The Legacy of Ernest Oliver

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Ernest Oliver—the first executive secretary of the United Mission to Nepal (1954–61), executive secretary of the Regions Beyond Missionary Union (1961–76), the first general secretary of the Evangelical Missionary Alliance (1966–83), and a director of Tearfund (1976–86)—was one of the most influential figures in the British evangelical missionary movement in the twentieth century. His clear sense of the priorities for Christian mission in the middle of the twentieth century left a legacy that still shapes much of the British evangelical missionary movement.

Oliver was born in London on August 20, 1911. One of three children, he grew up attending the local Baptist church in Chelsea. He left school when he was sixteen, having been baptized the previous year. He spent three years at the Hammersmith School of Art in London, concurrent with a six-year apprenticeship to an architectural calligrapher.

Interested in missionary work from an early age, Oliver described the annual Missionary Sunday in his local church as “the most exciting Sunday of the year to me.” Following his baptism, he moved from Sunday school teaching to open-air preaching and preaching in local churches and mission halls, all by the age of eighteen. He described his call to missionary service overseas as “a process, largely the outcome of a growing understanding of the Word of God in relation to his love for the world and his passion for the salvation of all.” However, he also wrote of a sense of assurance of a call, which happened while attending a circus and amusement park with a group of young people from his church, through which “the Lord spoke to me about wasting my time on trivial amusements and showed me that I had to walk firmly and resolutely in pursuance of his call.” Neither was he taken aback by his mother’s question, “Who do you think you are, David Livingstone?” when he informed her of his decision. In their devout household, to be a missionary was regarded as the ultimate in Christian service. Yet his sense of call was never based on his own sense of ability or worth: “I was naturally somewhat shy and timid, content to do the tasks assigned to me as well as I was able, but with no pretensions of being a leader. It took quite a time to wean me from the prayer ‘give me ability equal to my tasks’ to ‘give me ability equal to my tasks’.”

Training and Early Ministry

In 1933 Oliver left his apprenticeship and enrolled at All Nations Bible College in South London. He later wrote of this time; “The course was not very demanding intellectually, but its value for me lay in its emphasis upon the authority and content of the Bible, its cultivation of a devotional life, its wide window on the world, and the disciplining experience of living in community. . . . There was no attempt to produce ‘the compleat missionary’ at the end of two years, but it was a worthy and purposeful launching pad for the takeoff into God’s great adventure overseas for many of us. There was an urgency abroad in those days: we should not spend too much time in preparation, we must get out to the place of God’s calling as quickly as possible, for the Lord’s return was imminent.”

This experience was to influence his work in later life. As executive secretary of the Regions Beyond Missionary Union (RBMU), and later as general secretary of the Evangelical Missionary Alliance (EMA), he supported the development of an appropriate missions course for inclusion in the curriculum of all EMA member colleges. He taught various of the courses from 1961 to 1983, and his notes from that time represent a comprehensive and somewhat prescient introduction to the emerging discipline of missiology.

Oliver entered All Nations Bible College fully convinced that he was preparing to go to work in Belgian Congo with RBMU. In January 1934, however, a devastating earthquake hit Nepal and the Ganges Valley in Bihar, North India, and in a prayer meeting after hearing the news, Oliver sensed a strong call instead to Nepal. RBMU had worked in North Bihar since 1899, with a view to the ultimate opening of Nepal, but had since decided to suspend sending of new missionaries to the region because of the lack of results and the seeming impassability of the Nepal border. But then a supporter of the mission sent funds specifically for sending two new workers to India, and so Oliver was accepted for work in North Bihar.

During his time at college, Oliver spent some time working with the Caravan Mission in Suffolk in the east of England. Many of the young people on those missions visited a particular house for times of fellowship, and it was on one such visit that Ernest met Margaret, one of the daughters of the household, who worked as a schoolteacher. Margaret’s home had often been frequented by visiting missionaries, and she had long had an interest in missionary work in India. Both of them later said that they knew instantly that they would marry one another. Margaret’s family was Christian Brethren, and Oliver made this tradition his spiritual home, whose outlook shaped both his devotional life and his ecclesiology.

Mission rules forbade the recruitment of married missionaries, and so Ernest sailed alone to India in 1935, as Margaret went to Mount Hermon Missionary Training College. It was also required that missionaries had to be in country for a year, and to pass language exams, before they were allowed to marry (a reasonably sure incentive to study!), and so while Margaret joined him in India in 1937, they were not married until 1938.

Bihar, North India

Ernest and Margaret were based in Motihari, the main town of the district of Champaran in North Bihar. It was this district that Mahatma Gandhi made the center of his campaign of satyagraha (nonviolent noncooperation) for the workers exploited by the indigo planters and for the end of British imperial rule in India. In 1939 Oliver was privileged to have an audience with Gandhi himself and wrote later of being “greatly impressed by him.”

Language learning merged into evangelism and basic medical work using the common drugs available. Oliver decided to try to learn more about medicine, and while attending a mission hospital in Raxaul on the Nepal border, he befriended a minor member of the Nepali royal family, Nararaj Shamsher Jang.
Bahadur Rana, who became known as Colonel Sahib. Somewhat out of favor, he had been exiled from Kathmandu to become governor of a state on the southern border of Nepal and was at the hospital with his grandson. Colonel Sahib played chess with Oliver, read the Bible with him, and soon was converted. He would not be baptized, however, for he said that it would cost him everything, but they kept in touch during Oliver’s time away from Motihari during the Second World War.

Oliver was one of several British RBMU missionaries called up in 1940 and appointed as lieutenants in the Indian Army, at that time still led by the British. Work as a cipher officer with the Sixth Indian Division in Iraq until 1942 was followed by appointment as adjutant of a unit in India, and Oliver ended the war at the rank of major. He considered that it was during this time that he had his first real experiences of leadership, learning, as he put it, how to look after people and help them. His ministry was not curtailed by his military appointment, even if his audience had changed. He preached in local churches on Sundays and worked alongside a chaplain in an army prison. In 1946 Oliver was demobilized in London. Although the army wanted him to stay in the service, he had not lost his sense of call to Nepal, and so, following a year studying medicine in London, he returned with his family to Motihari in 1947 to lead the RBMU work in North Bihar.

Leprosy was endemic in the region, and Ernest and Marga ret took in a young boy named Mangul who had been rejected by his family. They found him a place in a children’s home and decided that something should be done about the social ostracism of those suffering from leprosy. Under Oliver’s leadership RBMU set up a hospital in the Muzaffarpur Leprosarium, which had hitherto only provided a home to those excluded from their society because of leprosy.

Nepal

Cracks finally began to appear in Nepal’s fortress borders. A palace revolt against the ruling family of hereditary prime ministers took place in 1950. One of the leaders of the revolt had been treated at the RBMU mission hospital in Raxaul, and he was well disposed toward the possibility of Christians being allowed to work in Nepal. Oliver and a colleague, Dr. Trevor Strong, were allowed to visit Kathmandu in 1951.

In 1952 Colonel Sahib wrote to Oliver, stating that he intended to visit at Easter and that he wished to be baptized, which he was, in full view of his servants and the local townspeople. His wish that no one should be told of his baptism was somewhat undermined by this large audience, and upon his return to Nepal he lost all his property and was cut off from his family. He moved back to Kathmandu and provided the means of entry for three young Indian Christians who made a survey visit to Nepal.

Subsequent visits to Kathmandu established that the British ambassador and the head of the American trade mission were Christians, and they advocated to the government the need for Christian mission work in Nepal. There was a clear conviction among many that this work should be through a united front and not fragmented through numerous agencies, as had happened so often elsewhere. And so in 1954 the United Mission to Nepal (UMN) was formed, and Ernest Oliver was appointed as its executive secretary.

Some mission agencies refused to join the UMN because of restrictions on open evangelism. Others held back because the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was involved, a denomination that some regarded as unacceptably contaminated by theological modernism. Oliver’s response was that UMN was not going to set up churches, since it was not permitted to do so, and in any case he wanted to see what the Spirit of God was saying as churches grew from Nepalese roots: “We determined that we would not engage in any sort of church order—not Anglicans, or anything like that—because this church had to have liberty in the Spirit to find something suitable to the place.”

Here we see one of Oliver’s lifelong concerns, which was for fully indigenized national churches. This impulse may have come from the Christian Brethren influence, but he also said he was strongly influenced by Roland Allen’s ideas about church development. Awareness of the possibly limited timescale of work in Nepal also focused his mind on the need for a church that could survive and thrive by itself. Oliver wrote later of his joy at the development of a vital Indian church leadership following the reduction in the numbers of expatriate missionaries in that country in the years after independence.

The first church in Kathmandu began meeting in the home of Colonel Sahib, who also helped with the revision of the Nepali Bible by the Bible Society. In 1960 Oliver helped to form the Nepal Christian Fellowship (now the National Christian Fellowship of Nepal). At the time, there were no more than a hundred converts, but it laid the foundation for church structures appropriate to the culture and context of Nepal, which now encompass some thousands of churches and as many as 700,000 Christians.

Evangelical Missionary Alliance

In 1961, at the invitation of the RBMU Board of Directors, Oliver returned to London to take up the newly created post of executive secretary. The post included responsibility to assist in and coordinate the planning of the several RBMU fields, recruitment of personnel to those fields, and responsibility to ensure good communication between the various RBMU fields and the sending councils, as well as representation of RBMU further afield.

Concurrent with his appointment as executive secretary of RBMU, Oliver joined the Committee of Management of the Evangelical Missionary Alliance, which had been created in 1958. He quickly became heavily involved in the work of this new network, joining various subcommittees and speaking at EMA conferences in 1962 and 1964 on the subject of missionary cooperation. This dual focus—one on missionary cooperation and on relationships between mission agencies and national churches—characterized his work with the EMA for the next twenty years.

Gilbert Kirby, general secretary of the Evangelical Alliance, had led the work of the EMA since its inception, but he resigned in November 1965. He had already approached Oliver about the possibility of being seconded part-time from RBMU to replace him within the EMA. So from January 1966 Oliver became EMA general secretary for two days each week. One of his first major undertakings was to hold a conference on the missionary society’s relationship to the church overseas. Convened in 1969 and entitled “The Role of Missionary Societies in the 1970s,” it consid-
ered the growth of the churches worldwide, coupled with a rising awareness of national identity. In proposing the conference, Oliver commented: “Churches have been planted in almost all countries of the world and Missionary work can no longer be carried on as though they did not exist.”

For the British missionary movement of the time, the end of the colonial era, coupled with the undeniable reality of the growth of the church worldwide, made the issue of relationships with national churches, and the debate about any ongoing role for expatriate missionaries, vital and challenging. The Evangelical Alliance appointed a Commission on World Mission in 1970, whose task was to “clarify the relationship between the Church in Britain and the Church in the Third World.” Along with his theological commitment to the vitality of indigenous local churches, Oliver viewed political nationalism as a pragmatic necessity for many of these new countries, quoting Harold Isaacs of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology: “In virtually all of these, the first task of the new man in power is to create a new national identity that their fragmented people will recognise and accept.”

Although he was not blind to the problems that such nationalism could cause, Oliver advised mission agencies not to be too worried about the effect of nationalization on their institutions: “The Mission should not be afraid if the country’s Government decides to nationalise. We must assume that in spite of the heyday of nationalism, Governments are becoming progressively saner in the conduct of their public service programmes and are likely to leave undisturbed a Mission hospital provided it is functioning satisfactorily.”

During 1974, in his capacity as executive secretary of RBMU, Oliver returned to Nepal to participate in the celebrations of the twentieth anniversary of UMN’s work. In his report the twin themes of cooperation and the importance of national leadership in every area come through clearly:

There can be no doubt now that the decision of the RBMU to enter Nepal with the UMN was the right decision. No one Society could have accomplished what this group of societies has been enabled to do by a pooling of resources in personnel and finance. The hospitals, schools and technical institute are all highly effective institutions contributing very considerably to the health and education of a nation emerging from years of despotism. . . . One of the great features of the United Mission to Nepal has been the priority given to the training of nationals and the willingness to give them responsibility. The new training scheme for auxiliary nurses and midwives and health assistants at Tansen continues this pattern and points to the wisdom of the United Mission’s priorities.

In the same year the International Congress on World Evangelization, meeting in Lausanne, set the agenda for discussions within EMA. Oliver attended this congress and considered “the emergence of Third World missionary societies to be of the highest significance.”

Time and again throughout his leadership of EMA, Oliver helped British missionary societies to navigate the challenging waters of indigenization and relationships with national churches. In 1978 an EMA conference entitled “The Missionary in Contemporary Tensions” considered how to respond to economic and political tensions when missionaries were closely integrated into the lives of national churches, as well as how to deal with disagreements between missionaries and national church leaders over leadership and priorities.

Oliver was committed to cooperation in mission at every level, and the EMA gave him a platform to develop this vision in operations at the “home end” as much as “overseas.” This theme of cooperation, and its centrality to the role of the EMA, was a recurring note in Oliver’s reports to EMA Annual General Meetings. He wrote of his desire that “considerable prayer and thought will be given to ways in which the EMA can become more adequately the platform for united thinking, planning and action,” and later that “in the EMA we are climbing towards that level of cooperation between our member societies where it is normal to consult one another, to coordinate our endeavours, to cooperate where a joint effort is likely to be more productive, and to consider forwarding the activities of another society where those activities are, for reasons of strategy or time, more important than their own.” Toward the end of his time with EMA, he noted that “it is easier to go it alone than to try and work together, but I believe that the benefits of working together are immeasurably greater than what we achieve singly.”

Tearfund

In 1976 Oliver retired from his role in RBMU. At an age when most people’s thoughts turn to retirement activities, Oliver not only remained as general secretary of the EMA but also became an associate director of Tearfund, an autonomous relief agency that was founded in 1968 as the Evangelical Alliance Relief Fund, on whose board Oliver served since its inception. Tearfund’s first director, George Hoffman, had considered EMA’s close involvement with the new organization to be crucial: “We saw the potential of working closely with the EMA, with its worldwide contacts through its 80 or so member societies.”

Oliver’s initial role was to advise Tearfund on all aspects of its work, for it was recognized that no one else on its board or staff had his experience of managing change overseas. Through Tearfund, churches were being encouraged to make strategic changes in their commitment to and involvement in their local communities. But Oliver soon became involved in the development of a new aspect of Tearfund’s work, and in 1979 he became the first director of its Overseas Evangelism and Christian Education (OECE) department.

The origins of the OECE department lay in discussions that had been taking place within the Evangelical Alliance. The success that Tearfund experienced in fostering evangelical involvement in relief and development had led to numerous requests from Third World churches to the Evangelical Alliance for similar financial support for their evangelism and leadership-training programs. The Evangelical Alliance formulated plans to launch a new organization that would fulfill this role—Evangelical Partnership with the Overseas Church (EPOCH). Tearfund and the EMA, however, had already been having similar discussions about the need for such funding. When he heard of the Evangelical Alliance’s plans, Oliver suggested that rather than set up a new organization, which would compete with Tearfund for funds as though their objectives were different, it would be
better for the aims of EPOCH to be included within Tearfund’s charge. To do otherwise, he considered, would be to deny what he called the fullness of mission. In this example we see again Oliver’s commitment both to a holistic understanding of mission and also to the importance of the growth and development of indigenous churches.

Following his (second) retirement in 1983, when he gave up the role of EMA general secretary, Oliver took on the additional responsibility of overseas director of Tearfund. He undertook this task along with his leadership of the OECE department of Tearfund until his (third and final) retirement from these posts in 1986 at the age of seventy-five (although he continued in the role of international consultant for a further three years). The role of the overseas director was to provide leadership and give cohesion to the various aspects of Tearfund’s work, including development grants, international personnel, leadership training, child sponsorship, and fair trade. Those who worked with him during this time say that Oliver’s primary contribution in this role was not perhaps what was intended, since he was a leader and inspirer rather than a strategic thinker or manager. But he gave Tearfund the confidence to work with other organizations and to share resources. He facilitated its involvement with the United Mission to Nepal, the International Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, and the Association for Cooperation in Tunisia. In doing so, he helped to raise Tearfund’s profile and enabled it to contribute to and learn from a wider network, again demonstrating the value of cooperation.

Legacy

On Oliver’s retirement from Tearfund, Gilbert Kirby described him as “a man ahead of his time.”14 While this was undoubtedly true, he was also very much a man for his moment in history: a person committed to evangelical cooperation in mission and the importance of strong indigenous national churches and leadership. This dual focus stayed with Oliver throughout his missionary career and characterized every stage of that journey, allowing him to provide clear leadership to the U.K. missionary movement dealing with the challenges of indigenization and nationalism. His excellent organizational skills meant that he started and left behind organizations that work, and his clear sense of vision, coupled with excellent interpersonal and diplomatic skills, means that he is still remembered with affection by those who knew him.

Ernest Oliver died on September 20, 2001, in Luton, England. He is survived by his wife, Margaret, their three children, eight grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, the Oliver quotations in this article are taken from his personal papers. I am very grateful to Ernest’s widow, Margaret, and their daughter, Mrs. Elizabeth Cooper, for their kindness in granting me full access to these papers.
3. Ibid., p. 13.
4. Numbers obtained from Betty Young, United Mission to Nepal, in a personal e-mail dated October 10, 2002.
5. EMA Planning Committee minutes, April 16–17, 1969.
7. Ernest Oliver, “Missionary Methods and Pastoralia” lecture notes, lecture 10, emphasis in original.
9. Ernest Oliver, Report of the RBMU Executive Secretary’s tour, February 27–May 10, 1974, p. 3.
10. EMA Committee of Management minutes, June 19, 1974.

Bibliographical Note

Ernest Oliver’s contribution was in mission administration, not writing, and he left no published works. His personal papers are in his family’s keeping. These are not extensive, but they do include a partly-completed biography begun by a family member (which covers his life up until his entry into Nepal) and detailed correspondence relating to his time with Tearfund. His other executive correspondence remains with the organizations for which he worked. The EMA archives are comprehensive and take the form of reports incorporated into minutes of meetings. To date, no works have been published about him.