



The Challenge of Change¹

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Modern missions began as an “Era of Bravery” as people followed the call of God into difficult and dangerous places. Many of us have lived through an “Era of Welcome” in which the Gospel was welcomed, often because of the health it brought along with it. And we have lived through the “Era of Closed and Closing Fields.”

I suspect that we are sitting at a hinge-point of history, when a new era is beginning. I’m calling it the “Era of Shrewdness” after Christ’s words in Matthew 10:16—re-entry to closed fields depends on shrewd new methods.

We saw God at work in the original opening of China to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The health professions were an important part of that opening. We saw God close China, though many didn’t think it was God doing it. Now we have seen God re-open China, but he has not re-opened it on our terms. Somehow, we wish to scold God that he did it wrong.

It is a hard lesson for us to learn that God is in command, even when he sets us aside for a time and insists that he has other ways to bring about a hearing of the Gospel. That is what the challenge of change is all about: recognizing that, when God moves, it often requires us to behave fundamentally differently.

So, let us search for new and emerging patterns in mission just as we search for new and emerging ideas in health care ministry.

What about some new patterns of overseas service as norms, instead of continuing to hold on to the “career missionary, go now, stay forever” image which largely hasn’t held true for the past 40 years? There really isn’t any such thing as a single “Biblical” formula for service overseas. There are all kinds of models in the Bible. And we must be creative as we face the challenge of change.



For example, why not a 5-10-15 year pattern for overseas service? First, physicians complete their residencies and pay off the big bills. Then, they enter 5 years of overseas service while the children are relatively young. After that, they do 10 years in North America as part of a group practice and gets the kids through school. Then they are ready for a period of very productive service for 15 years overseas. That’s a 5-10-15 pattern.

One of the things I’ve learned in my career with missions is that there is never an idea that doesn’t already have a precedent someplace where God is already at work. As we face the challenge of change, we should be asking, “What is God doing, and where can I help?” Just around the corner, it is already happening somewhere.

This conference has reminded us that a life given to Christ’s command is still a viable option. We’ve been reminded that as we face the challenge of change, God says, “Fear not”. And we have all felt the gentle but sure spirit of Christ at work in our hearts.

As we leave this place, I think every one of us has the sense that we hear our Lord, and we see our Lord, more clearly than ever. And as we go out to face the challenges of the changes that confront our ministries, we hear him say, “*Surely, I am with you always.*”

¹ Excerpted from the closing session of an international conference on medical or health missions, 1987. Ward’s address to a medical mission conference (1996) is available as an mp3 audio file: “Serving the Unknown God at a Hinge-point in History”.