One of the memorable moments during the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910 was the heartfelt cry of V. S. Azariah, a young, newly ordained Anglican from South India. In an evening address, Azariah identified racism and missionary paternalism as chief barriers to Christian life. Without all races working together, the full glory of Christ would not be realized. Only cross-racial friendships could reveal the image of the Lord. Speaking to the missionaries present, Azariah said, “Through all the ages to come the Indian Church will rise up in gratitude to attest the heroism and self-denying labours of the missionary body. You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. We also ask for love. Give us FRIENDS!”

The traditional reading of Azariah’s famous plea has focused on its judgmental and prophetic character: the struggle against racism and paternalism were major themes in twentieth-century ecumenical Protestant missions. But another interpretation of Azariah’s speech is to underscore its optimism and hope for change. Azariah believed in cross-cultural friendship because he knew its power firsthand. Although the twentieth-century mission movement has rightly been judged defective when set against the ideals it proclaimed, unless Azariah’s glass is seen as half full rather than half empty, it is impossible to understand how Christianity spread across cultures in the twentieth century.

One key that unlocks the history of missions from the 1910 World Missionary Conference to the mid-twentieth century is that of cross-cultural friendships. Christian community depends upon personal relationships, and missionary failures can be traced to
their lack. Cross-cultural friendship is a hidden component of twentieth-century missions. Azariah’s plea “Give us FRIENDS!” was prophetic because, despite human limitations, friendship made possible Christian community.

This article examines the theme of cross-cultural friendship during the early to mid-twentieth century, a formative period for the growth of Christianity as a multicultural reality. “World friendship” emerged as a mission focus after World War I. Cross-cultural friendships deepened sympathy for multiple cultures and religious practices on the part of missionaries. In turn, their efforts to communicate the richness of Asian and African Christianity back to Western supporters furthered the goal of Christian solidarity across cultural differences. For its practitioners, friendship stood as a bold witness against the racism of the age of Western colonialism.

By mid-century, with the end of European colonialism, organizational trends like “partnership” and “partners in mission” replaced friendship as a suitable ethic for a postcolonial age. Among the questions to consider for further research is whether it is realistic to reemphasize “friendship” as a contemporary framework for relational mission in today’s globalized world.

World Friendship as Cross-Cultural Discourse

The 1910 Edinburgh Conference was a milestone in the swelling chorus of appeals for personal relationships as an alternative to the Western superiority complex that accompanied European colonialism. In preparatory papers, for example, missionary Robert Hume noted, “The first word of the Gospel is the word Brother, never the word Sinner, nor even the word Christ, as is sometimes imagined.” The youth movements that fed the missionary societies emphasized cross-cultural friendships through the founding of the World’s Student Christian Federation (WSCF) in 1895. The egalitarian vision of the younger generation was expressed in the international work of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) and its groundbreaking interracialism. The YMCA sent young Westerners to India and China with the express purpose of crossing cultural boundaries and training indigenous leaders. As a parachurch auxiliary to church missions rather than a church-centered mission, youth work was not restricted by colonial traditions such as large mission stations and British class structures. The YMCA introduced youth centers, organized sports, Bible studies, and related enterprises into Christian colleges and strategic cities throughout Asia. In 1905 YMCA secretary Sherwood Eddy called a meeting of young men in Madras, India, from which was born the National Missionary Society, an indigenous Protestant interdenomina
tional agency. V. S. Azariah became general secretary of the new society, which drew together the promising young Indian leaders of various denominations. Among them was K. T. Paul, soon to become organizing secretary. Despite the interracial origins of the new society, Paul, Azariah, and other Indian leaders never knew how they would be treated by the older missionaries. Stated Paul’s biographer, “Those were the days when many missionaries were sahibs and kept the Indian in his place.” The uncertainty over whether he would be invited to sit down in a missionary living room provoked Azariah’s remarks in Edinburgh. Another YMCA foreign secretary in India, Scottish missionary J. N. Farquhar, wrote, “We must therefore be most careful to treat every man with the supreme courtesy which Christ would show him. . . . It is also right and wise to seek the closest social relations possible. Christ’s example is here decisive.” When he criticized missionary racism in his speech at Edinburgh, Azariah was self-consciously representing the newer ideals of cross-cultural friendship as practiced in the YMCA.

It is important to remember that the life task of the chairman of Edinburgh 1910, John R. Mott, was coordinating the expansion of global Christian youth movements. In 1912, as representative of the “Continuation Committee,” Mott traveled around the world to organize Christian councils. Everywhere he went, he mentored young men who were rising through the ranks of international Christian leadership. In the evenings he addressed groups of students. K. T. Paul accompanied Mott throughout India and, in 1916, became the first Indian national secretary of the YMCA. This post put him in charge of all the European and Indian leaders of Christian youth work. When the 250 YMCA secretaries met in conference in 1917, one of the British secretaries recalled, “The first thing that struck me was the complete absence of any racial sense. There were Indians of all hues, Britishers, Americans, Swiss and so on, and yet we met each other simply as men and brothers and never seemed to feel that we belonged to different races. . . . In India, with its distinct racial cleavages even in the Christian community, this was a remarkable and significant thing.”

World War I dealt a blow to the growing youth networks of Christian cross-cultural friendships. After the war, however, the determination to overcome racial and national divisions was so strong that it is not an overstatement to designate the 1920s the era of “world friendship.” Women’s missionary societies adopted it as a key rationale for their work, replacing the older maternalistic rationale “woman’s work for woman.” The WSCF started “European Student Relief” to raise money and assist homeless and poverty-stricken students. By 1922 traveling delegations of students were sent on “pilgrimages of friendship” around Europe, and later to Japan and Mexico.

When the Student Volunteer Movement met in 1923 in Indianapolis, Indiana, themes of Christian brotherhood, internationalism, and missionary service predominated. One of the most impressive speakers at the conference was C. Y. Cheng, honorary secretary of the National Christian Council of China. Cheng addressed the intense desire in China to learn about what made Western nations strong, and for youth to be educated. Cheng described the work of the Chinese Home Missionary Society, an indigenous agency supported by Chinese around the country. But the high point of Cheng’s speech to the Student Volunteers was when he described what kinds of foreign Christian workers were needed in China. While missionaries would be welcomed as disciples of Jesus, as big brothers, as yoke-fellows, and as seekers after truth, the most important quality of the missionary was as friend. Said Cheng, “Friend is a big word, especially as it appears in the eyes of the Oriental people. . . . He who comes to us with the spirit of a friend through and through will ultimately win our hearts. . . . We believe it is this friendship, which is another word for Christian love, which will solve many of our mission problems, and will lead the work to a more successful issue.”

The establishment of world friendship as a major mission priority in the 1920s was itself a cross-cultural and ecumenical effort that involved women’s mission societies, student leaders,
indigenous YMCA and Christian Council leaders, and missionaries. One reason for its broad appeal was its compatibility both with Christian values and with African and Asian ethical systems.\(^{3}\) As the words of Azariah, Paul, Farquhar, Cheng, and others show, the discourse of friendship could be embraced from the vantage point of multiple cultural backgrounds.

### Friendships as Bridges Across Cultures

World friendship was powerful both as rhetoric and as ideal from 1910 forward. But the credibility of Christian fellowship rested on concrete, specific cross-cultural friendships between Westerners and indigenous Christians. Most interpersonal relationships are invisible to history, buried by the details of institution-building, conference reports, and political controversies. Their details must be teased out of the mass of memoirs and correspondence.

A good place to begin is with an extensive quotation from Edwin Smith, one of the greatest missionary ethnographers of the early twentieth century, Bible translator, and founder of the journal Africa. Smith was one of the first scholars to make sustained arguments for the importance of learning African languages and cultures, and for viewing African religions as vehicles of God’s grace. The following quotation concludes his book The Golden Stool, published in 1926 as a plea for deeper understanding of African cultures.

> While these final words are being written there hangs before me in the place of honour in my study the enlarged photograph of Mungalo—one of my friends to whom I dedicate this book. He was an old chief of the Ba-ila at Kasenga ... he remained pagan to the end yet if ever two men loved each other they were Mungalo and myself. In a land where the term mulongo (“friend”) is sacred, he and I were “friends.” Nobody ever spoke to me of Mungalo by name: it was always “thy friend.” I never spoke of him by name: it was always “my friend,” and everybody understood. I can hear even now his ringing tones as he announced himself outside my door by calling me: Mulongwangu! (“my friend”); and can see his rugged countenance lighten as he welcomed me to his home with the same word: Mulongwangu! Heaven itself will be something less than heaven if I do not hear that greeting—Mulongwangu!—when I enter the pearly gates. We spent long hours together, whether in his hut, or in my study, or out in the open. He was a rare companion—the best raconteur I ever knew. We talked freely and frankly, discussing all things on earth and in heaven, so far as our limited experience would allow. Pagan as he was, I rarely have known a man of finer reverence. He was deeply religious. Through the window of Mungalo’s soul thrown open so unreservedly to me, I saw the African in all his weakness and strength: a man of like passions with ourselves, capable, as we are, of depths of infancy and of altitudes of nobility. Anyone who has enjoyed the intimate friendship of one African can never think meanly of the race. They have a genius for friendship; they excel in loyalty. No people perhaps are more capable of a deep and constant fidelity to those whom they love—for their sake they will go through fire and water and brave a thousand deaths.\(^{13}\)

Edwin Smith’s praise for his friend Mungalo provides a glimpse of the understanding of indigenous culture achieved by exemplary missionary partners. Smith pointed out that the secret to respecting the humanity and gifts of African races and cultures was friendship with a particular African, and that a non-Christian, Smith’s life witness in a context of colonialism unveiled the role of friendship as broker for cross-cultural sympathy and understanding.

A very different African missionary from Edwin Smith was Godfrey Callaway, for fifty years a High Church Anglican celibate among the Xhosa in Transkei. While Callaway’s voluminous writings evince the romantic paternalism of his social class, they also reflect decades of experiencing and defending Xhosa culture through rich relationships with native priests and church members, and of presenting African Christians as bridges “of mutual understanding and respect” between blacks and whites.\(^{14}\) In 1926 Callaway published The Fellowship of the Veld, a collection of essays about African notions of fellowship. Callaway was enthralled by perceived similarities between monastic life and the African communalism he experienced, both of which implicitly criticized modern Western civilization. Callaway’s idealized descriptions of African fellowship with nature, neighbor, and family were for him the models of church life. He was one of the first to explore the concept of ubuntu, a Xhosa word he translated as the dignity of human personhood that must be respected as a gift from God. The sense of neighborliness, of care for others, was the essence of both ubuntu and of the body of Christ. Toward the end of the book, Callaway described the final days of Ellen Mhlahlela, a member of his church choir. As she sat in the hospital—a place of fear and unfamiliarity for most—Ellen became an interpreter of friendship as she mediated between nurses and patients, and between English speakers and Xhosa speakers.\(^{15}\) For Callaway, African ubuntu and the ethics of Jesus converged into “friendship,” a sign of hope for the future of the church.

For early twentieth-century missionaries like Edwin Smith and Godfrey Callaway, friendships with Africans narrated their journeys of self-discovery. Appreciation for other cultures and religions accompanied the deepening spiral of their cross-cultural relationships. These interwoven themes were also prominent in the autobiography of American Methodist Fletcher S. Brockman, I Discover the Orient, published in 1935. Brockman recounted how he began his twenty-five years of mission work among Chinese students while prejudiced against Chinese religions and culture as forms of heathenism. Through a series of “intimate” relationships with Chinese friends, he renounced such views. Just as Callaway came to see his own religious life reflected in African ubuntu, so Brockman came to see his own family ethical code illumined by Confucianism’s focus on ethical relationships. After surviving the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, Brockman attended a conference in which Chinese Christians testified to the faithful witness of Christians under torture by the Boxers. One of his associates in youth work described the murder of his pastor father, mother, and sister in a rural village. Rather than return to the university, Chen Wei-ping announced, “I must go to serve the people in that village. I must call together those who killed my father, mother, and sister. I must tell them that I love them and have come to serve them in the place of my father. I must go there.”\(^{16}\) Hearing this testimony was a turning point for Brockman, as he came to see the apologetic for Christian missions not through doctrine but through the lives of Chinese Christians themselves.

As thousands of Chinese students poured into Japan to learn the ways of modernization, Brockman witnessed Japanese and Chinese youth leaders using Christianity as a way to unite across ethnic and political differences. In his own work among Chinese students, Brockman relied on close relationships with Chinese partners, including C. T. Wang (Wang Zhengting),\(^{17}\) for whom he raised a four-year scholarship to study in the United States. Other close friends included his college friend and fellow Southern Methodist Korean leader Yun Chi-ho, and Charlie Soong, the father of Mrs. Chiang Kai-shek and Mrs. Sun Yat-sen. Through his YMCA work, Brockman mentored Jimmy Yen (Yan Yangchu), who conducted the first successful mass literacy campaign among Chinese peasants after World War I. Ultimately Brockman came
to believe that the biblical position was not to root out China’s Confucian heritage but to graft Christianity into it. “The Bible had showed me unmistakably the real mission of Christianity to China: it must save the best in her civilization . . . it must erect on these foundations the Kingdom of Christ, the only kind of social entity that can save the world.”

Another moving missionary autobiography that focuses on the importance of embracing friendship as a path to social progress is that of Presbyterian John Leighton Stuart, founding president of Yenching University in 1919. Influenced by the example of Fletcher Brockman and other youth workers, Stuart insisted on Chinese and foreign equality in the founding and running of the university. Unlike most mission institutions of the day, Yenching workers of all nationalities lived side by side in identical houses. Stuart cultivated close friendships with Chinese Christians, who stood by him in challenging situations such as the Japanese occupation and his own imprisonment during the Second World War. Stuart recognized that “the best security in China lies in personal relationships” and that Chinese “civilization, moral philosophy and ethical standards are founded on human relationships.”

In 1946 Stuart became the last U.S. ambassador to China before relations broke down between the countries. Reflecting on the Communist sweep over China and its devastating impact on Christian life, he retained hope for the future based on the strength of personal friendships between Chinese and Americans. He attributed his deep understanding of Chinese people to his thirty-year relationship with former Yenching student Philip Fugh. After suffering a stroke, Stuart lived for the last decade of his life, until his death in 1962, with the Fugh family and was cared for by his loyal Chinese friend. In 2008, after decades of effort against Communist opposition, Fugh’s son finally succeeded in having Stuart’s ashes returned to his birthplace in Hangzhou.

Some of the strongest documentary evidence of early twentieth-century respect and friendship between missionaries and indigenous Christian leaders is sensitive biographies written by the missionary partners. These biographies differ from the traditional missionary vignette of the so-called native Christian by their full treatment, careful biographical reconstruction, and copious quotations that gave voice to the subject. In 1929 Edwin Smith opened his biography of Ghanaian educational leader J. E. K. Aggrey with the words, “I was convinced . . . that the remarkable story of my friend’s life should be told to the world, chiefly because of what he was in himself and also because of the light it throws upon problems which vex our minds in these days.” The book contains tributes from black and white friends in illustration of Aggrey’s parable of the piano keys: “You can play a tune of sorts on the white keys, and you can play a tune of sorts on the black keys, but for harmony you must use both the black and the white.”

H. A. Popley’s biography of K. T. Paul, published in 1938, begins with a moving tribute to their twenty-year friendship and the close affection between them. Popley sensitively portrays the ambiguity of cross-cultural friendship in Paul’s loyalties—torn between his Indian nationalist aspirations and his British friends.

What these and other biographies reveal is how missionaries and indigenous Christians shared a cross-cultural vision of the kingdom of God grounded in friendship. Though in lesser number than missionary biographers, Asian and Latin American Christians also paid tribute to their missionary partners by writing about them. Mexican-American mission leader and ecumenist Alberto Rembao, for example, had his life saved by a missionary who smuggled him across the border after the failed Mexican revolution of 1910–11, and then he was educated with mission support. He wrote a biography of another missionary, Alfred Clarence Wright, published as Horseman of the Lord (1951). Wright educated many Mexican revolutionaries at his Colegio Internacional, founded in 1901 in Guadalajara. Rembao remembered the solidarity of the Wrights with the Mexican people during their struggles, and he filled his brief biography with Mexican testimonies to how the Wrights nurtured three generations of Mexican evangelicals. Another moving tribute to a missionary friend was A Journey of a Thousand Miles (1979), by Osaka YMCA secretary Tsutae Nara, about Presbyterian missionary John D. Hayes during the Second World War. Together Nara and Hayes attempted to preserve peace and create reconciliation among races in occupied China.

Lest the motif of world friendship be seen as limited to Anglo-American missionaries, it is important to mention how German mission theorists in the same period underscored the importance of personal relationships as key to the success of German missions. German financial resources were typically inferior to those of their British counterparts, and German missions lacked the extensive institutional infrastructure of schools and hospitals that characterized Anglo missions. In contrast, German missionaries prided themselves on their closeness to the people, often described as paternalism, or fatherlike relationship between the missionary and the people. The Lutheran director of the Berlin Mission, Siegfried Knak, thus described the close affection Christians, pagans, and Muslims held for the Berlin Mission in Tanzania, despite being outnumbered by Roman Catholic missionaries with superior resources:

The riddle is solved when one learns that the work there was begun by a missionary who was himself the son of a missionary in Africa and who had unusual linguistic gifts. He spoke their language like one of themselves, adapted himself to their customs, gave new life to some of their half-forgotten tunes by setting them [to] Christian words, and more than once concluded a “blood-brotherhood,” the most solemn bond that the Africans there recognize, with important chiefs. At the sound of his native name “Mwakikato” every eye would light up with joy even fifteen years later when I visited that area. Paul aroused just such a deep love among the Galatians, so that they would have been willing to pluck out an eye if it would help him. This early Christian relationship of tender love between spiritual father and his spiritual children has been a special grace of God vouchsafed to the German missions.

Although paternalism lacked the equality assumed by modern ideals of friendship, the incarnational pattern of adaptation to local lifeways was a relational form of mission practiced as mission policy by many German missionaries in the early twentieth century.

Giving Voices to the Voiceless

One of the least appreciated components of twentieth-century world Christianity was the sustained effort of missionaries to give voices to their non-Western partners and to promote their concerns before Western audiences. Postcolonial scholars have condemned attempts by Westerners to represent the views of others by raising objections to “Orientalism” and asking whether the “subaltern” can really speak. If a Westerner is the one who names, describes, or translates the words of others, can indigenous voices be truly heard, or are they just reflections of the Westerners’ self-identity? If these questions are refracted through the lens of cross-cultural friendship, it becomes apparent that by the
1920s some missionaries saw friendship as a way to empower indigenous partners and persons marginalized by colonialism. Although missionaries were not free of self-interest, the hidden history of cross-cultural relationships nevertheless reveals growing momentum toward the construction of Christianity as a multicultural world religion. Friendships between Western missionaries and persons of other cultures cannot be dismissed out of hand as a form of colonial exploitation. In contrast to popular missionary literature that has used the missionized as an object for its own purposes of fund-raising or scholarly theorizing, the post–World War I missionary ethic of friendship sometimes created investment in the “other” to the point of extreme self-sacrifice.

The effort of Congregationalist Frank Laubach to bring literacy to the world’s “silent billion” stands as a metaphor for the social impact of empowering the voiceless. Laubach was well known as the founder of the world literacy movement. By the time he died in 1970, he had introduced his “each one teach one” and keyword method into 103 countries and 313 languages. His passion to teach the illiterate billion people of the world grew from his deep mystical faith and commitment to “abundant life” for all. He felt called to the Muslim Moros in Mindanao but believed himself unable to reach this hostile population. In despair, he heard God telling him that his own sense of racial superiority was blocking his ministry and that he needed to love the Moros as God loved them. Laubach then began studying the Qur’an and the Moro language and culture. In his attempt to understand Maranao, he put the language into Romanized script and developed a method of teaching basic phonetic syllables through identification of key words. This work took place over many months of experimentation. By 1932 Laubach and his team were producing 3,000 newly literate adults a month. His method spread throughout the Philippines and beyond. In 1935 he departed for his first world tour to spread his literacy method.

Laubach shared the importance of friendship in the development of his method in a student address and radio interview he gave during his first world tour. He told his listeners that the only way to be in mission was to follow Jesus into the neediest places and to “let human need break your heart.” The years spent among the Muslim Moros teaching them to read created deep friendships. When mission money to pay literacy teachers dried up, one local chief came up with the idea that each learner should commit himself to teach others. When the Laubachs left the Moros to go abroad, Frank recalled:

Four truckloads of Moro priests and datos and sultans followed us to the sea coast. They crowded the deck. After they had made speeches awhile, they selected the chief imam to pray. Very reverently they held out their hands as they prayed that this American friend whom they had helped to make the easiest method of teaching in the world should have the blessing of Allah as he started across the world teaching the MORO method to all the illiterate nations of the world. They all wanted to go with me!

As they kissed me good bye with their Arab whiskers, many of them wept as they said, “We will pray for you in every mosque in Lanao.” Then they bowed reverently as our Christian church members prayed and sang, “God be with you till we meet again.”

Around the world, missionaries and indigenous workers gathered to learn the method Laubach had developed in close relationship with the Moros. His correspondence and newsletters showed how his mystical unity with God and love for the Moros launched a wide network of passionate workers for worldwide literacy. Laubach considered his literacy movement a form of empowerment and counterwitness against racism. He warned prospective missionaries that racial exclusivism by Westerners created a burden of hypocrisy that undercut the spread of the Gospel.

Literacy campaigns are only one example of the important ways that North American missionaries worked cooperatively with indigenous partners to give them voice. By the 1930s Western mission presses were sponsoring increasing numbers of publications written by non-Western Christians. The U.S. women’s missionary movement produced study books written by Japanese and Chinese women. In its first fifty years the Committee on Christian Literature to Nonwestern Women and Children published twenty-seven magazines in different languages. With the founding of the Federal Council of Churches’ Friendship Press in the 1920s, books about and by Asian Christian leaders were mainstreamed into Western popular consciousness. Production of Christian literature by and for indigenous Christians facilitated cross-cultural communication, made Western audiences aware of the important contributions of non-Western Christians, and created Christian understanding across cultural divides.

Some missionaries lived out their missionary vocations through devoting their lives to assisting non-Western friends to reach a Western audience. These missionaries saw themselves as bridges between cultures and as advocates of international concerns to a nationalistic American constituency.

One of the most important examples of symbiotic friendship across cultures occurred between Japanese social leader Toyohiko Kagawa and the family of Henry and Genevieve Topping, American Baptist missionaries to Japan. Born of a businessman and his concubine and orphaned as a child, Kagawa became a Christian. While studying theology in Kobe, he moved into the slums and committed his life to work among the poor and laboring classes. He advocated for economic cooperatives as a counter to the devastation caused in rural areas by both capitalism and Communism, and he was a prominent voice for peace and international unity before World War II. He was arrested for labor activism and peace work. During the late 1920s he founded the “Kingdom of God” movement, including evangelism, education, and economic cooperatives, to promote the way of Jesus as an international solution to conflict among peoples. Kagawa often stated that the main purpose of missions was to make friends. To that end, he partnered with different missionaries and Christian community organizers who supported him. In 1932 Baptist missionary William Axling published a biography of Kagawa that propelled him into the public eye.

But it was his friendship with the Topping family that kept Kagawa at the forefront of Western attention for decades, helped support his family, and brokered the translation and publication of many of his 150 books in English. Henry and Genevieve Topping went as Baptist missionaries to Japan in 1895. Genevieve founded some of the first kindergartens in Tokyo and closely mentored Japanese women in early childhood education—at that time a groundbreaking field. The Toppings worked in northern Japan and saw their lifework as training Japanese Christian leaders. Japanese men and women they mentored became the heads of Christian schools, kindergartens, and social settlements. The Toppings’ commitment to social settlements, peace, and internationalism overlapped with that of Kagawa. They edited and published Kagawa’s English-language magazine, Friends of Jesus. Their son Willard used Kagawa’s methods in training rural leaders.

As Kagawa struggled to support his family while working in the slums, Genevieve Topping in 1933 began producing and...
serving an annual Kagawa calendar that showcased his sayings and promoted his principles of economic cooperatives and world fellowship. By the late 1930s the Toppings were distributing 30,000 Kagawa calendars a year. The proceeds paid Kagawa and provided funds for his social work in Japan.33 Kagawa’s internationalist stance was considered treasonous amid a context of Japanese militarism. The calendar month of September 1939 quoted him as saying:

The soul transcends national boundaries.
The soul takes no note of color or race.
The soul is an internationalist.34

When he was arrested again the next year, the Japanese government used the Kagawa calendars as evidence against him.

Kagawa’s most important partner was the Topping daughter Helen, a YWCA secretary in Japan when Kagawa asked her to work for him. She decided that God was calling her to devote her life to Kagawa’s service. In 1925 she became his “translator, editor, publisher, and organizer.”35 By the late 1930s her parents were supporting her sacrificial work by giving her their entire old-age pension.36 Helen translated Kagawa’s works into English, edited them, and arranged for publication. In 1935–36 she planned and arranged an eight-month speaking tour for him through North America, during which he spoke up to eight times a day in over 200 North American cities. This triumphant tour resulted in the organization of a Kagawa National Committee to spread his ideas in the United States. After Kagawa’s arrest by the military government, the Toppings and other Japan missionaries supported his Japanese fellow workers as long as they could. In their eighties, against all odds the Toppings kept the Kagawa Fellowship House going during the war. Helen Topping continued her close relationship with Kagawa by bringing his message to twenty-four different conscientious objector camps, and she taught Japanese interned by the United States. After his death in 1960 she continued to raise money for his ideas and projects.37

While the dedication of the Topping family to Toyohiko Kagawa was unusual, it was not an isolated case of missionary partnership with indigenous friends during the 1920s through the 1950s. For example, Gandhi had close friendships with several missionaries who supported and publicized his work, including A. W. Baker, E. Stanley and Mabel Jones, Fred and Welthy Fisher, and especially C. F. Andrews. Prominent Chinese medical doctors C. F. Andrews and Mabel Jones, Fred and Welthy Fisher supported his Japanese fellow workers as long as they could. In their eighties, against all odds the Toppings kept the Kagawa Fellowship House going during the war. Helen Topping continued her close relationship with Kagawa by bringing his message to twenty-four different conscientious objector camps, and she taught Japanese interned by the United States. After his death in 1960 she continued to raise money for his ideas and projects.37

As initially practiced, the idea of partnership was more corporate and structured and less intimate than that of friendship.38 Colonial guilt and pressure for reparations turned ideals of partnership into development projects that often lacked the personal and faith commitments of the friendship ideal. Ecumenical church leaders in Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia declared that the age of the foreign missionary was over. During the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s, Azariah’s cry “give us friends!” was replaced by “missionary, go home!” Ironically, while mainline mission boards were typically ahead of their grassroots constituencies in understanding the positive dimensions of structural transformation, the very concept of the missionary received radical critique as an essentially imperialist enterprise. Western mainline missionaries in the 1960s found themselves newly unpopular with their home constituencies because they were painted either as old-fashioned church colonialists or as collaborators with radical leftist social causes.

Yet behind the scenes, amid revolutionary changes, cross-cultural friendships quietly continued to shape the unfolding story of world Christianity. Some of the most powerful stories of cross-cultural missionary friendships during this period are only now being told. A case in point is the relationship between India missionary Lesslie Newbigin and Sri Lankan D. T. Niles, two of the most important leaders of ecumenical Christianity in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1947 Presbyterian Newbigin was elected one of the first bishops of the Church of South India. In 1959 he became head of the International Missionary Council (IMC) and oversaw its integration into the WCC. Methodist D. T. Niles was general secretary of the Ceylon Council of Churches during the 1940s, and then secretary of evangelism of the WCC during the 1950s. He was founding general secretary of the East Asia Christian Conference.

From Friendship to Partnership

The Second World War hastened the dissolution of European colonialism. Ecclesiastical decolonization accompanied the demise of European empires and the independence of new states in Africa and Asia. The powerful colonial-era witness of cross-cultural friendships was not an adequate symbol for the new age. Personal friendship was no longer a compelling witness against racism during an era characterized by revolutionary theologies, militant nationalisms, and Marxist critique of Western socioeconomic models. Nor was it advantageous for leading non-Western Christians to stress their close relationships with Western friends or sponsors. The victory of Communism pushed missionaries out of China, and being friends with a missionary became dangerous for Chinese Christians. In an age of revolutionary nationalism, indigenous Christians who had exhibited strong international ties were suspected of lacking patriotism, and some of the leading internationalists in East Asia were accused of treason.

The missionary movement adjusted to the end of colonialism by embracing the idea of *partnership* as the postcolonial model for cross-cultural relationships. During the 1947 meeting of the International Missionary Council, in Whitby, Ontario (the first international ecumenical meeting after the war), “partnership in obedience” was a central theme. The founding of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948 created a formal framework in which interchurch relationships could take place. During the 1950s and 1960s older mainline denominations transferred assets and projects to their overseas “partners.” The evolving meaning of partnership was also a source of dispute, as Western mission boards seemed to prefer the creation of global denominational fellowships as a framework for partnership, while a number of non-Western leaders preferred regional or national approaches over the denominational.39 Western mission theorists such as Max Warren of the Church Missionary Society, facing decolonization in the older mission fields, stressed more modest goals such as that of “Christian presence” over the older category of friendship. The postcolonial missionary needed to focus on listening and being present, rather than running the show or acting as spokesperson for Asians and Africans.

As initially practiced, the idea of partnership was more corporate and structured and less intimate than that of friendship.40 Colonial guilt and pressure for reparations turned ideals of partnership into development projects that often lacked the personal and faith commitments of the friendship ideal. Ecumenical church leaders in Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia declared that the age of the foreign missionary was over. During the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s, Azariah’s cry “give us friends!” was replaced by “missionary, go home!” Ironically, while mainline mission boards were typically ahead of their grassroots constituencies in understanding the positive dimensions of structural transformation, the very concept of the missionary received radical critique as an essentially imperialist enterprise. Western mainline missionaries in the 1960s found themselves newly unpopular with their home constituencies because they were painted either as old-fashioned church colonialists or as collaborators with radical leftist social causes.

Yet behind the scenes, amid revolutionary changes, cross-cultural friendships quietly continued to shape the unfolding story of world Christianity. Some of the most powerful stories of cross-cultural missionary friendships during this period are only now being told. A case in point is the relationship between India missionary Lesslie Newbigin and Sri Lankan D. T. Niles, two of the most important leaders of ecumenical Christianity in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1947 Presbyterian Newbigin was elected one of the first bishops of the Church of South India. In 1959 he became head of the International Missionary Council (IMC) and oversaw its integration into the WCC. Methodist D. T. Niles was general secretary of the Ceylon Council of Churches during the 1940s, and then secretary of evangelism of the WCC during the 1950s. He was founding general secretary of the East Asia Christian Conference.
The careers of Newbigin and Niles intertwined. They worked together extensively in the affairs of the WCC and of churches in South Asia, and they shared theological perspectives on the issues of the day, even developing their ideas in dialogue with each other. Together they shaped the 1961 WCC meeting at New Delhi. While Newbigin was head of the IMC, he commissioned Niles’s book *Upon the Earth*, published in 1962 as the first major ecumenical mission book by an Asian theologian. Then in 1965 Newbigin was asked to return to the Church of South India as bishop of Madras. Because of his commitment to cultivating indigenous leadership, he hesitated to do so. But Niles insisted that he take the position, and so Newbigin agreed and served as bishop until he retired in 1974. The friendship between Newbigin and Niles was remarkable because it was so ordinary, and so obviously a postcolonial relationship of equals. Regardless of its limitations and anti-Western rhetoric, the ecumenical framework nevertheless created opportunities for deep cross-cultural friendships.

Friendship as the Future of World Mission?

For unknown numbers of missionaries and indigenous Christian leaders in the early to mid-twentieth century, friendship was a potent yet underrecognized ethic and practice in the creation of world Christianity as a multicultural community. Indeed, without friendship as clear witness to Christlike love, the inequities and racism of the colonial era might have prevented the spread of Christianity across cultures. Azariah’s cry was a complaint, but it was also a prophecy. For some missionaries, lifetime cross-cultural friendships were a vital witness against racism and colonialism, and a sign of the inbreaking reign of God. Jesus said, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). Jesus’ willingness to give his life for his friends modeled an incarnational lifestyle adopted by some Western missionaries in partnership with Asians and Africans, including those of other faiths for whom friendship also represented a core value. But where are these kinds of friendships today, after fifty years of formal policies of “partnership,” innumerable books on mission strategies, and the celebration of Christianity as a multicultural religion?

In today’s context of globalization, the longing for cross-cultural relationships is often a stronger motivation for mission work than is evangelism or social service. Today’s missionaries see establishing interracial and intercultural relationships as both a means of mission and an end in itself.42 Marriage across ethnic or national lines, for example, is quite common among today’s mission-minded Christians in a way that was exceptional during the colonial period.

But in an age characterized by short-term mission service, what is the deeper meaning of friendship? Is true friendship of equals possible across widening economic divides, or is it a self-deluding rationalization that makes the wealthy feel good about their charitable activities? A century after Azariah’s heartfelt cry, do today’s young people going into mission service commit themselves to specific persons from other cultures? Do they learn the languages or develop mutual reciprocity with the “other”? Friendship as embraced by missionaries during the colonial period demanded long-term commitment to particular persons and places, major efforts to understand and to respect another culture or religion, and living with and putting themselves in service of others. Does anyone have time to make friends today, or is cross-cultural service a kind of global networking that looks good on a résumé? Is friendship now defined by Facebook rather than by walking in someone else’s shoes?

In today’s world of instant communication, short attention spans, and material development as mission, the sacrificial practices of friendship stand as evidence for the kingdom ethics of God’s love for all people. Despite the dangers of unreflective paternalism, friendship remains the proof and the promise of Christianity as a multicultural, worldwide religion. Azariah said it well, “You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. We also ask for love. Give us FRIENDS!”

Notes

1. Earlier versions of this article were delivered in 2010 as the Alexander Duff and Henry Drummond Missionary Lectures in Stirling, Scotland; as the Henry Martyn Lectures at Cambridge University; and at the 2010 celebrations of the Nederlandse Zendingsraad in Zeist, Netherlands. My sincere thanks go to the hosts of these lectures, especially Brian Stanley, Kenneth Ross, Wilbert van Saane, and Emma Wild-Wood.


7. Ibid., pp. 91–92.


10. Cheng had been the youngest delegate at the Edinburgh 1910 conference.


12. For example, as will be discussed later in this essay, missionaries noted the compatibility of Christianity’s love ethic with Confucianism in China and with *ubuntu* in South Africa.


Callaway showed his fascination with cross-cultural relationships by exploring the twenty-nine-year partnership between a chief and a Methodist missionary in the nineteenth century.


17. On Wang, see www.bdcconline.net/en/stories/w/wang-zen@ing.php.


20. Ibid., pp. 290, 293.


22. “My personal friendship with ‘K.T.’ from 1912 to 1931 and my intimate association with him in his purposes and plans, as well as the expressed desire of his colleagues and friends, encouraged me to take up what I knew would not be an easy task. I am aware that my affection for one whose friendship I prized so highly may have made it difficult for me to appraise dispassionately the personality and work of ‘K.T.’” This book “is my tribute to the spirit of one who was so loyal a friend and so gallant a leader in the cause of reconciliation and in the service of the millions of young men in India, Burma and Ceylon” (Popley, *K. T. Paul*, p. xv).


27. Leela Gandhi is one of the few postcolonial scholars to discuss friendship as a factor in anti-imperialism, in her book *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2006). Although homosexuals rather than missionaries are her focus, she includes missionary C. F. Andrews in her analysis.


29. “Radio Message Given by Dr. Frank Laubach,” Box 1, Frank Laubach Papers, Burke Library Archives, Union Theological Seminary, New York. I wish to thank Ruth Tonkiss Cameron for her assistance in the Burke Library Archives.

30. Ibid.

31. Missionary efforts to give voice to the non-Western “other” through literacy and literature laid the groundwork for a succession of missionary presses during the twentieth century. In the 1970s, for example, working at a financial loss, the Maryknoll mission press Orbis Books translated into English and published the first works of Latin American liberation theology. Missionary sponsorship was critical in the spread of liberation theology to the United States, including the publication by Christian presses of such classics as Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970, preface by missionary Richard Shaufl), Enrique Dussel’s *History of the Church in Latin America* (1981, translated into English by missionary Alan Neely), and Gustavo Gutierrez’s *Theology of Liberation* (1973, translated into English by Sr. Caridad Inga and John Eagleson). Mainline Protestantism’s Friendship Press continued publishing cutting-edge mission books from a non-Western perspective to the end of the century.


34. 1939 Calendar, in Box 1, Folder 3, Kagawa calendars, Kagawa Papers.

35. “Entire Family Works with Kagawa.”

36. Helen Topping, Letter “Dear Friend,” January 11, 1937, Box 2, American Tour, 1936, and Materials, 1937–41, Folder 19, Correspondence, 1937–40, Kagawa Papers, Burke Library Archives. “Father in his eightieth year, and Mother, even more frail, are actually giving their entire old age pension to enable me to continue this work.”


39. Further research is needed on the tensions during the 1950s and 1960s over the issue of what a decolonized church would look like. Sri Lankan D. T. Niles, first general secretary of the East Asia Christian Conference, for example, argued that worldwide denominational groupings were an effort by Westerners to retain control, while Asians preferred ecumenical regional associations. Ecumenical funding would allow greater self-support and would break the pattern of Western denominational paternalism. Niles wrote, “Confessionalisms, organized in world organizations, are for us in the younger churches not merely an obstacle but a temptation. God in His mercy led us to the point where in our lands both secular and sacred history showed us that denominationalism is not viable. . . . World Confessionalism is an attempt to make denominationalism viable again” (D. T. Niles, *Upon the Earth: The Mission of God and the Missionary Enterprise of the Churches* [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962], p. 213). Debates over decolonization were played out in regional associations such as the East Asia Christian Conference. For a useful overview of the EACC, see Yap Kim Hao, *From Prapat to Colombo: History of the Christian Conference of Asia, 1957–1995* (Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia, 1995).

40. After half a century of partnership as a model for cross-cultural mission relationships, there is a rich variety of interpretations of the concept, including expectations of true friendship within some partnership models. During mid-century struggles over decolonization of missions, however, emphasis on personal relationships was replaced by structured partnerships in efforts to break patterns of dependency and paternalism. I am not trying to claim here that friendships cannot emerge within partnership arrangements. Rather, I am merely commenting briefly on the historical transition required by decolonization in the mid-twentieth century.

41. Author conversation with Wilbert Shenk, June 14, 2007, Techny, Illinois. Lesslie Newbigin told Shenk personally about his struggle over whether to accept the bishopric.

42. There is a growing recent literature on relational models of mission. For example, see Anthony J. Gittins, *Ministry at the Margins: Strategy and Spirituality for Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002); Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Servanthood: Serving the World in Christlike Humility* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006); and Christopher L. Heuertz and Christine D. Pohl, *Friendship at the Margins: Discovering Mutuality in Service and Mission* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2010).