

The Watchword in World Missions

Celebrating the 20th Anniversary of the Watchword “A Church for Every People by the Year 2000”

by Jay Gary and Todd Johnson

The book of Joshua recounts how a new generation, after reaching the west bank of the Jordan, set up twelve stones at Gilgal (Joshua 4:20-21) to provoke future generations to ask, “What do these stones mean?” The Watchword in World Missions consultation, likewise, was an act of stone-piling for future generations.

Under the auspices of the Christian Futures Network, some 16 leaders gathered in Colorado Springs on March 15-16, 1999 to mark the 20th anniversary of “A Church for Every People by the Year 2000.” Our consultation theme was taken from the call of Jeremiah as a prophet to the nations, where the Lord said, “I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled” (Jeremiah 1:12). We looked at seven topics during our time together.

REFLECTING ON THE WATCHWORD

During the consultation, we reflected on the past 20 years and what the Watchword had brought forth. We affirmed that “A Church for Every People by the Year 2000” was a call to a new generation. In 1979 it focused the call to “frontier missions,” which Dr. Ralph Winter had seen and began to promote in the 1974 Lausanne Congress. During the consultation, Winter observed that the watchword brought a paradigm shift, toward reaching peoples, rather than just countries; toward forming churches, rather than just winning souls. We rejoiced in the fact that the

Watchword gave birth to the *Perspectives Study Program* and the Caleb Project which exposed thousands of people to the power of unreached peoples thinking and shaped the life calling of hundreds of missionaries. In the late ‘80s, the second half of the watchword, “by the year 2000” gave birth to an AD2000 vision. As we entered the ‘90s, national evangelism strategies, confessional decades of evangelism, and mission and intercession strategies were all empowered toward the 10/40 window by the millennial milestone.

THE CRISIS OF 1900 AND TODAY

We looked back at previous calls and watchwords to world mission related to the previous century’s ends. We reflected on how the 1886 watchword, “The Evangelization of the World in this Generation,” was first seen as a century-end call to finish world evangelization by the year 1900. When that campaign lost steam, YMCA leader, John Mott, kept the sense of urgency alive after 1900 and convened the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference in 1910.

After World War I, the Student Volunteer Movement’s watchword was recast into an open-ended call for each generation to be responsible to evangelize its own generation. In 1939 Mott lamented that the priority list of fields drafted at Edinburgh 29 years earlier were still unoccupied, only their populations had

increased. We were informed that the 1900s started with 15 percent of the missionary force working among the least evangelized. This number peaked shortly after 1910, then began to decline. By the mid-’70s, less than one percent labored among the truly unreached. By the ‘90s, that had climbed to 2.5% of the total missionary force.

There have been more than enough missionaries to establish “A Church for Every People” at any point during the 20th century, yet equitable field selection strategies had not been put into practice by mission agencies even though the total number of missionaries worldwide had increased seven fold since 1900. On this basis, we affirmed that the “crisis of missions” is still with us in the year 2000. We conclude the 20th century with some 4,000 ethno-linguistic peoples (about 10,000 people groups called unimax peoples) still unreached. These peoples comprise some 1.6 billion unevangelized individuals.

FORECASTING THE FUTURE

As a consultation, we then turned our attention to possible scenarios of world evangelization in the 21st century. A model of futures forecasting was presented, in which one first looked at the probable future, then contrasted this with a preferred future in order to ask what change could be introduced now to arrive at an alternative future, more in line with the ideal.

I (Todd Johnson) presented one possible scenario of change where missionary deployment toward the unreached would triple over the next twenty-five years, largely through third world missions. Factoring these variables in, this scenario for the year 2025 would still leave 2,500 ethno-linguistic groups, or a population of 1.6 billion individuals without the gospel.

In response to this scenario, some felt it was axiomatic that the church was at the end of the age, with world evangelization and the return of Christ imminent. Others questioned this assumption, and felt that on the eve of the year 2000, we ought to strive for a new accountability and authenticity, both before God and the church, as to the role of human responsibility in world mission. Rather than fall back on apocalyptic assumptions, we were encouraged to press forward into "future fluency."

THE CHURCH FOR THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

Seeking to give context to the millennial ferment of 2000, I (Jay Gary) challenged the members at the consultation to think biblically about the church of the third millennium. I asked, "What does it mean to be a Christian at the outset of the 21st Century? How can we think wholistically, contextually and globally in our engagement with the world, rather than embrace reductionistic and managerial missiology?" We acknowledged that the church is approaching the end of the modern age, and not necessarily of the end of the world. What epoch will follow, is still uncertain, whether a global age, an information age or a space age. Whatever world history brings, we affirmed it will not replace, nor transcend the eternal aeon which Christ brought forth through the New Covenant. A missiology of the future needs to acknowledge our post-modern situation, and continually call humanity to enter that New Order in space and time.

On this basis, we can be open to future horizons, whether the near-term or long-term future. We can believe God for the emergence of a worldwide church, not just a European church. We can have faith for a Pacific century, and an Indic millennium. We embrace the transforming call of Leslie Newbigin: "For the church to

WHATEVER WORLD HISTORY BRINGS, IT WELL NOT TRANSCEND THE ETERNAL AEON WHICH CHRIST BROUGHT FORTH.

call for a new kind of society, she must herself be a new kind of society." We considered how frontier missions could be seen as a call to world civilization (see Ephesians 2:21), rather than just a stage toward world evangelization.

PRAYERS FOR A NEW DAY

Dick Eastman, of Every Home for Christ, brought the morning message, challenging us to weave the "cords of closure" through prayer. He noted that leaders from the last century felt their effort suffered from two neglects, lack of cooperation and lack of prayer.

Eastman pointed us to "God's epilogue on the history of humanity," found in Revelation 11:15, where loud voices in heaven proclaimed, "The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever." What caused this? Eastman found the answer in Revelation 8:1. "When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour." In quoting Walter Wink, he read, "Heaven itself falls silent, the heavenly hosts and celestial spheres suspend their singing, so that the prayers of the saints on earth can be heard. The seven

angels of destiny cannot blow the signal of the next times to be, until an eighth angel gathers these prayers and mingles them with incense upon the altar. Silently they rise to the nostrils of God.

"Human beings have intervened in the heavenly liturgy. The uninterrupted flow of consequences is damned for a moment. New alternatives become feasible. The unexpected becomes suddenly possible because God's people on earth have invoked heaven, the home of the possibles and have become heard. What happens next happens because people prayed."

Eastman claimed the message is clear: history belongs to the intercessor! We affirmed together that prayer is the key to removing every obstacle that stands in the way of world evangelization.

GATHERING IN THE HARVEST BEYOND 2000

We inquired how a new agenda in world missions for the new century might be built. We felt that this agenda should affirm the whole of Christian mission to the whole world. We affirm both the mission of forming new communities of faith, and calling them to use the sciences and humanities to restrain natural and human evil. The gospel, therefore, is that call into the community of New Creation which makes all things new in Christ. It brings healing to persons and whole peoples and redeems all cultures, all sciences and all ways of life.

As we enter the third millennium, we asked how world Christian leaders could engage in an international conversation to create a "Global Action Plan" for mission which might embrace this wholistic mission, help mission agencies focus on global priorities, increase cooperation, refine tactics, decrease duplication, and monitor agreed upon standards.

THE WATCHWORD FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Finally we looked at whether the watchword of "A Church for Every Peo-

ple” ought to be reframed for a new generation. Beyond sloganeering, we considered how a future “governing metaphor” in world mission might reflect a cluster of values most needed for a global age. We felt that if a watchword was to emerge, it should be a transformative call to the whole church. Brad Sargent of Golden Gate Baptist Seminary helped us consider how both narrative theology and systematic theology could contribute to a new call in the new century. He also suggested that a new watchword, if it was to emerge, could suggest both qualitative and quantitative growth.

On the question of whether any future watchword in world missions should establish a time target, a range of opinions prevailed. Some mentioned the value that a time horizon provides. Others preferred a more open-ended generational sense of mission.

We concluded by giving thanks, for having been able to gather on the 20th anniversary of the Watchword. We look to continue this conversation with the church from now through 2001. Already a Watchword Consultation on the East Coast of the U.S. is being planned for July 28th. We welcome other invitations from other countries to continue this global conversation.

To email us, write: <christianfutures@wnrf.org>. To read articles and forthcoming developments coming out of The Watchword in World Mission Consultation, please check the Christian Future Network’s site at: <<http://www.wnrf.org/networkswatchword.htm>>.

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

We want to share 23 consultation questions we considered, which we encourage others to address also.

1. Since 1975, what contribution has the unreached peoples concept made to world missions? What other concepts focused our understanding of the Unfinished Task?

2. How did the watchword, “A Church for Every People by the Year 2000” improvise and improve the call to mission in comparison to previous evangelical watchwords?

3. How did the AD 2000 vision in the ‘90s seek to reshape the missions paradigm in light of cultural changes?

4. In what spheres of influence did the watchword “A Church for Every People by the Year 2000” have the greatest impact?

A FUTURE GOVERNING METAPHOR IN WORLD MISSION... SHOULD BE A TRANSFORMATIVE CALL TO THE WHOLE CHURCH.

5. Is the missionary deployment “crisis of 1900” the same for us today? Have we arrived at 2000 only now to face “a scandal of broken promises”?

6. What criteria should the 21st century church use to gauge the impact of the AD 2000 movement?

7. In what ways have we failed as world mission leaders in giving leadership to this century-end campaign? What decisions that limited the institutional impact were made along the way and allowed missions to continue as usual?

8. Before rushing out to set up a new fulfillment horizon for world missions, how should we be accountable to each other?

9. To what degree in the 1990s was world missions enhanced or hindered by popular fixations on endism, zionism, conspiracism? What is the proper relationship between evangelization and eschatology?

10. What truth, if any, do you find in this statement: “While the evangelical church has experienced significant growth

in this century, its mission strategies have been influenced by too much reductionist thinking and a managerial approach to ministry”?

11. In what way does the Watchword speak to evangelization? How does it speak to civilization building? Starting from “A Church for Every People,” how can we sharpen our biblical call to personal, social, national or global transformation?

12. Can one generation’s call to mission serve a successor generation? Or must that call be reframed in fresh new ways, to call a new generation forth, while being faithful to priority work in frontier missions?

13. How can we create a transforming Watchword for a new century, beyond the confines of sectarian church growth, culture wars or colonial ideology? Do we need a different Watchword to effectively do this?

14. How does “future fluency” help us as Great Commission Christians to forecast and plan for world mission in contextual ways?

15. Measured from the perspective of decades, what probable future is frontier missions facing in 2025, 2050, 2100, or beyond?

16. What factors, if introduced as planned change within churches and missions over the next 10 years, would bring closure of the missionary task at least within generational range?

17. As a governing metaphor in missions, what constellation of ideas or innovations should a new Watchword carry in a new century?

18. Is there a need for a new agenda for world missions in the 21st century? How does this relate to WEF’s desire to look “biblically, wholistically, contextually and globally into the next century and next millennium”?

19. What role might a Global Action Plan have, if any, in the creation of a new agenda for world missions?

20. Should the Watchword of the early 21st century have a time-target? If

so, what time horizon should a new Watchword look toward? A twenty year horizon? a bi-millennial year horizon, such as 2033? or beyond?

21. How should a new Watchword for the year 2020 or 2033 be introduced? What institutional stakeholders should be involved in its development to insure that it becomes an authentic call to a global church?

22. If another generation established a time horizon in world missions, and they, like us, found it became a stepping stone rather than a milestone for closure, at what point should they allow the "beyond" horizon to come into view?

23. How will you remember the 20th anniversary consultation of the Watchword? What insights have you gained from this consultation and its report which you would like to put into practice?

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(Continuation from Editorial page 109)

require substantial progress in opening up international executive roles to non-Westerners, welcoming more variety in leadership styles; becoming less task-oriented and more people-focused, etc. All of this will require a new way of seeing and then a new way of doing missions as we enter the third millennium.

Eric Watt's "The Straight Line" reflects the need of a new paradigm shift in world missions consisting of a direct-open straight line between the local church(es) and the missionary(ies) on the field. The results will be shocking. When this happens, and it is already launched, missionaries no longer need a corporate headquarters to direct their mission efforts. Rather they have "the straight line" direct to their church(es). With this paradigm missionaries need facilitators to help maintain the vital connections as well as draw up new ones. If this is of the Lord, and becomes widely operative in the 21st century, missions will never be the same again.

This Special Edition ends with an article co-authored by Jay Gary and

Todd Johnson. It evaluates the watchword of frontier missions that over the last 20 years sounded a clear trumpet call with its purpose and goal: "a Church for Every People by the Year 2000." With the new millennium upon us, what should our watchword be now? The authors' desire is that whatever it turns out to be, it would consist of a transformative call to the whole Church.

In closing, I would like to state that it is not likely that we can, nor very soon will, finish global evangelization, unless new and better paradigms, including a more biblical oriented worldview are deeply embedded in our hearts and minds. This as the apostle said will make us complete and thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16, 17). So may it be!

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