

Reaching Unreached People Groups:
Looking Back to Find the Future

“The prospects are as bright as are the promises of God”
Adoniram Judson (1788 – 1850)

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The first American effort to evangelize unreached people groups came 200 years ago in February 1812. The commemoration of the North American (U.S.A. and Canada) missions bicentennial is being celebrated in Salem and Boston, Massachusetts in February 2012. The bicentennial theme, “Commemorating the Past – Envisioning the Future,” will provide missions leaders with an opportunity for an introspective reflection upon U.S. and Canadian missions history and a visionary projection into our missions future with the launching of a new North American missions network.

The first missionaries sent from the United States were commissioned from Tabernacle Church in Salem, Massachusetts (near Boston) on February 6, 1812. The team members were Adoniram and Ann “Nancy” Judson, Samuel and Harriet Newell, Samuel and Rosanna Nott, Gordon Hall, and Luther Rice. Within days, the missionaries set sail for India, where they were to join the legendary British missionary pioneer William Carey. The Judsons would eventually move to Burma (now known as “Myanmar”) where they introduced the good news of the gospel to unreached tribal groups.

Prayer and the Pursuit of God’s Word

Judson had recently graduated from Andover Theological Seminary where he distinguished himself as a bright, globally aware, and disciplined student. One of his seminary friends, Samuel Mills, is remembered for his own college days at Williams College in Massachusetts where he and other students regularly gathered on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons for Bible study and prayer along the banks of the Hoosac River. On one of those afternoons in August 1806, Mills and his friends were caught in a thunderstorm and took refuge under the eaves of a haystack. Their prayer focus for that day was for the awakening of foreign missionary interest among students.

While waiting out the storm under the haystack, they prayed and considered their own missions obligation. What became known as the “Haystack Prayer Meeting” was one of the notable beginning points in American student activism in world missions. With the determined resolution, “We can do this if we will,” the young visionaries turned their prayer meeting that afternoon toward a vision for the creation of a missions sending structure. The North American missions movement had begun with students committed to Bible study and prayer.

Public Discourse on Missions

At seminary, Judson and Mills were active in organizing a “Society of Inquiry,” a student prayer-study group on world missions. In June 1810 the group presented a petition to the annual meeting of the General Association of Congregational Churches, requesting the formation of a foreign mission society. Within two years, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) was organized as the first interdenominational missions agency in the United States.

In recalling the amazing work of the Holy Spirit in recruiting university and seminary students, David M. Howard states that, “. . . within four years of the Haystack Prayer Meeting, these students had been influential in the formation of the first North American missionary society, and a year and a half later, the first volunteers were on their way to Asia” (“Student Power in World Missions,” in Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, Editors. Perspectives on The World Christian Movement, Fourth Edition. Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2009, p.307).

Perseverance for Life

The missionary service of the Judson team and their young colleagues could be characterized with the title of Eugene Peterson’s book on life-long discipleship: Perseverance: A Long Obedience in the Same Direction (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996). Judson had that perseverance, and was remembered for stating that, “The motto of every missionary, whether preacher, printer, or schoolmaster, ought to be ‘Devoted for life’” (Vinita Hampton and Carol Plueddemann, Compilers. World Shapers: A Treasury of Quotes From Great Missionaries. Wheaton, Illinois: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1991, p. 17).

This devotion to Christ kept Judson through false accusation, persecution, and imprisonment. He was charged with being an English spy and was imprisoned in June 1824. For almost two years of incarceration during the Anglo-Burmese war, “. . . he suffered from fever and malnutrition and underwent a forced march” (William H. Brackney in Gerald H. Anderson, Editor. Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions. New York: Simon & Schuster International, 1998, p. 345). Judson’s steadfast obedience, and sufferings, were remembered by Samuel Zwemer, renowned missionary to the Muslim world (italics mine):

When Judson was lying loaded with chains in a Burmese dungeon, a fellow prisoner asked with a sneer about the prospect for the conversion of the heathen. Judson calmly answered, ‘*The prospects are as bright as are the promises of God.*’ There is scarcely a country today which is not as accessible, or where the difficulties are greater, than was the case in Burma when Judson faced them and overcame (“The Glory of the Impossible,” in Winter and Hawthorne, Perspectives on the World Christian Movement, p. 332).

Ann Judson's missionary service alongside her husband was also marked with fruitfulness, sacrifice, and remarkable faith in the face of obstacles and tribulations. She evangelized, adopted orphans, educated children, and was instrumental in making a plea to government authorities that brought her husband's release in 1826, saving his life. Sadly, she lost her own. Ann Judson died of complications of smallpox later that same year (Brackney in Anderson, Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions, p. 345).

Missionary statesman Donald A. McGavran, whose writings and teaching (along with Ralph D. Winter) gave rise to much of the current focus on unreached people groups, paid tribute to the sacrifice and fruitful labor of the Judsons. In 1955 he recalled how they had won converts from among the "Karen" tribe, one of the most backward and animistic unreached people groups of Burma. "Today," McGavran stated, "there is a mighty Christian Movement among the Karens and their related tribes in Burma, numbering hundreds and thousands of souls" ("The Bridges of God," in Winter and Hawthorne, Perspectives on the World Christian Movement, p. 342).

Now, the Operation World information and global prayer manual indicates a deeply rooted Christian movement in Myanmar (formerly Burma). Amid the great suffering and repression of the last decade, the church of Jesus Christ is estimated to have more than seven million believers! In addition, the interdenominational missionary vision among the Karen and other national churches has resulted in more than 1,000 intercultural missionaries to additional unreached and tribal groups within the country (Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, Editors. Operation World: The Definitive Prayer Guide To Every Nation. Colorado Springs, Colorado: Biblica Publishing, 2010, pp. 609-614; see also www.operationworld.org for unreached people group data and prayer resources).

Prospects for the Future

Until recently, two associations of missions agencies and denominations have operated in the United States and Canada: CrossGlobal Link (formerly IFMA) and The Mission Exchange (formerly EFMA). Church of God World Missions is a founding member of the former EFMA. In October 2010, the executive leadership and member agencies of both associations voted to merge, thus uniting into one association that will represent 35,000 North American missionaries globally.

The official launch of the new association and the announcement of the newly-branded network name comes in February 2012 during the North American missions bicentennial celebration. Membership and services will now be offered to individual members, missions training programs, and local churches, including participation in the next meeting of the North American Missions Leaders Conference, scheduled for September 20-21, 2012 in Chicago (see www.themissionexchange.org for news, information, and member services).

As we move forward in our own twenty-first century efforts toward reaching unreached *and unengaged* people groups, may our missionaries and our missionary recruiting be characterized with the same elements that marked the Judsons and their colleagues – *prayer* for the nations, *pursuit* of God’s Word, *public* discourse (among the churches, the agencies/denominational missions departments, laity in the marketplace, and the emerging generation in our training systems), and a “devoted for life” *perseverance* in reaching the lost. Our *prospects* in reaching unreached *and unengaged* people groups with the gospel are “as bright as are the promises of God!”

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