

Global Missions Leader Discusses Church Challenges

On September 1, Lawrence Tong, from Singapore, became OM's third international director, succeeding Peter Maiden, who retired from the role after serving for 10 years, and George Verwer, who founded OM in 1957. Before assuming this new role, Lawrence shared his thoughts on the future of global mission and OM's role.

OM: The world of 2013 is defined by mega-changes in technology, distribution of wealth, pandemic threats, increasingly young populations and more. How can Christian mission navigate its mandate with confidence?

LT: First, we must believe with deep conviction that the gospel message is unchanged. World trends change; God's truth does not. With that reality and the Holy Spirit, we must not be afraid to change. The world should not influence our belief; our belief should influence the world. To do so, whatever we say or do must be relevant to our culture. Decades ago, we might distribute 5,000 tracts in a single day of outreach and sense an accomplishment. Today, we think in terms of hundreds of millions via the Internet. And we must be better listeners than speakers, eager to understand the hearts and minds of people. That can be a challenge for the activists among us.

OM: When you look at the global church, what causes you concern and what holds promise?

LT: A key concern is the shrinking global influence of the Church in the West. Membership is declining and resources are dwindling. The center of influence for world Christianity has already shifted to the East. Churches and mission groups in both worlds need to accept this reality. We cannot expect

Western churches alone to shoulder the burden of world evangelization.

Happily, the church in the Global South is expanding rapidly and is beginning to embrace its shared responsibility to reach the world. It has the people and resources, but a lingering sense of “letting the West do it” remains. Thirty years ago, a “missionary” meant a Westerner; today it belongs to everyone. This teaching has been weak in many places and is a key reason why Latin American churches lag behind in sending people. That mindset must change from limitation to privilege. I’m optimistic that this will happen.

OM: How can you maintain your organization’s foundations yet develop greater flexibility and responsiveness?

LT: We should never lose sight of our history and core values. Yet we must be brave and creative, open to new ideas. We must trust others as the Holy Spirit equips them for a task. The Bible says very little about structures, but it does talk about commitment, endeavor, attitudes and relationships. I ask myself: Do I want to lead an organization or a movement? To lead a movement, I must be willing to let go of centralized control and allow innovation to take place at a grass roots level. OM’s DNA is multiplication according to the principles of Jesus, whereas institutions or organizations have a tendency to control. OM is fundamentally an organic movement based on a deep conviction that the world belongs under the Lordship of Christ. We must continue to recruit creative thinkers and visionaries, seeking them out and welcoming them into a movement.

OM: You have a limited window in which to mentor the next generation. How will you accelerate and deepen this process?

LT: This is critical, as many of our senior leaders are “grey hairs” and more of us will join their ranks in a decade. Mentoring the next generation must be intentional; there is no

other option. We have launched programs such as the Daniel Initiative, which trains new leaders from both the Global South and the West to work together. We're trusting God for 7,000 more workers from the Global South in the next 13 years. That will require at least 900 Global South leaders who will share in the global leadership of OM.

It's not about fitting new people into old roles, but that they take our movement in new directions and develop new methods. If we fail to bring in new ideas, we are not far from failure. Let us trust younger peoples' passion and vision to connect with their world. When I joined OM, people would watch a 30-minute slide presentation; today, three minutes of video is pushing it for attention spans. But it can be done!

Churches everywhere face the same challenges as OM in this regard. We'd like to simply carry on with what we are comfortable with, but it's not about us—it's about God's kingdom today and tomorrow.

OM: Let's talk about partnership and ownership in missions and greater collaboration between missions and churches. What lays ahead for OM?

LT: Mission is an inseparable part of the church. As our understanding of world mission merges, there is great synergy of resources and experience: they know their people and resources; we know effective mission strategies "on the ground". Like most missions, OM can improve our part in this relationship by being better listeners and trusting God for greater cooperation.

To hear more from Lawrence Tong, visit him on Facebook at or follow him on Twitter: @omlawrencetong.