A photograph of a woman with a young child in a rural setting, looking at a man in a purple headwrap. The woman has short, curly brown hair and is wearing a white and blue striped sleeveless top. The child is a young boy with dark skin, wearing a blue and white striped shirt. The man is wearing a purple headwrap and a grey tank top. They are in a rustic, outdoor environment with mud-colored walls and a thatched roof in the background.

# THE BANNER

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A New  
Way to Do  
MISSIONS



# TRANSFORMING MISSIONS

It's time to let the tables turn

by Wiebe Boer

"**M**issionaries are only here to make money." During my studies at the University of Jos, Nigeria, from 1995 to 1996, I heard that thought expressed again and again.

I also often heard the following comment about my own appearance: "He looks like Jesus"—a reference to my long blond hair, blue eyes, and goatee.

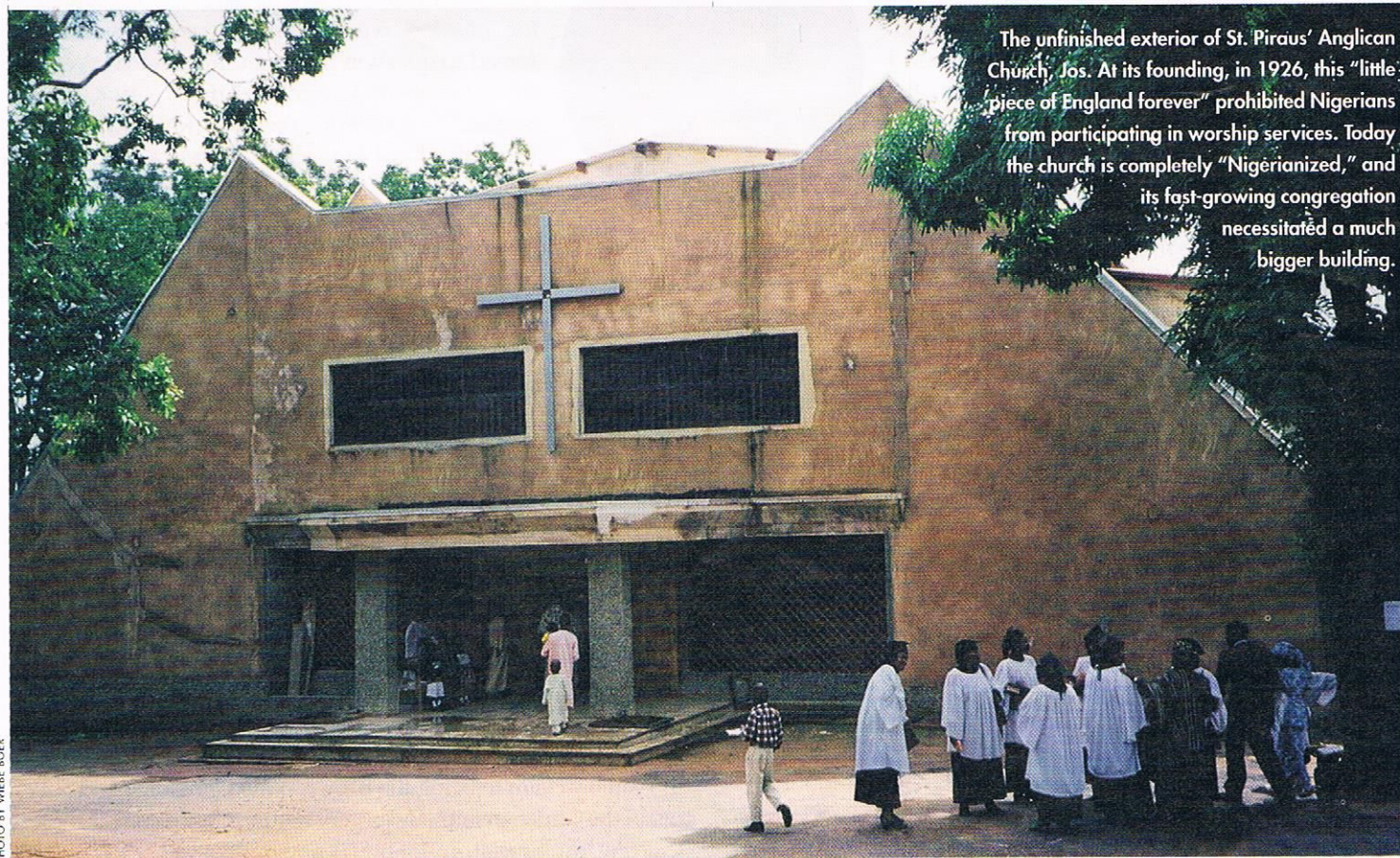
Those two statements speak volumes about the view of missions and Christianity in Nigeria. There missionaries are still brokers of wealth and power, and Nigerians often perceive Christianity as a white person's religion that offers a Northern European savior.

Such perceptions make it easy to wonder if Western missionaries have learned anything by their experience. Maybe

they're still stuck in the days of Johanna Veenstra, whose "natives" would carry her around in a chair because she seemed to be quite literally above walking.

The persistence of missionary privilege and of misperceptions about the gospel among the people missionaries serve doesn't help the reputation of mission work. It hasn't helped, either, that missionaries have been accused over the past few decades of playing a major role in the colonial subjugation of Third World countries. Many in those countries continue to see missionaries as paternalistic purveyors of a white gospel.

And there are ample grounds for the cynicism some non-Westerners feel about missionaries and mission work. During Veenstra's time paternalism was the prevailing attitude among missionaries. And today missionaries remain among



The unfinished exterior of St. Piraus' Anglican Church, Jos. At its founding, in 1926, this "little piece of England forever" prohibited Nigerians from participating in worship services. Today the church is completely "Nigerianized," and its fast-growing congregation necessitated a much bigger building.

PHOTO BY WIEBE BOER



Rather than destroying cultures and ethnic groups, Christian missionaries very nearly created them.

the richest and most influential people in many of the settings where they work.

These are realities at which the church needs to look critically. At the same time, it's also true that over the long term, mission work has been beneficial both to the peoples with whom missionaries have worked and to the missionaries themselves, as well as to their sending churches. For those reasons,

mission work needs to continue, though in ways different than the church now knows. Missions, I believe, are the most important mode of cross-cultural interaction in human history.

**THE MISSIONARY'S HIDDEN PRIVILEGE**

Since the days of Johanna Veenstra, the shape of mission work has changed. Today a missionary is simply someone who is sent somewhere by a mission agency. Modern missionaries are usually armed with considerable financial resources and the conviction that they are called to live among people who need their help, knowledge, and expertise.

With all these attitudes and resources backing them up, average missionaries are often hard-pressed not to behave paternalistically toward those whom they are serving. After all, the houses missionaries live in, the toys they have, and the cars they drive are much more luxurious than those of their local coworkers. Have missionaries you have heard speak in church ever mentioned the maid, gardener, cook, and perhaps chauffeur who work for them back on the field? Have they talked about how they hold an immense amount of power and respect simply because they are paid from abroad—and, unfortunately, simply because they are white? This “missionary apartheid,” as Tim Geysbeek of Michigan State University calls it, is something that we who have been involved in missions have all been guilty of living, almost without thinking about it.

More often than not, church members in North America hear not about privilege but about strange diseases and about exotic animals and food. We see pictures of friendly but desperate scantily clad natives in remote villages without an electric light or paved road in sight.

Missionaries and their families do make numerous personal sacrifices. But mission work is by nature an immensely complex cross-cultural transmission in which noble intentions easily conflict with personal ambition. Missionaries sacrifice immensely, but it's in a setting where they often also enjoy

untold and unexpected privileges—privileges obvious to the people among whom they work.

**LEAVING A PRICELESS LEGACY**

In Africa the privileged status of missionaries provoked years of attacks from Christian and non-Christian thinkers who decried the culturally destructive nature of mission work. As a result Western Christians have been filled with guilt about the mission enterprise.

It is time, though, to move beyond this sense of guilt and examine the long-term legacy of Christian missions. This is exactly what Lamin Sanneh has done. Sanneh is a professor of history at Yale University who converted to Christianity after an Islamic upbringing in the Gambia. He argues convincingly that Christianity has been responsible not for destroying cultures but for “the greatest revitalization of cultures world wide.” Sanneh has also shown that Christianity is at the forefront of cultural renewal and liberation of the oppressed around the world.

How could mission work, as driven by power and privilege as it has been, have resulted in such a positive result? The answer, says Sanneh, is through translation.

As Christian missionaries arrived on the world's foreign mission fields, they had to face the reality that their European languages were inadequate for mission work. They were immediately forced to question their assumption that everything European was inherently superior. They realized that to work they would first need to learn the local language as well as the local understanding and terminology for God. Missionaries came as proud teachers but were reduced to humble students asking questions about things that even children knew.

Then followed a monumental task: reducing local languages to written forms for the first time

in order to provide people with translations of the Bible in their own languages. In turn, the grammars and Bible translations that the missionaries wrote affirmed local culture and gave ethnic groups and nations pride in their heritage. And this pride enabled these peoples to withstand the difficulties of the colonial era. It also provided impetus for nationalist independence movements. So rather than destroying cultures and distinct ethnic groups, Christian missionaries, particularly in Africa, very nearly created them.

This worked in part because from its origins Christianity has been a translated religion. As opposed to other world religions the words of Christianity's founder were never written down in the language he spoke. Therefore no particular language or culture can lay claim to being the truly revealed language and culture of the Christian faith. By its very nature, Christianity is multicultural, multiracial, multilingual, and multiethnic. Those who



▲ Johanna Veenstra's model of missions no longer works.



see Christianity as a Western cultural transfusion fail to recognize that Christianity has always been a religion of translation and adaptation to new cultures and languages.

In fact, Christianity is at its best when a person can worship God in his or her own language without feeling that addressing God in that language is inferior and disrespectful. That's what makes Christianity an African religion just as much as it is a European or Middle Eastern religion. It is a religion in which a person's ethnicity, culture, and language are important but not exclusive. It is a religion in which the culture and language—Aramaic—of its founder are reduced to near extinction.

This is easy to see in contrast with Islam. In Islam the classical Arabic of Mohammed is the only language in which a person may properly pray or worship. *Allah* is the only valid name for God. Arabic culture and language are as much a part of the religion as is the message of the untranslatable Qur'an. To speak of a multicultural version of Islam in which Mohammed spoke any language but Arabic would be blasphemous.

In Christianity, however, the few words recorded in Aramaic that remain in our Bible appear unfamiliar and foreign. It's a testimony to Christianity's diversity that over the centuries, Christians in various places have believed that Jesus must have spoken in Latin, English, Frisian, or Tiv.

These and other factors have caused astonishing growth for Christianity in Africa. In the early 1960s, as Africa's colonial era drew to an end, the continent contained 50 million Christians. By 1970 that number had grown to 120 million, and in 1998 to around 330 million. This explosion in Christianity after the end of European political domination proves that Africa has Christianized of its own accord. Clearly the translation of Christianity into the thousands of cultures in Africa was successful. In little more than a generation, Africa has moved from the fringes to the center of the Christian world. Yale's Sanneh believes that we have entered a new era in Christian history in which the non-Western world will play a much greater role. He calls it the era of World Christianity.

Non-Western churches are now sending missionaries to the Western world. This is not the beginning, though, of non-Western influence on Western Christianity. The missionary enterprise has never been a one-way street. Missionaries, along with their sending communities, are always transformed by the people among whom they have been sent to work.

**A SHIFT TO THE NON-WESTERN WORLD**

Christian missions have often been taken too lightly and critiqued unfairly. But despite negative short-term effects, the long-term legacy of Christian missions worldwide has been profoundly positive, creating a multicultural global community. The emergence of that community has involved a shift in Christianity's center to the non-Western world. It is inevitable, as a result, that the Christian faith worldwide will be transformed.

What does this mean for Western Christians? First, that we should embrace this transformation gladly; after all, it demonstrates Western missionaries' success. Second, that we need to readjust our idea of what a missionary is. We have to move away from the prevailing definition of a missionary—"a person sent by a mission society"—and return to the tradition of the apostle Paul, the original missionary.

According to Jonathan Bonk of the Overseas Ministries Studies Center in New Haven, Conn., Westerners must acknowledge that the apostolic gift is no longer as strong in the West as it once was and that it now belongs to others. Those who are willing to take any risk for the sake of Christ today are more likely to be Asians or Africans themselves, not Western missionary heroes. These days a great number of missionaries in the non-Western world rarely serve outside the borders of their own country.

Yet this is not a time for slacking off. Even while Western Christians embrace the transformation that our missionaries set in motion, we should do what we can to provide every spiritual, technical, educational, and financial assistance possible for the new, non-Western heroes of the faith. This, I believe, should be the new focus of Western missionary societies: to assist, not lead, in the continuing spread of the gospel in the non-Western world. And Western Christians must encourage non-Western Christian missionaries to come to our shores to revitalize the faith in this corner of the globe.

Missionaries whom Western churches still have on the field must also stop emphasizing the exotic aspects of their work and the people among whom they live. Doing so only trivializes the all-important task of missions. It's true that missionaries are tempted to emphasize their exotic rather than their mundane experiences because that helps raise financial support. Dramatic activities in mysterious or dangerous settings are more appealing than the day-to-day grind of real mission work.

So mission supporters in the West need to get used to the idea of mundane missionary settings and activities. After all, the most likely mission field of the next century will be our own neighborhoods.



▲ Nigeria is so Christianized that even broken down trucks proclaim the gospel.



Wiebe Boer grew up in Nigeria, the son of Christian Reformed missionaries. He is now a doctoral student in African history at Yale University.