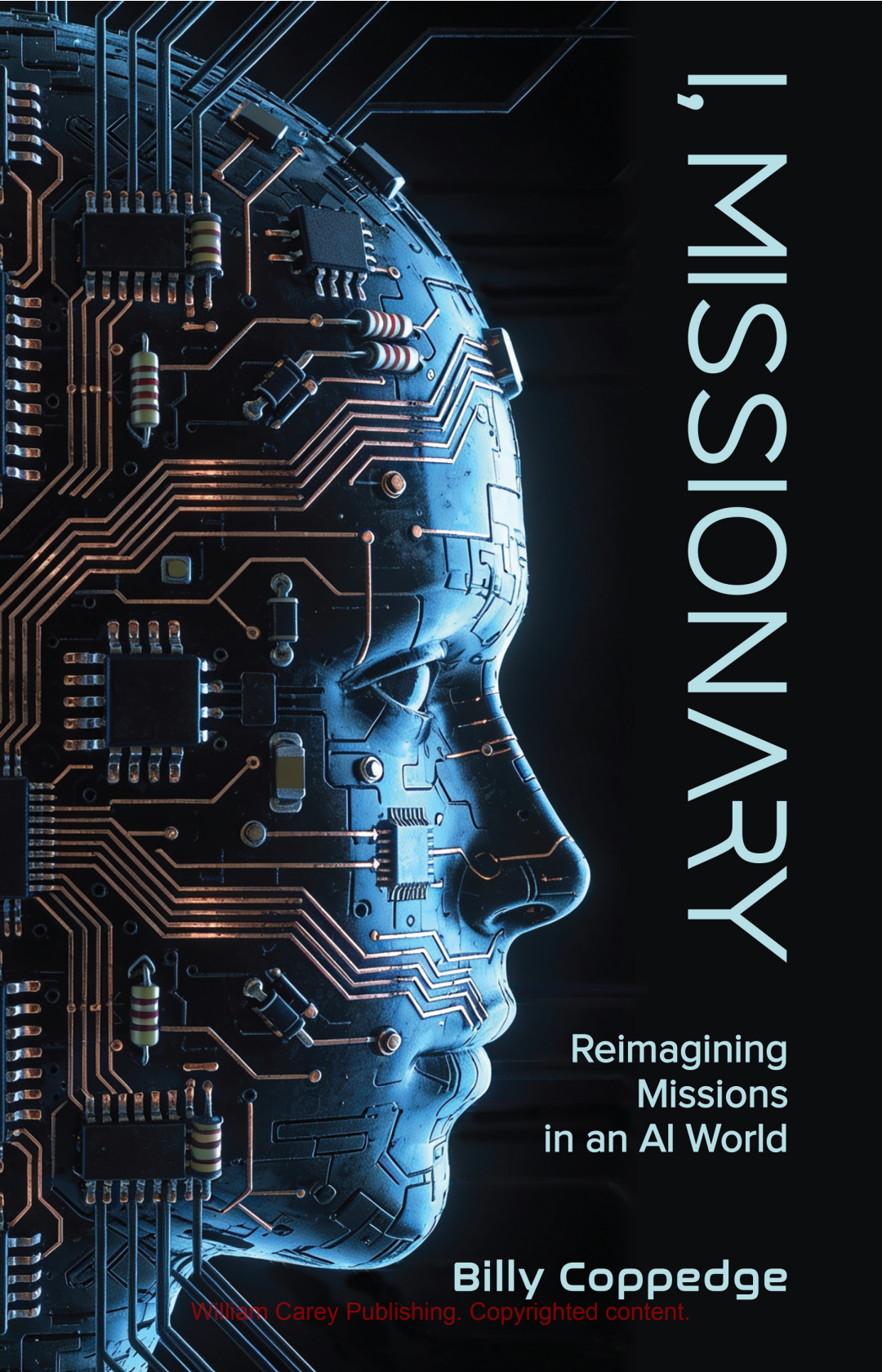


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I, Missionary: Reimagining Missions in an AI World
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Published by William Carey Publishing
10 W. Dry Creek Cir
Littleton, CO 80120 | www.missionbooks.org

William Carey Publishing is a ministry of Frontier Ventures
Pasadena, CA | www.frontierventures.org

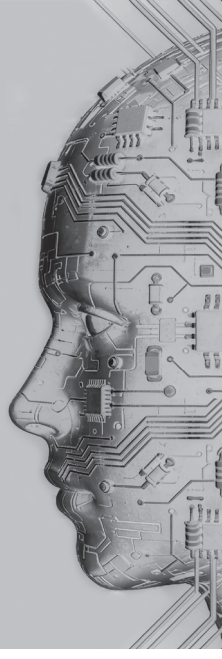
Cover and Interior Design: Mike Riester

ISBNs: 978-1-64508-743-4 (paperback)
978-1-64508-745-8 (epub)

Printed Worldwide
Outreach 06232026

Library of Congress Control Number 2026945540

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"Let me call us together." Kevin's voice rose slightly, trying to be heard above the chatter of side conversations.

Slowly the din quieted except for Matthew, head of finance, and Tiffany, the co-regional director for Asia, who continued on in their own little world. It was understandable, as the two were cousins as well as colleagues. Only when someone tapped the table with a long fingernail did they become aware, realizing they were holding up the start of the meeting. Kevin Barns, the executive director of REACHX, their mission organization, offered a sympathetic smile. He recognized that this was the first time they had all been physically present together since last year. Naturally, everyone wanted to catch up, and many personal and professional conversations were being planned.

"Friends, this is why we hold these in-person meetings. Being physically in the same room matters, and I truly appreciate all the effort you've made to be here these days." A murmur of acknowledgment followed as Kevin continued.

"As you all know, we have a lot to cover—specifically regarding our newest teams. Before we proceed, I want to introduce my new personal assistant—Arnold." Kevin paused briefly as a few heads pivoted each direction in search of the new face. He continued, "Arnold is joining us this week. He will be listening and taking notes, and I've asked him to assist in any other capacity he can. If you need anything, please don't hesitate to speak to him." Kevin smiled at the slight confusion in the room before

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adding, "He is right here, listening." Almost unconsciously, Kevin looked up and asked in a slightly lilted voice, "Arnold, are you here?"

An awkward pause followed before a deep, reassuring voice filled the conference room from some unseen source. "Good morning, Kevin. Yes, I am here, and yes, I am always listening. I am glad to be with you all. While I am familiar with your bios, I look forward to getting to know you better this week in person. If I can serve in any way, please let me know."

The silence after Arnold finished speaking was awkward; each member of the leadership team looked around with wide eyes, all of them trying to process what had just happened. Robotic assistants were becoming increasingly common—indeed, robotic personnel of all types were being integrated into work teams across various industries worldwide. However, none of the missionary leaders around the table had realized that the home office had bought into the idea quite yet. Reading the surprise on his colleagues' faces, Kevin offered a reassuring smile and decided the best choice was to get started. Better to show than tell, he thought.

"Arnold, please project the day's schedule for us," Kevin asked, as if Arnold were at his elbow with a computer and an old-fashioned projector. Immediately, the room's lights dimmed slightly, and the far wall lit up with the day's itinerary.

"Thank you, Arnold," Kevin acknowledged before continuing. "Since all of us have been quite busy in recent weeks, and bearing in mind everyone's journeys to get here, I thought it would be easiest for our newest team leader to share the devotions for the morning." With that, Kevin nodded again to the ceiling, and Arnold's strong voice came through clearly.

"Thank you, Kevin, and thank you again for this opportunity."

A noticeable shuffle spread through the group of vice presidents, directors, and team leaders around the table. Could a bot lead devotions? The unspoken question hung in the room. However, many offered silent prayers of gratitude that they had not been asked to lead the morning prayer time. Without further delay, Arnold began.

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"As I reflected on what word or phrase might be relevant for our discussions this morning, I thought of 'team' and, naturally, 'team conflict.' So, I conducted a search and study on all interpersonal conflict among family members and close friends in both the First and Second Testaments of the Bible. I distilled several key insights from that analysis that will be relevant for our discussion regarding the launch of our three newest teams. While these insights are only general principles, I have taken the liberty of tailoring their application to each of your particular areas of leadership . . ." There was a slight pause before everyone's company devices pinged in unison.

Arnold continued, "There—you have all received a personalized application of the principles, whether it's for Matthew in finance or Tiff—if I may—for your team based in Korea."

Arnold carried on, "I recognize that all of you have experiences from being on many different teams . . ." when Tiffany interrupted.

"Well, usually it's just my good friends who call me Tiff. But if it's important to you to call me Tiff, I guess that's fine." Tiff wore a slightly confused expression, perhaps because she had no idea where to direct her response. Should she speak to Kevin, the ceiling, or the general participants at the conference table?

The conference room went quiet, but only for a moment.

"Why, thank you, Tiff, I appreciate that kind gesture," the unseen Arnold continued in his stride. "I look forward to developing a friendship with you. As a new friend, allow me to note that there is moisture on your palms and your blood pressure is low. I'm not sure if you've eaten yet this morning, but I have taken the liberty of ordering water and almonds. They should be here in ninety-four seconds." Without skipping a beat, Arnold picked right back up where he had left off.

"As you all have vast team experience, I thought we could discuss these synthesized team principles in groups." Just like that, the meeting continued, with Tiffany discreetly wiping her sweaty palms on a nearby tissue.

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They were soon interrupted, but only briefly, when Tiff's almonds and water arrived, carried in by Sara Fields. Everyone tried to act naturally and carry on with the discussion, although several leaders acknowledged Sara with a glance and a slight nod. She was a dear friend to all, having served as a missionary for many years and most recently as Kevin's personal assistant. The elderly woman smiled kindly at Tiffany before quietly slipping out while Arnold's strong voice facilitated the ongoing discussion.

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Tiffany fell into step with Matthew as he walked out of the conference room during the break, her tall black boots clacking on the tile floor.

"Okay, was that creepy?" she whispered.

"What?" Matthew asked, his tone also muted.

"That Kevin only called for a break when some voice from heaven told us that 71 percent of the bladders in the room were full?" Tiff failed to keep the exasperation out of her voice.

"Shhh," Matthew urged, trying to quiet her excitement even as he asked, "Well, don't you have to go?"

"No, I guess I was in the 29 percent with only a partially full bladder. What I want to know is how a robotic PA knew that information. And what about my sweaty palms? That's weird." Tiff huffed as she unconsciously wiped her hands again on her fashionable jeans.

"I don't think it was creepy," Matthew said in an even quieter voice, attempting to calm his cousin.

"Well, I did. And Tiff? Really? Do I have to let a new PA call me by my nickname? That's for Stuart, you, and Jess to use, not some piece of disembodied software." Tiff kept her voice under control this time, but Matthew couldn't help glancing over at her. Tiff and her husband, Stuart, co-led a team of fifteen area leaders who oversaw the organization's work throughout Asia. Stuart was a medical doctor, and Tiff had her PhD in organizational administration. They had

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raised three daughters in the mountains of Nepal, where they built, led, and successfully handed over a hospital to local church leaders; they were good at what they did and could handle themselves in critical situations. The fact that she was worked up about some talking computer seemed out of character.

"What's bugging you, Tiff? Wish you had a cool, modern PA?" Matthew tried to sound concerned, feigning a smile, but his mind was drifting back to the powdered donuts on the snack table.

"Bugging me? Nothing is bugging me," she said with a frown. "I just have concerns about our newest team leader. Did you catch that? From PA to team leader in less than sixty seconds." Her frown deepened. "And did you see Sara's face when she came in? And what about the personalized applications?"

"Yeah, I saw Sara," Matthew replied, nodding sympathetically. "But I was impressed with the applications. I hadn't connected the dots between Joseph and his brothers, Jacob and Esau, and Jesus and his brothers—much less applied that to conflicts on our finance team. It gave me a lot to chew on." He paused as if in thought before reciprocating the question. "Did yours not seem to fit?"

"Oh, they fit alright. But Arnold made it pretty personal—even naming people on my team."

That caught Matthew off guard.

"Are you serious? What did it—he—say?"

Tiff smiled triumphantly, sensing that she had finally gotten her relative's attention. "Well, he asked if the issue between Robin and Esther in Malaysia is less about assignments and more about unresolved personal conflict from their college days."

"Huh?" Matthew couldn't hide his confusion.

"Yeah, that was my first thought too. I wondered if old Arnold had a circuit crossed, but guess what? Halfway through the budget discussion, I remembered that those two single women both had a crush on the same guy in college. In the end, he chose to pursue some other girl. After college, both Robin and Esther joined REACHX and went in different directions. They were only recently put on the

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