The Legacy of Frank Charles Laubach

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The Legacy

Frank Laubach’s bequest to the worldwide mission of the church was a zeal, motivated by the love of Christ, to bring the illiterate millions of the world’s people to a richer experience of God through literacy education. His “Key Word” and “Each One Teach One” methods of literacy teaching have been credited with enabling over 100 million people to read.

After fourteen years of a more or less conventional missionary career of church planting and theological education in the Christian regions of the Philippines, Laubach arrived in 1929 to work among the Muslim Filipino (Moro) population of the Lake Lanao area of Mindanao. Convinced that the usual evangelistic and educational programs would be counterproductive as a means of touching Moro lives with the light and love of Christ, Laubach almost immediately determined that literacy teaching was potentially the more fruitful approach.

In the course of a dozen years of literacy work among the Moros—those of the Lanao area were called Maranao (“People of the Lake”)—Laubach and his associates developed exciting new principles and techniques that caught the attention of government, missionary, and private organizations around the world concerned with literacy. Early in 1935, on his way back to the United States for furlough, Laubach visited several countries in southern Asia, the Middle East, and Europe to explain his literacy methods. While still on furlough in the fall of 1935, he and interested friends formed the World Literacy Committee in Upper Montclair, New Jersey, which in 1941 merged with the Committee for Christian Literature of the Foreign Missions Conference of North America to form the Committee on World Literacy and Christian Literature.

From 1942 until his retirement at the age of seventy in 1954, Frank Laubach was on the staff of that committee—informally known as “Lit-Lit”—which in 1950 became a unit of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. In that capacity, Laubach gave himself tirelessly to technical assistance and the promotion of literacy campaigns in many lands. After his retirement from Lit-Lit, he founded in 1955 a private, nonsectarian, nonprofit educational organization called Laubach Literacy, Inc. Now headquartered in Syracuse, New York, and headed by Frank’s son, Robert, Laubach Literacy continues to challenge and assist individual volunteers and public and private agencies around the globe to undertake literacy education in a spirit of compassion for, and a deep sense of the worth and dignity of, the illiterate half of the world’s population.

By the time Frank Laubach died on June 11, 1970, at the age of eighty-five, he had carried his literacy ministry to 103 countries and had been involved in developing literacy primers embodying his principles and methods in 313 languages. He had promoted both his spiritual and literacy causes in forty-three books, including Toward a Literate World (1938); How to Teach One and Win One for Christ (1964); and Forty Years with the Silent Billion (1970). He had given impetus to the opening of literacy and journalism courses at the Kennedy School of Missions at Hartford Seminary, Syracuse University, Asbury College, Baylor University, the University of California, and in more than twenty other centers in the United States. Popularly hailed as “Mr. Literacy,” Laubach was featured in many religious and secular magazines. Time referred to him as “Founder of a world literacy drive.” Newscaster Lowell Thomas called him “the foremost teacher of our times.” Newsweek featured him as “one of the grand men of the missionary world.” And Norman Vincent Peale in Look declared Laubach to be “one of the five greatest men in the world.” Ten universities and colleges—among them Princeton and Columbia, Wooster, and Baldwin-Wallace—conferred honorary degrees on Frank Laubach in recognition of his enormous contribution to world literacy. A deeply spiritual Christian, Frank Laubach’s religious faith was the inspiration of his great vision for the literacy of “the Silent Billion”; it was the wellspring of his eloquent preaching and teaching in that field; and it was the source of his boundless energy in that ministry until the day he died. He will be long remembered by a designation bestowed on him years ago and richly deserved: “Apostle to the Illiterates.”

The Making of a Literacy Evangelist

For Frank Charles Laubach the journey toward his calling as an Apostle to the Illiterates began at Benton in rural Pennsylvania on
September 2, 1884, where he was born into a devout Methodist family. His father, John Brittain Laubach, was the town dentist. Young Frank attended the local public schools, after which, at age eighteen, he taught in one of the grade schools for a year. He then attended a nearby normal school but soon decided to continue his further college preparation at the Perkiomen Preparatory School near Philadelphia. He graduated from Princeton University in 1909, majoring in sociology. In these years he was thrilled by the vivid accounts that two of his townmates, Harry Edwards and Joe Alberson, wrote of their experiences as young school teachers in the Philippines and particularly of the Moros of Mindanao and Sulu, “the worst troublemakers American soldiers had ever faced.” Feeling called to missionary service, Laubach attended Union Theological Seminary in New York City, from which he graduated in 1913. The year before, he had married a Benton girl, Effa Seely, who was a cousin of Harry Edwards. As further preparation for missionary service, Laubach continued his studies at Columbia University, earning the Ph.D. degree in 1915 with a dissertation on vagrants in New York City. In their New York years, the Laubachs did settlement work and for a time held a student pastorate. He was ordained to the Congregational ministry in 1915 and that same year he and his wife left for the Philippines as missionaries of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (now the United Church Board for World Ministries) to which the Evangelical Union in 1902 had committed northern and eastern Mindanao for mission work.

The Laubachs proceeded at once to Dansalan (now Marawi City) to begin evangelistic work among the Moros, believing that in the battle for Jesus Christ to conquer the world, that was one place in the Orient where “the ranks are thinnest and the battle hottest.” At Dansalan, however, American officials told them in no uncertain terms that inexperienced missionaries talking religion to the Moros would only make matters worse in that troubled area. For three and a third centuries the Muslim Filipinos had fought ferociously against Spanish efforts to subjugate them and convert them from their Islamic religion and life-ways. When in 1898 the Americans succeeded the Spaniards as colonial rulers and sought to integrate the Moros into the political system they were shaping for the rest of the Philippines, the Moros likewise took up arms against the new invaders. The Maranao Muslims of the Lake Lanao area were among the most stubborn in their resistance to American rule even after they learned the futility of a military struggle against a disciplined, well-armed modern U.S. army. Officers of that army tactfully but firmly stressed to the Laubachs that the Moros would not be ready to listen to missionaries for some time to come.

Thus barred from working at Dansalan, Frank and Effa Laubach then proceeded to Cagayan de Oro on the north-central coast of Mindanao and engaged in evangelistic work among the Christian population, which then numbered very few Protestants. Later in life, the Laubachs were to become ecumenical Christians par excellence, working closely with Christians of all denominations and people of many different faiths. But as new Congregational missionaries in Mindanao in 1915 they had strong anti-Roman Catholic prejudices common to Protestants of that time, which were, of course, reciprocated by Catholics. For several years the Laubachs established and nurtured Protestant (Evangelical) congregations in Cagayan and several other towns in northern Mindanao. For a month each year, however, they would take their vacation in the cool climes of Dansalan (2,300 feet above sea level, on the shores of Lake Lanao) where they would monitor the prospects for eventual work among the Moros.

In 1921 the Laubachs moved to Manila where Frank was invited to teach at Union Theological Seminary. There he not only taught, but shared administrative and fund-raising responsibilities in the seminary and gave strong spiritual leadership in the city as well. He also found time to plunge into serious, scholarly research on the history, culture, and religion of the Philippines, which resulted in two popular books: The People of the Philippines (1925) and Seven Thousand Emeralds (1929). In these years he also revealed a strong social conscience and exhibited a sensitivity for crucial social issues that was way ahead of his time. In 1926, for example, he asked in The Missionary Herald (vol. 132, p. 309):

Shall the public domain be homesteaded out to small Filipino landholders or shall it be given over to great American corporations? . . . The question in this country for missionaries is whether Christianity is chloroform poured on a feather, with which missionaries tickle the chins of the Filipinos, while America, big business, persuades Congress to pronounce upon the Philippines the same curse of landlordism that has paralyzed Ireland for a thousand years.

All the while the Laubachs were in Manila they did not abandon their dream of some day returning to take up a mission to the Lanao Moros. That Dr. Laubach maintained his interest in the Moros is demonstrated in his many articles about them (some published in the Moslem World) and references to them in his books during these years. Indeed, he had a grand, if rather naive, vision of the Moros being ripe for a Christian missionary campaign of such a success and magnitude that it would swoop down from Mindanao to engulf as well the Muslim peoples of Malaya, the East Indies, and even the subcontinent itself. In this vein (and in vain), he tried to recruit Frank Carpenter, newly retired governor of the Department of Mindanao and Sulu, to head a proposed nondenominational Christian mission to the Muslims of southern Asia, which would make use of Moro converts and would be financed in part by John D. Rockefeller. Carpenter replied, tactfully, that ill health prevented his considering such a proposition. Finally, Frank Laubach’s chance to try his hand at mission work among the Moros came. Resigning his post at Union Theological Seminary, and leaving his wife Effa and son Robert briefly in the north, he arrived in Dansalan in December 1929 to open the Lanao Station of the American Board’s mission in Mindanao. He was forty-five years old and he had been in the Philippines fourteen years.

Occupying a small cottage near the American military camp at Dansalan, Laubach soon concluded that any ideas he had about carrying out his mission to the Moros through the usual methods of preaching and teaching—he had a notion to found a normal school at Dansalan—simply would not work. He found the Moros unapproachable and resistant to all his overtures. Indeed, he confessed that his first month in Lanao was the hardest month of his life and he was discouraged and depressed. One evening, in that mood, he climbed Signal Hill, near Dansalan town, with his dog, Tip. According to his own report, as he sat overlooking the province that had him beaten, tears welled up in his eyes. His lips began to move and it seemed that God was speaking:

My child, you have failed because you do not really love these Moros. You feel superior to them because you are white. If you can forget you are an American and think only how I love them, they will respond.

To this, Laubach found himself replying:

God, I don’t know whether you spoke to me through my lips, but if you did it was the truth. I hate myself. My plans have all gone to pieces. Drive me out of myself and come and take possession of me and think Thy thoughts in my mind.

Laubach reported that from that moment God had killed his racial prejudice and made him “color-blind.” Again God spoke to him:
About that time (January 1930) Laubach was joined in Dansalan by Donato Galia (M.A., Columbia University) and his wife, teachers from the Visayas who had come to help with the normal school that Laubach had had in mind to establish. Finding that the missionary had now abandoned the idea of a normal school as unsuited for Moro needs, Galia joined Laubach in the study of Maranao language. Together they adopted a Roman alphabet for that language, which up to then had been written in Arabic letters, in which only 3,000 or 4,000 out of 90,000 Maranos were literate. They devised a perfectly phonetic system of using one Roman letter to a sound and one sound to a letter. As Laubach and Galia engaged in this work, which also included unraveling the mysteries of the language’s complex grammar, it occurred to them that they were being drawn into a vitally important work. As the two Christian teachers sought to reduce the Maranao language to easy reading and writing in Roman letters for themselves, they were also making it possible for the largely illiterate Maranao population to learn easily the reading and writing of that language.

Laubach and Galia were excited at the prospects opening before them. The Maranos were totally illiterate in Roman letters. Their language had never been written, let alone printed, in Roman letters. Would it not be a great service—a great Christian service—to teach them to read and write their language using the letters employed not only in English but in all the other major languages of the Philippines as well? The two teachers received much encouragement in this line of thinking from their new Moro friends.

By February 1930 Laubach had acquired a small secondhand printing press from friends in Cagayan—and with the press came a printer, Silvino Abaniano. With the help of their Maranao language teacher, Pambaya Bayabao, Laubach and Galia prepared copy for a two-page Maranao-language tabloid called Totul Ko Ranao (“The Story of Lanao”). Their first number featured on page one material in Maranao language, set in type for the first time ever, while on page two the Maranao material was in Arabic script written (by a pandita) on stencils supplied by the superintendent of schools. This first issue, published on February 16, was not very handsome to Laubach’s critical eye, but the Moros were delighted and the paper was a huge success. At once it stimulated much interest in learning to read, and the two teachers were deluged with requests from Moros wanting to be taught in the “new” letters.

At first the two men used the usual sentence method of teaching literacy, which seemed to them and to their Moro pupils unnecessarily long. Month after month they sought after a better method, and corresponded with literacy workers around the world. After some six months of experimenting they finally hit upon a revolutionary idea. They searched for three words that would contain all the sounds the Maranao language used, made up of twelve consonants and five vowels. (Laubach made use of the letter ә to stand for the vowel sound o as in “tool,” while retaining o for the vowel sound as in “total.”) Thus the Maranao word for “story” was spelled totul, pronounced totol. He received much criticism from this and eventually dropped the ә and taught two sounds for o. More months and at last they found three “key words,” each containing four different consonants, the consonants followed by the letter a (as in father): Malabanga (a town in Lanao); karutasa (“paper”); and paganada (“to learn”). Every word in the Maranao language can be derived by varying the vowels with the consonants used in those three familiar words. Teaching the Maranao to read became an infinitely easier task when, with the aid of a large chart and simple primers, the aim became the teaching of the phonetic sound of easily recognized syllables and combinations of syllables. Now any Moro could be taught to read in a day—and he could also be easily taught to write.

As the course became easier, the number of Moros who desired to learn increased, until hundreds crowded into the old building that Laubach had purchased to house his family, the press, and the literacy classrooms. Laubach and Galia continued to publish their tabloid, which was soon expanded to a four-page fortnightly and distributed by the thousands in Lanao. This and their other publications were very important for the new literates, of course. Laubach and Galia also trained a corps of literacy teachers to help instruct classes not only in Dansalan but in communities throughout the lake area. Most of the teachers were themselves graduates of Laubach’s literacy classes. From mission funds, they were paid wages ranging from $2.50 to $20.00 per month. In addition to the paid teachers, there were many volunteers who assisted in what became a major literacy movement in the province of Lanao. By late 1932 the movement was averaging 3,000 new literates a month and Frank Laubach’s “literacy thermometer” showed that 45,000 Lanao Moros had at least begun to read and write in Roman letters.

Building upon the success of his literacy work, Frank Laubach found ways to maintain the interest and harness the energies of the new literates. Totul Ko Ranao gave way to a fourteen-page newspaper called Lanao Progress, which was printed not only in Maranao but Cebuano Visayan and English as well. The press became the foundation for Lanao Press Publishers, which turned out various instructional primers, books, and pamphlets in addition to the newspaper. The literacy classes in various communities (including Dansalan) developed into Maranaw Folk Schools and taught not only literacy but health and hygiene, improved child-care, and farming methods. A library was set up in Dansalan, and friends in the Philippines and America contributed books to a collection that came to number over 5,000 volumes. Under Laubach’s inspiration and leadership a Moro Book Store was established; also a kindergarten for Moro children, a dispensary with a trained nurse, and even a small experimental farm to promote new varieties of food crops among Maranao farmers. Laubach established dormitories for Moro students attending school in Dansalan, to provide them with a wholesome “home away from home.” His wife and the wives of missionary colleagues who joined him in the ever-growing work assisted in organizing Moro women’s clubs, which among other activities sought to promote literacy among Moro women. Early on, Dr. Laubach organized throughout Lanao some twenty-five Societies of English Speaking Youth (later called Societies of Educated Youth) to assist the literacy campaign in their own communities. The effort was to get everybody in every Moro house to become literate, and it became a matter of high prestige to have a sign posted on one’s house declaring in Marano: “Certificate of Honor, 100%”—meaning that the whole household (i.e., everyone over ten years old) could read and that it had subscribed to Lanao Progress.

The economic depression in the United States threatened Laubach’s literacy work in Lanao for a time but it also had a significant methodological impact. Learning in December 1932 that his mission funds would be cut back so that he could no longer pay his literacy teachers, Dr. Laubach called the teachers together with some of the datus (Moro chiefs) to explain to them the sad news. Kakai Dagalanget, the leading datu of southern Lanao, a man with piercing eyes, arose and said: “This [literacy] campaign is the most important thing that ever came to Lanao. It shall not stop. Every
person who learns must teach five others. I will see that they do.” (This is Dr. Laubach’s earliest account of the datu’s words. With the passage of time, the account became somewhat embroidered to the point where the datu was reported to have said: “I’ll make everybody who knows how to read teach somebody else, or I’ll kill him.”) According to Laubach, this was the origin of the “Each One Teach Five” idea, which, when implemented in Lanao, was very successful, and even more so when it was soon transformed into “Each One Teach One.” The “Key Word” system combined with one-on-one instruction, which did away with the cost and inhibiting atmosphere of large classes, resulted in a methodology of literacy instruction that caught on like wildfire.

The concept of volunteer literacy teachers and their pupils who became volunteer literacy teachers in geometrically ever-expanding numbers quickly caught the imagination of the world. News of the literacy movement in Lanao spread all over the Philippines and visitors came down to see what was happening there among “the bloodthirsty Moros.” In 1933 and 1934 Dr. Laubach was invited to go all over the islands and assist in preparing charts and primers in some twenty languages using the “Key Word” and “Each One Teach One” methods perfected in Lanao. This so-called Philippine Method attracted the attention of literacy experts in other lands, and before long Laubach’s mail was flooded with inquiries and invitations to come and explain his techniques. In his office he posted a map of the world and from a tack marking the location of Dansalan, he stretched colored thread to other tacks marking locations from which the inquiries and invitations came. Moros visiting his office clucked their tongues in delight and said: “Just see how important we are getting in the world.”

When Laubach left Dansalan for furlough early in 1935, a trip that would take him on his first visits to other lands to instruct literacy workers in the Philippine Method, he was accompanied to the boat in Iligan by several thousand Moros. As the boat was about to leave, the chief pandita of Lanao prayed for the safe journey of Laubach and his family and many Moros kissed “Dr. Frank’s” hand and told him, “We will pray for you in every mosque in Lanao.” Laubach returned to Lanao in 1936 and stayed for five more years during which he was sometimes off on literacy missions elsewhere in the Philippines and Asia. In June 1941 he presided at the opening of the Madrasa High School, which was the first private secondary school in the province and was designed to meet the special needs of Moro students. A few months later, in October 1941, he and his family were once more off on furlough. By then World War II was already over a year old in Europe and two months later it was to engulf Asia and the Pacific. Dr. Laubach did not know it at the time, but he was never again to work in Lanao. From October 1941 on, the literacy evangelist to the Moros of Lanao was to become an apostle to the illiterates of the world. He was fifty-seven years of age and had been in the Philippines twenty-six years.

The Romance of Opening Blind Eyes

Very early in his literacy work, Frank Laubach found a phrase that aptly described not only the work but the ethos of what he was about as a Christian missionary engaged in literacy education: “the romance of opening blind eyes.” Laubach was nothing if not a romantic, in the best sense of that term. He thought large thoughts. He pursued his ideas with enthusiasm and fervor. He brought passion and idealism to everything he did. His motives were pure and continually subjected to searching introspection in a finely tuned life of prayer. Sometimes his ideas and actions could be judged naïve and impractical, but he was always ready to dare great things for Christ. Mention was made of his notion in 1921 that the Muslim peoples of southern Asia were ripe for mass conversion to the Christian religion. On Armistice Day 1933 he launched a campaign to get people in every land to “pair off” with people in other lands of the same calling and in a “continuous plebiscite” repudiate war and pledge their nonparticipation in armed conflict. A letter addressed to the highest officials in the Philippines and the United States, to the heads of state and governments of all the nations of the world and to as many world figures (Einstein, Dewey, Gandhi, Mott, Kagawa, etc.) as could be thought of, was sent out from Dansalan backed by the signatures of twelve sultans, nearly two hundred sheiks, hadjis, imams, panditas, and gurus as well as over 1,200 other Muslims, plus 200 Christian Filipinos, 20 Americans, 18 Chinese, and 4 Japanese—all residing in Lanao. Not content with preaching an Armistic Day sermon, Laubach set out “to do something” about the horror of human warfare. The campaign did not catch on and did little to avert World War II—but Laubach was never one to be discouraged from attempting to implement a romantically right idea of expecting great results.

World literacy was one romantically right idea that Laubach attempted to implement—and the results of his own contribution were very impressive indeed. Literacy for him was work that brought the Christian worker close to the estimated one billion people in the world who were “blind” and “unable to speak” because they could not read or write. Said Laubach in 1932: “They are the most backward, the most impoverished and the most oppressed of all classes of people, the kind for whom the heart of Christ bled most, the kind to whom one following Christ would naturally turn. They are in prison, hungry, thirsty and naked. . . .”

When Laubach came to work in Lanao he found the Moros hostile and unapproachable. Literacy provided the means not just to approach them but to approach them as one who wanted to share the love of Jesus Christ with them. In his early years in Lanao, Laubach was in the habit of writing his father in Benton a six-page letter each week, and these letters were published in The Argus, the local newspaper. Years later Constance Padwick, a missionary in Egypt, was able to excerpt passages from these letters that reflected the profoundly mystical quality of Frank Laubach’s spirituality. These excerpts were eventually published in a book that became a spiritual classic: Letters by a Modern Mystic (1937). In the letter dated March 3, 1930—four months after he had come to Lanao, three months after his Signal Hill experience, and at a time when he was well into his studies of Moro religion and culture and also into his new work in literacy—Laubach wrote:

For the first time in my life I know what I must do off in lonesome Lanao. I know why God left this aching void, for himself to fill. A letter addressed to the highest officials in the Philippines and the United States, to the heads of state and governments of all the nations of the world and to as many world figures (Einstein, Dewey, Gandhi, Mott, Kagawa, etc.) as could be thought of, was sent out from Dansalan backed by the signatures of twelve sultans, nearly two hundred sheiks, hadjis, imams, panditas, and gurus as well as over 1,200 other Muslims, plus 200 Christian Filipinos, 20 Americans, 18 Chinese, and 4 Japanese—all residing in Lanao. Not content with preaching an Armistic Day sermon, Laubach set out “to do something” about the horror of human warfare. The campaign did not catch on and did little to avert World War II—but Laubach was never one to be discouraged from attempting to implement a romantically right idea of expecting great results.

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For the first time in my life I know what I must do off in lonesome Lanao. I know why God left this aching void, for himself to fill. Off on this mountain I must do three things:

1. I must pursue this voyage of discovery in quest of God’s will. I must because the world needs me to do it.

2. I must plunge into mighty experiments in intercessory prayer, to test my hypothesis that God needs my help to do his will for others, and that my prayer releases his power. I must be his channel for the world needs me.

3. I must confront these Moros with a divine love which will speak Christ to them though I never use his name. They must see the tears that are falling on this typewriter, tears of a boundless joy broken loose.
For forty years more Frank Charles Laubach labored in literacy education in the spirit of a “boundless joy broken loose.” He rightly belongs among that very select group of missionaries whose good work in Christ’s name touched the lives of millions of people across the barriers of race, nationalities, tongues, and cultures.

Selected Bibliography

Books by Laubach


Material about Laubach


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