

Loren Cunningham Dies at 88: YWAM Founder, Global Missionary, Evangelist

Loren Cunningham, founder of interdenominational, multicultural Christian training organization Youth With a Mission, died today at his home in Hawaii after a battle with lung cancer. The first person in history to travel for the sake of Christ and the Great Commission to every sovereign nation on earth, all dependent countries and more than 100 territories, he was 88.

Cunningham founded YWAM in 1960 as a way to get young people involved in Christian mission and built the organization into a global missions movement touching every continent and influencing every generation over its 63-year history. He was often called the “deregulator of missions” because he broke the 1960s missionary paradigm by creating a way for youth to serve short-term, interdenominationally and unsalaried. YWAM now has over 2,000 locations in 200 countries, reaching more than 180 countries through three main areas: evangelism, training and mercy ministry.

Although many have credited YWAM as being one of the world’s largest mission movements, Cunningham responded to this claim by deflecting the glory to Jesus, noting, “Well, however large it is, it’s not large enough because Jesus’ last commandment to reach the whole world with the gospel has not been completed.”

His personal call to the Great Commission came while kneeling at the altar during a brush arbor revival meeting at age 13 in 1948. God used Mark 16:15 to speak to him: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.”

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A vision Cunningham saw as he was preparing to serve in the Bahamas in 1956 confirmed this call. He was staying in a missionary's home, praying in preparation to speak. He reported in his book "Is That Really You, God?" that as he knelt beside the bed,

Suddenly, I was looking at a map of the world, only the map was alive and moving! I could see all the continents, and waves were crashing onto their shores. Each wave went onto a continent, then receded, then came up further until it covered the continent completely. The waves became young people—kids my age and even younger—covering all the continents of the globe. They were talking to people on street corners and outside bars. They were going from house to house and preaching the Gospel. They came from everywhere and went everywhere, caring for people. Then, just as suddenly as it had come, the scene was gone.

Global initiatives launched under his leadership included King's Kids International, the University of the Nations, YWAM Ships (28 vessels currently serve the most isolated islands and coastlands) as well as multitudes of other ministries birthed by those he mentored and inspired.

Cunningham was born June 30, 1935, in Taft, California, to a family several generations deep with Christian ministers. He is survived by his wife of 60 years, Darlene, who led YWAM with him; their daughter, Karen; son, David; and three grandchildren.

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Condolences were increasing late today, many acknowledging the YWAM founder's pivotal role in the expansion of missions

ministry and the cause of the gospel. Cindy Jacobs, co-founder of Generals International, posted on X:

You taught us how to love the nations! 🙏@LorenCunningham🙏

– Cindy Jacobs (@cindyjacobs) October 6, 2023

Let Us Worship founder Sean Feucht also expressed his condolences via X:

A hero in our generation has just passed into eternity.🙏

Loren Cunningham founded YWAM at the age of 24 in 1960. He personally preached the gospel in every nation on earth!

The impact he made on my life, my family & my generation will never be forgotten.#LorenCunningham

– Sean Feucht (@seanfeucht) October 6, 2023

And Doug Stringer, founder of Somebody Cares America/International, shared the news and his heartfelt sympathy on Facebook:

A celebration of life for Cunningham will be held Saturday, Nov. 4 at the University of the Nations campus in Kona, Hawaii; other celebrations will also be held globally for those who cannot attend the Kona service. {eo}

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