My Pilgrimage in Mission

Gerald H. Anderson

The theme of my pilgrimage is that I have ended up where I never imagined and have done what I never expected. The lesson is that God’s providence prevails.

From Sax to Seminary

Born in New Castle, Pennsylvania, in 1930, I grew up in the depression era, attended a small Methodist church with my parents, became proficient on the clarinet and saxophone, and was the first member of my extended family ever to go to college.

In high school I led a thirteen-piece dance orchestra, then majored in business administration at Grove City College to better handle the business side of my “big band.” In my senior year of college, however, I felt that God was calling me to the ministry. I sold my orchestra business and my sax and went off to Boston University School of Theology to prepare to be a Methodist pastor.

Following graduation from seminary in 1955, I was ordained in the Methodist Church, served for a summer in Alaska helping to plant a new church on the Kenai Peninsula, then sailed for Europe to study at the University of Marburg, Germany, on a Fulbright scholarship. A second year in Europe was divided between the Ecumenical Institute near Geneva, Switzerland, and New College at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. My interest in missions, first sparked at Boston University, grew at Marburg and at the Ecumenical Institute, where meetings with Karl Barth, P. D. Devanandan, and Willem Visser ’t Hooft were memorable, and where students from Asia challenged my theological views as we discussed Hendrik Kraemer’s recently published book Religion and the Christian Faith (1956). This was the beginning of my lifelong engagement with mission studies and the theology of mission.

Returning to Boston University to complete a Ph.D. in church history, I decided to write my dissertation on the theology of missions in the twentieth century. By the time I finished, I felt compelled to go to Asia as a missionary. Fortunately for me, Joanne Pemberton, whom I had met during my doctoral studies in the church where I was an associate minister in Providence, Rhode Island, shared my love and my missionary vocational calling. A few weeks after my graduation in 1960, we were married and sailed to the Philippines as Methodist missionaries.

The Philippine Decade

I had been appointed to teach church history at Union Theological Seminary, which was in Manila when we arrived, but it soon moved to a new campus twenty-three miles south of Manila in Dasmariñas, Cavite. There Joanne and I enjoyed nearly ten years of richly rewarding service and fellowship with missionary and Filipino colleagues and students. Both of our children were born in Manila and flourished in our rural campus setting. We were also happily involved with the growing Philippine Methodist Church. It was the beginning of a lifelong love affair with the Filipino people.

About 80 percent of Filipinos are at least nominally Roman Catholic, with a conservative Spanish heritage. It was fascinating to be in that context during and after the Second Vatican Council, to see changes slowly taking place in the Catholic Church and in relations with Protestants. As a result of my involvement in numerous ecumenical dialogues, I developed lasting friendships...
with several Jesuit and Society of the Divine Word priests, as well as a greater appreciation for certain aspects of the Catholic tradition.

**Publishing Ventures**


Other, more personal benefits followed. Stephen Neill, who had seen and appreciated the book before we first met in Singapore in 1963, invited me to join him in coediting the *Concise Dictionary of the Christian World Mission* (1970). This began a friendship that lasted until his death in 1984. One of the last series of public lectures he gave was at the Overseas Ministries Study Center in Ventnor, New Jersey, on the assigned theme “How My Mind Has Changed About Mission.” Privately he said to me, “You know, Gerald, my mind really hasn’t changed!”

Lesslie Newbigin had written the foreword to *The Theology of the Christian Mission*. Later I visited him in Madras, India, en route to the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, in 1968 in Uppsala, Sweden. (I was a delegate of the Philippine Independent Church.) Newbigin also became a mentor, friend, and collaborator in numerous projects over the next thirty years.

**Scarritt College and Cornell University**

In 1970 an invitation came to serve as president of Scarritt College for Christian Workers in Nashville, Tennessee. While it was difficult to leave our colleagues and such a fulfilling ministry in the Philippines, we felt it was time to move on and open the way for a Filipino to teach church history at Union Theological Seminary. Being at Scarritt was a good experience for our family’s reentry to life in America at a tumultuous time (with Vietnam, racial tensions, and Watergate), but I soon realized that I did not want to spend my career absorbed in fund-raising for a small college. So after three years I resigned and went to Cornell University as a senior research scholar in the Southeast Asia Program. A few years earlier Cornell University Press had published a book on Philippine church history that I edited, so it was a good fit, and we had a happy year there. During that year I published articles on President Marcos’s corrupt regime in the Philippines; an interview with Raul Manglapus, former foreign secretary of the Philippines (who had an office next to mine at Cornell); and an article warning about the possibility that President Nixon might declare martial law to avoid impeachment. I also edited *Asian Voices in Christian Theology* (1976), the first book from a Protestant to be published by Orbis Books.

**Missiology Networks: IAMS and ASM**

Soon after returning to the United States from the Philippines, I was invited to join the committee of European missiologists...
headed by Olav Myklebust from Oslo and Hans-Werner Gensichen from Heidelberg that was planning to establish the International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS). The inaugural meeting was held at Driebegen, Netherlands, in the summer of 1972, at which time I was elected to the executive committee. I eventually served a three-year term as president. This ecumenical association has flourished, with 207 participants from 43 countries at its general assembly in Malaysia in 2004, and its journal Mission Studies is outstanding.

During my first summer at Scarritt College in 1970, I attended a meeting of the Association of Professors of Mission (APM) in North America. It was depressing to find only fourteen persons in attendance, mostly from seminaries of the mainline Protestant churches. I felt that if this poor turnout represented the future of mission studies in North America, we were in serious trouble.

Ralph Winter from Fuller Seminary shared my concerns, and over the next year or so we strategized about the need for a new organization that would encompass broader membership than the APM and be able to revitalize the discipline of mission studies. I invited APM to have its 1972 meeting at Scarritt College. A few months before the meeting, Ralph and I sent out a letter to the APM membership and to some evangelical and Roman Catholic professors, inviting them to a special consultation at Scarritt just prior to the APM meeting to consider the formation of a new organization focused on the advancement of mission studies in North America that would supplement the efforts of the APM. Ralph encouraged evangelicals to attend, and I cultivated those in the mainline churches related to the National Council of Churches.

Forty-five people, including quite a few members of APM, responded to our invitation and met on June 9–10 to consider the founding of the American Society of Missiology (ASM). Some feared the new organization would compete with and kill the APM. In the end, however, the participants unanimously agreed to proceed, and everyone signed up as charter members. When the APM met a few days later, its members not only supported the proposal but also contributed $250 from the APM treasury to help start the new organization. It was decided to hold the inaugural meeting of ASM a year later at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. I was elected chairman, Donald M. Wodarz, S.S.C., was vice-chairman, and Ralph Winter was secretary/treasurer of the continuation committee.

The inaugural meeting, in June 1973 on the theme “Salvation Today,” was attended by more than ninety persons. I was elected president, Wodarz vice-president, and Winter secretary/treasurer. Alan Tippett, of the Fuller School of World Mission, became the editor of ASM’s new journal, Missiology: An International Review, which began publication in January 1973. Tippett was a well-known missionary anthropologist, and his involvement facilitated the merging of the small but influential journal Practical Anthropology into Missiology, which gave Missiology a good start-up circulation. Today the annual meetings of the ASM regularly record an attendance of 140 to 150. ASM has also helped to revitalize the APM, which holds its meetings in conjunction with the ASM and normally draws about 80 participants.
Over the next couple of years several Catholic and Protestant mission agencies provided grants for a revolving fund that enabled ASM, in cooperation with Orbis Books, to publish the ASM Series, devoted to scholarly missiological monographs. The formation of the ASM, together with the journal and the book series, helped missiology gain recognition as an academic discipline in North America, and in 1976 ASM was granted membership in the Council on the Study of Religion.

In St. Louis in 1973, at the inaugural meeting of the ASM, I first met Thomas Stransky, president of the Paulist Fathers and formerly on the staff of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. We soon agreed to work together as coeditors of a series titled “Mission Trends”; five paperback volumes were published jointly by Paulist Press and Eerdmans and gained wide circulation. (Friends jokingly referred to it as the Tom and Jerry series.)

OMSC in Ventnor, New Jersey

Near the end of our year at Cornell, I was invited to speak at a conference at the Overseas Ministries Study Center (OMSC) in Ventnor, New Jersey, where my friend R. Pierce Beaver had recently come as director after retiring from the University of Chicago Divinity School. While I was there, he took me aside and asked if I would be willing to come and join him as associate director of the center. His invitation came as quite a surprise, and I was not sure this was what I wanted to do, as I thought I would prefer a teaching position on a seminary faculty. But it was an attractive setting for our family, the program focused on continuing education for missionaries, and Pierce was widely regarded as the doyen of American missiologists. He told me that he planned to stay only a couple more years and that it was likely that I could succeed him as director. So after Joanne and I talked it over, we decided this was a calling we should accept. That was 1974, which marked the beginning of twenty-six years at OMSC, first as associate director, then, following the retirement of Pierce in 1976, as director. I realized early on that OMSC, while small in size, had the potential to exercise some influence in the development and direction of the missionary movement and mission studies in North America.

As soon as I became the director of OMSC in 1976, I negotiated to assume the publication of the Occasional Bulletin from the Missionary Research Library in New York City. While it had a distinguished reputation, the Bulletin had languished in recent years, with a circulation of about 300, of which about half were complimentary subscriptions. We redesigned it into a quarterly journal, beginning in 1977, and began an aggressive campaign to increase the circulation. Within four years the circulation was over 5,000 worldwide, and we had changed the name to International Bulletin of Missionary Research. It continues as a signature ministry of OMSC, for the advancement of scholarship in the study of world mission.

When I came to OMSC, one of our goals was to make it more ecumenical and representative of the global church. Few Roman Catholics had ever been there, and 90 percent of the residents were North American missionaries on furlough, while only 10 percent were church workers from the non-Western world. Twenty-five years later this ratio was reversed: 10 percent of residents and program participants were North American personnel, and 90 percent were Asian and African missionaries and church workers, from many church traditions—mainline Protestants, evangelicals, Pentecostals, Roman Catholics, and an occasional Orthodox.

One of the personal benefits of this kind of involvement and association with a broad spectrum of mission personnel and agencies was that at one point in the 1980s, I was serving simultaneously on committees or commissions of the World Council of Churches, the Lausanne movement, and the United States Catholic Mission Association. I was eager to build bridges for the sake of unity and cooperation in the advancement of the Christian mission, and OMSC facilitated these efforts.

A Controversy Among Methodists

At the same time, I had a growing concern about the increasing relativism in mission theology that I observed in various Protestant mission agencies, especially in the General Board of Global Ministries of my own United Methodist Church. I had been educated in some of the premier liberal theological schools both in the United States and Europe. But I had also devoted much of my research and writing to developments in mission theology, and I recognized institutional malaise when I saw it. It was increasingly clear that evangelism was no longer on the agenda; mission was mainly social action and dialogue. Not surprisingly, the United Methodist Church had lost a million members in twenty years.

Private discussions over several years with staff in the Board of Global Ministries failed to effect any change, and I finally decided to “go public” with my concerns. In an address to some Methodist clergy in Dallas in October 1983, I proposed the creation of a new, alternative mission agency for United Methodists. My proposal was widely reported in the Methodist press, and suddenly I found myself at the center of a maelstrom in the church. It was an agonizing time for me personally, because until this point I had always been a part of the official system, whereas now I was challenging the structure.

Soon thereafter I was invited to speak to another gathering of pastors who shared my concern and wanted to do something about it. We met in November 1983 in St. Louis, Missouri, out of which came a decision to form a new unofficial agency known as the Mission Society for United Methodists. Those of us who participated were viewed as disloyal clergy, and some careers suffered. Fortunately I had the support of the OMSC board, and I served as a trustee of the Mission Society for the next twenty years. Today the Mission Society has over 170 missionaries serving in holistic ministries in 31 countries on five continents. Its combined annual budget of $9 million comes from churches and individuals nationwide. There is also a growing recognition that the Mission Society is not a threat to the denomination, but rather an agent for renewal in the church and for the advancement of the worldwide Christian mission. While my involvement in the creation of the Mission Society was difficult in many respects, it was one of the most rewarding experiences of my career, because I strongly believed that we were engaged in a struggle for the soul of the church. At the time of my retirement, I was deeply moved.
when, despite all that had happened, I received a certificate of appreciation from my bishop for my service as a minister of the United Methodist Church.

OMSC to New Haven, Connecticut

The continuing education program of OMSC flourished, but in Ventnor, New Jersey, we were too isolated from the academic and cultural resources of a great educational center. I felt we had to relocate the center to be close to a major university with a theological faculty that had a strong interest in mission and the global church.

After considering several options, the trustees of OMSC decided that New Haven, Connecticut, the home of Yale University, had the most to offer. Yale Divinity School had a distinguished tradition of professors of mission with Kenneth Scott Latourette and Charles Forman (who was vice president of our OMSC board). The Day Missions Collection in the Yale Divinity School Library offers the best collection of resources for mission studies in North America, perhaps in the world. We were fortunate to find and purchase attractive property just one and a half blocks from the Divinity School. Lesslie Newbigin gave the address at our dedication of the new facility on October 5, 1987, and David Bosch from South Africa taught the first seminar in the new location. With the expansion of our programs we added a spacious new building in 1999, aptly named Great Commission Hall.

I was greatly blessed at OMSC to work with three outstanding associate directors: Norman Horner, James Phillips, and Jonathan Bonk. Each of them brought remarkable gifts, vision, and vitality to the program, and we worked well together. Jonathan became my successor when I retired in 2000. We also benefited from the financial administration of Eugenia N. Dilg, tireless business manager of OMSC for twenty years.

The Biographical Dictionary

Sometime in 1990 I went to the Yale Divinity Library to look up some biographical information about an early missionary. I assumed I would find one or more biographical reference works about missionaries, but I found none. After consulting several colleagues and librarians, I came to realize that such a major comprehensive reference work of missionary biographies had never been published.

It was a project and opportunity that appealed to my interests: church history, biography, missions, editing, and publishing. Simon and Schuster Macmillan, one of the largest publishing firms in the United States, said it would be interested in publishing such a volume, and the Pew Charitable Trusts provided generous funding to support the project. Robert Coote, my longtime OMSC colleague, who had strong editing skills and journalistic experience, readily agreed to serve as assistant editor. Five years after we opened an editorial office for the project at OMSC, the Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions (1998) was published. It was a massive project with nearly a million words, with articles on 2,400 outstanding missionaries in the history of the church, written by 349 authors from 45 countries. Soon after it appeared, Bob Coote and I went to Rome and personally presented copies to Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Josef Tomko, who was head of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, known earlier as Propaganda Fide. A year later, Eerdmans Publishing Company brought out a paperback edition.

Thirty years earlier, in the editorial preface to the Concise Dictionary of the Christian World Mission, we said, “Only rarely is it possible for authors and editors to claim that they have done something that has never been done before. The editors of this Dictionary, however, believe that this is a claim they are entitled to make.” To be involved with two such pioneering projects was beyond my expectations, and was accomplished only with the generous cooperation and support of a great many colleagues.

In Retirement

Since retirement in June 2000, I have had opportunities to continue what I enjoy most: teaching and writing about the challenges facing the Christian mission today, especially in Asia, from Kazakhstan to Kota Kinabalu. I also enjoy serving on the Foundation for Theological Education in South East Asia, which provides assistance to theological schools in South East Asia and China. This enables me to keep in touch with some of the important developments that are taking place in the churches and seminaries in Asia.

I also take great pleasure and satisfaction in the fact that the IAMS, ASM, OMSC, the International Bulletin of Missionary Research, and the Mission Society for United Methodists—projects that have meant much to me—are all flourishing.

My pilgrimage continues. Joanne and I enjoy our children and their spouses, our grandchildren, and various opportunities to grow and serve the church in mission. Looking back over these years at a pilgrimage that has often taken me by surprise, I have learned to work and wait, with confidence that God will lead, and grateful that “the boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage” (Ps. 16:6).

IBMR Receives Associated Church Press Award of Excellence

When Christian magazine editors and publishers gathered in Nashville in April 2005 for the Associated Church Press convention, the International Bulletin of Missionary Research received the top Award of Excellence in the Theological Reflection: Long Format category, for the January 2004 feature “Converts or Proselytes? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church,” by Prof. Andrew F. Walls. The award was presented April 26. Congratulations, Andrew!