

Pioneers in Mission

Some years ago, I was teaching a class on *Global Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*. One particular lesson was on “Pioneers in Mission” and included a major section on women in mission.

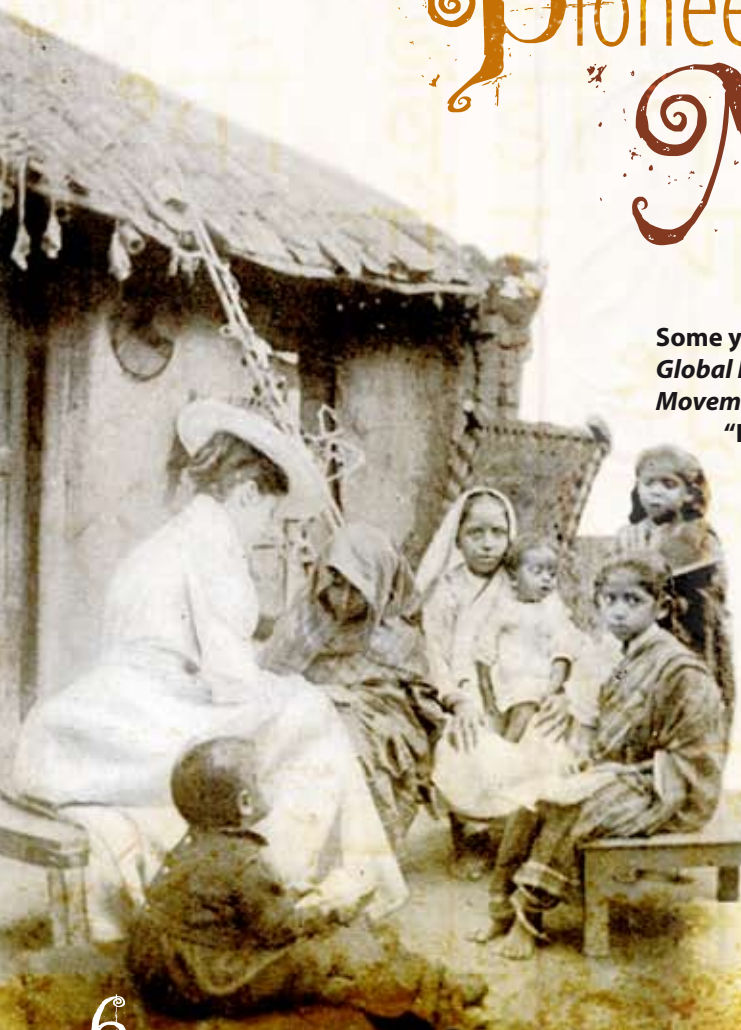
To introduce the topic, I asked the participants to imagine a mission made up of only women. The task I gave them was to describe how this mission might differ from other missions. Their answers were fascinating:

- A women’s mission would be strong on nurture of members.
- It would make decisions by consensus rather than by voting.
- An all-women’s mission would be characterised by humble service.

- There would be an emphasis on *doing* as much as on *telling*.
- There would be an impulse to cooperate with other like-minded groups.

It seemed to me to describe with uncanny accuracy what I value most in Interserve. Begun in Calcutta, India, in 1852 under the name Zenana Bible and Medical Mission, Interserve was an all-women’s mission for 100 years. That alone makes the fellowship distinctive, but even more significant are the ways those feisty early women have shaped our ethos 156 years later.

In the mid-19th century women were not being trained theologically and therefore could not become part of the major mission agencies of their day. Rather than bemoan their lot, they established their own agencies with a pragmatism that led to their involvement in ministries that targeted the marginalised – initially Indian women living in seclusion in the *zenanas*, the section of a house closed to all men except immediate relatives – through education, then later through medical missions. At a time when any sort of career for women was still regarded with suspicion, these pioneers challenged the cultural expectations of their day. In the 1870s they launched female medical missions, but as no medical school would accept women, they had to be trained privately. However, within ten years their persistence paid off, leading to Queen Victoria giving official sanction to the training of women as doctors.



We have inherited that same pragmatism and pioneer spirit, which has led Interserve to grasp whatever ministry opportunities present themselves. In the “hard places” of the world where we are committed to minister, this has made Interserve a leader in Tentmaking and Business as Mission. In fact, it was an Interserve Director, Bob Brow, who with Christy Wilson of Afghanistan fame, first coined the phrase “tentmaker” to describe the new mode of mission in which one’s profession and secular public identity allowed followers of Jesus to penetrate contexts otherwise inaccessible to the gospel.

Right from the beginning Interserve has practised integrated or holistic mission. For us that means far more than a balance between evangelism and social action. It also means a theological balance between Reformed, Anabaptist and Pentecostal traditions, equal partnership between sending and receiving entities, and inclusion of both men and women at every level of responsibility. One reflection of this balance can be found in the membership of our International Council and International Leadership Team, where approximately half the positions are held by women.

There was a time when all our country leaders in the Middle East were women – definitely not the norm in these male-dominated Muslim cultures. One of the leading evangelists working amongst Muslims was Vivienne Stacey: I remember sharing a rickshaw with her in Lahore,

Pakistan. As soon as Vivienne was seated, she asked the driver whether he could read and write. When he proudly responded in the affirmative, she offered him a gift, which he gladly received. It was a Gospel in his language. In the same natural way, Vivienne mentored a whole generation of Interserve women in Pakistan in sharing the gospel with women.

Interserve partners are continually challenging gender norms wherever they serve, whether it’s through female leadership, or the modeling of a Christ-like marriage. Sue, who was living in a Tibetan area, told of the time she had a disagreement with her husband in front of a young Tibetan female guest. When the young woman observed that the disagreement did not escalate into rage, or result in a physical beating for Sue, she was amazed. She asked Sue how it was possible, since in her culture the outcome would have been vastly different. So Sue was then able to share with her the Christian understanding of apology and forgiveness, marriage, and the equal value of men and women in God’s eyes.

Interserve partners still encounter a myriad of gender issues in the countries where they serve. For example, the Taliban refused to allow foreign women to instruct male students in the Kabul School of Physiotherapy. The problem was solved by telecasting the instructors from one room while the students watched the television monitor in the room next door (this in spite

of the Taliban’s ban on television!).

Many agencies left Afghanistan in 1997 in protest against the Taliban’s oppressive policies on women and girls. The Executive Director of one of the remaining agencies was an Interserve partner from New Zealand – Robert Grange. He was summoned to appear before the local Taliban commander, who demanded: “What do *you* think of our gender policies?”

Wisely, Robert first identified with the Muslim’s submission to Allah and his desire to do God’s will in all of life. But then he went on to say, “We believe the Prophet Jesus taught that real holiness comes as people allow God to transform them from within; and that real change will not result from even the harshest of punishments.” In effect Robert let them know that though he could relate to the motivation behind their gender policies – the desire to please God – he did not agree with their methodology. He was dismissed without further incident.

Robert’s experience reflects the cultural mine-fields that must be negotiated every day by Interserve partners as they seek simultaneously to be consistent followers of Jesus and agents of transformation in the world. ☞

Bob Morris is a former Director of Interserve Canada. Although retired, he still preaches and teaches mission, and mentors younger men. He first joined Interserve in 1969, and has lived in India, Pakistan and Cyprus.