sacrificing animals to appease the evil spirits. The cultivation of rice is bound up with myths and rituals, and must be done in the "Akha Way". In addition, they maintain the belief that there is a great world-creating deity.[7]

The Akha people have a great sense of interest in and a remarkable knowledge of their ancestors. Many

are able to recite over sixty names of their male ancestors.[8] They keep an ancestral altar in their homes upon which food and wine are offered up on important occasions, such as the Akha New Year—which generally occurs in November—and after a rice harvest.

Akha culture and Christianity

The Akha have been moving south for more than one hundred years. As the first Akha encountered Christianity in Burma, it is necessary to give a brief summary of how they reacted to Christianity there before we consider the conversion growth of Akha churches in Thailand.

The *Burma Baptist Chronicle* gives a valuable sketch of the early work of the American Baptist missionaries among the Akha in the Eastern Shan State of Burma (present-day Myanmar). Marcus Young, the famous missionary to the Lahu, visited Akha villages near Kengtung in 1907. By 1909, there were a number of Christians among them. The first Akha Baptist church was founded at Pang Hki Het. As Zan and Sowards record:

> The first Akha Baptist church was organized in 1936 as a result of ten years of persistent effort by Thra Tun Gyaw and his wife in spite of difficulties and discouragement. Scores of Karen workers from Lower Burma whose names have not been recorded have left their homes and served in distant places among strange peoples of different customs and language, and have helped to build the church of Christ in the far places of Burma.[9]

Two points should be noted here. The first is that this Marcus Young was involved in the great awakening among the Lahu which began in 1906 and resulted in tens of thousands of converts. These Lahu lived cheek and jowl with the Akha. Even so, the ethnic groups are quite different. The other important point is that most of the actual pioneer evangelism among both groups was carried out by Sgaw Karen Christians who were sent out by their own churches. Catholic missionary activities were occurring at the same time, albeit with different methodology and different results.[10] While the work among the Akha was relatively slow in comparison with what was occurring among their Lahu neighbors, there was progress. A key American Baptist couple in the history of the Akha church in both Burma and



Ahka children listening to the gospel recording played by Peter Nightingale, *East Asia Millions*, British edition (March 1971): 22.

Thailand was Paul and Elaine Lewis, who began work in China in the late 1940s, worked with Lahu and Akha in Burma until the 1960s, and served in Thailand for several more decades. Paul's work on the Akha Bible is perhaps one of the links that has kept the Akha in Burma and Thailand connected over the decades.

The Akha in Thailand meet Christianity

According to our informants, the general belief when the Akha and missionaries first made contact was that foreign missionaries were ogres. When they invited families to send their children to boarding schools, it was naturally supposed that they intended to fatten them before eating them. Though these fears were unfounded, they decreased the Akha's openness to Christianity, for a time.[11]

In Thailand, the first missionaries to begin work among the Akha in the 1950s were members of OMF. In 1954, the first villages were visited and in March 1955 the following announcement in the mimeographed North Thailand Roundup—the monthly OMF prayer letter for the missionaries working among the minority groups—was circulated.

> FLASH Peter and Jean Nightingale occupied White-Well-Village, a Christian Thai village... Long prayed over they are now actually planting the flag of His righteousness in the hearts of the Aka who have never had a witness of the cross among them in this country. Pray much.[12]

Peter and Jean Nightingale remained for six years in that Tai Ya Christian village at the foot of Doi Tung mountain where the largest concentration of Akha in Thailand was to be found.[13] Christians could not live permanently in a traditional Akha village due to the fact that all who lived within the village gate were required to participate in the worship of the spirits. Thus, the role of the Tai Ya Christian village as a base for the missionaries was of great importance during those pioneering years. Of similar importance was the arrival of Akha believers from Burma. The first were Ya Ju and his wife Mee Chu (Mi Chu) who came to Thailand in 1957.[14] As Christians, they lived near, but not in, an Akha village for several years until at last several families became Christians. Then, all the Akha Christians with the Nightingales were able to establish their own small Christian village.[15]

The forces that kept the Akha from becoming Christians were related to their desire to maintain the traditions of the ancestors in keeping the Akha Way (*Zahv*). In each village, there were spirit mediums, village headmen, and a *dzoema*—the priest who taught the rules that the people must follow. It was inconceivable that a person could live in a village and not be subject to the rules set out by the *dzoema*. As sacrifices to spirits were part and parcel of village life, it was impossible for someone to become a Christian and live in a non-Christian village. The *dzoema* benefited from the sacrificial system and thus may have had some material, as well as spiritual, reasons to oppose any alternate belief system. The people were afraid of offending the spirits while they simultaneously found the sacrificial system extremely burdensome. Thus, a growing number of people saw Christianity as a way to be freed from obligations to the spirits who could harm them and be freed from the sacrificial system which cost so much.

While it was theoretically possible to live just outside the village gate and maintain relations with one's community, it proved increasingly difficult. Christians were accused of offending the spirits and endangering not only themselves and their families but the whole neighboring village. As long as they lived near the village, they would still be liable for any misfortune that happened to the villagers. It thus became the norm for Christians to move far off and start their own Christian villages. As these villages prospered, more Akha became convinced that they could safely leave the old way, and the Christian movement picked up steam.[16] Eventually, as the Akha Way in Thailand broke down for a number of reasons, it became possible for Akha to

become Christians while remaining in their original villages. Thus, the openness to the gospel and the way in which communities responded to the gospel message varied greatly over the decades.[17]

1. Survey of Akha churches

Having given the briefest historical background about the beginnings of the Akha churches we will now look at the survey itself.

1.1. The number of Christians in 2017

When the survey of the Akha churches was begun in 2017, it was estimated that 80,000 Akha lived in Thailand.[18] The database of Thai churches underlying Thaichurches.org listed almost 27,000 members in Akha churches. This meant that approximately one third of all Akha in Thailand were identified as Christians.[19]

1.2. Distribution

Of 214 Akha churches in Thailand, 185 were in Chiang Rai Province, with all but a handful of the remainder in Chiang Mai Province. Only four of the churches were in Chiang Rai city, almost all the others were in Akha villages in the hills or mountains.

1.3. Denominations

Seventy percent of all Akha Christians are members of one of three denominations:
- Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT) District 2 (Presbyterian)[20]
- Akha Churches in Thailand (ACT), the result of a united effort by Akha Christians who migrated from Burma, working with OMF and American Baptist missionaries
- CCT District 12 (Baptist, started from Maitrichit Church in Bangkok)[21]

Table 1 shows the total picture.

Table 1. Number of Christians by denomination

Denomination	No. of Churches	Members
CCT District 2	34	7613
Akha Churches in Thailand	50	6150
CCT District 12	27	5160
Akha Evangelical Church in Thailand	18	1880
Akha Outreach Services Church Association	14	945
Others	71	5192
Total	**214**	**26940**

2. Methodology of survey

Thirty churches participated in the survey. These churches were all part of the Akha Churches in Thailand denomination. It is unclear whether other Akha churches would present a different picture from the findings of this survey.

Most churches provided exactly ten respondents who were selected by the individual pastors. It is likely that more questionnaires were filled out by leaders than other members. A truly random sample would undoubtedly have led to more women and youth taking part. The findings therefore should not be taken as representative of the churches as a whole.[22]

The survey form was produced by Marten Visser. When used to survey national churches, a random sample was selected from a database of churches. Church leaders were then asked to pass out the survey forms to be filled in after a Sunday service. In the case of the Akha survey, the form was translated into Akha by Rev. Asholi Akamu, a missionary who worked with the Akha for over a decade, and Kitsada Chahae, an Akha pastor, who is fluent in Akha, Thai, and English. Though strict research methods in line with those used elsewhere were desired, it was not possible to stick to them for several reasons.

1. Many Akha are functionally illiterate. While they may be able to read from their Bibles and sing from a hymnbook, that is not the same as answering a questionnaire. For this reason, the questions needed to be asked orally and then the interviewer needed to record the information. The time-consuming nature of this task, and the fact that village churches are often hard to access, meant that a relatively small and select sample of interviewees were chosen in place of the large and more random number that would have been preferable.

2. While filling in survey forms may appear harmless, most of the Akha contacted are descended from families that migrated into Siam/Thailand in the twentieth century. Their experience of filling in forms is generally associated with interactions with governments, and most people are cautious about revealing too much in writing.

3. It would be culturally unacceptable for an outsider to question Akha church members without the expressed consent of the church leader. The way to gain that consent was to have the leader choose who would be interviewed.

After the data from the thirty churches had been collected, the answers had to be translated back for the English language spreadsheets. As some questions required a written answer, those answers had to be translated into English as well. When this was all done, Visser was able to use computer software to analyze the data and compare it to results obtained in other surveys—primarily national ones. He was then able to make some initial conclusions and recommendations based on the results of the survey. He



recognized that data might be open to other interpretations, especially if those who interpreted it were familiar with the distinctive Akha culture and the history of their churches. His original conclusions and suggestions were thus sent back to Asholi Akamu and Kitsada Chahae for them to complete the final report. What follows are some notable points that emerged from the survey as well as the tentative conclusions derived from it. In some cases, we show the statistical results, but to save space, we often provide just summary statements.

What did the data say?

3. Profile of Christians

3.1. Growth

Because of the non-random nature of the survey, it is impossible to calculate the conversion growth of the Akha church. Among the respondents, only 14% were born into Protestant families, and another 7% into Roman-Catholic families. Thus, four in five respondents were born in non-Christian families. If the survey had included more young people, the percentage of converts would probably be lower. Even so, the overall picture is of a church that grew very rapidly. A church with just 14% people born in Protestant families has a yearly conversion growth rate of about 8% over several decades.

3.2. Sex

Forty-nine percent of respondents were men, and 51% were women. If a random sample was taken during a typical service, almost two thirds of the respondents would be female. That this finding is different may be because many leaders—who tend to be male—took part in the survey. Another possibility is that because Akha convert in family groups (see below), there are fewer women with non-Christian husbands than would be found in other Asian contexts.

3.3. Age

The average age of those surveyed was 52, and the average age of those born in a Protestant family was ten years younger. This high average age shows that the sample in this survey in all likelihood is not random, but skewed towards older people. One reason for this is that many younger people now live in towns or cities for work or studies, and some are in other countries.



3.4. Level of education

The level of education among (these older) Akha Christians is very low, with only 10% having finished secondary education. There are several reasons for this. (1) Until fifty years ago there were almost no opportunities for Akha, who practiced slash and burn agriculture, to receive any schooling. (2) Younger, well educated people are underrepresented in the sample because the surveys occurred in villages, while many educated Akha have left their villages to earn a living and therefore are not part of the churches surveyed.

Table 2. Level of education

Level of education	Percentage
Below Primary	80
Primary	9
Secondary	9
Vocational	2
Bachelors	1
Masters or higher	0

3.5. Ethnicity

All respondents, without exception, said they were ethnically Akha and were Thai nationals. However, 68% said they were born in Myanmar. This signifies that the sample studied was a product of a major social upheaval which demanded that they address issues of self-identity at a number of levels.

3.6. Birth religion

Table 3. What was the most important religion in the home you grew up in?

Religion	Percentage
Buddhism	1
Islam	0
Protestantism	14
Roman Catholicism	7
Other	43
Atheist	20
No religion	15

The large majority of Akha grew up following the traditional Akha religion—*Zahw*—which was a life-defining belief system. Because this was not listed as a separate option, respondents struggled to choose between "other", "atheist", and "no religion".

3.7. Marriage

The Akha tend to marry fairly young. Half of the women surveyed married at 18–22 years of age. Half of all men married when aged 20–27. Another feature of Akha culture is that marriage is universal. Only one from 290 respondents did not answer any question about his or her spouse. Not a single respondent stated that their spouse was not a Christian. It seems mixed marriages were non-existent among the Akha church members. This is because decisions on religion tend to be taken by the whole family, with 75% of respondents saying that husband and wife became Christians at the same time. Thus, the Akha church has the opportunity of building strong Christian families, with little or no influence from the traditional religion on the homes of Christians.

3.8. Friends

When asked about their friends, two-thirds of the Akha Christians said their five closest friends were all Christians. In part, this is due to the fact that in the past, Akha who became Christians had to leave their home villages and form Christian villages. There are now a number of villages where people have become Christians and been allowed to remain in their villages. But as this survey focused on the more established churches, the separation between Christians and non-Christians is very evident.

3.9. Core of faith

The question on the core of faith was an open question. In Table 4, the

results for the Akha are compared with a previous study of Thai-speaking churches throughout Thailand.

The Akha answers to what constitutes the core of their faith clearly distinguishes them from ethnic Thai Christians. Akha Christians overwhelmingly mention the existence of God (either God, Jesus, or the Trinity) as the core of their faith. When thinking about what their faith is all about, Akha Christians' first thought is: God exists! This seems to indicate that the Christian faith is confessed very consciously over and against the ancestral religion.

3.10. Theology

The numbers in Table 5 indicate the percentage of right answers for each doctrinal statement. The "correct" answer to each question is given in parentheses.

The answers given by the Akha are more uniform than any other group surveyed. Almost without exception, they affirm the orthodox, evangelical positions that Jesus never sinned, that everything the Bible teaches is true, and that those that don't believe in Christ are eternally lost. Ninety percent correctly deny that we are saved by keeping God's law. This is higher than in any other group, and indicated that the Akha church has a good grasp on the importance of grace. On the other hand, the Akha church also almost unanimously states that enough faith will lead to God's healing.[23]



An Akha village

4. Conversion

4.1. Conversion process

How long did it take from when you first heard the gospel until you believed?

Three in ten converts became Christians within a year after first hearing the gospel. Most others were converted within five years of first hearing the gospel. However, over time, the chance that people would respond positively diminished dramatically. So, if people did not respond to the gospel within a few years of hearing it, then the likelihood was that they would never respond.

In evangelism among the Akha, two true statements need to be held in tension. 1. It is rare for people to convert immediately, so one needs to go back to present the gospel time and again. 2. It is rare for people to become Christians many years after first hearing the gospel, so there should be an urgency in presenting the gospel and asking for a decision to follow Christ. The researchers have noted that Akha people wait for one another to turn to Christ for fear of persecution if they make an individual decision. An individual might have heard the gospel and may have wished to become a Christian for several years but did not dare to declare himself or herself in public. Thus, it might appear that they took several years to believe when in fact they took several years to find several others who were prepared to join them in publicly following Jesus.

Table 4. What is the core of your faith?

Core of faith	% of Akha	% of ethnic Thai
Salvation / eternal life	14	30
God / Jesus	72	16
God's help	6	13
A feeling	1	2
How to live your life well	4	5
God's or Jesus' love	1	16
A religious activity	0	6
Other	3	16

Table 5. Doctrinal correctness

Doctrinal statement	Heterodox answer %	Orthodox answer %
We get saved by keeping God's law (no)	10	90
Jesus never sinned (yes)	1	99
If you have enough faith, God will heal you (no)	99	1
Everything the Bible teaches is true (yes)	1	99
If you don't believe in Christ, you are eternally lost (yes)	1	99

4.2. Age of becoming Christian

A large number of Akha Christians born into Protestant families consider themselves Christians from birth (see Table 6). This number is higher than that among ethnic Thai Christians. Akha place more emphasis on the community and less on the personal decision to follow Christ. The most common age for Akha to convert to Christianity was in the late twenties, with lower numbers converting in their (late) teens and thirties. Akha were most likely to convert after they left their parents' home to start their own family or after their parents died. According to our informants, the death of parents especially impacted sons who had a duty to perform the last rites when their unbelieving parents died. To prevent potential difficulties, they waited.

Table 6. Age of conversion

Age	% of those born in Protestant families	% of converts	% All
0	40	1	7
0–9	34	3	8
10–19	11	19	18
20–29	8	36	32
30–39	8	27	24
40–49	0	11	10
50–59	0	2	2
60–69	0	1	1
70+	0	0	0
Mean	8.5	27.6	25.0
Medium	6	27	26

Table 7. What motivated you to become a Christian?*

Motivation	% of those born in Protestant families	% of converts	% All
To know the truth	83	62	65
To go to heaven	12	15	15
To get healing	2	3	3
To get God's help in my life	0	9	8
To get forgiveness of sins	0	1	1
To get freedom from fear of spirits	2	6	5
To get removal of shame	0	0	0
To be part of a loving church	0	2	1
To be accepted by a Christian person	0	0	0
Other	0	1	1
None	0	0	0

* Up to three answers were permitted per respondent.

4.3. Who had the most influence on you becoming a Christian?

Among Christians born in Protestant families, the influence of parents dwarfed that of all others. Among converts, a little over half mentioned someone in the family or another relative as the main influence. Next to relatives, friends played an important role, with about a quarter of converts mentioning a friend as most important influence. Pastors and church workers together accounted for only 6% of conversions, even fewer than missionaries at 9%. The reason for this is that churches did not have pastors when most of the respondents were converted in the 1980s and 1990s. Whatever the situation might be now, 85% of all converts mentioned a lay Christian as main influence. However, that influential person may have been a local lay leader selected by the members in the village.

4.4. What medium had influence in you becoming a Christian?

As in all surveyed groups, printed media had more impact among the Akha than other media. The historic reality is that literacy almost always followed conversion in Akha communities. For this reason, most references to Bibles, books, and tracts probably refer to what the evangelists used when they came to share the gospel.

4.5. Experience: What was the most important for you in coming to faith?

Among converts in most East Asian settings, a direct experience with God, hearing the gospel, seeing the love in Christians' lives, and attending church meetings are all important experiences in coming to faith. The situation with the Akha Christians was different: a direct experience with God was by far the most important experience that influenced them to become Christians. Two thirds of all Christians mentioned this. Most of them referred to a healing. This probably contributed to the universal thought among Akha Christians that God always heals if one has enough faith. Few converts mentioned any kind of Christian meeting as contributing to their conversion. This confirms the view that religious tension existed between Christians and non-Christians. A person or group of people who became Christians were usually persecuted and driven away from their original village. In a Christian village, all are considered to be Christian so that no non-believers would live there. Thus, for the first generations of Christians, at any rate, attendance at meetings only followed conversion.

4.6. Motivation

From a list of ten possible motivations to become Christian, respondents could choose three (see Table 7). Two thirds selected "to know the truth". This corresponds with the finding that the existence of God is recognized to be at the core of the faith (see 3.10). This is another unique feature of the Akha church. It probably shows that there was a sense that the old worldview did not explain their world anymore, and that a new paradigm to make sense of the world was needed. This is an indication that the church could potentially grow in places where social upheaval is leading to the need for a new worldview. Interestingly, while almost half of all converts reported that a healing played a role in their conversion, only 3% mentioned seeking healing as a motivation to become Christian. The healings seem to be a sign that convinced people of God's power but was not the focal point of their faith.

4.7. Group influence

The data about marriage already strongly suggested the Akha make religious decisions as a family (see 3.7). The responses to the question about group influence affirm this. Not a single respondent claimed to have become a Christian alone. Everybody said he believed along with a group.

The most common group size was seven. This supports the view that group conversions are family conversions and that the average Akha family included father, mother, and five children. Four respondents mentioned group sizes of around fifty, and four a group size of one hundred. This is more likely a village or a part of a village deciding together to become Christians. It seems that we are observing the synthesis of family decisions combining with the decision of the headman along with village leaders.

4.8. Personal evangelism

The pattern of personal evangelism found in the survey is remarkable.

Among ethnic Thai churches, three quarters of Thai Christians claimed that they actively shared their faith on a monthly basis.[24] Among the Akha,

Table 8. Evangelism

No. of people evangelised	% of Akha Christians	% of Thai Christians
0	83*	24
1–5	7	63
6–49	6	13
50+	4	0

*The 83 include those who made no response. Because non-response was very low in other questions, it was assumed that "no answer" meant "no evangelism".

it is just 17%. There were, however, a small percentage of Akha "super evangelists" who shared the gospel with over fifty people (Table 8). One man who was interviewed has done this over the past fifty years and is still alive and active, though over 85 years old. Most Akha came to the Lord through relatives and friends. Yet five in six Akha Christians presently do not share their faith at all. Some may not have relatives and friends to share their faith with. The Akha church should be trained to share the gospel with the many Akha who don't yet know the Lord Jesus and who most likely are found in other villages than their own.

5. The Akha church

Thirty Akha church leaders took part in the survey. The following data comes from their responses.

5.1. Age of churches

The age distribution of the churches in the survey is shown in Table 9.

The complete database of churches in Thailand with all fifty ACT churches has somewhat different data, with more uncertainty, as fifteen of the fifty churches do not seem to have reliable data regarding when they were founded. This data may be confusing partly due to village relocation programs that were implemented by the government to end the tradition of slash and burn agriculture on mountainsides. Even so, the picture is not dissimilar: a spike of church planting in the 1990s, and no new churches since 2010 (and actually a few years prior to that). Because of the way the sampling was done, no conclusion could be made about recent conversion growth. One explanation for this data is that after the 1990s, many new groups, organizations, and denominations arose. Each group did their own evangelism for their own group. In fact, some churches came out from the ACT to join other groups and/or form new groups. Furthermore, as there are now churches or at least groups of believers in every Akha village in Thailand, there is little need for more churches; rather the need is for more evangelism in villages where a group of believers has already been established.

Table 9. Age of churches

Decade founded	No. of churches established in that decade
1970s	6
1980s	6
1990s	14
2000s	4
2010s	0

5.2. Size of churches

The average size of the churches in the survey is 142 members. The average attendance in the surveyed churches is 57, ranging from 15 to 300. The median attendance is 50. The attendance rate—percentage of members worshiping in church on a given Sunday—was found to be independent of church size.

5.3. Church planters

According to the survey, most all churches were planted by an Akha "pastor".

Table 10. Planting churches

Church planted by:	No. of churches
Pastor	25
Missionary	1
Group of believers	1
Other	1

The researchers take issue with this finding. In their review of the survey report, they responded:

> This sentence creates a sense that missionaries were not involved in church planting programs. This contradicts the Akha church history where many missionaries labored tirelessly to proclaim the gospel and plant churches among the Akha people. Therefore, in a true sense, missionaries were the main backbone in the church planting initiative… Without them it would be hard to imagine seeing Akha churches being planted. …
>
> Akha people do not differentiate evangelists and pastors, they call them all "Sala". The evangelists, with the help and assistance of the missionaries, did the church planting. Though some pastors may have been involved in church planting, in most cases pastors were appointed after the church was planted.
>
> Thus, perhaps, the survey questions might not have been relevant and understood well by Akha people, to some extent resulting in a contradiction between the history and the survey findings.[25]

5.4 Home groups

Home groups are not a part of Akha church life. Nineteen churches said they do not have home groups. Ten churches said they have one home group, and one church said it has two home groups. The groups range in size from 15 to 80. Both the size and the fact that a church normally has no or just one home group, shows that home groups, as small gatherings of part of the church, are not an important part of the Akha churches.

The Thailand church database shows that over the last decade, the number of Akha churches has hardly grown, but the size of churches has. The need for cell groups or house church meetings to supplement the regular church activities may now be worth considering.



Rev. Asholi Akuma and Akha villagers at their house fellowship

5.5. Baptism

The amount of time between conversion and baptism is hard to explain from the data received from the church leaders. Possibly some responded with the number of months while others responded with the number of years. For this reason, the data is essentially useless. However, the fact that the range of answers can vary from a matter of months to many years is explainable from the culture and historic setting of the Akha movement to Christ. The research team explained it thus:

> The mother of an Akha girl may tell her to put off baptism by saying, "You

Table 11. Issues creating distinctives or divisions

Issue	No. of churches	
	Yes	No
Infant baptism	0	30
Speaking in tongues in church	1	29
Women in church board	27	3
Women preaching	24	6
Always sermon in the service	30	0

don't know the future. You may end up marrying a non-believer, so wait." Similarly, sons are often told to delay baptism, as it is seen as the final departure from the old religion that makes it impossible for him to perform the funeral rites for his parents. Fear of persecution, the need to have a place to move to after conversion, the shortage of ordained ministers, and the distance between villages could all be factors that increase the time between conversion and baptism. Twenty-five years ago, baptisms may have been delayed as it may have required a several-day trek for a pastor to reach an Akha village to perform the rites.[26]

5.6. Leader training

Twenty-seven of the thirty churches surveyed indicated there is no leadership training program in their local church. There are, however, training programs for church leaders at the district and association level.

5.7. Theology and traditions

In this section, the pastors were asked about issues that have been seen as creating distinctives or divisions in some church groups. However, since the survey was only carried out in one church "denomination," it is not surprising that answers were fairly uniform.

On most issues, the ACT churches are very similar (see Table 11). None of them practice infant baptism, all include a sermon in every service, and, with one exception, none practice speaking in tongues in church. Most churches accept women as members of the church board and preachers.

Differences are found in the celebration of the Lord's Supper (see Table 12). The celebration of the Lord's Supper is held weekly in one church, but is very infrequent in many churches. Almost half of all churches say they celebrate it once a year or less. Here, geographical and theological issues are involved. The churches are agreed that marriage, baptism, and communion are only to be performed by an ordained minister. The few ordained ministers perform communion when they visit various villages and some villages are rarely visited.

5.8. Organization

The question here is aimed at determining who initiated and established a church. It is open to question whether a process that generally took a period of months and years can be described by ticking a single box.

According to the data, most churches were planted because of personal initiative. This agrees with the finding stated above (Table 10) that pastors are the main church planters. However, we noted that the early churches were formed by a group of believers who left a traditional Akha village. Who sent the evangelists to those traditional villages? This question deserves further attention.[27]

The Akha Churches in Thailand came into being, in part, through missionary work by the OMF, which places a strong emphasis on plural leadership. It is not surprising to find, then, that church boards take the lead.

Table 14. Who initiated or established a church

Church plant initiated by	No. of churches out of 30
Denomination	1
Mission	4
Local church	2
Individuals	22

Table 15. Leadership structure

Leadership structure	No. of churches
Pastor submits to board	27
Board submits to pastor	3

Table 16. Full-time church staff

No. of full-time staff	No. of churches
0	7
1	15
2+	8

The survey showed that most churches have a full-time pastor. However, the researchers noted that almost all of them have fields or fish ponds that they attend to, while they are always available for weddings, funerals, house dedications, or visitation of the sick. So it is a full-time job, but not in the modern, urban sense of the term. The churches with two or more full-time staff may indicate that married couples serve together.

Table 12. Regularity of the Lord's Supper

Frequency of Lord's Supper	No. of churches
Weekly	1
Monthly	4
Every 3 months	12
Yearly or less	13

Table 13. Use of musical instruments in church services

Musical instrument	No. of churches
Organ/piano	0
Band	11
Local instruments	16
No instruments	3



5.9. Church ministry

The number of churches with separate budget available for social work, evangelism, church planting, and missions can be seen in Table 17.

Table 17. Budget for church ministries

Separate budget for:	No. of churches
Social work	19
Evangelism	18
Church planting	13
Missions	12

Most churches have a budget for social work and evangelism, and almost half have a budget for church planting and for missions. We do not know how these budgets are used, as no new churches were included in the survey but they are apparently contributing to effective evangelistic efforts. The Thai church database shows a similar phenomenon for all Akha churches. From 2009 to 2018, the number of Akha churches grew from 205 to 222 (8% growth), while the total membership grew from 16,000 to 27,000, which is 64% growth. The 64% growth over nine years translates to a yearly growth of 5.5%. Conceivably, up to half of this could be biological growth, but it is clear there is also significant conversion growth.

The explanation for the fact that the number of churches is not increasing anymore is that by now, almost all Akha villages already have a church. The 222 churches for 80,000 people reflect one church for every 360 people. Saturation church planting has been accomplished. The aim now is to enlarge the existing churches so that larger percentages in each village confess Christ as Lord. This would especially be the case in villages where the traditional religion once held sway but Christians are now permitted to live and practice their faith.

5.10. Building/Meeting place (Out of 30 churches surveyed)

The fact that twenty-one churches responded that they rent facilities indicates that they misunderstood the question. The churches all had their own meeting places. However, it is possible that the issue is one of who *legally* owns the title to the property on which the church is built. For those living in the hills of Thailand, land ownership is a complex matter. Most land is held under the Forestry Department, and though the land may be legally possessed by the villagers, it may not actually be owned by them.

Table 18. Meeting place

Where the church meets	No. of churches
Rented facility	21
Owned facility	8



Christmas feast

5.11. Ministry time in hours per week

Unpaid church leaders, part-time pastors, and full-time pastors spend, on average, ten hours a week fulfilling their core pastoral responsibilities. Terms like paid and unpaid, part-time and full-time do not mean much in places still governed by an agricultural economy. The time spent in ministry is, on average, divided as follows:

- Prayer: 2.3 hours
- Evangelism: 2.6 hours
- Pastoral care: 1.8 hours
- Preparing service: 1.7 hours
- House groups: 1.7 hours
- Training: 1.2 hours

Lessons from this study

1. Akha churches are distinctly Akha. The fact that interviews had to be carried out in the Akha language in thirty villages shows that these Akha churches are maintaining their language and culture albeit in a Christian form. Furthermore, churches surveyed have stood the test of sustainability. They all remained functional under Akha leadership for at least a decade and, in some cases, for several decades. The survey was not designed to provide information about indigeneity and sustainability, but it nevertheless does reveal these qualities.

2. According to the survey, Akha were substantially reached by Akha. The role of the missionary is not very evident. The survey format precluded the sort of interviews whereby the role of missionaries would have been revealed. Still, the survey shows that the Akha Christians perceive that their churches were established and sustained by Akha Christians.

3. Some questions that were asked in the survey provided answers that required further interpretation. Questions 3.6, on *Birth Religion*, and 5.11, on *Building/Meeting Place*, provide examples of how the wrong questions being asked will lead to wrong answers being provided. We can only learn how to ask good questions by trial and error.

Where to go from here?

As noted above, the role of the missionary appears nebulous. From a historic perspective, it seems impossible to imagine an Akha church emerging if not for the work of missionaries, but from the survey data, we might surmise that the Akha church was primarily the result of an indigenous movement. It would be well worth finding out what exactly the missionaries contributed to that movement.

Studies should also be made of the extent to which Christianity influences Akha Christians who move away from their village church to a city or large town or go to work in a factory in a foreign land. Do they take their faith with them or leave it behind? If they carry it with them, do they privatize it or share it with the non-Akha whom they meet beyond the village? Such questions were not considered in this study, but the results of the study should lead us to ask and to seek answers to the questions of where Akha churches and Akha believers will go from here. **MRT**

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[1] Marten Visser, "Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand" (PhD thesis, University of Utrecht, 2008), https://www.academia.edu/4482635/Conversion_growth_of_Protestant_churches_in_Thailand (accessed 27 April 2021).
[2] Marten Visser, "Conversion Research: The Future of Church Growth Research," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (April 2010): 200–204, https://missionexus.org/conversion-research-the-future-of-church-growth-research/ (accessed 23 April 2021).
[3] Interview with Sl. Jati Chahae, Sl. Ahchong Chermer, and Sl. Somsit Mayoe in Chiang Rai, Thailand, 9 October 2020. Sl., *Sala*, means "teacher".
[4] "Considering the closeness of the Hani and Akha

languages, it is likely that they were one language some 1,000 to 1,200 years ago. The term 'Akha' was evidently only used by those 'Zani' who moved south across the Mekong (Lancang) River." Paul W. Lewis and Bai Bibo, eds., *Hani-English/English-Hani Dictionary* (London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1996), 1.

[5] The Ethnologue states, "Total users in all countries: 616,600." Ethnologue, "Akha," https://www.ethnologue.com/language/ahk (accessed 23 April 2021). See also: David Bradley, "East and Southeast Asia," in Christopher Moseley, ed., *Encyclopedia of the World's Endangered Languages* (London: Routledge, 2007), 360, 364.

[6] The 1903 date is found on many websites, but I cannot find when or where it was first recorded. The best support for an early twentieth century arrival date of the Akha in Thailand is in Makio Katsura, "An Outline of the Structure of the Akha Language (Part 1): Introduction and Phonemics," *Tonan Ajia Kenkyu* (*The Southeast Asian Studies*) 8, no. 1 (June 1970): 18–19, http://hdl.handle.net/2433/55609 (accessed 23 April 2021).

[7] A former OMF missionary to the Akha wrote: "The name of God is 'A poe Mi yeh.' They already have this idea in their stories, they knew that He is the Creator God." Private correspondence from Lathanzauva, 28 October 2005.

[8] This is a truism which may no longer be quite so true. Those who are now learning Thai, English, and Chinese in schools and universities may not have much time for memorizing genealogies.

[9] U Zan and Erville Sowards, "Baptist Work Among Karens," in Genevieve Sowards and Erville Sowards, eds., *Burma Baptist Chronicle, Book II* (Rangoon: Board of Publications, Burma Baptist Convention, 1963), 318, https://archive.org/details/BurmaBaptistChronicle (accessed 27 April 2021). For further details about the work of the Baptists among the Akha in Burma, see Saw Aung Din and Erville Sowards, "Work Among Lahus, Was, Akhas," in *Burma Baptist Chronicle, Book II*, 411, 415, 419; Erville Sowards, "The Unfinished Task," in *Burma Baptist Chronicle, Book II*, 426.

[10] For some thought-provoking observations on the different methods of Catholics and Baptists, see Hugo Adolf Bernatzik, *Akha and Miao: Problems of Applied Ethnography in Farther India*, trans. Alois Nagler (New Haven: Human Relations Area Files, 1970), 680–89.

[11] Interview with Chahae, Chermer, and Mayoe. This belief is also mentioned in Jean Nightingale, *Without a Gate* (Singapore: OMF, 1990), 153.

[12] "North Thailand Roundup," March 1955, OMF Thailand Archives at Payap University Library, Chiang Mai.

[13] Isobel Kuhn, *Ascent to the Tribes: Pioneering in North Thailand* (London: OMF, 1956, reprinted with revisions 1968), 263.

[14] Kuhn, *Ascent to the Tribes*, 264.

[15] This story is described briefly by Peter Nightingale in the appendix of the 1968 revision of *Ascent to the Tribes* and in much greater detail in Nightingale, *Without a Gate*.

[16] Interview with Chahae, Chermer, and Mayoe.

[17] Cornelia Ann Kammerer, "Discarding the Basket: Reinterpretation of Tradition by Akha Christians of Northern Thailand," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 27, no. 2 (September 1996): 320–33. Dr. Kammerer was the right person at the right place at the right time to record and analyze the great changes that occurred among the Akha of North Thailand in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

[18] Once again, it appears that we are looking at an extrapolation from Bradley, "East and Southeast Asia," 360, 364.

[19] In 2021, the number of churches that identify themselves as worshiping primarily in the Akha language is 221. Tuthai, "Churches in Akha," https://thaichurches.org/directory/language/Akha (accessed 23 April 2021).

[20] The Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT) was established primarily by Presbyterians in Siam in the 1930s. District 2 represents their churches in Chiang Rai Province. To understand the nature and background of the CCT, see the upcoming article by Karl Dahlfred, "A Bumpy Road to Indigenization: The American Presbyterian Mission and the Church of Christ in Thailand," *Journal of Presbyterian History* (Spring/Summer 2021).

[21] The CCT 12th District Maitrichit Baptist Churches were originally Chinese but now have many congregations of various ethnicities. For more background information, see Dick Worley, "History of Baptist Ministries in Thailand," 2017, unpublished paper, https://ia801800.us.archive.org/35/items/bwa-2017-worley-thailand/bwa-2017-worley-thailand.pdf (accessed 27 April 2021). The latter portions may be somewhat controversial.

[22] A truly random sample would not have been humanly possible. An argument might be made that while the sample was not truly representative of Akha Christians, the methodology was representative of a method of gathering information that Akha leaders would approve of.

[23] The survey question was not wholly fair for respondents who overwhelmingly had no more than a primary school education. James 5:15 states: "the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up." As none of the respondents had studied Aristotelian logic, they were probably unaware that even a single case of a person who had faith but was not healed would make the whole statement false.

[24] Dwight Martin and Marten Visser, "Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand," October 2018, unpublished paper, 16.

[25] Email correspondence with Akamu and Chahae, 2 May 2021.

[26] Only an ordained minister or a licensed person can baptize among the ACT Churches. Even so, it is the unordained village pastor who prepares believers for baptism and decides who is ready to receive it. From the interview with Chahae, Chermer, and Mayoe.

[27] In 2004, I, Neel, was personally involved with the phasing out of an OMF policy of providing funds to the Akha Churches of Thailand which had been going on for many years in order to assist the denomination financially support the evangelists who were working in villages far from their own homes and fields. This fact may well have been unknown or forgotten by those who filled out the survey. Furthermore, the format of the questionnaire precluded the possibility of providing complex responses.

Interview with Akha Leaders

The following interview was conducted on 9 October 2020 in Chiang Rai, Thailand. Neel Roberts asked questions in Thai and, in some cases, used English to express some questions more clearly. Asholi Akamu and Kitsada Chahae translated into Akha. The three senior evangelists, men who have shared the gospel with their fellow Akha for decades—Sl. Jati Chahae, Sl. Ahchong Chermer, and Sl. Somsit Mayoe—answered sometimes in Thai and sometimes in Akha.



From left: Sl. Jati Chahae, Sl. Ahchong Chermer, and Sl. Somsit Mayoe

When the Akha first heard about the Good News, what was the first thought for the villagers and village leaders?

When the first missionaries came, they came as individuals and that is why they had trouble.

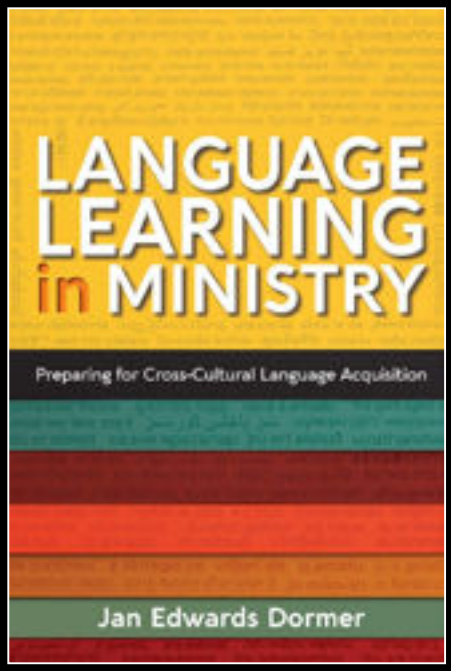
In Burma, when missionaries first came to the villages, the villagers thought the missionaries were giants (ยักษ์) and parents were afraid. They did not want their children to go to hostels [for education] and get fed [fattened]. At that time, priests and headmen opposed believing in Christ out of fear of losing the old ways. They did not want to venture into a new religion. Village headmen and priests thought that people would stop making sacrifices and stop honoring their parents and ancestors. Priests would no longer have an income.

How did village leaders influence the spread of the gospel?

Village headmen and spirit priests had a role in hindering the gospel. They feared the spirits would hurt them if they changed religion. The spirits would not just hurt the convert, but the village; not just an individual or family, but the whole village.

The *dzoema* has more power than the spirit priest. He gives laws. The spirit priest simply performs rituals and serves as a medium. You cannot have a village without a *dzoema*. You must have a *dzoema* to have a village, so he oversees not just religious activities but also holds political power. You cannot chase bad people away from the village without

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Language Learning in Ministry: Preparing for Cross-Cultural Language Acquisition

By Jan Edwards Dormer. Littleton, CO: William Carey, 2021.
ISBN 978-1-64508-323-8. 149pp.

Reviewed by Nathan Keller

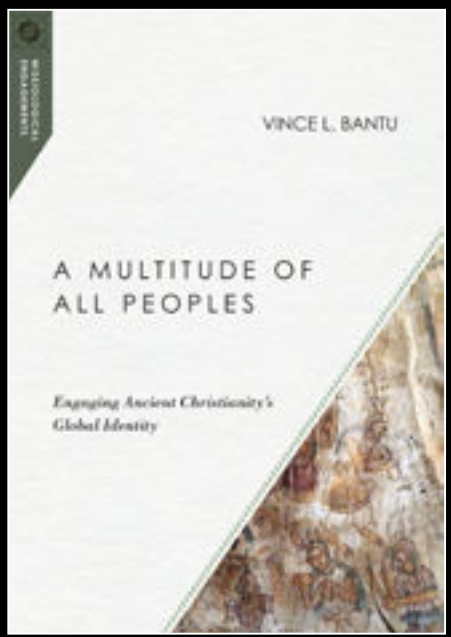
The International Daniel Training vision of OMF states, "In order to fulfil our overall vision, we see our members at home in their host culture, effectively relating to and serving alongside their focus people, performing with competence in culture and language." Learning the language of the people we minister to in cross-cultural ministry is both a vital and important undertaking that our organization is highly committed to.

Jan Dormer has been involved in many aspects of language learning: learning a new language as a missionary kid, learning another language as an adult missionary, studying and teaching TESOL, and completing an EdD in Language Education, just to name a few. Dormer's vast experience and thorough research inform the insight that she brings in this book.

In personal email correspondence, the author wrote, "A goal I had in writing this book was to look at acquiring a new language in ministry both positively and holistically, but also realistically. Rather than thinking of learning the language as a year or two before ministry, think of it as a life-long privilege within ministry. Rather than thinking of it as something the adults do, think of how it can positively impact the whole family. Challenge will definitely be a part of the journey. But this book can provide practical steps and resources for facing the challenges and experiencing success."

The first two chapters of the book deal with misconceptions and principles of language acquisition. Chapters three and four explain the differences and key elements of formal and informal language learning. Chapter five gives helpful insight into language acquisition for missionary kids. Chapter six demonstrates how ministry can co-exist with language learning. The final chapter is a useful summary of the whole book. The book concludes with six helpful and practical appendices related to language acquisition.

I would highly recommend this book for those who are committed to the task of learning a language for the purpose of ministry and for those who coach them along the way. It can be read before language learning begins and referred to time and time again along the process.



A Multitude of All Peoples: Engaging Ancient Christianity's Global Identity

By Vince L. Bantu. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2021.
ISBN 978-0830851072

Christianity Today's 2021 Award of Merit for Mission/Global Church

While Christianity is commonly understood to be a Western religion that has only recently become global, Vince Bantu, professor of church history and Black church studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, argues that since its beginnings the faith has always had multiple cultural expressions. The book begins with a broad overview of church history that demonstrates the early spread of the church. It then promotes a missional vision centered on appropriate contextualization that includes local leadership.