Missio Dei

Exploring God's work in the world

'A New Day in Mission'

Irene Weaver Reflects on Her Century of Mission

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Preface

In Africa, the ancestors guide life from their superior vantage point of proximity to spiritual power and from their wealth of experiential wisdom. Since Ed and Irene Weaver have been those ancestors for me and my husband, Rod, being chosen to write part of Irene's story is one of the highest honors I have ever received.

Before leaving for ministry in the West African country of Benin in 1987, Rod and I spent weeks poring over everything Ed and Irene had ever written: books, pamphlets and letters. As the two of us continually seek to align ourselves with God's mission in the world, we often look to the Weavers and imitate their example as they followed Jesus.

We knew Ed and Irene as spiritual mentors for 16 years. Their writings guided us faithfully, although the Atlantic Ocean separated us.

A more tangible blessing awaited us in 2001, when we met Irene in person for the first time in her home at Schowalter Villa, a retirement community in Hesston, Kan. She served her famous curry and regaled us with stories. The printed page, through which Irene had communicated with us until then, had not adequately transmitted the exuberance of her personality – the delight of exquisitely blended spices or the joy of shared laughter.

We updated Irene with the news from her West African friends and gave her the funeral cloth of Harry Y. Henry. Henry, a Beninese church leader who was influential internationally, had told the Weavers that because of their example, Mennonites were the only Western missionaries he would consider inviting to work in his country.

Rod and I described some of the fruit that had grown out of the seeds that Irene and Ed had planted three decades before: one of the most respected hospitals in the country, an internationally recognized garbage-and-recycling program, nine community-based development initiatives and the Benin Bible Institute where more than 500 church leaders from some 60 denominations have been trained. Beninese leaders created and administer all these institutions. All this represents the beginning of the harvest in just one of the more than a dozen countries where the Weavers engaged in mission.

I have divided Irene's reflections here into two sections. The first narrates the journey that led Ed and Irene into their pioneering ministry

with African-Initiated Churches (AICs)[1]. The second outlines some of the foundational principles that the Weavers developed to guide this ministry.

It is my hope and prayer that the reader will find as much joy and inspiration in Irene's reflections presented here as I have experienced in compiling and editing them.

Lynda Hollinger-Janzen

Note

[1]Historically, the term African Independent Churches was used. However, the AICs themselves objected to being labeled in this way because they understood that the church is dependent on Jesus and on the global body of Christ. Today, AIC stands for African-Initiated Churches.

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Part I: Irene’s story

Irene Lehman Weaver’s story begins in India. In the course of her 95 years, Irene has experienced virtually all the phases of Mennonite mission history. Although the first Mennonite missionaries went to India in 1899, 11 years before Irene’s birth, she grew up immersed in the ethos of those who described their ministry as being bearers of Christ’s light to a dark and famine-stricken land.

Irene’s parents, Lydia and Martin Clifford Lehman, endured many hardships as they cared for starving plague victims, long sleeves securely fastened around the wrists to prevent disease-carrying flea bites. Although the members of the Lehman family survived, the mango grove beside the Dhamtari mission station cradles the graves of other missionaries and their children who faithfully followed Jesus’ call to the end of their days.

Irene says of those early days of ministry: “The mission board was paying the [Indian] evangelists and Bible women. Churches, schools, hospitals were all running on foreign funds. In a time of famine, I guess it had to be that way. You can’t talk to people who are dying of hunger unless you feed them. When you have orphans, you have to have orphanages and schools. When people are sick, you need hospitals.”

Although Irene and Ed Weaver spoke out strongly against mission administered exclusively by expatriates, Irene always tempers her commentary by saying: “I can’t ever criticize the way they worked because if I had been there in that time I would have done the same thing. But, this is a new day in mission.”

Riding with the *rajah*: an empowering childhood

As the child of parents who were much respected by the Indian community, Irene was not burdened with the passivity that was instilled into young Mennonite women in North America during that

era. She developed self-confidence and a sense of empowerment from a community that admired her. These character traits later gave her the strength to tackle repressive structures in the church's practice in North America and in places of mission around the world.

One day when Irene was three years old, a troop of elephants rumbled into the Dhamtari mission compound where the Lehman family lived. A *rajah* (an Indian prince) and his entourage were on their way north when a glimpse of Irene playing caused the procession to stop. This *rajah* of Jagdalpur had never seen a child as light-skinned as Irene. He requested that she ride his elephant with him.

"The elephant sat down and steps were placed beside him so I could climb up onto his neck," Irene recalled. "There I sat between the *rajah* in his gold-and-blue chair and the driver, who directed the elephant by pulling on his ears or prodding him with a stick."

The *rajah* kept in touch with the Lehman family and later sent Irene a pony.

When Irene played house with her Indian friends, she was the *memsahib*, ordering her playmates to do her bidding. Though Irene's mother tried to teach her daughter the rudiments of Mennonite feminine humility by chiding her when her friends let her be first in all games, Irene didn't learn these lessons well enough to avoid trouble when she arrived at Goshen College – a small, Mennonite liberal-arts college located in Indiana – in the fall of 1928.

A witness in North America

Irene received an invitation to speak at a young peoples' mission meeting on the college campus. While dressing for the occasion, Irene remembered her father's earlier advice to her as he had helped her get settled on the ship in Calcutta. "Irene," he had told her, "when you get to America, just be careful what you wear. The people in America don't think about clothes the way we do."

Irene remembers being perplexed by these parting words. "I really didn't know what he meant, but there was no time to discuss it. At home, we dressed very, very simply, but clothes were never an issue. I didn't know that people in America got tied up in knots about clothes."

Irene decided on a plain dark blue dress with long sleeves and no ornamentation. However, her dress had no cape (an additional layer of cloth over the bodice of a dress, worn by some Mennonite women to diminish visible shapeliness).

When the church leader who chaired the meeting asked all those who were on the program to please come to the platform, Irene unself-consciously got up along with two other distinguished-looking men in their plain suits and took a place on the platform between them. She didn't realize the stir she was causing.

"I was not thinking about anything except what I was supposed to say," Irene said. "After the meeting, I felt quite happy. Several people affirmed me and thanked me. But a few days later, I heard that one of the board members [of the Elkhart-based Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities who supported her family] said that it had cost the mission $1,000 to have me on the program because of the way I was dressed. Well, that really shook me. My first impulse was, 'If that's what it means to be a Mennonite, if dress is your religion, then I don't want to have anything to do with Mennonites.'"

Ernest Miller, a missionary from India in Goshen on furlough at the time, consoled Irene by telling her that he knew how she was feeling. He was being criticized for the way he combed his hair.

"Ernest told me that not all Mennonites are like this. We prayed together and I felt better. God kept his hand on me and I am most grateful that God has helped me to understand and be a witness in the Mennonite Church," Irene said.

"Africa or India, but not Chicago"

Irene got to know a fellow student at Goshen College named Edwin Weaver. During her junior year, Ed invited Irene to Hesston, Kan., to meet his family. During that visit, Ed proposed to Irene.

"I wanted to say, 'yes'," Irene recalled. "But instead, I said, 'Will you go with me to India?' His answer was, 'Will you go with me to Africa?' So we decided wherever we went, we wanted to go together and we would let God decide whether it should be India or Africa or somewhere else. That's how it all started."

After graduating from Goshen College in 1932, Irene joined Ed in New York City at the New York Biblical Seminary. Ed believed Irene should have the same opportunities for training that he had.

One year later, the Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities called Ed and Irene. "The mission board informed us that we should get married and go to the Chicago Home Mission," Irene said. "I suspect they wanted to see whether we were orthodox or not before they sent us to the foreign field. Chicago is a place that I'd told Ed I would not go."

However, Ed and Irene celebrated their marriage in 1933 and did go to Chicago for two years. Here their first child, Carolyn Grace, was born, and they helped to begin a church for Spanish-speaking people "to be able to worship in their own way, in their own language, and to be autonomous."

In 1935, the mission board called Ed and Irene to India, where the first three years were spent in language learning for Ed and orientation to mission activities. During this time, a second daughter, Elizabeth, joined the Weaver family in 1937. A third child, Jerold, followed in 1941.

"We must change our ways"

When the Weaver family returned to India in 1945 after their first furlough, they were stationed in Dondi as evangelistic missionaries. Bible women went with Irene into villages to share the good news of Jesus Christ, and evangelists traveled with Ed.

One noon as Irene returned from a morning of mingling and counseling with the women waiting to be seen by the medical missionary personnel in the Dondi dispensary, a snippet of conversation caused her to pause before stepping into her British-style bungalow with high ceilings and a cool interior. A group of village women, who came to sell their rice and lentils at the Saturday market, had gathered around Irene's home, awed by the most beautiful building they had ever seen. One woman's words – "living here must be like heaven" – burned shame into Irene's soul.

"Those words did something to me," Irene said. "I began to question many things, including my philosophy of living. I decided my strategy of work in a foreign country would be different from anything I had experienced before."

Irene's questions grew more urgent as the months and years passed. After teaching with a Bible woman in a village, Irene overheard a woman ask the Bible woman, "How much are you paid to do this?"

That question haunted Irene. "I have never forgotten that voice," she said. "I can still hear it. I thought, 'When India's people witness voluntarily to their own people, it's going to make much more of an impression than when they are paid with foreign funds to do it.'"

Irene kept a needle and thread in her Hindi New Testament to mend tears in children's clothes and women's saris as she chatted with participants after Bible lessons. After a while, Irene noticed that the needle no longer slipped through cloth smoothly. She never discarded

that needle and it remains to this day embedded in the flyleaf of her Hindi Bible. "That needle serves as a parable to show how old ways get rusty. We need to change our ways of doing things," Irene said.

Dreaming of new mission strategy

Other experiences fertilized that growing kernel of discomfort with the way North American Mennonites carried out God's mission in India in the mid-20th century.

For Irene, preparation for village tours resembled a traumatic marathon. Ox-drawn carts trundled into the mission compound and were filled with tents for missionaries and Indian workers, beds, chairs, cooking utensils, wicker baskets full of food, kerosene lamps and literature.

"It took cartload after cartload of things just to transport us out into the village, even to live for 10 days," Irene said.

Preparation for village tours resembled a traumatic marathon. "It took cartload after cartload of things just to transport us out into the village," Irene said.

Although they traveled with so many amenities that weren't available in the remote areas, the missionaries lived rugged lives during their village stays. Access to water from the village well was often denied because the Christian church attracted many people of low social standing. When low-caste people drew water from a well, it was no longer deemed suitable for those of a higher caste.

"We'd go down to the pond where the buffaloes, cows and people bathed. We went out into the middle where it was less scummy to fill our containers. Then, we would strain the water and boil the life out of it. We would strain it again and cool it and try to think of something else when we were drinking it. I couldn't even bathe my baby in that kind of water without boiling it," Irene said.

Irene attempted to visit in every home while in a village, though sometimes she invited the women to her tent where they would talk, laugh, pray and sing together. Irene told Bible stories and taught health lessons about hygiene and nutrition. She also disproved, by demonstration, the generally accepted theory that white women couldn't nurse their babies.

Despite the difficulties related to roughing it in villages, beautiful moments remain nestled in Irene's memory. She remembered the eve-

nings when the villagers were coming home from work in their fields, walking along the rice banks and singing the *bajans* (Christian words set to traditional Indian melodies) they learned in the nightly evangelistic meetings led by the missionaries.

"The music echoed across the plain back to the tent where we could hear them. I long to have that kind of experience again. Yet, I found myself wondering, after all the trouble of moving everything out and moving everything back in at home again, what the people really got out of it. They would hold the pictures we gave them upside down and couldn't know if it was a tree or a man or who it was. Things that came from America didn't look real to them. Were we doing this just because we were paid to do it?" Irene asked, recalling her thoughts from those long-ago days.

Irene began to dream of a new mission strategy. "I thought that I would live among the people in their village in a house like theirs, helping them in their sicknesses, teaching them to read the Bible, getting them together to pray in times of trouble until there was a little nucleus formed of people. I would trust the Holy Spirit to direct them, to be their guide and their leader. When this happened in one village, I would move to another village and do the same thing, but always come back many times to encourage them and help them to grow," she said.

An autonomous Indian church

Missionary families looked forward to annual conferences that brought together all the congregations in a given region for a week. These gatherings combined revival meetings, business meetings and camping. However, no Indians were invited to participate in the business meetings. This exclusion grew unbearable for Ed and Irene.

"India still didn't have her freedom at that time and neither did the church," Irene said. "The mission was very much in control. Missionaries said the Indian Christians were not capable of governing themselves. We had mission business meeting, attended by all the missionaries only, and we had the executive committee, which was missionaries only. We felt that the day that the church would be free from the mission should be very soon."

But in the 1950s when the Indian Mennonite Church did gain its freedom, conflict continued.

"The struggle has to go on until a church finds itself," Irene said. "All of sudden, it was like we had put Saul's armor on David. The

church couldn't move – not with our way of doing things, not with the trappings we had brought. And now, the Indian church didn't know how to be free and for years there was a struggle of power and a struggle for the mission property. There was a struggle of the missionaries having had certain things and why couldn't they have the same things? There was a struggle over the mission board cutting off funds little by little.

"It was years after, when they finally shook off our trappings, when they finally found their strength. When we were out of the way, then, they could take charge of things. It was right for missionaries to go to India to lay foundations, but we could've done it in a way that didn't make them so dependent on foreign funds and foreign personnel. If we had, we would have saved the Indian church a lot of heartache," Irene said.

"I have often felt I was a daughter of India, that her people were my people, that her country was my country. I never felt like a foreign missionary."

Retirement #1

Ed and Irene left India in 1956 to "retire" from overseas mission and to serve the Hesston, Kan., community in counseling and pastoral roles. It was the first of five attempted retirements.

"I have often felt I was a daughter of India, that her people were my people, that her country was my country. I never felt like a foreign missionary," Irene said. "When I think of India, it is always with great love and deep indebtedness for what she has taught me. Part of my life story is how God revealed himself to me through people of the village and jungle, how God sharpened my vision for service in years to come. It is a story of the years that really shaped my philosophy on mission strategy, encouraged my desire to serve through the teacher-learner approach and a person-to-person approach. Through conflict and struggle India taught me the importance of being rather than doing, and that the power of the Holy Spirit working in us is greater than any other power."

In 1959, Irene got her chance to prove the sincerity of her "yes" to Ed's marriage proposal three decades earlier. The mission board asked Ed and Irene if they would start a ministry in Nigeria.

"Well, Irene, what do you think?" Ed asked her. "I went with you to India for 21 years; will you now go with me to Africa?"

Irene chuckles as she remembers she had no choice but to say, "Of course, I'll go with you to Africa."

African-Initiated Churches

A request had come to the Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities from 50 AICs who wanted to become "Mennonite" churches after hearing a Mennonite Hour radio program broadcast from the ELWA mission station in Liberia.

The AIC phenomenon emerged in the early 20th century when Africans began to establish their own churches independently of Western mission agencies. The AICs sought the essence of biblical faith that spoke authentically to their African reality and threw off the cultural wrappings of an imported Christianity.

Many AICs splintered off from mission-planted churches over differences in worldview (the Western scientific orientation of most missionaries diminished the importance of spiritual intervention that defines African – and biblical – reality), over discipline issues (most often, polygamy) or authority struggles.

Despite the many assets of AICs, they often lack the powerful symbols that Western money buys, such as substantial buildings and foreign affiliations. AICs are sometimes considered inferior churches and may be scorned by Africans and Westerners alike. By the 1950s, some AICs were searching to form partnerships with Western Christian organizations to gain credibility.

The AICs that invited the Mennonites had been through a succession of denominations; the one just prior to the Weavers' arrival had been the Mormons.

"We do not know what to do but our eyes are upon thee" (2 Chronicles 20:12)

A few months after Irene's consent to go to Africa, the Weavers found themselves in Uyo, Nigeria, where they counted 225 congregations from 40 different denominations in a five-mile radius around their new home. They wondered how many others remained hidden in the lush, tangled forest and whether God had really called them to this land of too many churches.

"Our minds often seemed to reflect the density of the jungle undergrowth," Irene said. "How could we find a way through the tangled

mesh of uncertainties in which we found ourselves?

"As we visited the newly named Mennonite churches, we were enthusiastically received with generous gifts, overwhelmed with kindness and urgent requests for hospitals and schools, but we saw good schools and hospitals everywhere we looked.

"Things didn't add up. It was all so confusing. Gradually we learned that in Africa, as in other parts of the world, one does not take things at face value. An uninitiated foreigner can easily jump to wrong conclusions."

On their first pastoral visit that began by car and concluded with piggy-back and hand-chair rides through a marsh, Ed and Irene lost 14 of the 50 Mennonite churches that they had come to shepherd because the pastors were not willing to give up polygamy. They lost another church because the leader was not willing to discontinue the practice of sacrificing goats to the ancestors in healing-prayer rituals for his members.

After being confronted with the cost of discipleship, only 10 congregations remained. With this nucleus, the Weavers started building a New Testament church from four clans of the Ibibio ethnic group.

"We could have developed a really big Mennonite church, but we were not interested in using the religious confusion in Uyo to develop a large church," Irene said.

Often, as Ed and Irene opened their eyes after a time of intense prayer, the calligraphy on the whitewashed wall of their mud-brick home came into focus in the lantern light, "We do not know what to do but our eyes are upon thee" (2 Chronicles 20:12). This verse guided their steps through uncharted territory in mission history.

"If God is working, new things will happen"

During their first year in Uyo, the Weavers attempted to create order out of the chaos they found. They helped to form an executive committee for the loosely organized Mennonite church conference giving a clear signal to the local church leaders at the outset of their collaboration that all decisions would be made by indigenous administrators. A small mission-funded budget for the support of church leaders was turned over to this committee to manage. This practice began stewardship training in the Nigerian Mennonite Church.

In moving toward a truly autonomous African church, the Weavers confronted a long-established mission tradition and faced opposi-

tion from both foreign agencies and the AICs. The deep hatred and distrust between the AICs and the mission-planted churches surprised the Weavers.

"I'm afraid that our sympathies were very much on the side of the mission churches, but we were sent to work with an AIC. We had to somehow try to understand how they felt and what they wanted. This called for so much adjustment, " Irene said.

"Our task seemed so impossible. Sometimes it felt as if we carried a sign that said, 'Missionaries for sale;' that the AICs were merely wanting help with material things. Missionaries stood for schools and jobs with salaries and prestige. With a missionary in their midst, the AICs could have the same advantages as members of mission churches.

"The problems we faced were, from the beginning, too great for us. What happened was in no way our doing. We simply waited and let God work them out one by one. If God is working, then we can expect new things to happen."

Education, a high priority for AICs

The Weavers noticed that African youth were desperately eager for an education. Other established mission agencies had also built their programs around this fact.

"Mission churches have the schools; therefore, they have the young people too," Irene said. "This strategy worked. There is no price too great for a young African to pay for a chance to study. They easily accepted cultural and religious change for this opportunity. They will go to the church where the best educational opportunities are offered them."

While the youth gravitated toward the mission-planted churches, the older people, who did not welcome the rapid changes, filled most of the benches in the AIC congregations, along with the preschool children in their care.

Ed and Irene realized that for a church to grow into the future, it needed to give special attention to young people. However, according to their analysis, there were already sufficient schools in the Uyo region. Their experience in India had also taught them to be cautious of institutions.

The Weavers perceived a problem, however, in families' ability to pay for their children's education. So the Weavers worked with the newly formed executive committee to develop a revolving, church-controlled

scholarship plan for the training of young people and church leaders in the areas of theological education, nursing, agriculture and other trades.

Those who received scholarships were expected to pay back into the scholarship fund once they had completed their training and began earning an income. "The scholarship program brought many fine young people back into the Mennonite congregations," Irene said. "Young people began doing things, organizing the youth and holding retreats. They were bringing new life into the church."

Uyo United Independent Churches Bible School

"Our newly adopted Mennonite churches were not only seeking money and prestige. The congregations wanted to be part of a good strong church. They continued to work and cooperate with us, even if we did not follow the pattern of the older missions who came a hundred years before us," Irene said.

"They gave high priority to the need for a Bible school. The key to the progress of a church is the level of its spiritual leadership. Almost all the men conducting services in the local congregations were untrained, and in some cases, illiterate."

From the beginning of their ministry in Nigeria, the Weavers taught Bible and leadership training classes in a small, rented room. Church leaders of different denominations came to Uyo with their own food to live, eat and study together for three months before returning to their congregations, their families and their farms. "We didn't pull them out of their cultural milieu into the Western world," Irene said. "And we never owned property, so the Nigerian church had nothing to fight over when the missionaries left."

These classes laid the groundwork for the birth of the Uyo United Independent Churches Bible College. In 1964, in collaboration with other missions and denominations, this school opened its doors to 50 students from 10 denominations. The students eagerly studied the Bible and immediately returned to their congregations to share the excitement of their new learning.

Building bridges over hostile waters

Ed and Irene continued to work at church unity by bringing denominations and mission agencies together to work at projects whose scope was beyond that of any one church.

By the time civil war erupted in 1967 with the Biafran secession from the seven-year-old nation of Nigeria, Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities had sent 54 workers to Nigeria, most of them seconded to other mission agencies to teach in their schools, staff their hospitals and administer their development programs. Through this kind of collaboration, Mennonites worked at breaking down the hostility that poisoned the relationships between AICs and mission-planted church agencies.

Sensitive to the movement for political freedom that was sweeping over the African continent during this era, the Weavers also sought to cooperate with the newly formed government structures.

"We needed to recognize Africa's fierce passion for freedom," Irene said. "We had to be sympathetic to the desire for human rights and self-determination. Africans had to be given the right to become the people that God in his grace created them to be. In an era where the colonial empires were disappearing from Africa, large colonial-type missions had to go too and adjust to the new day."

The Biafran war forced nearly all the Mennonite missionaries to leave Nigeria, the Weavers among them. Although Ed and Irene tried repeatedly to return, this possibility never materialized. Instead, they began a two-year tour along the West African coastline studying the viability of working with other AICs.

Out of their contacts grew important Mennonite Board of Missions ministries in Liberia, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo and Dahomey/Benin that continue to the present. (Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities changed its name to Mennonite Board of Missions in 1971.) Ed and Irene's experiences with the shortcomings of colonial-era mission in India and their pioneering ministry in Uyo laid stepping-stones that became foundational principles used throughout the African continent in the ensuing work with AICs.

The Weavers were called out of retirement several more times over the years to help mission workers in southern Africa and Latin America integrate these principles into their ministries.

Part II: Foundational principles in AIC ministry

In this section, I will attempt to examine Ed and Irene Weaver's strategy of mission as it emerged over the years. I will present here 10 founda-

tional principles as words of counsel and recommendation to current and future generations sensing the call to participate in God's mission.

1. Follow God into mission

The Weavers discovered that there were no guidebooks for pioneering missionaries to be purchased. They also learned that strategies must be fluid, shaped by the unique elements of each context. Preconceptions can cloud perceptions and the residue of the past must be wiped away in order to clearly see the way into a new day in mission.

At the end of one hot and trying day in Accra, Ghana, that included extensive repairs to the Weavers' old Peugeot station wagon, Ed and Irene went down to the beach where they had often joined AIC prayer groups kneeling in the sand.

"I sat on a rock watching the mighty drama of the waves through my sea-sprayed glasses," Irene said. "The tide was coming in with tremendous force, then quickly receding again, leaving shells, seaweed, fish and debris in its wake. The ocean spray kept blurring my vision. Again and again, I kept cleaning my lenses.

"The future in God's mission is always bright. The problem is to discover where and how God is working. It is there where we discover our mission."

"The pictures in the sand around my feet brought to mind the drama of my pilgrimage in mission. How often my vision had blurred because I had not understood a people, or because I was too structured or too ambitious, or because I was misunderstood by my colleagues, or because I was afraid of failure. Continually, I have had to clean the salt spray from my lenses so I could see clearly and pray, 'Lord, be thou my vision.'

"The future in God's mission is always bright. The problem is to discover where and how God is working. It is there where we discover our mission. Ed and I simply had to trust the Spirit of God to direct us step by step. There is no other way. The Holy Spirit is still the most important strategy in mission today."

2. Remember that worship beats at the heart of mission

Expressive worship beats at the heart of African Christianity, but Irene believed that, even as she gave the AIC members permission to worship with their dancing and drumming – a radical concession for a

Mennonite in those days – she should be allowed the freedom to worship in her own quiet way.

"During meetings, the AIC women couldn't understand what kept me glued to the bamboo bench, the most unhappy woman there," she said. "They wondered why I couldn't feel free to dance with them. I'm sure they were ready to chalk me off as missionary impossible. Then, one special time, an old woman came up behind me, put her hand under my arm and gently pulled me to my feet. I could see the question in her eyes, 'Why can't you share our joy?'

"I said to myself, 'This is the end of you, Irene Weaver.' It was. I was freed to be one of them. We danced and clapped with a new feeling of oneness. It was like crossing a bridge into a new world. This is how God showed me that there is more than one way to worship."

During furloughs or their brief intervals of "retirement," the Weavers' mission field included North America. Once, Irene was asked to present a five-minute skit on worship in Africa during the mission agency's board of directors' meeting.

"I was brazen," she said. "I asked a group of young people to dance reverently behind me as I sat on a stool and began praying, 'Dear God, how can I tell these people how we worship in Africa? Here are all the important board members. They'll never send me back to Africa if I tell them the truth about how I worship there. How do I help them understand that you like all forms of worship?'

"I prayed for about four minutes and 30 seconds, then I got up off the stool and joined hands with the youth and danced off the stage with them. The audience clapped and clapped. Afterward, an influential church leader said he almost came and joined us. I wanted to ask him why he didn't, but I held my tongue."

3. Build ministry on personal relationships in a specific context

"Missions so easily, so quickly institutionalize their witness. Missionaries must get out of their institutional and managerial offices and live closer to the people. To be understood, a program must be worked out in a specific situation."

Acting on this principle, the Weavers didn't build a mission station in Uyo, but set up housekeeping in the chief's compound.

"Well, it wasn't all that easy. We longed for a little more privacy at times and a little less noise. We moved from one rented property to another. While we struggled with the mechanics of each move, we learned

to be flexible and easily agreed to the advantages of living simply. Even though this is the way we wanted it to be, it would be untrue to deny that at times we wished there could have been some sort of divider.

"I have to admit, though, to building something more sinister than brick walls. My walls were those that spring up within overnight in trying circumstances, when our water drum was the only source of water. These walls separate more effectively and are more wrong than any physical wall."

Despite the hardships, the Weavers were blessed many times by living with an open-door policy.

One day, as they began their morning prayers, a neighbor named Auntie Aggie wandered through the door. She knelt beside them with upraised hands, ready to receive the blessing she was asking of God. When the praying time ended, Ed, Irene and Auntie Aggie embraced. Irene offered up yet another prayer, "O God, this is the way I want it to be. I want to be your person. My *doing* has so often come in the way. Forgive me, God."

"We do well to forget who we think we are and recognize our need to learn before trying to teach others."

In their book, *The Uyo Story*, Ed and Irene wrote that some of their most exciting, fruitful contacts came from joining AICs in their special places of worship at the seashore or on the mountain – joining them in fasting, praying and healing.

"Theology moves from living experience to prepositional statements rather than in the reverse order. This is said not to discredit high-level theological studies. Such are necessary. But the gap between high-level discussion and village Christian living must be bridged. Theologically, much happens at the grass roots, where the real confrontation between gospel and culture takes place" (*The Uyo Story*, p. 72).

"Meeting people on their level of life, as Jesus did – where they live and work and worship – is so right," Irene said.

4. Minister from a learning stance

"The teacher-learner approach to indigenous churches in West Africa is essential. In Africa, we do well to forget who we think we are and recognize our need to learn before trying to teach others. Jesus spoke so frequently about humility with reference to God's kingdom. As Westerners, we often go to Africa to teach and give, not knowing that Africans have so much to teach us if we are humble enough to

learn, and so much they would gladly share with us if we could only open our hands to receive."

Janet, who sold vegetables and oranges under a tree, taught Irene that the most effective way to share the good news of Jesus Christ is to tell everyone she meets about the great things God has done in her life.

Janet had been healed in an AIC and became an enthusiastic follower of Jesus who couldn't stop talking about what Jesus had done for her. Irene felt that she should train Janet to lead the Bible classes so the classes would continue after Irene left the country.

After studying together and working on Bible study outlines, Irene felt that Janet was ready to lead the next lesson on God's promises to Abraham. The women's group met outside the church under the stars with only a candle to light up the pages of their Bibles.

"I was one of the students," Irene said. "Janet was the leader. All of a sudden, I realized that she was not following the outline we had made together. She led the women into a discussion about Abraham and Hagar. I thought, 'Shall I step in and bring us back to the subject of the lesson?' Then, I thought, 'No, this discussion about polygamy is very relevant to their lives.'

"At the end of the lesson, Janet simply looked up at the stars and said, 'God's promises are to us like those stars. We can't begin to count them and we can't begin to realize what God's promises are to us. We'll never understand all about God, but he is great and he is good and he is the author of this word we are studying. We have to study the Bible together and someday we'll know.'

"And I was happy to leave it at that," Irene said. "It was a great lesson for me, too, learning that it didn't have to be my way because I didn't understand the culture the way I should have understood it at that time. I thank God for the wisdom to let Janet do it in her way."

5. Emphasize cooperation rather than control

"Mission must be done *with* others rather than *for* others. We need to avoid stifling or weakening indigenous effort by helping people when they really don't need it, even though they may ask for it."

The women of a certain community in Nigeria asked the Weavers to help them build a maternity clinic.

"I was all for the clinic, but I didn't put any more toward the offering for that project than they did, for I felt that they themselves could do it," Irene said. "When we left Nigeria, the women were still thinking

that foreign funds would arrive to build their clinic, but none did.

"Several years later, when a mission administrator went back to that community, the women proudly showed him their partly built clinic. They had made the bricks themselves. If we had just jumped in and done it all for them, it would have been the wrong thing."

6. Model ministry on the New Testament church

During the first conference of the Nigerian Mennonite Church in 1960, the issue of polygamy surfaced. Irene remembers that the atmosphere was charged with suspense and that she and Ed moved very cautiously on this issue, knowing that the Africans themselves needed to discern God's leading. Neither the church leaders nor the Weavers knew what would happen.

Ed asked the gathered leaders, "What kind of church do you want?"

"We want a New Testament church," a young leader quickly replied.

"No better reply could have been offered," Irene said. "Many times this spontaneous response was our guide in finding answers to difficult problems of faith and practice. It also effectively closed the door to blindly following down the road of Western traditional patterns and answers."

The conference representatives decided not to excommunicate polygamists, as was the practice in mission-planted churches. However, they resolved that polygamists would not be allowed to hold certain leadership positions and, once men became church members, they would not be allowed to marry any more wives.

The Weavers used the thorny polygamy question, on this and many future occasions, as a springboard to teach about the nature of a Christian home. Baby dedications also became important teaching times.

"Often we had a father, a child and three mothers stand up for a baby's dedication. This is the reality of the African family," Irene recalled. "Many people in the North American Mennonite church didn't agree with our position, but we felt that an open, positive, scriptural approach is ever so much more effective than a negative, legalistic attitude."

7. Work for Church unity

The Weavers bridged the barriers of denominationalism, one of the western diseases that thrives on the African continent. Ed and Irene served as a channel through which Mennonite workers were called to serve in the mission institutions of various other churches, and the Uyo United Independent Churches Bible School trained leaders from 10 different AICs.

When the Weavers moved into a house on a Scottish Presbyterian compound, one of the 41 homes of their lifetime, there were many things about the move they didn't understand. Effiong, their house helper who had been with them since their first days in Nigeria, was also thoroughly confused. He asked Irene, "Madam, what will we be now? The Mennonite Church of Scotland?"

Ed wrote in *The Uyo Story*, "The best answers will not be found in a denominational or one-mission approach, nor yet by a westerner or an African working alone. This is a new day for the church in the world. More and more, our answers must be sought and found in the wider context of the total church, in closer fellowship and working together, in better understanding of each other and our different religious cultures" (p. 121).

8. Cultivate diversified, trained leadership

African traditional society has many leader-figures (kings, chiefs, elders, priests, herbalists, to name a few), so a highly centralized church structure can quickly become dysfunctional. A leader can begin to think of his churches much as if they were a moneymaking business. The Nigerian Mennonite Church conference stepped away from one-man rule by giving increasing authority to local congregations.

The Weavers gave equal emphasis to the training of gifted lay leaders and the training of the heads of churches, believing that the diversity of leadership built on one of the cultural strengths of the African culture. The inability of many African communities to support a highly trained, full-time pastor also strengthened this decision.

"The place to start working with an AIC is in the local congregation and with its leadership, but this is not where you stop," Irene said. "There are levels of leadership in the church that have to be recognized and training to be developed for these levels."

9. Go slow

When the Weavers entered Uyo for the first time, they noticed a sign at the edge of the village intended to prolong the lives of wandering children and meandering goats from taxi drivers' furious pursuit of a better income. "Go slow through Uyo," the sign warned.

"The sign had little meaning for us when we first arrived," Irene said. "But in a very short time, we understood that God meant those words for us. An AIC does not move quickly; it is the missionary who pushes. Africans will take their time in working out appropriate solutions."

10. Finale: Love people into the kingdom

"Be sure you end this story with the grand finale," Irene told me. "The older I get, the more I realize that the whole purpose of life is to love people into God's kingdom, whether you are in India, Africa or anywhere. That is my strategy of mission. People say to me, 'Irene, that's too simple.' But I just tell them, 'That's the way I see it.' That is the finale of my experience in mission."

Today, Irene continues her mission at Schowalter Villa. Residents ask her to play the organ for them and take comfort in God's love that speaks through the music. "God gave me this organ for a reason. With my hands on the keys, I can cry with them through their pain and my own pain. I never had lessons, I just play from my heart," Irene said.

Students from the college nearby flock to her apartment to pour out their sorrows and be loved into God's family. "I don't know how it is that I have so many friends," Irene said. "I must have some enemies too, but I haven't met them yet."

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What did you know about African-Initiated Churches (AICs) before reading Irene's story? How did you learn about them?

2. Have you had personal encounters with African Christians? If so, how have these encounters shaped your faith?

3. What surprised you most as you read *A New Day in Mission*? Describe one new insight that might impact your life or the life of your congregation.

4. Is there any "salt spray that needs to be wiped from your lenses" (see page 14), or are there any preconceived ideas that cloud your per ceptions of other denominations?

5. How would you evaluate the Weavers' approach to ministry:
- Too low-key
- Too culturally sensitive, bordering on compromising the gospel
- A missed opportunity
- A good approach, but a little naïve
- A creative, courageous mission strategy

6. When we emphasize cooperation among denominations, do we gain increased understanding about God and God's mission in our world, or do we "water down" the gospel to the lowest common denominator?

7. Western Christians historically have taken one of four approaches to AICs — *ignore* them, convert them, *proselytize* them or *accompany* them on their faith journey. What reasons might be given to justify any one of these approaches? Which approach best describes the one taken by the Weavers?

8. This booklet identifies 10 foundational principles of ministry with AICs (pages 14-20). In your opinion, are some of these principles more important than others? Are any inappropriate for Christian mission? How might the 10 principles transform your congregation's witness?

For Further Reading

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