The Legacy of J. Waskom Pickett

John T. Seamands

Jarrel Waskom Pickett, son of a Methodist minister, was born on February 21, 1890, in northeast Texas. His father L. L. Pickett, had attained considerable recognition as a hymn writer, editor, author, and controversial debater. After serving a few years in Texas and then in South Carolina, the Rev. Mr. Pickett moved with his family to Wilmore, Kentucky, where Asbury College had recently been established.

Waskom's childhood was, in many respects, unusual. His mother taught him to recognize the alphabet, both in capital and lower-case letters, before he was two years old. By the middle of his fourth year he began to read the morning newspapers and to report chief items of news at the breakfast table. Before he was six, he had read all of the New Testament and several books of the Old Testament.

On his first day at public school, Waskom was put in the kindergarten at nine o'clock, promoted to first grade an hour later, and to second grade in the afternoon. The next day he was promoted to third grade, and after a month was advanced to fourth grade. At eight years of age Waskom began to learn Greek, with his father as his teacher. So by the time he graduated from high school, he could read and translate the Greek New Testament with considerable proficiency. When he was thirteen, he enrolled as a student in Asbury College.

Two days after college opened, a young man called at the Pickett home, asking for a place to stay while he attended college. It was E. Stanley Jones. Waskom graciously accepted him as his roommate, and thus began a life-long friendship between these two young men, both destined to be outstanding leaders of the church in India.

In May 1907 Waskom and Stanley graduated from Asbury College, both with academic honors. Stanley Jones went on to India as pastor of the English-speaking Methodist Church in Lucknow, while Waskom stayed on to teach at Asbury College and take a Master's degree. He wanted to go to the School of Theology at Vanderbilt University, but his father objected strongly. He was prejudiced against seminaries and called them "cemeteries." So instead, Waskom accepted a position as instructor of Latin and Greek in a small college at Vilonia, Arkansas, and a year later became assistant professor of New Testament and Greek at Taylor University, Upland, Indiana.

In February 1910 Waskom received a cablegram from Stanley Jones, advising him to apply to the Board of Missions to be sent to India, to replace Jones in the Lucknow church. Waskom immediately applied, was accepted, and soon after began his journey to India. But he had been in India only about four years when he was ordered to return to America because he had contracted tuberculosis. The government expert in that disease said that his lungs were so badly affected that he would not live more than a year. But on board ship, during his second day at sea, Waskom spent a long time on his knees in prayer, and the Lord assured him that he would recover. Several weeks later when he arrived in San Francisco, he reported to a doctor on orders from the Mission Board. The doctor examined him and said, "Who told you that you had tuberculosis?"

Pickett showed him his x-rays he had brought from India. The doctor said, "Well, you actually had advanced t.b. when these x-rays were taken, but something wonderful has happened to you since then."

During this first furlough, Waskom was married to Ruth Robinson, daughter of John Wesley Robinson, missionary bishop in India. For the next twenty-five years after the return to the field, Pickett served variously as pastor, superintendent, evangelist, and editor of the Indian Witness. In 1935 he was elected to the episcopacy and served in that capacity for twenty-one years, until his retirement in 1956. In the United States following his
Pickett, the Statesman

Waskom Pickett was especially gifted in meeting government officials and national leaders, and gaining their respect and confidence, not only for himself, but for the entire Christian movement in India. Though he had a wide range of such contacts, he made a great impact upon three persons in particular.

Bhim Raj Ambedkar was born into a low-caste Hindu family, but leaped into prominence after advanced study in England and America. He returned to India with an overpowering desire to free his people from age-long oppression. He traveled all across the country, holding mass meetings among members of the lower castes. He denounced Hindu gods as immoral, and urged his people to renounce Hinduism, which, he claimed, was the cause of their poverty and social stigma. "I was born a Hindu," he shouted, "but I will not die a Hindu."

Just at this time Waskom Pickett was elected bishop and appointed to the Bombay area, where Dr. Ambedkar served as president of the Law College. The two men became close friends and often prayed together. One day Ambedkar asked Bishop Pickett to baptize him as a Christian but, afraid it might ruin his political career, he wanted it done in secret. Bishop Pickett refused, and insisted that he should openly confess Christ as Lord and Savior. This, Ambedkar was not willing to do. Some time later, after he had become minister of law in Prime Minister Nehru's cabinet, he took the oath to Buddhism along with 75,000 of his followers.

During Ambedkar's last conversation with Bishop Pickett, he asked the bishop if he had lost hope for his acceptance of Christ. The bishop replied, "No, I am still praying for you." To this Ambedkar said, "Please keep it up. I am not yet satisfied, and may still ask you to baptize me and admit me to the Methodist Church." Shortly afterward, however, Ambedkar died of a heart attack.

Early in his missionary career, Waskom Pickett met Jawaharlal Nehru and over the years a strong friendship developed between the two men. Nehru was by birth a Hindu, but he was fully committed to the Christian ideal. In one of their early conversations, Nehru said to Pickett, "Bishop, in the area of ethics I try to be completely Christian. If at any time you think I am doing wrong, please rebuke me, and I will be grateful."

When Nehru was elected first prime minister of the new India in 1947, Pickett was resident bishop in Delhi. Immediately following independence, clashes between Hindus and Muslims took place in many parts of North India. Every day and night whole families were being murdered. Bishop Pickett felt concerned that he should organize a Relief Committee of Christians to help the Muslims who, in Delhi, were chief victims of the surging violence. When he approached the prime minister, Nehru was at first fearful, but then gave his permission. A few days later when the situation became desperate, Nehru asked Bishop Pickett to take charge of the Government Relief Station. The bishop told him he thought this would be unwise, so Nehru appointed a Christian official with the understanding that the bishop be his unofficial adviser. Messengers were sent out to the Christian community for volunteers, and within two or three days over 200 Christians were working in the Relief Center, seeking to stop the slaughter. Hindus and Sikhs threatened to kill Bishop Pickett and his wife, and one night actually fired a shot at him when he was in the upstairs bathroom of his home.

To care for the sick and wounded, Bishop Pickett prepared a list of needed medical supplies and tried to send it by cable to government friends in Washington. But Indian law-breakers had captured the telegraph offices and refused to accept the cablegram, saying, "You want medicine to save these damn Muslims. Let them die!" Bishop Pickett then went to the American ambassador, Dr. Henry Grady, who got the message through in a few hours. Within four days a plane landed in Delhi loaded with necessary supplies, donated by several pharmaceutical firms in the United States. In a few days these supplies were saving lives in every hospital in Delhi.

Mohandas K. Gandhi (Mahatma), father of India's independence, was another national leader with whom Waskom Pickett had close ties. Pickett was bold in his witness to Gandhi and often confronted him with the claims of Christ. In their very first interview, Gandhi made the statement that he was a Christian, as well as a Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist, and Jew, and that he worshiped Christ along with the Hindu gods. Pickett then asked, "Mr. Gandhi, are you not aware of the teachings of Jesus that He is the one and only Savior?"

Gandhi said, "Yes, I know what He said, but I cannot accept that claim. It was, I'm sure, a mistake."

Pickett then asked, "Do you believe that Jesus was totally without sin in all His life?"

Gandhi answered, "No, I think He sinned like all others have done."

Pickett then asked, "Would you be willing to mention what you regard as His sins?"

To this Gandhi replied, "His greatest sin as I see Him was His apparent approval of the man who killed a calf to honor his repentant son. No man can hold my affection who approves killing a calf."

Almost twenty years after this memorable personal contact with Gandhi, one of Gandhi's sons came to Bishop Pickett at his home in Bombay and asked him to baptize him. The bishop asked why he wished to be baptized. He said, "Because my father mistreats me and all my family. I hate him and want to hurt him. I know no possible way to hurt him more than to renounce Hinduism and become a Christian."

Gandhi's son was surprised when Bishop Pickett refused to accept him on these terms. A few weeks later, newspapers reported that young Gandhi had become a Muslim.

Shortly after independence, when the Hindu-Muslim conflict was at its height, Bishop Pickett was preparing to go to bed one night, when there was a sudden knock at the door. The Delhi commissioner informed Bishop Pickett that the police had uncovered a plot to assassinate Gandhi, and that his life was in danger. He requested Bishop Pickett to call on Prime Minister Nehru and explain the grave situation to him.

When the bishop explained his mission to Nehru over breakfast the next morning, Nehru said, "Bishop, I have done my best to persuade Mr. Gandhi to leave Delhi, but he will not listen. Why don't you go to see him? He has great respect for you."

Bishop Pickett went straight to Gandhi's residence, but found him adamant in his refusal to leave the city. "Why should I be afraid to die?" he asked. "I am a failure. I have pleaded for peace and we are having war. Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims have forgotten their promise and are killing one another. All my hopes for a better India are being destroyed. Perhaps Gandhi dead will be more respected than Gandhi alive."

"Mr. Gandhi," Bishop Pickett replied earnestly, "I assure you that Indian Christians are working tirelessly for peace. In my opinion, you have never been fair to the Christians in India."

"That is true," Gandhi admitted. "I have failed at this
point and I am planning to apologize to the Christian community.”

“I am delighted to hear you say that,” Pickett replied. “Now please listen to me and leave Delhi at once. India needs you and your life is in great danger.”

The Mahatma looked thoughtful as their conversation ended. Two days later an official in the prime minister’s office phoned to tell Pickett that Gandhi had been assassinated at a public prayer meeting.

Pickett, the Churchman

Bishop Pickett loved the church and sought to serve it in every way possible. An evangelist at heart, he promoted the work of evangelism wherever he went and encouraged those who possessed the gift of preaching. He took keen interest in the institutional life of the church, particularly schools and hospitals. He established a Bible school at Bellia to train young couples for voluntary service in their villages and conduct worship services on Sunday. He encouraged the development of a new English-speaking department in Bareilly Theological Seminary, which was later moved to Jabalpur and became the well-known Leonard Theological College. Early in his career he volunteered to raise $150,000 to save Lucknow Christian College from bankruptcy.

Waskom Pickett took a special interest in the ministry of healing. He served on the Board of Vellore Medical College in South India, and after retiring from the field in 1956, he undertook to raise funds for the Ludhiana Medical College in North India. When he told Prime Minister Nehru of the project, Nehru said to him, “If you raise a million dollars in America for Ludhiana, I’ll give the college an additional million.”

Bishop Pickett noted that there were very few church buildings in villages, and those few were built from the Christian community in the upper-caste section of town, in order to attract the caste people. He began pleading with the village Christians to build churches near their own homes. He promised them if they would give suitable sites, lay the foundations, and build walls, he would raise money to put on the roofs. While in the Bombay area, Bishop Pickett saw twenty-six new churches constructed. As a result of the program, Christians grew spiritually, respect for them increased, and occasionally non-Christians came and joined in worship.

Waskom Pickett was a strong supporter of church union in India and actively worked for twenty-six years to achieve it. He was keenly disappointed when, after his retirement, a plan was submitted to form the Church of North India, but his own Methodist Church withdrew from negotiations at the last moment. Bishop Pickett felt that denominationalism was a great stumbling block to non-Christians in India and that a united church was necessary for the evangelization of the country.

In 1953 when the new king of Nepal decided to open up his country to the outside world and was seeking advice, Prime Minister Nehru said to him, “If you want your country to make progress, you will need the aid of Christian missionaries. I suggest that you contact Bishop Pickett of the Methodist Church. He will be able to help you.”

The result was an invitation from the king to open up medical, educational, and agricultural work in Nepal. So Bishop Pickett wisely established the United Mission to Nepal, an interdenominational and international organization, which for the past thirty-two years has served the Nepalese people with great effectiveness, and has helped to lay the foundations of the Christian church in that land.

One of the special contributions that Waskom Pickett made to the entire church in India was the research on mass movements, which he directed at the request of the National Christian Council. In the early 1930s many church leaders in India were questioning the validity of such group decisions for Christ, arguing that salvation is always an individual matter. Results of this investigation were published in the book written by Waskom Pickett, Christian Mass Movements in India (1933), which was read and studied avidly all over India. The research completely vindicated the integrity of group movements in the Indian context. Pickett pointed out that the practice of urging individuals to be-
lieve in Christ worked very well in the United States where Christianity was the major religion, and people could become Christians without separating from their families and friends. The one-by-one method, however, did not work in India among Hindus, because if only one person became a Christian he was thrown out of his family and caste, and suffered social dislocation.

One very significant result of the survey must be noted. A Disciple of Christ missionary, Donald McGavran, was greatly influenced by the findings of that research, and joined Bishop Pickett in subsequent studies on group movements. This later led to the publication of his two books, *The Bridges of God and How Churches Grow*, and eventually to the inauguration of the Church Growth movement, which has greatly influenced the strategy and teaching of Christian missions in the past two decades. Church Growth principles have been the driving force in establishing several departments and schools of World Mission and Evangelism in seminaries across the United States and around the world.

In a letter addressed to this writer, McGavran has expressed his debt to Bishop Pickett’s influence in these words:

> Pickett limited his insight to India. He never hinted that this might be a universal principle applicable everywhere. During the years 1940 to 1952 I began to see that this principle applied everywhere. Between 1954 and 1961 I carried out extensive surveys in Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Formosa, Thailand, Belgian Congo, and Jamaica. What I had begun to see in the preceding decade was abundantly proved. In short, I universalized Pickett’s findings concerning India. ... All this opening of vision I owe to Waskom Pickett.’

### Pickett, the Social Activist

Waskom Pickett was not only concerned about the spiritual needs of the church in India, he was also concerned about the physical and material needs of Indian people, particularly in the villages. His interest in a variety of areas made a profound impact on life in India.

Discovering that the average Indian cow yielded little more than two quarts of milk a day, Waskom Pickett began to consider the possibility of importing first-class bulls from America and breeding them with the best cows in India. So he persuaded a successful dairyman in Merced, California, to ship four Jersey bulls to India, and arranged for the semen of the bulls to be artificially inseminated into several Punjabi cows. The result was a new breed of cows that produced considerably more and richer milk. Soon many Punjabi farmers were begging that their cows be inseminated so that they would have offspring equally productive and valuable. Finally the government imported over 800 Jersey bulls into India and started a full-scale program of interbreeding. Consequently, the milk supply in that part of India increased greatly!

The worldwide influenza epidemic of 1918 and 1919 left a great many babies in India as orphans. Dozens were brought by their neighbors to Christian hospitals or schools. So Bishop Pickett raised Rs. 100,000 (then $30,000) and constructed a baby fold on land adjacent to Clara Swain Hospital in Bareilly. One baby was left on a winter morning in a basket on the verandah of the missionary in charge. Years later that baby became Bishop Pickett’s secretary and sometime afterward came to America for advanced study. Today he is professor of Old Testament in Leonard Theological College in Jabalpur. Other baby-fold wards hold responsible positions in church and state all over North India.

One of Bishop Pickett’s chief public services was his campaign to promote prohibition in the country. He edited and published a biweekly *Temperance Clip Sheet*, which contained articles on the evil effects of the liquor traffic in society, and was mailed to over 1,000 editors who were influencing public opinion across India. This effort acquired wide recognition and brought letters of support from every province in the country. Politicians and national leaders joined in the fight against liquor. The Right Honorable Chintamani Rajagopalacharia, chief minister of Madras and later acting governor general of India, developed a severe restrictive policy for dealing with the sale of intoxicants, which he called “a half-way to prohibition.” He spoke of Bishop Pickett as “the father of Indian prohibition” and said that the *Temperance*
Clipsheet had convinced him that it was his duty to support the struggle against alcohol, opium, and hemp drugs. This is the legacy of J. Waskom Pickett, evangelist and social activist, churchman and statesman, who untiringly and unselfishly served the people of India for forty-six years and made an impact upon both church and nation that continues to this day.

Bishop and Mrs. Pickett spent the last years of their lives in a retirement village in Columbus, Ohio. He passed away in the summer of 1981, at the age of ninety-one, and his wife, Ruth, followed just two years later. This writer had the honor of conducting a memorial service for the couple in July 1983, when their remains were interred in the cemetery at Wilmore, Kentucky.

Notes

1. Pickett, handwritten notes entitled "My Struggle with t.b.," Archives of Asbury College.
2. Narrated by Bishop Pickett while speaking in Dr. Seamands's class in Asbury Theological Seminary.
3. Pickett, My Twentieth Century Odyssey, p. 156.

Bibliography

Publications by J. Waskom Pickett

The Indian Witness, Edited by Pickett, January to December, 1925. India: Lucknow Publishing House.


Publications about J. Waskom Pickett

"Our Bishops Who Retire at the Central Conference This Year." The Indian Witness (Lucknow, India), Nov. 1, 1956; pp. 10-11.


In the Archives of Asbury College, Wilmore, Kentucky, there is an assortment of unclassified personal correspondence and handwritten materials left by Bishop Pickett.
CONTINUING YOUR MINISTRY WHILE YOU GO TO GRAD SCHOOL IS NOT RECOMMENDED. IT’S REQUIRED.

What good is a masters without a working ministry?

At Moody Graduate School, we think you should stay with your ministry while you work toward your Masters Degree. As a matter of fact, it’s a requirement.

Classes last one week. While a course continues over several months, you only need to be on campus for a single week.

After that, you head back to your own ministry to complete assignments that are practical in the real world. Of the 36 hours many people take from Moody, six hours apply toward a final field project. Instead of writing a master’s thesis, we want you to put what you learned into action.

Classes are team-taught to bring students the widest range of academic and practical experience. Our teachers don’t stress tests and exams. And you can pursue your MA one class at a time—at your own pace.

We keep tuition low by relying on God for financial support—through the generous friends of Moody Bible Institute. And while entrance requirements are strict, we’ll gladly work with all serious applicants to help them gain admission.

Above all, Moody focuses on spiritual growth and evangelism. Just as we have for over a century.

Find out more about the master’s program that’s possible and practical—even when you’re already doing His work. And don’t want to interrupt it.

Please call 1-800-333-3139
In Illinois 1-312-329-4341

Moody Graduate School
A Ministry of Moody Bible Institute
820 North LaSalle Drive 9-14
Chicago, Illinois 60610

THE WORKABLE PROGRAM.