

Man (and 2.5 million Youth) With a Mission

Loren Cunningham and YWAM celebrate 50 years of reaching the world with the gospel

Loren Cunningham has always been a dreamer. As a young ministry student, he had a vision of waves crashing over the earth—waves that turned into thousands of young people taking the gospel to every nation. Fifty years later, that dream is one of the most influential missions movements in history.

At the age of 25, joined by a small band of “Jesus freaks” who shared his vision that Spirit-filled young people could be world changers, Cunningham founded Youth With A Mission (YWAM). Amid the hippie counterculture of the 1960s, at a time when short-term missions was virtually unheard of, YWAM ignited a missions revolution that sent waves of teenagers and college students proclaiming Jesus across oceans and continents.

Today, YWAM (pronounced *Y-wam*) is active in more than 150 nations. It's estimated that 2.5 million people have participated in its missions training or short-term outreaches, using performing arts, music, sports and compassion ministry to share the gospel in word and deed. Hundreds of thousands more have served in YWAM's evangelistic children's arm, King's Kids.

Some 16,000 full-time missionaries (known as YWAMers) representing more than 200 nationalities serve in 1,000 tremendously diverse locations, from the urban centers of Europe and North America to the jungles of South Asia. Most of them are under the age of 30. Their mission? To know God and to make Him known.

“God has given us the amazing privilege in our time of releasing young missionaries from 215 nations and many cultures,” says Cunningham, a former Assemblies of God youth minister. “The angels must have a fabulous view—a microcosm of when every people will gather before God’s throne.”

Cunningham and his wife, Darlene, are scheduled to visit 34 nations across six continents this year to celebrate YWAM’s 50th anniversary. Halfway through the global trek, Cunningham—who is enrolled in 14 frequent flier programs and holds two U.S. passports to expedite visas—describes the tour as “breathtaking.”

At age 75, he has visited every nation—239 to be precise, plus 160 islands and territories. (The number of sovereign nations varies according to criteria used by researchers). “Others have done it as a hobby,” Cunningham points out, “but my travel is for one purpose: the kingdom of God.” For Cunningham and most other YWAMers, reaching the nations has been a journey of faith. Every missionary is unpaid. From the president to the newest recruit, all YWAMers raise their own financial support. And each one has stories of God’s miraculous provision.

After Cunningham wrote *Daring to Live on the Edge*, thousands of new YWAMers from across the evangelical and charismatic spectrum took up the challenge to trust their finances completely to God—many literally not knowing where their next meal was coming from.

Such radical faith is a hallmark of YWAM worldwide. “Our DNA is discipleship,” states Lynn Green, YWAM’s chairman, “making every believer aware of the Holy Spirit within us and obeying everything Jesus taught us.”

Green, a 40-year YWAM veteran, was 22 when he joined the fledgling band of Jesus followers that made up YWAM’s training school in Switzerland in 1970. “I didn’t feel a calling to

missions as such,” says Green, a Colorado native. “After years of backsliding in my teens, I made a sincere commitment to the lordship of Jesus. I knew I needed teaching and stability if I was to survive as a Christian.”

All the YWAM students, he recalls, lived together, studied together and ate meals together—a communal arrangement that’s typical at YWAM centers, or “bases,” around the world. “There was very much a sense of ‘we’re all in this together,’ in believing in one another,” Green says, “a sense that God could use us and that we could go wherever He said and do whatever He said.”

By the age of 25, Green was leading a YWAM training school with more than 100 volunteer staff. He married the Cunninghams’ former secretary and two of their children became full-time YWAMers. The tendency for YWAM to “get in the blood” and go generational prevails, with some of the “oldies” now seeing their grandchildren become third-generation missionaries with YWAM.

Why are so many attracted to YWAM? “God is still in it,” Green says, “and it’s an environment in which people are able to do what God has called them to do—hopefully without interference. We’re aware of the tendency to become a bureaucracy, and we fight it. Our goal has always been to let young people have a go, warts and all. Even when we make mistakes, we don’t want to start laying down rules.”

YWAM’s rebellious streak is another trademark—one that has been paradoxically both a strength and a weakness. “Our strength is in being decentralized and nonhierarchical ... and our weakness is in being decentralized and nonhierarchical,” Green says. “‘Chaos’ and ‘anarchy’ are two words that have been used to describe YWAM, and I don’t deny it. We have no aspirations to be a well-oiled machine.”

As such, YWAM does not have an international headquarters like

most global organizations. YWAM's former president Jim Stier summed it up, pointing at his laptop computer and stating: "This is our HQ."

Yet this "disorganization" is exactly what has drawn so many people to YWAM. "I suppose there will always be a sort of spiritual anarchy in YWAM," says missiologist Patrick Johnstone, co-author of *Operation World*. "It hooked a cautious, wounded generation of believers into wholeness in Jesus and into long-term missions."

In the early days, the inexperienced troupes of longhaired, youthful YWAMers on evangelistic outreaches were frowned on by the missions establishment. But gradually YWAMers won respect for going places and doing things others couldn't or wouldn't. "The Jesus movement is long forgotten by most," says missions researcher Michael Jaffarian, "but YWAM is a continuing expression of that work of God."

One of the most prominent YWAMers during the Jesus movement era was Floyd McClung, a young American who joined the hippie trail in Afghanistan, sharing Jesus with travelers on the road to Kathmandu. In the early 1970s, McClung and his wife, Sally, moved to Amsterdam to run The Ark—two houseboats aboard which YWAMers befriended runaways, drug addicts and disillusioned wanderers.

The McClungs started a ministry to prostitutes in Amsterdam's notorious red-light district. YWAMers handed out roses to the prostitutes and offered them the message that Jesus loved them. The ministry, a window into YWAM's heart for social outcasts, continues today.

McClung now leads a separate church-planting initiative based in South Africa. He and Sally were among the first to join the Cunninghams when they were working out of a small office in Pasadena, Calif., in the 1960s. In those days, YWAM was "a band of dreamers and visionaries who dared to believe God

could use us to change the world," McClung told *Charisma*.

The Cunninghams, McClung says, were "years ahead of their time. ... [They] saw that missions was for all nations to all nations, and not just the West going to the rest. They believed in women in leadership, empowering the poor, holistic transformation and discipling the nations."

An Eye on the Future

As YWAM's influence spread, waves of enthusiastic young missionaries swept over the continents—exactly as Loren Cunningham's prophetic vision had foretold. Soon, it wasn't just Western missionaries carrying the torch—non-Westerners were leading the charge. "When we started, a missionary was a white man going to a non-white man," Cunningham says. "YWAM turned that upside down."

Like Cunningham, YWAMers dream big—and God works miracles in response to their faith. Bursting with enthusiasm but hardly flush with cash, YWAM acquired several impressive properties for use as training centers—properties that materialized after its leaders prayed, fasted and trusted God. These include a manor house and a former orphanage in England, a castle in Germany and a hotel turned college campus—now YWAM's University of the Nations—in Hawaii.

Every year, thousands of young people graduate from YWAM training schools and go on missions trips, often to challenging locations. Short-term missionaries—those who serve for a few weeks to a year—also pay their own way to special events such as the FIFA World Cup and the Olympic Games. At the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, Canada, YWAMers held placards on street corners offering "free prayer."

By morphing creatively into the culture, YWAM hasn't grown stale. Through the years, YWAMers have come up with innovative ways to share the gospel with those most unlikely to go to church. In Hawaii, YWAM's Solid Rock surf café welcomed

surfers and beach bums; in Minneapolis, the Hard Core Bible Study met in a former funeral home, connecting with teenage “death metal” music fans, several of whom surrendered their lives to Christ in the dark embalming room.

Cunningham—who lives in Kona, Hawaii, when he’s not globe-trotting—is still dreaming big, and he believes the Holy Spirit wants to unleash a new wave of creative dreams and visions on others. “God has a dream for every person,” he says, “and when we truly submit to the lordship of Jesus, the Holy Spirit leads us into our gifts and calling. My calling is to open up opportunities. I am a door opener in the house of the Lord, to help others find their place in fulfilling the Great Commission.”

This “door opener” is now one of the most respected pioneers and visionaries of modern evangelical missions. He names Billy Graham and Brother Andrew among his friends and mentors, and reminisces that the late Corrie ten Boom taught in a YWAM Discipleship Training School—the YWAMer’s rite of passage.

Listening to God’s voice and obeying Him, Cunningham says, is the key to YWAM’s phenomenal impact. Last year, 26 young YWAMers in Nigeria were praying and felt God telling them to witness to a group of vicious militants known for murder, rape and occult practices. Thinking they might have the wrong idea, the young missionaries returned to prayer, listening intently for God’s voice. The word came back loud and clear: Go!

So the YWAMers, most in their late teens, moved into the militants’ camp and started serving them, doing menial chores and telling them about Jesus. In the past year, hundreds have surrendered their weapons and come to Christ. “They’re broken ... they’re crying out to God,” Cunningham says, “all because 26 young people listened to God’s voice and obeyed.”

One of YWAM’s major thrusts is ministering to broken people—especially the poor, the oppressed and victims of

conflict and disasters. “Mercy ministries have been an inseparable part of YWAM from the beginning,” says Steve Goode, a long-time YWAMer who heads the organization’s compassion arm. “Even though back in 1960 we didn’t know what YWAM’s three overarching themes—evangelism, training and mercy ministries—would look like, loving your neighbor and the Great Commandment were there at the onset.”

YWAM’s mercy programs—including disaster relief, AIDS care and support for human trafficking victims—merge with evangelism and church planting, Goode explains, who led YWAM’s refugee ministry in the 1980s, assisting Cambodians who had fled genocide. “It’s the absolutely poor who will need to see the gospel before they hear its message. What does ‘good news’ look like to the poor? As we become more like Jesus, it will look like self-sacrificing love.”

Compassion ministries developed by YWAMers in places where people haven’t heard about Jesus help pave the way for church-planting teams. YWAM responded to the catastrophic earthquakes in Haiti and Chile this year. Mercy Ships, a hospital ship ministry launched by YWAM in 1978 and now independent, provides medical care.

“We really have no idea how many people we’ve served over the past 50 years,” Goode says, “but it is not the numbers that drive us. It is loving and obeying God ... and asking, ‘Have we loved our neighbor as ourselves?’ Many still need to taste and see that the Lord is good.”

Cunningham’s world-changing vision is affirmed by each new generation of YWAMers—covenanting to proclaim Jesus until the earth is “filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (Hab. 2:14, NKJV).

“I’m surrounded by heroes,” says John Dawson, YWAM’s current president, “dedicated, courageous people who pour out their lives in difficult and dangerous places. They make their own

plans, pay their own way and lay down their rights.”

Cunningham’s vision of crashing waves still summons Christians to a life of radical faith. “This year, we glance back with gratitude,” Dawson says, “but the eyes of the youth are always on the future.”

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