

My Sojourn in Mission

CMR Canadian Global Mission Legacy Series

*Never Learned this in Seminary...
God's Grace on the Cruel Edges of the World*

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Abstract/Summary—Often referred to as “Mr Vietnam,” Reg and Donna Reimer has spent their lives extending grace to people on the cruel edges of the world. The Reimer sojourn in mission is about intentionally living out a calling built on a variety of convictions that regularly found expression through their lives and ministry. The varied experiences documented in their sojourn reflect a consistent passion for advocacy, a concern for “the little, the lost, the last and the least.” The Reimer’s advocacy work has led them to some of the world’s darkest and most challenging corners where they have come alongside a struggling people to become tireless advocates; particularly for those undergoing religious persecution. Evidence of the Reimer’s creativity is regularly seen in their ability to use a variety of ministry platforms to carry out the mission God gave them and empower others to engage in their world both in word and deed. A much fuller understanding of their work can be explored through the two books highlighted at the end of this article.—**Editor C.A. Cook**

CMR Keywords—Banmethout; Bengé, Mike; Bodt, Walter; Brown, R.R.; Cambodia; Canadian Bible College / Canadian Theological Seminary; CAMA Services; Canadian Food Grains Bank; Christian and Missionary Alliance; DeFehr, Art; Drummond, Rick; Dyck, John; Glasser, Arthur; Goodwin, LaDonna Rose; Grace Bible Institute; Interdev; Jaffray School of Missions; Khmer Rouge; King, L.L.; Laos; Lausanne; Martyrdom; McGavran, Donald; Mennonites; Missio Dei; Myanmar; Omaha Gospel Tabernacle; Peoples Church; Persecution; Phuc, Kim; Pol Pot; Relief and Development; Religious human rights; Rwanda; Sheppard, Jack; Stiller, Brian; Taylor, William; Thailand; Tippett, Allan; Toronto Institute of Linguistics; van der Meer, Antonia; Vietnam; World Evangelical Fellowship; World Relief Canada; Yogaraja, Godfrey.

“Never learned this in seminary,” I have often said to myself or anyone within earshot as I found myself trying to mediate God’s grace to those on the “cruel edges of the world,” (to borrow a phrase from *The Message* translation of Hebrews), whether in war-torn Vietnam, Pol Pot-decimated Cambodia, genocidal Rwanda, tsunami-struck Sri Lanka, or elsewhere.

Let me start by telling you a story. Only later did it become clear how significant our crazy experiment would be.

Cambodia had been crushed and devastated by the hell of three and a half years under the murderous Khmer Rouge. Ironically, that yolk was thrown off by the invasion of communist Vietnam, enabling tens of thousands to flee for refuge to Thailand. Not only was the deluge of refugees in

need of relief and rehabilitation, but all of Cambodia needed help!

I was standing on a dusty plain north of the Thai town of Aranyaprathet, looking into Cambodia’s western extremity. Camouflaged in clouds of dry season dust, teams of oxen pulling wooden carts, wheels taller than a man, began to emerge. The sounds of cracking whips, cowbells, shouting drivers, and creaking axels I still can hear. By the hundreds they came. It was like an epic movie on a big screen. The title? The Cross-Border Land Bridge.

In what looked like confusion, the carts were registered and numbered. Veterinarians examined and vaccinated the skinny oxen. Organized into lines, the carts were loaded with sacks of precious floating-rice seed and with sacks of metal plough tips, hoe heads, sickles, fishing hooks, and nets – subsistence agricultural packets (SAP’s). At nightfall the loaded carts formed small circles illuminated by common cooking fires. The oxen were fed and rested. At first light, the drivers would yolk their animals and begin the long trek back to homes in devastated Western Cambodia – their carts loaded with hope!

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As the day ended, I walked among the bone-weary workers, thanking them for their labour and for pulling off a nearly impossible task. How did this come to pass?

I was in over my head and I knew it so I invited expert help! It was a strategic thinking Canadian Christian entrepreneur, Art DeFehr, of Winnipeg who launched us into the big time. Art had once stopped in Bangkok and offered to help me with the caveat that his help was for when I had “something significant to do.” With the Cambodian crisis I certainly did, so Art and his family came immediately when called and stayed for three months.

During his first trip to the Cambodia border area, Art observed a small agency feeding families coming from inside devastated Cambodia to the Thai border with a week’s supply of food. To Art that looked like an eternal project. He asked,



why not provide seed rice and basic agricultural implements to these same people so they could go back home and begin growing their own food again? Art wrote up a three-page concept paper on this “*cross border land bridge*” idea to help us sell it to the political and funding powers that were. Among these powers were plenty of naysayers!

One Saturday Art and I visited Sir Robert Jackson, the UN Special Representative for the Cambodia Emergency. Because it wasn't a workday, the air conditioning in Bangkok's large UNESCO building was not functioning. We were ushered into a palatial but very warm office to meet a shirtless Sir Robert behind the desk! He listened sympathetically. We also worked the many late afternoon diplomatic and aid agency cocktail receptions. These were critical venues to get things done.

It's our land bridge paper! A powerful diplomat we had convinced on the flight over to Switzerland was floating it for consideration and funding!

We decided to take our case for the land bridge to an international donors meeting at the UN's Palais de Nation in Geneva. After our arrival, the Chief Delegate of the International Red Cross accosted us in the hallway, belittling our concept and telling us our small agency had no business suggesting any ideas to the big boys. Somewhat chagrined, but no less confident in our concept, we went up to the gallery from which we could see government participants at their desks in preparation for an official session.

We observed a page handing out a document to everyone below. Art said, “*Look, Reg, it's our land bridge paper!*” A powerful diplomat we had convinced on the flight over to Switzerland was floating it for consideration and funding!

After the session we were invited to singer/activist Joan Baez's hotel suite where we celebrated with a glass of wine!

In spite of strong early resistance in some high places, our land bridge concept was adopted! It played a major role in the post-Khmer Rouge rehabilitation of all of Western Cambodia. With generous grants we raised for *World Relief*, we provided some 30,000 metric tons of seed rice plus many thousands of agricultural implements over two growing seasons to thousands of peasant farmers who came with ox carts to the border distributions.

This event is just one from the refugee and relief chapter of my service for the Master. My sojourn in mission falls into several 8 to 10 year, quite diverse, chapters.

Backdrop

The first, preparation, I count from high school graduation to our arrival in Vietnam in 1966. The second, evangelism and church planting, is our service in that country at war until it fell to communism in 1975. Chapter three, refugees and relief, describes our time in Thailand, from 1976 to 1984. From a base in Bangkok I directed ministries to refugees fleeing to Southeast Asian countries from the newly communist

Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. In July 1980, the middle of this life chapter, during an improbable, life-altering trip back to communist Vietnam during its dark decade, I was clearly called to advocacy for persecuted Christians.

Following the Thailand chapter, I was unexpectedly called to Toronto to build *World Relief Canada*. That demanding organization building and relief and development chapter lasted a decade, until 1994.

Then, after some 36 years abroad or away we moved back to my native Fraser Valley in BC. From there I served with the *World Evangelical Fellowship* (later, Alliance instead of Fellowship), facilitating relief and development endeavours by national evangelical fellowships in Africa and Asia. In 1998 I also joined *Interdev*, an organization which motivated and taught partnering to facilitate functional unity among the many and diverse ministries supposedly working for the same goal among the same peoples. My territory included the five mainland Southeast Asian countries of Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Burma.

A torn retina I suffered overseas in 2007, miraculously repaired in Vancouver, slowed my international travel, and at least put a comma behind this latest chapter. Nevertheless, I continue working much of my time in Vietnam and in writing and publishing.

With this backdrop of my major life chapters, I'll try to articulate major relationships, significant events and themes. I am deeply grateful to my Lord for allowing me to have a part in communicating His Good News to people on the “*on the cruel edges of the world.*” I would never have dreamed that obedience to the missionary call would allow me to participate in so many facets of the *Missio Dei*. It has connected me with the little, the lost, and last, and the least, in Asia and Africa, as well as with generals, ambassadors, kings, and prime ministers. All praise to Him!

I am deeply grateful to my Lord for allowing me to have a part in communicating His Good News to people on the “on the cruel edges of the world.”

I. Formation and Preparation

My triple great grandfather, David Reimer, served as the titled landscape architect to the German Kaiser in Prussia. He fell out of favor with the Kaiser, when he and fellow Mennonites declined to be conscripted into the war against Napoleon. In the first years of the 19th Century he and Mennonite co-religionists sojourned to Russia to settle in fertile Crimea, now the Ukraine. An expert arborist he established a nursery to supply the entire Molotschna Mennonite colony with fruit and ornamental trees.

By 1860 many of the Mennonite communities had fallen into a spiritual and social decline. It fell to David's son, Jacob, my great great grandfather, to help lead a spiritual and intellectual renewal. His role, however, also led to his rejection by both the closed conservatives on the one side and

the Toronto Blessing-type enthusiasts on the other. He went off to found his own community where he was determined to follow Jesus in a renewed but middle way. In 1919 the village, where both my parents were born, was subjected to murder and mayhem by Bolsheviks/anarchists. This led to the flight of survivors, including my parents, eventually to Canada in 1924 and 1925.

Like many Mennonites, my parents thrived in the freedom and opportunity that Canada offered. I was born on Vancouver Island, in 1940, in a native hospital, which Mom jokingly blamed for my wildness. The suitcase which served as my bassinette Mom credited for my love of travel.

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When I was four we moved to a Mennonite community near Chilliwack. I was forced to learn German to survive and went to a German speaking *Mennonite Brethren Church*. I was saved when I was eight, rebelled as a teen, and went to great pains to distance myself from my Mennonite culture during high school days.

However, when was 12, I was deeply challenged by two missionaries. One was a Mennonite missionary to Colombia named John Dyck, who told hair raising stories about being stoned by mobs led by Catholic priests. The other was David Livingston whom I encountered through a biography my parents gave me for Christmas. In both cases their adventures greatly appealed to me!

Toward the end of my last year in high school, I was led to seriously consider my relationship to Christ and reoriented my life before being baptized in the Mennonite Brethren Church. Despite all this, I wanted to get away from the confines of home and Mennonite community.

A sister of a friend told me about a Bible school she attended in Nebraska. Before I knew it, I was on a Greyhound bus heading to Omaha, 2,000 miles away. *Grace Bible Institute* (GBI) had been established post-war as a reaction to the Mennonite colleges in Kansas which were perceived by some as being theologically liberal. I was educated in ways beyond academics, but also by the school which proved to be a bastion of dispensational theology. From the outset I questioned this recently discovered key to understanding the scripture and I balked at the off-handed way some hard sayings of Jesus were considered abrogated because God suddenly changed His *modus operandi*.

Yet, my time at Grace gave me two indispensable gifts. The first was a clear call to mission. It came through a speaker from the West Indies Mission during the first missionary conference. The next year that call was confirmed under Dr. Arthur Glasser who had served in China. (Much later, Dr. Glasser became my major mentor at *Fuller Seminary's School of World Mission* in the early 1970's.) I had the strong impression during those stirring meetings that there was

nothing bigger or more significant to give one's life to than Christian mission. How could I not obey this call?

My second acquisition was LaDonna Rose Goodwin of Hutchinson, Kansas. We met during my second year, which was her only year there. From a non-churched background, she had been led to Christ by two Mennonite missionary women who recruited children for neighborhood Bible classes. Donna's strong faith was central to her life, more so than for some of us Mennonite type whose culture sometimes diluted our faith. And, wouldn't you know it; Donna was called to be a foreign missionary! Together we headed resolutely in that direction. After 51 years we still are on that path!

I was expelled during my third year at GBI. The trigger had to do with missing a curfew, but the reason I was under scrutiny was my campaign, as student-president elect, to defend a well-respected theology teacher, Orlando Wiebe. He had suddenly been asked to leave because of his uncertainty about an eschatological fine point about which he had informed the school when invited to teach seven years previously. I considered the procedure unjust and the issue itself insignificant. Years later the school asked me to consider being its mission professor.

Donna and I were married in Kansas in the summer of 1961. My family met Donna for the first time at our wedding.

On the advice of Orlando Wiebe ("*Christian work can be risky – it's good to have a back-up vocation!*"), I pursued a secular vocation, earning a secondary education certificate along with a BA in English Literature from the University of Nebraska at Omaha in 1964. Donna worked to put me through.

At this time we explored the practical matter of a mission agency. The *Omaha Gospel Tabernacle* of the C&MA was a flagship church in the city. Led by the legendary charismatic preacher, R.R. Brown, this church made missions a big deal! We were quickly integrated into the church through a wonderful young marrieds' class and the church stoked our missionary call. We applied to the C&MA, were provisionally accepted, and began fulfilling the long list of requirements for appointment as official missionaries.

For me these requirements included a year at the *Jaffray School of Mission*, and for Donna it was more academic study at Nyack Missionary College. We headed to New York in August, 1964. I miraculously got a teaching job just days before school started. Donna enrolled at Nyack and bore our first child, son Jay, in October.

We wanted to serve primitive peoples in a hard place. So, at Jaffray, I made Irian Jaya, Indonesia, my area of study. Jack Sheppard was a memorable teacher and mentor. A true intellectual himself, he taught us to think. He encouraged hard questioning.

As we were nearing final appointment, a communist insurrection in Indonesia was brutally crushed. A period of isolation followed. The county issued no visas for foreigners so Irian Jaya was out.

A phone call from C&MA Foreign Secretary, L.L. King, in the spring of 1966, offered us opportunity to go to Vietnam

instead. We asked for 24 hours to consider and pray. We replied, yes, and were soon appointed.

In May, 1966, Donna bore our second child, Jill. After only three days off, Donna was back climbing the hills at Nyack and writing final exams. We were required to be at the *Toronto Institute of Linguistic* in June and so we handed off our six week old daughter and 20 month old son to my mother who came from BC to fetch them. Taking this linguistic program was a requirement and decision which we later came to consider to be unreasonable.

II. Ministry in War

We landed in Saigon on December 3, 1966, just as the Vietnam War was heating up. We were sent to the beautiful mountain town of Dalat to study Vietnamese. Our mission (At this time, all Canadian missionaries were directed by International Ministries, the overseas department of the C&MA US.), in view of an influx of new personnel, had set up a state of the art language school at the long-vacated missionary kids' school. At coffee break we occasionally watched jets bombing a nearby valley.

Just weeks after arrival, I was diagnosed with a herniated disc, likely incurred in moving some 300 pound missionary barrels. Even with strong pain killers I could only stand, sit or lie down for short periods before having to change position. That is how I studied Vietnamese for 6 months. When it became intolerable I had spinal surgery in US military neurosurgical hospital in a rubber plantation. It cost \$1.00 and was successful!

After a year of language study, we were assigned to the coastal town of Phan Thiet. During the very week of our arrival, communists launched the Tet '68 Offensive, a simultaneous attack all over South Vietnam. With 10 minutes' notice we were evacuated by air to Nha Trang. I returned to our station just in time to witness a second wave of the offensive. When I got back to our rented house, I discovered it had been shelled and burned and, inside, I found the bodies of seven communist soldiers, one on our bed. I learned that at least 25 Americans of the 101st Airborne had been killed within 100 yards of our place.

We found six of our dead colleagues were not accidents of war but had been deliberately killed by exploding their houses and by bullets and grenades.

At this same time I heard on shortwave radio that missionaries had been killed in Banmethuot. It could only be our missionaries so I rushed back to Nha Trang just in time to join two colleagues on a military flight to Banmethuot. We found six of our dead colleagues were not accidents of war but had been deliberately killed by exploding their houses and by bullets and grenades. Unable to move the bodies of three not previously removed by the US military, we buried them in the garbage-pit-cum-bunker where they had sought safety. During this same attack two other missionaries were captured and led away with an American civilian. The two missionaries died on

their forced jungle march, the gruesome details emerging only in 1973 when the civilian, Mike Bengé, was released with US prisoners of war. Mike has since become my friend.

About half of the C&MA missionaries rotated out of Vietnam soon after these events but we were led to stay. During our first leave in 1970 our mission provided for me to study at *Fuller Theological Seminary's School of World Mission*. I was greatly privileged to sit under D. McGavran, A. Tippett, and A. Glasser. The hearts, minds, and teaching of these men bore no resemblance to later caricatures of the church growth movement which they founded. It was my best educational experience ever, in part because I came with serious and real questions borne out of hard experience on the front lines.

Vietnam became my life-long mission crucible. It greatly shaped my thinking, theology, and practice concerning the *Missio Dei*. Here are some things I learned:

- *War is the worst means developed by mankind to settle disputes and solve problems.* It is frightfully costly, painful, destructive, and inefficient for participants and innocent victims. The Vietnam War is still bearing bitter fruit for many 37 years after it ended.
- *And yet, God seems especially present in such man-made situations of extremity.* War generated refugees and migrants in great number. It also produced thousands of wounded and maimed soldiers. People in such circumstances proved more responsive to the gospel than in ordinary times.
- *In that era, though our mission leadership firmly held that verbal Gospel proclamation was the highest priority of mission, we field missionaries who lived with the daily consequences of war, responded much more holistically. It was our compassion, relief and aid ministries, often augmented by other organizations, which authenticated the Gospel we preached and shared.* I'm glad we performed better than what I perceived the organization's theory to be at that time.
- *A greater threat to winning the spiritually lost and establishing new congregations was when missionaries got stuck serving tables, as it were, for the well-established church.* The pushes and pulls to spend time scrounging material aid from the US military were very strong. A colleague, Rick Drummond, and I promoted a fresh start initiative for the unreached as an antidote.
- *We missionaries benefitted much from our strong mission family with bonds forged by danger and adversity – a contrast to other missions in nearby countries.* We were also effective in part because we were trusted by our headquarters to choose our own leaders and run our own affairs.

III. Transition

Following the fall of Vietnam and evacuation on the Royal Canadian Air Force Hercules which came to evacuate the Canadian charge de faire, I was ordered straight to Guam. This mid-Pacific island became a staging area where thousands of Vietnamese evacuees were brought by planes

and ships. I directed a group of a dozen rotating missionary colleagues to serve as translators and trouble shooters for the US Military and chaplains for Vietnamese Christians. For the tireless work of our team, I received a high commendation from the commanding Navy Admiral.

I was then ordered to Regina to serve as missionary-in-residence at *Canadian Bible College and Theological Seminary*. Given the pressure of a full teaching load right off the bat and without any notes or books from my own studies (I had lost two personal libraries in Vietnam) I developed horrible migraine headaches which plagued me for 25 years thereafter. Nowhere along the way had there been time to grieve or was provision made to debrief us concerning the huge losses we had incurred.

IV. Refugees, Relief and Rehabilitation

Next we were ordered (I repeat the word “ordered” advisedly) to Thailand to take over the fledgling *CAMA Services* ministry to Indochina refugees fleeing to that country. Foreseen as a temporary assignment, it lasted eight years for us. Handed one small project notebook and a little cash in a bank account when I arrived, we built this into a several million dollar operation by forming partnerships with complementary agencies, internal mission obstacles notwithstanding.

Things exploded after the 1979-1980 Cambodia emergency in which the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia freed tens of thousands of starving Cambodians to flee to Thailand. I was not only directing *CAMA Services* but also *World Relief* of the NAE, and serving as chair of a very active coordinating committee of all NGO’s, UN agencies, and the Thai government. Worn down at one juncture, I contracted typhoid during a refugee camp visit, was hospitalized, and then flown to Hawaii to recuperate for a month. Later in this chapter, I also oversaw *World Relief* development projects from Pakistan to Irian Jaya.

My opening story explained how we contributed to the rehabilitation of Cambodia itself. But most of our work had to do with saving the lives of the many thousands Cambodians who had fled the starving, torturous prison camp which Cambodia had become under Pol Pot.

We were among the first responders. In the first days, as camps were being built, bodies of dead refugees had to be picked up each morning. Without formality they were dumped into large pits-cum-mass-graves. We established a Christian Medical Team, an international, five-agency consortium to do life-saving medical work, including two maternity hospitals. It was not uncommon for our nurses to deliver babies less than 2 kilos. The joy of rescuing lives somehow helped our workers survive the grueling long days and weeks.

In addition to this overwhelming humanitarian side of our work, our missionaries, who alone among the hundreds of



foreigner workers spoke the Indochina languages, both ministered to Christians, and evangelized thousands, bringing many to Christian faith. Some saw much more spiritual fruit than ever in their careers. I saw this as a reward for being faithful in meeting human need in Jesus’ name!

During this period I also helped launch two major refugee resettlement programs, one to Canada under MCC and the other through *World Relief* to the US. Thousands were permanently given homes in North America in this way.

When I once excitedly shared this wide and effective refugee ministry with a home church, someone asked me when I would get back to “*real missionary work!*” The disconnect left me speechless!

The generous resources and compassionate care of Christian workers and agencies was Kingdom of God stuff at its best. This was even recognized by Thailand’s long-reigning Buddhist king, He awarded the director of *Catholic Relief Services* and me a high level of a rarely given “White Elephant” medal. You need to know that the albino elephant is considered sacred in Thailand!

V. Building a Relief and Development Organization

No doubt these experiences prepared me for my next chapter, building *World Relief Canada* (WRC), and convincing conservative Canadian evangelicals of the legitimacy and indispensability of God’s cultural and social mandate along with the evangelistic one.

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On arrival in Toronto, I was handed a six inch deep file box, a small amount of money, and a relationship with the famous *Peoples Church* in Toronto. My task was to develop WRC into a serious relief and development arm for the *Evangelical Fellowship of Canada* (EFC). The EFC was then being built by Brian Stiller, the greatest promoter of Christian causes that I have known.

Ten years later *World Relief Canada* had raised \$ 42 million for relief, development, and refugee projects in more than 30 countries. We also opened the way for EFC member denominations to participate in the *Canadian Foodgrains Bank*, a very effective farmer/government aid partnership to feed the hungry. I was blessed with a great board of directors and senior staff colleagues in that decade.

One the hardest challenges I faced was helping Canadian pastors and denominational leaders to consider helping the poor, that is, to make the social or cultural mandate of Scripture to be an integral part of the *Missio Dei*. A great encouragement was when leading C&MA Pastor Walter Boldt of Saskatoon said to me, “*Reg, you have made me feel good about relief work.*” Not all in our conservative denomination

agreed. One pastor, aiming at me, preached that social work would lead to liberalism.

My *World Relief* chapter connected me deeply to the great continent of Africa. Our work took me to countries in the Horn of Africa, West Africa, and both central and southern Africa. Our organization responded to epic famines in West Africa and also in the Horn. I encountered many wonderful African Christian leaders, heroic to me if little known to most.

My Africa connections contributed to our two children, during college and beyond, volunteering for service in Malawi, Ethiopia, the Sudan, and Eritrea. And this, in turn, led our son and daughter-in-law to adopt our Ethiopian grandson years later.

VI. Kingdom Partnering and Religious Human Rights

The 19 years since we moved to my native BC, have not been marked so much by distinct chapters as by major events, themes, and emphases. Let me recall some of the main ones.

A. Partnering

In 1998 I joined *Interdev* with mainland Southeast Asia as my territory to promote kingdom partnering. More than any other organization, *Interdev* popularized the idea that it made biblical and practical sense for many Christian organizations working to reach one people group, to work together in functional unity. Theologically the idea reflects Jesus' prayer in John 17 that our mutual love and oneness itself authenticates the Gospel and draws people to God. And it is so obvious that real collaboration is more effective than isolated individual efforts. Yet the tragedy of factionalism in our evangelical tribe often persists. At *Interdev* we worked to convene the critical mass of organizations labouring to reach a particular least-reached people group, to facilitate a common vision, and to teach partnering skills.

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The Vietnam example is a good one. Following the economic opening of Vietnam in the late 1980's, Christian groups, many new to Vietnam, began to go to Vietnam, connecting with churches, catch as catch can. In 1997 two colleagues and I convened 16 people working in Vietnam to begin to build trust among us and to discuss our common and significant challenges. This *Strategic Vietnam Partnership*, now including the critical mass of external organizations ministering in Vietnam, and indigenous churches, convenes some 90 people in Bangkok every year for a week-long conversation on Kingdom work in Vietnam. Each year we experience God-surprises and are immensely encouraged by the good fruit born of our emphasis on building trust and relationships. We plug a few holes in the scandal of our evangelical divisions.

B. Lausanne

Another helpful driver of evangelical unity has been the Lausanne movement. I've had the privilege of helping represent Vietnam at all three major *Lausanne Congresses*. I participated as the only missionary with a Vietnamese delegation of seven in 1974 at *Lausanne I* in Switzerland. Vietnam fell only months later. Vietnamese were unable to travel out of their country in 1989 when *Lausanne II* convened in Manila, so I represented them. In 2010, I was able to recruit and accompany a delegation of 18 indigenous Vietnamese leaders to *Lausanne III* in Cape Town. My hope is that good fruit will come from the vision of the much larger and diverse body which the long-isolated Vietnamese leaders observed in South Africa.

C. World Evangelical Alliance

The *World Evangelical Alliance*, which I served in various ways since 1994 is also another sign of the unity of some 600,000,000 million of us! In 1997, I was asked to organize the 10th General Assembly of the WEA in Abbotsford, BC. During a lifetime of international ministry I had visited many Christian leaders in their villages. Now I had the opportunity to invite some 600 of them all to my home village! With the wonderful and welcoming help of local churches and 10 warm, sunny, May days in a row we staged a memorable time!

A highlight of the event no one will ever forget was the testimony of the famous Vietnam Napalm Girl, Kim Phuc! I had arranged it as a surprise. I also surprised Kim by reuniting her, in front of the crowd of 2,000 with the Vietnamese pastor who had led her to faith 15 years previously. The event helped launch Kim into her amazing worldwide ministry. Last June I was invited to Toronto to attend the 40th anniversary of the day Kim was burned nearly to death by that napalm bomb. At a gala dinner at the *Royal York Hotel*, I was surprised to find my name at the table reserved for "Kim's heroes", including photographer Nick Ut, who took the world famous photo of the naked little girl with burning flesh. Kim calls me "older brother!"

D. Rwanda

My varied mission career, and wide contacts, led to being called to assist evangelical bodies to respond to major man-made and natural disasters. Following the Rwanda genocide in 1994 I was called by the Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA) to give them a hand. I went for three months. From the AEA base in Nairobi I made forays into Rwanda. Our

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daughter Kila was already in Kigali during my first visit, directing *Food for the Hungry*. She showed me the sites of mass killings in churches. Bodies were still strewn along the roads. She was leading an amazing food relief operation at the

time and later developed a system whereby Rwandan families took in many hundreds of orphans left by the genocide.

My main challenge was to organize the first attempt at reconciliation between Hutu and Tutsi church leaders who had fled to Kenya and other nearby countries. They were broken and angry men and, like their nation, very deeply divided.

Logistics were complicated by the fact that some leaders, still filled with fear, were unwilling to be flown over their own country of Rwanda. Further, there were some individuals who said if certain leaders attended they would not. After the invitees assembled in a meeting room at a guest house, one particularly controversial Tutsi leader showed up wanting to go in. It fell to me to dissuade him, as his presence would have certainly ended the fragile gathering. The meeting proved a good first step in the long road to reconciliation.

E. Asian Tsunami

The Boxing Day 2004 Asian earthquake and tsunami decimated coastlines throughout Asia claiming more than a quarter million lives. The island of Sri Lanka was particularly hard hit. I had long known Godfrey Yogaraja, the General Secretary of the Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (EASL). He jumped at my offer give him a hand. The EASL was overwhelmed on several fronts. There was the urgent 1) need to respond with relief to tsunami survivors, and also 2) the need to pivot quickly from relief to longer range rehabilitation, and 3) the challenge of handling the deluge of aid offers and aid agencies. In a way the first was the easiest though it was demanding. For the second I called a top planning and project design expert in Southeast Asia, our daughter, now Dr. Kila Reimer. Within a week of her arrival she had a finished plan which guided the EASL tsunami projects for the next three years.

It was left for me to help handle the many offers and people and agencies that show up in times like this. Do I have stories? The trick is to weed out the unrealistically demanding, or the here-today-gone-tomorrow ones, from those who will contribute long term not only to projects but to building the capacity of the local organization to deliver good service after the TV cameras have gone. This was not the kind of direct-with-victims work which many would-be volunteers envision. On the dumb end we saw German tourists on the beach handing out cash to everyone. Now that is direct aid!

F. Religious Human Rights

During every chapter since our Thailand one, I strove to be obedient to the 1980 call from beleaguered church leaders in Vietnam who had asked me to “*raise our voice in the outside world, we cannot speak for ourselves.*”

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In the 33 years since then I made over 100 missions back to Vietnam both to gather evidence on persecution and encourage the Christians and churches. Since the communist

victory in 1975, the Christian community has grown 10-fold or 1,000 percent! Persecution has many times come to where the churches are growing most – usually among Vietnam’s ethnic minorities.

Adrenalin rushes often accompanied my Vietnam missions. Many times I had a “tail”, sometimes two. Nothing like a few secret police paying close attention to you to keep one alert! In 2009, the authorities finally got my number and I was refused a visa. In a miraculous turn of events, still inconvenient to explain, I have returned officially each year since to deliver lectures in Vietnamese to government religion and security officials at special Protestant roundtable discussions, and have befriended some high officials and religion scholars. I am ever learning new ways of advocating being opened for me by the Divine Chess Master.

VII. Writing and Publishing

Long encouraged to write a book, I wrote *Vietnam’s Christians: A Century of Growth in Diversity*.¹ Published in 2011 for the centenary of Protestant missions in Vietnam, it is a short history, with emphasis on the difficulties of the communist period, interspersed with short illustrative stories. It was honored by the prestigious *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* by my peers as one of the top 15 missions study books of 2011. It is being translated into Vietnamese, Korean and Swedish.

In a major collaborative project with Dr. William Taylor, US missiologist in Texas, and Dr. Tonica Van Der Meer, Brazilian missiologist, I co-authored and co-edited the encyclopedic work, *Sorrow and Blood: Christian Mission in Contexts of Suffering, Persecution and Martyrdom*.² It was published in 2012, a full five years in the making. The book features some 62 authors from 23 countries. Top mission leaders, the Global South included, agree it is an indispensable tool for training missionaries and is expected to be translated into several major languages.

Final Thoughts

One life chapter contributed to the next. As an Alliance worker, I was graciously given the freedom to serve on special assignment with half a dozen organizations—in the same direction.

People who hear of my encounters with deep human suffering and with the face of evil, sometimes ask how I managed all this. I believe it was God’s strength He gives a day at a time. But, yes, there has been a cost. My body and my being have a lot of hard miles on them.

Between life chapters in 1994, I took an executive evaluation. One of the psychometric tests showed an extreme spike on one indicator. Puzzled by an anomaly he had not seen before, the consultant began his skilled questioning. In minutes the dam broke! No one had ever seriously probed me about the deaths I had witnessed, the bodies buried, the dangers I had experienced in our Vietnam War and Thailand refugee chapters, and the extent of the humanitarian crises we were called on to confront in Africa. I was diagnosed with acute PTSD. “No wonder,” said the consultant, “not one in a

million people has experienced what you have!” Self-awareness of this disorder has helped me understand why I sometimes offended people or seemed distant to others because of my very low tolerance for small stuff.

People who hear of my encounters with deep human suffering and with the face of evil, sometimes ask how I managed all this. I believe it was God’s strength ... [but]... there has been a cost. My body and my being

I don’t regret having taken orders from my superiors. I considered myself a soldier under orders. Now past the driven stage of life which requires a self-respecting man to do, produce, accomplish, manage, and control, I reflect. In my ministry life I was often torn between thinking and doing. I hope that this made me a reflective practitioner. Somewhat sadly, at the elder stage (the word senior just means old!), with rich and varied mission experience, I find myself in a culture and a world that does not much need or honor such. This makes one feel alone. This truth is not a complaint. One cannot know all the twists of the path one chooses.

The sophomore certainties of youth in some matters practical and theological now embarrass me. I’m more

Kingdom of God oriented and much less mission by management and objective. I have found strong evidence that God already was at work wherever I went. I could confirm that by what I said and did, but I have no conceit that he needed me to take Him anywhere. I am certain of fewer things but more certain of the main ones – especially the deep, deep love of God for all his creatures and his world. Through missionary travels I came to appreciate Christian traditions other than my own and participated in them when I could. I have grown more inclusive and look for God to surprise me more!

My relationship with God, my Heavenly Father, is anchored in trust. I’m blessed with the deep love of wife and children and grandchildren. Leaving, those years ago, added a large extended Vietnam family as well. I am truly blessed! No regrets! Other choices may have been safer as some judge safe, but more interesting, enjoyable and significant? What do you think?

REFERENCES

- [1] R. Reimer, *Vietnam’s Christians: A Century of Growth and Diversity*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2011.
- [2] W. Taylor, A. van der Meer and R. Reimer, *Sorrow and Blood: Christian Mission in Contexts of Suffering, Persecution, and Martyrdom*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2012.

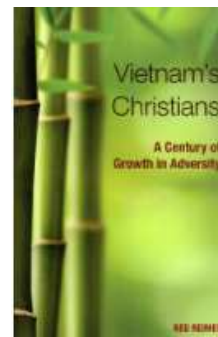
About the Author—Reg Reimer (MA.) has served the kingdom of God in many capacities around the world, but describes himself foremost as a missionary to Vietnam. After forty-five years of deep involvement there, he has become the acknowledged authority on Protestants in that enigmatic country. He has reported much on Vietnam, but, as the situation required, anonymously—until now. He was joined in the sojourn by his wife Donna and two adult children Jay and Kila.

Reg’s books are available at www.amazon.ca, and through the Ambrose University College and Seminary bookstore.

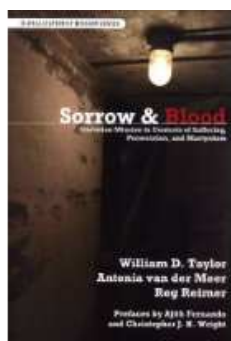
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