

# MESSAGE

## ‘I Will Build My Church’

**What Is a Church?**

**An Open Door to an  
Unreached Village**

**Reconciliation or Revenge?**

**The Gospel Triumphs Over Tribal Conflict**

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**WHO IS ABWE?**

ABWE was founded in 1927 as an independent Baptist mission. Supported by a network of 400 like-minded churches, we are a global family of ministries, dedicated to fulfilling the Great Commission by multiplying leaders, churches, and missions movements among every people. Currently, more than 1,000 ABWE missionaries are reaching the lost in 84 countries through evangelism, discipleship, church planting, leadership development, and national partnerships.

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## Christ's Church Versus the Gates of Hell

BY PAUL L. DAVIS | ABWE PRESIDENT

I've been to at least 20 countries in my time as ABWE's president, but none of them are anything like this place.

It was a place of idolatry and cultic ritual. According to legend, it was the place where fallen angels had arrived in our world. Locals believed it was a portal to the underworld.

I'm not describing any of the mission fields I've seen firsthand. Rather, I'm describing first-century Caesarea Philippi. It's at the base of Mount Hermon, a place biblically associated with the demonic. In Jesus' day, gods like Zeus and Pan were worshiped there.

Yet it's in Caesarea Philippi that Jesus makes this astonishing statement to Peter: "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18b). "Gates of hell" is no overstatement here—in a sense, Jesus said these words while overlooking the very mouth of Hades!

The point? No evil in the world can ultimately stop Christ's church.

Martha and I have visited many faithful, persevering ABWE missionaries. We've seen both places of great beauty and of great darkness. In some countries, the spiritual warfare manifests in visible idol worship and witchcraft, while in other places Satan's strategy is to trap the lost in modern life and its comforts.

Yet Christ is establishing his bride, the church, in all these places. Each day, we see local churches advancing against darkness. In 2022, we witnessed 24 new church plants initiated and hundreds continue in the planting process. Twenty-one churches sent out gospel laborers through ABWE for the first time. When I'm tempted to think that darkness is winning in the world, I'm reminded of the One who has overcome the world (John 16:33).

This year, the Lord has set our sights on Papua New Guinea. It is a context marked by footholds of spiritual darkness, yes, but Christ's church is being built here too—and local churches are boldly reaching out to the surrounding peoples.

We exist to serve the body of Christ at home and abroad. We exist because of more than 400 churches partnering together and sharing resources to fulfill the Great Commission. So, in this issue, we're celebrating—and recommitting ourselves to—the local church.

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**ON THE COVER**  
Church service in  
Papua New Guinea

Photo by Jordan Timpy

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# Connections



## C. & M. B. Balkans

“Last year the leadership team for our church plant found a place in the heart of the city to hold weekly services. God has blessed our transition and has brought several curious nationals through the doors. We’ve begun reaching out through a monthly women’s Bible study, which has been well attended by local teachers.”



## ROGER & MARCY SMITH Brazil

“Our young church in Arcoverde had a baptism with seven following the Lord in this public testimony of faith. On our baptism day, I presented the gospel, and the father of a girl being baptized [pictured above] told me afterward that he understood God’s plan better and wanted to be baptized. He was not yet a believer, but as we met over dinner, he trusted Christ. He will be included in our next baptism!”



## A Hungry Heart

BY TRACI WARNER  
LOCATION: NICARAGUA

Eda was a self-proclaimed Christian. Like many Nicaraguans, she considered herself a devoted Catholic and could list all the good works she had done to earn God’s favor. She attended mass every week. She helped her neighbors. She gave money to the church. By overwhelming consensus, she was a good person.

When ABWE missionary Traci Warner invited Eda to a ladies’ Bible study held in her own neighborhood, she consented. At first, Eda knew very little about the Bible, despite years of listening to the priest and observing religious traditions.

A lesson on Matthew 7:21–23 sparked Eda’s interest. When she heard the words, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven,” she thought over her list of spiritual accomplishments. Would God say to her, “I never knew you; depart from me”?

Eda was eager to hear more. Each week she came to the Bible study prepared. The Holy Spirit was softening her heart, and Traci decided to talk with her individually.

The first day Traci climbed the hill to Eda’s house, Eda greeted her and immediately asked if Traci could explain portions of the Bible study that she did not understand. Soon after, Eda made the most important decision of her life, placing her faith in Christ.

Traci later visited Eda again, planning to suggest they meet for discipleship, as Traci does through her ministry of training women in Nicaraguan churches.

Once again, Eda greeted her excitedly at the door. She explained that she had been sharing everything she learned about the Bible with her close friend, Karla, because she wanted Karla to know Jesus. Eda did not need to be told that Christians are called to share the good news; she already grasped God’s heart for others and was proclaiming the gospel.

Praise God for new believers hungry to learn and share God’s Word. ■

# A Pastor Who Looks Like Us

BY KATELYN HAWKINS

LOCATION: SPAIN

“How can that man be a pastor?” Isabel asked in amazement. “He looks like just a normal guy!”

Isabel sat beside ABWE missionary Rosalie Duryee, overlooking the soccer field where their sons’ team practiced.

Like many Spaniards of her generation, Isabel had been raised as a cultural Catholic but came to see the Church as irrelevant. She was intrigued to hear that Rosalie and her husband Chris served as evangelical church planters. She was even more fascinated by the Spanish pastor they assisted: Live Global partner Miguel Ángel Pozo.

“I know him! His daughter is in my son’s class, and I see him at school pickup,” Isabel exclaimed. “But he doesn’t look like a pastor.”

Rosalie explained how this outgoing family man, who wore t-shirts rather than a clerical collar, qualified for church leadership. Miguel Ángel had been recruited in seminary by ABWE missionary Rich Brown to serve in a church plant. Rich mentored and disciplined Miguel Ángel, and in September 2021, installed him as lead pastor. Of greater importance than his training, Miguel Ángel met the biblical qualifications for a pastor: he was a man of integrity, self-controlled, respectful, hospitable, mature in his faith, able to teach, and leading his family well.

Isabel, who had been mistreated as a young girl by her Catholic school teachers, was struck by these high standards and resonated with them.

Traditionally, in Spain, the priesthood served as the social barometer in a community. The lifestyle of clergymen can speak volumes. So after that conversation on the sidelines, Isabel continued observing Miguel Ángel’s life.

“Many Spaniards still watch priests as religious leaders, but now they watch

them with disdain and skepticism. Many have lost respect in the community,” Rosalie explained. “But an evangelical Spanish pastor can earn that respect by demonstrating holy character. So having an evangelical pastor in the community is a really important witness.”

The need for pastors is critical. According to research firm Decision, 92 percent of Spanish towns—representing over 10 million people—have no evangelical church.

“We praise God for pastors like Miguel Ángel and long for more like him,” Rosalie continued. “People like Isabel are watching, slowly becoming more open as they see the gospel lived out by godly leaders.”

Pray for Isabel and Spaniards like her to be drawn to Christ through the witness and conduct of more godly pastors like Miguel Ángel. ■

*Editor’s Note: Isabel’s name has been changed for privacy.*

Miguel Ángel and his family



**P. & H. M.**  
South Asia

“It was our joy late in October to host another pastors’ family conference at our main church. We had 150 people attend. It was a day of encouraging, teaching, praying with, and serving the families of these pastors who are shepherds of other local congregations throughout the capital city of our nation.”



**D. & A. S.**  
Middle East

“Our church plant was launched during strict COVID-19 lockdowns in 2021. Without a building, we saw growth in both numbers and maturity—whether we met on Zoom, in a park, or in a rented community center. Our people have learned to recognize that the church is a body, not a building.”

# An Open Door to an Unreached Village

BY KATELYN HAWKINS

LOCATION: THAILAND



**T**im and Laura C. prayed for more than a year to gain access to one Thai village without a church.

Burdened for unreached peoples in northern Thailand, they developed a vision to plant churches throughout mountain villages. They identified a village near the northern border as a strategic location and partnered with two local believers living there.

Their plan faced challenges from the beginning. When COVID-19 cases rose, the village closed its doors to outsiders. Undaunted, Tim and Laura began sending relief supplies to the village for their national partners to distribute, laying a foundation of trust.

When Tim gained approval to reenter the village, he found the small group of believers disheartened. The local Buddhist and animist leaders had forbidden Christians to worship in the village. The Christians were afraid to meet in their homes for Bible study, lest they provoke the elders.

Tim suggested they continue to engage the village through community development. “Our command to love and serve others is not limited to those who agree with what we believe, or to those who will allow us to study the Bible,” he explained. “We are to show love and care to all our neighbors. Then we pray for opportunities.”

But access closed again when their national partners moved to another country to pursue better employment.

Discouraged, Tim and Laura turned their focus to other villages. Several months later, they met Pastor Amity, a Thai pastor requesting assistance. They climbed into their truck early one Sunday morning to meet with him but soon discovered they were not headed to his church—their destination was the village near the border. Pastor Amity and several of his church members had begun leading worship services there each month.

The people in the village belong to the Lao and Hmong ethnic groups. Because Pastor Amity and his team are also Hmong, they were able to gain access to the village and lead the service in the Hmong language. They asked Tim and Laura to partner with them in engaging the local people.

Through their perseverance, the relationship with the village strengthened. When the team met with the village leader to ask permission to hold a Christmas celebration, he not only granted approval but asked the schools to close early that day. Over 400 people came to the event and heard the gospel message.

“That evening I came to the realization that the ministry here is not mine,” Tim reflected. “God is writing his story and I am invited to be a part of it. I cannot believe I get to do that.” ■

*Editor’s Note: Pastor Amity’s name has been changed for security.*



# Refugees Reaching Refugees

BY KATELYN HAWKINS

LOCATION: POLAND

For many, the war in Ukraine started in February 2022. But for Pastor Maksym Sliazin, it began eight years earlier as he fled Russian-backed separatists launching a violent offensive against his city in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. As the separatists fought for control, Maksym gathered his young family and a few belongings and tearfully left their home and the church where he faithfully served as worship leader. Radical separatists later set fire to the church building.

Maksym and his family arrived in Gdansk, Poland with the first wave of Ukrainian refugees.

“God started using my education and my experience in ministry to plant a Russian-speaking church for all post-Soviet residents—Ukrainians, Belarusians, Russians, and Moldovans,” Maksym

explained. “We were serving refugees, being refugees.”

Overwhelmed by the needs, Maksym began praying for God to provide an American missionary to partner with him in his fledgling church plant. When ABWE missionary Ron Davis arrived in Gdansk in May 2022, they compared the timeline of his call to Poland with Maksym’s chronology of prayer. To their amazement, the steps of Ron’s journey to the field—first planned with his wife and then revived after the Lord called her home—synced perfectly with Maksym’s periods of focused prayer. Maksym had effectively prayed Ron to the field.

Ron and Maksym now lead a dynamic ministry at Fourth Baptist Church. With the influx of refugees since February 2022, attendance has swelled from a core of 60 members to 200. Poland has welcomed more Ukrainian refugees than

**Left:** Maksym (far left) and Ron (front row, second from left) with a men’s prayer group

**Right:** Transporting refugees

any other nation, with over 1.5 million applying for residency and millions more passing through its borders, the UN reports, and the church has intensified efforts to meet ever-changing needs.

“There’s so much work, so much happening . . . and so much opportunity, that the only thing we’re limited by is that there aren’t enough hours in the day,” Maksym conveyed.

The church rented an office to serve as a base for distributing aid and sharing the gospel with new arrivals desperate for hope and stability. Conscious of the need for long-term relationships, Maksym and Ron are planting daughter churches in cities hosting large refugee populations. A church plant in Tczew was inaugurated this spring.

Despite the unique challenges of refugees reaching refugees, Maksym instills in his congregation an attitude of service. “We don’t like fat in the church; we like muscles,” he teaches. Ron explained: “As soon as someone comes, they are drawn into ministry and into the life of the church.” Through this gospel partnership, lives are transformed.

“God is doing tremendous things right now,” marveled Maksym. “Poland is the most blessed place in Europe.” ■

## Legacies OF FAITHFULNESS



# Jim and Allene Latzko

Most missionaries aspire to complete a full cycle of ministry: to see nationals saved, disciplined, and incorporated into local churches which, in turn, plant new churches and send their own cross-cultural missionaries. Jim and Allene Latzko saw that vision realized through their 41 years of faithful service to God and to the Filipino church.

**Q: How did your journey to missions begin?**

**Jim:** I grew up listening to missionary speakers at my home church, First Baptist Church of Richland, Wash. My parents often entertained missionaries in our home, and their stories made me curious about other cultures and countries. While at camp in high school, the Lord gave me a deep desire to do something with my life that would count for eternity. The next step was to attend Bible school and begin missionary training.

**Allene:** I was born in the Philippines to missionary parents, Carrel and Fern Aagard. In high school, I told the Lord I would be a missionary if that's what he wanted. Since I had grown up as an MK, I had an accurate picture of what missionary life was like.

**Q: What is a highlight from your ministry in the Philippines?**

**Jim:** I think of the Filipino pastors and missionaries I mentored. Some whom I met as college students, or as laymen taking classes at our Bible institute, went on to become pastors or church planters on various islands. One couple served as tentmaker missionaries in a restricted-access country. Their zeal for God and heart for the lost was beautiful to witness.

**Allene:** The highlight of ministry is always people and relationships. One of our fondest memories is of baptisms at

the beach. The beauty of the natural surroundings, along with the precious testimonies of our friends' changed lives, was worth all the difficulties we faced. What's better than watching God miraculously change lives?

**Q: What was your vision for the local church in the Philippines?**

The missionary couple who recruited us, Dr. Bill and Marilyn Stevenson, imparted a vision for starting a church in Tacloban City, a regional capital, that would plant daughter churches throughout the region. We were also inspired by Allene's father, former ABWE missionary Carrel Aagard, who modeled the importance of discipling Filipino leaders and trusting them to take leadership roles as soon as possible.

**Q: How did you partner with the local church?**

Together with Filipino and ABWE co-workers, we won people to Christ and started two churches. Filipino leaders in our first church in Tacloban City then began planting new churches. We joined them in developing a Filipino mission board, New Life Baptist Mission, and recruited church planters to partner with us in planting churches throughout the Philippine islands. Today, New Life Baptist Mission has become a family of more than 20 churches.

To train these new leaders, we worked with the church to establish a pastoral

training center. And, after a stirring challenge from our ABWE regional director, our final missionary emphasis shifted to training Filipinos to serve as cross-cultural missionaries.

**Q: Most recently, you've served in the US as EveryEthne missionaries to internationals. How did your experience in Asia shape your ministry here?**

**Allene:** As Americans, we were a minority in Asia and felt very conscious of how different Asian culture was. Here in the US, we can easily identify with new immigrants who are feeling out of place and overwhelmed trying to adjust to a new culture.

**Q: What advice would you give someone considering cross-cultural ministry?**

**Allene:** Before you leave your home country, take every opportunity to make friends with people who are not like you. Visit ethnic churches. Study the book of Acts to understand how the first missionaries met cultural challenges, because you will meet similar challenges.

**Jim:** In his classic missions textbook, "Christianity Confronts Culture," Marvin Mayers emphasized a critical question: "Is what I am doing, thinking, or saying building trust or undermining trust?" (Mayers 1987, 7). To accomplish ministry of lasting value, we must establish and maintain a foundation of trust.

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**DAY OF  
PRAYER**  
FOR CHURCH PLANTING

MAY 28 — 2023

# Day of Prayer for Church Planting

**Did you know that new church plants lead more people to Christ than existing churches?**

We're dedicating May 28—the day of Pentecost—to pray individually and corporately for more people to come to faith in Jesus through new churches planted across the globe. Will you commit to pray on May 28 and invite others to join you? Sign up today to receive a free prayer guide.

Visit [doprayer.church](https://doprayer.church) to register.





# Why the Ends of the Earth Remain Unreached

BY BROOKS BUSER

Church planting is the means and end of the Great Commission. While we can use a wide array of methods for obeying Christ's command to go and make disciples of all nations, the goal of those efforts should be church planting. We see this clearly demonstrated in the apostles' obedience to the final command of Jesus. Those who heard the Great Commission from the very lips of Jesus devoted the rest of their lives to teaching the good news about him, discipling those who believed, and gathering those disciples into churches.

The apostles were motivated to keep moving to areas where no gospel witness, no disciples, and no church existed. They committed themselves to Christ's mission even at the cost of their lives. Peter preached the gospel and planted churches throughout Galatia, Bethania, Italy, and Asia. The early church historian Eusebius tells us that his ministry ended with martyrdom in Rome, in the same place and around the same time that the Apostle Paul was killed, in A.D. 64-68. Andrew carried the gospel to Greece, where he too gave his life for Christ, and Thomas made it as far as India before being speared to death. Simon the Zealot is said to have served with Thaddaeus, and both perished in Persia. Matthew ended his earthly journey in Ethiopia, Bartholomew in Saudi Arabia, James the Lesser in lower Egypt, and Philip in Hierapolis, in modern Turkey. John was imprisoned on the island of Patmos before returning to the church at Ephesus. According to church tradition, John was the only apostle to die of natural causes.

Church history estimates the location of the apostles' deaths based upon their last known place of ministry. Only one of the disciples, James the brother of John, died in his home country! All the rest died in foreign lands carrying out the Great Commission: sharing the gospel among people who dwelt in darkness, discipling those who believed, and gathering those believers into churches. This was the overriding pursuit of their lives.

As a result of their witness, and that of other faithful believers throughout the centuries, virtually every geopolitical nation on earth now has the gospel and the church among it in some form. Even so, the church is not yet spread wide enough

to give every people group access to the gospel. What remains are minority language groups and populations with too few believers to effectively evangelize their own people without outside assistance. Many people groups still have no gospel light among them.

The number of unreached people groups begs the question: Why are they still unreached? The answer lies in the difficulty of working with these groups. In most cases, their languages are harder to learn, and they exist in challenging climates and in countries that are hostile to the gospel. In short, the easy places have been reached; it is the hard ones that remain.

So how can the church reach these places? We must send qualified missionaries who have been trained for the difficulties they will encounter. They need training in how to learn languages that have never been written down, and training in how to stay in a country that is hostile to the gospel long enough to see a strong New Testament church planted. They need equipping that evaluates their character and giftings, and increases their skills in teamwork, marriage or singleness, parenting, and ability to handle stress. Some of this training can, and should, be done in the local church, but I have yet to meet a church staff that can effectively teach the breadth of skills necessary, including phonetics, phonemics, linguistics, Bible

translation, high-stress marriage and parenting, and a host of other critical skills.

Radius International is the only program widely acknowledged to provide this level of training. Through Radius' unique, highly specialized curriculum, missionary candidates spend nine months in a cross-cultural location receiving comprehensive training in cross-cultural church planting, language and culture acquisition, and stress management for ministry in difficult locations. Radius is committed to providing one-on-one discipleship for candidates and offers regular reporting to the local church.

If you are interested in learning more about Radius and how our training has effectively equipped missionaries serving across the globe, please join us for our annual conference offered virtually or in person on June 28-29, 2023, at Grace Community Church, in Sun Valley, Ca. Guest speakers include John MacArthur, Costi Hinn, Ian Hamilton, and Aubrey Sequeira.

While new ideas for reaching these last unreached people groups pop up regularly, Christ's method of church planting remains timeless and viable. He did not say that it would be easy, but the glory due to our King motivates us just as strongly now as it did the first disciples 2,000 years ago. ■

**CLEAR GOSPEL. TRUE GOSPEL.**

**CLEAR GOSPEL PROCLAMATION IS NECESSARY FOR TRUE GOSPEL UNDERSTANDING**

**RADIUS CONFERENCE**

**GRACE COMMUNITY CHURCH SUN VALLEY, CA JUNE 28-29, 2023**

**JOHN MACARTHUR**

**COSTI HINN**

**BROOKS BUSER**

**IAN HAMILTON**

**WAYNE CHEN**

**AUBREY SEQUEIRA**

**MORE INFO**

# Launch Point: Helping Transform Lives and Serve the Global Church

BY JASON PHILLIPS

As we emerged above the clouds and hiked into the Himalayan village, everyone stopped and stared at me. One young man ran across the village and returned with a group of men asking us who we were and why we had come. After a brief discussion through my translator, we were invited to sit with the village elder and share the message we brought. As we sipped tea with them, I discovered I was the first white man to have entered this unreached Buddhist village. That experience transformed my understanding of the “ends of the earth,” and it ignited a deeper passion for global missions. Just like every other missions trip I have led, I learned new things and grew closer to the Lord. You can experience the same impact on your life—while impacting other lives with the gospel—through short-term missions.

Short-term missions trips provide opportunities to participate in global ministries around the world. Well-planned trips with properly prepared participants enable long-term impact on the ministry served, as well as spiritual growth for each participant. Serving God in other cultures cultivates a spirit of humility and selflessness that helps us become more like Christ, while allowing us to focus on spiritual lessons we miss in our daily lives. As participants return transformed, a new passion for missions is ignited within them that impacts their daily



PREPARATION



APPLICATION



TRANSFORMATION

lives. This new passion often multiplies in their church, creating greater engagement in ministering to their community. What's learned on the field gets lived out at home!

Are you interested in learning more about short-term missions or identifying potential trips for you and your church? Let Launch Point help. Launch Point is a ministry of ABWE that utilizes gospel-centered short-term missions trips for long-term impact across the globe. Launch Point partners with ABWE missionaries and ministry partners to find the right ministry opportunity for you or your team.

Launch Point offers training resources to help individuals and teams prepare for maximum effectiveness for the ministry and the participants, providing all you need to facilitate missions trips. Let Launch Point help launch you into missions. ■

You can learn more at [launchpointmissions.org](https://launchpointmissions.org) or email us at [info@launchpointmissions.org](mailto:info@launchpointmissions.org).



 **LAUNCHPOINT**



A young boy with short, curly hair is smiling warmly at the camera. He is shirtless and leaning against the rough, textured bark of a tree trunk on the right side of the frame. The background is a soft-focus green landscape with trees and foliage, suggesting an outdoor, natural setting. The lighting is bright and natural, highlighting the boy's features and the texture of the tree bark.

# Let the Nations Be Glad!

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**2022 MINISTRY  
IMPACT REPORT**

**Training Leaders. Planting Churches. Launching Movements.**

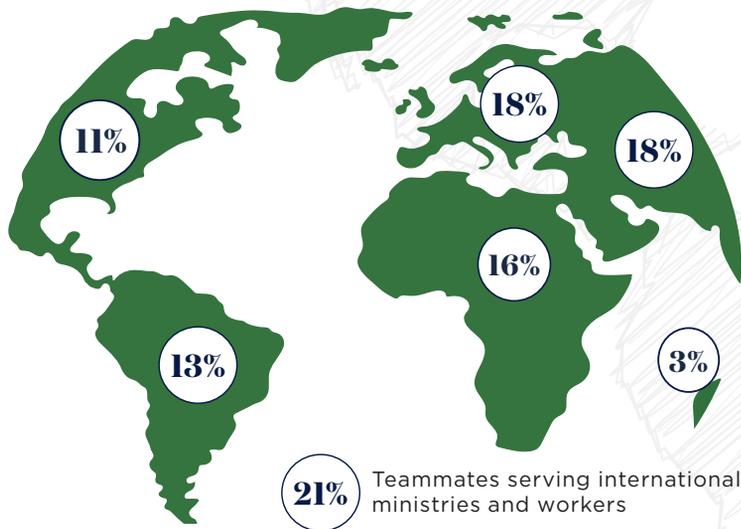
# 2022 Ministry Impact Report

*“So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.”  
(1 Corinthians 3:6-7)*

The numbers in this report only tell a small part of God’s story—how he’s working through ABWE’s 459 sending churches and 3,610 supporting churches. Rejoice with us in the Lord’s work for the sake of his name among the nations.

## WHERE OUR WORKERS SERVE

\*Percentage of ABWE workers serving in each region of the globe.



## WORKERS BY CATEGORY

\*Each icon represents 10 workers.

ABWE has **926** Active Workers

**794** Long-Term



**48** Mid-Term



**84** Short-Term



**504**  
Baptisms Celebrated



**479**  
Church Plants or Churches Strengthened



**3,669**  
Students Trained or Mentored

## NEW WORKERS BY YEAR



ST = Short-Term, MT = Mid-Term, LT = Long-Term

50 committed to serving four years or more on their appointed field.

12 committed to serving one to four years.

39 serving two months to one year.

## MAJOR PROJECT FUNDRAISING\*

Hôpital Baptiste Biblique Vision Project (Togo) \$2,890,000

Ukraine Crisis Fund \$1,770,000

Global Gospel Fund \$510,000

The Hospital of Hope (Togo) \$510,000

Goroka Baptist Bible College Development \$350,000

Colombia Tenjo Seminary \$310,000

Afghan Initiative \$260,000

Memorial Christian Hospital (Bangladesh) \$220,000

\*Rounded figures used. For more financial insights from 2022, be on the lookout for our full financial report in our upcoming summer issue, pending the results of our annual audit.

## NET CHANGES



\*This includes short, mid, and long-term.

92 workers lost in 2022 (deceased, retired, released, or concluded their time of service).

101 total workers added in 2022.

## NEW PROJECTS IN 2022

### UKRAINE CRISIS FUND

ABWE missionaries and national partners sprang to action when the war broke out in February 2022, providing over 25,000 displaced persons with meals, beds, and gospel presentations throughout Ukraine and across Europe.

Learn more at [abwe.org/ukraine-crisis](https://abwe.org/ukraine-crisis)

### THE AFGHAN INITIATIVE

ABWE's Live Global and EveryEthne ministries partnered with Afghan Christians fleeing the Taliban to relocate, train, and deploy them as missionaries in the US reaching fellow refugees.

Learn more at [abwe.org/afghan-initiative](https://abwe.org/afghan-initiative)



**21**

New Sending Churches Added



**122,539**

Patients Received Healthcare



**23**

Translation Projects Completed

# Reconciliation or Revenge?

## The Gospel Triumphs Over Tribal Conflict

---

In a nation known for violence, one group of Papua New Guinean churches confronts crisis with compassion.

BY KATELYN HAWKINS

The convoy of rough-hewn longboats motored down the Ramu River, each man seated inside scanning the dense rainforest cascading over the muddy banks. Local reports had warned of criminal activity along the waterway.

The longboats sat low in the swift current, laden with rice and supplies purchased in the port city of Madang. For three of the men, the journey had begun days earlier. Benson and Simon John, both indigenous pastors, had set out from their villages in Simbai, a remote region perched high in the rugged mountains of north-central Papua New Guinea. Their isolated villages of woven-thatch huts offered no modern amenities. To purchase provisions for their families, the men had to trek out of the highlands.

Accompanied by Simon John's son, they had descended 25 miles down steep mountain paths and crossed the cloud-covered valley to the Ramu River. They boarded a motorized dugout canoe to carry them through the tropical lowlands to the larger town of Usino Bundi. Their trek continued over another mountain chain before emerging onto the road, where, with other travelers, they hailed a truck fitted for passengers to carry them into the bustling town of Madang.

Their business in Madang complete, the three men had reversed course with their supplies. They were joined by Solomon, a faithful young believer from Simbai who had attended vocational school in Madang and was now employed as a mechanic.

Cognizant of the danger from gangs reported along the river, the men secured seats in a procession of five longboats and launched into the Ramu. Both pastors were anxious to return to their Simbai churches.



### **Doors Split Wide Open**

The gospel first came to Simbai in 1983. “Long story short is that a rebellious teenager left home to find his fortune in Madang,” related veteran ABWE missionary Bill Tobias. “His friend took him to a Baptist church, and he got saved.”

Burdened for his people in Yomneki—a highland village so steeped in sorcery it was known as “the throne of Satan”—the young man searched Madang to find a missionary available to go to his village.

Finally, a missionary told him, “If you want your people to get saved, you need to go tell them yourself.”

The young man hesitated: “What do I tell them?”

Photo in circle: Steve Mayo



**His bold preaching drew the attention of the village witch doctor. Confronted with the gospel, the witch doctor—face colorfully painted and fiercely adorned in bones, feathers, and foliage—waged an internal spiritual battle.**

The missionary replied, “Tell them what God did for you.”

At first, only a few people turned to Christ through the young man’s witness. His bold preaching drew the attention of the village witch doctor. Confronted with the gospel, the witch doctor—face colorfully painted and fiercely adorned in bones, feathers, and foliage—waged a spiritual battle within himself. The power of the gospel prevailed. Radically transformed, the witch doctor changed his name to Antipas, after the faithful witness in Revelation 2, and cast all his magic potions and amulets into the fire in a public denouncement of witchcraft. He stood before the village proclaiming that God is the true God and Jesus is the only way of salvation.

“When he made that declaration, the Lord just split the doors wide open,” Bill recalled.

Families in Yomneki turned to Christ en masse. The new believers gathered for church services, patterning their meetings after the examples they had observed on trips into town. They named their congregation Kalvari (Calvary) Baptist and began

spreading their faith throughout the Simbai region. By 1987, these indigenous Christians had established churches in seven villages within a two-hour hiking radius of Yomneki.

**Training the First Generation**

“Two pivotal decisions were made in the early days,” explained ABWE Regional Director Steve Mayo. “To construct an airstrip on the side of the mountain so missionaries could get in, and to send their best young men to Goroka Baptist Bible College to be trained.”

Goroka Baptist Bible College (GBBC) had been established as an ABWE ministry in 1974. Located in the nation’s seventh largest town, 75 miles southeast of Simbai by air, GBBC was founded to strengthen local churches by providing theological education and ministry training for national pastors and lay leaders who would, in turn, equip others for gospel ministry. To date, GBBC has graduated 485 Christian leaders from every province in Papua New Guinea, including 30 from Simbai.

The first students from Simbai arrived with a request: they needed a missionary to help them reach the peo-

Photo: Getty Images



ple groups in their remote region. Bill and Debbie Tobias answered their call. From his first survey trip to Simbai, Bill became a pastor to the pastors, leading, training, and discipling the nascent church.

“It was always national leadership, all lay pastors,” Bill said.

Over the next 30 years, Bill and Debbie established a mission base in Simbai station and from there led a fellowship of pastors throughout the region. The number of churches blossomed from seven to 36, each new church charted expectantly on a hand-drawn map. Bill developed a handbook to train pastors in the biblical requirements for the local church, teaching them to observe the ordinances of baptism and communion.

Benson became the pastor of a growing church in Miliki, a five-hour hike from Simbai station. After Bill taught his congregation to observe communion, he recruited Benson to help him train other churches in the ordinances.

“Benson was one of our faithful guys helping equip others in that ministry,” Bill recalled.

Simon John had been one of the first to trek out to Bible college at GBBC in the late 1980s. He faith-



fully pastored Immanuel Baptist Church—another of the original seven churches—for two decades until detouring into apostasy. The other Simbai pastors were forced to break fellowship with him in 2012. Nevertheless, they refused to give up on him.

Pastor Moses, and other pastors, met with Simon John for over 10 years, patiently explaining the error of his ways. Simon John finally surrendered to the Lord’s conviction in 2022. He humbly repented and recommitted to setting his life back on track. He needed to make a trip to Madang on business for his father, but when he returned to Simbai, he planned to make amends with the church and his fellow pastors and request to be restored to fellowship.

He never got the chance.

### The Keys to Death

The convoy of longboats set off from Usino Bundi, the Ramu River already swollen and treacherous from the downpours of rainy season. Tropical birds took flight overhead as a crocodile slid from the grassy banks. The men continued downriver. In the swift





A longboat transports fuel along the Ramu River.

Photo: Bill Tobias

**Benson  
toppled into  
the water.  
One by one,  
longboat by  
longboat,  
the convoy  
rounded the  
corner and  
endured brutal  
attack.**

current, the five longboats drifted further and further apart.

As the first longboat rounded a bend, they were confronted by another dugout traveling upstream. The criminals inside converged upon them. They leaped into the longboat, brandishing bush knives. Indiscriminately attacking the passengers, they robbed them, seizing phones, money, and provisions.

The second longboat sailed around the bend. Immediately seeing the attack, they attempted to pass on the other side of the river. Even the 100-yard width of the river was not enough. The criminals exchanged weapons and fired upon the boat. At the first explosion of gunfire, Simon John's son dove into the muddy water, fighting under the current until he emerged out of range. In the vicious volley, one of the criminals aimed his shotgun at the back of the second boat and fired. Benson toppled into the water. One by one, longboat by longboat, the convoy rounded the corner, enduring brutal attack.

Their ambush complete, the criminals fled downriver. The stunned passengers looked around. Of the original group, over 25 were robbed. Many were injured. Seven were killed, including Simon John, Benson, and Solomon. Their work on earth finished, they had been ushered from their longboat into the glorious presence of the Living One, the Lamb once slain who holds the keys to death and to Hades.

**Forgiveness or Retribution?**

Word of the attack spread quickly back to Usino Bundi. Several within the large group of passengers had recognized the attackers. They reported their identities to the police, who, together with incensed villagers, pursued the criminals along the river. They discovered the canoe abandoned, still overflowing with stolen rice and provisions. The police tracked the criminals from the riverbank into the rainforest, capturing 12 and transferring them to prison to await trial.

That the criminals were arrested at all is unusual in Papua New Guinea. Robberies and murder, among a host of other crimes, occur frequently throughout the island nation. Legal justice is often bypassed for deeply-ingrained cultural traditions demanding unquestioning loyalty to one’s clan—the *wantok* system—and retribution.

The elaborate system of payback overarches Papua New Guinean culture, despite the diversity of the nation’s more than 800 language groups.

“The philosophy is that you don’t get angry, you don’t get even; you get ahead,” explained Bill. If a pig causes damage to someone’s property, the property owner may go to the pig owner’s land and cut down his banana trees. Then the pig owner’s family must retaliate for losing their trees, so they may burn down a house. The volley of payback can escalate rapidly to the point of murder, igniting tribal conflict.

The bereaved Simbai churches faced a choice. Would they pursue retribution or relinquish justice to God’s divine purview?

The village of Miliki assembled to discuss the matter. As Benson’s beloved family and congregation met in their grief, they recalled the hope and testimony of 1 Thessalonians 4. Although their physical bodies were dead, Benson, Simon John, and Solomon would be raised to eternal life in Christ. The Miliki believers agreed on a radical, counter-cultural course of action: they would forgive those who had taken the life of their pastor.

The Christians throughout Simbai publicly declared that they would not take revenge against the criminals. Rather, they were praying for the attackers to be saved.

A fellow believer from Usino Bundi took advantage of his role as a parliament member to publish a letter urging that when the criminals were pros-



Photo: Bill Tobias



Photo: Cassie Timpy

**Top:** Pastor Benson serving communion

**Bottom:** Bill Tobias addressing local believers



Photo: Jordan Timpy

# “God is working. Yes, there have been difficulties, there has been crisis, but God has promised to build his church, and he’s still doing that in Papua New Guinea.”

Bill Tobias

ecuted, they should not be given the death penalty. If the attackers were put to death, he reasoned, they may not have the opportunity to trust Christ as Savior.

“Our believers have suffered tragedy, but they are handling it with the right attitude. And God is blessing that,” conveyed Bill. “There’s a peace and harmony among the believers; there’s not the unrest that could go along with it. What becomes of that . . . we may not find out until we get to heaven. So we keep praying that these churches will continue to be faithful in the work they are doing.”

## A Chain of Gospel Advance

Forty years after the gospel first arrived in Yomneki, breaking the bonds of animism and sorcery, indigenous believers have multiplied into 36 congregations throughout the Simbai region, representing a total of 1,500–1,800 indigenous people attending services each Sunday. Through their obedience to Christ, and the depth of discipleship they received at GBBC and from ABWE missionaries, the churches have grown to biblical maturity: teaching, discipling, observing the ordinances, exercising church discipline, and applying the gospel to forgive in the face of heart-rending tragedy.

“I often invoke Paul’s declaration in my own preaching,” said Steve Mayo. “The gospel . . . is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. . . .’ After going to Simbai, I now have a clear picture of what that means. We aspire to church planting movements, and in Simbai we witnessed church after church after church started in a chain of gospel advance.”

But their job is not finished. Bill Tobias estimates that only 10 to 20 percent of the greater Simbai region has been evangelized, a task complicated by the remote, difficult terrain and the diversity of local villages. To further equip the local church, GBBC has inaugurated a branch of the Bible college in Simbai, led entirely by national graduates of GBBC.

“Today, Simbai Baptist Bible Institute builds on the foundation they laid,” Steve continued. “[They are] training a new generation of evangelists and pastors who are courageously pushing the boundary of gospel advance farther into unreached tribes.”

“God is working. Yes, there have been difficulties, there has been crisis,” Bill reflected. “But God has promised to build his church, and he’s still doing that in Papua New Guinea.” ■



Photo: Jordan Timpy



**Goroka Baptist Bible College (GBBC)** empowers the Papua New Guinean church to transform communities with the love of Christ. By providing biblical education and training, GBBC equips national church leaders to serve in all 22 provinces of the nation.

GBBC shares a campus with the Seigu Medical Clinic, which treats more than 20,000 patients annually and offers community health education. The clinic includes a pregnancy center focused on providing life-affirming, gospel-centered care.

To meet the increasing needs of their community, both GBBC and the Seigu Medical Clinic need to expand and renovate. The Goroka Project will provide the necessary facilities and infrastructure for both ministries to grow and impact a new generation of changed lives.



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[abwe.org/goroka](https://abwe.org/goroka)

# What Is a Church?

One of the most essential questions of the missionary task is often left unanswered—to our detriment.

BY ALEX KOCCMAN

Ours is an age at war with reality. What is a man? What is a woman? Never have definitions mattered more. Christians, as followers of the Word made flesh (John 1:14), must be at home dealing in the realm of meaning.

How do we define a “church”? Ironically, this question is most contested within the church itself. (Even as I write this article at a public picnic table, a passerby noticed the title and began to interrogate me about how I defined the church.) Pastors and missionaries are no strangers to these debates either. Crucial ministry decisions hinge on such questions as, *How much of what I consider to be essential to the church is just my own tradition?* and, *At what point does my evangelistic Bible study become a true church plant?*

To further illustrate the importance of defining church: consider the experience of inviting a nominal Christian to your own Sunday service. Chances are you’ve heard, “I believe in Jesus, but I don’t need to attend your group to follow him.”

Most responses to this trope go something like, “But following Jesus is impossible to do alone. You need support, accountability, and encouragement. You need to be nurtured, to experience fellowship, and to serve in order to be sanctified.” This is all well and good. But this hypothetical fails to address what a church is, elevating instead what a church does for me. It is instrumental (concerning uses) rather than ontological (concerning being). We must instead start with God’s design for the corporate body of Christ.

The Apostle Paul issues us a critical declaration in Colossians 1:13: “He has delivered us *from* the domain of darkness and transferred us *to* the kingdom of his beloved Son” (emphasis mine). Note the prepositions. By virtue of his delivering his people out of the realm of darkness, Christ necessarily also assimilates them into an alternative community, “a people for himself” (Titus 2:14). This people comes into being as the product of redemption itself. Christ as Savior is not out merely grabbing indi-

vidual, atomized souls in a haphazard fashion. Rather, he is taking hold of souls to build his church (Matthew 16:15), assembling her stone by stone (1 Peter 2:5) and covenanting himself to her as her Husband (Revelation 19:7-9).

Considered in this light, the notion that an individual might belong to Christ but not to his church is as intelligible as that of a true Englishman existing entirely apart from a thing called England. As the third-century bishop Cyprian of Carthage wrote, “He can no longer have God for his Father who has not the Church for his mother.” If we belong to Christ, then we will of necessity be numbered among his people.

If *the* church is the global or *catholic* (meaning universal) community of the redeemed, then a church is a local expression of that community. (*Ekklesia*, the Greek word translated “church,” means “assembly.”) The New Testament expectation and explicit command for believers is to congregate visibly (Hebrews 10:24-25). The London Baptist Confession of Faith (1689) pro-



vides this helpful summary: “[T]he Lord Jesus calls out of the world unto himself, through the ministry of his word, by his Spirit, those that are given unto him by his Father . . . Those thus called, he commands to walk together in particular societies, or churches, for their mutual edification, and the due performance of that public worship, which he requires of them in the world” (26.5).

Of course, rarely in the course of a casual invitation to a Sunday service is there time to quote church fathers and historic confessions. In such cases, it helps to not only know what a church is but also what a church *isn't*. A church is not just a Bible study, although churches study the Bible. A church is not just a group of believers enjoying camaraderie, although healthy churches engage in fellowship. A church is not even necessarily present when the word “church” officially appears on signage or founding documents, as it does in the case of many heretical cults. And a church is certainly not yet present when those gathering are unbelievers still developing an under-

standing of the gospel, among whom the Holy Spirit has not yet brought about repentance and faith.

The church is present when a fellowship of believers intentionally joins together under the preaching of the Word, the proper administration of the ordinances (baptism and the Lord’s supper), and standards of membership or discipline, ordaining qualified pastor-elders to lead and deacons to serve. Though particular churches may be deficient in one or more of these areas for a season (e.g. practicing communion infrequently or surviving for a season without a pastor), these features mark a church *in principle*. A dog may have a docked tail or a dry nose, but *in principle* a dog is a thing which has a cold, wet nose and a wagging appendage.

Pastors and missionaries zealous for disciple making may, with noble intentions, simplify or even deconstruct aspects of church life to catalyze movements. This impulse is not altogether misguided and may represent an attempted correction to the stodgy

institutionalism that can affect established churches. But our disciple-making efforts will fail to form healthy churches without due attention to the church’s God-given nature. We cannot score without aiming, and we cannot aim without a target.

In Revelation 2:5, Jesus threatened the Ephesian church with the removal of its candlestick—in essence, with being *de-churched*. Whatever it means to be de-churched, it follows that to be a church must be very precious indeed. Little wonder that Christians have all along confessed in the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe in . . . the holy catholic church, the communion of saints[.]” Amen. ■



**Alex Kocman** is the director of communications and media for ABWE. He serves as general editor for Message Magazine and co-hosts The Missions Podcast. He lives in Pennsylvania with his wife and three children.



# When Nothing Works: A Path of Humble Obedience

BY STEVE WENDEL

The Czech Republic is one of the most atheistic and agnostic countries in the world.

Many layers of history and politics paved the way for the Czech Republic’s descent into secularism, making evangelism a challenge for missionaries like us. Our Czech friends’ worldview gives us little foundation on which to build.

tions. There is no “normal” for us. Every day, we adapt our parenting strategies and family life to new challenges. With each turn, we build a bit more flexibility, even though many days bring often-overwhelming feelings of failure.

uals saved each year through a nationwide ministry program. Trying to sidestep my learning curve, I asked, “What really works here?” He laughed heartily, then kindly recalibrated my thinking: “You must understand that nothing works. We try lots of different things, and we work very hard. We . . . [see one conversion] here, one there, but nothing works for many.”

That was a hard pill to swallow as ambitious American missionaries, but one with which we were already well acquainted as special needs parents.

When we laid aside our own goals to help our Czech brothers and sisters shoulder the load, we went from being a burden to being a blessing. The way forward in challenging fields is not to discourage our fellow servants by pointing out the fallow ground but to put our hand to the plow with them. I am grateful the Lord has used our challenges as parents to teach us this vital lesson. ■



Nevertheless, the Czech church has survived. Generations of withstanding pressure from imperialism and communism have instilled resilience in the church. But this beautiful hardiness can be a two-edged sword for missionaries. How can missionaries help churches to grow and reproduce when they have survived by their virtue of resistance to change?

Living out our faith in the Czech Republic has been a consistent and often-difficult learning experience. Yet all along, God has brought us circumstances to condition us for this task. The experience of raising a special needs child on the mission field has been one such tool in God’s hands.

Parenting a special needs child is a daily exercise in laying aside expecta-

Yet we are committed to the long, difficult process of growth and maturation for our child.

The real difficulty isn’t our child’s special needs—it’s our own selfish ambition and pride, which God must daily chip away to fit us for humbler service. Ministry in the Czech Republic also has this humbling effect. It took years for us to understand that our “normal” strategies would not work here and that ministry in the Czech Republic is an uphill grind—even compared with other Eastern European countries.

Yet once we accepted the realities of both parenting and ministry, we became more useful to our Czech ministry partners. I once met a Czech leader who had seen some “success” in ministry—meaning that he had seen six or seven individ-



**Steve Wendel** and his wife, Cari, served as church planters with ABWE in the Czech Republic from 2006 to 2022. Most recently, they’ve relocated to the US to serve in ABWE’s training department.



# The Church off the Beaten Path

BY HANNAH STRAYER

Veering from the paved road, a red dirt path full of potholes and nearly impassable during rainy season winds past the populated regions of Togo into the bush. Along the path, Muslim farmers herd cattle as women and children fetch water in jugs or bowls perched upon their heads. Down the road, trees and brush give way to a cluster of crude grass and mud huts.

In the village, chickens dart across the dense clay while dogs laze in the sun. A group of women emerge from the fields carrying wooden benches atop their heads. They set the benches in a semi-circle under a large tree in the clearing

and take their seats. Over the next several minutes, a handful of men arrive with other women and children. Once the congregation has assembled, they sing a few songs from memory, and the preacher shares a message from the Bible while someone translates it into Kabiye, the local language.

This church in Gbakakpakope, Togo has nearly tripled in size from its original 20 to 25 attendees in 2015. Now, a deacon comes each week from the mother church in Agou to share the Word, but the congregants are praying for God to raise up a permanent pastor for this church. ■



**Hannah Strayer** is a media specialist serving in Africa with ABWE. She uses media to share the needs on the field, help missionaries more effectively communicate with supporters, and share the gospel with nationals.



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