My Pilgrimage in Mission

W. Harold Fuller

Early in childhood, I wanted to write, but I had no idea my “mission” in life would be to do so. Father, a mission leader, lined our hallway with shelves of used books he would pick up for five cents apiece. Adventure, travelogues, and biographies tempted us six children to read ourselves into other worlds. At night I even found ways to read past “lights out”—with an extension cord smuggled under the blankets. Less tempting in our childhood were theological books and a two-volume set of Miller’s Church History. My four sisters set about earning the princely sum of fifty cents each if they read the latter work, but The Boy’s Own Annual adventure stories were about the limit for my brother and me, the tail end of the family.

Father, from Britain, had wanted to be a missionary to China, but in those days a heart condition ruled that out. Instead he pioneered on the Canadian prairies on horseback before ending up on the coast of British Columbia. When marriage and a family came along (I was born in Vancouver, October 24, 1925), he kept God’s call to missions ever prominent, and four of us children did become missionaries. As well, Dad was an editor, likely giving me the idea of writing. Anyway, my parents thought something in the arts was in my future because our family doctor, discovering a heart murmur, ruled out all robust pursuits; I was not supposed even to run upstairs.

So as daily rest periods dragged by, I dreamed of producing a book—“logically” starting by making the cover. However, that was as far as the five-year-old got. Instead, I later scribbled on the back of used envelopes or anything to hand (during the Great Depression, notepads were beyond family resources). Ideas often ended up as paper scraps bearing precious thoughts—some undecipherable because written in the night.

Meanwhile, “English” became a passion, making me a linguisitic pest to my sisters and brother. For instance, I crusaded against the word “got,” which I regarded as a lazy “wee word” that displaced description verbs; I listed some 156. But I became extreme, using substitutes such as “purloined” in place of the strong Anglo-Saxon “stole.” An elementary schoolteacher told me I should become a journalist—likely because when I did not know the answer to a question, I would resort to verbiage!

My first publishing break came in my teens, when in Toronto, to which we had moved in 1928, a little boy wandered past our house, crying. He had lost his way home; could I help? I took him to the local police, who soon located his parents. The Toronto Globe and Mail published my news item in their “Local” column. It amounted to no more than an inch of copy, but I was a published reporter—wow!

Meanwhile, my heart condition cleared up (another story of God’s provision). During World War II, in order to avoid army conscription, I enlisted in the Royal Canadian Navy. Fresh out of the cocoon of a puritan home, I suddenly found myself in the Battle of the North Atlantic, escorting food convoys across to Europe. As I wrote in a poem, it “changed the boy into a man,” but the turbulent world of a sailor’s life also revealed to me man’s sinful nature.

After discharge, I enrolled in a correspondence course in journalism. That helped me understand the five W’s (who, what, when, where, and why) and their changing priorities in news. The Toronto Star offered me a “copyboy” apprenticeship (obsolete these days), but I was headed out west—ostensibly to study at Prairie Bible Institute (PBI), in Three Hills, Alberta. I had announced that goal in my boyhood, when Prairie grads who passed through our home impressed me.

As I was leaving home, my father said, “Write to tell us when you’ve given everything over to the Lord!” He knew that I was in a rebellious mood. I stomped off, furious at his remark. My secret plan was to stay at PBI only until Christmas break and then head to the West Coast, volunteering on a merchant ship headed for Australia. “Then I can see the rest of the world!” I thought.

Only a Pile of Ashes?

But the first few months at PBI radically changed my plans—and my spiritual life. The Fall Conference speaker, Armin Gesswein, brought powerful messages on the Christian life. Students lined up for hours to confess their sins, until Principal L. E. Maxwell had to send everyone off to bed. I knew I was not right with God, but still rebelling, I despised the lined-up “repentants.” Instead, I sat out the sessions; but the Holy Spirit was sitting right beside me, gently convicting. After a sweaty struggle I gave up, next day writing home: “Harold Fuller is now only a pile of ashes!” At least, so I thought. It was a rather grandstand statement, for the ashes of one’s ego have a way of standing up again. I had much to learn about “the victorious life” as I stayed on for the full course.

Academically, Prairie’s excellent English course attracted me, and in my junior year I ended up grading the essay papers of seniors (they never knew!). PBI’s Sunday radio broadcasts gave me the outlet of writing (and narrating) the weekly children’s story. Pumped up with ambition, I confided to Principal Leslie Maxwell my desire to follow a writing career. “Forget it, young man!” the soldierly Maxwell barked. “First get something to write about.” Years later, “L.E.” told me he never so counseled anyone else, but somehow he sensed I was putting ambition ahead of personal walk with God.

Maxwell was right. Writing for the public could feed one’s ego: what power I would have as the public read my thoughts! I remembered my father’s advice, “We must become willing for...
God even to place us on the shelf, if that would glorify him." *On the shelf?* That was unthinkable! But then the Lord’s message to Jeremiah spoke to me: “Should you then seek great things for yourself? Seek them not” (Jer. 45:5 NIV). The most God promised was to protect the prophet’s life during Israel’s impending banishment. I struggled until finally I said, “OK, Lord, take my writing ambition. I put it to death under your cross. I will not seek a writing assignment until you resurrect it.” In a great mansion, I realized, both the ornamental vase on the shelf and the serviceable pitcher on the table glorified their designer. Instead of trying to impress readers with my writing, I needed to point them to the Eternal Word.

After graduation, I filled in as editor of my father’s mission paper while he was overseas. In 1951 I applied to the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM, which now stands for Serving in Mission) for general service in Africa. Arriving in Nigeria, I buried myself in language study, exploring new words and looking forward to teaching literacy in some rural village.

I did not know that our language teacher hoped I would take her place when she retired. But neither did I know that SIM had just launched *African Challenge*, a magazine to reach Africa’s burgeoning readership. The founding editor was searching for anyone who could write, to help staff the magazine. SIM came across the papers of a newly arrived missionary who had actually studied journalism. "Send him here!" the Challenge editor cried. And so I found myself at the magazine’s office in Nigeria’s bustling port city, Lagos, instead of in a rural village.

Facing Goliath

I ended up assisting in producing a magazine that combined news, general interest articles, features for women and children, a fiction story, and educational materials, as well as Bible studies. It was an instant seller. Teachers ordered bulk quantities because schools lacked teaching materials. News vendors sold *Challenge* along with the daily newspapers. Six months later the editor left over a disagreement with the business manager, predicting the magazine would fail within a month. I thought he might be right. My teenage cockiness had gone. When the mission asked if I could handle editorship, I could only reply like David: “God, who enabled me to slay the lion, can help me handle Goliath.”

The magazine did survive, its circulation growing astronomically for an African monthly in the mid-1900s. It gained the highest circulation on the continent until a secular monthly overtook it in South Africa, where literacy was greater. If I had ever wanted to write, now a publishing tsunami inundated me. As each issue’s deadline approached, I would work through the night, often lying across my desk to catch forty winks.

Writing was now a question not of pride but of survival. In fact, my name never appeared in *African Challenge*.

Themes spoke to readers “right where they lived.” For instance, most believed that witchcraft caused such phenomena as solar eclipses. They were amazed when we published a cover photo of a total eclipse weeks before one did take place (we used a photo from an earlier eclipse elsewhere). Inside the magazine, diagrams and explanations enabled teachers to give a science lesson—and articles presented the truth of the Creator-God’s love for humankind.

One of our most popular issues featured the topic of juju, occult magic and spiritism. The cover featured a juju mask, a grotesque distortion that could strike fear into anyone threatened by it. Fetishes provided a lucrative livelihood for witch doctors and a powerful way for chiefs to keep their subjects in order. Christians believed that juju had satanic power. Through Bible studies and personal stories, we emphasized the greater power of the living God and protection for followers of Jesus Christ. That juju issue featured the testimonies of African Christians who had found deliverance from Satan’s power and who had inner peace. Readers flooded our counseling department with positive response, including professions of conversion.

*Challenge* had the privilege of promoting Billy Graham’s 1960 Nigeria Crusade. For the meetings, we published a cover photo of the evangelist with a message by him and a pullout section of crusade songs. The issue sold out early. Graham and his team blessed our staff with a personal visit. Among other evangelical leaders who dropped in were Carl Henry, cofounder of Christian-ity Today, and Kenneth Taylor, who paraphrased *The Living Bible* and founded Tyndale House Publishers. Such leaders maintained an ongoing interest in SIM’s literature ministries. Later, when I became SIM director for Nigeria and Ghana, Kenneth Hansen, cofounder of ServiceMaster, on three occasions came to teach our pastors and missionaries biblical principles of time and organizational management.

Reaching Readers at All Levels

In the early years of *Challenge*, I would not have had time for romance—or a wife could have sued me for desertion! But as we developed staff, I developed an interest in the business manager’s secretary, who also happened to hail from Canada. I proposed to Lorna Parrott on a rain-forest trail (poor girl—what could she say?), and later an African pastor “tied the knot” for us. Canada’s *Weekend* magazine, a supplement in twenty-six newspapers across Canada, carried a three-page photo spread under the title, “The Bride Wore White in Darkest Africa.” (Such a title would never be used these days!) Four years later, the same national magazine ran a cover photo story with a more positive heading: “Canadian Boy Calls Nigeria Home: An ordinary child in a Christian home, three-year-old David Fuller is helping his parent’s missionary work.”

While Nigerians contribute much to the spread of the Gospel in their nation and other nations, unfortunately to this day “Nigeria” is synonymous with corruption. However, we had many upstanding African friends; one of them started the Anti- Bribery Crusade (ABC) and made me its chaplain. *Challenge* became known for its stand, so much so that when immigration
or police at a checkpoint demanded a cash bribe, I would casually produce a copy of the magazine—and that was the end of the confrontation.

In the mid ’90s, full-color Communist literature was also available on the street, but Challenge readers recognized that the Christian magazine was more relevant to their lives. Not only students and the “man on the street” read the magazine; politicians and government leaders also were regular subscribers. The premier of Nigeria’s Western Region, Obafemi Awolowo, complained to our agent that his children had run off with his copy of the Christmas issue—could he please have another? Nigeria’s first president, Nnamdi Azikiwe, was a regular reader, as was General Yakubu Gowon, who led the nation during its civil war.

In Ghana, a copy of Challenge helped change the life—and career—of William Ofori-Attah, one of Kwame Nkrumah’s cabinet ministers who fell from the president’s grace and landed in prison. Guards allowed the prisoner only his reading glasses, a copy of Challenge, and a Bible supplied by the Gideons—all harmlessly, the guards reckoned. “Until then, I had never known the way of salvation,” Ofori-Attah told us later. “But there in my cell, all my sins came before me—and I cried out to the Lord to save me.” After a coup freed him, he became chair of our Ghana cell, all my sins came before me—and I cried out to the Lord to save me.” Did anything change? You bet—giving up smugness, he became a gentle and trustworthy employee. Lorna and I confers with editor W. Harold Fuller about a special crusade issue of African Challenge.

Of course, publishing always has its dangers. In Africa a copy of Daily Times, a newspaper, was active at all levels, including that of a burly smuggler guilty of manslaughter. After reading a copy of Challenge, he found my office, knelt on the floor, and as simply as a child asked “Jesus into his heart.” Did anything change? You bet—giving up smuggling, he became a gentle and trustworthy employee. Lorna and I treasure a photo of him cuddling our two young children, David and Rebecca, in his massive arms.

I enjoyed other writing opportunities, such as producing the weekly “Pastor’s Column” for Nigeria’s largest circulation newspaper, Daily Times. A twist happened when the paper’s nationalistic columnist wrote scathing articles attacking African Challenge for “taking jobs from Nigerians.” I invited “Jeremy” to our home for refreshments to discuss the misrepresentations: our foreign members of staff were actually unpaid missionaries, training Nigerians to take over their work. “Thank you for explaining,” the columnist said as he left. “You will not see any more articles attacking the Challenge.” Indeed, he became a friend.

French-language countries shared borders with English-speaking nations in Africa, and soon we were besieged with pleas for a French edition. SIM recruited francophone staff, who started the sister publication Champion. We also published African vernacular editions. Wheaton-based Evangelical Literature Overseas reckoned that Challenge inspired a dozen similarly formatted publications globally. World Evangelization Crusade (WEC) wrote to ask if we minded their launching the Caribbean Challenge. We readily agreed; even though African Challenge had been selling in the Caribbean, we knew that a local magazine would be more effective.

As we trained Nigerian staff, SIM asked me in 1966 to transfer to mission administration. I reluctantly agreed, provided I could also continue some writing. I was able to start a contemporary magazine for SIM’s home constituencies, SIMNow. Later, while serving as deputy to International Director Ian Hay, I also filled the slot of international publications secretary/director. While in Africa, I had been a correspondent for Christianity Today. But based back in the West, besides editing SIMNow I found opportunity to write for publications such as Evangelical Missions Quarterly, Christian Week, and Faith Today. I became editorial adviser to the editor of Faith Today, and in 1996 that magazine awarded me its annual Leslie Tarr award for “outstanding contribution to the field of writing.” In 1989 Biola University awarded me an honorary doctor of letters, partly in recognition of my book, Mission-Church Relations.

Completing “That Book”

Although I had written countless articles, what about that book I had dreamed of writing? My first, a travelogue on Africa, came out in 1968. Among others was one on South America (1990). I recently completed my twelfth—a research tome on Asia, but written as a travelogue. Although Solomon said, “Of the writing of books there is no end,” my wife, Lorna, says this must be my last. “How about our memoirs?” I ask mischievously. A special bonus of our marriage is the skill Lorna has picked up in writing and editing. We critique each other’s work—and still stay together!

In publishing for new literates, one fear I harbored was losing skill with the English language. Actually, the opposite happened. Communicating to new literates in simple vocabulary and syntax was more important than being “literary.” I had to keep to fairly simple English (although not as limited as Basic English, which, in a pinch, can be written using only 650 different words). If I used a word that a new literate might not have learned, I made sure context would reveal the meaning—thus increasing the reader’s vocabulary. Words and constructions must not have double meanings. For instance, what would a news headline such as “Graham Draws Large Crowds” mean? Was he an artist?

Our grandchildren will tell you that word games have been the result, as we purposely play with double meanings. “Fuss pot!” they might tease me. Campus Crusade for Christ’s Bill Bright had his own description. “You’re a wordsmith!” he once commented as I fine-tuned a purpose statement for CCC.

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being asked to pray for the general secretary of the World Council of Churches (who was present) in Geneva, where I met with the Conference of Secretaries of Christian World Communions.

Mongolia presented my most challenging assignment in teaching writing techniques to budding writers. Until a couple of years before my visit, journalists had been limited to parroting official Communist handouts. Without these prompts, journalists floundered. Some sought to make headlines by resorting to character assassination. My challenge was to show them how to ferret out newsworthy items while still maintaining objectivity. How could those reporters interest a noncaptive readership? My formula was simple: “Capture a reader’s attention within the first sentence—the first five words, if possible. Then hold on to his hand to the end.”

One of the editing exercises I assigned was to reduce an article to a single paragraph. I had had to do that myself at times. It was not as drastic as editing and reducing for publication the twenty-three papers presented by speakers at the 1997 international conference of the World Evangelical Alliance. For that I had to reduce papers of some 7,000 words to a limit of 2,500 each, yet preserve the speaker’s persona and intent. Ravi Zacharias was one of the presenters who graciously approved my drastic condensation of his excellent paper.

A different challenge was editing a treatise by Dr. Ken Gamble, director of International Health Services, Toronto, as a chapter for a professional volume on missionary health care. “Please make it readable,” the good doctor asked me. It was a challenge for a nonmedical layman to preserve medical expertise minus professional jargon.

So although God had to cut my early ambitions down to size through the sheer pressures of writing and editing, he has in turn allowed me to realize far more than I dreamed of. When I offered for missionary service in Africa, I had become willing to spend my life in some remote village, sharing God’s Word and mentoring believers. Instead, the people on six continents and numerous islands of the sea have been my mentors, as I have learned about life in many colors and watched people respond to the Word of God. I myself have had to learn first, before leading seminars not only in communicating but also in missiology, management, and leadership skills.

Participation in the Study Group Leaders’ Forum, held twice a year by the Overseas Ministries Study Center and now called the Mission Leadership Forum, has been a growth experience for me. Ever since I joined the group shortly after its inauguration in the late 1970s, it has broadened my understanding of mission. Church and mission practitioners from a wide cross section of disciplines around the globe have shared invaluable insights. The biggest benefit, though, has been the opportunity to discuss and examine each other’s conclusions. Doing that in a refreshing spirit of Christian fellowship, aided by Scripture exposition, adds up to meaningful peer interaction. I was glad to write a brief history of the study group for its twentieth anniversary, at Gerald Anderson’s request.

What Has All This Taught Me?

I can think of five simple conclusions to my story:

- We can never outgive God. Turning our lives over to him does not result in loss but in much personal blessing.
- God sometimes has to bring us face-to-face with seeming calamity to make us trust.
- The Lord still calms life’s storms with his “Peace, be still!”
- Nothing God gives us—whether talent, experience, or relationship—is wasted.
- Nearing the end of my own life, I realize that, as Isaiah said, we do indeed “fade as a leaf.”

Many younger people do not recognize the names of church leaders and Christian politicians who have meant so much to my generation. But this is as it should be; we are not immortal icons. The Lord raises up his anointed servants for each generation’s tasks, and he it is who continues his work.

Over the past eighty-plus years, pursuits other than writing have also stretched me, but they have enriched my writing. Now I can only say, “Thank you, Lord, for your Word. And thank you for giving us the gift of language to make known the Living Word!”

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