

Across the Bridge

DON FLEMING

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Preface

Five years ago I published *A Different World*, a collection of stories and observations taken from the ministry that Gae and I had in many countries over forty years. *Across the Bridge* comes from the same background but is different in that it is written from the other side, so to speak. It has arisen out of Bridgeway's ministry of supplying needy countries with biblical resource materials and is largely written in the words of people who live 'across the bridge.' Out of the thousands of letters we receive, I have made selections on which to base this book – spiced with our own observations and some occasional light relief.

Hardly any of our correspondents write in their mother tongue, so it is understandable that their language sometimes places considerable demands upon the reader. I have therefore edited many of the letters, aiming to improve the grammar enough to make for easy reading but not so much that the original flavour is lost. Also, because titles of some Bridgeway books have changed over the years (from *Bridge* to *Bridgeway*, from *Directory* to *Dictionary*), there are places where I have standardised the titles to avoid confusion.

The thirty chapters cover many topics, many years and many countries and are not in chronological or topical order. My hope is that they will inform, encourage, amuse and challenge the reader.

Again I am thankful for the help of my friend Philip Juler, whose interest in the English language, the global church, the work of Bridgeway and our own ministry enabled him to make helpful comments before the manuscript went to press. As with *A Different World*, all proceeds from the sale of this book will go to help Christians in countries from which the stories come.

Don Fleming

Hallelujah! Books arrived!

We all think we need perseverance and patience to deal with the frustrations of life, though in the well-organised West we seldom realise how well off we are. Most things work. But in the needy countries of the world everything is difficult. People can take nothing for granted; even the simplest procedures are complicated, slow and unreliable.

For Bridgeway, the call for patience is usually in relation to the postal system. Cartons of books might take a very long time to arrive but most eventually get through. Occasionally, things are stolen from them, but in general they arrive intact. Some letters of thanks are novel in their wording, as grateful people struggle to express their appreciation. Others are instructive and challenging. They show us how people survive amid frustrations and might even rebuke us for our lack of faith.

Finding the right words

In country after country across Africa and Asia, Christians are hungry for the Word of God. 'We have hunger like a desert soil that thirsts for water to soak the Word of God deeply,' said one. Others referred to the books as 'manna coming from heaven,' 'optimum food' and 'bread for our souls.' One said, 'Like Oliver Twist, I still need more of your food materials.'

One man in Malawi always expresses his thanks with some energy. 'We have nothing to give back, only Jehovah Jireh, the Lord will provide you. You will be surprised seeing how many people are in the kingdom of God, saying we are here because of the books you send your brother in Malawi, Africa. These books change our lives! Oh, what a millionaire you will be in our home of the New Jerusalem Bank. Praise be to Jesus. Keep feeding us in Malawi with the spiritual books.'

A common expression of thanks is along the lines, 'These books are more than silver and gold.' Several have referred to them as 'a mine of gold', and one said they were 'more precious than gems.' Not to be outdone, one person said, 'These are the most precious gifts the world ever had.' Another went outside the world by saying the books were 'astronomical.'

Some expression of thanks are full-blooded, to say the least. 'Praise the Almighty for what he has done and given me a best friend in you. Let me say the truth, you are my only friend who is meeting the needs of my ministry like this. You are always in my heart.' One grateful recipient saw the books as evidence of the love God's people have for each other. 'I will never forget the gifts you have given me. Oh, praise the Lord. This is love, and by this people know that we are Jesus' disciples when we love one another. I remember you daily in my prayers. You are giving me more than money because what I need is the Word of God and the One inside me to make me grow.'

Another thankful recipient, searching for a suitable human image, wrote, 'Your kind of help is like a walking stick in an old man's hand.' Another found an image even more personal by saying our 'loving kindness in sending books' was 'more than the love of a man for a woman.' One writer asked me to express his thanks to all our workers and donors with a holy kiss, and another wanted us to imagine he was shaking all our hands with 'a lovely handshaking.' 'If I had a camera,' said another, 'I should take a photo which would show myself with a lot of books in my hands and a big smiling on my face.'

Many say they do not have the right words to express their thanks. An evangelist in Lesotho said, 'I lack mouth to say how much I thank you,' a pastor in Madagascar said, 'I lack English words to express my feelings,' and a schools worker in Swaziland was 'tongue-tied and overwhelmed with joy and happiness.' A Nigerian wrote, 'Sometimes

I wake up around two o'clock in the morning and thank the Lord for all you have done for us. I am seriously happy.'

People might do more than express their thanks in words. One man sent us postage stamps and another put in a few local bank notes with his letter – not that we had much use for foreign stamps or bank notes. Occasionally, someone will send a local artefact. Mostly, however, receivers can do no more than say 'thank you' in whatever words they can find.

Patience rewarded

Some Muslim countries, such as Sudan, Syria and Egypt, often give us problems, but probably the most difficult country has been Myanmar (popularly known as Burma). Because of the unreliability of the postal system, we sometimes sent books in with couriers from Bangkok and Singapore or overland through north-east India. The route through India was reliable for a few years, but then it too became difficult as officials in Myanmar stole or confiscated cartons at checkpoints along the journey.

Concerning countries of Africa, cartons usually take between six and twelve months to arrive. The record of two years used to be held by Togo, but then we heard of a carton to Ethiopia (not usually a problem country) that arrived after three years, and one that reached Burundi after three and a half years. Not all countries test our patience to that length, but most are erratic. That is why we often receive letters with many hallelujahs, though occasionally with a quiet rebuke when I have grown impatient. When one Nigerian mission leader informed us of the arrival of some books (after eighteen months), he added, 'With the arrival of these books I want to counsel you not to be discouraged about sending books to Nigeria. It is true the situation is really bad, but God is having his way. We are making things work through prevailing prayer.'

Another Nigerian said, 'I know the postal system is very bad here, but all the books you sent have got to us each time. We have daily prayed and taken limit off God to trust he will answer every problem, including postal. We desperately need your continued help. As we serve God faithfully and endure all things, he will satisfy us according to his riches in mercy.' Another said, 'Please do not be discouraged because the books take long to arrive. We receive them always. You might not have given us cash but you have given us millions of spiritual food. We pray daily two or three times for you and the ministry.' And from yet another Nigerian: 'When I heard you had sent the carton, I gave myself to serious prayer day and night that God through his angels should sail it through safely. And by the grace of God I got the carton intact on 31 January. Oh, how happy I was that day. Tears of joy filled my eyes.'



Sooner or later, books arrive

One man found his patience tested to the limit when, after almost two years, the books had still not arrived. 'I am nearly sick because of it. Day in, day out, I am fully watching and expecting it. In Proverbs 13:12 it says that hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life. I know the carton can't go missing, because the Devil has no right over it. Satan will suffer for this.'

More ways to say 'Thank you'

Some expressions of thanks are totally disproportionate to the modest gift of a carton of books. The wife of a pastor in Kenya said they were so overwhelmed by the supply of books that they decided to name their newborn child Donfleming, all one word. They sent a photo of my namesake and uplifted me with the news that I was now, like Abraham, a 'father of many nations.'

An Ethiopian couple who had just had twins wrote, 'I was praying my Lord for his mercy, so as a result the female child is called Mehret, which means 'mercy' in Ethiopian language, and the male child is called Fleming, because I received mercy through him.' I wrote back to thank them for the honour, but suggested that the name Fleming might not have much meaning to Ethiopians and perhaps they could find an alternative. They took the point, so renamed the boy Grace. But they were still not happy to give in totally and six months later wrote to say they had renamed their older daughter Gae.

It is difficult for us in affluent countries to realise the near impossibility for most people to buy books, even if they were available. A ministry leader in Uganda commented that one *Bridgeway Bible Commentary* was equal to a full month's wages for one of their workers. In Zambia, a person said that the full kit of Bridgeway books was more than the total wages some people received over six months. Many people earn less than fifty cents a day, such as the evangelist in Ethiopia who wrote, 'Believe me, I don't wish to be a millionaire, but I wish to be knowledgeable and wise.' A man in Uganda wrote, 'You have made the best investment of all, an investment in my spiritual life.'

From Kenya a man wrote that he had been fasting and praying to get some books, and when he came to the house of a pastor who had just received one of our cartons, he 'shouted loudly and started praising God for the miracle.' A pastor in Malawi said that his ambition to have books of his own had been 'a nightmare,' until a sponsored carton arrived.

One thing that has encouraged us over the years is the number of expatriate missionaries who, acknowledging the tremendous needs in their countries of service, have sent money to Bridgeway. From places as diverse as Botswana, Colombia, Japan, Indonesia, Pakistan, Réunion, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Vanuatu, Vietnam and Zimbabwe we have received generous gifts from missionaries who are desperate to get helpful books into the hands of local Christians.

Praise God and bless his people

Many of the receivers of books offer fulsome praise to God, sometimes in expressions of their own and sometimes in expressions taken from the Bible – not always using the Bible in a way that I would have chosen.

Often the praise is like that of an evangelist in Côte d'Ivoire (once known as Ivory Coast) who wrote, 'Oh, what a gift! As soon as I saw the books I was so exceedingly glad and gave praise and thanks to God for what he has done for me through you.' A variation is typified by a pastor in Ghana: 'Oh hallelujah! What love! My wife and I knelt down on our knees and gave thanks and praises to our Lord Jesus as soon as we received your great gifts.' But a writer from Cameroon seemed to be a little excessive: 'Just like the four living creatures of Revelation 4:8 who in God's presence were compelled to remain in unstoppable worship of God when they beheld the greatness and glory of God which ordinary words can't describe, so also I am lacking in words which can actually describe the greatness of this gesture of love to your brother in the Lord's vineyard. I will ever live to remember your love.'

Some people announce blessings upon the donors of the books with words like, 'May goodness and mercy follow you all the days of your life and may you never taste bitterness.' One person announced a mixture of Old and New Testament verses:

‘Whatever you lay your hands upon shall surely prosper, and no weapon formed against you shall prosper. The almighty God shall supply all your needs according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.’ An evangelist in the Philippines assured the donors, ‘Your package is bigger in heaven than on earth,’ and a pastor in the Republic of Niger wrote, ‘God will bless you and keep supplying your spiritual and financial need. He will surprise you with blessing that you will not know where to keep it.’

The blessings called down upon us by some people can be embarrassingly large, such as those requested by a man in Ghana: ‘The Lord increase you more and more, and you will see your children’s children and great grandchildren, and the Lord will protect you to live 120 years as in Genesis 6:3.’ With the best of intentions, a pastor in Namibia prayed, ‘In heaven may you shine like the brightness of a star for ever. And may God always keep the candle in your heart burning.’ A Nigerian added a typical local expression of practicality: ‘May God increase and equip you to gather more knowledge and give more grease to your elbow.’ A woman in India said simply, ‘When we come to meet at the feet of Christ, we will thank you the more.’

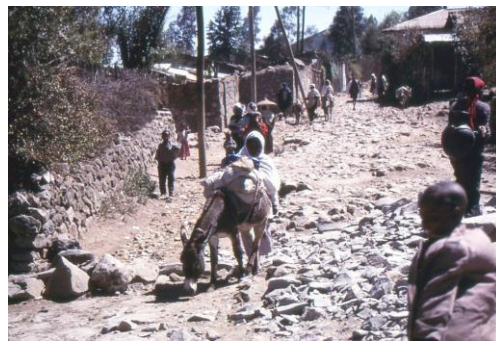
Help from the poor

Christians in poor countries are often better than some of us in the West at getting involved in community affairs. Because our governments provide us with services, we tend to take things for granted, but in many poor countries neither governments nor citizens show much interest in the kinds of civic amenities that make life more pleasant. The people in government are often self-centred and greedy (in other words, corrupt) and ordinary citizens are so poor that they have no mind for anything other than personal survival. But Christians are often different.

Improving the neighbourhood

The year I visited Ethiopia, the United Nations had it listed as the world's third poorest country. The town where I spent much of my time, Debre Berhan, seemed to be a treeless place of stones, shanties, donkeys and horse taxis. As in other parts of the world, many houses were without a toilet. It would not occur to people in the West that a house, church or civic building could have no toilet. I have learnt the wisdom of heeding the advice of local people when they point and say, 'Just go over there somewhere. But be careful where you walk.'

In the part of Debre Berhan where one church was located, most houses had no toilet and a small open piece of land beside a rough path had become badly polluted. It looked and smelt awful, I was told, so people in the church decided to do something about it. They went to the town council and obtained permission to clean up the land and build a toilet, which they then operated for the local residents.



Debre Berhan residential area

Cleaning up the land took some effort, and buying concrete blocks took money that the local Christians raised by giving 'beyond their means.' When they had built the toilet block – just one small room each for women and men – they installed an attendant and put a rough fence around the area to prevent further pollution. By this time they had visited every house in the community to sell subscriptions. Those who bought a subscription (a minimal monthly fee equal to a few cents) then received a card, which they showed to the attendant whenever they wanted to use the toilet. The scheme transformed one aspect of neighbourhood living. Residents had, on the whole, paid the subscription and refrained from finding an alternative free zone. The church then set about planting grass and other vegetation in the fenced-off area.

The man behind this project was Dereje Getaneh, a person I had previously known only through his efficient distribution of our books but who has since become a very dear friend. Dereje and his wife Mimi felt embarrassed to accommodate me in their humble dwelling, so put me into what might be called a half-star hotel – though they insisted I eat with them each evening. Their simple hospitality, out of deep poverty, was priceless. Then, when I went to settle my account at the hotel, I found they had already paid it.

Flowers, trees and houses

As I moved around Debre Berhan, I saw no flowers, just stones – except for a small triangular plot where two main streets converged. It was surrounded by a low fence, with a little grass struggling to grow in the centre and a few hardy flowers

around the perimeter. I did not want to embarrass Dereje by commenting on the novelty of seeing flowers in the town, but a day or so later, when we passed the plot



Dereje Getaneh and the smartened-up streetscape

again, he said to me, 'This is another of our church initiatives.' They had again gone to the town council and obtained permission to smarten up the streetscape.

Later again I was walking along another street when I noticed a row of young trees, each protected from hungry donkeys by woven matting wrapped around four stakes. 'That's another of our initiatives,' said Dereje. One

local church, in adding some 'salt' and 'light' to the town, was also adding grass, trees and flowers – not to mention the toilet.

Another local church initiative was to help the poor with house repairs, which often consisted of no more than a few sheets of corrugated metal to replace the plastic, cardboard and straw that served as a roof. The church also ran school classes for those whose poverty prevented them from attending school regularly, and had programs to teach people elementary hygiene, including instruction concerning HIV/AIDS. At four o'clock each afternoon, Dereje and Mimi would be back at the local church, handing out a mug of milk and an unfilled bread roll to each of fifty children. These were what they called 'the poorest of the poor' and this was probably the only decent food they received each day.

Back in Australia we maintained our contribution to this Ethiopian ministry through prayer, correspondence, books and other material aid. One day we received the following letter from Dereje.

'Let me tell you what the Lord is doing in our street children project. We had community training program and God is changing people. They are learning Christian doctrine through your *Basic Christianity* books. Also, we had a development training program for forty people, and among them ten received Jesus Christ as Saviour. We have holistic programs for 320 households. The work is challenging but the hand of God is with us. These are the poorest people and we are so happy serving them by sharing from what the Lord provides . . . Let me tell you also one very good news. Three months ago one family had HIV/AIDS crisis when they lost their dad and went to their homeland in Eritrea border region and left the boy Grade 5 with Mimi and me. Like the Lord served the poor and homeless, so we follow him, and this boy now trusts Jesus as his Saviour. But one day he might lose his mum like his dad.'

Care for the sick

Across the world, the contribution of Christians to humanitarian work is disproportionate to their numbers. In India, for example, Christians constitute just over 2% of the population, but provide 25% of care for orphans and 30% of care for the handicapped and lepers. In the Central African country of Burundi, one of the world's poorest, local Christians run a clinic for the general public as well as schools for the blind and the deaf, even though they have few trained nurses and no doctors. In many countries around Africa, I see simple 'health centres' that Christians have set up because the region has no other facility to help the sick. Local Christians visit with food, medicine, toiletries and a word of cheer from the Scriptures.

Here is a letter from an evangelist in Malawi who took young people from his church to a hospital to help them develop compassion for the sick. 'At the district

hospital we divided into groups to go into different wards. Our aim in taking the youth to the hospital was to train them to be good citizens, to be Christians who can work, to identify with sick people, and to prevent them getting HIV/AIDS by seeing for themselves the suffering it brings. Before this, we used *Let the Bible Speak for Itself* to train the youth on how to talk to a sick person, use the right voice and avoid irrelevant words and bad examples. The result of our visit to the hospital is that three Christian girls have given their lives to the Lord to become nurses.'

The man went on to say that he was 'a free man with the free gospel' and, after expressing appreciation for the books we had sent him, asked for anything else we could give, even used books. Most of Malawi's hospitals had no reading matter for patients, staff or visitors, and here was an opportunity, he said, for Christians to supply the need. Zambia and Nigeria are other countries where hospital chaplains have asked for books to place in chapels and reading rooms they set up.

One man in India, who had no medical skills, had enough compassion to set up a rough building for sick people picked up off the street. He called it The Nest. His letter of thanks to us was quaint but it was sincere. 'We have received your extra parcel of very valuable books and the parcel of clothes. I am unable to understand how to pay you thanks for distributing clothes to poor people to enjoy this coming Merry Christmas. Our people will wear these clothes on a special occasion. For your *Bridgeway Bible Dictionary* especially I am very appreciable. When I saw that book I felt very much happy in a way which I cannot express my glad. My praying thanks to you is a drop in the ocean. I am requesting you to kindly send even used children's books if you have any, because we run Sunday schools in five villages where there is no church. We are unable to provide free clothes and books, so we go round some rich people begging for some used clothes and books for our poor people who are half naked. And please I request also for any used teaching tapes, if you have any.'

Orphans and widows

All over Africa, people are dying of HIV/AIDS. The average age in some countries has fallen to the mid-thirties, and most people have some relative who has died of HIV/AIDS. But in every country Christians are reaching out to orphans and widows who are victims of this pandemic. These Christians are themselves poor, many of them living in small houses that have dirt floors, mud brick walls, grass roofs, little furniture, no electricity, no running water and no inside bathrooms or toilets. Houses might have only cloth hangings for internal partitions and doors, and often many people must sleep in one room. Some people bring orphans into their homes to live, while others, because of lack of space, can look after the orphans only during the day and then must spread them around other houses to sleep at night.

An evangelist in Congo, after thanking Bridgeway for a carton of books and some stationery items, said, 'I know that many people are going to be helped because of these books, especial our elders who struggle because they have no books. The economy and politic of our country is in total chaos, and all this while we are caring for seven orphans besides our own two children.'

This combination of a teaching ministry with care for orphans is reflected also in a letter from Guinea Bissau: 'The books are a great help to me and our local missionaries, who speak English even though our country is Portuguese-speaking. If you have some more books, please do send. People are always trying to learn English, but our great need is for literature in Portuguese. It pains us that new believers are crying out for Portuguese Bibles but we have nothing to give them . . . By God's grace, I have planted three churches and a home for orphans, but the leaders and others in these ministries have no salary because the economy of our country is very poor.'

Part of the family

An initiative of more than twenty local churches in one region of Zambia provides care and support for orphans and chronically ill persons by taking orphans into their homes, rather than through clinics and orphanages. As a result, 57 Christian families are now caring for 160 orphans. They care also for 252 HIV/AIDS-related chronically ill people, providing nursing help and food supplements. A comparable work in Mozambique has assembled 25 volunteers to care for 247 orphans in their homes, and a similar ministry in Burundi supports 117 orphans in their homes. A ministry we help in Congo supports 139 orphans – and so it goes on, in country after country.

The wife of a church elder in Zambia wrote of the work that she and her husband were doing in Bible teaching and caring for the poor. Apart from looking after their own five children, they had taken in four orphans. The husband drove a truck at the mine and his wife spent time helping poor families locally. In a letter to Gae she wrote, 'I have learnt a lot of things from Don's books and can now preach in women's meetings and conferences. I listen to Don's tapes and I have copied so many messages which help women and other men who come home. My husband James is well known in many parts of Zambia because of his preaching and the Bridgeway books he takes around, but he always brings people home. At first when I married James I didn't like the way he brought so many people home, because he liked very dirty people. He would just say to me, "Don't worry, my wife, everybody is created by the same God." So now I understand him. This is what the Lord wants us to do. I want our women to do agriculture and dressmaking so that it can help send our children to school and have enough food in our homes and to help the orphans and widows.'

This generosity of spirit is reflected in many letters we receive. Occasionally, a person will even be apologetic for not helping with the cost. 'I have to confess for not even sending you a single dollar for postage. I am really concerned about it. My problem is that I adopted orphan children who are staying with us in our family. Our family is now so big that the allowance I receive does not meet our demand every month. Could you please forgive me for my failure. But I do tithe in the church from the little allowance I get.'

The necessities of life

As if suffering from the HIV/AIDS pandemic is not enough, orphans and widows have further suffering inflicted upon them from natural disasters such as drought and famine. But, as is often the case, the best evangelists are also the best welfare workers. They are not turned away from preaching the gospel by the pressing needs of poverty, but neither are they so occupied with preaching as to have no time for welfare. When I received the following letter from an evangelist in Malawi, I could not help but contrast the kinds of gifts that excite children in Malawi with the kinds of gifts that excite children in my own country.

'Your books,' wrote the man, 'continue to help us and others in our ministry. My wife has opened a preschool here at our church and our aim is to help in the education. We are also caring for ten orphans in their homes, and at the opening ceremony we invited the ward councillor and chiefs. We gave each orphan child two cakes of soap, one packet of rice, one packet of salt and some used clothes. These are all items from our church members . . . We have opened two new preaching points, one 5 km north and one 20 km north. Because people accept the Lord Jesus as their Saviour, it is not too hard to plant a church, but very hard to grow.'

After we sent this man a small gift from sales of *A Different World*, he replied, 'In my life I have never seen a blessing like this since I was born. I want to appreciate your help, love and generosity. It is astonished to us for your willingness to uplift my family and my ministry. The same day I received the money I received a carton of clothes you sent six months earlier. We started this orphan ministry because James 2:14-26 told us

about faith and deeds. We assist orphans, children and widows in six villages, plus here in Lumbadzi. Also I tell you I bought a bicycle for myself to help with my transport.'

Another Malawian pastor, who had been receiving our books, revealed in his correspondence that he and his wife were also conducting an extensive ministry among orphans. 'Oh, my dear brother, I am very happy to inform you about receiving the books. I thank you and the sponsors and am very praising God. Please continue to join me in your prayers every day. People are dying like flies because of the HIV/AIDS. We are trying to take care of some of the orphans, but they are suffering indeed because we do not have enough to feed them. We have four houses looking after orphans.'



In Africa and Asia alike: caring for orphans

In view of this, we sent cartons of other materials as well as books, and later passed on a monetary gift from Christians who wanted to help. In letters of thanks he wrote:

'We highly appreciate this parcel of clothes. Oh, the Lord is doing very wonderful works for us. Indeed some of our nursing school teachers, who are really poorly for clothing, I tell you today are enjoying the Lord's work because of your hearts touched with compassion, and the children are enjoying the small toys and good clothing. Despite the drought, today looks for us like a rich country because of your sympathy hearts. I tell you, some people are helpless and are seeking the husks of maize, buying it with firewood to survive . . . With the great compassion of the Holy Spirit I received the money, Hallelujah. When we received this money the Lord said to me, "Kingstone my servant, this is the Lord's money. Buy some food for the four orphanages that they may survive, and the other money share it to the caretakers and the teachers of the orphans." I agreed and did that for the Lord's work.'

Sometimes when packing books, we stuff pieces of light clothing around the edges, or put in a few pictures and stationery items. These are all highly appreciated by people who have little. One man from Zimbabwe wrote, 'God bless you for continuing this labour of love to send us books which we cannot get here because of expense and not available. And you have helped me very much with the shirt and the pictures which I have pinned on my wall. You know what, brother, you are the only one who has thought of me by sending these things. Please you can send me any other unwanted material and I will give it to young boys and girls who are poor.'

Frustrations from church and state

Whereas poor people often display self-sacrificial love and deep concern for other poor people, those who are better off might be indifferent, lazy or hostile. Letters from two Ethiopian evangelists reflect the frustration that national Christians sometimes feel when fellow-believers or fellow-citizens do not share their concern.

One evangelist wrote, 'The books are always of use to many, and concerning our personal ministries we are so happy, things are going well. But there is a challenge in my local church, that is the ordained minister and evangelist are not actively involved, not committed to God's work. Because of this, I am busy to make disciples and evangelise the newcomers. But these paid ministers are dreamers without vision, with no goal, without purpose. Please, our dear family, pray the Lord to mobilise them to achieve his purpose. The method to win the lost is in holistic approach which is an open door to evangelise even the poorest because we love them. But these men are staying in their home to play with their children, drink coffee and so on. They don't

visit the church members or any. They are pulpit experts but not keeping the sheep of the Lord.'

And from the other evangelist: 'We are helping the poor, some with money for school purposes and now we help 270 children for the first time. Its purpose is to enrich the gospel to the Orthodox and Muslim people. The government for long time rejected our efforts but now they permit us. Brother Don, this all happened by the efficiency of answers to the believers' prayers. We were before God in prayer day and night with tears, groaning in empty houses for the sake of the lost, the hungry, the poor, the people of our country who are hopeless, no things to eat, no shelter, no clothing, no spiritual hope. How ready it was the books you sent me. I supplied to the group of elders and deacons who preach the gospel underground in Orthodox Churches and they informed me it serves a great deal to them. Even the paper and material for Sunday school is thankful. Brother Don, if there is a possibility soon, please send us your cassette preaching. We are watching for it longingly.'

All need the gospel

From another African country came the following report from a local ministry that reaches out to children and youths, whose sense of hopelessness reflects the problems of Africa's increasing urbanisation. 'We go to areas of our town known for street children. These are crowded, busy and polluted places with lots of garbage. The children learn greed, lust, rebellion and manipulation on the street. They suffer from hunger, abuse and abandonment, and are high on drugs, which they say helps them forget their miserable life.'

'In our work among street children, two very important questions go together: "Do you know Jesus" and "Have you had anything to eat?" Many times we feel overwhelmed by the masses and we are at a loss where to start. It takes a long time to build a trusting relationship with them, and the spiritual warfare is real. We play games, sing songs, have sketches, hug the children, pray, tell Bible stories and serve a delicious meal on Sundays. We also treat their sores, cuts and wounds. It is a good time of friendship and ministry, all done in an endeavour to give them hope and friendship. Those we have put back in local schools are improving and changing for the better. This gives us hope and encouragement to soldier on.'

'We must never forget, however, that if we feed the hungry, care for the poor and heal the sick but fail to explain God's way of salvation to them, we have not reached their deepest need, which is spiritual. We have failed. As we take a look at this work, we observe that nothing is impossible through Christ. He can change their lives and through this he will touch the lives of their families.'

Libraries with a difference

To Christians in the West, the word ‘library’ might bring to mind the image of a public building that houses books, or possibly a room in a house or church where books are kept. To Christians in the developing world a library might likewise be a building or room, but in most cases it is more likely to be just a shelf or cupboard. It might not even get that far, because people who have no books themselves can only dream of having books they can lend to others. In the West, where there is a glut of books, many Christians are not interested in reading them; elsewhere, where books are scarcely available, people cry out for them. They have a hunger for the Word of God, an appetite for learning and a desire for spiritual growth.

A good proportion of the people who write to Bridgeway mention these modest libraries. Their letters give an insight into the initiative needed to set them up and the perseverance needed to maintain them.

A mobile library

Among the most novel initiatives was that of a man in Zambia who established what he called a mobile library. It consisted of two plastic bags of books that he carried with him on minibuses as he moved around towns and villages visiting churches. This is the way he wrote to thank us for books and outline his ministry:

‘I would like firstly to thank God who thought of making you as a man, and at the same time he had you in his mind as his choice to spread his Word to the poorest people who he wanted to come to him after hearing his word of salvation through his beloved Son Jesus Christ. God knew one day you would bring Jesus’ word to Africa. God also knew the time, which you didn’t know. God knew many people in Zambia would hear his Word through your books.

‘Through these books you have given me the privilege to talk to ministers, managers, superintendents, sectional engineers, police officers, students from higher schools, evangelists, church elders, pastors, common people, all walks of life. I introduce them to the library of your books, because I always move about with 15 books in my plastic bag which is easy to see in one hand and same in the other hand. People ask me what I am carrying, so I introduce them to the books. Some come home to my house to talk about the books, and I have good time talking to them. Some people changed to become Jesus’ servants.

‘The books you are sending me are helping many people. I took them to a conference for our assemblies that attracted many people, more than 11,000. I only managed to lend to 500 people from 18 to 23 August. Every evening we keep receiving people who come to borrow or bring back books. The books that are bringing top people are *Bridgeway Bible Commentary* and *Bridgeway Bible Dictionary*, but the real hot cake is *Let the Bible Speak for Itself*. About this I do not know what to do because so many people ask for it. And we need youth books, Sunday school books and everything teachers can use.’

On a later occasion, after receiving a quantity of miscellaneous second-hand Christian books, the same man wrote, ‘I can’t have suitable words to express my joy for what you have done for our library. These latest books have already helped more than 200 people, and will continue to help many more who come to our library as well as help me and my wife to grow very much spiritually in the Lord.

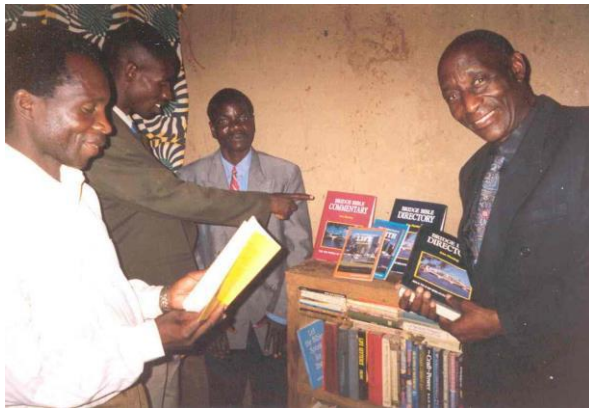
‘We started using these books with our neighbours, then with church elders and others sections of our church, then I advertised in the district churches, because we had proved that when people can’t understand about the application of what God wants

them to do, these books help them, even the old ones. We learn many new things. I didn't know that Martin Luther and other great evangelists had problems they faced in their marriages and other things, and our church leaders have learnt something, like the weakness of King Solomon and other things in God's Word. This mobile library is a very good work, and many people invite me to go with it to their districts, so now it has reached a radius of 200 kilometres.'

Churches that help

Many times I have seen in the homes of elders and pastors two or three shelves of books sitting on the bare floor and not looking very attractive, only to discover that this is the church's lending library. Then, as I move around the district, I hear from preachers, youth workers, students, women's workers and Sunday school teachers how they benefit from this modest library. The books might look grubby and tattered, but that is because they are well used. A Nigerian missionary in Gambia is typical of many when, in writing to thank us for books, he said, 'I have put the books in our church library, which everyone uses because they have no books of their own.'

An itinerant evangelist in India told of three district libraries he had set up and left in the care of young believers. From the Pacific island nation of Kiribati came news of libraries set up around the islands to meet the needs of teachers and churches who otherwise had no reference materials.



Pastors' lending library

In Ghana a pastor showed me a small library he used to prepare believers to reach out to Muslims in the area. An evangelist in Cameroon said, 'We have a prayer room library which is like a reading room and is a blessing to many hundreds who come and use it.' From Kenya a pastor wrote, 'All our church are jobless people and cannot afford to buy Bibles and books, so they use this library. Also, people from the town come to read and borrow

books, and by this we win souls. Right now, through these books, six Muslims and four Hindus have given their hearts to Christ.'

Appeals for help might be designed to soften our hearts, but such appeals might still be genuine. A pastor in Ethiopia wrote, 'We can't satisfy the food to our readers, so we are stretching our empty hands to our God who is Lord of the treasury, and with soft lovely voice we are whispering to the ears of brothers and sisters at Bridgeway Publications in the hope you can be a vessel to meet our needs.'

A Zambian pastor, in establishing his church library, drew up a formal membership roll. He wrote, 'Our library has grown to 430 members and these are pastors from different churches. It is situated in the Copperbelt, where there are about 7,000 churches. Most of the pastors have little hope of a formal theological education and few have more than a handful of books to help them in their preaching. Some have no books at all, only their Bible. This library is designed to overcome this problem.'

But not all libraries in Zambia were securely organised. One pastor wrote, 'We put these books of yours into our church library. They are good and powerful, very educative and useful for church planters to teach other believers. Unfortunately, three-quarters of all the books have been stolen, because everyone is using them and keeping them.'

The non-English countries

Even from French-speaking countries such as Niger, Mali, Cote d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso we receive letters of thanks from Christians who, in spite of limited English, borrow our books from small church libraries. From one pastor we heard, 'The people are still asking for your books,' and from another, 'People borrow your books from our library all the time.' Another, who had received only two kits of books, said his region had twelve churches, divided into three groups, and each group was allowed to use the books for three months on a rotation basis.

The most ambitious library project using English-language books among French speakers comes from one of the world's poorest countries, Chad. The person in charge wrote, 'We have been leading a Culture and Evangelism Centre set up by Christian Assemblies in Chad. Our library has now reached 2,500 volumes and offers services to teachers, researchers, pastors, students and evangelists. One of our training courses is how to witness to intellectuals and city people. Many come to me and ask about some books dealing with specific subjects, and the *Bridgeway Bible Dictionary* is very resourceful in this. It provides a clear understanding of the subject and has a presentation to help in further research.'

In the Portuguese-speaking country of Angola, churches coming from the same missionary origins as those in Chad showed similar initiative from national leaders. A representative wrote, 'Our churches have a national committee for studies and seminars. This group visits churches around the country for Bible studies, and once a year we have a full month for a national conference to study specific topics in the Bible. Your books have gone into the central library for use of the teachers in this group. We strongly support the translation of these books into Portuguese.'

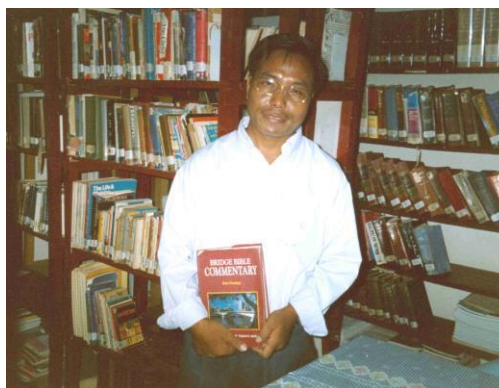
We are surprised at the number of Bible colleges outside the English-speaking world that request or use Bridgeway's English-language books. Letters from the former French and Portuguese colonies of Africa are no longer exceptional, but we have heard also from European countries such as Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Poland and Ukraine. A Bible college in Malta run by Egyptians uses the books in preparing Arabic-speaking workers for Muslim countries in North Africa. A Bible college in Lebanon uses the books in training workers for the Arab world.

Students and teachers

In the English-language countries, Bible school libraries are a predictable destination for many Bridgeway books. Although some of the larger colleges have managed to build good libraries, many places struggle to assemble more than a few shelves of books or even fill a small cupboard.

Although Bridgeway does not send free books to individual Bible college students, it might make quantities available for students to buy at a nominal price. A college principal in Malawi wrote, 'I have put the books in the Students' Rotation Book Fund, which means they are sold to students at a cheaper price and the

money is kept to buy more books to be sold again. This helps the students build up libraries while they are here for when they leave. It is almost impossible for them to buy books in Malawi.' A student who benefited from a similar scheme in Nigeria tried to find fitting words to express his feelings: 'We are as much grateful that the Lord can use you flamboyantly by sending books to our principal, for same to sell to us at a low



Bible college library, Myanmar

price and pay whatever realised into the Bible school library funds. We pray that the living God would enrich your spiritual talents and crown both you and your earthly and heavenly assizes with success and provide for all your needs in abundance.'

In a few cases Bible colleges equip graduating students with at least a basic kit of books for their ministry, but in most cases students graduate with simply a certificate and, at best, one or two small books. We are pleased when we can help these struggling graduates after they begin their full-time ministry. A college principal in India told how he helped in this: 'Some of the books you sent have gone to past graduates who are now evangelists, pastors and Bible teachers. For all of them this is the first time in their lives to receive a complete commentary on the Bible and they are deeply grateful.'

Resource centres

From Addis Ababa, capital of Ethiopia, we heard from an enthusiastic believer who set up an all-purpose library to serve both the Christian and non-Christian communities. He called it Library of Horeb and wrote asking for Bibles in English, Greek, Hebrew and Latin, along with Bible commentaries, dictionaries and other Christian books. He added, 'This library is unique in Ethiopia. Members pay a subscription, which helps our funds, and it is registered officially. Government has given approval to the list of books I submitted.'

In a number of countries we have supplied books to libraries in prisons, hospitals, universities, high schools and vocational schools. An encouraging letter from a college principal in Zimbabwe said, 'I must acknowledge the remarkable spiritual insight in this new book, *Making Sense*. It is a masterpiece, as if written especially for Zimbabwe. Along with all the others, it is now in the library of the Mutare Teachers College, which is used by thousands of students and others in the community. They find them useful, because biblical knowledge is taught in schools here. It is an examinable subject.'

Christian enterprises across a variety of ministries establish central reference libraries that are used by elders, pastors, teachers, evangelists and other Christian workers who cannot afford to buy books. The coordinator of one of these centres wrote, 'Our library helps the ministers of the gospel build up their faith and prepare their sermons. The easy English of these books is a great advantage.'

Tragedy in Nigeria

A friend in Nigeria set up the same kind of library, only to have it destroyed in a Muslim attack. But the attackers destroyed more than just books. Our friend wrote:

'I lost my four daughters killed and I was seriously beaten and in the hospital for four months. The church and mission with all our books was burnt and destroyed, also my own library and all study books and Bibles. All that I have laboured for was burnt away in a single day. Many churches are burnt because of *sharia* (Islamic law) that is now adopted by some state governors. I need your help for the sake of Christ to build a new lending library. Please help me with commentaries and books because of my beloved heroes who are still in hospital . . . I would like to affiliate my church and library with you, for you to be our apostle. Because of the killing of my four daughters, I have moved my family down to our village.'

A month later, after I wrote to say we had posted three cartons of good used books donated by Christians in Australia, he responded, 'Where do I start to praise God in my life, because I don't know that I can have a wonderful feeling again. I thought it was finished, but you put a big smile on my mouth when you said you have sent some cartons of books. I can't wait to receive them. When a brother from the post office brought your letter to me, I started praising God that in time like this you remember me. Jesus will be with you and the Holy Spirit by your side always. I don't know what to say. Help me say a big thank you to all the people who contribute. I am praying for you daily, with fasting every Friday. Also I will set aside three days first week next

month with seven prayer warriors to pray for you. Send me your prayer requests and we shall pray for you. Take me as your son in faith and I am ready to do whatever you lay down for me. Take note, you have a man in Nigeria.'

We had nothing to 'lay down' for this brother, but many months later a triumphant letter arrived. 'We have received the books!' he announced. 'May God bless you and your friends who contributed these books to our New Heart and Holiness Library. Help me to say thank you to them, and I will be grateful to see your prayer requests with theirs so that I can be praying for you. In the midst of tears, you make me to understand that I can still survive the current problems. My heavy heart, you take it away. I am relief, praise the Lord. I can only pray for you with fasting. You have done wonderful things to erase the sadness in my heart. Sir, I still need books, commentaries and Bibles, used or new, as we go through the evil of *sharia*. Your tape preaching message gave me more courage. We are going to listen to your voice this coming Sunday in church.'

In the same envelope was a second letter: 'I was on my way to my preaching station and had in mind to post the thanks for your books [the above letter], but was turned back because of what is going on in Kaduna. Alas, it is another cruelty, bloodbath again, as Muslims stage another evil war on the people of God. Killings and burning churches, this is another bitter experience because it affects our members that are there . . .

'What must we do? We must cope with it and press forward to give all the glory to God. We covet your prayers in times like this. We are still in the battle. We are still in the world – today joy, tomorrow sorrow with tears. I just hold on to the Spirit of God. Maybe that is the reason your books arrived before this latest tragedy. I was told that little remaining clothes have been burnt and destroyed. Sir, I am fed up, but in this agony the Holy Spirit told me to look up Hebrews 12:2. With what you have done for me, thank God. I am in the midst of tears. I have sold my bed, chairs, fan, radio – nothing, nothing. Glory to God, I still have Jesus. He is my sufficient.'

Rubber stamps

Across the entire non-Western world of my experience, people in positions of responsibility love rubber stamps. From government offices to local churches, they love to see the mark of a rubber stamp somewhere near the signature to give a letter or document the look of authority. These rubber stamps carry no status of governmental registration or approval, such as the common seal of a corporation, but they look impressive none the less. They are, in a sense, symbols of meaningless bureaucratic procedures.

Duplicates and more

I needed a visa to visit Myanmar (Burma) so went along to the Myanmar embassy in Bangkok. Like most embassies, it was open for visa transactions only for a short time each day – in this case, 10.30 to 11.30 a.m. It was also one of those embassies that required two identical applications to be filled out (no photocopies or carbon copies allowed) and, to make matters worse, each application consisted of two separate forms, one of which would eventually be stapled to the page of the passport containing the visa. Each of the four forms also required a photo. To set the process in motion, I picked up two sets of the four papers from the embassy, took them home for Gae and me to complete and then returned to the embassy the next day to lodge them.

As I handed over the papers, the official noticed an omission. In the excitement of recording our history and sticking on photos, Gae had forgotten to sign one of the applications (in other words, two of the forms). ‘Oh, no,’ I moaned as I prepared to collect the papers and return home. ‘No, no,’ said the official, ‘you sign for her.’ ‘What? Sign my own name?’ I asked. ‘No,’ said the official, ‘sign her name. Just copy your wife’s signature.’ So, right under his nose, I copied Gae’s signature and he was happy.

The official then laid out our two sets of four forms in one long line along the counter, together with similar sets of papers from two other applicants, and headed for his collection of rubber stamps. Stamp, stamp, stamp, stamp, stamp . . . along the row of papers sixteen times with the first rubber stamp. Then another sixteen stamps . . . then sixteen more with his third rubber stamp . . . then two more stamps on one page of each passport. He then disappeared to find the man who signed visas and a minute later returned with our visas duly authorised. From what I could see, no one had looked at anything we had written on our application forms, other than to ensure that every slot had something written in it. They had collected the money and wielded the rubber stamps, so they were happy.

The stamp of authority

On one occasion the Bangplat Church in Bangkok ran into an obstacle with a government department when it had to lodge an application regarding tax exemption. The application was typed on the church’s printed letterhead and signed by three people, but the Taxation Office would not accept it, because it did not carry the mark of the church’s rubber stamp. The church had no rubber stamp, but after some quick work with drawing instruments, scissors and glue we took our design to the rubber stamp maker and next day took our stamped letter back to the Taxation Office. It was approved without question.

Years later I had a similar problem when we provided a gift of computers and printers to churches in the African country of Burundi. A signed letter for the Burundian government on Bridgeway’s letterhead was not good enough. It had no rubber stamp. I emailed my Burundian friends to tell them to cut up an old letterhead, stick things on paper, get a rubber stamp made and plonk the stamp over my signature.

They did, with the result that the letter now looked official and the consignment was cleared without delay.

Clearing the corpse

A friend in Bangkok had been visited by his American parents for several months. In those days, the extended length of their stay meant they had to have a non-immigrant visa, which in turn meant they had to have a tax clearance before they could leave the country. Unfortunately, the husband died in Thailand. The wife wanted his body taken back to America, but first she had to be in possession of his tax clearance.

When the son went to the taxation office to fill out the relevant form, he had trouble with the official behind the counter because the applicant had not signed the form. 'But he can't sign the form,' explained my friend, 'he's dead.' The official was unmoved. He pointed to the part of the form where it stated 'Signature of Applicant.' Until the applicant signed the document, said the official, nothing could be done. My friend tried to show that a dead man could not sign anything, but the official could not be persuaded. 'Our regulations require . . .'

After some minutes of frustrating argument, my friend excused himself, took the form to a nearby table, wrote a signature in the required spot and returned to the counter. 'Good,' said the official and, with a sense of satisfaction, brought out his collection of rubber stamps and proceeded to stamp, stamp, stamp with much gusto. The clearance was duly issued.

Keeping the record

This fascination with rubber stamps and official forms might be irksome, but I genuinely felt sorry for a Lao immigration official when on one occasion I was about to leave Laos and cross the Mekong River back to Thailand. The Lao official, who was



Border river crossing

sitting at a crude wooden table beside the ferry landing, was not accustomed to people like me making the border crossing at that point. He had his trusty rubber stamp but did not seem to know what he was to do, other than stamp the passport.

After a few moments reflection, the man took out a sheet of ruled foolscap and set about writing down, longhand, everything in the passport. He began with page one, 'Commonwealth of Australia.' He obviously was not fluent in English, for he pointed to every letter with his left hand while writing with his right. It took him a long time to complete all my details. Then he set about recording visas and immigration stamps of other countries I had visited, slowly working his way through the passport till he reached the page containing the Lao visa. He then stamped the passport and, with typical Lao politeness, returned it to me in both hands with a smile and bow of the head. The piece of foolscap probably went into a cupboard, never to be seen again.

Piles of useless paper

The reason I suspect the Lao immigration paper was never seen again is that once the procedures have been satisfied, that is the end of the matter. The papers might be kept, but they are not filed in any kind of system. We discovered this when we were to go home on leave and had to apply for a passport for our two-year-old son. He had been born in Thailand and was a Thai citizen (as well as Australian) so needed a Thai passport to leave the country. It took many months to issue and it entailed a seemingly

endless round of visits to government departments to ensure he was a fit person to be issued with a passport.

Procedures began with the Foreign Affairs Department, from where they passed on to the Police Department to ascertain whether our two-year-old had any criminal record. The police investigated the child's father and even his grandfather (my father), who by this time was deceased. For some reason the police seemed particularly concerned about any criminal record my father might have had. I assured them he had none, though I said I could recall one evening during World War II, probably about 1944, when he was late getting home from work and was pulled up by a policeman for not having a light on his bicycle. They listened attentively and responded gravely that they did not think it was a serious enough offence to record.

Then we had to go to the Taxation Office with a guarantee worth 300,000 baht, which a relative of a local Christian had kindly supplied. They did not want this two-year-old to escape without paying his income tax. Finally, after three months of hassle, we received the passport. We visited Australia and in due course returned to Thailand.

A number of years later, when we left on leave again, we had to apply for a new passport, because in those days a Thai passport lasted only two years. When I went to the Foreign Affairs Department to collect the application forms, the official told me that we would have to go through the entire procedure again – Foreign Affairs, Police, Taxation, guarantor, the lot. I protested that we had already done all that for the original passport. Since they had all the details, surely they could simply reissue an updated passport. The official behind the counter turned side on, waved his arm towards the back wall where papers were piled higgledy-piggledy from floor to ceiling, from one end of the room to the other, and said in a plaintive tone, 'How could we find his papers in there?'

Car registration

When we lived in Bangkok, registering the car each year usually required a full day. In fact, most dealings with any government department required the best part of a day, and employers were usually understanding enough to give employees time off without penalty.

To register my car each year, I would arrive at the relevant office at 8.30 a.m., along with a hundred other hopeful people, to get the process started as soon as possible. First, we queued at a window to buy the required form . . . then went to a desk upstairs where we bought a tax stamp . . . then back downstairs to fill in the form . . . then to Window 6 in the brown building across the quadrangle . . . and so on . . . and on. One year I counted the number of windows and desks we had to go to and it came to seventeen. This all took time, and then just when we thought we were getting somewhere, down would come the shutters. It was noon, lunchtime. Come back at 2.00 p.m. Then the race was on again, this time to be through before the shutters came down at 4.00 p.m. and proceedings were over for the day.

There were, however, ways of speeding up the system. One way was to hire one of the self-appointed brokers who moved around the milling throng, touting for business. Their well practised routine facilitated proceedings and supplemented the officials' income. Alternatively, the car owners themselves could help clear the bottlenecks with gifts of cigarettes, whisky or money. I hear that these days, with more sophisticated ways, things are not as crude, though unofficial dealings are still available to facilitate procedures. For Christians, and no doubt for any others who happen to be either too honest or too mean, it helps maintain the tension between principle and pragmatism.

War and refugees

The legacies of war can be very depressing. People are left homeless, property is destroyed, economies are left in tatters and thousands of people find themselves seeking refuge in what they hope will be safer countries. There are more than ten million refugees in the world, most of them hosted by poor countries. But God has done great things in bringing many of these people to himself and in some cases sending them out as evangelists.

Cambodia, landmines and children

My first experience of an official refugee camp was overwhelming – hundreds of thousands of Cambodians in vast camps on the Thai side of the border. The looks of hopelessness on the faces, the long queues of people waiting for their rations of food, the makeshift hospital where the injured were patched up, the prowling groups of self-appointed but well-armed guards who protected the interests of the Khmer Rouge – these things reinforced the impression that refugee camps are not good places to be. Yet out of these camps came thousands of converts to Jesus Christ. I have met some of these in churches they founded in Australia, and met others who, after Cambodia was liberated, returned to their homeland to evangelise. And as the church in Cambodia grows, it reaches out to the amputees one sees everywhere.



Cambodian refugees, Thailand 1980

Of Cambodia's twelve million people, five million are still at risk of being killed or maimed by landmines. Twelve years after a task force began de-mining Cambodia, more than six thousand villages were still affected by landmines, and a quarter of those were classified as high risk. Over one hundred million landmines are still buried in more than sixty countries across the world.

Children suffer in disproportionately high numbers from the horrors of war. They tread on landmines when they go to gather firewood, fetch water and tend cattle, or when they tinker with interesting looking objects. In many countries they grow up knowing only the violence of war. In the last decade of the twentieth century, two million children worldwide were killed, four to five million disabled, one million orphaned and twelve million left homeless as a result of war. In a 'normal' world, children are seen as innocent non-combatants, but in many conflict zones this is not so. To supplement adult armies and militias, warlords use children as soldiers. Those who survive the fighting and live to see peace are left with the terrible legacy of a childhood filled with violence.

Other Asian countries

The conflict that produced the Cambodian crisis began many years earlier with what became known as the Vietnam war. The conflict spread also to Laos, where I once visited a disused rice mill that had been taken over by refugees fleeing from their own countrymen. Some years later, in Hong Kong, I met refugees from Vietnam itself, who were housed in row after row of corrugated iron buildings. These desolate looking

refugees were stacked three bunks high, surrounded by whatever goods they managed to bring with them when they fled.

In Delhi, India, I had just finished preaching in a well known church when a man cautiously approached me and said, in apologetic tones, that he had been translating and printing articles from my *Bible Dictionary* without permission. He was an Afghan refugee who had found the book in India and was feeding the small underground church in Afghanistan by infiltrating these articles across the border. For me, matters of copyright are of little significance when people exercise such initiative and undertake such risks.

From Nepal, a difficult country because of ingrained Hindu nationalism, came a note from a Nepalese evangelist who had founded a church among Bhutanese refugees. He wanted more of the books that he and others, from both Nepal and India, were using as training material for those reaching the refugees.

An international news magazine once made the statement that no government in the world was more hated by the people it ruled than the government of Myanmar. The hill tribe people, many of whom are nominally Christian, suffer more than most and are a particular target for the government's program of abduction and forced labour. Able-bodied men are forced into work assignments in remote areas and abducted children are forced into Buddhist monasteries. Many hill tribe people are constantly on the run as they look for refuge in mountain jungles or flee into neighbouring countries.

More than a million of Myanmar's hill tribe people have escaped across the border into Thailand. Many of these have been truly born again through the enthusiastic work of Christian refugees from their homeland. In one Burmese-language church I addressed in Bangkok, baptisms were taking place monthly. In another they took place almost every week.

Croatia, Serbia and Kosovo

The war between Croatia and Serbia might have achieved some political goals for the political leaders, but it left huge numbers of people without homes or jobs. Serbs who had lived all their lives in Croatia were forced to abandon their homes and jobs and move to Serbia, where they had neither homes nor jobs, and little hope of getting any. Croats in Serbia were likewise forced out of their lifelong dwelling places and driven into Croatia, where they too faced a hopeless future.

As always, international aid came from emotive responses to media coverage but did not last long. Christian organisations were among the few who were committed to ongoing support. Local churches in Serbia and Croatia reached out to desperately needy people who, with only a few salvaged possessions, were cooped up in schools, public halls and other commandeered buildings. People had no privacy, no comforts and no prospect of a life such as they had once known. But the church went to them with the love of Christ.

Slowly the situation improved. Then, just when churches in Serbia began to think they were getting on top of the refugee problem, they were hit by something far more devastating. The Kosovo crisis had arisen and NATO began bombing Serbia, their prime aim being to get rid of the dictator Milosevic. Christians who had for years helped refugees were now the victims of military attack from Christian countries.

A year or so earlier I had been privileged to speak in a Serbian church on the occasion of the baptism of six converts who were gypsies (or Roma). Serbs and Croats might look down on each other, but everyone looks down on gypsies. In the racial rankings, they are on the bottom. That same church not only reached out to gypsies, but helped refugees from other parts of former Yugoslavia. As victims of the Kosovo war poured in, they extended Christian love to a new wave of unwanted people. Then came the cruellest of blows when a stray bomb from a NATO plane landed on this very church and destroyed most of the provisions that Christians were distributing to the

pitiful people around them. There seemed to be no justice. But those Serbian Christians neither gave up nor grew bitter. They just kept reaching out with the love of Christ.

In Albania I met more refugees from the Kosovo war. Albania was in a bad enough condition as it was, without being landed with all these unwanted people. But in the capital, Tirana, and in towns around the country, Albanian Christians were witnessing to the truth of the gospel through proclamation and practical love. When the Kosovo refugees later returned home, Albanian Christians went with them to help plant churches in Kosovo.

Burundi and Rwanda

Africa is the continent most afflicted with the sufferings of war. The World Bank estimates that almost half of Africa's people are kept in poverty by chronic fighting. One gets used to seeing soldiers and weaponry everywhere and military road blocks are routine, but I have rarely been within range of serious conflicts.

On my first visit to Burundi I saw plenty of refugees from the war across the border in Congo, but the saddest sight was the destruction resulting from the fighting within Burundi itself. The genocide of a decade earlier had shattered neighbouring Rwanda, and similar ethnic rivalries now threatened to destroy Burundi. Rebels from the Hutus (who accounted for 90% of the population) were still trying to oust the Tutsis from power (for the Tutsi minority controlled the armed forces, police and civil administration), but the results were devastating. And, as usual, the innocent suffered most.

In Bujumbura, the capital, parts of the city were still 'no go' areas, no one ventured far after dark, and gunfire could still be heard during the night. During the day life went on as usual. But if rebels launched an attack from any part of town, the army response was swift, merciless and without discrimination. All over the city were streets of houses that had been destroyed by the army's heavy weapons. Among these were homes owned by Burundian Christians with whom I was working.



Burundi: homes destroyed through civil war

One of these, Côme Mbonihankuye, was a man with whom I had established a close friendship through meetings at international conferences and subsequent provision of books. It was heartbreaking to stand with him and his wife Viola in the ruins and hear him say, 'This used to be our home.' Earlier, he had written to me concerning books: 'I cannot tell you how big is the need, because all the provision I had was burnt early at the beginning of this 10-year war. One of my worst wounds is the loss of my dear books, collected through many efforts and sacrifices, now reduced in ash and smoke.'

If I was saddened to stand with him in the ruins of his home, I was saddened even more when I received an email from him a few weeks later. His eldest son, who against his parents' wishes had gone to the hills a year earlier and joined the rebels, had been killed in the fighting.

Plight of the Congolese

The messiest war in Africa is in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where other African countries make matters worse by supporting opposing forces. Congolese refugees are scattered far and wide, both within Congo and in neighbouring countries.

We meet them often in our travels, but our warmest relationship is with one in a refugee camp in neighbouring Tanzania. Although we have never met him, we have helped with books and other things. He first wrote, 'We received some of your books through a Tanzanian Christian friend, and this makes us grow, so that I want more of these other books you print. Briefly, our whole life here is miserable for lack of food and clothes and being refugees. But most I hunger for the Word of God.'

This man, along with others, helped establish several churches in and around the refugee camp. A year later he wrote, 'The procedure I follow when I receive the books is to invite all leaders of different churches and from villages around and share books with everyone who can benefit from them. Before distributing I told briefly of your ministry to help God's servants in Africa. They were so grateful and want you to carry on the work till the day we go back from refugee camp to our country of Congo. It is hard life in camp.'

Years later, life had not improved. He wrote, 'I have to tell you that the whole family life with my wife and three children is miserable in this camp. When we fled we left all things at home, and we specially have almost no clothes. It is three years since we fled from the war.' We sent him books and clothes, and received this letter in response. 'I really glorified God to receive two cartons, one of clothes and one of books. I see that I am in your mind, in your program, and in your budget. We thank God so much for his love that has no limitations or end and he is seen and manifest himself through his ministers. Brother, from this time you are now my spiritual father who will bring me up and make me mature and prepare me for God's work as Paul did to Timothy.'

Malawi and Mozambique

Another central African country, Malawi, also became a refuge for displaced people, in this case from Mozambique. Part of Malawi's main southern highway runs along the border between Malawi and Mozambique, and the first time I travelled that road, the entire area on the Mozambique side was deserted. All shops and houses had been destroyed. There was no sign of life and I was told it was like that for the next twenty kilometres stretching back from the road. On the other side of the road, the Malawi side, tens of thousands of Mozambican refugees lived in shanty towns that spread over the hills. But many people found Christ in those shanty towns, and when the war in Mozambique ended they went back with the gospel.

Years later, when I visited Mozambique, the devastation of war was still evident – buildings abandoned during construction, others destroyed in the war – but the church was growing. A few years later again, when I was back in Malawi and once more drove down the southern highway, shanty towns on the Malawi side were gone and deserted areas on the Mozambique side were alive with villages and markets.

The Sudanese

During the second half of the twentieth century, the world's longest running civil war was in Sudan. Almost forty years of conflict claimed more than two million lives and resulted in more than four million refugees. The government of Sudan (which was Islamic and dominated by the Arab north) pursued a policy of unrelenting assault designed to Islamise the south (which was largely Christian and negroid). It carried out systematic bombardment by air and land, targeting Christian institutions such as churches, schools, hospitals and aid groups, and orchestrated famine as a weapon of genocide. Communities were systematically destroyed through tactical starvation, scorched earth strategies and abduction of people into slavery. A policy of ethnic cleansing – the depopulation of oil-rich areas within the Christian region – created huge carnage and left hundreds of thousands without land or homes.

My first experience of working with Sudanese was in Cairo, Egypt, when I ran a week-long leadership course among refugees from southern Sudan. These people later

went to work with Sudanese refugees elsewhere, some in Western countries such as America and others in African countries such as Ethiopia. Those who went to Ethiopia have maintained regular contact with us and become centres of distribution of biblical materials we send to them. One of these Sudanese wrote later from Ethiopia, 'The books have been of great help to me personally as well as to the congregation. I have twelve lay leaders who currently are doing some training in ministry. I have to look after four churches as well as go to refugee camps, and these leaders are being trained to help in this work.'

As for the Christians back in southern Sudan, many became refugees in their own country. We sent books in via Kenya and these went to churches, pastors, evangelists, refugee camps and Bible schools across southern Sudan. Over the years one man in particular became an enthusiastic correspondent whose letters presented us with challenging insights.

'The bushes of south Sudan are littered with bones of our dead people. South Sudan has vast economic resources but our only experience is war. The suffering of our people has reached pathetic level. I have seen in many places people eating leaves of trees and grass like wild animals just to keep alive. Over two million people have died in this war and we expect more of us to die. Most children, nine out of ten, are not able to go to school. Brother, keep praying for us and sending us your Bridgeway books. But please can you send the very important book called *Operation World* because we are praying for the whole world and someone told me this book is now with new printing.'

In a later letter the man wrote, 'We value these books so much that I would send you millions of money for them, but that is not possible because of the war. Many pastors and all God's people go without food for several days. If you visited our country, you would not believe your eyes. Life is too hard with us here, yet some of us are still alive and we want to carry on all God's work to the end of the world. I will never, never, never give up to Satan at all. Kindly pray for us. We are dying. And we will keep praying for you and your publications. We love you and all yours to be our friends for life.'



Distributing aid, South Sudan

A few years later, after the signing of a peace accord between north and south, the man wrote of his reunion

with long-separated relatives. 'I want to inform you that after the peace agreement I now see some of my family members who came to see us in Juba by footing after 21 years. They came from 150 miles away. But sadly to tell you that fifteen people from my family have gone to be with Christ. My mother is still alive, only the war has made them prisoners to everything and look like slaves. My village in the countryside asked me to help them with blankets, mosquito nets, cooking utensils, washing soaps, Bibles, books, cassettes and other necessary things. Here in Juba too we badly need these things. Please tell your friends. If possible send me some second-hand clothes too, because I have hardly any to wear. I am sorry to ask these things, but the Bible teaches that it is better to ask than to steal.'

Ethiopians, Eritreans and others

In view of conditions in Sudan, one would hardly think it the sort of place to escape to for refuge. But when civil war was raging in neighbouring Ethiopia, people

escaped to any place that looked safer at the time. A man from Eritrea, which became independent of Ethiopia as a result of the war, wrote, 'The war in Ethiopia made me run away to Sudan, but now it's finished and I go back to my land and tell about Jesus to make new Christians and a new church. That is why I need these books. Oh, they are wonderful for me, because we do not get such books in these countries. I cannot explain in words the blessings I get from these books. I see them very easy for language. In Eritrea we do not speak English very much, but I am reading.'

An Ethiopian who fled from the war into Kenya found my books in a refugee camp there. Back in Ethiopia at the end of the war he wrote, 'My mother and father died in the war front. Now I am studying for a theology degree. I am in midst of raging tempest, attacked from left to right, fears, sadness, sorrow and frustration all mingled down through my cheeks. Dear brother, your books are helping to encourage me.'

Others who write or who I meet on my travels tell of finding the books when they took refuge in a neighbouring country. A Mozambican told of finding the books when he was a refugee in Malawi; a Liberian found them when he was a refugee in Ghana; a Ghanaian, in turn, found the books in Côte d'Ivoire when he went to help victims of the civil war there.

Concerning the war in Côte d'Ivoire, one of our friends wrote, 'The war came on us suddenly in the night and we had to leave everything we owned to seek shelter somewhere. Because we were working in the coastal land we had some fishermen join their canoe to us and take us to Ghana. The canoe spent four days in the sea and only through the grace and power of our Lord we reached Ghana untouched. After eight months there, now the situation in Côte d'Ivoire is a little bit alright and I have come back. But our church has been ransacked, even breaking down our house and burning things. I am appealing to you for more books to help us rebuild and to emancipate us from the power of the world. It is terrible to be in the midst of war.'

West Africa

In many ways West Africa is the most turbulent region of Africa. We might wonder how anyone could be optimistic in a refugee camp, yet we receive some very positive letters. One man wrote, 'Because of the war, we have been forced to flee across the border into Côte d'Ivoire, along with a hundred thousand other Liberians. We are only one hour drive from the border, and we have a very fruitful work among the twenty-five churches in the refugee area. These pastors have lost everything and need every resource material they can get. So we have put the four sets of Bridgeway books in a central library for them to use. Just imagine being in exile, where you cannot afford to find a single meal, it is impossible even to think about buying a single book. Yet these people continue to minister.'

Another Liberian refugee wrote, 'The civil war has brought hardship, disgrace and frustration, and many of us have fled to Côte d'Ivoire, where we live on handouts to survive. But we still serve God with Liberian refugees in these border camps, and I write to ask your good office to assist us with more books and Bibles while we run from bullets.'

With the apparent cessation of hostilities in neighbouring Sierra Leone, we received the following news. 'Now that the war has ended, the post office is working again and I am pleased to inform you that the latest parcels of books you sent have all arrived safely. We have put a set of your books in each of the three Scripture Union offices throughout the country, where pastors who have no books of their own come in and use them regularly.'

A pastor in Freetown, capital of Sierra Leone, wrote that he was 'directly in charge of two churches with combined number of 1500 adults, 500 young people and 300 children.' After speaking of the need for 'constant teaching in sound doctrine,' he went on to say, 'The trauma that a lot of our population now experience because of the war

can only be properly addressed by getting these traumatised victims well grounded in God's Word. Besides the two churches I am responsible for in Freetown, I have pastoral responsibility for forty ministers. They have lost all their reading materials in the war and their purchasing power is weak, so I have put these Bridgeway books in a central library for them to use. If you know any who want to dispose of their books, please mail them to us.'

As we receive letters from people recovering from the ravages of war, we are often encouraged, often rebuked. People with little are often more positive than those with much. Another in Sierra Leone wrote, 'I am a sister in the Lord who received one full set of your books through Scripture Union. Thank you very much, because these books have helped us a lot. The most exciting testimony is that the fire of evangelism inspires us and our vision is broader than ever. We have peace in our country after six years of civil war and now we have this vision to reach the provinces that were previously cut off. We help the refugees and the needy, because many want revenge and cannot forgive. Through God's power and anointing we do our best to spread the gospel of his grace and leave the rest to him.'

Finding the Saviour

All my books were written in the confidence that the Bible will do its work in the hearts of the readers once it is understood. The Bible is not as hard to understand as many people imagine, but because we are far removed in time from the world of the biblical writings, any explanation of their circumstances and content should help our understanding. God's Spirit inspired the writing of the biblical books, and when people understand what is written, that same Spirit can use the Word to convince them of its truth and relevance.

Introducing Christianity

For those who know little of the Bible, or of Christianity in general, some introduction is always helpful. That is why I wrote the *Basic Christianity Series* of five small books. The first of the books, *The Christian's Faith*, shows why human beings need God's saving help and how God has provided a Saviour in Jesus Christ. It urges people to commit their lives to him through repentance and faith. The next two books, *The Christian's Bible* and *The Christian's God*, were also written largely with non-Christians in mind, though they are especially useful for new believers. This is even more the case with the remaining two books, *The Christian's Life* and *The Christian's World*.

Of all Bridgeway books, there are more *Basic Christianity* books around the world than any others. They are in more languages than any other titles and are used in large quantities in many countries. Apart from being widely used in everyday evangelism, they are used extensively in religious education in schools and as follow-up material sent to interested listeners of Christian radio broadcasts. It is encouraging to hear from time to time of people finding the Saviour through these books.

Among the liveliest testimonies is this one from a young man in Ghana. 'I am very excited to discuss a problem with you. I am twenty years old and at first I was a thief. There was a day when I decide to steal from the school headmaster and in his office I came across a book by Don Fleming. I took this book and read it. After reading it, I went down on my knees and said, "God I've sinned against you. Have mercy on me and forgive all my sins." I repented instantly. And so because of you I am now a Christian. I've started giving my testimony and preaching the good news of Jesus Christ to people, friends, parents and those I've sinned against. But please, I have a problem. My problem is that when I read the Bible there are some words which seem to be technical to me, so I need some books to explain words to me and assist me in my Christian life.'

Unexpected responses

Merchant seamen might not be the first people who come to mind when we talk of using Bridgeway books, but a person in India wrote about a young officer who found Christ through a set of Bridgeway books placed in the ship's library. In Australia a local ministry keeps a supply of the *Basic Christianity* books in various languages to use with seamen from around the globe who call at Australian ports.

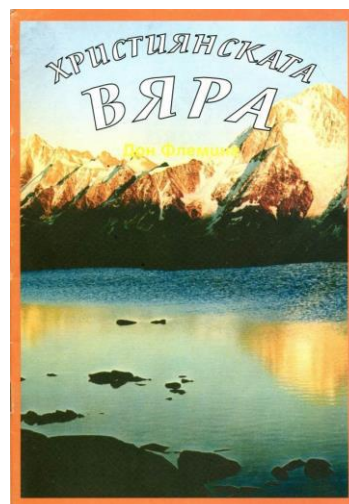
In Thailand I used the *Basic Christianity* books to explain the gospel to all kinds of non-Christian people – students, nurses, labourers, office workers, government employees and people in the armed forces. Young men doing national service military training sometimes joined the Bible study groups I ran in the camps, even if only to get away from the routines of army life. Thailand was apparently not the only place where conscripts were open to the gospel. From the Bulgarian publisher of the *Basic Christianity Series* came the following email. 'We are happy to share with you that in

our church we have a new young brother who was saved through your book *The Christian's Faith*. He is at present doing his national service training in the army.'

Nigeria is a place where anything might happen. A local evangelist wrote to us about a woman who had a spectacular conversion 'through the *Bridgeway Bible Commentary* that a sister read to her. She is from a non-Christian home, but within the same month she witnessed to her mother and father and both of them also are now converted, baptised and in the church.'

A man in India wrote likewise of a woman converted through reading the *Bridgeway Bible Commentary* and other material. She was a Muslim, but the books helped her to understand the Bible and find Jesus Christ as her Saviour.

The man went on to say that she was now reading the *Bridgeway Bible Dictionary*, which she was 'studying minutely with a thirst to know the truth.'



The Christian's Faith, Bulgarian

God is doing amazing things, often far more than we in Western countries are likely to expect. Many believers in difficult countries have a faith that is beyond our experience. That was certainly the case with an Indian man who once wrote, 'I know your books and how good they are and I want you to evangelise the Presidents of North and South Korea by sending these books to them. So I am sending with this letter 40 rupees [little more than a dollar]. Please pray for the efforts of uniting both Koreas, and for the President of North Korea to receive the world's greatest gift.'

Radio and internet

One never knows the extent of blessing through radio broadcasts, though letters from listeners at least give some indication. From Serbia came the following testimony (translated) from a listener of Orthodox Church background who came to Christ through hearing a serialised version of the Serbian *Basic Christianity* books and then reading the books sent to her. 'I read the *Basic Christianity* books slowly. It is necessary to think deeply about what is written. If every person would come alongside the Bible, also read the *Basic Christianity* books, others too would believe.' This encouraging response led to a further series of broadcasts based on the books, this time in the Macedonian language.

The Serbian broadcasters then asked permission to use the text from another Bridgeway series, the five pictorial books, as a series of radio talks. They also extracted selected portions for publication in their magazine and promoted the books to students around the nation.

In Pakistan also an evangelist serialised the *Basics* books in radio broadcasts. In Thailand a radio-based ministry serialised the books in a set of cassette tapes for use in remote regions.

A broadcaster in Nigeria, though not serialising the books, made an offer to send the books to listeners as a follow-up to an interview he conducted with me on air. Months later, when I was back in Australia, he wrote with much enthusiasm (too much, I suspect) to say that 'sixty persons were converted through the messages and inspiration drawn from the books.' Some years later he wrote about further conversions, which, while having no direct link with my books, demonstrate the response to the gospel in regions with large Muslim populations. 'In the past six months, eighty-four Muslims across our outreach areas have given their lives to our

Lord Jesus. Five of them are already undergoing theological training at our college here to prepare them to outreach to their own people.'

From another state in Nigeria came news of similar openness among Muslims. 'I gave one Agatu version of *Basic Christianity* to my uncle who is a Muslim and he received it with joy. Other Muslims are demanding for these books too. The Lord is greatly to be praised. We put some questions at the back of these books when we printed them, and I have prepared keys for people who check answers. This is very rewarding.'

Our books are also freely available on the web. We have not heard of anyone finding the Saviour through the Bridgeway website, but we hear of good responses to other Christian websites. An Arabic website reports that 7% of its 15,000 hits per month are from Saudi Arabia. Muslims, denied access to direct information from Christians, find the web helpful, provided they can keep their activity hidden from other Muslims. Another Arab initiative allows people to download the Arabic Bible to mobile phones. Also, Muslim enquirers to TV and radio programs can receive replies as text messages on their mobile phones.

Various religions

Among the more unlikely letters from evangelists using our books was this one from Ghana: 'We are Jesuits and love the Word of God. We show Christian films and distribute Bibles, Christian books, magazines and preaching tapes to those who come to our place. After that, we preach the Word of God, but recently we received more people so that our Christian materials we distribute to them aren't sufficient. So we ask you please if you can send us Bibles, preaching cassette tapes, magazines and Christian films to show them, plus *Bridgeway Bible Dictionary* and *Bridgeway Bible Commentary* to use as we preach, because we want to surmount Satan's work.'

A year later the same Jesuit preacher wrote, 'The books have been a beneficial help to us for the evangelism work, especially the *Commentary* and *Dictionary*. We have been using them as well as the other books for winning many souls for Christ. We are now preparing preaching cassette tapes to share to the new repentance people for them to know what salvation means. At times we win some souls but suddenly we lose them because they don't get the understanding of salvation. So we thank you for your contribution towards God's work, and for using your resources to boost the morals of Christian living.'

We heard also of quantities of our books being sent to Goa from India (where they are published in English and several other languages), because many Catholics in Goa were coming to Christ. Elsewhere came news of Hindus and Muslims being saved. From Kenya we heard, 'I thank you for extending the gospel to Hindus and Muslims throughout our community by the help of these Bridgeway books and the Bibles you sent.'

Another in Kenya wrote, 'I have witnessed many being converted and joining the church after going through some of your books. May the mighty God continue to shower his blessings upon you and may you continue to shine as the brightness of the firmament as you turn many to righteousness.' From a church in Zimbabwe came the news, 'Through your books, twenty young people began to seek the Lord. One couple was converted from Islam.'

From Lesotho, Zambia, Ghana and the Philippines we have received letters speaking of 'changed lives' through non-Christian people responding to the gospel as they read the *Basic Christianity* books, often in conjunction with audio tapes, videos or the *Jesus* film. Even in French-speaking countries such as Central African Republic, the books are tools in the proclamation of the gospel. 'These books are greatly appreciated by the brothers as they go about their evangelism and pastoring. Many read

English and can profit from your books. Last month teams went to Mbaiki where we witnessed the tearing down of the walls of darkness. We baptised fifteen converts.'

A university lecturer in China who came to Christ is now engaging in bold evangelism on campus. Regarding the *Basic Christianity Series* he wrote, 'I am using the five small books as textbooks to teach students the elements of Christian faith. Most of them are interested in learning English rather than Christianity, but I am sure that these books will lead them to know the truth and God's love. Let's pray together so that more and more people will come to Jesus Christ and the Lord's name will be glorified.'

Australasia also

The English edition of the *Basic Christianity Series* was written in the context of local evangelism around suburban Australia (that is, it was not an attempted translation from the original Thai edition). It therefore should not be surprising to hear of the *Basics* books being a channel through which people in the West hear the gospel and make a response. A person in New Zealand sent us the story that follows.

'The interest in the *Basic Christianity* books is most encouraging. I gave *The Christian's Faith* to an elderly Maori lady who is a keen Christian at our church, and she was so delighted she got another to give to a niece she has led to the Lord. Then her Mormon sister came to stay with her and got so interested in the book that she packed it in her suitcase to take home! She has led more adult members of her extended family to the Lord and asks for full sets plus extras of *The Christian's Faith*. We also gave different books to three women who were baptised at our church. One was seventy years old and seldom reads, but she was excited to find she understood her book and has read it three times! She's asked for the rest of the set.'

Even in our own suburban street in Brisbane we saw unexpected results through the *Basic Christianity Series*. Gae had befriended a widow who was experiencing some difficulties after her husband's death. Though a Catholic, she was not attending church, but Gae had lots of talks with her and left her *The Christian's Faith*, followed by others in the *Basics* series.

The woman was drawn in by what she read and soon asked for more books to give to her offspring. Among these were a granddaughter and her partner, who were living together with their own children plus one or two from previous relationships. As they read the books they became convicted that they were not living aright and should get married, but told the grandmother, 'Only if the person who wrote those books will marry us.' They lived in Victoria, two thousand kilometres south from us, but drove up with their children and had some valuable time with Gae and me. They listened to all we had to say and went away with plenty to think about, along with a Bible and some more Bridgeway books.

Some time later, they phoned from Victoria to say that whatever had happened to them as a result of their visit, they were now changed people. They were trusting in Jesus. In due course they came back to Brisbane to be married, and then returned home to Victoria. Years later, when in Victoria, I visited them and was pleased to see their commitment to the Word of God, prayer, witness and the church.

Unknown outcomes

With more than a million of our books scattered around the world, it is not possible to know how many people find salvation through them. Typical of the letters that bring us encouragement are the three that follow, one from each of our main areas of service, Africa, Asia and the Pacific.

A man in Cameroon wrote, 'What you are doing you may not know, but it is very good in the eyes of God and you will know when all of us enter heaven. If you give somebody something without Jesus Christ, you have done nothing with that person, but

if you give Jesus Christ before any other thing, that will be very good forever. I know you have done a mighty work for me and others around me with these books, and I have nothing to give you now, but my Father in heaven who is the gardener will bless you in wonderful way.'

From Muslim Pakistan we received encouraging news from a man who operates a book van. 'These lovely books are very quickly sold through our ministry. I go to the market among non-Christians and sell from our book van. There are many from a non-Christian background who have become Christians through the books I distribute. God has given me an extremely good ministry.'

An elder in Tonga, a nation of churchgoers who need to be born again, had faith that the simple presentation of the gospel would bring a change. 'You may not be aware of how worldwide are the blessings of your books but they make the gospel penetrate into all levels of our society. You may not get to them all directly, but the clarity of the messages and the facts of the words are due to the books that you wrote. Who knows, that many will surprise you in heaven for they got to know the Saviour by the simple and clear message.'

Among children

Through the decades of the 80s and 90s, Gae had a very fruitful ministry among children in Australia and, through the children, we reached the parents and families. We built a church largely from converts who came from relationships established through children in play groups, Sunday school and religious education in schools.

Our international ministry, however, was rarely concerned directly with children. Bridgeway does not produce children's books, though we collect used children's books and teaching manuals to send to needy countries. We also send Bridgeway books as resource materials to those working with children. This opened our eyes to a world of high risk and high opportunity that otherwise we knew little about.

A turbulent world

While Sunday schools and other children's ministries may be in decline in the West, they are growing elsewhere. Many countries of the developing world have high birth rates and low average incomes, which means that many children grow up in poverty, with little education, few prospects for a worthwhile vocation and the possibility of finishing up as street kids, child soldiers, prostitutes, criminals or slaves. HIV/AIDS continues to create millions of widows and orphans – over 34 million African children under the age of fifteen have lost at least one parent. Famine devastates entire regions, war wrecks one country after another, corruption makes the poor even poorer and government mismanagement increases the hardship for people who have already had more than their share of suffering.

Slavery, otherwise referred to as people trafficking, has increased alarmingly in many countries. The United Nations estimates that one million human beings are trafficked across international borders annually and many millions more are sold into slavery within their own countries. Bonded child labour is rampant.

When we live in a country of peace and prosperity, we find it hard to believe statistics about the plight of people in other countries. We might wonder why it is that 125 million children in the world today will never go to school, but we fail to understand that in many countries education is not free, not even in state-operated schools. Parents cannot afford to pay school fees, quite apart from the associated costs of books and clothes. Across Africa the average number of years a child spends in school is three and a half. Forty per cent of children are unlikely to receive any formal education at all.

In South Sudan, nine out of ten school-age children are not in schools. In Kinshasa, the capital of war-devastated Congo, 20,000 children live permanently on the streets. In Mumbai, India, the figure is 100,000. In Pakistan only twenty-five per cent of children go to school, and exploitative child labour affects more than six million. In Afghanistan, the Taliban use children to raid across mine-infested fields in advance of their armed forces. In the hill tribes of Myanmar, the government rounds up children along with men and women to



Myanmar: vulnerable orphans rescued

provide it with a free workforce for dubious development projects in remote regions. In Brazil, seventy per cent of child deaths result from street violence. In Colombia, one-third of the 20,000 guerrilla fighters are children.

Christian influence

Liberia, in West Africa, is one country where Christian ministry had an impact on children who suffered from the devastation of war. Through the years of civil war, Bridgeway managed to maintain a supply route for books to Scripture Union in Liberia, even when local staff were forced to flee for refuge into neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire. When a peace accord was reached and my friends were back in Liberia, one of them wrote of their determination to re-establish their work throughout the nation. They began in the capital, Monrovia, and moved out, one region at a time. 'One of our rooms at SU is now set aside for a small library,' he wrote, 'and more than forty churches come to use the resource material. You cannot imagine how much they want these books, because most of them have lost everything in the war.'

As in other Scripture Union centres across Africa, children's workers were among the main users of the resource centre. Various initiatives quickly saw children's work making an impact far wider than anyone might have imagined. One of these was an international program called KidsGames.

KidsGames, combined with TeenGames, created a partnership of eighty-four local churches and community groups. It attracted 20,000 children and teens, who served over 1,200 hours on compassion projects. They took gifts and sang songs to child amputees in hospital, took gifts to disabled children in an orphanage, did practical maintenance work in two refugee camps and gave clothes and shoes to each of seventy-four child soldiers who had been disarmed by the United Nations troops. The UN officials were so impressed that they asked these Christian young people to help with the counselling of child soldiers.

Costly exercises

A Sudanese friend wrote of a Christian ministry that was rescuing women and children who had been abducted from the Christian south by Arab traders from the Muslim north and sold as slaves. When some of these women and children found freedom through the slave-redemption ministry, most had frightful stories to tell. They told of the terrible abuse they had suffered and the executions they had witnessed when slaves resisted Islamic conversion or in some other way displeased their masters.

Not all Christian ministry, however, was such a departure from the conventional. A simple hand-washing program among children in Ghana reduced deaths from diarrhoea by forty-three per cent. A survey across Africa showed that diarrhoea killed more children than malaria, tuberculosis or HIV/AIDS, and what was needed was the provision of clean water and some health education to persuade people to use it.

Ghana is one of those countries where church attendance is high and to provide even a cake of soap for everyone was an expensive undertaking. To provide everyone with Bibles and books was even more difficult. One pastor wrote of his plan to help his church of 850 (of whom 300 were children and youth) with Bibles, books and health benefits. But his wider vision was 'to keep teaching the Word and helping others till every person on this planet hears and understands the gospel.'

Pictorial aids

Besides needing health care, children need picture books. A children's worker in Ghana wrote, 'I read one of your books called *Following Jesus* from a friend. I got to see for the first time places like Jerusalem, Nazareth, etc. I am wanting plenty more picture books to train children who are profoundly living in ignorance.'

It is not just children who need pictorial aids to help them understand the biblical world. My main reason for writing the five pictorials was to provide such material.

From elsewhere in Ghana a pastor wrote, '*Bible Lands, Then and Now* enables me to know things in the Bible I did not know before, for example, that where Abraham came from in ancient Babylonia is present-day Iraq.' An evangelist working among tribal people in remote villages of Côte d'Ivoire said, 'I use books like *Going Places with Paul* not just for my own preparation but for teaching others.' A church elder in Zambia said of other pictorials, 'My wife uses *Bible Lands, Parables and Pictures* and *Proverbs Today* in teaching the children. Now she wants the other two books. If you have any more picture books or maps, please do not hesitate sending them to my wife.'

Although the books were not written for children, we are encouraged to hear of people using them with children. As one man in Kenya put it, even if children cannot read English they can look at the pictures and so the Holy Spirit prepares what he called 'the fertile ground.'

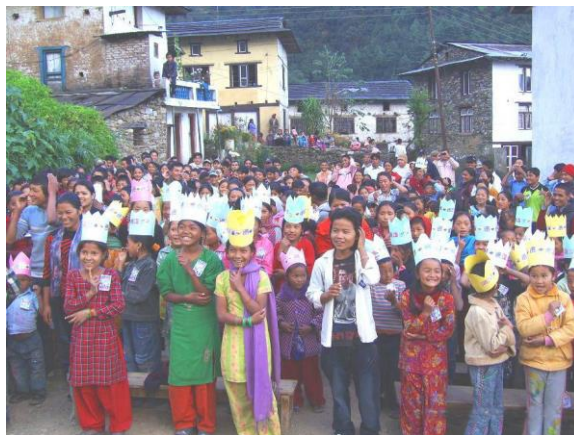
From Swaziland a man wrote of a Bible club he and his wife ran for children 6-18 years of age – quite an age range for one Bible club! After expressing appreciation for the books we sent, he added, 'On Saturdays we rent videos to play to kids attacked by HIV/AIDS. They have no clothes, have lost parents and need help.' A woman in Malawi appreciated the extra books we put in the carton: 'Thank you for the children's books, family books and the tapes of your preaching. Pastors and others borrow them to hear these wonderful messages. And the five pictorial books give us the privilege to know about Bible lands and make the Bible easier to understand. Praise the Lord for the support that Bridgeway is giving all over the world. We will never cease to pray for you.'

Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands are two Pacific region countries that appeal desperately to Australia and New Zealand for second-hand teaching aids, Sunday school lesson materials and manuals for religious education in schools. A children's worker in PNG wrote, 'We have been especially praying for children's material, and now God has wonderfully answered our prayers! The Bridgeway books are wonderful for our work, and I especially want to thank you for all the children's material you included, like flannel graphs, pictures and lessons books.'

A Solomon Islander wrote, 'In recent months I have travelled through twenty-one congregations doing children's classes and youth ministries. There is a deep hunger for the Word of God and a need for material that teachers can use.'

Equipping the workers

Among the largest children's ministries to which we send books is one in Nepal. After receiving more books, the leader of this ministry wrote, 'We have just had more training and workshop programs for nearly 200 children's workers, both in Kathmandu and remote country parts of Nepal, six places with from 23 to 35 in each place. The *Commentary* and *Dictionary* are playing a vital role in developing our Bible study and preparing our teaching and evangelistic material. We believe it is important for proper grounding in the Word of God to teach the children. After each training we have a festival with children, and these trainees use their experience. In the last six places mentioned, we had 100 to 200 children each time. Many families came to the Lord



Children's festival, Nepal

because their children believed first and they became the witness to the family . . . We take the books also to training in Bhutan, where many understand English.'

A ministry based in Poland operates a similar training program, this time in countries of the former Soviet Union. Across twenty-eight countries where generation after generation of children grew up knowing little or nothing of the Lord Jesus, this ministry now has more than 250 full-time workers and hundreds of volunteers. There is a requirement that all workers have experience in their own churches and, if possible, in Bible schools before doing the leadership training courses.

Not all those working with children, however, see the urgency of evangelism. A person in Bosnia and Herzegovina complained that churches often saw children's ministry as playtime rather than a time when children receive a spiritual foundation, find salvation and grow in Christ. When a friend in Jamaica read this in one of our *Worldnews* reports, he wrote, 'Many churches here are in the same position as those you mention in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Children's ministry is not given the serious attention it deserves in this country. Because of the freedom we have (the Bible is a required text book in the elementary schools), we have taken things for granted. Although Christianity is the dominant religion in Jamaica, we see a steady increase in the visibility of Muslims. Even more disturbing is the fact that the church does not see what is happening.'

By contrast, most churches in Africa have a sense of urgency in evangelising children and are thankful for whatever help they can get. From Cameroon a children's



Bible club for children, Cameroon

worker wrote, 'Each of these Bridgeway books is a blessing and has come at a time that Cameroon needs them. Apart from helping the teachers in our Bible clubs, they are a great blessing to young men and women in Cameroon Youth for Jesus.'

Another in Cameroon said, 'Ever since I started using the *Bridgeway Bible Commentary* and *Dictionary* from our children workers' resource library, my Bible study life has never been the same. I now enjoy Bible

study and understand a lot of things I didn't understand before. My humble request is for more copies for the library and for any other books, lesson material or study aids you can send. If I could have my own Bridgeway set, that would be wonderful.'

Gratitude, faith and hope

Population explosion is still a serious problem in many parts of the world. It seems when we visit some developing countries that there are children everywhere. After a while we get used to the large numbers that some churches reach through their various ministries, but a special children's outreach in Burundi was exceptional.

An earlier chapter mentioned a local family whose house had been destroyed in the war. We had sent them some money to get the rebuilding under way and in response the man wrote, 'We are amazed how God is fulfilling his promises to answer some of our private prayers. He is a good God! We are so blessed by your love in action in connecting us with friends to help us by sending goods, gifts and books, and now helping us rebuild our destroyed house. It seems like we are dreaming! We have no words to express our joy to know that one day we will live in our own house again. My wife was sometimes crying for long minutes to think after ten years of losing our house that we will get it back. We thank you that we received the first lot of money. Will you

permit that we give a tithe to the Lord? God has done great things through your kindness and those you got helping us. We want to show him our thankful heart.'

I replied that just as we were stewards of what God gave us, so now they were stewards of what God had given them. It was thoughtful of them to write, but they did not need our permission concerning their own tithes and offerings. A short time later he told us what they had done. 'The tithe we gave to Noah's Boat project of our Sunday school. It helped a kids outreach that gathered 1,562 children. Our average Sunday school attendance was only 385 at the beginning of this year and we realise now the need to do more outreach.' Later again he wrote, 'We are now between 1,100 and 1,600 children every Sunday. Our only problem is lack of materials to train teachers and teach such big numbers who are attending. God is sending this revival to tomorrow's citizens of our wounded nation. Will this be the answer to the non-ceasing circle of violence for more than thirty years?'

In their distress these people have hope – for themselves and for their nation. In spite of its present suffering, their nation might have more hope than ours; for if the children of today are not reached for Christ, there is little hope that the nation of the future will know what it means to be Christian.

What eye has not seen

As we talk with people of various countries, at home and abroad, we see how difficult it is for them to understand features of a country they have never seen. We have sometimes been amused to see children in a foreign country overcome with fear when they see a white person for the first time. Some run away screaming, while others stand transfixed. Even among adults, where we are not quite the same objects of interest, features of our way of life are impossible to explain adequately.

The same applies to those who live in the West when they hear about people and places elsewhere. The reality is that, no matter where we come from, we usually must see for ourselves before we can understand. And even then our understanding might be superficial.

First time in a city

When, back in the 1960s, a Lao Christian had to make a trip to Bangkok for hospital treatment, a missionary friend in Laos asked that we help him through. He had never been out of Laos, and Bangkok can be a frightening place for anyone who has never before seen a big city. So, besides taking him to hospital, I took him to see some particularly unusual things.

One of these things was an escalator and another a lift (elevator). He was not just dumbstruck; he was dead scared. In those days, escalators were a novelty even in Bangkok and had a set of instructions in word and picture to show people how to use them. Some shopping centres had the same kind of instructions where sit-down toilets had been installed, so that people who had only ever used squat toilets might know what to do. These strange pieces of equipment were often damaged by people who used them for squatting instead of sitting.

While we might be surprised that people are not familiar with things that are everyday to us, people in other countries are just as surprised that we are inept at other things – such as taking a bath in the open behind a simple wrap-around cloth, sitting cross-legged comfortably, eating neatly with fingers instead of cutlery, or weaving a hat from a palm frond.

My Lao friend met his most mind-boggling piece of equipment when we went to see the loading of a large ship at the Port of Bangkok. After talking my way on to the ship, I took the man around the passageways and multiple decks. ‘It’s like a building,’ he said, never having seen any larger boat than the shallow-draft vessels on the Mekong River. What stumped him completely was the sight of a Land Rover being lowered into the cavernous hold of the ship, ‘like a pineapple being put into a basket.’

As others see it

Back in Brisbane, we often have international visitors stay with us. After picking them up at the airport, we might have travelled only a kilometre or two when the expressions of surprise begin. A man from India wanted to know if it was a public holiday, because there seemed to be no people anywhere. Some friends from Thailand wanted to know how we kept the streets so clean – and they too wondered where all the people were. A person from Myanmar asked, ‘Why is everything so quiet?’ Then her eyes nearly popped out when she saw a woman driving a bus. But then our eyes nearly popped out the first time we landed in Asia and saw women labourers digging up the street, women coolies carrying buckets of wet concrete and women farmers cutting sugar cane.

When people come from countries where citizens have limited freedoms and live in constant fear, they find it difficult to understand our freedom of movement. Unlike

them, we do not need permission to travel within our own country, we are free to travel outside the country, we have a right to a passport and we do not have to surrender that passport as soon as we return home. Even as we walked around our city centre, one of our visitors repeatedly asked things like, 'Are we allowed to go here?' or 'Don't they even search us?'

On the other hand, we have some pieces of officialdom that have our visitors bursting with laughter; for example, preschool children wearing crash helmets while riding tricycles in a park. To them, our country has a lot of restrictions that theirs does not. People here are not allowed to burn rubbish, cut down trees, smoke inside buildings, wrap food in newspaper or seat more than a specified number of people in a car.

All our visitors are dumbfounded when they learn of our welfare system which provides citizens with an unbelievable range of benefits. But they are dumbfounded again when they hear the amount we pay in taxes. Most of their countries have no reliable way of collecting taxes or policing the system. As a result, only a minority pay taxes and the amount they pay is minimal. Because they see little return for what they pay and have no hope of receiving social benefits from the government, they have little incentive to cooperate in paying taxes. There is no goodwill on either side and so the standard of living for most people spirals downwards.

Skills and machines

People in the developing countries are usually skilled with their hands, whereas we have become reliant on gadgets and machines. Sometimes our visitors wonder if Australians are capable of any skilled handiwork at all. At roadworks they see hardly a pick or shovel anywhere – or workers, for that matter; just machines. Even public garbage collection, itself a service unheard of in some parts of the world, does not appear to use human beings. A mechanical arm picks up the bin and tips its contents into a truck. Carpenters use a mechanical saw instead of a handsaw, and instead of a hammer they use a gun that shoots nails into the wood. But, in the eyes of one visitor, the ultimate in laziness was a machine that blew leaves off a path. We are too lazy even to sweep! To another we seemed not to have the energy to brush our teeth, but relied upon an electric toothbrush to do the work for us.

It is worth pointing out that the visitors I refer to are not simpletons. Some are tertiary educated and hold degrees in a variety of subjects, but their studies in history or zoology do not touch on such things as nail guns and electric toothbrushes – just as tertiary educated people in our country might not know that in other countries people make kitchen utensils out of truck tyres and build houses from beaten-out oil drums.

The sea and the sky

Those of us who live near the sea have no idea what an experience it is for people from landlocked countries to see the sea for the first time. The Lao friend referred to above came from a landlocked country and entered Thailand by crossing the Mekong River, which, being almost a kilometre wide, was the largest expanse of water he knew. When I took him to see the sea, he could not understand why he could not see



Household items made from truck tyres

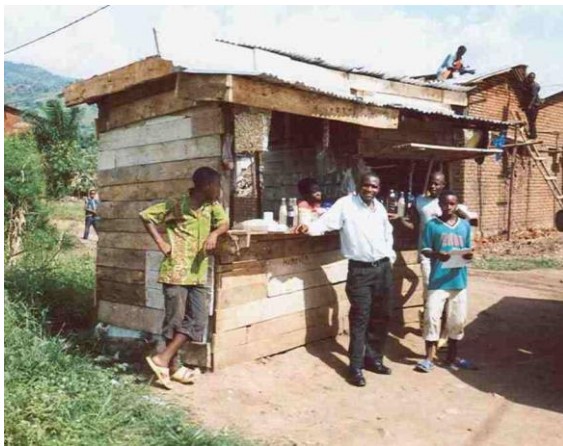
the opposite bank. What he found hard to grasp was that this was not a river and there was no opposite bank. The notion of water just stretching on and on was beyond him.

I have met people from other landlocked countries who had never before seen the sea, but pictures and better education had prepared them for their first sighting. Even so, the unrestrained exclamation of delight I heard from an African woman when she first saw the sea was something I shall never forget. She was well educated and well informed, and had seen the sea from the plane on her way to Australia, but she was totally unprepared for her first sight of the sea close up. We drove over the crest of a hill and there, right in front, was a beautiful seascape. She squealed with delight, clapped her hands and shouted praises to the Lord. She even took a bottle of sea water back home to show her family. 'Imagine swimming in salty water!'

The same person expressed surprise at her first experience of air travel a few days earlier. She expected to have a sensation of the wind rushing past, but there was no sense of movement at all. That sort of impression is hardly surprising. What was more surprising was the understanding of a person in another country who expressed the hope that when we flew home to Australia, it would not rain, because she did not want us to get wet. We then discovered that she thought the plane we were to fly in was like those she had seen on a children's merry-go-round – two children per plane and no roof. It was difficult to convince her of the size of an international passenger plane, because all the planes she saw in the sky looked just as small as those on the merry-go-round.

Views in the West

This lack of understanding of unfamiliar things is not confined to people in underdeveloped countries. All of us, wherever we live, interpret what we hear in terms of what we already know. When talking to an audience at home, I might talk about a



'I own a mixed goods shop on the road into town'

bus, a train, a boat, a school, a hotel, a hospital or a coffee shop in another country, but most hearers are incapable of understanding the picture I have in my mind as I talk. This is no fault of theirs. What is frustrating is people's assumption that the way of life in the West is normal for the human race, when in reality it is the exception.

When I was talking in my home town about the shortage of paper in schools around Africa, one person suggested we solve the problem by giving each child a computer. Apart from the fact

that computers increase rather than reduce the usage of paper, the houses that many of the children came from had no electricity or other basic facilities that we consider normal – no curtains, floor coverings, toilets, garbage collection, books, toys or bicycles and only the barest of basic furniture. A computer for each child in one school would have amounted to more computers than in the entire region of a million people.

On one occasion when an African school teacher mentioned to an Australian audience the long distances she walked each day to and from school, a person beside me whispered, 'Doesn't she have a car?' I almost exploded. Have a car? She didn't even have a bicycle. As far as I knew, no one in her church of 300 people had a car either, and only half a dozen owned bicycles.

An unfeeling person once objected to my pleas on behalf of the poor of Africa by asking why they did not stop loafing and get a job. He could not grasp that jobs, in the sense of employment, hardly existed. Three-quarters of those able to work had no employment. They subsisted only by selling sticks of sugar cane, making small packets out of used paper, collecting scraps of metal, making shoes out of truck tyres, or walking between lines of traffic selling chewing gum, torch batteries, bottles of water or anything else they could lay their hands on.

My unsympathetic friend then accused the governments of corruption and ineptitude (which was largely true) and said the people should get rid of them. But how can they do that? In most countries there is no workable mechanism to change the government. We in Australia can change the government through the ballot box, but in three-quarters of the world's countries that is not possible. They might have elections, but the elections are a farce. There is little freedom to protest and nothing that most citizens can do to change the system. Power comes out of the barrel of a gun, and those who control the army can do whatever they choose.

In most countries of the developing world, bribery affects every facet of life, and those who are lower in the social scale are the ones who suffer most. They are disadvantaged and exploited, with no way of getting the most elementary social justice and no apparent way of improving their lot. It is little wonder, then, that many countries are torn apart with uprisings, terrorism, assassinations and civil war. People who are angry and frustrated see no other way to bring about change. We might not approve of what they do, but we should at least try to understand the world in which they live. We might also use whatever means are available to us not just to help the needy one-on-one, but to influence the powerful in a way that will see God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven.

Growing churches

Although many in the West might not realise it, we are living in the period of greatest church growth since apostolic times. We are probably living also in the period of the church's greatest suffering, though this also is not evident in the West.

This suffering is not necessarily because of persecution. Many countries are pro-Christian but most people still suffer. The suffering comes through a variety of factors – poverty, war, natural disasters, lack of clean water, poor health services, anti-Christian aggression, corrupt governments – but the result is always severe hardship for most Christians. Other chapters in this book touch on these matters, but this chapter looks at the church's growth, in spite of the adverse circumstances. It is not a statistical analysis, but a random collection of examples from countries we deal with that illustrate the pluses and minuses of rapid growth.

The changing scene

Since the end of World War II and the dismantling of the colonial empires, there has been a revolution in world mission. It was during the 1970s that certain people in the West began to notice something happening that would alter the appearance of the church globally. Over the following decades the change became more noticeable, as the church worldwide changed from being predominantly Western to being predominantly non-Western. In many countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America the church is experiencing extraordinary growth.

A comment one hears, often from national church leaders within the growth countries, is that the church is a mile wide and an inch deep. Local Christians have enormous enthusiasm for evangelism and, with lots of people becoming Christians, others are easily inclined to jump on the bandwagon. But Jesus did not tell his followers to go and make converts. He told them to go and make *disciples*. Church leaders in these countries are aware of the dangers of a new nominalism if people look for a kind of fire-escape salvation without learning what commitment to Jesus Christ means. Besides this new nominalism there is a new syncretism, where people add a Christian veneer to traditional religious or cultural ideas and practices. Even prominent church figures have been caught engaging in immoral, occult and illegal activities. Some churches and TV programs have been taken over by a 'prosperity gospel' characterised by the pursuit of money, an abundance of prophetic promises and the promotion of miracles as a shortcut to achievement.

It is easy for us in the West to look at these problems and become cynical about reports of rapid growth. In contrast to the church in some countries being a mile wide, the church in the West might be only a quarter of a mile wide – but, alas, it also is only an inch deep. Nominalism and syncretism in the West are far more widespread than many will acknowledge. Evangelical churches might have a healthy history of genuine Christianity, but in today's world show little understanding of what the gospel is or the demands it makes. Syncretism occurs not because Christians absorb elements of pagan cultures but because they have never abandoned elements of their own culture. They add a Christian veneer to the norms and values of a secular society.

Nothing in my ministry in more than sixty countries convinces me that churches in the growth countries are less mature than those in the West. They may not be as sophisticated, but sophistication in matters of procedures and facilities has little to do with the maturity taught in the Bible. The church in some countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America may be a mile wide and an inch deep, but it has many deep channels spread across its width.

Examples from West Africa

The West African nation of Burkina Faso, though small in area, has a high population density. Almost half its 12 million people are Muslim, but occult practices, fetishism and idolatry are widespread. Nevertheless, the church has grown vigorously and about 20% of the population now calls itself Christian. But four-fifths of the Christians have no access to God's written Word, partly through illiteracy, partly through a shortage of Bibles and partly through a lack of money to buy them. The rapid growth in poor countries brings challenges to the church in wealthy countries.

One Christmas we received an enthusiastic, but honest, letter from a local evangelist in Nigeria. 'Here is my plan for the new year. I want to plant twelve churches in rural areas, one church each month. I believe that we are to fill the rural areas with the gospel of Christ as the waters cover the sea. This year we attempted to plant churches in eleven villages but have planted only five that are still standing. We have trained seven teachers to take up the newly planted churches.'

Nigerian missionaries are found all over West Africa – and in other parts of Africa as well. In the decade of the 1990s, one national mission planted churches among eighty previously unreached groups. Nationwide its number of churches increased from 3,600 to 8,000, with an average membership of 240. In neighbouring Benin, one Nigerian missionary was largely responsible for raising up forty-two local missionaries to work among twenty-five tribes in that country. Without wanting to speak only of his own work, he wrote, 'In another area, one local missionary has planted eighteen churches, three of which have now become missionary-sending churches.'

In Togo, Nigerians in one mission were training fifty locals a year to go out in cross-cultural ministry. Besides evangelising, they ran clinics to treat the sick and teach hygiene. One man wrote, 'We have drinking water projects, and have just finished digging a village well. We supplied the building materials and paid the workers, the village supplied the labourers, the men carried the bags of cement and bricks, the children gathered the sand, the women fetched water and cooked, and now everyone is happy. No longer will they go kilometres for drinking water.'

An annual report from a ministry in Ghana indicated that it operated Bible Clubs in 832 Junior Secondary Schools (13% of schools nationwide) and 532 Senior Secondary schools (93% of schools nationwide). In 105 evangelistic rallies, 30,919 students attended, of whom 5,079 responded to calls to trust Jesus Christ for salvation. In an additional 156 evangelistic rallies to reach first-year students, 25,494 turned up. New churches sprung up around the country and an increasing number of cinemas were recycled as worship centres. Almost every month the number of daily Christian programs on radio and TV increased.

But the writer of the report asked his fellow Ghanaians, 'Could this be no more than pseudo-revival? When there is real revival, people on the streets and on radio will be afraid to utter profanities lest they be smitten by divine wrath; people in business will be afraid to act unethically lest God's judgment fall upon them; believers will be so overawed by the presence of God that they will tremble in the streets and cry for mercy; the Holy Spirit will sweep across our cities and towns without sensationalist advertising; every shop will become a pulpit, every heart an altar and every home a sanctuary.'

Central regions

A local ministry we help in Central African Republic sent eighteen teams into various regions 'to mobilise churches to pray for the transformation of lives and communities.' They planted 150 churches in one and a half years and aimed at 250 the next year. They established ten Bible schools to ground converts in the Scriptures and prepare them for mission.

When I first became involved with the Christian Assemblies of Burundi (registered locally as the Community of Emmanuel Churches), they had forty-three churches. Two years later they had sixty-five, and a further two years later they had eighty-six. These churches are not small. Membership ranges from 200 to 2,000, and most new chapels are built to accommodate at least a thousand people. In neighbouring Rwanda, a decade after all Bible study leaders on university campuses were killed in the genocide, about one-quarter of all university students attend campus Bible study groups. Such growth, however, has not gone unchallenged. Both countries, nominally Catholic but with large Protestant minorities, have been targeted by Muslim missionaries who offer incentives to change religion. Consequently, Muslims have increased their numbers substantially in both countries.

This concern for practical aid to go hand-in-hand with evangelism is common in most needy countries. It was well demonstrated in this news received from Malawi: ‘In the last six months, besides planting three churches, we have helped the poor by covering seven unroofed houses with plastic and providing one hundred orphans with mosquito nets. We have helped one hundred starving families by distributing 5,000 kgs of maize, 2,500 kgs of beans and 2,500 kgs of salt.’

Zambians at work

A Zambian missionary in Mozambique wrote asking prayer for HIV/AIDS patients and orphans. ‘People are humbled by this disease. As the beauty of the body disappears, clothes no longer fit properly, friends disappear and eating with family becomes taboo. Then, desperation and hopelessness eats them up. Such are the people the Lord has been bringing in our way, but the gospel brings hope as we introduce them to salvation in our Lord Jesus Christ . . . We have fourteen weekly house groups where believers meet to pray and bring a neighbour each time. We have spent much time discipling cell group leaders. Our goal is to lead a soul to Christ each day . . . Reaching people with the gospel you see the intensity on their faces wanting to know more about what God says in his Word. People come along and get hooked on the Bible . . . On 14 January we witnessed seventeen believers baptised as followers of Christ.’

In October of one year, another Zambian evangelist, this one within his own country, wrote confessing to a degree of failure because he had finished planting only his second church that year. His goal had been three. Elsewhere in Zambia, an evangelist took a team into some rural areas, riding bicycles for more than 200 kilometres, preaching in many centres and seeing dozens respond to the gospel. He concluded his letter, ‘This trip had months of preparation, many roadblocks, rough riding on bicycles, many tyre punctures, sleepless nights with friendly mosquitoes, uncomfortable canoes for many hours and some very interesting accommodation. But then, if it was easy, everybody would be doing it.’



Evangelism team, Zambia

East Asia

Most people are aware of the amazing growth of the church in South Korea over the past fifty years. It is now the second largest missionary-sending nation, after the United States. But Bridgeway has little contact with Korea. The main country we send books to in East and South-East Asia is the Philippines, another country of extraordinary church growth.

In 1974 evangelical churches in the Philippines numbered about 5,000, but this number rose to 40,000 by the turn of the century. Inevitably, there is shallowness in some churches, but many have risen above this and responded to the call to 'go and make disciples.' As a result, the Philippines is now a significant missionary-sending nation. Even within their own country, Filipinos often tackle the tough areas. One local mission we help with books, confronting Muslim opposition on the troubled island of Mindanao, initiates evangelism in ten new centres each year. In most cases a church is operating within the year. The mission's Mobile School of Theology and Ministry, which moves around six strategic centres, prepares church leaders for new ministry. Each of the centres graduates from twenty to forty students a year.

Most of us are aware of the astonishing growth in China, where the Christian population is heading towards 100 million. Bridgeway's service to China is minimal, though some day one of the many enquiries about translation might result in our books being published in Chinese. The following 10-point summary, prepared by someone in China, gives a glimpse of what is happening. 1) Most colleges in China have a Christian fellowship. 2) Christian radio has a wide influence. 3) Bible schools are springing up across the country. 4) Christian books from overseas help supply the house churches. 5) International missions work in almost every major city. 6) Many young people are going into full-time Christian service. 7) Large numbers of Chinese studying abroad are turning to Christ. 8) Evangelists are moving out to the remote unreached regions. 9) Churches have a vision to reach the world for Christ. 10) Christians believe in the vital importance of prayer.

Vietnam might not be thought of as a country worthy of mention in a chapter dealing with church growth. It is among the world's toughest countries for local Christians. Like its neighbour Laos, it is a communist nation whose government associates Christians with its chief enemy, America. Following the lead of China, Vietnam recognises only the registered state-sanctioned churches. It opposes house churches and is vehement in persecuting the prominent Christian minorities among tribal peoples. But the underground church is growing. A common strategy is for believers to spread the gospel one-on-one and, when there are twenty believers in an area, to set up a worship point in a Christian's home. As numbers grow, the group divides to create a new house church.

Despite a government handbook to show officials how to harass Christians, local people are often sympathetic. This is mainly because of the help Christians give the needy, often in the form of medical aid. Through Christian compassion and witness, the underground church multiplies.

Something special in Myanmar

When Myanmar fell to a military takeover in 1962 (when it was still called Burma), it became the victim of an oppressive form of socialism which, mixed with the paranoia, superstition, brutality and corruption of the ruling junta, saw the country locked off from the rest of the world for the next thirty years. The country was like one huge prison, which maintained strict limits on the travel of people to or from the country.

During those years, some of my fellow-missionaries from Thailand made occasional but brief visits, partly to encourage a small church that met in a private home in the capital, Rangoon (now Yangon). In the 1990s, in an attempt to improve its image and bring in much-needed foreign currency, the government opened its borders to tourists. This gave us the opportunity to make the first of many trips to Myanmar, some of which feature in *A Different World*. The struggling church in the private home had by now grown to a thriving congregation of about 700, which in turn had planted dozens of other churches. At the time of writing, this church has more than seventy daughter churches, plus a range of other activities including radio broadcasts,

correspondence courses, a Bible institute and facilities to care for disadvantaged people.

When in Myanmar, sometimes I am able to preach in large churches and sometimes not, depending on the political climate. My last visit to the church just referred to happened to be on the second Sunday of the month, which, I discovered, was baptism Sunday – as it is every month. The baptisms were conducted in a tank beside the church, in full view of passers-by. The church, located on a main road, is unregistered, but its high profile is its protection. Government agents attend services to keep an eye on things and, because the political climate on this occasion was tense, I did not preach there – though I preached in some house churches. Fourteen people were baptised that day, which was about average, I was told. Sometimes there might be only half a dozen, other times as many as thirty, but always the baptisms followed months of Bible teaching for the new converts.

Not every church in Myanmar has such leadership and drive, but all over Myanmar the church is growing. Most Christians have their ethnic origins among the hill tribes, who are suspected of being anti-government and are the target for government-sponsored violence. But converts are coming increasingly from those who are Burmese by ethnicity (60% of the population) and Buddhist by religion (85% of the population). Bridgeway books have been published in ten of Myanmar's languages, including the national language, Burmese. They are also printed locally in English, entirely for the national market.

Hindus and Sikhs

India, which was among the first countries targeted as a 'mission field' at the birth of the modern missionary movement, is now an important missionary-sending country. In spite of the impression we might gather from militant Hindu nationalism and anti-conversion legislation aimed at Christians, the church is growing vigorously around India. In 1993 there were 12,000 national missionaries spread across 200 mission agencies, but by the year 2000 the numbers had grown to 44,000 missionaries and 440 mission agencies. The growth increases. One Indian ministry alone has now planted over 4,000 churches and has a further 5,000 groups on the way to becoming churches. It has more than fifty theological colleges.

In the early days of Bridgeway, India was the largest user of our books, but now that they are published locally in English and Hindi (along with five other Indian



Sikhs being counselled after a Punjab gospel service:

languages), our general rule is not to send in sponsored books. But we are still in regular contact with many friends in India and give particular attention to the northern states, which are less Christianised than those of the south. Of special interest is the Punjab, home state of the Sikhs, where there is a growing response to the gospel. One local mission has now started more than forty churches. The goal is to

have churches in each of Punjab's twelve districts and Christian workers in each of its 491 postcode areas.

A more fervently Hindu country than India is Nepal, where over the past fifty years the number of Christians has grown from fewer than thirty to an estimated half a million. This growth is not so much through the work of large missions and mainline denominations as through the outreach of individuals, small groups and local churches.

One evangelist friend, in his recent annual report, named four centres where he had planted churches during the year, each church now having from twenty to thirty baptised believers. 'Every week,' he said, 'we are preparing new believers for water baptism. Once a month we have a day of prayer and fasting.'

Other subcontinent countries

Earlier I mentioned a book van we help in Pakistan, one of several we send books to, and all report insufficient books to meet the demand. In Pakistan's volatile political climate and notwithstanding its notorious blasphemy laws, the church keeps growing. One book van is part of a wider ministry that brings aid to the disadvantaged, including schools for the poor and sewing classes for women. In addition, they run outreach campaigns every few months, which see up to a thousand in attendance and up to a hundred decisions for Christ.

In Bangladesh a program has been going on for ten years, and with some success, to ensure that at least one church has been planted in each of the country's 464 subdistricts and in each of its tribal groups. Poverty, illiteracy and a shortage of good leaders are among the difficulties that churches face. With more than half of Bangladesh's population being under the age of sixteen, there is a pressing need for children's and youth workers. There are hardly any full-time Christian workers on the nation's tertiary campuses.

Sri Lanka, a Buddhist country, is experiencing growth in the face of violence from a militant Buddhist group whose declared aim is to rid the country of Christians. Its followers, often led by Buddhist monks, have invaded churches, disrupted services and burnt down many church buildings. But Christians are not deterred from their goal of reaching the entire nation for Christ. One of our partners there, in thanking us for some books, said, 'We have 35,000 villages in Sri Lanka, and in 29,000 the gospel has not been preached. We must reach them all.'

Island nations

In the early days of the modern missionary movement, many of the world's island nations were evangelised. In some there was such a turning to God that they became outwardly Christian, but today most of these island nations need re-evangelising. Some enjoy a reasonable standard of living, but with it comes the problem of materialism that has weakened the church in the West. Others are beset with problems of social degeneracy, economic stagnation, political upheaval and racial tension. Most seem to be struggling with spiritual apathy.

Letters we receive from the Caribbean indicate that, although there are some lively churches, overall they are in need of revival. The same applies to the scattered islands of the Pacific. Of the smaller island nations, the main destinations for our books have been the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marianas, Kiribati, Tonga, Samoa and the Cook Islands, all of which cry out for a new injection of spiritual life. Some good things are happening among our partners in the larger nations of Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji, reflected in correspondence quoted in parts of this book.

Larger island nations such as Indonesia and the Philippines are mentioned elsewhere, but we do not want to forget the region's newest nation, East Timor. Still feeling the threat of its former master, Indonesia, it struggles to establish economic and political viability. The church also struggles, but the number of believers increases and reconstruction of church facilities moves ahead. We have been able to help with a few books.

The Indian Ocean islands of Réunion and Mauritius have large nominal Christian communities and, being economically better off than some others, buy our books rather than rely on sponsorships. The large island of Madagascar, near Africa, shares much of Africa's church growth but also shares its economic pain and gets occasional help from

us with books. The Comoro Islands, closer to Africa, and the Maldives, closer to India, are fervently anti-Christian Muslim nations and Christian books are not allowed.

How things appear

In the days of the Cold War, Communism was usually considered to be Christianity's most vigorous opponent. Today the focus has shifted to Islam. But, regardless of Islam's aggressive expansion, more Muslims have come to Christ in the past twenty or so years than at any other time in history. Many of these conversions are in the West or in Afro-Asian countries outside the region of the hardline Islamic countries. Since 1990, tens of thousands in the Central Asian Republics have turned to Christ, along with comparable numbers among Berbers in North Africa and Albanians in the region of the Balkans. The kind of Islam practised in some of these places is more cultural than religious, but conversions still create a climate of fear. Those of the Muslim majority do not like fellow-Muslims changing their religion.

Whereas many Christians in Western countries are fearful of Muslims, many Christians in Africa are fired up to reach them with the gospel. In fact, they seem fired up about reaching everyone. This evangelistic fervour is demonstrated in the large prayer services held around the continent. In 2004 more than 15 million Africans had simultaneous prayer services in rugby stadiums and other venues for the fourth annual Transformation Day of Prayer. Christians prayed for God's hand to be seen across the continent in dealing with spiritual failure, social instability, HIV/AIDS, drought and famine. This prayer initiative spread to most of Africa's fifty-three countries.

An example of the emerging dominance of African leadership was the 1998 Lambeth Conference of the global Anglican Church. When some European and American bishops wanted to permit the ordination of practising homosexuals, African bishops were the main ones to hold the line against them. Of 736 bishops registered at Lambeth, only 316 were from Europe, the US and Canada. Africa sent 224 and Asia 95.

When anyone mentions the international Anglican Church, our minds naturally drift towards England rather than, let us say, Nigeria. But on a typical Sunday morning, there are more Anglicans attending church in Nigeria than in Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand combined. A similar picture could be drawn for other denominations or groups. The average Christian in the world today is not a person of white European extraction but a darker skinned African, Asian or Latin American.

Nothing hidden

The Lord Jesus and his followers often used word pictures that spoke of light. Those who searched for the truth were seekers of the light, and those who hardened themselves against it remained in darkness. His followers, being those who had found the light, were to shine that light to others. They were not to keep their faith hidden, like a light kept under a tin can, and neither were they to engage in behaviour that we today would call shady. There was to be an openness about their lives, so that as they lived in the light of God's truth they would commend themselves to others as being transparent and straightforward. These characteristics of enlightenment, witness and openness are demonstrated in four markedly different cases that, for various reasons, left an impression on me.

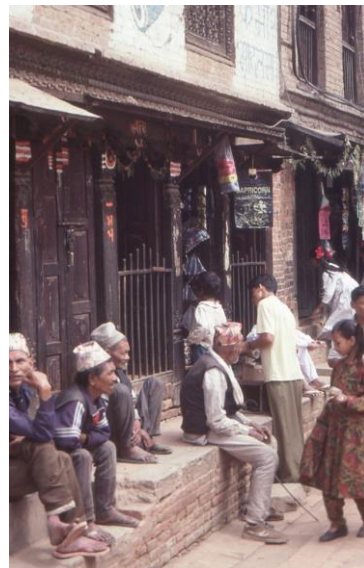
An evangelist in Nepal

The ancient town of Bhaktapur in Nepal is one of the most interesting places I have visited. The buildings, the way of life, the people, all are utterly fascinating and strikingly different from anything I have seen elsewhere. It is another world. But the sights of Bhaktapur could not compare with my time with a local evangelist and his wife.

This energetic couple had turned the top floor of their rented house into a church meeting place, where up to a hundred Christians crammed in for weekly worship. But this was only half the number they had led to Christ. The problem was that the believers were scattered in small numbers across more than a dozen villages, located as far as twenty kilometres away. The man spent most of the week away helping these Christians, but came home at weekends for the meetings of the church.

As we talked about their life and ministry, I learnt how this man became a follower of Jesus Christ. Ten years earlier, the number of Christians in Nepal was small. The church was not outlawed, but in the eyes of the government it was powerless, partly because of strict laws that prohibited conversion to Christianity and distribution of Bibles. At this time my friend was a university student but, more significantly, he was a doctrinaire Marxist-Leninist and a fervent Hindu nationalist. His ideological, political and religious beliefs produced within him a particular hatred of Christians. In those days most Christians met secretly, but if he learnt of a meeting he would disrupt proceedings by shouting insults, throwing stones, smashing windows or rallying anti-Christian demonstrators.

One thing this young zealot desperately wanted was a Bible. He wanted to arm himself with all the anti-Christian ammunition possible by finding places where the Bible denigrated Hinduism and promoted capitalism. He was passionate about what he saw as the religious arrogance and economic exploitation that Christianity promoted. But with Bibles scarce and under official suspicion, finding one was not easy. For month after month he kept trying, even using friends of friends to approach Christians and churches. Eventually, in a roundabout way, he managed to get a New Testament.



Bhaktapur, Nepal

With much enthusiasm he began reading. But the book was nothing like what he expected! He could not believe it when he read that Jesus announced blessings on the meek, the peacemakers and the merciful. Jesus told people to love their enemies and do good to those who hated them. He healed the sick and the diseased, even lepers. And while doing so, he reached out to the lepers and touched them – something unheard of for a middle-class Hindu. Jesus loved the poor and downtrodden, and when there was a conflict between the privileged and the oppressed, he always seemed to be on the side of the oppressed. He denounced injustice and was even the victim of injustice himself. In the end he was killed, despite his obvious innocence, but even in the course of the execution he prayed, ‘Father, forgive them.’

As the young man read the Gospels, the light of God began to penetrate his darkened soul. He kept reading and as he did so the Word of God continued to work. Here was something living, active and sharper than a two-edged sword. It pierced into the parts of his heart and mind where nothing else could pierce, and brought him to the foot of the cross in unconditional repentance. Through faith he found salvation in Jesus Christ and went on to become a well known figure in Nepal – not just an evangelist, pastor and teacher, but a trainer of other evangelists, pastors and teachers. Now, not wanting to be tied to a training school indefinitely, here he was, back in a needy town, doing grass roots evangelism.

The airport worker

After a time of ministry in Abidjan, capital of Côte d’Ivoire, I had arrived at the international airport, checked in my luggage and was heading in the direction of the sign that read ‘Departures’ when something caught my attention. I noticed a man sitting on a chair reading a book. His chair seemed not to be in any place in particular – not against a wall, not beside a doorway, not near any desk or booth – but the man was so engrossed in what he was reading that he seemed not to notice all the people walking by. From his uniform it was clear that he was an airport worker.

As I strolled past, I noticed that the book in the man’s hands was a Bible. It was a French Bible and, though I do not read French, I recognised that he was reading the Gospel of Matthew. I stood there a moment but, when the man did not notice me, I said, ‘I see you are reading the Bible.’ Slightly startled, he raised his head, looked straight into my eyes and, as his face lit up with a beaming smile, said, in forthright African English, ‘Yes, I am reading about Jesus, and he is my best friend.’ It might not sound to be a statement worth writing a story about, but for me it was a magic moment. The man had no idea who I was or where I had come from, but his spontaneous response and radiant smile would surely have made any stranger think.

I soon learnt that the man was on his tea break. As we talked, he told me how he became a Christian, how Jesus had changed his life and how he lived each day to know Jesus better and introduce him to others. It was tough, he said, because most people refused to believe, but Jesus was with him and gave him encouragement all day long.



Market and mosque, Abidjan

When our brief talk came to an end, I proceeded through the immigration and customs sections into the departure lounge. In one corner of the departure lounge, seated cross-legged on the floor, were five men, one of whom was reading a book to the other four. The book was the Quran (Koran) and Muslims are required to read it only in Arabic. The four listeners were Negroid Africans, not Arabs, so I doubt if they understood what the other was

reading. In fact, I doubt if they *were* listeners. They were hearing, but not listening. Certainly, nothing on their faces indicated that they were gaining anything at all from what was being read.

I know that the faces of people are not always a true indication of the reality of their religious beliefs, but on this occasion I could not help but contrast the face of the Christian man reading his 'holy book' with the faces of the other men reading theirs. It seemed to illustrate what Jesus said, 'I am the light of the world; the person who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'

My Ghanaian friend

For a number of years I had corresponded with a well known Christian leader in Ghana who had come to be an enthusiastic user and distributor of Bridgeway books. I gathered from our correspondence that he was a man of fairly robust personality and this was confirmed the first time I met him in the flesh.

The occasion was Amsterdam 2000, a nine-day residential congress hosted by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and attended by 10,000 people from 200 countries. He and I met the day before the congress opened, when all who were speakers of one sort or another gathered for briefings. From photos I had seen, I recognised him immediately – an imposing figure with his distinctive appearance and his flowing Ghanaian dress. Years later, he and his wife hosted me in Ghana, and the more I got to know him, the more I understood why he was so highly regarded, not just in Ghana but in many other countries across Africa.

With 10,000 participants at the congress, one's chances of bumping into acquaintances were not great. I was therefore delighted when I happened to meet him again a few days later. We were talking together in one of the concourses when we saw James Packer and another person approaching. This was the great Dr J. I. Packer, possibly the leading theologian of the age, author of some of the Christian world's best known books and a plenary speaker a few days earlier on the topic, 'The content of the gospel.' On seeing him approach, my friend said, 'Just a minute, I want to talk to this man.'

Without any appearance of shyness, but also without any suggestion of self-importance, my Ghanaian friend stood in front of Dr Packer, excused himself and said something along the lines, 'Thank you for your address the other day, but what we need in Africa these days is more than just straight theology. We need *applied* theology. Africa is full of social and political problems, like poverty, injustice, HIV/AIDS, and we need a theology that addresses these problems. There is slavery in Africa, literal and economic. The world thinks the slave trade has been eradicated but people are still being trafficked, everywhere. And there is economic slavery. Western countries follow policies that will keep African countries in economic slavery for ever, because the West controls the system that keeps themselves on top and the rest underneath. The Christian message must have something to say about these things.'

My friend did not unburden himself of all this in an unbroken monologue as my account might suggest. James Packer, listening graciously, nodded his head at each pause with comments like 'Yes,' 'I see what you're saying,' 'Quite so,' 'That is something to think about,' and concluded with, 'Well, thank you for that. I'll certainly give it some thought.' In all honesty, Dr Packer had already given those things 'some thought,' because he was a senior figure in an institution specifically set up to address such issues. My friend knew that too, but he could not pass up the opportunity to speak to an influential person.

While this dialogue was taking place, I stood by silently, not quite knowing where to look. Bystanders quickly gathered, even though the entire event lasted only a few minutes. Two things struck me. One was this Ghanaian man's natural, uninhibited approach. There was no swagger, no bluster, nothing know-all or smart-aleck in his

words or manner. The other was James Packer's grace and humility. He listened carefully and made no attempt to defend his sermon or dismiss the matters as not being within the scope of his brief.

A friend of mine who lectures in a top theological college in Australia once said to me that most of the 'big name' speakers who visited the college were just like Dr Packer – approachable, humble, generous. He then went on, 'It's people on my level we have trouble with.'

A converted Orthodox priest

Among the people in Ethiopia who made an impression on me is a man named Mehari, who was formerly a priest in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church – which is the national church and is regarded as being anti-evangelical. After his conversion and subsequent theological training, Mehari established a ministry to the populace in general that over the next fourteen years planted 52 churches. From there he set up a new ministry to evangelise specifically among the clergy of the Orthodox Church. In his own words, 'We give biblical education and study seminars to all who want to know the Word of God, plus spiritual education to help people become disciples of Jesus. We teach and train evangelists, but always so that they engage in holistic ministry, serving whole people in family and community needs.'

One of Mehari's first projects was to translate and publish *Let the Bible Speak for Itself* so that the candidates he trained as fellow workers would 'know how to understand and teach the Scriptures.' Teaching the Bible was at the centre of his methodology, because there was widespread ignorance of the Bible among the Orthodox clergy. Many did not even own a Bible. In one letter he wrote, 'At one gathering for an Ethiopian Orthodox Church celebration, there were 135 clergymen, but among these only seven had Bibles at their home. It is amazing. They are leaders of their followers but they do not even have a Bible in their house. I have now delivered one hundred Bibles to such men and advised them to read these Bibles themselves and to their local churches.'

Ethiopia has 20 higher Orthodox monasteries, more than 160,000 clergymen and over twenty million Orthodox Church members. In one periodic report, Mehari said he had recently reached another 377 traditionalist clergymen personally with the gospel and was in the process of training twenty-three key workers for a special year-long evangelistic campaign. With the first half dozen who 'accepted Christ as Saviour,' he wondered whether they would persevere in the faith or turn back to the old ways. To his delight, not only did they stand firm, but they spread the truth of the gospel to their parish churches. They admitted they did not know enough of the Bible to lead the churches effectively, so Mehari's work multiplied as he pushed on to equip this group with biblical knowledge.



Worshippers arriving, Ethiopian Orthodox Church

And so the work progressed. In one centre after another, Mehari broke through the barriers to start Bible study groups and training classes, though always at high risk, as the hierarchy would not tolerate this intrusion into their territory. They had a vested interest in 'salvation by works' and resented Mehari's preaching of 'salvation by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ.' In spite of being banned in certain centres and suffering opposition and setbacks in others, the work has kept growing. More than a

hundred converted clergy are now preaching the gospel, making disciples and ministering holistically to their communities.

In some cases, when a priest began to preach salvation by grace and not by works, he could be shut down by a more senior priest and forced to flee. In other cases the priest's parents might reject him, or his in-laws might try to persuade his wife to leave him. We have received several lengthy and colourful accounts of preachers being put on trial in front of the church, sometimes resulting in excommunication, sometimes in acquittal, and sometimes in the intervention of police. Some men have been fined, but others released without charge; some have been reconciled to their senior ecclesiastical officials, but others driven away. Tension and hostility remain, but Mehari's brave work goes on, bringing hope and life to thousands who otherwise would never have heard the gospel.

Where is the world going?

The above four examples come from widely differing circumstances and raise different questions. In general, people in difficult countries are remarkably uncomplaining. Everything for them is difficult, but they just get on with life. Occasionally, however, we receive distressing letters as Christians try to cope with the injustices and imbalances in the world. Here is part of a letter one Ethiopian Christian sent me.

'I would like to ask you a question, and that is, Where is the world going? Big organizations, for instance United Nations, always promise the best but the result is going to the contrary. I don't want to blame only UN, but look at my own country. The business sector including basic things for survival like food is in the hands of non-Christians and they are doing as they want, daily increasing prices so my people cannot make a living. But in 2 Corinthians 8 it talks about using resources on equity basis to make things equal that are not. People today are becoming greedy more than any other time I read about in the Bible and world history. Had the resources been in the hands of Bible-believing Christians, things would have been brought to the right track. Things are in the hands of those who kill human beings as wild animals, tell lies and commit crimes without conscience. We should pray to God to change this situation.'

Another Ethiopian wrote similarly. 'Let me tell you one thing. We have arable land and manpower but we are stricken again and again with drought. Many people left the country, many girls left to be maidservants in the Middle East, where the cheapest labour is Ethiopians. No job, no hope. Why? Why? For Western people the cause for many deaths is over-eating; here, hunger. Also HIV/AIDS and malaria. As Christians we pray regularly but nothing happens; for many people their home is the street. No job, no hope every single day, the price of food surges at alarming rate. I read about

Japan that two million tonnes of rice is surplus, they throw away. At this moment many people here cry. I don't understand what is happening in our world.'

A pastor in Zimbabwe wrote, 'Every day I wonder what is happening to the religious world. It is like confusion is piling daily. Why exactly did Christ die? Was it to make us materially rich? Was it to be physically healthy? Prosperity types of preaching are bombarding us



Zimbabwe Christians working on their church building

from all angles, saying that being materially poor or unhealthy is a sign of spiritual poverty. This is affecting spirituality, as many people now worship God in pursuit of the material world instead of working with fear and trembling through clean lives and reverence to God. Sin is now considered part of life and fewer sermons are being preached to this effect. We are under siege.'

From Ghana this letter came from an evangelist and pastor who has a wide and fruitful ministry. 'Today I preached from your book *Making Sense*. You made this statement that caught my attention: "If faith is never put to the test, how can its genuineness be proved?" So now I will tell you what I thought about and passed on to the congregation.

'Sometimes I have many questions in my mind but without answers; e.g. Paul performed many special miracles, prayed for Eutychus to be raised from dead after falling from the window, then in 2 Corinthians 12 went to heaven to learn something, yet when he was in trouble, he prayed three times and the heavens seemed closed on him. Then you see a pastor praying for people to get pregnant and yet his wife cannot get pregnant. People pray to get a car, yet still walking without a car. This happened to Jesus. He never seems to pray things for himself, only in Gethsemane, and three times that prayer wasn't answered according to his will but according to the Father's. Sometimes as a pastor you pray for someone to be healed but you have this same sickness and pray for yourself but nothing is happening. I believe God wants us to learn endurance because when we endure we overcome.'

Food

When we arrive back home after ministry in other countries, perhaps the most commonly asked question we meet is, ‘What was the food like?’ Sometimes I am happy to reply that the food is one of the bonuses, because no matter how inconvenient the travel and accommodation might be, the different food can be an adventure. But not always. In some places the food might not be to our liking, but since there is not a lot we can do about it, we might as well make the most of what is available.

Food in abundance – and variety

In matters of food, living in Thailand spoils a person for anywhere else. Well, that’s my opinion, and the opinion of Gae and our family. Thai food is not only the tastiest in the world, but has a variety unmatched anywhere. Most of the cooked food is spicy and therefore might not be to the liking of everyone from outside the country, but there is an abundance of alternatives. Hot food, cold food, appetisers, snacks and sweets of every kind seem to be available. The fresh fruit is without equal, both in the variety available and the quality of the produce. There is an abundance of food that people in poorer countries never knew existed.

For all that, there are plenty of things in Thailand I do not care to eat – offal of all sorts, along with a variety of animal life drawn from land, sea and air. There are some I have eaten and some I wish I had not – unidentifiable objects floating in slimy fluid whose taste defies description. All around the world I meet such mystery foods, but the best thing to do is to eat without complaint, realizing that what I consider unpalatable tastes great to the people around me. I have learnt to make the most of whatever is put in front of me and not complain – as I was taught as a child. But, also as I discovered as a child, there are cunning ways of disposing of things unwanted – a hole in the floor, an open window behind one’s head, a paper towel to conceal the uneaten, or, if the worst comes to the worst, a wrapping of food slipped into a trouser pocket.

On only rare occasions can I recall being physically sick from something I ate, and one of those occurred in Singapore – of all places! Singaporeans would be shocked to the point of fainting if they heard this, because they see their country as just about the most sterilised on earth.

Food of the poor

Living conditions in most poor countries are uncomfortable and inconvenient, and poverty means that food might have little variety. One must get used to filling up with food that does little more than fill up. Some people in poor countries receive only minimal nourishment but eat large amounts of fillers, far more than I can handle. But they are invariably happy to eat my leftovers.

The most common of these fillers is rice. In the countries of my experience, it is eaten just about everywhere, though more in Asia than in Africa. In many of the Pacific islands, the most common meal is rice with tinned fish. It seems strange that in towns and villages surrounded by sea, people eat fish that comes out of a tin.

In many countries of Africa, the preferred fillers are made from



Mealtime at pastors' seminar, Solomon Islands

maize (mealie) and are commonly known as mealie meal. Breads of various kinds seem to be available almost everywhere. Some countries have a filler made from a banana-type fruit that is non-edible raw but palatable enough when cooked properly. Ethiopia has a filler made from a plant called *teff*, a kind of poor person's millet found almost exclusively in Ethiopia.

Ethiopians also eat pasta, a practice inherited from Italy. In the amount of pasta they eat, however, they cannot compare with Italians. After one trip to Italy, when I spent two weeks in the homes of local believers, I felt so clogged with pasta that I needed another two weeks to feel normal again. In Argentina the feeling of having overeaten concerned beef, which dominates Argentine eating habits.

In one or two poor countries of Africa we have had difficulty even with cooked food, because it has been cooked in rancid oil. Sometimes the 'meat' was more fat than meat, and that made matters worse. Perhaps the local people have tough constitutions that can handle such things. They certainly have tough teeth. On one occasion each of the six people around the table had been given a small fish, cooked whole, but when I had finished, I was the only one with bones left on the plate. In another place in Africa I heard my mealtime companions crunching and cracking their way through chicken bones, and again I was the only one with bones left on the plate.

Cleaning up the leftovers had a different twist in one Asian country. After we had all helped devour a huge fish, there was a fight over who got to suck, chew and swallow the 'best' part, the eyes. A Pacific island meal that the locals found more delicious than we did was a one-metre turtle that helped feed 150 people.

Special portions

In *A Different World* I wrote of one country where some poor people, who had put aside two tiny pieces of chicken as a special treat, sacrificed their special treat to give us the only meat they had. It was very moving and humbling. But in another country, the offerings of the poor had a comical element.

I had just preached to an enthusiastic congregation in a very rough building and was invited back to the pastor's house for a meeting with his five elders. His wife brought out a plate of rice with some chicken and 'chips' (soggy, yellow, fatty slices of cooked potato), which I was told were for me. I partly persuaded the pastor to join with me, but when one or two of the elders tentatively leant over to take some of the food, the pastor said, 'Sorry, there's not enough. This is for the man of God.' When I hesitated, I was urged to eat on, because this had been prepared specially for me. I discreetly ate a bit more and then made the excuse that I was full. So a dutiful wife cleared it away.

When the time came for me to leave, they brought out my leftover food in a plastic bag and insisted I take it with me. It was for me, they explained. So the 'man of God' took the leftover chicken and chips back to his lodgings, while the five elders remained hungry. Somehow, it didn't seem the sort of thing a man of God should do.

Something to drink

Drinks are not as great a problem as some might imagine, because many local concoctions are boiled in the making. They might be of strange taste and texture, but at least they provide fluid. As for water, we learnt from the beginning of our time in Thailand that there was little point in being too particular, because people brought it as soon as we entered the house – a universally practised custom in Thailand, but found in other countries also. We always drank it and have followed the same practice elsewhere. Over the years we have had surprisingly few troubles. The risk in drinking such water is probably no greater than in drinking the bottled water that commercial enterprises have set up around the world.

Coca Cola, Fanta, Sprite and other soft drinks seem to be available in just about every country of the world. And no matter how poor a country might be, people have found a ready market for beer, whisky and other distilled beverages.

In several countries popular drinks are based on boiled grain; in others they are made of boiled milk with assorted additives. They take a bit of getting used to. Drinks I found more to my liking were sugar-loaded black coffee poured into a glass of ice, and hot Ovaltine poured into half a cup of condensed milk. A sweet tooth goes well with a love for spicy food.

What about *our* food?

If we think other people's food strange, they find ours no less strange. The greatest difference between Western and non-Western foods concerns breakfast. We have really struggled with certain foods that have been served up to us for breakfast. Some might have been edible at other times of the day, but not first thing in the morning.

Consider, however, how they see the food that we eat first thing in the morning – dry cereal out of a packet, with cold milk poured over it! Could anything be worse? For them, breakfast must be something hot, and by that I don't mean the English cooked breakfast of sausages, eggs, bacon, potato and tomatoes. They are more likely to prefer noodles, fish and spring onions. When we have had Asians staying with us in Brisbane and given them free run of the kitchen to prepare breakfast, out comes the wok, the cutting board and the fish oil, and soon the house is full of steam, smoke and the smell of garlic. One cannot blame them for wanting a *proper* breakfast.

In some countries people have the impression that bread is the basis of the Western diet, and thoughtful hosts have served it up to us in unusual ways and in large quantities. In one place a person thought he was doing the right thing when he put on the floor (we were sitting on the floor because there was no table) a loaf of bread, a tin of condensed milk and an empty bowl. We were not quite sure what to do, but he showed the way by opening the tin, pouring the contents into the bowl, breaking off a piece of bread, dipping it into the condensed milk and handing it to me as the honoured guest. From what we learnt later by asking questions of others, the host's action had no significance in the local culture, but it at least showed us how to eat the meal. White people eat bread, so that is what we did.

Teachers and students

Among the many Bible schools and colleges I have visited in needy countries, few have the kinds of amenities we are accustomed to in the West. Although most seem to be overflowing with students, they are under-equipped with resources. Facilities for teaching, studying, eating and sleeping are usually inadequate, and well-stocked libraries are rare. Some schools have no library at all. As a result, the standard of teaching suffers and progress in learning is impeded.

Occasionally I have been asked by lecturers for help as they prepare to teach a difficult biblical book or theological subject, only to find they have nothing to consult that might give them a start. Students likewise struggle. Many arrive at Bible school expecting they will know everything by the time they graduate, but they soon discover that Christian knowledge is not acquired rapidly, nor does it come in neatly packaged bundles. No set of books can satisfy this need, but if Bridgeway can at least provide materials that are concise and easy to read, we might help people take their first steps towards the biblical understanding they are looking for. In an earlier chapter I wrote about the libraries we help to equip, but in this chapter I want to look outside the libraries to other aspects of Bible learning.

Rarely available, rarely affordable

The reason Bible schools lack biblical materials is twofold. First, the sorts of books they need are not readily available, not just in the locality but perhaps in the entire country. Second, even if they are available, most people cannot afford them.

From country after country there are common themes in the hundreds of letters of thanks we receive for books sent to Bible training institutions. A principal in Zimbabwe wrote, 'Our teachers and students have nothing for further perusal, only their Bibles, so please keep sending us anything you can that will assist us. The language in these books is easy to understand.' From a Bible school in the Solomon Islands the principal wrote, 'These books are a great way of teaching a knowledge of the Scriptures, especially in isolated areas where people lack Christian literature. I thank God for enabling you to write these books, because they help me as a Bible teacher.'

Even in the French-speaking Republic of Niger, Bible colleges use Bridgeway books. 'Beloved,' said one college principal, 'I have never seen simple and easy-to-read Christian books like these. Our teachers have been trained in English and are able to tackle English documents. Though Niger is a strong Islamic country, the Lord has helped us set up a French Bible Training College, and now we have started Hausa and Arabic Bible Colleges. I tell you that these tools are greatly used in Niger.'

Another Bible college principal, this one from neighbouring Nigeria (which is English-speaking), wrote, 'I thank the people who responded to the needs of this country and sent us the Bridgeway books. We were jubilated at their arrival. The books are a special blessing to our staff who have no notes to give out, so they copy from the books on to the blackboard and the students can then write for themselves. They are easy English to follow.' The jubilation in this college was matched by another in Nigeria, where the principal wrote, 'This is to acknowledge our receipt of the carton after serious prayer and several attempts to trace it. When I finally announced to the students the arrival of the books, they busted into serious songs of praise. We have turned them to text books, because of the humble presentation coupled with clarity and simplicity of the language. The students want to have their own copies.'

Unfortunately, many students will not get their own copies. When a student writes to us requesting books, we have to refuse, otherwise we would be swamped with letters

from an entire school of hopeful students. Sometimes, however, we send to the principal, who makes the books available at an affordable price. He then uses the proceeds to buy books from other sources and so give staff and students the chance to establish their own modest collections. From Malawi we received this encouraging letter: 'I am writing on behalf of all my fellow students to express our appreciation to the givers of the Bible commentaries and Bible dictionaries. We are getting them at a cheap price we cannot get anywhere, because books are hard to buy in this country and the price is too high for us to afford. We pray the Lord will enable whoever helps you to keep helping us buy such books.'

Copies, lawful and otherwise

From a man in Kenya we heard that he ran two Bible schools, ten kilometres apart, but they had only one of our commentaries and one dictionary between them. 'We are requesting more books, because we are running up and down with one book. We have many friends and churches with no books at all, so they come here to get references from us.' A Bible student in Zambia wrote, 'Sometimes all we have are photocopies. The principal takes originals to a photocopy machine but it is very costly. Complaints from students are never-ending because of lack of proper books.'

A lecturer from a Christian college in Pakistan wrote apologetically saying that for seven years he had been downloading and printing material from our Bridgeway website and thought it time he wrote and asked permission. Their internal and external students numbered almost six thousand, about fifteen percent of whom were Christian and the remainder Muslim. It was good of him to write, but material on Bridgeway's website is free for anyone to download and use.

But while people may help themselves to material on the website, they may not help themselves to somebody else's books. For one graduate in Zambia the joy of having his own books did not last. In much distress he appealed to us, 'I bought a *Bridgeway Bible Dictionary* from the Bible college I attended, and also the *Bridgeway Bible Commentary*. But now a thief stole my *Bible Dictionary*, which was very useful to me day and night, and now I cannot get it in my country. Please help me if you have some in stock, old or new, because I am sick about missing this book.'

Text books and prizes

Bridgeway books are in more than 130 countries, and in at least 80 of those countries they are used in Bible schools. In some cases the use might be solely within the school library, but in more than half the cases the books are commonly used in the classroom as study material or set texts.

Letters from these countries, whether in Asia, Africa, the Pacific or the Caribbean, indicate that this widespread usage is partly because of the books' easy-read language. Even from a country such as Cameroon, where English must compete with French as the major non-indigenous language, we received the following from a Bible college principal. 'We confess that these books are always the most helpful and useful to us because of their simplicity. Many testify that they read and understand easily. In the classroom we were managing the few copies we had, but it is never enough, and the congestion of people waiting to use the books was too much. But now this new carton came and we have a big relief.'



Bible school, Papua New Guinea

Often the books are given as graduation prizes. Although Bridgeway is not able to supply enough sponsored books for such a purpose, some countries have printed local editions and others buy quantities from us at cost price for special purposes. From various countries we hear of Bible colleges that present selected books as prizes, or even give one book to every graduate. But for most students in poor countries, they leave Bible school with the same number of books as they had when they arrived – nil.

Over the years we have received hundreds of letters from evangelists and pastors who first met our books in Bible school and, now that they are free from the restrictions upon students, write and ask for books. Wherever possible, we are pleased to send to them and this spreads the network further. In countries that are large receivers of Bridgeway books, our network extends into most states, provinces or regions.

Typical of the letters of request from former students is one from Nigeria. ‘Your *Bridge Bible Handbook No. 7* was given to me as the best student in evangelism prize from my Bible college here. By my assessment this book is a fortune and blessed are the eyes that read it. Now I am pastor of a church and have started a school for evangelism requiring access to all the information I can get. So I am soliciting your kind gesture to get the remaining books in this series to me please. Do not let any obstacle hinder you from rendering any help you can give within your limit to help the work that God has committed to my hand.’

Not for everyone

Bible training institutions might fulfil a worthy purpose, but they are not for everyone. This might be because some people have enough ability and motivation to become biblically equipped through private study, church programs, part-time courses, well-taught friends or access to helpful study material. In the eyes of many, Bible college graduation carries with it a certain status, but this might have little bearing upon a person’s effectiveness as a Christian worker. Local people are aware of this, such as a person in Ethiopia who said, ‘It doesn’t make sense to graduate with a qualification but without applying what we learnt at Bible college. We Ethiopians struggle with this, because some enter Bible college because they find no opportunity to work in an office. Then such people are in the ministry field without bearing fruit.’

On the other hand, it is warmly satisfying to hear from Christians who are teaching or studying in circumstances where most are never likely to go to Bible school but are



Church Bible study group, Malawi

enthusiastic about their Christian development. We are pleased to send books to people such as a man in Ghana who wrote, ‘I am leader of the men’s fellowship and it is hard to answer important questions in our discussion times. I wanted to enter Bible school and cannot afford it, but a friend who is a pastor lent me your books. Oh, how I

want them, especially *Commentary* and *Dictionary*.’ A man in Uganda, after receiving a *Commentary* and a *Dictionary*, wrote, ‘I missed joining a Bible school because there was none, but now I have it my house.’

From Kenya a local pastor pleaded, ‘I am leader of 120 churches, but in these churches the pastors and elders have never been to Bible school. What we need is

books, like the *Bridgeway Bible Commentary* and *Dictionary* that I have and give me great help. I have some experience of teaching the Bible and I am requesting whether you can supply me with these books and others. I cannot think to start a Bible school, but with books like these I can start more classes to train these pastors and elders so that they can teach the members. God has given them a burden to teach, but we have nothing very much to help.'

Another man in Kenya wrote similarly. 'The Lord has helped me set up an in-service leadership training centre, because many church leaders cannot attend Bible school. We use your books for our Bible study material because they take us to the real life of the Bible. As far as I am concerned, these are the topmost books that I have ever read and are very much helpful to the people at the training centre. We love you because of your help with the Word of God. We are praying for you to come to Kenya and I will organise leaders conferences for you.'

Something different

Many letters come not from people running a ministry but from those who just want some help at home; for example, this young man in Zimbabwe: 'Well, Sir Don Fleming, how are you perusing the pages of life? I am quite pretty fine. I write this short paper to say that I am a young man worshipping God. I am reading your *Bridge Bible Handbook* 7, Acts to Corinthians, and with that book I know the background of everything. So can you send me more and more books so that I can know the whole Bible. I don't have money to go to Bible college, but I want to be a pastor with knowledge from your books which you can send me. That is my problem. Give my heartfelt greetings to all your crew.'

From Malawi a man wrote about a 'Bible school' established in a prison. 'Did I tell you about the brother in the Lord who has devoured your books? He is so switched on now that he has started a Bible school in a prison.' Some time later he wrote to say that the work was going well and giving local Christians scope for developing their teaching gifts.

A pastor in Ethiopia used our books in what he called a Bible school for church leaders in Sudanese refugee camps. 'I believe that this kind of training program, though it may appear as a drop in an ocean, is vital and desperately needed, particularly in our present situation where there is a crying need for trained and qualified church leaders. I am really trying my level best to train as many church leaders in these refugee camps as possible. The Word of God brings these people joy in the midst of suffering. It makes me joyful too.'

Even in French-speaking Chad, pastors use the books to train disciples. 'These books are what we use in our daily reading and they edify our ministry. I draw lessons from them to teach in our church. We train those in our church to understand the Word like in a Bible school by lending these books to them.'

Expressions of enthusiasm

It might sound to be good for the ego to hear from people helped by the books but, like the man in Ethiopia, I get added enthusiasm for what we are doing when I see the enthusiasm of others. Here is an example from a Solomon Islander: 'I've got excited from the bottom of my heart for your great support with these very expensive books that I distribute to our pastors, evangelists and other Christian workers. When I begin to study these books I want to jump right into the next one every day of my life. The materials improve my teaching and preaching. Also in my leadership care I arrange for short-term Bible training seminars with pastors, elders and many co-workers. These are people who cannot attain Bible college due to lack of finance, so we must help them in any other way possible.'

A lecturer in a Bible school in Sudan said he felt I wrote as if I had Sudanese students in mind. Another, in Uganda, thought I wrote with Ugandans in mind. But the

principal of a Bible school in Nigeria went over the top when he said that the books were so helping Africans to understand the Bible that God was using me 'for the total emancipation of the black races.'

People of some Pacific island nations are not so readily excited. This might be because they are very 'laid back' to start with, but it might also be because nominalism has a dampening effect on Christian enthusiasm. In view of that, the comment from a Bible college principal in Tonga was very welcome. 'Thank you and the sponsors for this wonderful gift. I say "wonderful" because those books have hit me and others here, even in the state church, like a breath of Pacific fresh air. We desperately need such resources here.'

A Bible college lecturer in the Cook Islands looked for similar refreshment. 'The books are going to ministers as well as trainees here at the Bible college. Even some liberal ministers have got hold of your books and are starting to change. They have to preach something every Sunday and are often scratching around for ideas. They find some commentaries unintelligible, but they like the simple style of your books.'

Public recognition

Nigerians are noted for being 'full on' in just about everything, for better or for worse. They are very demonstrative and look for all sorts of ways to show their appreciation. One would hardly think that sending a few cartons of books would warrant a doctorate, but that is what one Bible college bestowed on me. It had no accreditation to do so, but that is of no concern to many Bible colleges in developing countries. They bestow degrees and doctorates very generously.

The same college then named its administration block after me. Other colleges have named libraries similarly, one publishing ministry put my name on its translation centre, and other ministries have acknowledged our help by putting 'Bridgeway' in their name. Whether they want to use my name or Bridgeway's, I usually protest. One never knows what some of these organisations believe or practise.

Sermon preparation

Sermon preparation is an area where the books seem to be widely used in just about every country. We have even heard from lecturers in Catholic seminaries in countries as diverse as Zimbabwe, Solomon Islands, Malawi, Tonga and Nigeria who have somehow got hold of our books and, besides using them in their seminaries, use them in preparing sermons. One Catholic seminary bought fifteen sets.

Whatever the denominational setting, the demand on preachers is considerable, especially in the growing churches across Africa and Asia where preachers must prepare several sermons

every week. A pastor in Cameroon wrote that, with his work in church, schools, streets and hospitals, he had to prepare at least one sermon every day. Understandably, certain stories from the Gospels and some well known passages from the Epistles get worked over so often that staleness sets in. At least with a simple commentary on the whole Bible, preachers can feel a little more confidence in preaching from less familiar parts of the Bible.



Bible college, India

One preacher in Zambia told me he had been preaching though Old Testament books covered by the first volume in the *Bridge Bible Handbooks* (his Bible school graduation gift) and he had now reached the book of Numbers. Then, pulling the rolled-up *Handbook* out of his hip pocket, he 'expounded' some of my own material from Numbers to show that he understood it. More importantly, the congregation understood it. In fact, he said, they loved it, because they were learning something new every time he preached.

A preacher in India informed me he was now preaching 'beautiful sermons' because of the help the books were giving him. From a Bible college lecturer in Nigeria came reassuring words that 'the students testify to good sermon preparation by aid of these books.' Another, in Botswana, said he was using the commentary on the Gospels in his Bible college and when students preached in church he heard the material coming back from the pulpit.

Even from French-speaking Central African Republic we received news of help with sermons. 'Recently a preacher phoned me in much excitement after he preached. This man cannot read English fluently, but he wanted to tell me that after he had consulted your *Dictionary* and *Commentary* he understood more than he expected and this helped him with his sermon. Thank you for touching lives here and around the world.'

Up front

In my travels I occasionally witness something in a church meeting or missions congress that is strikingly different from what I am accustomed to. But things that are different are not necessarily wrong. They can be spiritually challenging and might even be closer to biblical practice than some of our well worn routines.

We like to quote biblical precedents for practices we find acceptable, but ignore other biblical precedents for practices not to our liking. For example, we might claim to follow the church in Troas by observing the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week, but not follow the church in Jerusalem by putting our possessions into a common pool. Even with practices that have a biblical precedent, we rarely carry them out exactly as people did in biblical times. The things we practise or ignore depend largely on what we have become accustomed to in our established routine. To see something different can be beneficial.

Praying for the sick in Yangon

Conservative church groups of the kind known as Christian Assemblies usually avoid anything that looks to be coloured by Pentecostalism. This caution applies to a range of issues that are documented in the Bible – not just things such as speaking in tongues and prophesying but also things such as lifting the hands in prayer and anointing the sick with oil.

An earlier chapter referred to one of these churches in Yangon, the capital of Myanmar, that maintains a congregation of 700 and is continually planting more churches. It also runs an extensive array of ministries embracing radio broadcasts, correspondence courses, evangelistic outreaches, part-time Bible schools and a full-time ministry training centre. But it also has an effective welfare ministry, which brings help to widows, orphans and others who are marginalised or in need.

Myanmar's economy is so run down that the country is more comparable with the poor nations of Africa than with the dynamic nations of East and South-East Asia. On recent lists published by the United Nations, its ranking for national economy and quality of life was in the bottom quarter of the world's countries, but its ranking for health services was last. It is hard to understand how a country once reckoned the most prosperous in the region could now be so bad, but anyone with first-hand experience of Myanmar would not doubt the UN's statistics.

Perhaps the country's abysmal health record was one factor that convinced the elders of the Yangon church to take seriously what the Bible says about anointing the sick and praying for them. The regular practice is that on Sunday morning, after the Lord's Supper, the elders come to the front and give sick people the opportunity to express their requests for prayer and healing. Each elder has a small egg cup sized container of oil, and sick people who want to ask the elders to anoint them and pray over them come to the front. From my observation, about twenty people usually come forward. The seven or eight elders then move around them, one on one, anoint them and pray for them, while the rest of us sit quietly in our seats – praying too, one should hope.

Feet-washing in Abidjan

In Abidjan, capital of Côte d'Ivoire, we had come to the end of a week-long residential conference for four hundred national Christian workers. The amount of planning information that came out of this conference was as impressive as I have seen anywhere. While the committee met in a back room to prepare summaries for participants to take home, the rest of us assembled in the main auditorium for the final

address. The speaker, a local pastor, gave a quiet but clear exposition of John 13, the chapter that records the actions and teaching of Jesus on the occasion when he washed the disciples' feet.

As the speaker approached the end of his talk, he surprised everyone by excusing himself for a moment and disappearing behind the stage curtain. He then reappeared with two plastic basins (of different shapes and colours) and two towels (also of different shapes and colours). We guessed what the man was about to do, but he had not dressed things up for a polished stage performance.

Without any attempt at pressure or emotionalism, the man then said words to the effect, 'You have heard what Jesus said; now who is prepared to *do* what he said?' He pointed out that jealousies were common among pastors, especially those from bigger churches, and perhaps this was the time for someone to put things right. After a brief, uncomfortable pause, a man came to the platform and asked that Pastor So-and-so come up and join him. Then, in front of four hundred people, one pastor washed the other's feet. It is difficult to say who was more embarrassed, but at the conclusion they hugged each other with tears rolling down their faces. The speaker then asked, 'Anyone else?' One more pastor came forward and the exercise was repeated. And that was that. The speaker, it seemed, did not want the exercise cheapened through any showmanship or insincerity creeping in, so he made a few remarks, prayed and sat down.

When the committee members emerged from the back room, they were stunned to hear what had happened. They had no indication that the speaker would make such an appeal, and conversation with him revealed he had not told anyone. For all present, it was a simple but moving demonstration of a teaching from Jesus that few of us take seriously.

Appeal in Bujumbura

One Sunday in Bujumbura, capital of Burundi, I preached in one of the Emmanuel Churches where about 1,200 people had gathered for worship. My sermon was interpreted into the local language, and the audience response indicated that the interpreter was very good. But when I sat down, the interpreter continued to speak. The person beside me gave a whispered interpretation and my heart sank. The speaker was reminding the audience of things I had just said, causing me to think, 'Oh, no, not one of those people who tries to re-preach your talk after you have already finished it.' But I was wrong. The man had picked out some points and then issued an appeal, urging people to respond to the message by coming and kneeling in front of the platform, where prayer would then be made for them.

Two or three people came and knelt down. Then a few more came, and a few more, and then a lot more. Soon the entire area between the platform and the front row was filled with seventy people, jammed shoulder to shoulder and kneeling on all fours. Six or seven elders positioned themselves around the group and prayed over them. Most of those kneeling were believers (the sermon had, after all, followed the Lord's Supper) but a few were making first-time commitments. These were then identified so that they could be followed up.

As I watched all this, I concluded that it must have been a procedure people were accustomed to. This was confirmed when I made enquiries later, though the number was larger than usual, partly explained by the novelty of having an international speaker. The elders said they liked to make this kind of appeal, because they did not want people simply to come to church, listen to a sermon and go home without facing up to the matters that had been raised.

Challenge to the Arabs

In 2003 I received an invitation to a conference of AWEMA, the Arab World Evangelical Ministers Association. My books have filtered into a few Arabic-speaking

countries and some titles have been published in Arabic. Although AWEMA is based in Egypt, the conference was held in Cyprus, an accessible venue for Christians from inhospitable Muslim countries. I was one of thirty present from the West whose ministries have some association with the Middle East, but at this conference we were learners, not speakers. The speakers came from the seventy Christian participants from Arabic countries. The conference was wide-ranging, but the story that follows concerns just one thing that happened in just one session. It demonstrates again how Christians outside the sophisticated West are more inclined to take the Bible at face value.

Egypt has a larger Christian population than other Arab countries and, because the government gives official recognition to Christianity, many churches appear to operate more or less like churches in the West. Some Egyptians had just presented a paper on youth ministries that covered many of the points we are familiar with – building bridges into the youth culture, catering for youth in the



AWEMA – serving the Arabic world

church, and so on. This session was conducted in English with interpretation into Arabic (whereas other sessions were conducted in Arabic with interpretation into English), which helped us non-Arabs to follow things easily.

Among the participants were two Nigerians, a husband and wife team who had come from a Muslim-majority region in northern Nigeria to take the gospel to the Muslims of Egypt. They had learnt Arabic and were evangelising in Egypt with typical Nigerian vigour. During the discussion on work among the youth of the church, the Nigerian man stood up and called in a loud, clear voice, 'But are we telling these young people what their Christianity will cost them? Are we telling them that to follow Jesus means doing what he said, taking up the cross, following him to the place of execution? If they follow Jesus as he said, it will cost some of them their lives. Blood will flow! They must be prepared to be killed for Jesus! Are we telling them that?'

I can recall the tingling down my spine as the Nigerian said, 'Blood will flow.' It was a chilling moment, felt around the auditorium. Christians in the part of Nigeria he came from know the cost, and so do Arab Christians in countries where the church does not have the official recognition it has in Egypt. When Jesus spoke about taking up the cross and following him, his hearers probably took him literally. Most of us today do not take him literally, but in so doing we reduce the impact of his words. We acknowledge that we must be prepared for anything, but when the crunch comes, we tend to opt for an interpretation of Jesus' words that we find less confronting.

Eye-catching names

Moving around Nigeria or Ghana, one is astounded by the high profile of Christianity. There are churches everywhere, so many that people have trouble coming up with names that are different from others. But not only churches have striking names. Shops, factories, schools, businesses and professional offices are innovative in giving themselves names with a Christian flavour. In some cases people might want to declare their faith or promote the gospel; in others they might be using Christianity to seek profit. Some business names give the impression they might even contain an element of superstition.

New churches, new names

When someone told me there were 50,000 denominations in Nigeria, I thought this was just a colourful way of saying there were lots of churches. But I was assured the figure was to be taken seriously; in fact, it was conservative.

The denominations, however, are not of the kind we in the West are familiar with. A local church, let us say, will decide to have an evangelistic outreach in an area called Kwali and name the project Salvation for All. There will be such a response to the gospel that they will plant a church there and call it Salvation for All Church, Kwali. This church will produce another, the parent church might produce three more, these daughter churches will produce more, and within a short time there might be eight or nine Salvation for All churches. Since the word 'denomination' has to do with naming, another 'denomination' is born.



Nigerian church mission

Churches all over the country might be doing the same, each finding a new name for its expanding ministry. In searching for a name, some call upon names of Bible places such as Bethel, Berea, Calvary, Hebron, Jordan, Macedonia, Nazareth and Zion, or personal names and titles such as Bread of Life, El Shaddai, Emmanuel, Good Shepherd, Jehovah Jireh, Prince of Peace and Redeemer. Transliterated biblical words such as Agape, Hosanna and Maranatha feature often. With this variety available, the number of 50,000 distinct names soon becomes believable. Other African countries cannot boast the statistics of Nigeria, but they show comparable originality in their naming initiatives.

Church names with a difference

Some names reflect a church's particular emphasis, such as Dominion Faith Miracle Church, Amazing Faith Assembly, God's Powerline Church, Last Generation Ministries, Deeper Life Bible Church, Latter Glory Centre, Royal Priesthood Bible Church and Calvary Royal Family. Christian ministries bear names such as Million Souls Association, Fire Fighters for Christ and Eleventh Hour Ambassadors.

The themes of light and life occur often – God's Lighthouse Church, Holy Light Salvation Church, Heavenly Light Church, Gospel Light Embassy, City of Light Church, Truth and Life Assembly, Abundant Life Cathedral, Fountain of Life Chapel, Goshen Life Church. The theme of life is reflected also in names containing the words

Living Christ, Living Gospel, Living Hope, Living Stones and Living Waters. Positive words like Glory, Hope, Resurrection, Triumph and Victory are understandably popular.

Names displayed on some noticeboards proclaim that the church's foundation is the solid rock of truth, in some cases surrounded by a sea of suspects – Preach Christ Only Church, Harvest Rock Church, On the Rock Ministry, Truth Application Church. In one area I noticed several churches called Christ Believers Assembly (followed by the district designation), but then further along the road was one called Christ True Believers Assembly. Others who seem to have deviated from the parent church were the Pentecostal Presbyterians and the Seventh Day Baptists.



Churches, shops and businesses

Not all variations, however, were so strident. Many names featured Love, Joy, Grace, Mercy, Peace and Shalom, or had appealing references to the Lord Jesus – Wonderful Jesus Church, Christ Within Church, Showers of Blessings Church, Joy Christian Centre, Grace Alone Church, Oasis of Love Church, The Lord's Palace. Others had a clear missionary ring to them – Christ for All

Nation's Ministry, Kingdom House of God, Holy City Tabernacle International, Gospel Harvest Church, Liberation Evangel Mission, Gospel for All Nations Chapel, Missionary Crusaders Church.

Shops and businesses

Before observing this originality in church names, I had noticed the originality in business names. When first landing in Nigeria, I had no sooner left the airport than I noticed the Christian flavour to names and signs. The truck in front of us had a huge picture of Jesus painted on the back, surmounted by the title Sir Holy Son. We passed shops by the names of Love the Lord Photos, Our God Reigns Electrical, Rock of Ages Paints and Christ the King Supermarket, before stopping to make a few purchases at Hallelujah Vegetables. The pattern was set, and over the next month in Nigeria, along with a period in Ghana a few years later, I collected names.

On one occasion our car's tyre was punctured, but it was ably mended at Glory Hallelujah Engineering Works. Nearby was Trust in God Trucking Company and across the street I noticed The Lord's Laundry. Back on the road, we headed out of town, passing such places as God's Grace Business Centre, Hope for Life Fashions, Trust and Obey Electrical, God is King Furniture, and Forgiveness Communications. Some of these businesses were in reasonable looking buildings, but many operated out of roadside shanties. Beside one roadside shanty was a taxi emblazoned, Safe By the Blood of Jesus, but another taxi carried the message, Try Islam.

A walk through the centre of any township always yielded plenty of interesting signs. Some adorned the fronts of small businesses, such as Jesus Loves Me Foreign Exchange Bureau, Christ's Auto Cooling, Holy Innocents Refrigeration, Christ our Banner Motor Works, Jesus is Coming Soon Stationery Shop, Psalm 23 Enterprises and It's God Phone Service. Of particular interest were those connected with centres that trained people in hand skills or sold their products. Favourite names were along the lines of My Hands Are Blessed Sewing Centre, Anointed Hands Hairstyling, Psalm 35 Arts Centre and The Lord is My Helper Herbal Medicines.

While some shop owners seem to have been thinking mainly of profits (such as one with the prominently painted prayer, Enlarge Our Borders, Lord), others had signs designed to stir the complacent. The message might have been a statement such as God's Will Is Best, an encouragement such as God Will Provide, or a sober warning such as If God Judges, No Appeal. Several shops had just the simple dedication, To The Saviour. Others had a Christ-exalting statement such as Unbelievable Mighty Jesus or Jesus Above All.

Personal names

In many non-Western countries, the first names of most people – their given names, or Christian names – are actual words in the language. In many Western countries names have no particular meaning (in spite of the imaginative lists that appear in glossy magazines) and do not occur as common words in everyday speech. There are exceptions, such as Dawn, Grace, Joy and Rose, but the exception for us is the norm in many other countries. I have even heard of cases where the government registration office refused to accept a name because it meant nothing in the local language.

People in African countries where English is common might give their children English names that reflect desirable virtues. We know one Christian family in Zambia whose eight children are named Faith, Hope, Mercy, Thanks, Pray, Gracious, Joy and Blessing. In non-English-speaking countries, enquiries have revealed that names such as Amnad, Niyihishura and Vishwas are common words in the local language that we would translate, respectively, as power, revival, and faith. The name could indicate an aspiration parents have for the child or reflect circumstances at the time of birth, as occurred in biblical times. We have African friends with such improbable English names as Ambassador, Expert, Gift, Lonely, Patience and Prosper. Within the Christian community, biblical names are common, not because they have linguistic significance but more likely because of their biblical association. There are popular names such as Abraham, Benjamin, Mary, Matthew, Ruth and Samuel, and less popular names such as Elisha, Hephzibah, Jehoshaphat, Obed and Zipporah.

Some people are named after the day on which they were born – though while we know several with the names Sunday, Monday and Friday, we know none with the names Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday. Some might have such names but it is not obvious, because their names are in the native language, not English. For example, the former UN Secretary General has the name Kofi Annan, but had he come from Nigeria instead of Ghana he would have the name Friday Annan.

When a name is a common word in its own right, wisecracks are bound to follow. In English-speaking countries, a girl with the name Rose is probably sick of wisecracks about flowers, thorns, scent and colours. Local people the world over give themselves amusement with wordplay on names, but it is wise for visitors not to try to match them. There were occasions in Thailand when visiting entertainers tried to be funny by making a pun on a Thai name or word, only to find themselves issuing an apology a few days later. Names are very personal, and there is sometimes a fine line between a joke and an insult.

Seen on TV

The Christian influence seen in signs around the streets of some African countries is evident also in TV and radio programs. Many countries of the developing world have only one local TV station and lack funds to produce expensive programs. They will readily televise lengthy community, political, church and sporting events, because little expenditure is required. The pro-Christian stance of some governments means they will televise videos sent to them free from church organisations in the West, even though such videos might be unhelpful or even harmful. In some cases TV stations make their own serialised shows, some of which simply copy the West's soap operas, though others have a strongly moralistic Christian flavour. They reminded me of the short

plays we used to perform at Sunday school presentations, with predictable lessons about trusting Jesus, going to church and obeying parents. The script and acting might not be all that realistic, but the programs have a refreshing innocence.

We sometimes wonder why countries with such a strong Christian influence can have governments that are so corrupt and inept. But the reason we think this way is that we are comparing them with us in areas where we are strong. From their side, people in these troubled countries wonder why, if there is such a strong Christian influence in the West, we are so immoral and self-indulgent.

In those countries one would not see a Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras on TV, because the government would not allow it. In several countries I was struck by the government's TV advertising about the spread of HIV/AIDS. The only way to stop it, the advertisements said, was not to have sex until married and to remain faithful to one's marriage partner. Again they used brief dramas to get the point across. I reflected on the chances of such advertisements appearing on our TV at home, to say nothing of being paid for by the government.

While we smile at the wording of signs and the TV presentations in some poorer countries, we would do well to ask ourselves whether our assumed sophistication is in any way related to Christian maturity. At least many people in these disadvantaged countries seem to have a greater awareness of certain Christian values. And Christians are not hesitant to make their faith public.

When little is much

In this book there are many examples of the differences between the rich and the poor concerning our evaluation of material gifts. A single carton of books, for example, might not excite us as being particularly special, but to recipients in poor countries it might be reckoned as gold, bring tears of rejoicing, cause celebrations in the church, or even inspire people to say of the donors, ‘You will be my friends for life.’ Things that appear to us to be everyday, routine, insignificant or even trifling might not be so to others.

A cake for Christmas

For most people in the West, the Christmas season is one of much commercial activity, the giving and receiving of presents, and celebrations that entail excessive eating of expensive food. Several months before Christmas we had sent a carton of used clothes to an evangelist in Zambia, and later we sent a small gift of money. The money was for no particular purpose; it was just part of a periodic disbursement, which in this case happened to be in December. A day or so after Christmas we received the following email of thanks.

‘Let me testify to the glory of God what happened an hour before checking our email box. The children were demanding for a Christmas cake, but we had no money for that. Then my wife suggested, “Let us pray together to the Lord.” So we all prayed. An hour later we happened to be in town so we went to the internet café to check our email box. To our great amazement, we found you had sent a gift to our account. Although we do not yet have the money in the account, it gave us strength to borrow elsewhere from a friend with the view that we can repay soon. So we were able to buy a cake for Christmas. We are really encouraged by this move of God. It has also greatly elevated the faith of our children. Thank you. What a relief! Praise be to God in the Highest.’

The man’s email was a timely rebuke. While I was worried about putting on weight because of the amount of rich food eaten at Christmas, here was a family praying for just one cake.

The church offering

Practices for the Sunday church offering vary considerably around the world. Some churches pass round a bag or plate and others have a box at the entrance where people can make offerings as they arrive or depart. Another practice is to have a box, carton, bowl or other receptacle, usually in front of the congregation, so that at a given point in the service people leave their seats, walk to the front and make their offering.

It is always difficult to know how much money to put into the church offering in a poor country. To make the kind of offering one makes at home would be disproportionate in the local context, but to make the kind of offering a local person makes would be mean. So I usually opt for an appropriate amount somewhere between the two.

In one church of about thirty people in rural Malawi, they had two offerings, one for ministry within the church itself and the other for local welfare ministry. Not wanting to load the offering too heavily, I put into the first offering what I thought was the modest gift of 500 kwacha (about \$10) and put into the second offering an even more modest gift of 100 kwacha (about \$2). In most churches the money is counted after the service has ended, but, to my surprise and embarrassment, this church counted the money and announced the amounts before the service concluded. The amounts

were 574 for the first offering and 168 for the second. Quick calculation will show that the totals normally received would be less than two dollars for each offering.

Nevertheless, this small church, despite being full of poor people, was reaching out to the lost with the gospel and practical care. They were helping forty orphans and five widows with food and clothing and paying for two orphans to go through secondary school. Later, when we helped them buy sewing and knitting machines, they taught widows how to make clothing, which they then sold in the market to help their income. The church also grew maize and beans on rented land in order to help the poor with food. One person wrote, 'We live poor lives but we have the Saviour Jesus in our hearts.'



Knitting machine: helping widows, Malawi

Armies of volunteers

When, in 2003, Liberia ended fourteen years of civil war, churches and Christian agencies began the task of rejuvenating the devastated countryside. During the war years, insecurity was such that most Christian work was restricted to the region around the capital, Monrovia, and contact with rural areas was minimal. When hostilities ceased, Christian work among school children, orphans and widows expanded. Hundreds attended Bible camps and many people who had been isolated from mainstream Christianity rededicated themselves to the Lord.

It now became evident that Liberia had a major problem with HIV/AIDS. By this time postal services had reopened and we were sending in books, but the people we were supplying were also ministering to 85,000 HIV/AIDS victims. In one letter they asked, 'How is it possible for an organisation to help so many when it only has only eight staff? The answer is we have 441 volunteers. We trained church members, youth leaders, Sunday school teachers and people from many places. They then went back to their constituencies and conducted HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns through lectures, dramas, literature and practical help.' From a handful of dedicated people, hundreds became motivated and thousands were blessed.

Another huge commitment from volunteers was reported from our friends on the Philippines island of Mindanao, which had suffered prolonged turmoil because of Muslim extremists. When the national government initiated a Moral Recovery Program to be taught in schools, this local Filipino mission was given the responsibility to write the materials, train the teachers and coordinate the program. Week after week they taught and trained the volunteer teachers, who then went out to reach the 72,000 students across the area. One of the letters recorded, 'This is a one-week course, and for last week 176 of the 874 volunteer teachers who did the course were Muslims. Though given the option of opting out, the Muslims agreed to do the course because of good reports they had heard from people who attended previous trainings. We praise God for the privilege of proclaiming the Word of God to the Sons of Ishmael.'

The plight of Ethiopia

It is hard for us in the West to realise the desperation of people in poor countries. The following lengthy letter came from a man in Ethiopia.

'As you know, we Ethiopians are known around the world for non-civilisation and famine. We live hand to mouth the most basic needs of life, and it is suffer and struggle living below the poverty line. I am 28 years old, studying electrical engineering at the

institute far from my home. I have no family or income, and go there on foot, which makes my shoes worn out because I can't pay for bus. Let alone to buy books at high price, the money to buy my meal is not known where to come from. I don't say this to break your hearts but to tell you I cannot buy books. Even in capital city of Addis Ababa is only one public library, and when I want to use academic books I wake up early morning to make queue with other students, but told later that the library gets full and we can't go in. Even if we enter the library, we can only get very oldest worn out book.

'In the church I serve the Lord in different angles and teach a Bible study group. It is undeniable that the teacher must know more than the congregation. To serve them well is expected of me, so your help is important in my study. Please pray for the present Ethiopian church, where 95% of gospel ministers have no personal library to study the Scriptures. Maybe 80% know nothing about the Bible and in this situation Christians are being tossed about by every wind of doctrine. The work of evangelism is not being done in the biblical way. In some meetings the historical Jesus is hardly mentioned and the Bible is not even used. All is the work of man. Man is being exalted.

'At this moment getting food is not my burning issue. My request is not food, clothes and shelter, but God's Word and books to teach it. So please lend me your hands again and send me whatever other Christian materials you have. I am praying that you will be blessed richly more and more. I send this letter by leaving one day's meal fee.'

A short time after receiving the books, the man wrote, 'My joy knew no bounds when the books came. Tears were rolling on my face since I can't find enough words to express my innermost feelings to your sponsors. Your kindness in Christ towards me is good, and your best effort to help me is unforgettable throughout my lifetime. I can't convey how much your books opened my eyes to much better understanding of the God of the Bible. Oh, the Bible now makes so much more sense to me. Every time I study it my eyes are opened to some new facet of divine truth. It is like a light going in on a dark room. What I get from you I copy down and translate into our native tongue, Amharic, and give out for those I serve.

'Dear sir, you may think this act in sending me these books is a minor thing, and you and your Christian friends may underestimate your assistance towards me. Whereas for me, it is becoming a cause to praise and thank God in remembering his hand of providing. Just as the feeding of the Israelites in the wilderness with manna from heaven, so again he is remembering his poor servant through your generous books.

'Today, because we now have religious freedom in Ethiopia, many false teachers are coming from different parts of the world. Christians are tossed about by false teaching. As you know, a Christian minister cannot preach if he doesn't study, and he can't study if he doesn't have books. Thus books are the key to raising the standards of teaching and preaching in the church. I have a profound thirst to know more about God in his Word, to serve him the best way. So please keep sending books. I need books! I have a vision to build up Ethiopian Christian congregations by writing ministry. I have a great faith that God will help me in his own time and hour.'

Into other languages

The books currently published by Bridgeway began life in the Thai language. At that stage I did not think that one day they might appear in English; then, when they were published in English, I did not expect them to appear in other languages. Bridgeway simply sent the English-language books to countries where people wanted them, which meant that most books went to countries where English was widely used, such as former British colonies. In time, the books spread across those countries and people began asking to publish in local languages. In India, for example, requests came first of all for Hindi, then for Telugu, Oriya, Malayalam, Punjabi and Tamil. In due course books were published in all those languages.

In the non-English-language countries, however, Bridgeway books are sparsely scattered, which means there is less likelihood of widespread interest in translation. We do not go to people and suggest they translate our books; something that appears self-promoting is probably counter-productive. Our main purpose is to send English-language books to those who can benefit from them. If other-language versions eventuate, that is a bonus.

Those who want to publish

When publishers ask to translate, we must first find out what credibility they have in the Christian community and satisfy ourselves that they have the capacity to do the job. There is no point translating if they cannot publish, and no point publishing if they have no effective way of marketing. Publishers must hire printers to do the job (most publishers are not printers, and most printers are not publishers) and then market the books in such a way as to recoup their expenditure, sustain their livelihood and accumulate enough money to finance a reprint.

We make it clear from the outset that Bridgeway is not a funding organisation. We merely give permission to publishers, who then produce the books under licence from us but under their own publishing labels. We do not claim royalties in developing countries, though this is not the case in affluent countries. The United States is by far the largest producer and user of our books – offset productions of the originals but with different titles and covers – and royalties from sales go into Bridgeway's non-profit trust. From there we then send aid to needy countries that may be struggling to find capital for their local-language publications.

The church is growing vigorously in most parts of the non-Western world, and many people are keen to produce helpful Christian literature. But enthusiasm alone will not produce books. A person might, for example, tell us he is a publisher, but when we make enquiries we find that he has published no more than a few gospel tracts that he distributes around markets and bus parks.

Probably the majority of requests are from such enthusiasts. Because of my widespread travels, I might know the people personally or might know others in the country who can tell me something about them, all of which helps us decide whether to take discussions further. If a proposal looks promising, we might give the publisher permission to produce the *Basic Christianity Series* to start with. Results are varied. For some the exercise has set them on the path to a viable Christian publishing ministry, but for others it has been less satisfactory. In general we prefer to deal with organisations that are widely respected and better able to handle the job.

Quality of translation

A question people often ask is how do we know if a translation is satisfactory. In the short term we don't, but in the long-term we get some indication by the pace of

sales and demand for reprints. Probably the most successful of all other-language publishing ventures has been in Tanzania, where German missionaries and local experts between them produced the books in Swahili, the national language of Tanzania and the most widely used market language of Central and East Africa.

One indication of a good translation is its acceptability among a reading public who keep buying in such quantities that the books need regular reprinting. Of added significance is that in Tanzania this is so even with the larger and more expensive books, the *Commentary* and *Dictionary*. Even if the retail price is subsidised to market the books at an affordable price, the books are still *sold*, not given away free. Tanzania is a poor country, yet the books keep selling. That would not happen if the translation was substandard.

In our Thailand days, I read Thai versions of books by world renowned authors that sold poorly because the translation was ‘wooden’ and the books did not communicate. The translators so slavishly followed the sentence structure of the originals that the books no longer read like Thai. They did not even sell through the initial print run. I know of similar experiences with my own books in two languages, where the publishers received such negative feedback that the books needed fresh translation before reprinting.

Towards good translation

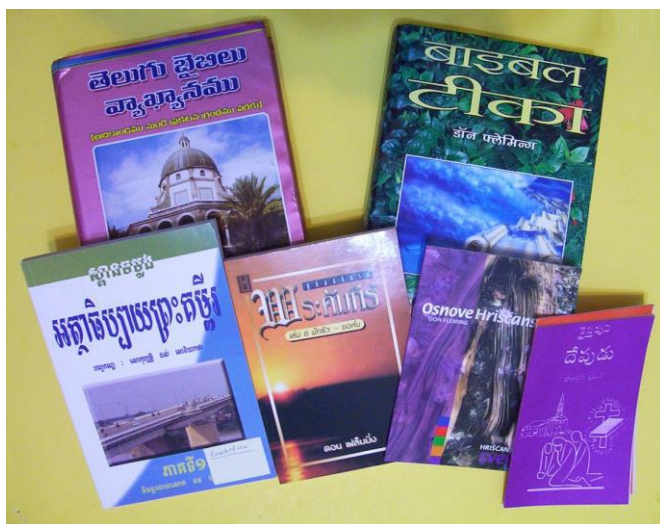
Christian books do not carry the authority of the inspired Scriptures and consequently translation is not as demanding. When people translate the Bible, there are strict procedures to help ensure accuracy while still producing something that is a readable local-language equivalent of the original. This work requires many people and large amounts of time and money. With the limited personnel and funds available, Bridgeway and the local publishers must be content with something less, though we still aim at a translation that is accurate and readable.

To this end Bridgeway has prepared guidelines concerning style of translation, variations in languages, differences in Bible versions, arrangements for organising the work and so on. But, regardless of how they organise their work, the publishers should

have an overall editor who is skilled at his job and will still listen to the views of others.

Upon completion of translation and editing but before printing, we require the entire work to be checked by people with abilities in various fields. One should be a person sufficiently skilled in English to be satisfied that the translation conveys the original meaning.

Someone must check specifically for style,



Bridgeway books: samples from more than fifty languages

grammar and structure. Another important checker is one who can assess biblical and theological accuracy, because a good translator might not have good biblical knowledge. In addition to these and other checks, the book must be read by someone who cannot read English and therefore must understand everything that is written, without reference to the original. If a translation is good, it will not read like a translation.

Finding the wherewithal

Although translation takes much time, printing does not. But printing, not translation, is the prohibitive cost in developing countries. Labour for translation is inexpensive but commodities for printing are very expensive.

Even if Bridgeway can offer financial help for printing, local ministries are expected to handle translation costs. Some translators are paid, others are not, often depending on the size of the project. Big books like the *Commentary* and *Dictionary* may require years of work. Publishers of these in Amharic (Ethiopia) and Kirundi (Burundi), though grateful for volunteer helpers, still felt obliged to pay their out-of-pocket expenses.

In the days when we sent sponsored English books to India, a local publisher decided to sell them to raise capital for local translations. Then he thought of a more aggressive approach. 'Concerning income from sale of your books, I am presenting some sets to my rich acquaintances and demand from them large contributions that will fulfil my dream of having your books in Telugu. My contribution will be to translate the books, look after publishing, raise funds and so on. Your share will be to supply as many as you can for me to sell. I think I can do it. I want to do it. And, with the help of God, I will do it.'

Neighbouring Pakistan, where our first title has now been published in Urdu, is a country where expatriate missionaries of a former generation set up substantial publishing operations with the long-term aim of helping the national church to be self-sustaining. Other countries to benefit from such initiatives are India, Tanzania and Papua New Guinea.

Challenges in Nigeria

The sacrifice and commitment of some people is humbling. Among such people is Sunday Edo, a Nigerian with whom we have been working for many years. He speaks good English and has a credible doctorate that would entitle him to lecture at many international theological institutions, but he has chosen to live in a humble dwelling in a difficult part of the country, where he has a teaching and publishing ministry in local languages. Nigeria, by far Africa's most populous country, has more than two hundred ethnic groups, each with its own language. Sunday has published Bridgeway's *Basic Christianity Series* in eight languages – Agatu, Bassa, Hausa, Ibo, Idoma, Igala, Isekiri and Tiv.

While still publishing the smaller books in various languages, Sunday began to translate and publish the eight-volume *Bridge Bible Handbooks* in his own language, Igala. Not owning a computer, he wrote

everything longhand. He had finished Volume 6 (Matthew-John) and had it checked and corrected ready to send for typing, when someone cleaning his workroom mistook it for rubbish and burnt it. He had no copy so started again. By this time friends in Australia had bought him a computer, so when he re-did the work he typed it into the computer. Then the computer crashed and he lost it all again. Undaunted, he did the translation a third time (this time backing up his material) and eventually it was published. To date he has finished four of the eight volumes.



Sunday Edo and his wife Leah

Some time after this we discovered, more or less by chance, that Sunday did all this without electricity. He had a small generator for the computer, plus lamps and candles. On the occasion of his fiftieth birthday, his wife Leah wrote to us, 'For the remaining years left, we look to God what will happen. When we meet at the feet of Christ we will thank you the more for your help. We are happy that the government has just brought electricity to our house. That means since the world began we have never experienced such a thing.' Later, when we got them a photocopier, they wrote, 'Oh, God is so good. We are so happy, we don't know whether we can sleep tonight. Our office is so small and electricity only partly operates because of power failures, but worse is when we have to go to town every time to photocopy something. How can we run publishing like that?' The answer is that he had been running publishing like that for more than ten years!

What drives Sunday is his conviction that 'Nigerians must hear the Word in their own languages.' They struggle always but never give up. On one occasion he wrote, 'We still have an urgent need to finish translating and publishing the Agatu Bible. Some people in the West have many versions, but our people cannot even get the verses.'

Upon returning from selling the *Basic Christianity* books in Agatu land he wrote, 'They are overjoyed at what they saw. We only asked payment for each book of one naira (three cents) so that people could afford them, but our joy turned to sorrow as many people could not afford even that. Some bought on credit! Some are waiting for December to finish the harvest before they can pay.' Later he wrote, 'In Tiv land, six persons combined so that each gave fifteen naira to buy a Bible in Tiv. One person reads it one day and gives it to another the next day until six of them read it the whole week.'

To help generate income, Sunday and Leah started a small cassava farm and opened a shop where stationery sales could subsidise Christian literature. But it was a battle to keep afloat. 'We have now paid all our debts and are able to buy food for the family. My children are rejoicing. For two months we could not pay our workers and had little food, which made things difficult for us. Now that the Lord has blessed us the work is going on well and everybody is happy, singing to the Lord.'

Focus on the Bible

If non-Christians are to hear the gospel, and if Christians are to grow, they need to read and understand the Word, which means they need Bible helps. The pastor of a mainline church in Tanzania wrote to the publishers of our Swahili books (who were not from a mainline church), 'Sales at our regional meeting were good, but the best was that people noted what I was seeking to demonstrate, namely, that our church has failed to do literature work while smaller churches like yours have filled the gap. You may be pleased to know that my keenest customers for your books were our bishops.' One of the translators, a lecturer at the Swahili Language Institute and a preacher in a mainline church, said the books had 'revolutionised' his Bible reading. 'I never understood the Old Testament before; now I preach on it often.'

What these people most appreciate is to understand the Bible better. Some publishers produce a variety of Christian literature, but not materials that focus directly on the biblical text. A Bible college principal in Poland said, 'Our big problem here is that though we have keen Bible students, we have very few good reference books in the Polish language. The people who publish books give us many books about sex and drugs, but not many about the Bible. In our thirty students there are five or six who can read English, so we value the books you sent.' Some of our smaller books have been translated into Polish, but much more needs to be done.

Other European languages in which the smaller books have been published are Bulgarian, Hungarian, Romanian, Serbian and Slovak. The *Bible Dictionary* is currently being translated into Albanian. Selections of various books have been

published in German study manuals along with materials from other authors. Various Christian ministries, such as Bible colleges, radio programs and magazines, have translated some of the books into Czech, Kazakh, Macedonian, Russian, Spanish and Ukrainian but never published them in book form.

First language, second language, third language

People who read and speak English, even as their second or third language, are happy to receive English-language materials, partly because more is available in English than in any other language. But it is not the same as reading and speaking in their heart language. A Bible college principal in Cameroon, after explaining that more English is used in his country than is sometimes imagined, expressed his yearning for the books in French. 'Other schools come to read in our small library and most of them scramble for the *Bridgeway Bible Commentary* and *Dictionary*. These three extra sets we have just received mean that three more students can read the books at the same time. But our French students want to read directly in French.'

A Nigerian missionary in Benin wrote, 'There is not plenty of good Christian books in French, so we give them these English books when they understand it. We have four schools of missions, with 160 students, and a leadership development program with lots of leaders attending. We want to translate these books into French in order they be more beneficial to all the people of Benin.' A pastor in Côte d'Ivoire did get round to translating the *Basic Christianity* books into French, but they were never published, in spite of some help from Bridgeway. Another African country where books were translated but never published was Zimbabwe, where the local Shona publisher did not keep faith with the publishing agreement.

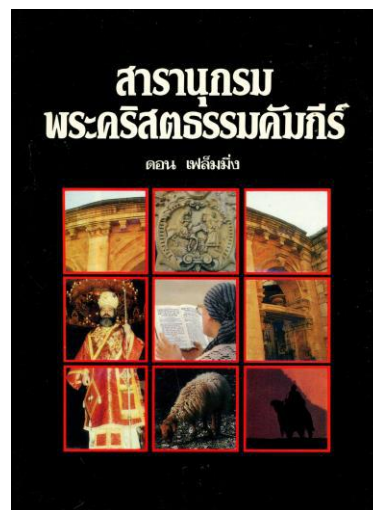
Such failures, though rare, are disappointing. Other African languages in which Bridgeway books have been published are Kisanga (Congo), Chichewa (Malawi), Rukiga (Uganda) and Yuroba (Nigeria). As in most countries, only some titles have so far been published, usually the smaller books. An exception is Egypt, where high quality editions of the *Bible Commentary* and other titles were produced in Arabic with marked efficiency.

South-East Asia and the Pacific

From the beginning, my Thai-language books were used in Laos, Thailand's northern neighbour, partly because Thai and Lao are so closely related that speakers can usually understand each other and sometimes read each others languages. But there is no substitute for having books in the people's first language, especially when Laos in recent years has become increasingly isolated through a communist government that is aggressively anti-Christian. All the Thai books have now been published in Lao and spread around the country through the church's underground network.

By contrast Cambodia, Thailand's eastern neighbour, is enjoying unprecedented openness for Christian activity. In the fifteen years from 1990 to 2005, the number of born again Christians rose from two thousand to one hundred thousand. The *Bridge Bible Handbooks*, now available in the national language, have provided the rapidly growing church with its first commentary on the Bible.

Thailand's neighbour to the west is Myanmar and, like Thailand (also Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Sri Lanka), it is largely Buddhist. But most of its hill tribe



Bridgeway Bible Dictionary in Thai

people are nominally Christian. When Bridgeway books found their way into these regions, we began receiving requests to translate and publish in tribal languages. Various titles are now in Falam, Hakka, Khumi, Lhaovo, Lisu, Mizo, Rawang, Shan, Tiddim and Zotung. All the books are in the national language, Burmese.

One Myanmar publisher, after producing the *Basics* series in his native language, wrote, 'These are the first Christian books in our language. We have nothing here like this before. We have been like a mad man going to reap the paddy without a sickle. The books give us solid food and make us hungry for more of the Lord.' The publisher in another hill tribe language wrote, 'The work in this area started only thirty years ago, and now there are 170 churches, attended by more than 10,000 Christians. This is the first ever Bible commentary in their language.'

Bhutan, sandwiched between India and China, is another Buddhist country and is vehemently opposed to the gospel. Nevertheless, our books filter in from India and some have been translated into the national language, though not published. To the west of Bhutan is another Himalayan nation, Nepal. The country is fervently Hindu, but the church's spectacular growth over the past fifty years has created a great need for biblical reference material. The *Dictionary* has been published in Nepali, and the *Commentary* is currently being translated.

The other main region of Bridgeway's activity is the Pacific, where the predominance of English means that translation projects have been few. Outside Australia, the region's largest country is Papua New Guinea, where the *Bible Dictionary* is available in Pidgin. The Pidgin of PNG is usable in some countries, such as Solomon Islands, but not in others. From Vanuatu, for example, a request has come to translate the books into Vanuatu's Bislama, which is different from PNG's Pidgin. In Fiji the needs are for English, Fijian and Indian languages, not Pidgin. One of our books was published in Fijian, but it was another instance where the translation was not satisfactory and needs to be re-done.

The local perspective

Bridgeway books have now been published in well over forty languages, besides the other languages where selected parts of various titles have appeared in magazines and study manuals. Requests keep coming in and, although the interest is heartening, the ideal is for countries to produce their own authors.

Economic and other matters often hamper the publishing of original local writings, but 2006 marked a significant step forward in at least one region of the world with the publication of the *Africa Bible Commentary*. This one-volume commentary is written by Africans for Africans and is published by the Association of Evangelicals of Africa. It has contributions from seventy scholars in twenty-five countries. In addition to providing biblical commentary, it addresses practical matters confronting Africans such as HIV/AIDS, sexual behaviour, tribal customs, witchcraft and other social, moral, religious and economic issues. It is published in English and French, and translation is under way in major African languages. Being written within the African environment, it has brought rejoicing today and augurs well for the future.

Electricity

One day we received the following letter from a friend in Ghana. ‘Our house where we were sleeping during the night caught fire and by the grace of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, my family and I were saved. But almost all our belongings, including my second hand laptop which I am training myself on it, our TV and most of my books were burnt. This was due to electrical fault from other area which resulted in three people dead including two children. We and my family were also taken to the hospital due to the excessive of smoke. The small money we were having got into ashes. I would be very much pleased if you will send me more books because the remaining is being soaked through hydrant from the fire combatants.’

This kind of story can be repeated across the developing world. Electrical faults cause fires and electrocutions everywhere. In the West, where safety is a major concern, we have rules and regulations that govern most of what we do around our homes, and for most of this we are thankful. We might at times be annoyed because of by-laws that prevent us from trimming trees or diverting waste water, but most times we feel safe with by-laws that stop us electrocuting ourselves. In many countries, however, people do not have our built-in precautions. A few stories from Thailand illustrate the point.

Sparks in Bangkok

Electricity was always a cause for concern when we lived in Bangkok. In most houses that had a fridge, the fridge door handle had a cloth wrapped around it to stop people from getting an electric shock when opening the door. Household electricity was not earthed and no power point had a switch. The power point, which was usually attached to the skirting board, consisted of two holes into which a two-pronged plug was inserted. The power cable was just two plastic-covered wires, in appearance like two pieces of flex stuck together, with a groove down the middle. This plastic-covered flex was usually exposed (that is, fastened to the surface of the wall) and the groove between the two wires invited people to attach the cable the easy way by nailing straight through the middle.

The government might not have had requirements for wiring, but it showed at least some concern for our safety by giving warnings on our electricity bills. The warning was always accompanied by an explanatory drawing. One of these showed a baby on all fours poking a piece of wire into the plug, and another showed a person nailing cable to the wall by spiking it through the middle. On one of our bills was the drawing of a fisherman standing in a pond and holding in the water a pole, tied to which was a wire that drew electricity from an adjacent power pole. The message warned firstly against electrocuting oneself while trying to electrocute the fish, and secondly against stealing the government’s electricity.

In one place I saw a rudimentary ‘switch’ for the light bulb suspended from the ceiling. Two plastic coated wires, also dangling from the ceiling, were pared back at their ends, each of which was then curled into a hook. Just hook the wires together and the light came on.

Stealing electricity was always a problem. Inspectors had to check constantly to ensure that residents were not obtaining their electricity through bypassing the meter. But inspectors could barely keep pace with street vendors. Chief offenders were those who sold thick-shake fruit drinks that were made in an electric blender wired to a nearby power pole.

Short cuts and short circuits

One Sunday at church in Bangkok an electrical fault caused a power point to explode. One of the resourceful young men was soon down on his knees digging around the skirting board, removing the plug cover and gingerly removing and fastening wires with a screwdriver. Alarmed at what I saw, I yelled, 'Wait a minute! You haven't turned off the power.' He turned to me with a look of disgust and words along the lines, 'I've done this before, you know. I'm not stupid enough to touch both wires at the same time.' The look on his face said, 'These foreigners think we don't know anything.'

We had a similar experience when someone gave us an air conditioner to install in our bedroom. When the electrician came to install it, I left him to do what he had to do while I worked away in my office. After a reasonable time, the power had still not been turned off, so I went to see what he was doing. 'Just finished,' he said. Again, it was simply a matter of using his sharp knife to pare away the plastic from the wires, making sure not to touch both wires at the same time, and then binding it all up with trusty insulation tape.

When the church wanted to replace the standard light bulb fittings with fluorescent tubes, the shopkeeper who sold me the tubes and ballast showed me the correct sequence of wiring so that I could install the lights myself. The fluorescents certainly improved the lighting. Some time later the church decided to install a ceiling fan, though this time arranged for the man at the shop to come and install it. But next time we turned on the lights, nothing happened. We then discovered he had simply taken the wires from the light and connected them to the fan. When we complained, he promised to come and correct the problem, which he did. We had our lights back, but now we had no fan. Back we went with a further complaint, to which his response was along the lines, 'Well, make up your mind.' We insisted on having both lights and fan – and finally we got them.

Spare a thought, however, for the unfortunate rock singer who was performing at a public venue in Bangkok. He made a dramatic stage entry, shouted a response to the screaming fans, grabbed the microphone from the stand and, clutching it tightly to his chest, sank to his knees. The screaming fans thought it was great, till they realised he had electrocuted himself. The mike was alive but the singer was dead.

Difficult countries

All sponsored Bridgeway books sent to needy countries are in English. The main receiving countries are the old English-speaking colonies, though as English becomes an increasingly global language, the demand from other countries increases. Books enter most countries without trouble, though we soon meet problems when sending to the Communist countries of Asia or the Islamic countries of the Middle East and North Africa. But difficulties getting books into countries are nothing compared with the difficulties faced by Christians living in those countries.

The Arabic world

Earlier I mentioned a conference of Christian leaders from the Arabic world held in Cyprus under the auspices of AWEMA. Having been to few Arabic countries, I found the conference an eye-opener.

The popular view across the Arab world is that ‘Arab’ means ‘Muslim’ and ‘Christian’ means ‘Western’, which results in Arab Christians being seen as social misfits. In general they are misunderstood and under suspicion. But the conference revealed some positive aspects that we in the West hear little about. There are about 1,500 Protestant churches in the twenty-two Arabic countries, though admittedly the majority of these churches are in just one country, Egypt.

Conference speakers reminded us that the Arab world is not universally Muslim. Not all countries are closed to the gospel and, even in those that are, opportunities exist for business investment that can provide a credible cover for a Christian presence. This is one of the main strategies used by our friends in AWEMA. Upon initiating a venture, they maintain it for four years, which they consider is enough time to see whether a viable church is likely to result. Their observation is that in spite of the church having to operate underground in sixteen of the twenty-two Arabic countries, people are coming to Christ in increasing numbers.

Wherever possible, these Arab Christian ministries organise training in evangelism, Bible study, leadership, church management and family life. They also initiate micro-enterprises as a way of assisting those who have difficulty gaining employment because of their faith. Local Christians receive small loans to begin projects that enable them earn income, live with integrity, contribute to the spiritual and financial ministries of the church, and resist the temptation to look for an easier life in the West.



Jordan – outreach, teaching and training through youth camps

One Arab leader sent us a copy of a letter to fellow believers in which he said, 'Now is the time for the Arab churches to send out Arab missionaries to needy Arab countries. We all share the same language and traditions, we all face the same challenges and we all have similar problems. The Lord has opened the door for Arab missions, and we believe that no one can close it. We believe that many will be blessed and millions will come to know Christ as their Saviour as a result of this missionary work.'

This is a bold statement in view of the particular difficulties of Arab countries. According to one United Nations report, Arab countries rate lowest in individual liberties, civil participation and press freedom. More than half the total number of Arab women are illiterate.

Problems with buildings

Bridgeway has on occasions sent a few cartons of books into Turkey, our chief interest being in what is believed to be the only Bible school in the country. When we visited the school in 1998, it had no more than a dozen students, operated in rented premises on a street front and carried a prominent Christian identification sign. Turkey was a Muslim country with a secular constitution that, on paper at least, upheld freedom of religion. In a nation of almost 70 million, churches existed in only fifteen of the country's eighty provinces. The Bible school shared with Turkey's churches the goal of having congregations in fifty provinces within the next five years and, in an optimistic step towards a better future, had bought a nearby building. But then it ran into the kind of trouble that Christian institutions regularly encounter in Muslim countries – building regulations.

The local Council threatened demolition on the grounds that parts of the roof and porch contravened building regulations. At least twenty nearby buildings were of similar construction, but the Council singled out the Christian property for its attention.

Even in countries where churches are not outlawed, the government's policy is one of obstruction. While mosques spring up everywhere, churches find it impossible to get building approval. In some countries they need approval even to carry out repairs, but such approval is rarely given. The authorities expect buildings to fall into disrepair so that they can then demand their demolition. If a home or office is used for a Christian meeting, authorities can use zoning laws to declare the meetings illegal.

But not everything is cause for pessimism. We heard from the Gulf state of Qatar that the government gave permission to four churches to construct buildings. Although these were largely for Christians among the expatriate workforce, they were Qatar's first purpose-built churches since the seventh century. From other Arab countries we hear of Christians being allowed to set up stalls at book fairs. Most report good sales.

Fickle public, creative outreach

Conditions in a country can change rapidly and wildly. In Algeria, for example, the year 2002 saw innovative policies of religious tolerance that gave Christians unprecedented freedom. The number of churches increased markedly, especially among Berbers. An international Christian TV service reported one and a half million viewers within the country, and radio programs received hundreds of enquiries each week. But when Islamists complained about the growing number of Christians, the government introduced restrictions to limit the places of public worship, control the number in attendance and prohibit speaking about the Christian faith to Muslims. Christians were again marginalised and in some cases denied access to utilities such as health services and schools.

In Turkey we met Christians who presented Bible studies over the radio, but a few years later we heard of Christians who were killed or imprisoned because of anti-Christian reporting in the media. The climate of tolerance can change very quickly. Despite the hostility, Christians still find ways to make known the gospel. One group

placed an advertisement for a 'prayer line' in local newspapers and received hundreds of responses. In an unlikely country, Muslims were led in prayers of repentance over the phone and introduced to local churches.

The internet is another way that enables enquirers in anti-Christian countries to learn about Christianity without risking hostility from friends and family. People who are prohibited from buying a Bible can download and print from the web.

Among the most difficult Muslim countries to penetrate is Mauritania in West Africa. Officially, all citizens are Muslim and are forbidden to enter a non-Muslim place of worship or own a non-Muslim sacred book. But an Egyptian-led ministry has set up a training centre in Malta to equip Christians from North Africa to go into apparently inaccessible places such as Mauritania. Also, 'tentmakers' move in from West Africa. One Nigerian missionary we help in Mauritania was full of faith: 'We praise God for increasing converts in this thoroughly Muslim country. Pray that the disciples will be taught adequately so that the church will gain deep roots and reach out to others.'

The personal approach

An Italian friend has a special concern for Morocco. She initiated a program for helping prostitutes by opening a pizza shop that could give them a better way to earn a living. When she had to leave the country, she looked for a way of sneaking back to take the gospel to the people she loved. Her dauntless enthusiasm was reflected in a letter she sent us.

'We did some friendship evangelism in a park, where I met Fatima and her baby. She was an Arabic teacher, a conservative Muslim and spoke French fluently, so I was able to share with her my testimony of how Jesus changed my life. She was open and interested about Jesus, so I offered her a New Testament, which she accepted. When her husband came to pick her up, he was friendly as well, and they invited me home to dinner. We ended up having a long discussion about Muslim and Christian beliefs. Being conservative Muslims, they practised the five 'pillars of Islam,' but they seemed hungry to hear about Jesus, why he died and how he changed my life.

'When we were in the park a few days later and gave a Christian audio tape to a girl, a policeman saw what we were doing and came to question us. I talked well and avoided trouble, but people began growing suspicious of us, so next day we took a train to Rabat. While on the train, I shared my testimony with a teacher named Nydia, so she started asking me questions about Christianity. She told me she watches a Christian TV program from Lebanon and I was the first Christian she had ever met. I gave her a New Testament also, and she started crying tears of joy. She said she had wanted one but didn't know how to get one safely. We prayed together before saying goodbye. I gave her more Christian material and the *Jesus* film.'

No one knows the exact number of Christians in Morocco (estimates vary between 5,000 and 25,000), but most Christians meet secretly in house churches. We hear that baptisms occur regularly, even though proselytising is illegal.

Some of the Central Asian Republics of the former Soviet Union are also difficult countries. The governments might be Muslim, but their opposition to Christianity is not because they promote Islamic extremism. Rather, they want to prevent it. They therefore enact laws that hinder a range of religious activity and consequently Christians suffer. If people decide to become followers of Jesus, they are seen as extremists and a threat to social harmony. Evangelists might be accused of inciting religious hatred and be fined, tortured, imprisoned or deported.

Blasphemy accusations

Pakistan's infamous blasphemy laws can easily be used in ways that have little to do with religion, such as to take revenge, eliminate opposition or get one's own way.

Christians are vulnerable to unjust use of the blasphemy laws and have suffered violence and imprisonment. A Muslim can use any pretext to make an accusation and his testimony is accepted, regardless of whether there are witnesses.

Sometimes the accused are acquitted, though in the eyes of the public they are forever guilty. They live in constant danger, their families are ostracised, work is hard to obtain and often they have no alternative but to go and begin life afresh in a locality where they are not known. Even a judge who acquits a Christian might be in danger and some have been assassinated.

In contrast to Pakistan, Tanzania had a case where its blasphemy laws saw the arrest of a Muslim for blaspheming Jesus Christ. But the Christians still suffered, because Muslim hotheads then attacked churches.

Accusations of blasphemy have caused conflict in northern Nigeria. Issues that spark Nigeria's violence might be economic and political as much as religious, but the introduction of *sharia* in several states of a majority-Christian country has made things worse. Although the imposition of *sharia* by state governments is unconstitutional, the national government is unable to control what happens in the



Christians killed by Islamists, northern Nigeria

predominantly Muslim north. Thousands of Christians have been killed, and hundreds of churches, homes and businesses destroyed. An accusation of blasphemy against Islam is enough to cause a riot, but when that happens, some Christians have behaved no better than the Muslims. Retaliation breeds retaliation and so the problem escalates.

While violence and bloodshed grab the headlines, a more widespread ordeal is what has been called 'silent persecution.' In many countries Christians might be stripped of basic freedoms, coerced into converting to the state religion, denied entrance into schools, barred from working in the civil service, refused treatment at clinics, excluded from aid distribution and subjected to other forms of discrimination and injustice.

Bullies and slave-traders

Often, however, persecution is anything but silent. In Sudan, where the Muslim government officially allows freedom of religion, a female street vendor in Khartoum was arrested and given thirty lashes for not wearing socks to cover her feet. Another was taken by police from a bus for not wearing a headscarf and at her court appearance was not allowed to speak in her own defence. All children in government schools are forced to learn the Koran. Christian children might be kidnapped on the streets and taken to special schools in unknown locations where they are trained to hate the rebel Christians of the south and eventually become child soldiers of the government.

Although Sudan has the worst reputation for slavery, the practice is widespread. In many cases the traders are Muslims and the victims are Christians. Some are kidnapped and sold for profit, others are made bonded workers to pay off debts, and many are lured by the offer of good work only to find themselves trapped in the sex trade or the sweat-shop industries. Trafficking in children as bonded labour is a profitable business. A militant Islamic organisation in Pakistan funds its activities by selling Christian children into slavery.

Contending with brutality

In countries such as North Korea and China, Christians constitute a large portion of the huge slave labour camps. Over 100,000 Christians are among the inmates of North Korea's labour camps, their 'crime' perhaps being that they were caught talking about Jesus, possessing a Bible, singing a Christian song or attending an illegal gathering. Beatings are routine, the forms of torture are unspeakable and starvation is everywhere. Life expectancy inside a North Korean labour camp is three years. North Korea and China have contributed substantially to the number of Christian martyrs – more in the past hundred years than in the entire previous history of the church.

Around the world, torture is used against all kinds of people, not just Christians. Of 195 nations where Amnesty International obtained reports, more than 150 used state-sanctioned torture. In more than eighty of these, people died from torture. Corporal punishment is legal in more than thirty countries, seven of which have documented cases of judicial amputation.

Saudi Arabia, where judicial brutality is commonplace, is often regarded as the most anti-Christian country, sometimes surpassed by North Korea. By law all Saudis must be Muslims. Apostasy is a capital offence, which means that any Saudi found to have converted to Christianity will be executed. The government bans all Christian literature, music, symbols and religious observances. Christians among the seven million foreign workers meet secretly for worship, but run the risk of being tracked down by the dreaded religious police. The government offers rewards for information on the existence of Christian groups and vigorously pursues any Saudi nationals thought to have contact with them.

Most Christians we have contact with across Africa, Asia and the Middle East do not suffer the kind of opposition and difficulty outlined above, but they have a sense of solidarity with their suffering fellow-believers. They respond with enthusiasm and tears to our monthly *Worldnews* bulletin, often asking for more details so they can pray more earnestly. They have a bigger view of the world than many in the West, where most news media have no globally balanced view because of the dominance of local trivia.

One man from Kenya put it well when he wrote, 'I need more spiritual books from you not just for my work but also to help me pray for those who are tortured and in prison. It is my strong desire to help those who suffer because of Jesus. We as Christians are responsible to pray for those who are tortured, even if we do not see them. Please, I want to keep them in my prayers.'

Universities

My teaching ministry has taken me into more than one hundred Bible colleges around the world, but into far fewer universities. This is partly because Bible colleges are concerned with Christian ministry, whereas universities are concerned with other things, which means that Christian ministry is restricted to time available outside the university's timetable. Although Bible colleges are large recipients of our books, lots of books go also to university Christian groups. Occasionally, I have first-hand involvement with things happening on campus, but most news comes from what I hear from Christian campus workers.

Brave students in Sudan

Christians from Nigeria are often found evangelising in the most difficult places. I once received a request from Nigeria to send books via a specified safe route to a Nigerian Christian who was working undercover on the campus of the University of Khartoum in northern Sudan. Understandably, he was one man I wanted to meet when I was in Sudan a few years later. In the process of locating him, I heard from Christians in Khartoum how well regarded he was – a person of courage and integrity whose awareness of God's presence was something special. He was a delight to meet.

To have an excuse to be on campus full-time, the man had enrolled to study Arabic. When I made the obvious comment that evangelistic activity must be dangerous, he agreed – 'but Jesus told us it could be dangerous.' It was not illegal for citizens of Khartoum to practise as Christians, nor indeed to operate a Christian fellowship within the university. But it was always dangerous to try to evangelise Muslims. Nevertheless, the man went about his work quietly, using whatever opportunities came his way. He was by no means the only Christian witnessing for Christ on campus, for the university had a Christian fellowship affiliated with IFES (International Fellowship of Evangelical Students), but he might very well have been the only one who was there primarily for the purpose of evangelising.

Postal mail to and from Sudan was notoriously bad and in time I lost contact with my Nigerian friend. But some years later a Ugandan, who had worked initially with the Nigerian and was now working full-time with IFES, wrote of the astounding Christian growth there had been on Khartoum's campuses. At that time Sudan's Khartoum-based Muslim government regularly bombed the predominantly Christian south, targeting Christian institutions such as churches, hospitals and schools. But at an annual IFES conference in Khartoum, attended by more than a thousand believers from twenty-four institutions of higher learning, ninety-four people made public commitments to serve the Lord wherever he might send them, whether in Sudan or in other difficult regions beyond its borders.

Less volatile places

In former Soviet-bloc countries, universities were one place where enquiring minds were receptive of the Bible's message and Bridgeway books became of use. In Slovakia the staff worker affiliated with IFES, in writing to ask prayer for some enquiring students, added, 'I first read many parts of your *Commentary and Dictionary*, but just lately I have read *Let the Bible Speak for Itself*. Now I have a better understanding how to use commentaries and not to be much afraid when I look for historical background and the main teaching of whole books and chapters.' He went on to say that many churches had become so negative through years of resisting communism that they were suspicious of any variation from the stereotyped preaching that had become standard fare over fifty years.

Ethiopia was another country that had been liberated from communism and soon saw a rapid increase in the number of Christians on its university campuses. One worker among students wrote, 'This year the number of evangelical students has reached 600, praise the Lord. Your devotion to help develop their spiritual life with these books is becoming impactful and tremendously useful. Please send more.'

Another campus worker in Ethiopia, upon hearing of Bridgeway's ministry, wrote, 'I am serving in the students fellowship as coordinator with others in mission. The fellowship has about 700 students and we have many departments such as evangelism, discipling, counselling, literature, drama, etc. But we lack spiritual materials, and our fellowship increases in size from year to year. We want to open a library but we have no books and no source of getting books. That is why I am applying to you to provide us with some materials.'

Uganda is another place that has seen amazing growth on its university campuses. One campus worker wrote, 'I've been through these books and see that anyone can understand them. This is the material we need. We've had other books given to us that are too difficult to understand, and others that are so simple they say hardly anything. But these books really expound the Bible, while being easy to read. We can use plenty in Uganda.' A few years later, when the world had grown fearful of Islamic terrorism, another Ugandan wrote, 'These books have helped me this year to train more than a thousand Christians in Muslim and Catholic evangelism. The Lord is doing wonderful things. About 500 people have recently trusted Christ. I can't explain the way God is moving here. He is saving Catholics and Muslims in large numbers, especially from universities and high schools.'

Some variations

Speaking to university groups brings encouragements and challenges, and can usually assure variety. Perhaps the largest group I ever addressed was in Delhi, where the Indians' grasp of English and sharpness of mind brought plenty of lively interaction. In countries such as Burundi, where numbers were smaller and the language required interpretation, interaction was valuable but far less robust. In Australia I have enjoyed conducting studies for many university fellowships, whether on campus or at weekend camps, and at one time was honorary chaplain of the Overseas Christian Fellowship in Brisbane. This was a fellowship largely of Asian students drawn from a number of local universities, and meetings with them usually left me with a yearning to be back in Thailand.

During our years in Thailand, I spent a good deal of time visiting university campuses, mainly because students regularly fed the small Bible study groups I established for non-Christians. To get students talking religion was not difficult, but to get them to repent and believe the gospel was a different matter.



Thammasat University, Thailand

One year I taught at Bangkok's Thammasat University, not as a low-profile evangelist but as a lecturer in the Faculty of Liberal Arts. I did this two afternoons a week for six months. The purpose of the exercise was mainly mercenary, because the church we had just established needed urgent money.

It wanted to take out a 13-year lease on a meeting place, and most of the money had to be provided up front. The local Christians did not have enough money, and Gae and I had no intention of writing home to ask for it. We did not want local people to see us as a convenient source of funds.

So, following the lead of the apostle Paul, we thought it would be an example and a help to the young church if I worked four hours each week and donated the proceeds to the building fund. We were as much part of the church as others, and we wanted to work with our hands to help the church accumulate the necessary money.

The local Christians apparently saw things in the same light, because our extra contribution, far from making them dependent, gave them incentive. They worked hard and gave sacrificially, far beyond what could be expected of them, and within the six months we raised the required amount. It was a wonderful exercise of faith and commitment for all of us in the church. A bonus was that my association with the university students resulted in many joining my Bible study groups and several attending church. I would like to finish the story triumphantly and say that some became believers, but that was not so.

In Accra, Ghana

Perhaps my most astonishing experience of Christian activity at a university was in Accra, capital of Ghana. My host took me along to address one of the many Christian groups – at the unlikely time of 8.45 at night, mainly because that was the only available time for a suitable auditorium.

We arrived on campus soon after eight o'clock, to be met immediately by the sound of lusty Christian singing coming from one of the lecture halls. We asked a person at the door what sort of meeting this was and were told it was an evangelistic outreach by students affiliated with a group of churches. More than four hundred people were packed inside.

Moving on, we came to the building where our own meeting was to be held, but as our room was in use by an academic group, we decided to sit and talk in a sheltered area nearby. But we found that it too was occupied, this time by a dozen or so Christians having a Bible study. They were not part of the group I was booked to speak to, so we left them and walked to an area of some park benches where we could sit and pass the time. But as we turned a corner, there, sitting along a low brick wall beside the path, was another group of students, this lot holding a prayer meeting. We reached the park benches to find that only one was vacant. To the right five or six students had brought two benches together and were having a prayer meeting, and to the left four students on two more benches were engaged in deep discussion. We could not hear what they were saying, but noticed that at the end they had a round of prayer.

As the four got up to leave, my friend went across and asked them who they were and what they were doing. It turned out they were simply a few young people who were concerned that some of their fellow students were struggling with their studies, so they had formed this group to pray for the strugglers and find ways of helping them.

It was approaching time for our meeting, so we began to walk back to the venue. A short way along the path we met another group of a dozen or so students (also sitting along a low brick wall), who were about to disperse after holding a meeting. We noticed two of them holding Bibles, so asked if they were a Christian group. No, was the reply, they were a maths group. The Bibles had nothing to do with the meeting; the two people were carrying Bibles because they were about to go to another Christian meeting – not ours either! Nevertheless, more than a hundred other people were at our meeting. The auditorium was filled to overflowing and we spent the next hour dealing with the subject of disciplined Bible reading as a way of life.

I returned home that night in something of a daze. I could not help but reflect upon the difference in atmosphere between the campus of this university and that of any comparable institution in my own country. I reflected also on the enthusiasm for two things for which there is declining interest in the West – prayer and the Word. The difference of emphasis in some of the developing countries is no doubt a contributing factor to the extraordinary church growth these countries are seeing.

Loud speakers and other gear

Nigerians are never ones to take a backward step when faced with some obstacle or challenge. One long-time recipient of Bridgeway books wrote one day asking if we could buy him a megaphone so that he could counter the noise coming from the loud speakers at the mosque. He wanted a hand-held loud hailer to use in the minibus park where he went to preach each morning between 5.00 and 6.30. During this time the neighbouring mosque broadcast prayers and sermons, and he was not willing to 'let them have all the preaching opportunities' without the alternative being heard from those who 'preach the true gospel.'

Indoors and outdoors

Through some aid projects we operate, we have bought more than megaphones for those who need them. We have helped several countries with public address systems for use inside churches and in outdoor places. Most church buildings in Africa are not built with any consideration for acoustics, being just four walls and a roof. They are usually large enough to accommodate several hundred people, in some cases thousands, but with metal roofs and no ceiling, they become impossibly noisy when rain is falling. Even without rain, a PA system is often needed.

Churches might have no lighting, poor ventilation, a dirt floor and crude seating, but have a PA system – usually adjusted to maximum volume. Alas, many preachers shout anyway, and the high amplification of the sound system can make life difficult for the audience. At least, that is how it appears to me; the locals seem used to it. Outdoors the preachers shout all the louder. And mostly, they themselves are loud speakers, whether or not they have a sound system.

One man in Uganda sent photos of him preaching outdoors using his newly acquired sound system. He wrote, 'The number of people coming to our open air preaching has doubled because of the PA system. I have just returned from a mission in one district and at every open air preaching over a thousand people came to listen. The Lord moved mightily and ninety-three trusted Christ. Muslims also attended and one got saved.'

Back in his home town, however, he found that Muslim missionaries had arrived from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia and were establishing a school for training missionaries. When they were reinforced with a fresh team of eleven, he decided it was time to meet the challenge head-on. 'Another brother and I went to their centre and talked to them. They are well equipped with supplies, especially food. I have contacted Christians to pray for God to give us wisdom from above to handle this serious matter. All of us agree to pray and go for offensive immediately. We are mobilising funds for fuel and renting a van to follow them into the rural areas.'



Uganda: Open air debate with Muslim cleric

With another letter the man recounted how he debated with a Muslim cleric before an assorted crowd of bystanders in a public area of town that was, surprisingly, property owned by the mosque! The man wrote, 'We had a public debate with Muslims on Muslim premises. It was peaceful and blessed by the Lord. In fact,

the Lord rescued one young man from Islam. Right now we are heading for Kisoro to give baptismal lessons and after that thirty will be baptised.'

Being positive towards Muslims

Across Africa, as in the rest of the world, Christians are apprehensive about the spread of Islam. Many have lived with Muslim neighbours for years but done nothing to pass on the Good News. We often receive requests for any material we have that can help in evangelising Muslims. Bridgeway itself does not produce any, but we use a book that is the best I have seen on the subject, *Sharing God's Love with Muslims* by Bill Dennett (published by SPCK). This book, by a good friend, points out that we do not need detailed knowledge of the Quran before approaching Muslims – though any background knowledge of Islam will help. Basically, what we need is to act towards them as we would towards any other human beings that we are supposed to love for the sake of Christ. Bridgeway includes this book with our own in selected despatches and we are pleased at the help it gives those who want to tell Muslims about the Saviour.

Because Islamic missionary activity is sponsored by oil-rich states, there is plenty of money to build mosques and equip them with external loud speakers. But the number of mosques is disproportionately large in relation to the number of Muslims, especially in nominally Christian countries. While Christians are concerned about this, they do not give up in despair. A Christian bookseller in a Muslim area of Malawi said, 'I am selling Christian books and sharing God's love with our Muslim friends. Islam has great material wealth for propagating itself, such as motor vehicles, magnificent buildings and radio station, to mention just a few, but when I am with the Bible I have a weapon sharper than a two-edged sword.'

Talks on tape

Audio cassette tapes might be out of fashion in the West, but they are still used widely in the poorer countries, provided people can get hold of a cassette player. For those with no electricity there are batteries, and for those who cannot afford batteries there are hand-wind players.

Not all preaching tapes from the West are suitable, partly because the way we speak among each other may not be easy for people elsewhere to follow. We must make certain adjustments when speaking to those for whom English is not the mother tongue. This is especially important where listeners to a tape do not have the advantage of seeing the speaker's mouth. With this in mind, I have prepared hundreds of tapes (later converted to CDs), which cover every book of the Bible and many important Christian topics. We send these tapes or CDs with our books to any who want them and have the equipment to play them. They are also available free on Bridgeway's website.

Zimbabwe has a fairly good standard of English. One pastor used a series of eight cassettes (16 talks) to teach the entire church the book of Romans. In Ghana, another country with a good standard of English, a pastor wrote, 'After listening to that message on discipleship, I have decided to arrange a day for all my church members to listen.' Another person in Ghana, this one a Catholic priest, wrote, 'My profound appreciation for your immense generosity in sending me the tapes. I rejoice in a very special way for what you are doing and will pray for your ministry.' An optimistic, but not very realistic, pastor in Gabon said he had learnt from my tapes but wondered if I could do them also in French. An elder of an Ethiopian church wanted more tapes, because, he said, they now had heard each of the four talks five times and they wanted some variety.

Helping the preachers

Mostly the tapes are used by the pastors and evangelists in smaller groups or in their own preaching preparation, but some use the tapes for another kind of learning. This is particularly so where I have run seminars for pastors and teachers on how to prepare and give simple expository Bible teaching. Preachers listen to the tapes

critically with an eye to utilising some of the techniques. Many of these preachers have a burning passion to be Bible teachers who can help their churches know God's Word. A pastor in Swaziland wrote, 'I am listening to your tapes and I am learning the way you handle your lessons and the way you express to the audience. I am following this example and I thank God, for I am changing the way I handle the lessons in preaching the Bible.'

A pastor in Papua New Guinea, also writing after a seminar I had run with pastors and teachers, had a different twist on the connection the seminar had with tapes. He confessed that he and his fellow preachers often 'borrowed' their sermons from tapes and magazines, but with help received through the seminar they now had confidence to preach from the Bible direct.

For all that, I can understand why some pastors re-preach sermons they heard on tape. Often they are merely looking for something different that will give variety and at the same time ease their load, because they might be spread around a number of churches and have to preach five or six times a week. One reason I prepare books or tapes is to give help to such people, so I am happy for them to recycle any of the material. But occasionally I am reminded to be careful should I myself want to recycle a sermon. At a large conference in Kolkata (Calcutta) in 2001, my Bengali interpreter said that in 1984 he was a student in a Bible College where I gave a number of talks, among which was one on Psalm 118. I was flattered that, after seventeen years, he remembered what I had spoken on. 'It is not difficult,' he said, 'because I have re-preached your sermon in many places. So please do not preach it here.'

Sight and sound

Like people the world over, most people in poorer countries want to own a radio or television set – though we heard of one exception in Nigeria: 'I sold my first television set to get money to buy books. Then I heard of your program to assist evangelists and pastors to have a library. So now I am praising God for these more books. He answered my prayer through you.'

Once people have a TV set, they then aim to get a video player. This enables them to play Christian videos, especially the *Jesus* film, which is a widely used tool of evangelism throughout the developing world. But having a video player leaves the way open for all sorts of videos, and not all are helpful. Within church circles the greatest harm might come not from secular suppliers but from sources that portray themselves as Christian. Some productions give the appearance of being Christian, but in reality are more a reflection of the West's consumer-driven mindset. They might look interesting and promise much, but in the end they damage people who, in their desperation, might grasp at anything that looks like a quick way out of difficulty.

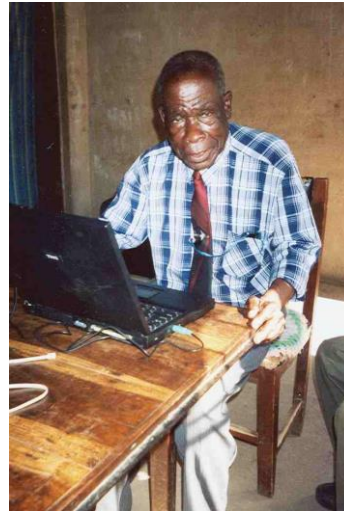
Communications are a major problem in most developing countries. Getting around countries never seems to be easy, and a bus trip that appears on a map to be only a two-hour journey can easily turn into a full-day event. Also, keeping in touch with people to coordinate travel has always been a problem, but that is changing with the advent of the cell phone. In countries where lack of services and prohibitive costs make a landline telephone impossible for most people, many now have mobile phones. In comparison with landline phones, cell phones are cheap and reliable, and have improved one aspect of communication enormously. Users buy phone cards that enable them to load as little or as much time on to their phone as they can afford. When they run out of money, the phone simply goes silent till they have enough money to put it back into business.

Another boon is the email café. For most countries in Africa, we consider to have done well to send an air mail letter and receive a reply within six weeks. But more than half the people we deal with now have an email address. They might not be able to write long letters (because email cafés charge according to the time used) but we are told that on average a short email costs less than an air mail letter.

Few of these people, however, own a computer, the piece of equipment that most of them would dearly love to own. With used laptop computers available in the West at low prices, I no longer carry my own laptop with me on overseas trips. Instead, I acquire a second-hand unit that I can use along the way and then leave with some designated person. In this way we have so far delivered fourteen laptops. Through the generosity of Christians at home, a comparable number of desktop units have been acquired locally for key people.

On wheels

We know that just about everyone would like to own a motor vehicle, and in specific cases it might be worth helping someone acquire one, but in general we avoid getting involved in such projects. If a person's financial status is such that he is unable to contribute most of the purchase price of a vehicle, even one that is second-hand, he is unlikely to have enough money to pay for its running costs.



Laptop for Malawian pastor

A bicycle is a different matter. As a form of transport, it is the most that people can usually aspire to own. One Zambian man expressed this aspiration, though he might not have first checked it with his wife: 'I have no hope to own a motor vehicle, but if I had a bicycle we could extend our range of preaching. I was thinking of carrying my wife at the back of the bicycle and reach the people in the bush areas to the far distance of fifty kilometres.'

Most people do not ask for much. A man in Kenya, thankful for the gift of a bicycle, said, 'People are very thirsty for the Word of God, but reaching them is very hard because we must walk many kilometres from one village to another. Now we have one bicycle and two men ride it fifty kilometres to reach the remote villages with the Word of God.' An evangelist in Ghana wrote, 'I now do the work of God smoothly because of the bicycle I bought with the money you sent. I am in a thick forest doing the work of God in six villages where there is no electricity. They are so poor they cannot offer money for things we take to them. We care for widows also.'

For those of us who get around our countries in comfort, these people provide an example of sacrifice and commitment. That commitment might be tested when things go wrong, but they do not give in easily. A report sent by a national evangelist in Zambia recorded, 'I made a trip to encourage the two assemblies I planted last year. Thanks be to the Lord that they still stand and grow. I also travelled more, in fact 190 km on a bicycle visiting and encouraging leaders in distant places. In one place a woman who used to help us in the Samfya Bible School lost her bicycle and all her household goods when her house burnt down. But she has kept walking 18 km twice a week to visit these small churches.' Many of us might feel that to lose our transport, facilities or equipment would be a fair reason to opt out. Better people just press on.

Other ways of helping

Where we can help provide things like bicycles, generators, electricity, clean water, weather-proof roofing and better housing, we are pleased to do so. Some kinds of equipment, such as computers, photocopiers and sewing machines, not only improve people's living conditions but also give them a means of earning income. These kinds of income-producing activities are often referred to as micro-enterprises. The capital for them usually comes from grants or micro-loans, whether from the West or from locally based Christian entities such as churches, individuals or groups. We have found that rather than try to organise details from afar, it is better to give these entities some

capital and then leave them to work out local arrangements. In general we have found the local people very astute and responsible in handling such things.

The micro-loans (or grants) may range from twenty dollars to several hundred, and may set up people to earn income by cooking food, making clothes, or selling basic commodities such as soap, cooking oil, charcoal, small groceries or phone cards.



Micro-enterprise, Burundi

Others may grow crops, raise chickens, or acquire animals such as goats, pigs or cows that can provide food for the family, products for sale, manure for farms and income opportunities through breeding.

Some of our friends in these countries manage only a handful of micro-loans, but others have hundreds. In countries that have no government-

sponsored welfare provisions such as we in the West enjoy, these modest enterprises give the poor and vulnerable, especially widows, a chance to survive without having to beg.

Valuable packaging

When we pack cartons of books, we may at times stuff in small articles of clothing to protect the edges or fill up spaces, knowing that these clothes will readily be worn by someone somewhere. We also include stationery items such as file folders and writing paper. Sometimes we receive off-cuts from printers, so that people in countries where paper is scarce can benefit from scraps that otherwise would be thrown into the recycling bin. In thanking us for these extras, recipients often give us a full accounting of what they received and how they utilised it.

From Burundi a man wrote, 'Our parents in Christ, we wish to thank you very much for the carton of books. When we open it we fall down in joy and deep sensation. This is the addition of books in the carton: sixteen *Bridge Bible Handbooks*, two *Bridge Bible Directories*, ten *Basic Christianity* small books, two *Let the Bible Speak for Itself*, 126 red papers, 223 grey papers, 310 short papers white.' Small pieces of paper like this were also valuable to a woman in Kenya who wrote, 'I teach in the Bible classes to help women in the church read the Bible. But because they do not have money to buy Bibles, I must write verses on hundreds of these small pieces of paper to give each of them. They are poor like ourselves, but we have the Saviour Jesus in our hearts who does not look on us as poor people.'

A Nigerian missionary in Central African Republic wrote, 'We received three lots of all Bridgeway books, plus 12 flat files, 38 big envelopes, 79 sheets of A4 paper, and 2 spring-ring folders. Praise the Lord for all this. There are not books and Bibles enough for everyone, so we have just started a library and the Lord is blessing it. But please don't forget the 16 pastors I told you about earlier who can all read English and badly need your books.'

In thanking us for a carton of books, a pastor in Malawi added, 'God answered my prayers because of the spring-ring folders you put in. I can use these to keep minutes of meetings of national conferences, regional conferences, Bible school and my local church.' After receiving a later carton he wrote, 'I thank you also for the shirts for my two sons Meshech and Elisha who are blessed by putting on.' An evangelist in Sudan, who also received a carton with two shirts stuffed in around the books, searched for

words to express his thanks: 'I did not find anyone like you in this world. If all people can be like you, there would be no problems in the world. You are my friends for life.'

Small things with value

An Ethiopian was overjoyed to 'receive these more Bridgeway books to help the elders, plus the one packet of chalk, two Bibles, one New Testament, two clipboards, one pad and sheets of paper, twelve daily reading books, two cassettes of Bible teaching, one fax scroll for drawing paper and two children's books. Such things are not available here.' A Kenyan said, 'We loved the beautiful small clothings you poked around as packing. It was as if you knew we had a baby girl.' And a Nigerian wrote, 'Sir, I got my books with special trouser you send to me. I am so happy. My Lord will never put you to shame and the blessing of the Almighty will never be dry upon your ministry. Half of the books I sent to Ogun State, to the churches I normally go for ministering and to their Sunday school teachers, but the trouser is for me.'

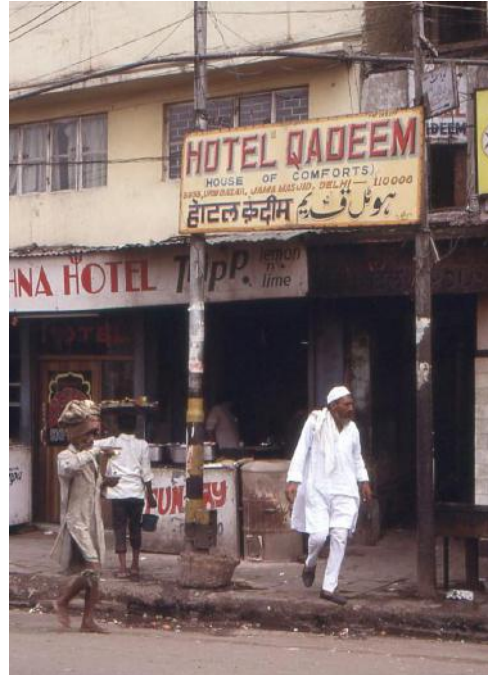
Perhaps the most moving letter of thanks for these bits and pieces came from an evangelist in Zambia. We had slipped into the carton two used imitation Matchbox cars of the sort bought in dollar discount stores at five for a dollar. The man was so excited he asked a friend to take a photo of the children with the cars and then sent it to us. These were the first commercially manufactured toys any of his eight children had ever owned. Here are parts of his letter: 'I am now with my second church that I planted this year, and I call it Gospel Mission Church, defining why the church was planted: to reach out to the community and really be a model of what a New Testament church should be . . . Enclosed is a photo of our two youngest kids treasuring the toy gifts. Previously they were playing only with toys made from mud. We love you.'

Somewhere to stay

Although the Bridgeway work has taken us to many countries, the only country outside Australia where we lived permanently was Thailand. In an earlier book I wrote about the first of three houses we called home during our years in Bangkok, but since the Thailand days, we have stayed in many kinds of accommodation. Again, I have written elsewhere about this, in particular concerning the wonderful hospitality local Christians showered upon us in difficult countries and adverse circumstances. But some of our lodgings, usually in stopovers for a few nights, have produced real tests of patience and Christian behaviour.

Brought back to earth

Our only visit to Indonesia was a three-night stay in Jakarta in the mid-eighties. We were on our way to Bangkok for an extended period of ministry, and had just spent three wonderful days with Chinese friends in Singapore. Their fellowship and generosity, expressed in the delights of their comfortable home and the enjoyment of eating out with them around Singapore, gave us a few days taste of the kind of genteel life we were not accustomed to.



Accommodation guides can be misleading

For various reasons, I had planned three days in Jakarta on our way to Bangkok, so had booked us into a hotel listed in a budget accommodation guide. We became apprehensive when the airport taxi driver had difficulty finding it, but eventually he found it behind a row of tyre-mending shops in downtown Jakarta. Things only got worse from that point. Gae never cries at the trials of life, but when we found our room she succumbed for the only time I can recall. After floating on cloud nine in Singapore, this was the pits. There were two crude wooden beds crammed almost side by side into a dark unpainted timber room that had a single 40-watt bulb dangling from the ceiling. Each of the mattresses had a covering sheet and a pillow, but that was all. The communal bathroom and toilet were at the end of a long, narrow and equally dingy passage.

It was night, and there was little we felt like doing at such an hour. Once Gae had got over her initial despondency ('I could take this once, but not any longer') we decided to sleep there anyway and see what alternatives we could find the next day. But the next day arrived much sooner than we expected when, before six o'clock, a loud speaker from the adjacent mosque burst into life with Muslim prayers, sermons, or whatever those ear-shattering sounds represent. By the time we arrived at the breakfast room, the noise had stopped and we fell into pleasant conversation with local Indonesian people.

By the time we set out from the hotel, our annoyances had abated to some extent. We then met more pleasant people as we wandered nearby streets looking for somewhere better to stay. Nothing presented itself, and by the time we heard stories from a few local Christians, we concluded that we were not so badly off after all. And

with one night gone and only two to go, we decided to stick it out where we were. It was all a lesson in contrasts between what we have and what we expect – first a great letdown for us, but then a feeling of thanks that soon we would be somewhere better.

Ten years later, we came across a similar hotel during our time in Turkey. On this occasion we were simply looking for overnight accommodation, but again we found ourselves in a dark and dingy room, with a disgustingly dirty toilet block down the passage and a wake-up call from the local mosque next morning. Again, however, the friendliness of the local people was some sort of compensation. Nowhere else in Turkey did we meet such filthy accommodation, but everywhere else we met people who were welcoming and friendly. And the Christians, few and far between, were a lesson in how to be positive in seemingly impossible circumstances.

Be prepared for anything

In some places, people might appear to be welcoming and friendly, but for the wrong reasons. On one occasion, back in the late sixties, I was returning home after a time of Bible teaching in Laos and arrived late afternoon in the Thai provincial town of Udorn. It had been a long day. After travelling across rural areas of Laos, I made the lengthy border crossing by boat across the Mekong River and caught a country bus for the dusty journey to Udorn. There I would spend the night in readiness for the train journey back to Bangkok in the morning.

I found a hotel of the usual provincial kind – a two-storey timber establishment, cheap but clean. I checked in but declined the offer of a girl for the night, an offer that is more or less standard in many parts of Thailand. Being covered in red dust from the bus journey, I quickly found my way upstairs to the allocated room, dropped my carry bag on the floor and headed along the verandah towards the shower block. A girl was waiting there to see if I needed any help to shower. I assured her I did not and set about removing the accumulated dust and sweat from the previous twelve hours.

When I came out of the shower, refreshingly cleansed and newly attired, a young man was waiting for me with various offers of female companionship. I was getting sick of this, so decided to give him a brief lecture on Christian beliefs and morality. Without batting an eyelid, he agreed with my highly commendable principles and, like the woman at the well who tried to match Jesus' conversation, he sought to impress with his grasp of religious knowledge. In his case the religion was Buddhism and, like many in Thailand who shared his religion, he saw no problem in being a good Buddhist and a good pimp at the same time.

When I went for a stroll down the street to get something to eat, I was accosted half a dozen times by other pimps and prostitutes peddling their wares. One gets used to brushing off such people in Thailand – it is as everyday as brushing off an unwelcome hawker – but this town seemed worse than average. The hotel, with rooms separated only by single-sided timber walls, was very noisy and boisterous. When I arrived back in Bangkok and recounted my experience to Thai friends, I was assured that I had not stumbled into the wrong place. Udorn had always been like that, they said, and just about every hotel would have been the same.

How to accommodate a foreigner

All of us are uncertain at times what to do when we have visitors, especially if those visitors are from countries substantially different from ours. We have heard stories, for example, of people from some Asian countries who, in an Australian house, have stood in the middle of the bathroom and thrown liberal amounts of water over themselves, with the result that they have flooded not only the bathroom but also carpeted areas outside. Some people have broken Western-style toilets through squatting on something made for sitting; but Westerners have sometimes got themselves into difficulty in Asian countries through sitting on something made for

squatting. When cultures clash, we all make mistakes, even when trying to do what is right.

Because we do not want to embarrass the local Christians or be a burden to them on our travels, we usually ask them to book us into a guesthouse or modest hotel. Usually they do, but sometimes, when I am traveling alone, they might insist I stay with them or in some church-associated accommodation such as a Bible school.

In finding us lodgings, the local Christians usually have difficulty knowing what level of accommodation to aim at. The room might have nothing but a wire bed, perhaps a table and maybe some nails on the wall to hang clothes on. In one such place the landlord gave us a padlock and told us always to lock the door, but the glass in the windows was either broken or missing. In other cases, by contrast, the locals tried to find something they thought would be like a hotel in our home country. In one case it was, but it was far beyond the sort of price we would normally pay. They, however, were not to know that. Many people in these countries think that all Westerners have an inexhaustible supply of money, and even when we try to explain that we do not, the look on their faces tells us we have not convinced them.

Overall our experience has been that people are invariably kind in going out of their way to make us as comfortable as they can. Sometimes they even try to buy or prepare food that they think we like, even though their efforts are not always successful. But there are times when they do nothing at all till we arrive. Then they start to shop around. On occasions we have found ourselves billeted with people who are not part of the church but who happen to have a spare bedroom. These are not bed-and-breakfast entrepreneurs; just friends of people in the church who are asked to help out. Even non-Christians are unbelievably hospitable.

Lavish letters

When learning to speak Thai, I sometimes noticed amused looks on listeners' faces when I worked into my speech some impressive words or phrases I had recently learnt. Whether they were grammatically correct or not, they obviously sounded out of place in the context. A person should not use lavish expressions when talking about fairly mundane things. We meet the same kind of problem in our mother tongue when speeches at wedding or funerals portray a person in a way that is too good to be true. The speaker's intention might be good, but it is easy to get carried away by the occasion.

Bridgeway receives lots of letters from grateful recipients who also get carried away at times. But their letters at least indicate some effort to express how much they appreciate receiving a few books.

How learners become users

For a first-ever letter written in English, the following, from a man in Ethiopia, is commendable. 'I am extremely interested to meet you because I am enriched by your books. I wish to grow adequately by reading lots of spiritual books. In order to fulfil my desire, your advice will be indispensable. Your dynamic books make me strong and energetic in the corners and directions of life. Since I am first time to write such types of letters as this, you may face a problem to understand the concept. Though I am sorry for unavoidable challenges you may face, I will improve my language still gradually.'

A woman in India was no such novice at writing in English. 'Brother Fleming, it is a solemn pleasure to offer my thanks for your helpful books and to pen you my views of the spiritual service to your good heart in the honour of our immaculate Lord Jesus. I thank God for the gift of friendship that makes people care for one another. Ever since the beams of salvation pierced through our gloomy hearts, my husband and I have been preaching the manifold wisdom and truth of God's Word in every remote place. The ardour and ideal of our gospel service is to proclaim freely the gospel of grace in order to save all sin-ridden souls in door-to-door and place-to-place service on foot. That is why my husband is a gospel worker who preaches the Word of God as it is to every nook and corner of all these rural towns, while I give my life to do the gospel work through this children's home.'

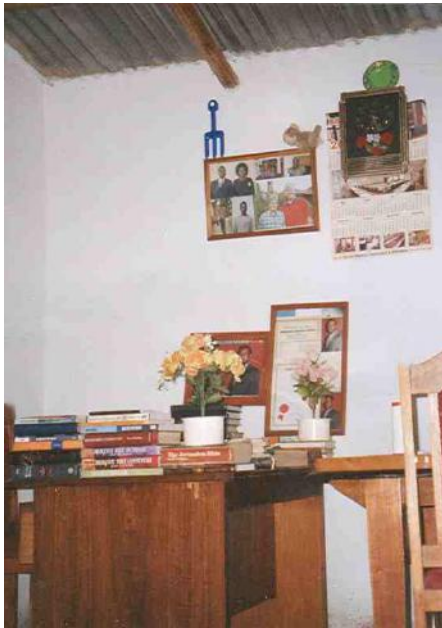
From Zimbabwe we received this letter of thanks. 'Your Excellency, honourable comrade in arms for the Lord Jesus Christ, it gives me pleasure to extend my warm felicitations and gratitude towards you through the mighty and wonderful name of our Saviour. Amen. I have read your books and they blessed me. So can you send for me Holy Bibles and books of evangelism, books about preaching and lesson books. I think your policy is to give careful consideration to every request that I make to your office.'

A preacher in Uganda wrote in a more sober vein. After expressing thanks for at last having some reference material to use, he said, 'I don't want to commit spiritual suicide by preaching sermons that have no authority of research.' A Nigerian had a similarly grave sense of responsibility: 'These books induce me to kneel and ask God for meekness so that God would use me at his will and time and in any place as he did others who penetrated even to slum areas to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. I would like to have other books to help me win more souls for the kingdom of God. I should therefore be greatly delighted to see positive and realistic moves from your end to send books that you know can be a sort of help to me.'

Eloquent praise, desperate pleas

People hear of our books in all sorts of ways. One man's request began, 'I heard of your books from people I met in the bus one day when I was travelling from Bulawayo to Harare. They were praising your books, saying they were of great value and educative. That motivated me into action to read them for myself, and now I cannot rest till I have some. So I am applying to you to assist my Bible knowledge to be broadened to a commendable level.'

Another applicant wrote, 'I am a burning Christian, a teacher in the ministry and also a preacher of the Word. I am a keen and studious student of the Scriptures for more knowledge and sound interpretation of the Bible. Sequel to my ambition but restricted by financial incapability, I was apprised by a friend and brother of your aids for the handicap ministries of crawling ones. In view of this, I am writing. I have been



Most pastors have few, if any, books

arming myself and companion in the ministry for the end time battle, but we need more resources to better solidify and authenticate our knowledge in the Scriptures. So my humble self and companion request for your illuminating, inspiring, educating and spiritual resources for the further promotion, proclamation and propagation of the gospel and Christ's Kingdom. We promise to wisely tailor it for the proliferation of Bible knowledge.'

Similar pleading came from a man who wrote, 'I would like to inform you that I am too appreciative of your worldwide service rendered to Christians found in the world regardless of their ethnic groups.

Accordingly, I would like to engage your biblical items and other pertinent ones that you consider to be of substantial assistance to the realisation of my Christianity more than ever before. Ultimately, I would humbly request you to send me all items at

your disposal that you consider are quite necessary to my spiritual life. Thank you for your optimistic deliberation of my request. I look forward inquisitively to your response, which I long for enthusiastically.'

Financial difficulties are reflected in the correspondence of most people, but they never give up. The leader of a national mission likened Bridgeway to Joseph, 'who God prepared in advance for the difficult times.' He went on, 'Without mincing words, we are seriously hit by the wind that blows across our land. The political tension is affecting the church, and the high cost of living is doing its worst. Our vehicles are in bad condition, our staff salaries have not been paid for months, and creditors are pestering our lives.' Another pleaded, 'I am sorry to be knocking to your doorstep again for your help, but truly speaking our finances are the big problem, and we badly need more of your books. We are desperate. Please help us.'

Difficulties are more than economic, especially in countries where a large part of the populace is anti-Christian. One church member wrote, 'More are attending church and some are asking for water baptism. The gospel adversaries have come to know about this and are working against it. One of the antagonistic leaders, having enarmed himself with a sword, came to the church intoxicated and pronounced unparliamentary vernacular against our pastor and warned him to retreat from the process of saving souls.'

Blessings received and given

People who receive books often feel they must express their gratitude by praying God's abundant blessings on the givers. 'These books are our long-existent dream, which was impeded from coming into effect from lack of budget. These precious books will result in the church community's acquisition of invaluable knowledge. Altogether the cooperation of your organisation and your benevolence to us is more than we can express in terms of words. We wish many colourful moments in your ongoing life.' Another wanted these colourful moments enhanced, praying 'that your star will shine brightly, you will grow spiritually and the fire of the Holy Spirit will not be quenched.'

One man was so grateful he felt divine approval to make the following pronouncement: 'Because of what you do through these books, your cup of blessing will never run dry. The Almighty will set you at peace with your neighbours and friends, and people will fall over one another to do you favours. Year in, year out, God will always be there to bless your work.'

A pastor who received a set of books through the generous distribution of a fellow pastor said, 'When I read these books I felt a wave of revival blowing upon me. I believe there is much anointing oil on these materials. They help me deepen my Christian life and service, and widen my historical studies of nations and peoples. They also broaden my knowledge of the books of the Bible with background information and clear explanations of each book. Sincerely speaking, these books are so beneficial to me that I promise to read and communicate them in my ministry as the Holy Spirit enables me. I pray for more grease to your elbow in Jesus name.'

Not all letters use imagery based on oil and grease. A more theoretical assessment came from one writer who asked, 'Could you intimate to me how possible are the rudiments for one to rise as you to comment on biblical happenings. The height reached by some great men in any field of knowledge is not by a sudden flight.' Another man, aspiring to be better equipped through owning a good library, added, 'This is not for fancy, but difficult Bible passages and theological terms are not easily integrated in my doctrinal perception. I need help for evangelism, mission, Christian defence, leadership, family teachings and counselling. Books are scarcely gotten in this country, and even when they are available, the little income is not enough to buy them. My constant hunger is for knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection.'

Becoming a preacher

Of all the encouragement we receive from letters, probably none can equal that which comes from people who have been denied opportunities for formal education, whether secular or biblical, but who are serious in their desire to study the Word and serve God. One such person was a farmer in rural Zambia. Our correspondence began when he wrote to say, 'I am the only one in our congregation who can speak a bit of English, and a missionary gave me some Bridgeway books. These books help me to prepare my Bible studies. I was born again a long time ago, but I am still very behind. Please, brother, if you could prepare some exercises for me, I would know better how to preach and pray.'

We did what we could to help and then heard from him again. 'I wish to thank the people who sponsored the carton for the extra books they sent and for the two shirts. It was a gift which I received at an appropriate time. When I was weary, the Lord told you to send two shirts. After reading *Let the Bible Speak for Itself* I managed to give two sermons in our assembly here. It was very wonderful, something I never thought of, that I could preach. But I have some questions and I think I shall keep writing to you as long as I live.'

The man went on to ask several questions and outline some discoveries. He said that among two strings of biblical references in one lengthy article in the *Bible Dictionary* he had found two errors. In one case he was right (it was a wrong chapter

number) but in the other he had mistaken First Letter for Second Letter. What his queries showed, however, was that he had carefully looked up every one of the hundred or more references in the article. He also asked questions about related articles. Here was a man spending time in diligent Bible study.

Some time later we received another letter from him. 'After a short time I have decided to break the silence to inform you that I was appointed by the church elders on 25 September as a Sunday school teacher. This has come after seeing very good improvement in my sermons. This is because I have the *Bridgeway Bible Dictionary* and *Commentary* to help my Bible study.'

From another country came a letter of appreciation for similar help in studying and teaching the Bible. 'My present problems, since I gave my life one year ago to be a pastor, are that I have never seen anybody to teach me how to study the Bible, prepare or preach a sermon. I am in fact illiterate to them and it affects my academic. These problems were a snare to me and discouraging my future, but praise God I have come in contact with you through your books. You are now kindly my teacher to break these barriers and brush me up to a standard to remove these reproaches from my life.'

Some confessions

Our Western sophistication can at times mask our spiritual poverty. We are often hesitant to bare our souls lest people see the real person behind the respectable middle-class citizen. Less sophisticated people might also be guilty of displaying a false image, but on the whole they are less self-conscious than Westerners. That may be one reason why they are better than us at one-on-one evangelism, and consequently why their churches are growing. But growth without depth can be deceiving, and most leaders in the growing churches of the developing world are aware of the problem.

A reader in Papua New Guinea, who had bought our books through a retail outlet, wrote a lengthy letter asking a number of good questions. He then admitted, 'The books are moving me from where I have been bogged down for years. They are very inspiring. I wonder how many readers have been touched and renewed in their spiritual warfare through these books. I am honoured to write these words of appreciation.'

From Swaziland came a letter from a church elder who confessed, 'Until I began reading these books I had not gone anywhere in my Christianity. I was still a baby, yet I was leader of a church. The truth is I have been missing information about the Bible. Your books are full of information that makes me a beneficiary and my church too is now starting to benefit.'

Very rarely do we run into disputes over denominational distinctives. This is so not just in dealing with correspondence but also in preaching around many countries. It seems that most people are more concerned with evangelism and church growth than with matters that create division. We once received a letter from Tanzania where the writer (from a non-Pentecostal church) commented, 'Someone from a Pentecostal church told me that he sees that your books are written in the Spirit of God (and they generally do not agree that people in our churches have the Holy Spirit). Actually, those pastors who announce loudly that we are not of the Spirit most of them have your *Bible Commentary* and *Bible Dictionary* on their bookshelves!'

Spiritual family

It is probably just as well that we do not know the denominational identification of a lot of people who write to express their gratitude. Nor do we know much about most who write to claim us as their 'spiritual parents.' We find it wise to be cautious about the apparent relationship, as one never knows what the 'children' are really like.

Typical of many such letters of appreciation is this from a man in Ghana: 'I don't know how to describe it but you are like a biological father to me, caring for my spiritual and physical needs. I owe you millions of thanks that no word in any

dictionary can I use to thank you.’ We do not know the age of this man, but some who claim us as their parents have turned out to be only ten years or so younger than us.

That was not the case with an evangelist in India. This man, in his late twenties, was committed to grassroots work among the needy, conscious always that people who needed to hear the gospel also needed to be fed, clothed and housed. In one letter he wrote, ‘Here I am to disturb you again, Mum and Dad, if you don’t mind. The road of life is hard but I hope that Christ will always remain in our relationship and that Christ will give us patience to wait for his coming. You see, I am just come from Chichama, where I see people had to cover themselves. I don’t mean they were fully naked, but I can say half naked. If possible, please send some clothes for them.’

Later he wrote to give us the exciting news that he was to be married next year. We sent our congratulations and asked the name of the lucky girl. He replied he did not know. His parents were working on it and he would find out in due course.

Mixed feelings

Another young man, this one in Ethiopia, was particularly inspiring, though we were astounded by the numbers he ministered to in the churches and the vision he had for the wider world. ‘I am giving service for more than 2,000 people in my local church and thirty branch churches. I am 26 and young to be a pastor, but a pastor is always a winner in Jesus. The area is dominated by Muslims but it is Jesus who makes me to be a winner. I do not want to restrict myself to Ethiopia. I have a worldwide vision to preach the gospel to all nations. Therefore I need to extend my knowledge through your books even though I already have a theological degree.’

Not all Ethiopian churches, however, are lights for the gospel. The Orthodox Church traces its roots to apostolic times, but over the past two thousand years has moved so far from the gospel that it has become a hindrance to true Christianity. One pastor lived in a rural area where there were fifty churches in a population of only six thousand. In an uncompromising pronouncement, he lamented that many churches were ‘like Pharisees, full of spiritual diseases, and do not know meaning of words like grace, mercy, forgiveness, love and Christ-centred life. Many churches are affected by weakness. I am sorry even in my local church many people are affected by termites of foolishness. People have religion but not spiritual life.’

To finish on a more positive note, here is something from Tonga, another country where the dominance of the state church can hinder people’s understanding of the true gospel. ‘You will never know the impact of your books on the churches, but more especially on me. I find it easier now to understand the Bible, and especially the Gospels, by reading your picture books on places where Jesus went, parables, and so on. There were many things that hindered me from a better understanding of the Bible, but since I have been reading your books lots of the little things are there. When I read them I am more loving the Gospels than ever. Please my brother, God knows my heart, that because of these books I love studying and preaching the gospel more than ever.’

Bookshops

In an earlier chapter I pointed out that the word 'library' brings a picture to the Western mind that is entirely different from the reality in the developing world. The same applies to the word 'bookshop.' In very few cases have I seen a bookshop in a developing country that bears any similarity to a bookshop in the West, and even then it was more like our small suburban bookshop.

The average Christian bookshop in the developing world is just a small room, or part of a room, that might open on to a street, but more likely is in a church, a house, or some other building with a sympathetic owner. In some cases the shop is a shipping container. Usually it is poorly stocked (and in speaking of books I include Bibles), partly because of the cost of imported books and partly because of currency exchange problems. Although Christians in these countries are crying out for books, there are few shops where they can buy them.

Local suppliers

Sending sponsored books into needy countries is a necessary ministry to help the poor, but it is not a long-term solution to the problem of book supply. The ideal is for local enterprises to produce or import books that can be sold on the open market in a way that will develop a viable, self-sustaining and permanent service to the church. Where efforts have been made to do this, Bridgeway gives whatever help it can, which means that the kind of ministry we offer varies from country to country.

In countries where national organisations have a book supply service, Bridgeway does not as a rule send in sponsored books. We have arrangements with publishers in Zambia, Nigeria, India, Myanmar and the Caribbean to produce some titles under licence for local markets. (This refers to English-language books. An earlier chapter deals with other-language projects.) Also, we might sell books to local organisations on a cost-only basis. Either way, it makes books available to a wider public.



In the corner of another shop



Bookshops are often poorly stocked

Variety stores

It might sound encouraging to speak of countries with their own suppliers and retailers, but in most developing countries there is no marketing network for Christian books. There is not even a list of retail outlets. Book retailing usually operates in conjunction with some other retailing and occupies only a small area. The shop might be only two or three metres wide and not much more in length, and the items sold could be groceries, stationery,

hardware, clothing, building materials or cooked food. Alternatively, the place could be an office, health centre, school, or hairdressing shop. The bookselling area might consist of some designated shelf space, a cupboard, or a small stand. Even in a shop where Christian books are the main commodity, other items are sold to help keep the business afloat.

We send sponsored books to such people so that they can sell at an affordable price and use the income to buy Bibles and other books from local suppliers. Some, like a man in Kenya, use the proceeds for free gospel handouts. 'The money from these books helps us buy evangelistic literature to give to people in the slums where we evangelise. If you know any Christians who want to give away old books or Bibles, they will be of great use here. I have always dreamed to set up a Christian bookshop to help the poor people. We need proper Christian literature to help us grow.'

This man's request for used books and Bibles is echoed in most letters of thanks, so we do what we can. People give us used books and Bibles, which we include where possible with our own books. But these few extras are nothing compared to the huge numbers of used books and Bibles sent to needy countries by large organisations such as Book Aid, a British-based ministry. Each year Book Aid sends many containers to needy countries of Africa, where retailers buy at a nominal price and then re-sell at affordable prices. In Nigeria, Zambia and Malawi I have seen large quantities of these second-hand books being sold by Christian book retailers who otherwise would not survive financially. Similar ministries, large and small, operate in other Western countries and help needy regions in Asia, the Pacific and the Caribbean.

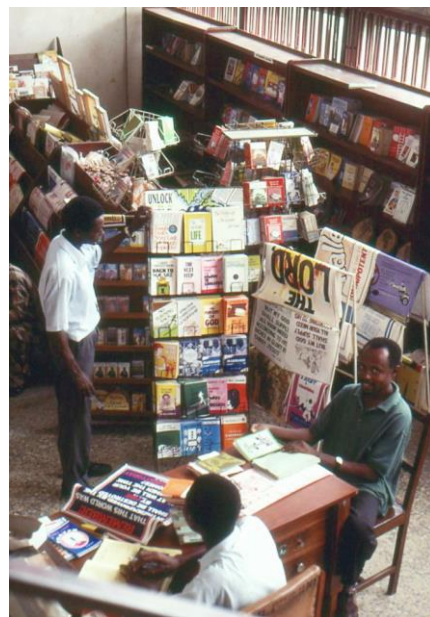
Scripture Union

Even in countries that appear to have no Christian bookshop, there will usually be some outlet that Scripture Union operates or assists. It might be as minimal as those just referred to, but when an organisation such as SU promotes the Bible it usually promotes things that help readers use the Bible.

When we began sending books to a newly opened shop in Sierra Leone, the local SU director responded, 'This is the only Christian bookshop in the whole country, though some operate small book stalls to complement their ministry . . . We are making your books available for sale to the wider Christian public, as well as using them as resource materials for our ongoing ministry among secondary school students and youth. Funds from these sales are used to buy Bibles for children and young people who become Christians (born again) at our regular children and youth camps.'

That kind of comment could be quoted from Scripture Union recipients in most African countries. In many of these countries, apart from the books that sell in shops, some go into resource centres for those who write Bible reading materials or teach Scripture in schools. We can never meet the demand, though some SU offices have raised funds to buy additional books. Most, however, have to be content with the few sponsored cartons we dribble across to them.

One staff worker in Swaziland made a particularly earnest appeal. 'More brethren have been exposed to your books, and now they have purchased them all! These people



A Scripture Union bookshop in Africa

seem to be from a desert and all of a sudden discover Canaan. With great pressure I plead for you to come to my rescue and send more for our small SU bookroom. If not, I'll be torn apart.' A seller in Malawi wrote, 'We can never have enough of these books. The demand is so great that as soon as more arrive, they are gone in a few days. We must sell outdoors because we have no building and this creates many difficulties.'

Although the countries of Africa constitute our biggest field for helping Scripture Union, we have sent to SU bookshops and their writers of daily Bible reading materials in countries of Asia such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Malaysia, Thailand and Cambodia. We have also had good involvement in the Pacific countries of Fiji, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. In the Caribbean our materials have again been used to teach Scripture in schools in Jamaica, Trinidad and the Bahamas.

In various countries, Scripture Union and others have asked me to run writers' workshops. This is something I am pleased to do, because people need to read material from local writers. In general, vernacular writings are preferable to translations, but writers must have resource materials to work from and must know how to write. This was well expressed in a letter received from Swaziland. 'We still talk about your visit to us, and especially the time you gave to help us with our writing ministries. Our difficulty is having the right reference books, otherwise we find difficulty getting ideas. We are trying to develop local Swazi writers.'

From my home in Australia I continue this work of helping writers elsewhere. Many send me pre-published material, both magazines and books, asking for editorial suggestions that can help their writing.

The Arab world

One remarkable ministry we have become associated with is that of Isam Ghattas and his wife Nihad in the nation of Jordan. It is called Manara Ministries and has a confidently Christian 'face' in what is otherwise, for Christians, the insecure region of the Middle East. It operates two street-front Christian bookshops in Amman, runs youth camps, works among street kids, operates preschools and sewing centres, evangelises on tertiary campuses, engages in extensive humanitarian aid among refugees and has radio and other media activities. With regard to Christian literature, perhaps Manara's most important work is in sending huge quantities of Bibles and books into Islamic countries of the region – and by 'huge' I mean more than a million since the first Gulf War. Most of the books went initially to Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, but then gained entrance into more difficult countries such as Yemen and Libya.



Christian bookshop in Amman, Jordan

By mixing Christian books with general educational books, Manara gets Christian materials into the large international book fairs that are held around the region. In this way, small quantities of Bridgeway books have penetrated countries where cartons sent by mail would not gain access. A letter from Isam Ghattas said, 'We not only use the books in our literature ministry (local shops and international book fairs), but also in youth ministry and schools, where we have many openings. The *Basics* books are very suitable for our schools work.'

Jordan's policy of religious freedom does not mean that everything has gone smoothly for Manara. One of their bookshops was firebombed, as was one they cooperate with in the Palestinian region of Gaza. Some of our books to Gaza have gone through Jordan and others through Israel.

Bridgeway books have also found their way into the Gulf States. The manager of a bookshop in Bahrain wrote, 'These books are so valuable that rather than sell them all, we have placed some with key people who are using them in their church libraries and sharing with others.' A church leader from United Arab Emirates wrote, 'I read your books once from a brother from Sudan who visits us and then from a visitor from Ghana. We in the Arab world are under force and some are killed, but thanks to those outside the country who assist us with Bibles and books to keep our faith alive. Four of us started a church back 2005 but now we have 60 worshippers.'

The mobile and the immobile

In a number of countries we supply books to mobile shops, otherwise known as book vans. One of these countries is Pakistan, where, many years ago, people with



Mobile bookseller, Pakistan

foresight made sure the country had a good Urdu publishing ministry to equip the church with quality literature for both Christians and non-Christians. There is also plenty of scope for English, as we discovered from one book seller who wrote, 'The book van ministry increases by the day. These books of yours sell quickly and help our income to buy whatever books we can.'

The books help many people, like preachers and elders and Bible study group leaders. But brother, you must pray for Karachi, because religious conflict is increasing. Muslims do not like Christians, but we believe God cares for us.'

From West Africa a Ghanaian book van operator wrote, 'I move around the country introducing people to good books that will help them to know, grow and serve God better. Our ministry has been to form a team to serve as a link between Christian bookshops and churches and all those people who do not have any knowledge about our Lord Jesus Christ.'

These bookshops might be in mobile vehicles, but a man in Zambia wrote about a bookshop he had set up in the back of a disused truck. 'You are one of the pillars to my Christian book ministry. The shop I run is the back of an old truck that doesn't move. God uses this place for doing wonders apart from selling books, because people need Jesus and here they find him for salvation. Please don't forget me to send more books. Please be my walking stick and reply soon.' So we replied, and after the next carton came another letter. 'For your information, you're the only person who has blessed me in sending books freely. I am waiting for the day I can afford to order



Bookshop in the back of a disused truck, Zambia

books to buy from other people. I ask you please send me letters of encouragement. I am two years selling books and the shop is hidden, but God still sends customers. I've nothing to show how pleased I am, but I owe it all to Jehovah Jireh.' Then, later again: 'It is not easy to survive just selling books, but I thank God for his hand. The book ministry is still not yet grown. I haven't done anything wrong, but I just don't have books to sell because I can't afford to buy them.'

Disaster in Zimbabwe

For many years we have been sending books to a pastor in Zimbabwe who sells books in a corner of a small hardware shop he runs to help support his ministry. He also sells books around churches and on one occasion sent this appreciative letter: 'On behalf of my country and myself I say we are really proud of you. Words are indeed difficult to express. Whenever I take books to meetings to sell, I always return empty handed, leaving people stranded, asking for more books. I can only tell them to wait till I hear from you or any other place where I can get books. Bibles are running out of stock. Bookshop people are no longer able to import books because our dollar has dropped value. Having a friend who does what you do is a miracle.'

President Mugabe had already ground the country into the dust, but as if that was not enough he then initiated his infamous campaign to 'clean up' Zimbabwe. This meant he could destroy any building or locality whose occupants he disapproved of. Our hearts sank when we received this letter from our friend:

'I was in Mozambique for church ministry and when I came home I found that church property was bulldozed by government authorities during their so-called 'clean up' exercise. The issue was politically motivated. We lost all our information and church documents. Please ask our beloved brothers and sisters to pray for our nation, especially those steering the state, to repent and seek God's face. Thank you for the books you sent; they arrived safely during our time of sorrows. We pray for more books, new or used, as well as audio tapes.'

Here is another letter from him, written a few months later. 'I am so thankful to know that brothers and sisters in Christ are praying for us and for Zimbabwe as a whole. Yes, good brother, remember Proverbs 29:2 which says, When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice, but when the wicked bear rule, the people mourn. I put this verse in our local media. I asked my fellow Zimbabweans, "Which of the two rulers is our current leader? Are people rejoicing or mourning? Think about it." I did not know this would provoke Nebuchadnezzar to hurt the church in the name of the 'clean up' exercise when they bulldozed our church. We thank God the treatment did not separate us from the love of Christ (Romans 8:35a). Although we may be physically weak, we are spiritually strong. This is because good people like you are praying for us day and night. We are also praying for those who govern this country that they will repent before the trumpet sounds.'

Praying for you

By now readers will see that the Bridgeway ministry brings a lot of letter writing. To start with we notify people when we send them a carton of sponsored books, and when they receive the books they send us a letter of thanks which we pass on to the sponsors. Further books produce further correspondence and so our understanding of people and their ministry increases. But we have also visited many of the major recipient countries, along with others, and met many of those who receive books. We have seen their ministry, been to their churches and in some cases visited their homes. Over many years the relationship may grow into a strong friendship. The more we learn about each other, the more we pray for each other.

Friends from afar

Letters arrive at our home daily, formerly through the post but today more through email. At the end of each day, Gae and I try to pray for all the people whose letters have arrived that day, whether by post or email. Besides these, there are many people who have become good friends and we pray for them often. In addition, there are hundreds more people and items that we pray for in most countries of the world, so that even if we pray for dozens each day, it still takes months to work through the list.

Our friends and acquaintances range from some very special people to some we hardly know at all, but we cannot truly say of any that we pray for them every day. We feel embarrassed to receive letter after letter from people who say, truthfully I believe, that they pray for us daily.

While some of these correspondents are good friends, others we have never met face to face. Their only connection with us is that they received some books. When writing to them, we do not usually mention the ill-health, chronic pain, medical procedures, frequent surgery and energy-draining routines that have become part of normal life (at least, for Gae), yet they ask constantly about our well-being. They only need a hint of some health problem to write and say they are praying for us, often with fasting, occasionally through the night and sometimes in special meetings of the church. It is very humbling.

Our standard of living in the West provides so well for our daily needs – physical and social, individual and collective – that Christians do not always see the need for prayer. At times it would make little difference to the way we live if, so to speak, God ceased to exist. Faith does not seem necessary, because everything is covered by some provision or service. Our public welfare schemes have many safety nets. Consequently, faith seems unnecessary and so does prayer. For people in poor countries, however, prayer is their first course of action. They have no welfare services to depend on, so they are cast entirely upon God. Prayer is a big part of their lives.

A woman in Zambia

In 1990 we met a school teacher in Zambia, Emily Nswana, who interpreted for Gae at a women's meeting. As they chatted together afterwards and Emily learnt of Gae's ministry among children, Emily decided she could do the same kind of thing in her locality. While still teaching in a nearby government school, she began what she called a nursery school, which ran on church property. We maintained correspondence with her and



Emily Nswana

sent children's material to help in her work. She then applied to the government for a plot of land to build a permanent school, but soon after she received the land her husband died, leaving her with three school-age children.

Ten years later, Gae had a major crisis when some surgery produced complications that saw her in hospital and hovering on the brink of death for many weeks. When Emily heard of this, she sent me an email, which began by asking me to 'sit beside Gae's bedside, hold her hand and pray this prayer for her from me.' Her prayer was: 'Father in heaven, this is the prayer of your daughter Emily for her friend Gae. In Jesus' name I come before you, continuously appreciating you for taking care of Gae. I do uplift Gae before you in Jesus' name, for you to know her present situation, how she longs for your healing hand, and so do we, her dear ones. Father in heaven, I thank you for your Son's blood shed for us, and I pray for your living water to be poured upon Gae through the power of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' name to touch and heal her. I believe you are listening and I lift up my eyes to you and wait for that healing, that this may bring glory and honour to you. In Jesus' name I pray, with thanksgiving. Amen.'

Emily's was only one of countless prayers offered to God for Gae's survival through this time, and God in his mercy saved her. Months later, doctors and nurses were still saying it was a miracle. They never expected her to leave the hospital alive.

A few years later I met Emily again in Zambia and saw that the building of her school was making little progress because of a lack of funds. We therefore decided to bring her to Australia for three weeks to see if we could raise money to finish the building and get it operational. We had never embarked upon this kind of fundraising exercise before, but funds received exceeded the goal and in due course the school was up and running. Christians in Australia, impressed with Emily's work, have carried on their support, not just for the school but also for the extensive widows and orphans ministry that became associated with it.

No inhibitions

On many occasions we have been talking to a person or a group about a particular concern when someone says we should pray about the matter 'right now.' There is nothing unusual in that; it happens at home or abroad. What makes it different in some parts of Africa and Asia is the apparent disregard people have for time or place. I have had this happen on the footpath of a main street or in some other public place where people and cars are noisily rushing to and fro, all of which is distracting to me but not to those who are praying – nor, apparently, to the passers-by. These people do not share the inhibitions of many of us Westerners.

The most colourful occasion when this kind of thing happened to me was during a lunch break at the Amsterdam 2000 Congress. I was speaking casually with a group of African friends in a wide but busy passageway when my eyes met those of a passer-by whom I recognised immediately as a person I had met in Nigeria seven years earlier.

With a spontaneous handshake and hug the man burst into animated discourse, in the process revealing that he and his wife had recently been blessed with twin sons, thirteen years after they thought their family was complete. He showed me photos of his young twins and when he asked about my family I showed him a photo of Gae that I kept in my wallet. While doing so I told him that I had spoken to her the previous night on the phone, she was not well and the doctor was to do some day surgery later that week. Immediately, in the midst of the bustling throng and without so much as an introductory 'let us pray,' he slapped his right hand on Gae's photo, raised his left hand in the air and with loud voice burst out in prayer, 'Lord, we pray for our sister Fleming . . .'

The incident was typical of my experiences with such people. There seemed to be no consciousness of the crowded surroundings and the conversation did not drift into

small talk or clinical details. It just turned abruptly into prayer – spontaneous, uninhibited prayer.

An unselfish spirit

Among the many people in Ethiopia who have become our friends is a family in the south who, though poor themselves, have given their lives to helping the poor and needy around them. Our initial contact with them was through books, and over the years they have distributed well to churches and Christian workers in the region. They have three small children of their own, have adopted four orphaned children into their home and support ten others in their extended family.

One of their own children, the youngest, was born with some mental problems and they were at their wits end knowing how to get suitable treatment. The husband was an evangelist and pastor, the mother was doing a nursing course so she could better serve the community and all of them farmed a small plot to help support the household. They had been struggling for six years to finish a humble house of saplings overlaid with mud, but through some gifts sent to them the house was at last finished, with a concrete floor and a metal roof.

We had never met this family, but our hearts bled for them as they pushed on amid trying circumstances, especially with the problems surrounding the youngest child. In correspondence we must have mentioned in passing that Gae was about to have further surgery, though our worries seemed light compared with theirs. But they were not so overcome by their own difficulties that they forgot others. They touched our hearts when they sent us this prayer:

‘Dear Father, our Father in heaven, we are very much worried about our spiritual mother Gae. Because she is suffering of bad health problem, she is living without comfort and will be operated on 10 September. Now we are before you to pray as in your word, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” Please, Oh Lord, you are better than any special doctors. You are good healer, please help her. Gae is mother of ours and other poor people in Africa. Her suffering is ours. She is your gift to us. You do not like our poverty or suffering, so you do not like hers. Besides she is good servant of you, but why do you not help her health problem? Please help her. Don’t worry us. Give her speedy recovery. In your own word you said, “I am the Lord, your healer.” Because of her suffering, our father Don is worried too. Please take away any kind of evil thing from them, we pray and pour our soul before you. Although they are in such a problem, they are always with us in love and mercy, and as you know because of them we have become what we cannot become otherwise. Therefore, as a merciful one and in your Godhead, please hear our prayer. We pray and cry before you in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.’

What touched us about their prayer was its unselfishness. At the time they sent this prayer, they were in much distress because their retarded toddler could barely walk and no one gave much hope for improvement. They were looking after their own children and adopted orphans, supporting assorted poor in their extended family, evangelising the lost, pastoring a church and studying at the nursing school.

Three months later they heard of an international Christian medical unit that was examining children with health problems, so they took their young child along in hope. Of five thousand children examined and treated in some way, only five were chosen for extended specialised treatment. Their child was one. At the time of writing, the treatment is still going on and the child’s condition is improving consistently.

Public transport

When riding on public transport, many people in non-Western countries seem not to have the inbuilt caution that we have in the West. In India and Pakistan we see people climbing on to the roofs of trains and buses for a genuinely open-air ride. At least they are able to sit down, which provides more safety than clinging with a dozen others on to the steps of a train or bus. On suburban trains doors might be unable to close because of the number of people clinging to the outside of the carriage; though they instinctively press themselves towards the carriage whenever a train passes in the opposite direction. In many countries of the developing world, all public transport is dangerously overloaded.

Foolhardiness or necessary risk?

In the days before Bangkok had air conditioned buses, so many people would cling to the front and back steps that buses sometimes tipped over going around corners. The front, side or rear of a bus often scraped the road because of overloading. But the biggest danger was from electricity poles against the kerb.



Bangkok bus of the 1960s

After one bad period when a number of hangers-on were knocked off and killed as buses sped past electricity poles, the relevant government minister announced solemnly that he could not understand how it was happening. 'According to the law,' he said, 'a bus cannot move from the bus stop till everyone is inside and the doors are closed.' The truth

was that scarcely one of Bangkok's 10,000 buses had a door that could close. In most buses the doors were either welded or bolted open permanently. When safety experts were brought from abroad to improve the public transport system, the result was invariably a spate of new laws; but, also invariably, the laws were never policed.

In Nigeria, the best precaution for bus travellers is prayer. When a bus travels from one country centre to another, some Christian on the bus usually breaks out in loud and fervent prayer for protection from hijacking, robbery, breakdown and other misadventures. Upon safe arrival, another Christian on board usually bursts forth in thanks with a similarly vigorous prayer. And when the passengers respond 'Amen,' it is with a genuine sense of gratitude and relief.

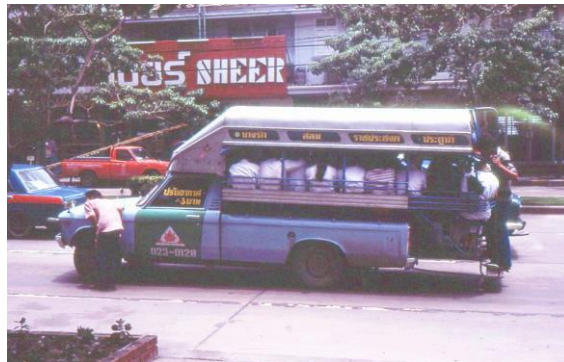
We might be grateful in the West that regulations have increased the safety and diminished the risks we must take, but in the process the orderliness of society has diminished our faith. We ought not to be foolhardy, but we need to correct the tendency where we fear to do anything unless we are covered by some guarantee or insurance. Most of us are happy to live in a society where most things are predictable and safe, but in the process we ignore faith and take things for granted. Christians in countries of chronic uncertainty are forced to live differently. Prayer has made them strong.

How local people see it

In one country I visited, travel between towns was so dangerous that local Christians always made sure someone went with me. In other places, such dangers are rare, but the travel is still unreliable and uncomfortable. In such countries, I usually

find my way around by getting myself to the minibus park, where many full-throated attendants are touting for business. Within a short time I find myself directed towards a vehicle heading in the direction I want to go.

I was not aware there was anything unusual in using a minibus until, when about to leave a town after several days of ministry, I was treated to a farewell meal with church elders and their wives. After thanking me for the visit, one then said to me, 'And you came on a minibus.' 'So?' I responded. They said they had never before been visited by a white man on a minibus. 'They all come in their own vehicles.' I suppose that, had I lived there, I too would have owned a vehicle and driven to their town. But the comments of these men, only one of whom owned even a bicycle, showed how an apparently unimportant incident helped create an atmosphere of equality.



One kind of mini-bus

In Thailand, where each of us missionaries owned a vehicle of one sort or another, one missionary refused to own anything other than a motorcycle – though, in true Thai style, it carried mum, dad and the three children all at once. The reasoning was that a car would have raised a barrier between them and the people they were trying to reach with the gospel.

Creature comforts

Minibuses might be cramped because of the excessive numbers of people stacked in, but full-sized passenger buses are often just as cramped. The seats might be wide and the aisle narrow, so that passengers can be squashed in, three to a seat, either side. When all seats are occupied, and provided the aisle is not impossibly narrow, a bus boy might then put extra seats in the aisle to take more passengers. With people packed shoulder to shoulder across the bus, there is no hope of easy escape in an emergency.

Many countries, however, are upgrading their bus services. In Thailand, for example, all parts of the country are now serviced by comfortable air conditioned coaches like those we are accustomed to in the West. Countries of Africa also have an increasing number of such services. The only annoying feature, in some places, is to be frequently forced out of coaches at roadblocks while police search under the seats, on the overhead racks and through the luggage for suspicious articles.

Pickpockets

Travellers are constantly warned to beware of pickpockets in crowded areas. In all my travels I have rarely been troubled, though I am careful to keep valuables out of sight, walk clear of passing traffic and keep alert in general. The most likely place to encounter pickpockets is on a crowded bus or train. Most of my travel on crowded buses has been in Thailand, so it might not be surprising that my only encounter with a pickpocket was on a Bangkok bus.

My usual carry bag in Bangkok was an open cloth shoulder bag of the kind that hippies made popular some years ago. Bags of this kind are common in many parts of the world and in Thailand are standard accessories for hill tribe people. On a crowded bus it was easy to keep the contents of the bag safe by simply clasping the fist around the bag at the point where the straps attach to the open pouch.

On one occasion I was riding a bus home from the printery and, as usual, the bus was packed and I was standing. In my bag were sheafs of proofs and other printed materials, but their size and shape meant I was not able to get my hand around the mouth of the bag. So my precaution was to keep my hand inside the bag, should an unauthorised hand happen to find its way in.

There was not much room for movement in the sardine-like conditions inside the bus, so I sensed something was wrong when the papers inside my bag began to move. As I groped around inside the bag, I made contact with another hand, also groping around inside the bag. Like a gecko darting for an insect, I grabbed the fingers – two of them, anyway – and proceeded to bend them back. The last thing to do in such a situation is to create a scene, so I kept my impassive pose while bending the fingers back further and further. I chanced a look out of the corner of my eye, and a man beside me was pulling faces – eyes rolling, mouth contorting, but not making a sound. Neither he nor I said a word or gave any indication of what was going on inside the bag. I kept up the pressure and then, having made my point, let the fingers go. The bus was by now pulling into a stop, so the owner of the intruding fingers made his move. He turned for the door, squeezed through the crowd and was off.

Bangkok buses were not, in themselves, dangerous places. The danger was in making a scene. People could put up with all sorts of things, but they could not bear to lose face. The press occasionally reported cases of bus conductors being assaulted when they confronted people trying to evade fares.

Trains

One thing the British left behind in India was one of the world's most extensive railway networks, with a comparably extensive bureaucracy to administer it. On my first trip there, in the 1980s, I used this bureaucracy to buy an All-India Rail Pass, which enabled me to avoid long queues and protracted hassle in booking each sector as I moved around the country. The best carriages, I found, were not those that were air conditioned (which I was entitled to when they were available) but the old colonial-style corridor carriages. These had



Train travel in India

compartments with bench seats facing each other, and the compartments opened on to a corridor that ran along one side of the carriage. The open windows and wide seats provided a comfortable way to enjoy the constantly changing scenery of India – rice fields, mountains, deserts, rivers, villages, animals, cities and people.

I found the meal service on the trains good, though if people do not like curry and rice and cannot eat with their fingers, they might not share my satisfaction. The tiny cups of tea, along with locally cooked snacks that people hawk through the train and at stations, help things along.

Travelling companions

My train journeys not only provided a welcome break from constant preaching and teaching, but also brought conversation with many interesting people. On one occasion I found myself in a compartment with five Indians who came from five regions of the country and spoke different native languages. The only language they had in common was English. As in many countries of the former British Empire, English might not be anyone's native tongue, but still be the most widely spoken. It might not be the first language of anybody, but be the national language and the medium of education.

On a later rail journey in Pakistan, the cosiness of the compartment was not so relaxed. There were eight passengers and, as Gae and I were the last in, we were separated on opposite benches. I thought nothing of taking the last seat available, till a local Pakistani had a polite word with me. He told me that I should move to another seat, because I was sitting next to a woman who did not know me and this was 'not proper.'

During a period in Cairo, where I was running a School of Discipleship with Sudanese refugees, I welcomed the Saturday off, which allowed me to take the train to Alexandria. The other passengers did not appear to speak English, so I was happy to gaze out the window and take in some biblical geography. But then a nearby man asked, out of the blue, if I was a Christian. I told him I was, but was a little hesitant to elaborate on what I was doing in Egypt. The man assured me he was not spying on me but was a Christian, and was delighted to meet someone from another country who shared his faith. The two of us might only have met casually on a train, but we were part of a unique family, that vast international community known as the church. He made a good travelling companion.

Two titles

People sometimes ask questions that indicate they think I spend a lot of my time writing books – questions such as ‘What are you writing now?’ or ‘What will be your next book?’ or ‘How do you find time to write all these books?’ The reality is that I spend very little time writing books. Most have arisen out of evangelistic or teaching work I was engaged in and began life as explanatory notes to give to interested people. The *Basic Christianity Series*, the *Commentary* and the *Dictionary* all came about by this process. So did *Let the Bible Speak for Itself* and, to a lesser degree, *Making Sense*.

Interpreting the Bible

One reality of preaching, or any other form of public speaking, is that some hearers will misunderstand a word or phrase that the speaker thinks is straightforward. This is not necessarily because the hearers are looking for an argument; it might be because a certain word triggers things in their minds that are different from what is in the speaker’s mind.

This was driven home to me after I had just given a series of studies in a Bible college on a subject advertised as ‘How to interpret the Bible.’ Audience feedback indicated that the students understood the talks, until one person came to me at the end to say that, although he understood what I had taught, he still did not know how to find the interpretation of the Bible. My talks were about how to understand the Bible, but the advertising was about how to *interpret* the Bible. For him, interpretation meant there was some deeply hidden mystery that could not be understood unless it was unravelled by someone using special techniques. After I explained the terminology, he was relieved and I had learnt another lesson: be careful when using the word ‘interpretation.’ I thought the word was more user-friendly than the technical ‘hermeneutics,’ but it clouded the issue I was really concerned about, which was how to understand the Bible. For would-be preachers, as these students were, there was the added issue of how to help others understand the Bible – hermeneutics plus a bit of homiletics, if you wish.

Although I had never concentrated on this aspect of biblical studies as an end in itself, I guess it had always been central to my ministry. Eventually, it appeared in written form in *Let the Bible Speak for Itself*, but, as usual, I did not set out to write a book on a chosen topic. I had already given teaching on the subject in several countries over a number of years when the idea came to me to put the material into book form. I thought it could be useful not just to students but to Christians in general.

Initiative from India

The origin of the book goes back to the mid-1980s when, unexpectedly, I received an invitation from the Evangelical Fellowship of India to go there for two months and lecture in Bible colleges on how to teach the Bible in church. The concern of the EFI people was that churches were not receiving a lot of benefit from the extensive Bible college training that preachers received. Many students graduated with a qualification they saw as a ticket to a pulpit, but once they were in the pulpit their biblical education seemed not to matter. Their sermons lacked the biblical substance one might expect from those who had studied the Bible. It was as if they had put their biblical studies behind them and gone back to the well-worn path of favourite verses, three-point sermons and interesting stories.

To be fair to the young preachers, some had improved their sermon style and had tried to pass on the fruits of their biblical education, but after a while they gave up because the church showed dissatisfaction with their more academic approach. If they tried to explain the Bible, they seemed to err in one of two extremes. Either they got

bogged down in verse-by-verse studies that dragged on for months, or they surveyed a book in a way that flew over the top without touching the contents. The request from the EFI people was to show preachers how they could deal with a biblical book over a reasonable number of talks while at the same time ministering to the pastoral needs of the church. The challenge was for the preachers to explain what was written in the Bible so that the hearers understood its meaning and were spiritually nourished, without being bored through too much technical detail.

At that time I had never been to India and, so far as I was aware, nobody connected with EFI knew me. I was therefore curious to know why they issued such an invitation. It turned out that two of their members had been at conferences I had spoken at in England a few years earlier and had taken tapes of the talks back to India, along with copies of the mini-commentaries that preceded the *Bridge Bible Handbooks*.

Upon accepting the invitation, I had to analyse, for the first time, exactly what I did in preparing and giving expository Bible teaching. As I moved around India I developed the material, making sure that at each Bible college I preached on a different part of the Bible. The reason for this was that the Bible contains many kinds of literature – narratives, poems, wisdom sayings, laws, visions, letters, debates, genealogies – and we must deal with different kinds of books in different ways. While teaching others, I was broadening my own base.

Although there are many helpful ways to study and teach the Bible, there is still no substitute for dealing with the Bible in the form God gave it. God gave us the Bible not as a set of studies or propositions, but as a collection of books, widely different in style and content. Teaching ‘a book at a time’ might not always be possible, or even desirable, but we should still aim to feed the church with the entire Word of God.

The field widens

People from the national Evangelical Fellowships around the world apparently communicate with each other, and in time I received invitations to conduct similar teaching courses in other countries. By now my books were better known and more widely spread. From what I heard, it seemed that people elsewhere shared the concerns of those in India, and church leaders were looking for help in the general area of how to prepare and give simple expository Bible teaching.

After running teaching sessions in places as widespread as the Solomon Islands, Tanzania, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Germany, England, Australia and Fiji, I decided the time had come to put the material into book form. Since the book’s publication I have had ministry in probably fifty countries, and although I do not go armed with a packaged presentation, preachers and teachers are crying out for help as they struggle to feed the growing church. They all want the *Commentary* and *Dictionary* as overall reference tools, but the ‘hot cake’ (as our friend in Zambia put it) is *Let the Bible Speak for Itself*. The book has not been especially popular in the West, but elsewhere it is in great demand. This might reflect the lack of available material in the developing world compared with West, but it might also reflect a difference in the value placed on Bible exposition.

Of all my books, this is easily the most difficult to translate, mainly because examples are based on the English-language text and might not be applicable in another language. Bridgeway gives translators the liberty to find more appropriate examples, but not everyone succeeds in doing so. The technical term for this kind of translation is ‘dynamic equivalence,’ which means translating the idea rather than particular words. In some cases this can cause problems, but with *Let the Bible Speak for Itself* it is the best way to achieve a useful translation.

In one country where the book was translated and published, it was so much a word-for-word translation as to be almost incomprehensible. It was later redone with a different translator and publisher. I fear the same woodenness might have crept into

translations in some other languages, but the risk is worth taking. At least people are enthusiastic for material that helps them understand and teach the Word of God. Translation deficiencies can be corrected when a reprint becomes due.

Committed to learning

Being concerned mainly with one issue, how to prepare and give simple expository teaching, *Let the Bible Speak for Itself* was not designed to be a text book on hermeneutics or homiletics. Yet it has become a text book in Bible colleges from Kazakhstan to Kenya, from Botswana to Burma, from Thailand to Tonga. We hear that students take the book back to their churches, where elders, preachers, pastors, Sunday school teachers, youth leaders and other Christian workers find help.

One person who found help was a man in Nigeria – not a pastor but an ordinary church member – who wrote, ‘I came across your book *Let the Bible Speak for Itself* and it blessed me with a new approach to the Bible. As a result I made up my mind to summarise the whole book for myself in an exercise book, but after a while I have a tendency to inaccuracy which leads to a loss of the flavour of the book. Then I decided to type out or photocopy the whole book, but this was going to cost more money than I can afford. So now I have resolved to take the step of faith and write you to request a copy of this soul-enriching book, believing God may help you mail me a copy, and a catalogue of any other books you have written.’

An Indonesian mission leader gave further insight into the hunger for God’s Word across the developing world. ‘This book will be a big help for our sermons. My wife and I, every morning from 4.00 to 5.30, pray and read the Bible together, and also read one new book every month. When God sent us your latest book, I knew it was his will for me to read it and now to share it with my friends to help them too. After 33 years in the ministry, I get a freshness, biblical and fundamental, from Bridgeway’s books. They are a channel of blessing to our congregation.’

The Indonesian man was a Baptist, but books jump across denominational lines. In Zimbabwe one of my books finished up with a Catholic priest, who liked what he saw and wrote, ‘I read with enthusiasm one of your books called *Let the Bible Speak for Itself*. The book helped me until somebody pinched it from my shelf. I am writing appealing for another copy and for your other books like the *Commentary* and *Dictionary*.’

Conferences large and small

Over the three years following Amsterdam 2000, the Billy Graham Association co-opted me to conduct the Bible teaching component of their Beyond Amsterdam Conferences in a number of countries around Africa, Asia and the Pacific. These were five-day residential conferences attended by up to 2,000 national Christian workers.

With plenty of Bible study time available, I usually dealt with a biblical book, preferably a large book such as Isaiah or Jeremiah which was not likely to be covered in their local church meetings. Among the materials that all participants received was *Let the Bible Speak for Itself*. Although my talks were not based on the book, people went home knowing that if they wanted to attempt some biblical exposition, the conference materials might help.

The outcome of those conferences was heartening. Time and again I received letters from people saying they had tried some of the things suggested in the book.



Beyond Amsterdam Conference, Kolkata, India

Others had taken home tapes of the talks and listened to them, with the book open, in an attempt to learn 'how to do it.' Some used the book to run seminars with their own personnel, one man getting together thirty local pastors to 'spread the work further.' Several had tried preaching 'in a new way.' One said, 'I did it the way you did at the Beyond Amsterdam Conference.' Another said, 'As I read the book and remembered your teaching, I realised I had been making mistakes the way I approached the Bible.' An enthusiast who had planted twenty churches wrote, 'I am giving special training to all my lay preachers and I would like additional books for them all.'

Whether in countries I have been to or not, preachers express appreciation for the books we send because they are 'concise and simple,' 'give us headings that help to prepare sermons,' and 'are straight to the point.' They seem to know how to use *Let the Bible Speak for Itself* to get the most out of the other books. A Salvation Army major in Malawi called it his AK47 – his 'powerful weapon and action book' which he had introduced to the Army's field training schools in Malawi and neighbouring countries.

Different people pick up different points. Some have acted on the suggestion to prepare a teaching program for the church instead of jumping randomly from one topic to another. Others said they had 'got new ideas to relate the Bible and show people the way.' A number commented that they would never have thought of using the book of Romans in evangelism, one man adding, 'I have found it is a very good book for teaching non-Christians.'

More suitable than we thought

The comment about the usefulness of Romans in evangelism shows how the Bible will prove to be relevant to people's needs if we explain it clearly. At times we assume, mistakenly, that something said to address a particular need will not be of use anywhere else. This was driven home to me with the publication of *Making Sense*, a miscellaneous collection of fifty articles written for magazines around the world over thirty years.

Making Sense is not a book of biblical exposition. The reader of a magazine article is not usually sitting at a desk doing Bible study. Articles should be written to arouse interest and provoke thought and, though they might be biblically based, they are not pages from a reference manual. Also, they must be written to fit within a stipulated length.

One perceptive African, observing the difference between my biblical reference materials and this more topical book, wrote, 'When we read your other books we learn more about the Bible, but when we read *Making Sense* we learn more about you.' People learn what I think about matters such as family, church, television, politics, technology, mission, discipleship, community affairs and social values.

These topics are dealt with mostly in the context of Western society, where Christians might need to take a stance that puts them at odds with their society and sometimes with their fellow Christians. It was this Western flavour in some articles that made me wonder whether the book would be suitable for distribution in non-Western countries. I need not have feared. The book turned out to be highly relevant to non-Western countries, mainly because whatever happens in the West sooner or later affects the rest of the world. The West has become very proficient at exporting not just its technological achievements but also its distorted values, and many people in other countries do not know how to cope with them. This is particularly the case among people who are older and more traditional.

In freedom and in oppression

Among the early responses, the most enthusiastic came from countries that formerly were part of the Soviet empire. While people were struggling to handle their newfound freedom, they were being bombarded with all sorts of things from the West, some good and some bad. Tensions quickly emerged between older and younger

generation Christians, with no automatic way of discerning what was acceptable and what was not. At least the book gave readers something to think about.

The comments of a magazine editor in Bulgaria are typical of several who wrote asking permission to translate and publish selected articles. 'There are many subjects in this book that are very useful for Christians in Bulgaria where everything has changed in recent years. Christians need the direction from God in life.' From Czech Republic came the comments, 'The ideas, subjects and questions raised in *Making Sense* are so typical of the church here at present. Many problems the book deals with have appeared in our countries in the years since the political changes and have caused some confusion among Christians.' A Bible college lecturer in Kazakhstan wrote, 'The day before yesterday I got your book *Making Sense* and I read all 176 pages in one day, as it was my free day. I like this book so much that I want to use it for the course Church and Society, so I have started translating it.'

Another unlikely country to translate the book is Myanmar, where an oppressive regime tries hard to resist influences from the West. But one church leader translated chapter after chapter for a regular Bible teaching bulletin distributed around sixty churches. Later, a national publisher produced the book in Burmese and other publishers produced it in tribal languages.

In wealth and in poverty

One of the world's wealthiest countries is the island nation of Bermuda, where church leaders readily identified with some of the matters dealt with in *Making Sense*. 'Thank you for this refreshing book, which is so timely and speaks to the heart of essential issues. It is very helpful in meeting the needs of persons who have little knowledge of the things of the Lord.'

At the other end of the wealth scale is Africa, which is home to twenty-eight of the world's thirty poorest nations. But they also found the book relevant. A Bible college principal in Cameroon said, 'The book touches the serious issues of the day and is absolutely relevant to our country. We would like to publish parts of the book in our college magazine.' From Nigeria a pastor wrote, 'It is a book every Christian must read, especially in this part of the world where the gospel of prosperity, healing and wealth is preached.'

From Guinea Bissau we heard of one man who found the book useful in helping people see how knowledge of the Bible helps counter current trends in society. Although the book contains very little about marriage, this man liked the articles about family and social values. His view was that 'the most urgent need for new converts is for couples to get married officially. Many people live together as husband and wife but after they come to the Lord they need to make it official.' Even in war-torn Sudan a reader wrote to tell us, 'The book is very suitable for our country right now.'

Sometimes there are clear-cut answers to difficult situations and sometimes there are not. These people have found that even when we cannot find a chapter and verse to answer a specific question, we can be assured that knowledge of God's Word transforms the mind. In this way it helps believers, no matter where they live, to make right judgments.

Big ideas, novel ideas

We are regularly amazed when Christians in developing countries embark upon ventures that at first seem beyond their capacity. Some of these people might need to be reminded of Jesus' illustration that a person wanting to build a tower should first consider if he has enough to finish it. By contrast, some of us in the developed countries are so cautious in eliminating every possibility of things going wrong that we never get round to building. As I meet Christians in various countries and read the letters they send us, I am often left gasping at the magnitude of their faith.

Not put off by poverty

At the time I first visited Ethiopia, it was the poorest looking country I had been to. In spite of a sparkling airport and some impressive building projects around Addis Ababa, the country looked pathetically poor. I had seen worse pockets of squalor in other countries but never such overall poverty.

In one country town I was meeting with members of the local Evangelical Fellowship when a pastor began to give me his plan for mission. He spoke excitedly of expected growth in his own church, then of the number of churches he wanted to plant around Ethiopia, then of his plans for neighbouring countries, and finally of his ambition to take the gospel to the pagans of Europe and America. When he began his impassioned speech I was smiling inwardly, for he was entertaining if nothing else, but as he moved on I began to realise he was deadly serious. What's more, others present were just as serious, even though they and their churches were unbelievably poor. These men were not over-the-top Pentecostals, but came from middle-of-the-road evangelical churches.

Then I heard of the work of the Christian Assemblies of Ethiopia. They traced their roots back several decades to the work of an Irish missionary whose modest gains were threatened when the communists seized power in 1974 and expelled all missionaries. The brutal dictatorship lasted seventeen years. When it collapsed in 1991, modified democracy and religious freedom were restored, and by the turn of the century the church was experiencing unprecedented growth.

In 2006 the secretary for the national fellowship of these churches sent me a summary of the previous year – 1,357 people baptised, 7,655 children in Sunday schools, 110 evangelists in full-time ministry, 80 churches in the fellowship (membership ranging from 35 to 800), 200 new elders trained during the year and 35 evangelists in training. They had drawn up a plan to evangelise twelve new areas over the next five years, estimated the budget to be \$US30,000 and committed themselves to raising 70% of the funds from Ethiopian believers. Ethiopia is among the largest recipients of sponsored Bridgeway books and the demand is increasing. The *Commentary*, *Dictionary* and other titles are now in the national language, Amharic.

From Nepal one of our long-time partners matched the enthusiasm of our Ethiopian friends. He wrote, 'Our plan is to train 200 young people in the next ten years and send them all over Nepal, Bhutan and northeast India to plant churches in places where there is no church. I have no house, no car, no bank balance and I am now 54 years old, but my house is in heaven and my work is to please God alone.'

Expansive programs

Among African countries, Nigeria provides perhaps the most startling statistics. One organisation has mobilised over 15,000 secondary school teachers, each of whom teaches the Bible to about 300 students per week. An organiser wrote to us, 'Your *Bridgeway Bible Dictionary* has been an absolute Godsend for our project. In fact, we

have plagiarised (with proper credit) more articles from that book than any of the other 110 books we have used. Apart from the material we prepare for them, the teachers have only their Bible and perhaps some notes from teachers college. On their \$25 a month salary, they can't afford any Bible reference books. Most Bible dictionaries are too technical, with articles that are too detailed and too lengthy for what we need. That's why your *Bible Dictionary* is ideal. We have joked that we could just buy 15,000 copies of the book for all the teachers and save ourselves all this work!

Even in neighbouring Benin, where French, not English, is the language of education, the books are widely used in religious education in secondary schools. One national worker wrote of over 600 students using material from the books.



Portuguese language literature, Angola

From Angola, where the inherited language is Portuguese, the general secretary of one national ministry wrote, 'It is a big responsibility to help in the administration and leadership of 2,500 churches. These books are useful because more people are reading English all the time, but our great need is for them in Portuguese. Our big problem is we cannot do many things because we do not have material and financial resources to put two hands in the Lord's work. Please pray with us to

help change the thinking of churches in England and Australia to stop seeing Angola as a pioneer mission field.'

In Zimbabwe also an established church struggles to cope with dramatic growth. One pastor spoke of a youth fellowship of over 3,000 spread across nine districts – though he added that the 'youth' ranged in age from eighteen to thirty-five! Another in Zimbabwe pointed out the inadequacy of their church building, because it could accommodate only 600 people. In addition, they had four branch churches. Both these Zimbabwean pastors had also taken the gospel across the border into Portuguese-speaking Mozambique, where they established more churches. Although they lamented the lack of Portuguese material, they found enough people learning English to leave our books there as something to get them started.

Bangladesh is another country with limited use for English material, but because of the shortage of material in the national language, those with ability in English use whatever we send. They too are seeing much growth. One man wrote, 'We baptised 357 people and planted seven new churches. We need your continued prayers for the construction of our new centre for training pastors, evangelists, youth leaders, Sunday school teachers, secular school teachers and health workers.'

Buying and selling

Most sponsored Bridgeway books are distributed free to national Christian workers, churches, or ministries, but in some cases arrangements are different. This could be for a variety of reasons. For example, an international mission or trust might pay Bridgeway for a large quantity of books to be used entirely for its own projects. Or, where economic conditions warrant it, local people might sell books at a modest price to raise funds for a specific project, such as a resource centre.

Christian professional and business people from India visit Muslim countries of the Middle East to take Bibles and books to the large Indian workforce scattered around those countries. It is a risky business. An Indian doctor who visits those countries says

the people there earn good money and can afford to pay for the books he takes in. He takes the proceeds back home to buy gospel literature for India.

Within India, Christians show the same kind of enterprise as Christians in Muslim countries show in using international book fairs as openings for Christian books. One ministry, which kept a good record of its activity, reported that over one nine-day book fair in Delhi it sold, on average, a Bible every two minutes and a Christian book every two minutes.

In the South American country of Guyana, whose official language is English, our distributor felt that though people were poor, they could afford to pay a nominal price for the books. After selling the contents of one carton, he wrote to say he had received the equivalent of \$100, which he used to help pay expenses for a special gospel outreach in a rural area. Twenty people made professions of faith. A distributor in Sri Lanka also felt people could afford to pay, otherwise the books might simply 'decorate their homes.' He used the proceeds to buy Sunday school materials.

Something to own

Economic conditions may not be consistent across a country, especially in the developing world. Some people are able to buy, but others are almost destitute. In a region of Papua New Guinea where the economy had slumped badly, a missionary bought 100 copies of all our titles, and then made 100 weather-proof boxes which could each contain a full set of books, a Bible and a concordance. Over a period she distributed a box of books to each of 100 selected evangelists and pastors. Later she said, 'The men could not fathom that these were books for them to keep. They are not used to owning anything.'

The small Pacific island nation of Kiribati has become the recipient of an increasing number of Bridgeway books in recent years. Although we receive letters from islanders, we were particularly heartened to receive the following from a visitor. He was on a small atoll, having fellowship with a church elder in a tiny house made from palm trees, when he asked the man if he had any books besides the Bible. The man reached above his head and pulled down the *Bridgeway Bible Dictionary* from its 'shelf' among the rafters. 'I have only this,' he said, smiling broadly.

In another Pacific nation, the Solomon Islands, one church leader who distributes our books does so only in conjunction with leadership training camps or conferences. His aim is to ensure that elders, pastors and teachers know how to get best use out of the books. We heard of a similar program in the West African country of Gambia.

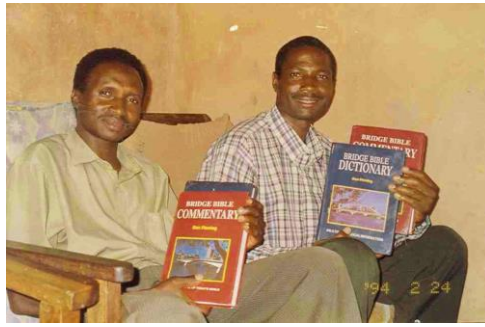
The director of a leadership training camp in the Southern African country of Namibia had no plans to distribute Bridgeway books as part of the program, because he did not have enough. So he thought that by selling his small number of books at a price only a few could afford, he could get by. At first, he said, those who bought the books were mainly theological students, but when others read them, all the books soon sold out. He wrote saying he 'had a problem, but a good problem,' because of the demand. He needed to buy larger quantities than he could reasonably expect us to supply through sponsorships.

The bottomless well

At least the man in Namibia knew of our inability to meet the need. Others, thinking we have unlimited resources, write asking for huge quantities of free books. One person asked for 500 *Commentaries* and 500 *Dictionaries*. Most people, however, are not so demanding. Even when the need is great, people are satisfied with much less, such as the man in Togo who wrote, 'We are Nigerian missionaries here, eighty in number, but please if you can send us books for twenty to start with, we can then take it bit by bit. Please do not keep silent.'

Across Africa the church is growing so rapidly that satisfying the need for Bibles and books is like trying to fill a bottomless well. In most churches, most Christians do not own a Bible, let alone books. This might be through inadequate supply but mostly through lack of money. Even at subsidised prices, Bibles are beyond the purchasing power of most people. We in affluent countries should think how readily we would buy a Bible if it cost us our entire income for one week.

One correspondent wrote, 'I and my two assistant pastors have only one Bible for us three, and most in church have no Bible at all. Many have no income and cannot get payment to buy.' Another wrote, 'In our country, spiritual books to help us grow are not many and some are not at all, and if so are very expensive. I am not a beggar but I have one question to ask you in the love of God: please can you send us Bibles, plus Bible commentary and dictionary so that we can study the Bible well.' From another country a church elder assured us he was 'not commanding, but pleading' for Bibles and books, because Christians were 'in a very desperate situation.'



At last, their own Commentary and Dictionary

A man in Ghana reflected the needs across Africa when he wrote, 'I have no materials to help train mature leaders. Souls are desiring to be matured and I am not meeting their demands. Often I have to travel many miles to big cities to borrow books from fellow servants of the Lord. I wrote to Christian publishing houses for books but to no avail. I wish I could sit down and discuss the hectic problems with you. I have read your books which I borrowed and they have a serious input in my ministry. I do not ask for many, but I make this passionate appeal for just one set of your books so that I can have them here.'

Out of the ordinary

Rarely does my work take me to establishments such as stately homes or lofty cathedrals where tour guides extol the wonders of a bygone age. Most of the Christian establishments I visit can boast little architectural or artistic splendour. They might be bursting with Christian enterprise, but they will never appear on the glossy pages of coffee table books. Every now and then, however, I come across something special.

Carey's pulpit

No city in the world is quite like Kolkata (Calcutta). It is one chaotic mass of people and traffic battling through congested streets in an epic struggle for survival. Along one of these streets, close to the choked-up town centre, a gate opens into an enclosure containing an assortment of buildings, among which is a Bible college. This was my base in Kolkata. By day I lectured to the students and by night I slept in an old timber-shuttered building left over from the colonial era. Someone pointed out the campus chapel where I was to preach on the Sunday, but it looked nothing special.

I have preached in all sorts of buildings, from very humble to very elaborate, and the setting rarely has much effect on the nerves or calm I feel before preaching. But when I walked into this building and was told about the pulpit from which I was to preach, the occasion suddenly assumed greater importance; for this was the original pulpit of William Carey, the father of the modern missionary movement.

A few moments rational thought would have told me that to preach from this pulpit was no cause to be nervous. After all, people of all kinds preach from this pulpit, they do it every Sunday, and they have been doing it for almost two hundred years. But to preach from the place once occupied by such a person was a special moment, especially now that we can see the connection between Carey's break with the past and the global church of today. He opened the way into a new world in much the same way as the apostle Paul did in the first century.

Until Paul cut loose from the established pattern, the church was largely confined to the region of pre-Christian history in West Asia. But when Paul established Christianity in Europe, the character of both Europe and the church changed, so that within a few centuries Europe became Christianised and the church became Europeanised. In relation to the gospel, other parts of the world were left behind or, worse still, forgotten. This went on for over a thousand years – closer to two thousand years – and then Carey awakened the church to the unevangelised non-European world. Other pioneers followed Carey, and soon missionaries were breaking into countries far and near.

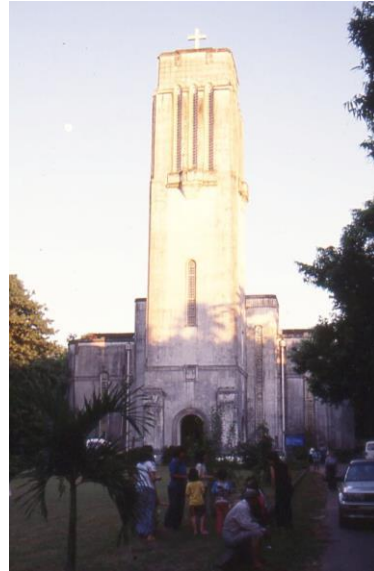
Progress was slow at first, and after one hundred years less than a tenth of the worldwide church was non-European. But growth increased markedly over the next one hundred years, especially after the dismantling of the colonial empires, and over the past thirty years has been explosive. Today the church is truly global and is predominantly non-European.

In the book of Romans, Paul used the illustration of an olive tree to demonstrate the changing composition of the family of God in his time. The family that in the beginning looked to be entirely Jewish now looked different. It still had Jewish roots, but its Jewish branches had been replaced by Gentile branches. Something similar has happened today. Until the time of the modern missionary movement, the church looked to be almost entirely European, but now it looks different. It might have European roots, but its branches are now largely from the non-European world. And the more the tree grows, the more its appearance changes.

Judson church

One of the early pioneer missionaries to follow Carey was Adoniram Judson, who headed for India's neighbour, Burma (now Myanmar). But before reaching Burma, Judson's views on baptism had changed and, when in Calcutta, he was baptised. The baptistery in front of Carey's pulpit carries a plaque declaring this to be the place of Judson's baptism.

In Burma's capital Rangoon, now Yangon, Judson began a work that saw its greatest fruit when it spread to the hill tribe people, who were largely animist, though there is still plenty of evidence of early Christianity among the Buddhist people of the plains. Among this evidence is Judson Church on the campus of the University of Yangon. This relic from the colonial era has survived the hostility of a brutal regime that is both anti-Christian and anti-Western. I have preached there on two occasions, but the spirit in the church today is scarcely a reflection of the vitality of the pioneers; for this is a registered church, sanctioned by the government but subservient to its demands. It is the only state-sanctioned church where I have preached in Myanmar and the difference in spirit from the unregistered churches is striking.



Judson church, Yangon, Myanmar

The British tradition of having a Christian chapel on a university campus has survived not only in Buddhist Myanmar but also in Muslim Pakistan. When Christians began renovating the church on the campus of Peshawar University (because of damage done by Muslim attacks), some Muslim students filed a petition to stop the work. The Chief Justice of the Peshawar Court pointed out that Pakistan's constitution protects religious minorities, and noted that Muslims can build mosques and spread their faith without obstruction in non-Muslim countries. So the renovation work was allowed to proceed. But the church is still outnumbered by the 38 mosques on campus.

Holy Scriptures

It was among Pakistani university students that I discovered how carefully one must handle a sacred book in a Muslim country. I had for many years been accustomed to meetings where people sat on the floor and placed their Bibles and other books on the floor beside them. When I did this at the meeting in Pakistan, someone discreetly lifted my Bible and placed it on a ledge. Muslims would never place their holy book on the floor, and Christians would not be seen as less respectful of their holy book. The matter was not one of superstition but one of consideration. Something of no consequence to one person might be a stumbling block to another.

The value of the Bible as a book is diminishing in our society, partly because of the popularity of audio-visuals. It might be true that new editions of the Bible appear often, but this seems to have more to do with Western consumerism than with an increasing desire to know the Scriptures. Producers are looking for commercial profit, and consumers have the cash to spend.

But when we see ancient Christian documents displayed in museums, or Christian heroes and events commemorated in monuments, we are reminded of the different values of a former era. Christians placed a much higher value on the Scriptures when they had to copy them by hand or print them on primitive presses, often at great risk to their own lives. Today also we read reports of dangers that Christians face in countries like North Korea, Saudi Arabia and Somalia, where imported Bibles are banned.

Christians must make copies by hand, section by section, page by page, so that they have the written Word to use themselves and pass on to others.

Other Christians are busy making translations, for all people ought to have the opportunity to read God's Word in their heart language. According to one report, at least part of the Bible is available, or soon will be, in more than 4,000 languages, but translations are needed in a further 3,000.

One translation exercise that left a lasting impression on me was in Khartoum, Sudan, where a Bible Society translations consultant was working with a dozen Sudanese translators on the Dinka Bible. There was nothing illegal or underground about the activity, even though Khartoum can be an inhospitable place for Christians. What impressed me was that all these Sudanese were reading and writing in Hebrew as they translated the Hebrew Old Testament into Dinka. The room was a picture of poverty – one could imagine a photo of it in a mission magazine soliciting funds for Sudan – but I wondered how many of us could read and write Hebrew. Our well-appointed church facilities have not produced the intellectual and spiritual abilities on display in that humble room.

Fit for a king

Whatever the language or country, the Bible is widely acknowledged as something exceptional. Although it might be banned in some countries, in other countries it might have a degree of public recognition. Even in Buddhist Thailand, Bibles have been presented at various times to the nation's top people, from the king down through prime ministers and cabinet ministers to prominent government officials. This explains how the Thai Bible I currently use bears a dedication to Thailand's crown prince.

While I was staying with a pastor in a provincial capital, he showed me a Bible he had spent some money on but could not use. He was one of a number of local figures to be presented to the crown prince during a proposed visit, so he thought it a good opportunity to give His Royal Highness a Bible. He bought the best Bible he could find and had it suitably inscribed with embossed lettering. At the last minute the royal visit was cancelled and the inscribed Bible could not now be used. As my friend lamented the wasted money, it occurred to me that there was a way to help. I was leaving Thailand within a few weeks, so I bought the Bible, which compensated the pastor and gave me a status symbol at the same time.

This Bible is better to handle than the one I had before, so from that day on I have used it, though it is now beginning to look a little the worse for wear. This Bible provoked some interest at the small Thai church where I sometimes preach in Brisbane. Thais are exceptionally deferential towards anything associated with the royal family and they were bemused that I should use this Bible. In time they became accustomed to it, realising that I was neither a thief nor a pretender to the throne. They calmed themselves by acknowledging that the crown prince would have received other Bibles anyway.

The broad and the narrow

Jesus taught that entrance into eternal life is through a gate that is narrow and a path that is hard. The broad gate and the easy path, though more appealing to most, lead to destruction. Jesus himself did not live in ease and comfort, and he resisted the temptation to seek instant satisfaction, even for legitimate desires. He showed his followers, by example and teaching, that their lives would have similar characteristics if they were identified with him.

In many ways Christians in the world's needy and difficult countries find themselves in circumstances more like those of Jesus' time than do Christians in the West. One reason for the weakening of the church in the West is that it lives in an environment where the lifestyle is fundamentally opposed to that which Jesus taught. Christians in less developed parts of the world do not have expectations of a prosperous, trouble-free life and are often more ready to accept life's hardships. That does not mean, however, they are not enticed when prospects of wealth are put before them.

Enticements from Islam

Over the years, Christian evangelistic activity has been accused of seeking converts by offering inducements. When people accepted Christian requirements in the hope of receiving material aid, they were called 'rice Christians.' No doubt many people joined themselves to Christians for wrong motives, even when the evangelists did not operate with wrong motives. Most evangelists simply wanted to put into practice what Jesus and his followers taught about genuine faith expressing itself in genuine charity. To preach about spiritual things without caring about physical needs could be heartless and hypocritical. Jesus was merciful but he never used acts of mercy to lure people into the kingdom. He was not mercenary and he did not 'buy' converts.

Some people are quick to criticise the church for its charitable works while they themselves display a distinctly mercenary spirit. From letters we receive, this is particularly so among Muslims. The expanding Islamic movement is funded by apparently limitless amounts of money from oil-rich countries, especially Saudi Arabia and Libya.

In the nominally Christian country of Angola, where Muslims do not even number one-tenth of one per cent of the population, Muslims have used money from the oil states to build warehouses as centres for food distribution, medical aid and education for the poor, but only if they convert to Islam. The temptation to impoverished people is great. From Malawi, a country that is about 80% Christian and less than 20% Muslim, we heard from one person that 'large amounts of money from oil-rich Muslim countries are pouring in. Kuwait is funding a new highway on the condition that a mosque can be built every ten kilometres. Bore holes are sunk for village water supplies that only Muslims can use. This puts pressure on women to convert, as they must carry water long distances each day.'

A correspondent from South Africa reflected the situation in many countries of Africa when he wrote, 'Islam is growing here, though not as much as the number of new mosques suggests. Many young people are drawn into Islam because of the promise of free education, financial help to start a business, or migration to a rich country.'

In countries where Muslims constitute the bulk of the population, the situation is different. The pressure comes not from enticements to convert to Islam but from threats to those who refuse to convert. Christians who stand firm in their faith might be denied education, employment or medical services.

Hard road, full life

In relation to Christianity, Pakistan is a country of extremes. Although it is a Muslim country, the church has government sanction, Christians can preach the gospel, Christian institutions are highly regarded and the Bible is widely distributed. On the other hand, anti-Christian violence is common and some laws are so unjust that innocent Christians stand little chance against the flimsiest of accusations.

One Christian ministry that we help has a wide ministry in literature distribution, church planting, Bible training, secular education and welfare aid. All aspects of the ministry are prospering, but not without opposition and hardship. The next four paragraphs are extracted from just one letter, sent to us by a leader in this ministry.

‘We built a single-room dwelling with an attached bathroom for a brother who had to lie low for a while. Then an Afghan family stayed there during the summer. We have helped other converted families who have been forced to move house because of persecution . . . In a village near Sheikapura we helped believers when they were attacked by terrorists. Some were killed, others beaten . . . We have also started a food program for the poor people in Rawalpindi. At present 164 families are receiving food each month . . . We built five new rooms for the school at Doksaيدا and bought two more machines for the sewing classes . . .



Pakistan: more school rooms

‘A brother and sister in Peshawar who were baptised this year have a strong testimony, which leads to much persecution for them. The local people do not allow them to travel by public transport. They cannot afford taxis, so as a church we helped them purchase a motorbike. We also purchased a motorbike for a brother who evangelises in the tribal territories on the Afghan border . . .



Pakistan: more sewing machines

‘In Kashmir we distributed steel sheeting to needy people affected by the earthquake . . . In another part of Kashmir there is a Christian family who has delivered a lot of literature over the years. Then they fixed a large cross on their house as a visible testimony. This attracted persecution. They were forbidden to draw water from the public spring nearby, but after much prayer and fasting the Lord intervened by sending water up from a new spring right in front of their house. The locals then retaliated by putting poison into the new spring and the believers began to vomit up blood. But God saved their lives. Then terrorists attacked the family, beat them up and demolished their house. Praise the Lord he has helped them rebuild . . .

‘Back in Rawalpindi we had a convention where 1,300 people took part. People came from many places and many churches. We baptised sixty during the convention . . . This year we have sold literature in Rawalpindi of 430,000 rupees. In Peshawar our literature workers have been busy and sold many books in Urdu, Pashto and Dari to the value of 46,000 rupees. We baptised more than twenty. Our Open Theological Seminary Course has been operating in Peshawar for the past four years and about twenty people have graduated so far. There is also a Sunday school with fifty children. Please pray for all those who are working in such a dangerous area.’

Improving the statistics

In Western countries most non-Christian religions are growing, but this is largely because of immigration from non-Christian countries. In the world as a whole, Islam is the fastest growing religion, but this is more from a high birth rate than from the number of converts. This fact should not cause us to be complacent, just as horror stories should not cause us to panic. Statisticians tell us that more Muslims have come to Christ in the past two decades than at any other time in history – and similar claims might be made concerning converts from other major world religions. Although many of these Muslim converts came to Christ since migrating to the nominally Christian countries of the West, the threat that Islam poses to these Christian countries is real. We should remember that many Muslim countries, from North Africa to Asia Minor, were once Christian.

Elsewhere in this book are stories of bold Christians who had remarkable experiences in evangelising Muslims. Some Muslims respond to the gospel and others react against it. A pastor in Kenya wrote of difficulties faced when Christians use premises owned by Muslims, though his letter shows that the story need not end on a sad note. 'Our small Bible school operates in a building we rent from a Muslim. The owner is threatening to send us out because he does not like Christianity. The reason is that some Muslims came to our meetings and nine got saved. These ex-Muslim brothers have promised to buy some iron roof sheets if we are thrown out. There is hope for others to join us. We have shown love by giving them flour and clothes and now four more want to join our Bible class.'

A less pleasing story comes from Egypt, where, as in many Muslim countries, laws concerning marriage and family are designed to produce statistics that will maximise Muslim numbers. One ploy used to bolster numbers is for large shops to run bogus competitions, where girls with recognisably Christian family names are the winners. When the winner is invited to an office to receive her prize, she is asked to sign a receipt which, in the small print, contains a statement of conversion to Islam. This means that no matter who the girl might later marry, any children will automatically be registered as Muslims.

The increase in Muslim numbers in Rwanda is again more to do with official records than with religious conviction. It has resulted largely from marriage into Muslim families. Rwanda is a nominally Christian country, but when the 1994 genocide left the country short of men, many women previously known as Christian married Muslims. In the decade after the genocide, the proportion of Muslims in the population almost doubled, from 8% to 15%. In spite of this, one Rwandan ministry reported 'a harvest last year of 450 new born-again Christians from a Muslim background.'

The cost of conversion

In almost every country of Africa and Asia that we help, we have either met or heard of Christians who once were Muslims. Some have escaped from hardline Islamic states, while others have come from a less hostile environment. All, however, have paid a price of some sort.

Generalisations about Muslims can be misleading. In some countries, particularly around the Middle East, governments might be so strictly Muslim that open adherence to other religions is outlawed. Whether or not the local Muslim people support militants and terrorists, they know it is prudent to go along with government policy and not show dissent. In other Muslim-majority countries, such as some of the Central Asian Republics, things are different. The religious practices of much of the population might look more like a Muslimised folk religion than a doctrinaire expression of Islam. Then there are the countries where Islam is a minority religion. In these places there might be variations in local practices and the amount of tolerance shown by Muslims varies widely.

From the strict societies of the Middle East to the tolerant societies of the West, all converts to Christianity face at least some penalties, whether official or unofficial. These penalties range from execution or imprisonment to loss of citizenship, dismissal from employment, disinheritance, or ostracism by family and friends.

Ways of helping converts

Although Bridgeway's ministry is not oriented towards the Islamic world, the simple explanation of God's Word has proved as useful among Muslims as among others. We give thanks to God every time we receive mail telling us of Muslims finding Christ and ex-Muslims growing in their knowledge of Christ.

From Nigeria came the news, 'I made a useful contact with a Muslim girl who was hungry looking for Christian literature. I gave her your book *Following Jesus* and now she is reading about Jesus for the first time in her life.' Another in Nigeria, in the predominantly Muslim region of the north-east, wrote asking for more books and tapes because of the readiness of many Muslims to read and hear about Jesus. An evangelist in Kenya wrote, 'Another four Muslims have given their lives to Christ after going through some of your books in our library.' One in Mozambique said, 'We have an open door to evangelise our Muslim neighbours. For years I have had a desire to reach out to these people who are against Christ and the gospel. Please send me more materials.'

Indirectly, our books help Muslim evangelism by helping prepare the evangelists. From the West African country of Guinea, a pastor wrote, 'The books you send us help the ministry in Guinea, where over 90% of the population are Muslims, because through these books we train leaders who preach the gospel. I plead that you send us more books, also Bibles, because it is very difficult to get Bibles in Guinea.'

A man in the Republic of Niger, a country that is 97% Muslim, wrote in the same vein, emphasising that 'we who evangelise in Muslim countries must have a very good knowing of the Word of God.' But such evangelism is tough work, reflected in comments from a local evangelist in Chad: 'To live in the midst of Muslims and still maintain your relationship with Christ is not an easy road. That is why I value the Bridgeway books and your messages on tapes.'

The Christian response

In the difficulties Christians face in countries where another religion dominates and they are a disadvantaged minority, decision-making can be difficult. The path of the majority might be broad and easy but it does not lead to life. The path that the followers of Jesus choose might be hard, but it is the right path. They know they should love their Muslim neighbours and forgive any wrongs done to them, but they feel they cannot stand idly by while the church is attacked. Christians need courage, wisdom and love.

A few years ago, the Republic of Niger was in headlines around the world because of the devastation of drought. In one region the Christian minority, who were suffering along with the Muslim majority, received some food aid from Christians in another country. When they saw that the Muslims in their community were suffering even more than they were, they shared out their food among them. They blessed those who cursed them and helped those who opposed them. In so doing they deprived themselves of needed food, but they also displayed the heart of Christ.

Overcomers

We are not surprised, though we are always humbled, when we hear of people who go through adversity and in the process are spiritually enriched. While some people succumb to their trials, others seem always to be positive.

Comfort from Job and Paul

One day we received the following letter from West Africa. 'I have been in hospital more than two years and no one thought I'd survive. During this time my children were taken to their grandmother and my wife has been with me in hospital for ten months without visiting home. Then one day news came that our house and all our belongings had been burnt to ashes. When I saw my wife collapsing on to the ground, I wanted to ask God to take away my life instead of all this suffering. But God said, No. Then I remembered Job's suffering and I took comfort.

'Although we cannot recover the great loss, our good God is taking care of us. I can say boldly like Paul, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loves us. The joy in my heart is that the Devil did not succeed in destroying my life or my wife. And as such he will never succeed in closing my mouth from preaching the gospel. The Devil is a loser. He has lost the battle. I and my wife are the winners.'

National disasters

Some disasters befall the individual, but others affect a whole nation. In an email outlining the damage done by one of Bangladesh's devastating floods, a local pastor told of continued growth in the churches. Certainly, they could use some financial aid, but he also wanted more books to replace those they had lost in the flood.

As described earlier, Sudan has suffered much from war and drought. In one letter a local preacher wrote, 'I was born in war and I grow up all my life in war. I have four children and twenty family live here with me. Sometimes we have been a week without food, but we are still alive. I am hard-working by my own hands. We used to plant groundnuts, cassava, grains, but sadly this year's agriculture has failed because of no rain. God knows our suffering and needs, he is a God of love and power, and he knows what to do in his time. Doctors write medicine for us but we cannot buy because we have no money. But God still cares for us and I still serve him. I shall be a preacher of the truth wherever I go. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve the Lord; if I am poor, my poorness may serve the Lord; if I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve the Lord.'

Crisis in Zimbabwe

Since the year 2000, Zimbabwe has suffered terribly. But out of the suffering comes new life. One local church leader put it this way: 'Zimbabwe is suffering from many problems, such as political and economic instability, famine, human rights abuses, just to name a few. Our country is under siege, with lawlessness the order of the day, and government security agents beating and killing people with the full blessing of the head of state. This once beautiful country is an economic shambles. Because of the turmoil, people are coming to Jesus Christ like never before. We need your books. Ten churches and colleges approached us for them. Please can you spare us ten kits?'

One recipient of books wrote apologetically, 'I am sorry to be long time in writing to thank you for books, but the reason was I had no money for the stamps.' We looked at the stamps and noted that an air mail letter that once cost three Zimbabwean dollars now cost more than sixty. We used to get more letters from Zimbabwe than anywhere

else, but for almost a year we received nothing. Then one arrived with postage of \$700. The next letter, many months later, cost \$2,700, and the one after that \$5,400. Within the next twelve months we received only two letters, the first costing \$120,000 and the second \$340,000.

The best way we in the West can understand such inflation is not by quoting a percentage per annum, but by thinking of ourselves as saving up, let us say, \$300,000 to buy a retirement unit, only to find that the money will not even buy a postage stamp. The government made an attempt to hide the seriousness of the situation by knocking three noughts off the currency, but within a few weeks the huge figures were back to where they were before. In fact, things got worse.

This was driven home to us by a letter we received from a long-time associate who wrote, 'I got back two days ago from the country. The Lord's work is going on well in



Zimbabwe's worthless dollars

spite of the hellish economic and political situation, with no end in sight. Imagine last month I paid \$2,700,000 for my public transport fare out, but after three weeks when I came back, the same trip cost \$17,000,000. Inflation is out of this world. Basic goods are only available on the black market tied to US dollars. Shops are empty. Prices are beyond the reach of many innocent souls.' In his next letter he said he had paid \$200,000 for a loaf of bread, but a week later it cost \$1,500,000. Two weeks later again it cost \$500,000,000.

With unemployment reaching a staggering 90%, another friend wrote, 'This is not just a point of poverty for

us, but we are heading for death. We are suffering of hunger. Very few commodities are available and they are very expensive. The church and outside worldly people are all suffering. We are in a state which leads many astray. It is difficult for people to sit and do nothing, but when there is nothing to do, people end up doing the unexpected. Please remember us for sure.'

As Zimbabweans fled the country in millions, those who stayed behind fell deeper into despair. Whether Christians were prominent in protest activity or not, the state saw them as opposed to Mugabe's rule and persecuted them increasingly. Many were abducted and tortured by the state's terror agents. A pastor friend of ours managed to get across the border into Mozambique to buy food for starving people in his church, but as soon as he crossed the border back into Zimbabwe, the militia seized the food for themselves – goat meat, maize meal, chickens and nuts.

Ecclesiastical power

In some countries, however, the strongest opposition comes not from political dictators but from the state-backed church. It resents the growing influence of evangelical churches. An Ethiopian friend lamented, 'Where I serve the Lord in the northern part of my homeland is the traditional Orthodox Christianity. The true Good News to the people is rejected by the priests and noblemen of the surrounding area who say that cemeteries are not permitted to those who follow evangelical belief but only for those who follow traditions inherited from the great-grandfathers. But many youths in home-to-home services that run underground give triumph of Christ over Orthodox Church.' This enthusiasm of the youth for evangelism is echoed in a letter from the capital, Addis Ababa. 'Our youth go out in evangelism every week and see many come to know Jesus Christ as Saviour.'

In Eritrea, once part of Ethiopia, evangelical Christians are persecuted by a dictatorial, communist-style government that recognises only four religious groups – Muslims, Catholics, Orthodox and Lutheran – and is fearful of anything it considers to be religious extremism. Hundreds of believers are in prison. Others live in constant peril.

One Eritrean in peril, who was also a grateful recipient of Bridgeway books, wrote, ‘In our country people must do national service for one year and six months, but we had to do it for four years and without any pay, because our country is in conflict with Ethiopia. Please pray earnestly for us, because believers are under heavy persecution. All our churches are supposed to be closed by the government, but we keep on in underground. That’s where your books are really helping. They help me in my daily Bible study as well as in my cell group study. I am 40 years old and the father of three children. If you have any material that helps me bring up these God-given children in a proper spiritual way, I will be thankful. I hold a bachelor degree from the only university in our country, and I serve as an elder in my church, on committee of prayer group, leader of home cells and chairman of one regional church.’

Refusing the easy way out

During the late 1990s and into the 2000s, the church in Nepal had a difficult time through a combination of Hindu nationalism, dictatorial government and Maoist terrorism. The temptation to look for a better life elsewhere was appealing, as reflected in a letter from one local evangelist. ‘Many Christian leaders here failed in the ministry because they ran away to USA and other parts of the world to earn money. They closed down their ministries. Because of them their church members went back to the world. We thank God for giving us servants of God like Bridgeway to help us carry the cross. Praise the Lord!’

Vietnam is much more dangerous for Christians than Nepal, but that only seems to urge the committed ones forward. It is difficult to get books into Vietnam direct, so we use other means. One Vietnamese pastor wrote, ‘I successfully collected the books you sent to the Bangkok address and I have taken some back to Vietnam. I have sent in others by different means. Various groups in my country will benefit from them and I will ask the people to send you an email to acknowledge receipt of them. Maybe it will not be safe for some to do this, but I will try to give you a list of the people who get these materials.’

An evangelist in one country could have been speaking on behalf of God’s workers in many countries when he wrote, ‘God brought us here. It is by his will we are in this difficult place. God will keep us in his love and give grace in this trial to behave as his child. He will make this trial a blessing, teaching me the lesson he wants me to learn and working his grace in me. In God’s time he will bring me out.’

Religious and ethnic tension

Northern Nigeria is a risky place for Christians, but even those living in the predominantly Christian south are vulnerable to attack once Muslims become agitated. After an event that stirred up Muslims worldwide, a friend in Lagos wrote, ‘That day in February was a bad day because of what happened as Muslim fanatics waged war with the children of God over a cartoon about Muhammad. Many people were killed, churches burnt and destroyed. I am just released from hospital after three months, but I thank God because I am still alive today. I lost my right eye and a finger but I have to thank God for everything he has done for me. But what pains me most is the materials that we are using for the gospel, everything was destroyed by these fanatics. I have it in mind to look unto you for help if we are to rebuild our church and Bible school, and have more of your biblical materials that we use to preach the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.’

Religious and ethnic conflicts bring out the worst in some people, but bring out the best in others. The one-time peaceful nation of the Solomon Islands, which enjoyed a long tradition of Christian influence in society and government, has been torn apart in recent years through ethnic conflict and governmental mismanagement. The events have awakened the church and caused people to examine the genuineness of their Christian commitment.

One pastor in the Solomons wrote, 'We have gone through our ethnic conflict and it has taught us to teach and train people so that they understand what God requires us to do in these last days. More than ever, we need the right scriptural materials to make people rooted in the Word of God.' Another said, 'I see this as a small shaking of the Christians here to be on alert for greater testings ahead. Christians in this country have been enjoying the one side of revival in joy, without the other side of cost-counting and persecution.'

No surrender to adversity

We hear frequent stories of the government of Myanmar closing down churches and Christian facilities. Invariably, the Christians find some new place to meet and within a short time have resumed operations. The typical procedure is reflected in a letter from one of our friends. 'On 3 July the District Chairman of the Social Development Council called us and the students to his office and forced us to close our Bible college and church, plus four other churches. We were warned we would be put in jail if we did not follow their commands. Also, they forced the students back to their homes. But now, by the grace of God and much fervent prayer, we reopen the college and church bravely. Satan calms down, but please keep praying for us.'

In another part of Myanmar, when officials closed a Bible college they forced the Christians to demolish it themselves. The Christians, who had constructed the building by their own labour in the first place, turned disaster into triumph by 'demolishing' the building so carefully that they were able to re-use most of the materials when they rebuilt the Bible college on another site. So far it has survived, as Christians continue their endless game of cat and mouse with a hostile government.



Part of a Myanmar Bible college

Bhutan, a small Buddhist kingdom between India and China, is one of the world's most anti-Christian countries. Penalties for Christian witness include withdrawal of health and education benefits, banning from training programs, denial of promotion, termination of employment, cancellation of business licences, restriction of movement, imprisonment and exile. Christian training facilities and other ministries for Bhutanese are based just across the border in India, and through these we send books into Bhutan. The country now has an estimated seven thousand believers.

No matter how adverse the circumstances, many Christians in difficult countries have a deep concern for their brothers and sisters elsewhere. This concern is not just for their well-being but also for the spread of the gospel. Many write and ask for a copy of *Operation World*, so they can learn more about the church worldwide. A church elder in Burundi, whose own home had been destroyed in the war, in thanking us for sending our *Worldnews* each month, said, 'Now we can pray with brothers around the world who are suffering a hard time.'

Rising above poverty

Although we in the West are grateful for a welfare system that relieves hardship, the system's benefits have made us less able to handle hardship when it comes. People in poor countries would welcome such a system, but when they have no such expectation they simply get on with life and make do with what they have. An evangelist in Zambia, in expressing thanks for books and a small gift, wrote, 'You are killing us with kindness. For the first time in two years we have some decent clothes. The children had worn out their shoes and went barefoot. They had one blanket to share among the three of them.'

One evangelist we visited in Malawi was keen to preach the gospel to the poor, but was sad that few helped them in other ways. On one occasion he wrote, 'Many are short of food and clothing, especially food. It is vital to serve man in all aspects, but we have only limited supplies of food to give. We also have the Bible, to take the gospel to the people and arrest them for Jesus before they are taken by the Muslims. The Muslims persuade people to join them by giving them handouts. Many Christians are powerful in preaching the gospel, but do not give anything to the poor. It pains.' Another pastor, who with his local church was looking after twenty abandoned people, wrote, 'It is sorry to see these orphans and widows sleeping without food and blankets, yet they are in the image of God.' This caring church was also evangelistic. The man added, 'We baptized 67 people last month, those who had accepted Christ as their Saviour, and we opened three new preaching points.'

A pastor in a neighbouring town, after welcoming us into his humble home, took us to see the chapel that he and his congregation were building. In the course of doing this he let slip that the house we had just come from was not his. He had sold his home to get the money to build the church.

Another Malawian pastor, who once hosted us for lunch in his crumbling house, later wrote, 'We are busy distributing as the Lord gives. For the orphans, widows and old people in three towns we bought sugar, rice and milk. They bowed their heads and gave thanks to God. We have seen that God's hand is truly long which reaches to us here in Malawi and lifts us up from great drought to redeem us. Oh, he is such an almighty God.'

Love does wonders

On being approached by local officials, a pastor and his wife in Kenya began taking in widows that were left around the streets. The only place to accommodate them was on the concrete floor of the church, which itself was without walls. The man and his wife tried by various means to look after them – planting maize on adjacent ground, building mud huts to give more protection, acquiring mattresses and blankets –



Widows in Kenya – no longer abandoned

but the group just kept growing. The number of widows grew to 39, but then six abused girls landed on them, then some more, and then a number of abused boys. 'How can I not take them in?' he asked. Further down he said, 'You know brother, when we have no money, me and my wife go to look for any kind of work, to wash clothes or dishes just to get paid per day, so that we can get food for these people. We are

becoming old and sometimes are walking far to look for work. We skip one meal so that food can last a bit. The little money the church once gave is no more, because of hunger in the church members.'

Eventually, they were forced to draw the line at the number of people they could take in, but fifty people still remain in their care, and somehow their needs are met. Later the man wrote, 'Some who were not able to walk because of hunger and sickness are now able to walk, and they can drink clean water from the borehole. Some even help a little with the farming land. They think of it like their land, because no one can expel them. We call this a miracle in the village.'

In neighbouring Ethiopia, the house of one evangelist I got to know was as decrepit as any I had seen anywhere. This man and his family were among the poorest of the poor and appeared to have good reason not to accept responsibility for the needs of others. Then one day we received a letter saying they had adopted an orphan. After talking about their family ailments, he said, 'Now I want to tell you some good news. We adopted a daughter who has lost both parents with HIV/AIDS. She is 14 and does not have any relative to adopt her, so we adopted her with the help of our Lord. We are really so happy to bring her into our home. We see her face shine much. Praise God for his great love.'

Appendix

How Bridgeway operates

The central ministry of Bridgeway Publications is to help national Christians, churches, missions and institutions in needy countries, by publishing and supplying the Christian reference materials referred to in this book. Most Christians in developing countries have few, if any, Bible helps, partly because they lack the money to buy and partly because the materials are scarcely available. One way to supply books to these countries is for Christians in the West to pay for them by way of a sponsorship scheme that Bridgeway has set up.

The collection of books is, for convenience, referred to as a Christian Workers Kit. It can be sponsored for \$80, including postage, and consists of:

- the 600-page *Bridgeway Bible Commentary*
- the 480-page *Bridgeway Bible Dictionary*
- a 5-book *Basic Christianity Series*, for non-Christians or new Christians
- *Let the Bible Speak for Itself*, a book on how to teach the Bible
- *Making Sense*, a book about Christianity in today's world
- a 5-book pictorial and expository series
 - Bible Lands – then and now*
 - Following Jesus*
 - Going Places with Paul*
 - Parables and Pictures*
 - Proverbs Today*

For economy in postage, a number of sponsored kits may be put into one carton to go to one destination, from where they are distributed. Bridgeway has an up-to-date picture of specific needs around the world and allocates books accordingly. Sponsorship gifts, no matter how small or large, are allocated to a matching number of kits, depending on local needs and requirements. The demand is always greater than the capacity to meet it, as the stories in this book illustrate. When books arrive in the destination countries and recipients write back to express their thanks, their letters are forwarded to the sponsors. Letters quoted in this book are samples of what the sponsors receive.

Bridgeway is a non-profit foundation registered by the Australian government as an income tax exempt charity. This means that, although there is no tax benefit for donors, Bridgeway is able to utilise the full amount of all gifts without any tax deduction. Also, Bridgeway's overheads are very small. The entire operation is run by volunteers who work out of their homes, using their own facilities and equipment. Bridgeway neither owns nor rents office premises and is grateful that it can warehouse its stock rent-free. It pays no wages and owns no equipment or vehicles. Apart from the cost of printing and posting the books, the only significant overhead costs are for the insurance of stock and the annual financial audit required by the government.

The author takes no royalties from Bridgeway and waives royalties for publishers of other-language editions in needy countries. Publishers in Western countries pay royalties, though not to the author. All royalties are paid into the Bridgeway trust, from where they are disbursed to a variety of projects in needy countries. It is a cause of praise to God that, through the simplest of organisational structures, much is being done to help people around the world – though this could not happen without the generosity of the sponsors and the commitment of the volunteer workers.