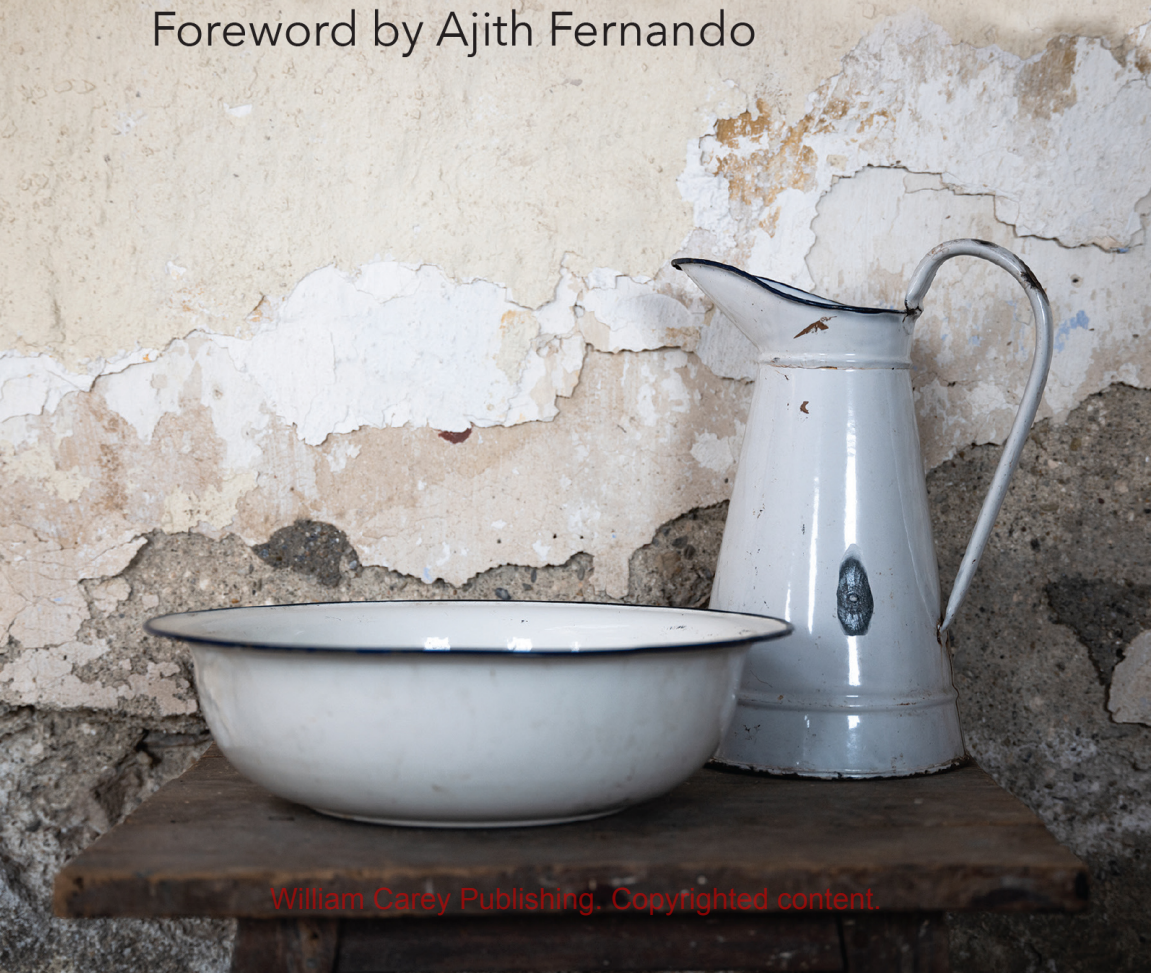
Leading from Below

Lessons from the Crucible of Global Mission

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Foreword by Ajith Fernando



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Leading from Below: Lessons from the Crucible of Global Mission

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False Sacrifices

> Thus says the LORD: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD." (Jer 9:23–24)

Pan American 501

It was March 1971. At age thirty I was a first-term hot new missionary in Guatemala City, a rookie already on the top of my game (so I thought and felt). An adult TCK who had returned "home," my command of Spanish was rather good. I, a "gringo," was mastering the textured subjunctive mood, the use of Latin American proverbs in my public speaking ministry, and the innate and inherited *don de gente* (a gifted way of relating with people).

I was emerging as a successful young professor at a leading evangelical seminary in Central America, *Seminario Teológico Centroamericano*. I was a new, sought-out speaker in churches throughout the urban and rural regions of Guatemala. I regularly discipled university students in the *Grupo Evangélico Universitario* (the Guatemalan International Fellowship of Evangelical Students affiliate). I was happily busy doing God's urgent work of bringing the gospel to the millions, loving my job, and living my dreams.

I was also a product of my evangelical subculture, which believed that "the more you did, the more spiritual you were," "the harder you worked, the more God blessed you," "the greater the faith, the greater the harvest." Subconsciously, I had absorbed American management productivity metrics; clearly measurable goals which gauged worth by maximal and quantifiable output, wedded to a pragmatic spirituality. There was little awareness of the Holy Spirit in my life.

It was a dangerous brew and there was a lot of "me" flying around.

On that Thursday night I arrived home around 6 p.m. needing a quick meal. I had a speaking commitment at a local church that I could not break.

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I breezed into our little house, kissed my one-year-old strawberry-blond Christine and then my twenty-five-year-old Texan wife Yvonne, who simply said, "I need to talk with you." I brushed her off and suggested that we could talk on Saturday over the weekend. Quietly, firmly, she insisted, "I need to talk with you ... tonight." I disregarded her request and went looking for my own dinner in the fridge.

I muttered to myself, "How could she so totally misunderstand my calling, my ministry—the Lord's work? Did she not understand that there was so much to do and so little time to accomplish it, that the fields were white for harvest and the workers were few?" I quickly tired of our tense and deeply disconcerting exchange.

She then interrupted me, speaking tersely, intensely, slowly: "Bill, look at me; listen carefully to me." I stopped eating and looked up, hearing her clipped tones. "If you don't stop right now and talk with me, tomorrow morning I am taking *my daughter*, and *we* will fly Pan American Airlines flight 501 direct from Guatemala to Dallas. I will stay with my parents, and you can stay here with your blankety-blank (her word was stronger, more graphic and memorable) ministry of saving the millions."

In that nanosecond I knew that I was in serious trouble. Still clueless, I kept asking myself, "What in God's name is wrong with Yvonne?" I was deeply in love with her; and I knew she loved me—an enthusiastic, extroverted good guy from a respected missionary family, with a solid evangelical theological pedigree. But I also was utterly incapable of detecting the marriage crisis that I alone had caused over the past months.

Then a second voice emerged, the Holy Spirit this time. "Be quiet, Bill. Listen to your wife. Remember your vows. Stop what you are doing. Pay attention."

Don't. Blow. It.

I stopped eating as time froze, her intense eyes full of pain. I looked up at her expectantly, fearfully. At an appropriate break in the negotiations, I went next door to borrow the telephone at Mandolini's Gulf gas station next door, then realized that my church contact had no phone for me to cancel my now-not-important commitment. I was a no-show that night and never heard back from them. I called my dean and said I could not teach on Friday. He asked one question. The long conversation that ensued with my courageous wife over the course of that night changed how I would "do my ministry." Guidelines were set to accept or decline invitations and to guide how I viewed my identity and role as husband, father, missionary, professor, Christian, human.

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I was truly and deeply sorry. I told Yvonne that and asked for her forgiveness. She listened, yet wisely did not grant immediate absolution. Rather, she told me of the heartache she experienced being relegated to a distant second place in my new illustrious ministry, left to grapple alone as a brand-new missionary and mother in a foreign culture, negotiating a strange country and a new language without the infrastructure of family, friends, or faith community while I was "busy in ministry for the Lord."

I have never forgotten that night. How close did I come to blowing my marriage out of the water? How close did I come to becoming another early mission attrition statistic? How could I have failed in the most elemental leadership role—that of loving and serving my wife well, understanding that she was the "true missionary," i.e., the one who had veritably left family, home, culture, nation, language, friends, and community?

Was I in a pre-kinder school program for potential leadership? Little did I know. Unsure raw material there for sure. And I was to learn other lessons from her over those early years.

Interpreting Pan Am 501

Was I in danger of making a false sacrifice?

What was truly happening that early in my mission career while I was on the cusp of fulfilling my lifelong dream of long-term cross-cultural service? Was I just immature, stupid, and insensitive? Was Yvonne too demanding of me? Could she not "cut it" in another culture? No, over time I saw God's hand, a heavy and loving hand, on my shoulder. I was being reproved for committing a mistake common to most of us in the start of our life-calling. Too early on I was disregarding my marital vows; I did not understand what Yvonne was going through—the degree of cultural shock, our peculiar evangelical mission ethos and culture, the impact of being far from "home" with a toddler and a husband married also to ministry.

Over time I realized God's discipline of me, a younger man in love with his wife and committed to ministry but losing perspective. If I did not make substantive early course corrections, I would never become the person God wanted me to be and would certainly not qualify for spiritual leadership in the global mission enterprise.

The guidelines we outlined back then served us well in the ensuing years until a second family crisis happened in the early years with the WEA-MC, around 1987. We had moved to a small Arkansas city and

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were still processing reentry into the USA. My responsibilities required extended international travel. One afternoon after I had returned from a fantastic and oh-so-significant ministry trip somewhere very far from home and family, I entered the house and kissed Yvonne. All seemed well on that front, but not so with Christine, then about sixteen years old. When she came back from high school I kissed her, but she just said, "When are you leaving again?" and walked to her room. I was speechless. I was devastated. How had the imbalance emerged yet again?

That second watershed experience led to a new set of guidelines that Yvonne helped me draft, through which I evaluated all travel and speaking commitments. Those eight (in that first version) standards protected me. The first one was, "Wait twenty-four to forty-eight hours before responding to invitations in order to listen to the Spirit and Yvonne." The eighth one was very clear, "If I don't accept this invitation, will somebody die?" A different set of norms protect me today, for even in this latter lap the temptations lurk to do "something significant for God" before it is too late!

In hindsight, conscious of God's gracious hand, I discerned what he was doing with me, in me, and for me as he was testing me and equipping me for my future. The Spirit had to teach me that no Christian leader can justify sacrificing marriage and family on an illegitimate altar. I am a thankful man.

Ah, so little did I know.

The Refining

The specific geography, Singapore; the date, June 28, 1986. I sat (dry mouthed, stomach knotted) in a conference room with forty-five seasoned global mission leaders in the Novo Orchid Hotel. They were participants of the World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF) General Assembly (changed to World Evangelical Alliance, WEA, at the Malaysia General Assembly in 2001). I knew only a few of them. Theodore Williams of India (WEF's chairman, also former head of its Mission Commission), introduced me as the newly appointed general secretary of the WEF Mission Commission. Not surprisingly, nobody clapped. I could not make sense of what had happened in the twenty-four hours since I had flown to Singapore. I also knew that 9,683 miles away in our temporary home in Russellville, AR, USA, Yvonne rightfully had grave questions about my decision.

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Yes, I had inklings of my own overarching vocation in life; I had tested my childhood "call" into missions. The call was confirmed over time during the process of trying out ministry in different experiences and challenges. Confirmation of vocation and occupation started early, at a Christian camp in Texas. Later, the call was tested through IVCF as a student plus three years on staff, followed by my four years at Dallas Theological Seminary (DTS). Before we left for Latin America, I felt I knew the purposes for which God had brought me into the world. But this watershed event in 1986?

Was this the same little Billy Taylor born in Costa Rica, who lived in towns with dirt streets, who flunked second grade, who struggled to understand the new situations in life as he grew up? Yes, little Billy had godly missionary parents who loved him and his sister, but they were passive. Demonstrating affection and affirmation was nearly impossible for his missionary mother. He was thankful for his father who demonstrated both regularly throughout his life. But their parenting style was passive, and that passivity would misshape Billy-Bill for decades.

He grew up unevenly yet made it somehow. The family moved to Wheaton, IL for his senior year in high school—he only sixteen years old, bewildered, with no orientation into American culture. At seventeen, he started Moody with the goal of mission service; he was immature and majored in ping-pong that first year. He also cheated in three final exams—he would pay the price. Although his confession led to official forgiveness, he studied for two years under institutional discipline. He had struggled academically for many years, yet later earned a ThM from DTS and a PhD from the University of Texas (UT) in Latin American Studies and the Cultural Foundations of Education. He ended up going to school for a total of twenty-seven years.

He's the one who, in his mid-forties, suffered a triple death at the apparent peak of his career. In the space of just two years, he died to all dreams of serving his entire life in Latin America; he died to teaching in the academy; and to cap it off, he died to any sense of pastoral gifts while serving a dysfunctional Arkansas congregation.

Through it all, he learned that death is followed by resurrection; but resurrection presupposes death. And those deaths led to new life. Again, he would relearn the baptismal rhythm of God's silence, submerged under waters, and only at the right time brought up to new life.

But on that day in 1986, somebody believed in Bill, and that was David Howard, his mentor since Urbana 1967. And alongside him that

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