

Serving in Mission: *Linking Hands around the Globe*

IF THERE'S AN INTERNATIONAL CLUB in heaven, the Allens, Bingham, Davidsons, Murrays, and Reeves must be members—along with colleagues from around the globe. Of course we know that *everyone* in Heaven will surround the Lamb's Throne. It will be one Universal Club—the Church of the Son of God.

But as we think of the multiple founders of what we today know as **Serving in Mission (SIM)**, we can imagine their rejoicing at the remarkable results of their obedience just over a century ago, Earth Time. They'll understand—perhaps still marvel—how God brought their mission agencies serving on different continents together as one. They'll know each other “as they are known” and they'll join in the chorus of The Redeemed--gathered from the very continents to which those pioneers once helped take the gospel.

To us on this side of Earth Time, it seems an unlikely scenario for the formation of a global mission. Unknown to each other, around the turn of the 20th c., an evangelist sails from Australia for India, a Scottish businessman heads off to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), a newlywed couple leave New Zealand for South America, a South African Bible teacher chairs a new sending mission, and three youthful North Americans land in West Africa.

All of these forays take place in the same generation, three in the same year. Not only are the lead players from different countries but also from different church backgrounds. Yet a century later their successors find themselves working together in *one* mission society. Several of today's missionaries come from countries those pioneers took the gospel to.

An unlikely scenario, perhaps, but this is the remarkable story of SIM beginnings. What motivated the pioneers? How did they decide where to serve? What was happening around the turn of the century to give rise to a number of missionary movements? And what eventually brought these particular missions together to form today's SIM?

New Generation of Missions

During the 18th and 19th centuries, major denominations had sent missionaries along the world's trade routes. Later, as several once-fervent mainline churches succumbed to liberal “universalism,” their overseas missionaries often who remained evangelical. Meanwhile across the denominational spectrum, many believers responded to Christ's Great Commission through new interdenominational agencies.

The **South African General Mission (SAGM)** was one of those. **Andrew Murray** (along with two colleagues) founded it in 1889, and became its president. Son of a Scottish minister, Murray was already known for his Bible teaching (eventually published in some 250 books). He found a university, seminaries, and a missionary training institute. But he always considered missions as “the chief end of the church.” SAGM changed its initial name from the **Cape General Mission**, but as it spread into other African countries, it took on the name **Africa Evangelical Fellowship (AEF)**. In 1998, it “lengthened its cords,” merging with SIM. Since it was already sending

missionaries into islands of the Indian Ocean, it felt at home with SIM, which by then included Asia-based **International Christian Fellowship (ICF)**.

ICF itself was a hybrid of two other missions: **Pune and India Village Mission (PIVM)** and **Ceylon and India General Mission (CIGM)**. PIVM began when Australian evangelist Charles Reeve left his pastoral island of Tasmania to share the gospel with India's crowded villages. A visiting Eurasian Christian had told him about Poona (Pune), a major transit center for Hindu pilgrims and a potential base for evangelizing countless villages. In 1893, he and M.E. Gavin formed PIVM.

In the same year, Benjamin Davidson, a Scottish businessman, formed **Ceylon and India Mission (CIGM)**. On an earlier visit to Ceylon as agent for a pearl-trading company, he had seen the spiritual and physical plight of the people. Back in Britain, a visiting Sri Lankan evangelist, Tamil David, challenged him to help evangelize his people. On November 3, 1893, the Sri Lankan, having returned home, welcomed Davidson and eleven companions to his island, and within a year CIGM had opened two bases in Sri Lanka and three in India. In 1968 PIVM and CIGM merged under CIGM's new name, ICF. In 1989, seeking wider administration, in turn it merged with SIM.

The same year Davidson landed in Asia, on the other side of the world three young men arrived in Lagos, Nigeria, West Africa, December 4, 1893. American Tom Kent and Canadians Rowland Bingham and Walter Gowans were concerned for the estimated sixty to eighty million people of the vast area, then called The Soudan, across the widest part of Africa south of the Sahara. That area was also known as "The White Man's Grave." Within a year malaria took the lives of Gowans and Kent. Himself feverish from malaria, Bingham returned to Canada. There he reorganized his team under the name **Soudan Interior Mission (SIM)**—the name decided on in 1894. Again, mosquito-borne fever turned them back, but in 1901 a third team finally established an inland base at Patigi.

Their intention was to provide a gospel-centered industrial project (**the African Industrial Mission**) in contrast to the iniquitous slave trade—recently banned in the British Empire but still plagued by vested interests. Illness and death hindered the project from developing, however. In 1895, SIM took the name, **Africa Evangelistic Mission (AEM)**, but again in 1906 it temporarily bore the name **Sudan United Mission** while discussing merger with Britain's SUM. In 1907 Bingham and his colleagues reverted to the earlier SIM.¹ Today the global mission is known as **Serving In Mission**.

It was also in 1893 that British Keswick evangelists visited South America. One of them, Harry Guinness, and his sister Lucy (both in-laws of J. Hudson Taylor's son, Howard) published their report, *South America: The Neglected Continent*. Over in New Zealand, George Allan and his fiancé, Mary Stirling, read the book and felt called to evangelize among the Americas' largest ethnic group, the Quechua. George and his new bride sailed for South America in 1899, and in 1907 formed the **Bolivian Indian Mission (BIM)**. In 1965 BIM changed its name to **Andes Evangelical Mission (AEM)**. In 1982, it merged with SIM—not as unusual as it might seem. Decades earlier, even as SIM's original

¹ James H. Hunter records the early name changes in *A Flame of Fire*, SIM, Toronto, 1961 (pages 82-83).

leader, Bingham, was sending missionaries to Africa, that little man with the big heart had thundered in his mission paper, “*South America’s Indians are the most neglected people of the most neglected continent!*”

GROWING TOGETHER

All the pioneers faced physical rigors, oppressive spiritual darkness, and violent opposition. (In Bolivia at the time, evangelicals could face death.) But they persevered until they saw the Word of God take root and bear fruit. As their work has grown, each mission has been overwhelmed by the yet unfinished task.

That is why they have come together—to strengthen their hands and to be more effective. In Africa, SIM had grown in response to the enlarging opportunities on that continent. The Mission was not considering outreach in other parts of the world; there was plenty to do in Africa. But with escalating costs, AEM in Latin America, ICF in Asia, and AEF in Africa felt it was only good stewardship to join in a larger group, sharing representation and administration. One by one, they approached the original SIM, which itself had been a merger of smaller agencies in earlier years. In 1990 SIM reflected its wider components by changing its name to Society for International Ministries, and in 2002 to Serving in Mission. This gave wider meaning to the familiar acronym, SIM.

DIFFERENT ROOTS, COMMON FIBERS

Today’s SIM is an international partnership that grew from roots in different parts of the globe. Yet there were several common fibers that have shaped its present character.

1. The missionary initiatives at the end of the nineteenth century (end of the 1800s)—and there were many more than those cited here—grew out of a time of spiritual revival. As in the case of the Apostle Paul, an overwhelming sense of Christ’s love “compelled” men and women to witness to their own nations as well as to other nations worldwide. All must hear of God’s redemptive love, they felt.

2. Although the founders of the missions that are now joined in SIM lived and worked in different corners of the earth, their lives were influenced by a common circle of Christian leaders such as H. Gratton Guinness, Samuel H. Kellogg, A.T. Pierson, A.B. Simpson, and J. Hudson Taylor. Those earlier pioneers operated on principles of dependence on God and obedience to Christ’s commands, which SIM’s pioneers shared.

3. The founders came from established denominations, but the size of the task of world evangelism ruled out any sectarian isolation. Increasingly, liberal theology and a “universalist” view denied the need for Christ’s redemptive work. But evangelicals adhered to scriptural basics and responded to the Great Commission. Coming from a wide spectrum of church backgrounds, they demonstrated *biblical* ecumenism: the “universality” of the Gospel Evangel rather than rationalist universalism.

4. It was an era of increasing awareness of a world of diverse peoples. Rather than looking on in idle curiosity, evangelicals felt personal responsibility to share their faith. They sought out ethnic groups that had the least knowledge (if any) of Christ’s salvation.

Even as the Apostle Paul used the communication routes of the Roman Empire, missions of the 18th and 19th nineteenth centuries traveled the trade routes of their day.

Some critics allege that missionaries were colonial adventurers, extending the grasp of empire. SIM archives refute that stereotype, documenting the pioneers' opposition to oppressive policies-- imperial or nationalist. They considered that the colonizers (soldiers, administrators, and traders alike) had as much spiritual need as the indigenous peoples, and actively sought their conversion too.

Although the pioneers kept the message of spiritual redemption in focus, they also led the way in alleviating physical suffering, changing conditions that spawned it. They protested mistreatment of indigenous peoples and helped to bring about reform. Back in their own lands, Christian parliamentarians and others in government service were actively seeking to overcome the slave trade, abuse of women, and other iniquities. Christian churches became salt and light in their nations. In fact, some indigenous churches are now sending missionaries back to the lands from which the pioneers came.

What the Pioneers Would Find Today

If we could assemble the pioneers to review the past, they would be able to tell many stories of faith and courage, of tears and joy. But their "glory and joy," like the Apostle Paul's, would be in redeemed men, women, and children. In lands where early converts were sometimes beaten, imprisoned, and even killed, they would now find strong indigenous churches making an impact on their nations. Of course, in certain lands they would still find tiny groups struggling against fierce opposition. But worldwide, around ten million (some seven million baptized) attend SIM-related churches and preaching points. Leaders from their own ethnic groups, trained in their own Bible schools and seminaries by their own theologians, shepherd these groups..

Allen, Bingham, Davidson, Murray, and Reeve would be encouraged by the missionary vision which many of those churches have, extending the gospel into the dark corners of their own nations and to other nations. For instance, in Nigeria Bingham would meet the leaders of one of the world's largest indigenous missions, the Evangelical Missionary Society, which has arisen from the work that God used him to start. In India, Davidson would meet Ethiopians; in South America, Allen would find oriental missionaries. Some 1500 active SIM members, plus 800 retirees, come from or work in 46 countries.

The scenario of SIM beginnings may have seemed unlikely, but the scene we shall all celebrate is what John of the Apocalypse previewed: a multitude "from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing...in front of the Lamb." Today's SIM links hands around the globe, looking forward to the day when we shall all join our voices in the anthem: *"To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood . . . , to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen."*

--W. Harold Fuller, Lit. D., © SIM 2007