

# We Were Not Disobedient to the Vision

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On January 9, 1997, on the campus of the Mennonite World Conference meeting in Delhi, India, the International Missions Association (IMA) was officially born. Four mission groups representing Anabaptist circles of churches on four continents banded together to “pray for each other, learn from each other, and partner as God leads in cross-cultural missions to the unreached peoples of the world.”

Of course, long before 1997, the IMA began differently in the lives of each of us who were involved in those first meetings. For me it began as a four-year-old when I went to New York City with my parents to say good-bye to the Chester and Sara Jane Wenger family who were leaving for Ethiopia as missionaries. It continued when I met Ralph Winter at the Fuller School of World Missions and saw the importance of mission leadership, not only local church leadership, from the Global South. It continued when I met Kenyans in the United States, like Henry Mulandi, who took me back to Africa with them and I saw the birth of a grassroots Kenyan mission movement. And it especially continued in 1994, 1995, and 1996 when I began to meet Eastern Mennonite Mission’s (EMM’s) mission partners in Honduras, Ethiopia, and Indonesia and I realized that they had things to remind us and teach us about missions—some of which we had never learned and others we were in danger of forgetting.

I don’t know exactly where it began for Pak Abdi, Bedru Hussein, Rene Penalba, David Shenk, and, later, others who joined us in those early days. I only know that it began much longer ago than twenty years. Truth be told, I believe it began at Pentecost.

In those first 1997 meetings, the continents were Africa, Asia, Latin America, and North America. The mission groups were the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC), the mission arm of Ethiopia; Pekabaran Injil dan Pelayanan Kasih (PIPKA), the mission arm of Gereja Kristen Muria Indonesia (GKMI); the mission leader of Amor Viviente of Honduras; and Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM), the mission arm of Lancaster Conference and related groups in the United States.

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We held our first annual meeting in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, later that year in August. Since then, we have met every year except three, which had been scheduled for Indonesia (1999), Israel (2009), and Honduras (2014). These meetings have been held in ten countries on five continents—Honduras, Ethiopia, Indonesia, the United States, Tanzania, the Philippines, Germany, India, Kenya, and Singapore. If the IMA continues to exist for another twenty years, I hope we can add at least ten more countries to that list. Among those we should consider are Peru, Israel, South Korea, Mexico, Guatemala, Uganda, Nigeria, Turkey, Switzerland, and Morocco—to name only a few.

The guiding vision for the IMA from its beginning is threefold:

- a fellowship for mission leaders representing Anabaptist churches;
- praying for each other, learning from each other, partnering with each other;
- taking the good news to the least-reached peoples of the world.

Or, as I said in November 1997, our core convictions are “prayer, dependence on the Spirit, the centrality of the Great Commission in our missions, and taking the good news to those who have not yet heard.”

1. First, we identified “mission leaders” as the group that should gather. We knew that when church leaders gather, they have many pressing issues to consider—Biblical faithfulness in every part of life, theological correctness, church polity, church discipline, training institutions, the care of widows and orphans, personal and corporate relationship with God, and many more issues, all of them important. We wanted to establish a group with singular focus—intercultural mission.
2. Second, we identified the importance of fellowship in prayer, learning from each other, and partnering as the Holy Spirit leads. We soon began not only to pray but also to fast together. We knew that the newer churches of Africa, Asia, and Latin America had much to teach the older churches of North America and Europe. We knew that the Great Commission is just as much for Africans as for Europeans, for Asians as for North Americans. We knew that in many cases, we Westerners had more to learn in mission from our brothers and sisters in the Global South than they from us. And we wanted to partner, truly partner, in new ways.
3. Third, we wanted to maintain a special focus on going to peoples and places where the church did not yet exist, the least-reached peoples of the world. As Oswald Smith of Toronto asked many years ago, “Why should anyone hear the gospel twice when there are some who have not heard it once?” We knew that this meant intercultural mission, whether in our own countries or abroad. We knew that it meant incarnational mission—learning new languages, going to difficult and unreceptive places, getting outside our com-

fort zones. And we believed that we could encourage and help each other as we went.

By the grace of God, we have not been disobedient to that vision. Yes, sometimes we have lost sight of it. Sometimes we have faltered and fallen. But for the past twenty years, we have been renewed year by year as we've gathered.

We have partnered, and that partnership has been expressed in a multitude of little and big ways. We have partnered in encouragement, in testimony, in finances, in prayer, and in prophetic words of direction. Sometimes we have done program together, but our partnership has gone far beyond mere program. Soul friendships have blossomed among us. Whole new directions in our ministries have emerged. Lives are being changed. Countries are being impacted.

We were not disobedient to the heavenly vision

- when we were on our faces before the Lord in Honduras saying, Yes, by your grace we are ready to die for your sake and for those who have not yet heard.
- when in the Philippines we enrolled together in the University of the Holy Spirit, signing our names on a whiteboard.
- when finances for frontier mission began to travel from Southeast Asia to Africa and the Middle East, and they're still traveling today.
- when on multiple occasions a brother from Asia challenged us to begin living by faith, abandoning ourselves in fresh ways to the God who provides.
- when I've left these meetings, year after year, challenged to the core of my being to go back home to walk out this kingdom life in Christ in generosity, faith, and persistent love—against all odds.
- when a young Nepali attended an IMA meeting and went back home with a new awareness that he and his church, too, were called to mission.
- when bishops from Lancaster Mennonite Conference (LMC) said, "We have many conferences on peacemaking in our country. Couldn't we have a conference on the Holy Spirit in mission?" That vision did not die, and the next year in Ethiopia the first Holy Spirit in Mission conference was held as a part of IMA, and it has never stopped. This year is the tenth, I think.
- when we gave each other seminars on what we've learned about mission—Honduras, Ethiopia, Indonesia, and the United States. Though we no longer give the formal seminars every year, we have never stopped learning from each other.
- when a bishop from the Kenya Mennonite Church came as a guest to the IMA. We inquired whether KMC wanted to become a member. He

- said, “We’re not ready yet, but give us a couple years, and we’ll be back.”
- when we were asked, do you have to be a mission board to join? And we said no! If your whole church understands itself to be on this mission, just send whichever mission leader can represent you in that mission. Amor Viviente has been like that from the beginning.
  - when LMC leaders and other church leaders connected with IMA joined us in Kenya in 2010 to meet other leaders from around the globe. IMA continued with its agenda, and the church leaders to whom we are accountable met for theirs.
  - when 3,000 ordinary Kenyan believers headed north to some of the wildest, conflict-prone regions of their nation this summer to share the gospel with anyone who would listen. The whole Kenyan church is being impacted by this missional vision.

And now, almost everywhere I go in the world, I see the ripple effects of living out IMA’s vision, and I rejoice.

So we celebrate twenty years tonight. But let’s never forget that our primary celebration is not of some human institution like IMA. IMA can come and go.

Rather, we celebrate because we’re a little part of a great kingdom movement that has circled the globe for millennia:

- it was already a movement 4,000 years ago when God told Abram, “I’m going to bless all the clans of the world through you” (see Genesis 12:3).
- it was already a movement when the voice spoke from heaven at Jesus’s baptism, “You are my beloved Son; in you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11, NASB).
- it was already a movement when Jesus told the eleven, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:18–19, NIV).
- it was already a movement when Paul wrote to the Romans, “I made it my goal to preach where the gospel had not yet been proclaimed” (see Romans 15:20).
- it was already a movement for captives to the wild Germans (257), Anbaram in Ethiopia (300s), Patrick in Ireland (400s), an Armenian among the Turks of Central Asia (500s), unnamed Berbers in North Africa (200–600), and hundreds of others today who are going, going, going.