

Hungering for a harvest

Strategizing for the gospel

By Harvey R. Brown Jr.



Photo by Harvey Brown

They came from every corner of the globe. Some journeys began on foot, others began in canoe. From remote villages and teeming jungles, from the bush and burgeoning cities, evangelists from around the world gathered in Amsterdam from July 29 through August 6 to pray, learn, and strategize together how to carry the gospel of Christ into all the world in the 21st century.

Amsterdam 2000, a global gathering of preaching evangelists hosted by Billy Graham, was the largest, most representative gathering of nations in history—either secular or religious. The conference attracted 10,732 participants from 209 countries and territories (37 more nations than were



(Above) A children's choir from Africa performed for the 10,000 delegates who were assembled in Amsterdam. (Bottom left) Harvey Brown speaks with Goodson Silavwe, a church planter who oversees a network of churches—23 local churches so far during the last three years—with an average of 1,200 members.

represented at Amsterdam '86). Seventy-five percent of the participants came from developing nations. Over 50,000 persons applied for the slightly more than 10,000 delegate invitations that were extended by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

Although Dr. Graham was unable to attend because of his health, attendees heard his opening greetings read by his son, Franklin Graham. Expressing regret that he could not physically be present, Graham told attendees that he would be a full participant through satellite video fed directly into the Mayo Clinic.

"Be assured, however, that I will be with you in spirit and prayer throughout the conference," said Graham. "We must go back and search the Word of God to discover what we need to do for the extension of the kingdom in our day. That is the reason we have convened this conference." He ended his remarks with the prayer "O God, let the fire of your Holy Spirit fall on us!"

Over the course of the nine-day conference, delegates participated in more than 500 plenary, seminar, and workshop sessions that were conducted by some of the world's top Christian leaders, including the Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey, Chuck Colson, the Rev. Billy Kim, Dr. Bill Bright, Dr. Ravi Zacharias, Dr. J.I. Packer, and the Rev. Luis Palau. Daily themes—from the content of the message to the character of the evangelist—provided the focus for the presentations during the conference.

Cutting Edge Technology with a Timeless Message

After more than half a century in ministry, the Billy Graham organization continued to break new ground in combining ministry and technology. All major sessions were Webcast and archived at www.amsterdam2000.org and www.crosswalk.com/billygraham. Daily interactive press briefings, daily plenary sessions, news releases, and information are still available on the official Amsterdam 2000 websites.

All plenary sessions were interpreted into 28 languages and broadcast on a low power, AM radio signal. Participants were able to tune in their native languages using digital pocket radios with headphones. With 28 channels, the Amsterdam 2000 interpretation system featured the most AM broadcasts ever run simultaneously in a facility.

Amsterdam 2000 organizers were faced with the monumental task of meeting the daily physical needs of more than 10,000 participants. The Jaarbeurs Congress Center served as the temporary home for 7,000 evangelists. The conversion of the Center into a suitable living space required 10,512 square meters of carpet, 3,500 sets of bunk beds, and 289 toilets. Other bare necessities for the 10 days included: 308,610 meals, 235 two-way radios, 182 cell phones, 160 computers, and 70 buses.

Conferees were served by a small army of blue-vested stewards who referred to themselves as "servants of the servants of Christ." Two thousand people submitted applications to become volunteer stewards for the conference. The 704 who were selected came from 43 countries. Their duties included everything from making copies and serving meals, to escorting thousands of participants on a daily, 60-mile round trip train journey to and from the RAI Center.

Walking with Giants

During my time at Amsterdam 2000, I had the great joy and privilege of spending twelve-hour conference days with giants in the faith. The marquee speakers—brothers and sisters whose names we would all know—were wonderful presenters and challenged us to continue to press the cause of Christ. But for me, I discovered other giants of the faith among the unsung and unknown "barefoot evangelists"—men and women who labor for the Lord under conditions that are inconceivable for many of us in the developed world. One such brother is Goodson Silavwe from Zambia.

During a conference break, my wife Marilyn and I sat next to Goodson on the floor of the RAI Conference Center as we shared a mid-morning snack. A delightful man with a ready smile, Goodson—who speaks 19 languages and dialects—was easily able to navigate through our southeastern U.S. drawl as we participated in a brief mutual geography lesson. Then we began to hear the vision and ministry

that God had given this church planter, missionary, and Bible translator.

Goodson, his wife, and four children live and work in Mbala, a town of 28,000 inhabitants 800 miles north of Zambia's capital city, Lusaka. The main occupation in the region is peasant farming. Most of the people are illiterate.

Although the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association provided significant scholarship support for Goodson Silavwe and the vast majority of attendees from developing countries, he, like others who were receiving Amsterdam 2000 scholarships, was asked to contribute some funds toward the trip. Silavwe, who receives no fixed salary as a church planter and missionary, grows maize, a staple food crop, for his livelihood.

"I produced 78 bags, weighing 90 kg (about 180 pound) each, of white maize during the last season," Goodson told us. "But I sold part of the produce to contribute \$300 towards my Amsterdam 2000 pledge. What is remaining cannot take me to the next farming season as well as support my family and school-going children. I entirely depend on God in faith," he continued. "I know that since he let me come to this great gathering, he will meet all of my needs."

Goodson oversees a network of church plants—23 local churches so far during the last three years—with an average number of 1,200 members. "I am supported in my work by 14 local evangelists who always walk, covering an area of 150km (roughly 94 miles) radius, on foot. I sometimes use an old bicycle that I bought 10 years ago, but it requires perpetual repairs each time I make a tour."

Mambwe-Lungu, the native language of most of Mbala's inhabitants, had no alphabet until Goodson developed one. His work has been generally accepted by the people, and literacy among these previously illiterate people is now becoming a distinct possibility.

"They have had no literature, including the Bible," stated Goodson. "Just imagine how difficult the propagation of the gospel would be when working among people who have no literature at all, let alone not having the Scriptures in their own heart language." His passion to reach his people has already resulted in his translating the synoptic gospels into Mambwe-Lungu using the alphabet he created.

He then shared more of his vision with us. "It is my prayer that some people—including some Bible translating organization—will recognize God's work in what I am doing

and possibly get motivated to join in the work. I see it as a matter of profound importance because having the Scriptures in their own tongue will mean the restoration of their status before God."

Part of Goodson's prayer was answered that night when Marilyn and I introduced ourselves to another North American couple at our hotel. Roy Peterson, president of Wycliffe Bible Translators U.S., and his wife Rita, who were also delegates to the conference. As we told them about our new friend from Zambia, Roy shared with us Wycliffe's conference goal—locating persons from 100 language groups that had yet to receive the Scriptures in their own tongue who might be linkage points for Wycliffe's ministry of Scripture translation. The following day we found Goodson, and introduced him to Roy Peterson—and Wycliffe Bible Translators.



Steve Saint moved in 1995 to Ecuador with his wife and children to work with the Huaorani people to build an airport and a hospital. The Huaorani, called the Auca by outsiders, martyred Steve's father, Nate Saint in 1955.

Unto All the World

On the final day of the conference, three special task groups presented their findings on the future of evangelism in a document entitled, "The Amsterdam Declaration." The 5,000-word paper addresses a variety of issues including social responsibility and evangelism. It reads: "We pledge ourselves to follow the way of justice in our family and social life, and to keep personal, social, and environmental values in view as we evangelize."

Participants signed a one-page Covenant for Evangelists to take home with them. They pledged, among other things, to "practice a life of constant personal prayer, Bible study, and devotion to God" and to "serve the needy and oppressed, remembering the mercy and compassion of Jesus."

During the closing service, Dr. Graham did address the conference via satellite. "I want to be among those who represent a generation of evangelists that hands the torch to a new generation of God's servants. We will go out from Amsterdam with a new fire burning in our hearts to touch a lost world....Let us light a fire of commitment to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit to the ends of the earth, using every resource at our command and with every ounce of our strength."

Harvey R. Brown Jr. is president of Impact Ministries, Inc. in Wilmore, Kentucky and author of When God Strikes the Match (Destiny Image). A United Methodist clergyman, Dr. Brown was invited by Billy Graham to present a workshop on "Personal Renewal and Holiness" at Amsterdam 2000. The text of his presentation may be read on the world-wide web at www.impactministries.org