

YWAM Founder Calls for 1 Million Intercessors to Usher in Greatest Revival the World Has Ever Seen

For more than a half-century, Youth With a Mission—better known as YWAM—has mobilized believers around the world to fulfill the Great Commission and save souls for Christ. Conceived originally for youth missions, it has grown into one of the largest mission organizations on earth, with 2,000 locations in 191 countries, utilizing tens of thousands of missionaries representing about 200 denominations, all of whom raise their own support. Besides long-term missionaries, another 5 million people have gone on short-term mission trips.

The founder and driving force behind YWAM is a spiritual dynamo named Loren Cunningham, who was just 20 when he received a vision from God during a mission trip to the Caribbean. In his vision, God showed him millions would come to Christ, and he would somehow be involved.

Now 82, Loren shows no signs of slowing down. Instead, he is focused on translating the Bible into 639 languages. And after recruiting hundreds of thousands of full-time missionaries, he's set on raising up 1 million intercessors. But he couldn't tackle that audacious goal alone. YWAM has teamed up with another longtime ministry, the International House of Prayer of Kansas City (IHOPKC).

The two ministries were already friendly and had a lot in common. Mike Bickle, founder of IHOPKC, is a visionary who has motivated thousands to become full-time intercessors and raise their own support. IHOPKC calls its locations "missions

bases.” The two organizations share similar theology and the same heart for reaching the world.

In September 2016, YWAM and IHOPKC staff met for weeklong intercession. But as the fruitful week wound down, YWAM co-founder Loren Cunningham took it to the next level. He knew that behind every effective missionary is a great team of prayer warriors—and he wanted that for his people.

“You need to undergird [missionaries] in prayer,” Loren says. “And if you don’t have a prayer force, you’re going to get involved in a fight that you can’t win, and that’s a fight with the enemy. You need the prayer support, and therefore, you need the Holy Spirit moving in to see the changes occur that you couldn’t change. And so I challenged Mike, ‘Would you help me raise up a million people praying that we can end Bible poverty?’”

Finding 1 million intercessors is no small feat, but Mike welcomed it. By week’s end, YWAM and IHOPKC’s staffs took the stage together, announcing their official partnership.

“We love what the Lord has done through Loren and Darlene Cunningham and the whole YWAM family for over 50 years, and we are committing to cover them in intercession for the great cause of advancing the kingdom in the nations and to call other prayer ministries throughout the world to join us,” Mike says.

John Dawson, YWAM’s president emeritus, says he’s excited about the partnership.

“Out at the ends of the earth, our missionaries can feel the power of this loving shield. In the hard places, in the dangerous places, we know we are not alone because intercessors are travailing, even through the night watches,” Dawson says. “With tears of joy, we have communicated our gratitude to Mike and the community of worshippers who stand with him. With thankful hearts, we came to Kansas City to

report our victories and trials, only to experience an even greater commitment to prayer mobilization.”

For Loren, this historic partnership is only the latest in a series of miracles that have defined YWAM’s history. In this conversation with Charisma, Loren reflects on his ministry’s humble roots and—emboldened by 1 million new intercessors—shares his vision for the future.

Original Vision

The spiritual seeds that grew into YWAM were first planted in June 1956. Just 20, Loren was on a mission trip to the Caribbean and was supposed to talk to 200 young people about Jesus one night. During his pre-message prayer, he received a vision from God.

“He showed me the big picture of millions and millions of young people going across every continent in the world to every nation on earth with the gospel of Jesus Christ,” he says. “It was like waves coming across the continents. ... I thought, ‘This has never been done in history.’ So I began to wait like Mary. She had to ponder the Word in her heart. She didn’t tell Joseph or anyone else until the Lord told them. By 1960, I had several confirmations: This was of God.”

Looking at his genealogy, Loren seems born to be an evangelist. He comes from eight generations of preachers, and his wife, Darlene, from seven. In retrospect, it’s no surprise the two founded YWAM together in 1960.

Though Darlene is Loren’s equal at the mission, he jokes, “I call her a ‘stay-at-home.’ She’s only been in 153 countries in the world.”

As a couple, Loren and Darlene have been and continue to be a true ministry partnership.

“Without her, YWAM would be a whole lot of vision and a lot of

blood on the ground actually, a lot of confusion,” he says. “But ... she has the ability to bring together in leadership the cohesion, the community sense and the familial spirit.”

Despite YWAM’s more than 2,000 locations worldwide, that “familial spirit” prevails. Loren decided early that he wanted YWAM’s thousands of volunteers to feel like a giant family. To that end, he’s careful to call it a movement, not an organization. He suspects that focus comes from his own family tree.

For his ancestors, preaching was a family affair. After being filled with the Spirit, Loren’s grandfather bought a covered wagon, moved his family into it and traveled from town to town preaching and planting churches. Loren’s father took him to street corners every Saturday night to share the gospel and invite passers-by to church.

Those family ministry sessions yielded important lessons. Once, his whole family was leading worship under a town portico when his mom felt God wanted them to leave immediately. The family shut down the session and started walking away—and immediately after they left, an earthquake hit, the portico collapsed and everyone in the area was crushed. Moments like that have stuck with Loren decades later.

“God protects you if you obey immediately the voice of the Lord,” he says. “And so I’ve tried to do that. A few days of my life, I never thought I’d live beyond that day. I’ve found a few times in my life where I was getting arrested in places that you don’t want to get arrested. Yet as I obeyed the Lord, everything just turned out in a positive way. So that’s what we try to teach, live and impart to our newcomers into YWAM.”

Early Decisions

That approach to ministry—hearing and immediately following God’s call—has been the key to YWAM’s growth and longevity.

Loren listened to God when he had to make several significant decisions. The first was whether or not to partner with a denomination.

"I grew up in the Assemblies of God, but the thing the Lord showed me at the beginning was it was not to be one denomination," he says. "It was to include all the denominations."

Loren didn't know how that would work out, but he heeded God's voice. He still leaned on his charismatic roots, inviting Jesus Movement hippies to be his first missionaries and getting advice from David Wilkerson. But he also allowed Christians of all stripes to be missionaries—which let the ministry grow rapidly.

Determining YWAM's funding model was another important decision. YWAM became known for asking its staff to raise their own support—so well-known, in fact, that some joked YWAM stood for "Youth Without Any Money." But Loren says God masterminded the unorthodox model.

"The Lord said, 'First of all, I don't want YWAM to be a cul-de-sac,'" Loren says. "'I want it to be a bridge—easy to get on, easy to get off—so there would be a lot of short-termers.'"

This was not a popular position. The head of another mission organization told Loren, "You've got to pay them so you can hire them and you can fire them. Otherwise, you lose control."

Loren disagreed.

"I don't want control," he said. "The Holy Spirit has to control them."

His faith in God was tested early. Seven YWAM employees—all brimming with leadership potential—came to him and said God was calling them out of YWAM to build a new ministry. Loren

not only consented to their resignation but offered to help support their new venture.

His unceasing trust that God knew best paid dividends. In the first 15 years, YWAM spread across Europe, Africa, the Middle East and the Pacific. Though many staffers were short-term and left after a brief tenure, others have been incredibly loyal and stayed for more than 50 years.

“I didn’t know it would be this big,” Loren says. “I just knew millions would be involved. We have had over 5 million involved short-term. But I didn’t know how that would fit. I learned that a step at a time.”

As YWAM grew, it attracted a lot of eyes, which led to another big decision. In 1974, Loren was approached by Time magazine about doing a cover story on the fledgling Christian ministry that grew so quickly. But Loren declined the interview. Loren remembers the Time reporter looked at him for a moment, then said, “You’ve really made a good choice.”

“I saw so many out of the Jesus Movement—they went and then they were gone, because you can’t handle things at that level when you’re that age,” Loren says. “Some do, but it ruins many of them. It would have ruined our movement, because we were all young people making our youthful mistakes.”

Loren was not yet 40.

Modern Movement

The exposure from Time turned out to be unnecessary; YWAM grew substantially without it. It was already big compared to most ministries and has always operated “under the radar,” but it continued to grow. Today, it has tens of thousands of full-time staff who serve in 191 countries. Loren himself has been to every country and dependent territory on earth, as well as 100 islands and territories.

So if this miraculous growth is happening worldwide, why aren't we hearing about it? The main problem, Loren suggests, is not a lack of miracles; it's a lack of reporting.

"We in missions tend to not communicate enough, because we're on the frontline doing the work and the battle is going on," he says. "We don't sit down and write a letter or send a podcast or whatever. I think we have to do a better job of that, because the things that are happening are phenomenal."

"Phenomenal" may be an understatement. According to Loren, there were 639 unreached, unengaged people groups in 2007. These are groups of 100,000 or more that don't have a single Christian, church, pastor or missionary. Today, Loren says, YWAM has helped cut that number down to just five. Church communities have started in these groups and led more than 1 million people to Christ. Some of these churches are so on fire for Jesus they're tripling in size every year.

Mike says all these achievements are the fruit of a Spirit-honoring ministry.

"Over 55-plus years that YWAM has been going, they have this long, proven track record and history of service, sacrifice, risk-taking and humility," Mike says. "What I mean by that—and I've said a few of these things over the years—is it's not just that they were called. They've been proven faithful by God and man for over 50 years."

But YWAM isn't resting on its mission laurels. Loren's new goal is to see the Bible translated into every language by 2020.

"The Word of God is going to be in audio recordings in all the languages left that have no Scripture at all," he says. "By 2020, we want to give it as a Christmas gift to Jesus on His birthday."

Billy Graham once asked Loren how many denominations were

represented in YWAM. Loren estimated at least 200.

“In other words, there are little denominations starting up all over the world,” he says. “We’re watching a unity that I never could have imagined. I saw those numbers in a vision. But it was the unity that God has given us across all the lines, because our goal is one together—and that’s finishing the Great Commission in each of our generations.”

God has even opened doors for YWAM to go to countries typically off-limits for Christian ministries. In one nation Loren couldn’t name, YWAM is feeding, clothing and housing 72,000 children every day.

“As we do this and clothe them and we house them and we take care of them, God blesses us,” he says. “That’s all you do. You give away what God gives you. You’re just the middleman who just passes it on and doesn’t take from it.”

What Loren finds incredible is that, as the world population continues to rise, the gospel is spreading even faster.

“Population has grown faster and faster, but the kingdom of God is growing even faster than that,” he says. “That’s the secret worldwide that should be known, but you only know it if you’re on the frontlines, if you have the connections as we do. We meet together with all the major mission movements now in the world. And 1,200 of them, mission movements and denominations and area organizations, are working together around what we call a ‘Call to All.’ That’s the Great Commission.”

Future Revival

All of these incredible things predated September 2016, when Mike Bickle got on stage at IHOPKC and announced the official partnership with YWAM.

“Here’s my declaration,” Mike said to the crowd. “The largest

missions movement in history needs the largest prayer covering in history.”

Now armed with 1 million intercessors praying into the gap, YWAM could make bolder strides than ever.

“A million intercessors!” Dawson says. “The implications are staggering. There is a growing army of intercessory missionaries who actively focus on world evangelization, county by county, people group by people group. They may not be on location as we are, but they are totally engaged nonetheless.”

After just a few months of the partnership, Loren says he can already see the difference. He calls the prayer movement “spiritual fuel” that’s igniting worldwide spiritual awakening. YWAM’s missionaries have seen their work spiritually multiplied and lost hearts being primed for the gospel.

“In the Middle East, more and more people are suddenly having visions of Jesus,” Loren says. “[The prayer movement] literally has multiplied what is taking place at that level. God takes no respect to a person, so that means He’s fair to everyone. But through prayer, it releases God to do things on our behalf when we have been given the task of evangelizing and discipling all nations. So as we do that, we’re seeing the results of prayer multiplying the results of missions and the Great Commission. And it’s a growing tidal wave that’s going to be a tsunami that will cover the earth even as the waters cover the sea.”

Despite pressure from the Communists, China is seeing more people coming to Christ than any other country. Loren calls this harvest the “greatest ingathering the world has ever known.” In India, a YWAM team has seen more than 200 churches established in one city in just four years. Persecution rates are rising too—and Loren says that’s, paradoxically, a good

thing.

“There’s going to be persecution increasing across the world, but that persecution is because the enemy is afraid,” he says. And though he’s traveled the world evangelizing for 57 years, Loren shows no signs of slowing down: “I don’t know what I’m going to do when I get old, but I’m only 81 now. When I get old, I’ll have to figure out what I’ll do then. In the meantime, I’m having the joy and fulfillment of my life.”

Yet whenever God calls him home, he knows YWAM will be in good hands. He says the Millennial generation is already doing greater things than he ever did. He’s heartened at how technology makes the Bible accessible to everyone. He’s thrilled whenever his young staff asks to start traveling to an unreached territory or a banned country. That shows him the next leader will be as sensitive to God’s voice as he is.

“What I see in the world is we are poised for the greatest spiritual awakening the world has ever known,” he says. “Now that means revival starts with the people with God.”

Some Christians see awakening on the horizon. Others see biblical prophecy coming to pass and believe the end times are upon us. If they’re right, Loren says, spreading the gospel has become that much more urgent.

“Literally thousands upon thousands of people are being disrupted by natural disasters,” he says. “We also have terrorism. We also have wars and rumors of wars—it’s still rumors, mostly, for us—but there is still war going on in Afghanistan, Iraq and other places. When we begin to understand what God is doing, we need to get a Bible—or at least some of God’s Word—to every home in the world. As we do so, we’re going to see, as a result, the wonderful things God is doing.” {eoa}

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Editor's note: *Charisma* founder Steve Strang interviewed YWAM founder Loren Cunningham for several of his podcasts. Listen to the "Strang Report" on the Charisma Podcast Network at to learn more about this influential missions organization.

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