

My Pilgrimage in Mission

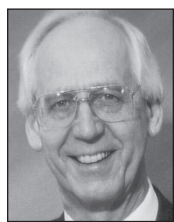
Arnold L. Cook

My pilgrimage in mission began emerging during the last year of World War II. In my rural community of Keady, in southern Ontario, Canada, war planes seemed to fill the sky, flying in and out of a nearby training base. On the ground, I was intrigued by our neighbors' sons, hanging out at the village store in military garb on weekend leaves. In that same village, in 1943, I gave my heart to Jesus in a little Baptist church at age eleven. Nine years later our parents moved our family of eight children to a more vibrant church in the city of Owen Sound. There I met my first mentor, a dynamic Christian businessman, and was baptized. Following a life-transforming encounter with the filling of the Holy Spirit at age twenty, I joined my first Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA) church. With this move, my journey into mission picked up momentum.

An Emerging Mission Perspective

Four events moved me down the missionary track. First, I began meeting and hearing from "live" missionaries. One was from Colombia, South America, and another from Côte d'Ivoire, West Africa. Many more followed. A second event was the introduction to my new C&MA church's yearly weeklong missionary convention. Along with being exposed to the world of missions, I was introduced to the Bible college movement. Initially I was disturbed by the students from the Western Canadian Bible Institute (later Canadian Bible College), in Regina, Saskatchewan, who came each year to our church to sing and recruit prospective students. My response was, "God is certainly not calling me, a high school dropout. My role is 'giving.'" In addition to my good salary in sales, I had added chinchilla ranching as further proof to God that I was serious about giving. The combination would allow me to increase my annual faith promise for missions.

During one of those missionary conventions, however, a third formative encounter occurred. Oswald J. Smith, well-known pastor from the Peoples Church in Toronto, came to our church and preached on his favorite theme—missions. As was the pattern in those days, he closed the service by calling for a response time. I stepped forward and heard him thunder, "Young people, get moving for God—God cannot guide a standing ship!" I sensed that this movement meant going to a Bible school and preparing for Christian ministry. In the context of my Alliance church, the pattern in those days was to travel 1,500 miles to the Western Canadian Bible Institute (WCBI), out on the western prairies. The fourth significant factor was my marriage into a missionary family. The Catts had two children. Their son was in the process of departing for Indonesia as a missionary. I married their daughter, Mary Lou, in September 1954 and then departed for the C&MA training school in Regina, leaving the chinchilla business in the hands of my mother-in-law.



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Early Mentors and Constituted Authority

WCBI was an old-fashioned school where one basic Bible-centered curriculum seemed to fit all students. Chapel services, held five days a week, often featured missionaries. Every Friday evening all students, along with a high percentage of the faculty and staff, attended a missionary meeting. At the end of a three- or four-year program, every student was expected to apply either for missionary service or for ministry in Canada. Mary Lou and I applied for missions with this footnote: "We are open to wherever we are needed, with an inclination toward South America." Our specific assignment, to Colombia, was chosen for us by our denominational leadership.

In my era, denominational structures counted heavily on respect for the authority vested in leadership. As I reflect on my pilgrimage in mission, I am intrigued by the significant role that "constituted authority" played in providing direction throughout our ministry. When we were assigned to Colombia, we took that assignment as the will of God for us.

On three occasions during our ministry in South America, constituted authority (at that point, the mission leadership) requested that we do something we would not otherwise have chosen. In each case, however, we would have made a costly error had we been allowed to do things our way. The first related to the education of our children. We had agreed to send our children to a mission school when they reached school age. That commitment seemed easy to make in 1957 before we had children. But once in Colombia with two boys, we felt we should keep them in the local Colombian schools where we lived. This became an issue of either complying with or resigning from the mission. In hindsight, we thank God for the mission leadership. We would have done a great injustice to our children if we had locked them into the local educational system, good as it was.

The second occasion was just before our third term of three years. We were ready to return to Latin America after spending some time in seminary studies. The president of Canadian Theological Seminary surprised us by strongly suggesting that we go to the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary, in Pasadena, California, to complete doctoral studies. We were hesitant. With two teenage children, we felt it unwise to take them to Southern California. All our children were already eagerly anticipating their return to Latin America and to the Alliance Academy missionary kids' school in Quito, Ecuador. Our decision was complicated by an offer to us, from the C&MA seminary in Canada, of a two-year, all-expenses-paid scholarship. This was certainly a generous offer to a forty-two-year-old with a family of five! We went to Fuller, from which I benefited greatly. And our family had a fabulous time in Southern California.

The third occasion was during our last three-year term. It started with six months of teaching in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The C&MA mission plan was that I would teach in the Buenos Aires Bible College (Instituto Bíblico Buenos Aires) for six months, and then complete the balance of our term in Lima, Peru. Near the end of the six months the thought occurred to us to just stay in Buenos Aires for the remaining two years of our term, versus making another move. I ran this idea by our regional director in Nyack, New York. His gracious but firm reply was, "No, let's stick with Plan A. The Peruvian C&MA church is awaiting your

help to launch a Theological Education by Extension program in the churches throughout Peru." Once again, listening to constituted authority proved to be the better choice. Had we done our own thing, we would have missed out on the Peruvian chapter of our lives, which brought us the greatest church and mission experiences of our ministry.

Our Field Experience

In a sense, our field experience began during the process in 1962 of getting from Owen Sound to Colombia. We made two significant stops that impacted our field experience. First, we arrived in New York City, headquarters of our mission's international office. There we received our final instructions. At that time, the tradition was to be commissioned by our home church in Canada and to have a second commissioning at the national headquarters. Several of our Alliance leaders who were in the office gathered around us to pray. A. W. Tozer, a well known C&MA pastor from Chicago, was asked to pray. Tozer liked to pray with a sequence of similar phrases: "O Lord, you know that nothing this couple has studied, nothing they think they know, nothing they have experienced 9etc., etc., etc.0 will be sufficient for the task ahead. O God, give them a fresh anointing for their ministry in Colombia. Amen." After he had finished with the list of our inadequacies, we felt about a foot high. Yet this served as a good reminder that our ministry would be "not by might, nor by power," but by God's Spirit (Zech. 4:6). We recalled Tozer's prayer often throughout our pilgrimage in mission.

Our second important stop was San José, Costa Rica. We were thankful for a mission that considered the acquisition of the language to be essential. We were given two years to gain a working knowledge of Spanish. The first year was in a formal classroom setting, at a language school in San José. The second year was in Colombia, our country of service.

We arrived in Colombia, a politically turbulent country in 1962. We cut our teeth in missions on university student evangelism in the old colonial southern city of Popayán. We were fortunate to be fully embraced into a missionary family that encouraged us to try new methods. I experimented by opening a reading room next door to the Medical Faculty of the State University (La Universidad de Antioquia). This kind of high-profile approach was new in Colombia for a couple of reasons. Aggressive persecution of Protestants caused most missionaries to work in the rural regions of the country. Likewise, urban evangelism with a focus on university students was quite new at that time. But these factors were to be altered. Roman Catholicism was on the cusp of significant change, greatly assisted by Vatican II (1962–65). We sensed a new openness on the part of university students.

During those years I began to learn the importance of using the early morning as a time for intercession. I was greatly helped by the early morning culture of Popayán. The city sidewalks were rolled up by 8:00 P.M., but there was movement to the markets by 4:30 in the morning. I attribute the modest success that we had in the conversion of five university students to what I learned about intercessory prayer. We discovered that converted university students were a novelty for our mission organization, particularly for the Colombian church. Few young people in our churches even finished high school, let alone university. We started experimenting with inviting our neighbors into our home for cultural interchanges as an evangelistic strategy. Again in the providence of God, a middle class was beginning to emerge in urban Colombia in the 1960s, following decades of violence.

Grappling with Mission Changes

At the end of our first term we moved to the north-central city of Medellín to teach at the Union Bible Seminary (Seminario Bíblico Unido). This move was precipitated by several university student converts who felt called to train for ministry. God had other lessons to teach us about effective means of training leaders. Medellín was known as the city of eternal spring but later, in the 1980s, became infamous as the home of the Medellín drug cartel. The seminary campus was originally directed by OMS International. In the mid-1960s OMS facilitated the transfer of the leadership of the seminary to a consortium of missions that included the C&MA. I served in leadership and as a faculty member for three years. The number of students was always small, with most of them being supported by a number of mission groups. Unfortunately, each mission had a different formula for assisting its students, and ultimately the lack of a coordinated funding model contributed to an atmosphere of discontent among the students.

Returning for our second term to Medellín in the late 1960s, we were pleasantly surprised by the arrival of an innovative new concept for theological training—Theological Education by Extension (TEE). Developed by three Presbyterian missionaries in Guatemala in the mid-1960s, TEE was a paradigm shift in the way we trained leaders for ministry. Ralph Winter, who later

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became my professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, was one of the three. I was able to develop a pilot project with TEE from the seminary in Medellín. Every second weekend I would fly south to three C&MA centers. Two aspects of the initial results were refreshing. First, in these centers I was teaching the "real leaders" rather than the often untested potential leaders of the resident seminary. Second, I sensed a marked change in the students' attitude—they were very appreciative that the training had come within their reach while they continued ministering. This was the beginning of our long-term involvement with so-called distance education.

Midstream Retooling

Having pushed hard for change in the areas of middle-class evangelism and alternate methods of training nationals, I found my resources depleted in 1971 at the end of our second term. This led to a three-year hiatus and the completion of a master of divinity in missions at Canadian Theological Seminary in Regina. During those "down years" God met me in spiritual renewal through the ministry of the Western Canadian Revival of 1971. He turned me around 180 degrees, restoring my love for him and my passion for mission. In the providence of God, as mentioned earlier, I was granted a full scholarship to Fuller's School of World Mission. I greatly benefited from sitting under the teaching of the outstanding core professors: Donald McGavran, Arthur Glasser, Ralph Winter, Peter Wagner, and Allan Tippett. I was able to

complete my course work for a doctorate in missiology. Having been retooled, we returned to Latin America, where I completed my thesis during our third term on the topic "The Biblical and Ethical Implications of Latin American Marriage Problems."

The Peruvian Chapter

Following a six-month teaching assignment in Buenos Aires, in 1975 we moved to Lima, Peru, where we assisted in developing a TEE program for the C&MA churches there. Through the providence of God, an amazing moving of the Spirit was occurring in the 1970s in Lima, Peru's capital. Following a decade of living under a military junta, the middle class had become responsive to the Gospel. Hundreds came to Christ every month in continual evangelistic meetings. Discipling ministries resulted in large, growing churches located on major avenues. We entered Lima in the middle of this amazing wave of evangelism and church planting. In that context we launched a TEE program for the

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churches throughout the country, beginning with the flagship Lince church in Lima. Within the first year, more than five hundred students were enrolled, a target I had anticipated reaching only after two years. Also in Lima I was privileged to teach in A Night Bible School (today the Alliance Seminary of the Peruvian National Alliance Church), an initiative that had been born out of the evangelistic thrust in the city and that had produced a wave of new Christians seeking training. In that process, I discovered the unique study program called SEAN (an acronym for Seminario Anglicano, later changed to mean Studies by Extension for All Nations). The SEAN program was originally developed in Argentina and Chile by evangelical Anglican churches, using material based on the life of Christ in Matthew. Eventually SEAN was used in over seventy countries.

After those difficult, slow-growth years in resistant Colombia, we experienced ministry in Lima in ways we had never seen before and have not seen since, including:

- Seeing two to three hundred professions of faith every month, followed by groups of sixty to seventy baptisms, followed by equal numbers signing up for baptism classes for the next month.
- Participating in a growing church focused on evangelism and discipleship. A second large church (Pueblo Libre), with a seating capacity of 2,000, was built with two baptismal tanks to facilitate simultaneous baptisms.
- Teaching in a night school where pastors were being trained in the fervor of evangelism. Classes would be released early to allow the students to go next door to the church to act as counselors at the altar during the evangelistic services.

- Watching churches working in harmony. I had never been in a church business meeting called to discuss the need to suspend evangelistic services in order to catch up with discipleship. It ended with a unanimous decision: "We must continue reaching out, God's Spirit is moving."
- Observing a focused church leadership in action. I watched a key church handle a pastoral conflict issue that would have split most churches. Their elders declared, however, "We must continue with evangelism." The conflict was handled as a side issue as the church continued to evangelize.

This phenomenal growth in Lima was part of the urbanization of missions. The shift to the cities, linked with a strong pastoral training program, made it possible in the 1990s to reassign all our North American C&MA missionaries from Peru, many of them to the least reached areas of the world. The impact of these C&MA churches in Lima, many of which are very large congregations pastored by Peruvians, has caught the attention of the Peruvian government. Officials have particularly been impressed by the feeding programs for children. Many of these large churches conduct weekly ministry events in poverty-stricken areas of the city.

The Surprising Side to Mentoring

Christian businessman Max DePree wrote *Leadership Is an Art* (2004), in which he mentions "rover mentors." These are the people that we meet briefly along the way who impact us powerfully. I have been blessed by many rover mentors whom I have met at forks in the road of life. Just a few words of encouragement timely spoken greatly helped me. Much of my own mentoring has been done through the medium of formal education in both Canada and Latin America. It has been rewarding to see former students, especially those from our time in Latin America, finding their way into missionary service, many serving in the Muslim world. On the Canadian front, I taught at Canadian Bible College and Canadian Theological Seminary on three occasions (1957–60, 1970–73, 1978–81). I would later connect with many of these former students either as missionaries or as candidates in preparation for field ministry in my role as director of personnel and mission of the C&MA in Canada (1981–92).

One example of the value of mentoring came as a surprise to me after many years of ministry in Latin America. In 1971, when we left Medellín, we had turned a struggling little church over to a Colombian colleague. We revisited that city twenty-nine years later and found a flourishing church on that site, with 270 people in two services. They were looking for a larger lot. The simple and humbling truth is, as a former elder liked to jest, "Arnold, the church has done very well since you left!" In a recent conversation, the young pastor that I left behind in Medellín shared with me his long sojourn in training. He came from rural Colombia to train for ministry at the Bible Institute. He had never attended high school but felt called to ministry. Years later he became my student in the Union Bible Seminary, which accepted graduates from Bible institutes. He graduated and decided to pursue his high school diploma. Later he felt led to study law and became a lawyer. Today he is a bivocational pastor. How did God lead that country boy through that long educational journey? Here's his story:

You asked me to lead the reading-room ministry for university students back in Popayán. That made a powerful statement to

me that you thought that I could communicate with university students despite my lack of schooling. Later, in the Reading Room in Medellín, you asked me again to help. There I met Paul Goring, the missionary professor who headed the department of psychology in the state university. He encouraged me to consider studying law.

When we arrived back in Canada in 1978, I felt out of touch with Canadian culture. I was committed, however, to speak at a Manitoba family camp and wondered how I could connect with those camping families. In preparation for my daily talks I asked myself the question, “What is the most basic issue that sincere Christians struggle with most often?” I concluded that it was knowing where and how best to serve God. From that thought I began to develop the idea of the importance of making our “maximum impact for God”—our MIFG. The phrase stemmed from Paul’s declaration, “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Phil. 3:12 NIV). The idea of making one’s MIFG became a significant emphasis in my ministry from that day forward. Over the years I have been surprised by how this simple sermon “Making Your MIFG” has helped others in discerning where God might direct and use them.

The Canadian Years

In 1981 I was appointed to serve as the director of missions and personnel at the new C&MA national office in Toronto. The C&MA in Canada had just transitioned to a status of being autonomous from the U.S. C&MA. I spent my last nineteen years of active ministry primarily in administrative roles. I focused exclusively on mission during the first eleven years, and then during the final eight years I served as president of the denomination. In my mission role I visited most of the countries where our Canadian C&MA personnel worked. The personnel side of the job required travel across Canada, working with our colleges and district churches in missionary recruitment. An observation, especially from the overseas travel, began to dominate my thinking regarding Christian ministry and what happens to Christian movements over time. Especially in older mission fields it was very evident that institutional ministries, such as those involving medical and educational facilities, tended to become nominal—that is, Christian in name only. This was often closely related to a drifting away from a focus on evangelism and church planting to one of increasing involvement in institutional work. Over the last thirty years of ministry, I collected data and recorded my observations of this aspect of Christian ministry. Just before retiring in 2000 I published *Historical Drift*, in which I described the inherent tendency of human organizations to depart from their original beliefs, purposes, and practices, which in the Christian context

often results in the loss of spiritual vitality. I concluded that God’s one great answer to this phenomenon has been spiritual revival. God used the great awakenings of the nineteenth century to raise up missionary movements apart from historic churches that had drifted from mission. I witnessed the special moving of God during the Western Canadian Revival in Saskatchewan (1971) and again in Lima, Peru (1975–78).

Looking back on our pilgrimage in mission, Mary Lou and I are certainly humbled by the high privilege of serving God in mission during an amazing period of history, 1960–2000, which witnessed many headline events:

- 1940s to 1980s: The rise and fall of Communism as a world power
- 1950s to 1960s: The worldwide urbanization movement in mission
- 1955 to 1975: The development of the church growth movement
- 1960s: The emergence of the autonomy of national churches
- 1960s: The revolutionary impact of TEE
- 1970s: The amazing growth of a persecuted yet powerful church in China
- 1970s: The emergence of younger churches becoming sending churches
- 1974: The redefining of the unfinished task by the Lausanne Conference

From 2000 to 2004 I had the privilege of giving leadership to the Alliance World Fellowship (AWF). These fully autonomous international churches exist in the forty-four countries where C&MA missionaries have served. In 2004 I handed over the full-time leadership of AWF to a young Dutch leader, a product of one of the many younger C&MA missionary-sending churches.

Mary Lou has been amazing in her ability to turn twenty-seven places in six countries into homes! We served during a transition period in mission history, when it was no longer expected that we would serve in the same field for our entire lifetime. Moving from country to country may sound exciting, but it required many more transitions for Mary Lou and in particular for our five children. I want to salute each of them for their cope-ability and willingness in handling many different school settings that, in some cases, were less than ideal. To God be the glory!

Our pilgrimage in mission could be summarized by the words of Abraham’s servant who was sent to find a wife for Isaac. When he sensed that God had led him to the home of Rebekah, he responded, “I being in the way, the Lord led me” (Gen. 24:27 KJV). We have simply made ourselves available, and God has chosen to guide us into various ministries. High privilege indeed!