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LEADERSHIP LIVED

RUSSELL STAPLES
**RALPH D.
WINTER,
1924-2009:
INNOVATIVE
AND INSPIRING
MISSIONS LEADER**

***Editor's Note:** Earlier this year one of the most fervent advocates of the church's mission of salvation to those not yet reached by the Gospel passed away. Already during his lifetime Ralph Winter had become a legend. I remember sitting with other pastors like Rick Warren in Peter Wagner's doctoral church growth class at Fuller Seminary and hearing Peter Wagner marveling over Ralph Winter as one of the most innovative mission strategists he had ever met. Russell Staples, Professor Emeritus of World Mission at Andrews University, remembers the remarkable life and legacy of this extraordinary Christian leader.*

It is not difficult to compile a list of missionary leaders and thinkers who have had a profound influence on the missionary movement. One thinks of practical visionaries like Donald McGavran,

initiator of the church growth movement and founder of the Fuller School of World Mission (SWM), of Alan Tippett, analytical missionary anthropologist, and of many others who initiated and led movements like Campus Crusade for Christ, the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, and the Navigators. However, as I survey the contemporary missions scene I cannot think of a leader who has had as broad an influence in reshaping the vision and direction of missions as has Ralph Winter. His life has been an epitome of dedicated service, analytical thinking and responsible action.

I first met Winter, and gained an introduction to his vision and commitment, at a meeting of the Association of Professors of Mission at Scarritt College in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1972. I had joined the faculty of Andrews University the previous year with responsibilities for teaching and the preparation of new appointees for missionary service. Consequently I joined the society to establish fellowship with members of other mission faculties and learn from their experience. The meeting turned out to be entirely different from that outlined in the bulletin. Arthur Glasser, Ralph Winter and Peter Wagner from the Fuller School of World Mission (SWM) and several others including Herbert Kane of the Trinity Evangelical Divinity School made the case for the establishment of a broader missions society with a professional journal. There was a declining interest in missions in Mainline Protestantism at the time, accompanied by the closing

of mission courses in seminaries and colleges.

At the same time there was a resurgence of missionary enthusiasm among Evangelicals, but candidates were experiencing difficulty in finding programs to adequately equip them for service. Winter was at the forefront in explicating the need for a society with a publication that would give support and direction to this enthusiasm and facilitate accreditation of programs in mission studies. As a result, the American Society of Missiology (ASM) was established, with Gerald Anderson as president and Winter as secretary-treasurer. Winter promptly set about negotiating the transfer of *Practical Anthropology* and its mailing list to the ASM. The title was changed to *Missiology: An International Review* and publication was commenced in 1973 under the editorship of Alan Tippett.

As a newcomer I listened to the discussion at this meeting in amazement. It was like a preview of the vision and concerns which gave shape to Winter's amazing life of service and influence. This introductory view of his dedication and responsible action was confirmed and deepened as I listened to him at subsequent meetings, read his publications, took note of his departure from the SWM, and watched his progress in the development of the U. S. Center for World Mission (USCWM). It seemed like a story beyond belief—except that it was practical reality that I was watching.

A brief resume of his life story helps to provide perspective

regarding his vision and leadership. Winter grew up in a committed Christian family in Pasadena. “The will of God in this imperfect world was central early in my thinking” (Autobiography, p. 1). His father, an engineer, was the prominent designer of the L.A. freeway system. Winter earned a B.A. in engineering at Caltech which accorded him the mathematical skills to present missionary statistics clearly in tables, charts and graphs. He attended Lake Avenue Presbyterian Church where he became well acquainted with Dawson Trotman, founder of the Navigators, and Charles Fuller, founder of the Fuller School of Theology. He describes a religious experience at this time in which “my life was turned around into an intense commitment . . .” (Autobiography, p. 2). Instead of pursuing a career in engineering he decided to commit his life to mission service. In preparation he studied for a doctorate in linguistics, anthropology and mathematical studies at Cornell University where he met and married Roberta Helm, a registered nurse. In order to enhance his language skills he then took an M.A. course in teaching English as a second language at Columbia Teachers College. But he did not feel adequately equipped theologically, so he registered for a B.D. at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he met Bill Brightman, who became a lifelong friend. He planned to commence mission service in Afghanistan, where he could communicate the gospel while involved in the establishment of

a Caltech style school of engineering. Consequently, he and Brightman inspired a group of short-term volunteers to render service there. However, in 1956, Winter accepted the call of the Foreign Mission Board of the Presbyterian Church to service in Guatemala, where both his services and those of a registered nurse were required. The Winters spent a year in a language school in Costa Rica, learning the Mam language in preparation for their work.

Two aspects of his missionary experience in Guatemala, where he served at the seminary with Jim Emery, are of particular interest. The Mam were poor and did not have the skills to improve their station in life. During this time, Winter and Emery assisted in the establishment of seventeen small businesses by means of which they could teach the Mam commercial and practical skills to open the way to a more satisfactory life. But more than this, they realized they were not attracting young ministerial recruits with appropriate talents to the seminary in sufficient numbers to provide leadership for the growing church. Rather than concentrating their efforts solely on this small group, they set about equipping the lay church elders, who were already leading the churches and companies, for ministry. They drafted and assembled lessons appropriate for private study and then gathered groups together for intensive seminar sessions.

Thus was born the Theological Education by Extension (TEE) program, which proved to be highly

effective. It spread to adjoining peoples and countries rapidly. Winter subsequently became the Executive Director of a TEE Association that covered seventeen Latin American countries. He edited *Theological Education by Extension* in 1969 after he joined the Fuller SWM (R. D. Winter, 1969). It was widely distributed by the Theological Education Fund, sponsored by the World Council of Churches (WCC), and in due course was adopted in 500 mission programs and enlisted 100,000 lay church leaders preparing for ordination.

The School of World Mission at Fuller was established in 1965, and probably because of Winter's influence in the TEE program, McGavran invited him to join the faculty the following year. Winter focused on a course on "the historical growth factors of the Christian Movement in the last 2000 years" (Autobiography, p. 2), which opened the way for careful analysis of factors which over the years had contributed to both success and failure in the propagation of the gospel. Under his guidance, some 1000 missionaries studied and wrote M.A. and doctoral theses about their fields of labor, analyzing the successes and failures of their work. This broadened his understanding of the worldwide missionary enterprise. He travelled widely and continued to sponsor the TEE program, but two other concerns became more dominant in his thought. He realized more and more that the students with whom he worked came from and returned to areas where the

church was already established, and that while attention was paid to national/political boundaries, almost no attention was paid to the unreached people groups within these countries.

At the same time he became aware of an additional hindrance: the valuable information in student research papers, and much other important missiological material, remained hidden in the vaults of a few select libraries. He initiated SWM faculty discussion about the issue. Consequently, Winter was delegated to explore possibilities of publishing these materials at an affordable price. He established the William Carey Library (WCL) and in due course the whole Winter family was involved in editing and publishing. To date, WCL has published over 700 titles and sold over a million missiological publications (Minard, 2009). This has made much important information available to missionaries and sponsoring organizations at a surprisingly low cost. In due course it became the publishing and distribution agent for the materials—books, journals, statistical materials and charts—produced by the agencies clustered at the USCWM.

Winter's next major contribution to the mission of the church was his participation in the movement in 1972 to create The American Society of Missiology and publish the journal *Missiology*, as has already been described.

In 1973 Winter attended the Urbana Conference for college students interested in mission service, organized by David

Howard and the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship. It was attended by 17,000 students, 5,000 of whom signed up for mission service. He realized that there was no program to equip them for their missionary experience and thus organized a fifteen-week follow-up course, initially called The Summer Institute for International Studies, based on the 850-page *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* volume (R. D. Winter & Hawthorne, 1981). This college level course on missions, based on selected studies by some 70 authors, was organized under the four foundational perspectives of Christian service: Biblical, Historical, Cultural and Strategic. This course subsequently became very popular and has been offered by many institutions in the USA and abroad and followed by some 70,000 students.

At about the same time, the Billy Graham Association was organizing the International Congress on World Evangelism, which convened at Lausanne, Switzerland, in July 1974. Winter's presentation, "The Highest Priority: Cross-Cultural Evangelism" (R. D. Winter, 1975), built on his teaching experience at Fuller, made the case that most Evangelical missions were focused on already reached peoples and that the Christian movement needed to look beyond national boundaries and focus attention on the unreached 2.7 billion in secluded people groups. This flaming message constituted a major turning point in evangelical thought about missions and also in the Winter family experience.

There was ongoing discussion among the Fuller missions faculty over a two-year period as to how this challenge could best be met. Winter made the case for the establishment of a new institution-based program to recruit, prepare and support candidates committed to work among designated unreached people groups. While the need was felt, no one was willing to leave the security of the established institution and undertake the challenge of developing the program he had in mind. "It finally became clear that I was the only one who was willing and able to walk out of their present job and attempt a project as huge and risky as this was" (Autobiography, p. 3).

Consequently, after a six-month leave of absence, he resigned from his position at Fuller and, supported by Roberta and a secretary, set out in 1976 without denominational or institutional support to investigate the possibility of fulfilling this purpose. The only justification for this endeavor was the value of the goal and the conviction of divine support in the enterprise. "At no time in my life before or after have I to the extent I did then, sense[d] that God was forcing me to choose a much harder row to hoe" (Autobiography, p. 3).

Consequently, Winter led out in the establishment of the Frontier Mission Fellowship, incorporated in 1976, which became the organizational body sponsoring and directing events which eventually led to the establishment of the USCWM. As the program took shape, the vision

grew of obtaining the \$15 million campus of the Pasadena Nazarene College which had been relocated in San Diego. They had no funds but set forth in faith, and through much work and prayer the dream was accomplished. This amazing, practically unbelievable, story is told by Roberta Winter in the book *I Will Do a New Thing* (1987). The USCWM became the center for the William Carey International University founded in 1977, which now enrolls some "6,000 new students a year, drawing upon over 900 teachers/professors all over the country, teaching in over 130 places in the U. S. alone . . . with half of our staff either at regional centers in the USA or in similar activities around the world" (Autobiography, p. 4). In addition, the USCWM became the organizational center for the publishing house William Carey Library, the International Society for Frontier Missiology (1986), and about 50 other mission agencies, such as the Zwemer Institute, which focuses on ministry in the Muslim world, and Global Mapping International (GMI).

The USCWM serves these ministries with the Perspectives course, the World Christian Foundations curriculum, and journals such as *Mission Frontiers*. The latter, founded and edited by Winter until his death, and published six times per year, has been extremely influential and gained a circulation of 92,000. Other journals published include the *Global Prayer Digest* and the *International Journal for Frontier Missiology*. At the same time, using the latest computer technology, the group

developed a web system which makes a vast amount of information available to all missions agencies. Centers working in relationship with the USCWM have been established around the world and provide national mission movements with adapted study courses, publications and a variety of services. All told, the USCWM has had a global impact both in shaping the concepts regarding, and functions of, world mission and in providing materials to facilitate these programs.

As I have listened to Winter and read his publications over the years since 1972, watched the development of the USCWM and the many missions programs it supports, and taken note of its influence in reshaping the world missionary movement, I have come to the conclusion that he has been the most significant missions thinker/leader of the contemporary era. *Time* magazine (2005) listed Winter, along with Billy Graham, Rick Warren, and James Dobson, among the most influential evangelicals during the past 50 years, and not surprisingly, he was awarded the 2008 Lifetime of Service Award at the North American Mission Leaders Conference last year (Moore & Newell, 2008). He passed to rest on May 20, 2009.

Having outlined the saga of his life and achievements, the question then arises as to how one understands the motivation and forces which gave shape to his life and mission. First, and most fundamental, it was based on a very deep dedication to the Lord and an all encompassing commitment

to His mission. At difficult turning points, he set forth in faith and confidence and much prayer, to fulfill the will of the Lord.

Secondly, the intellectual gifts which God had bestowed upon him were single-mindedly devoted to the cause, and no stone was left unturned in sharpening and preparing them for mission. Rather than simply continuing what he was expected to do, he constantly applied his investigative skills to the task. He analyzed contemporary practice, asking what was being achieved and what should be discontinued, what was neglected and how things could be done better, and whether it was time for a new vision and program of mission. And when a plan was fully confirmed in his mind, he set forth with courage and confidence and, at times, considerable personal cost to bring it to fulfillment.

Thirdly, he built communities of faith, prayer and deep commitment which in unison sought to bring their understanding of the will of God to fulfillment. In surveying the great contributions of Winter, they are best regarded as having been brought to fulfillment by a team working in close harmony with a visionary companion/leader, never the result of a commander/despot.

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