

Chapter 1

Reckless Abandonment

Champagne corks popped, fireworks sparkled and midnight prayer vigils were held, as almost three billion people around the world welcomed the New Year – 1957. But that world was already changing. Half of Europe lay under the shadow of the Iron Curtain. In 1957, five Western European countries signed up to the Treaty of Rome, which led to the European Union. Mao Tse-tung, soon to implement his 'Great Leap Forward' in China, famously called for 'a hundred flowers' to bloom.¹ The USSR began the space race by launching Sputnik, the world's first artificial satellite. In the 'developing world', colonialism was collapsing as nations in Africa and elsewhere fought for independence. In America, Elvis Presley's *All Shook Up* was top of the charts.

Also that year, three unknown young students took a step of faith that would have consequences beyond their wildest dreams. Fifty years have passed since George Verwer, Dale Rhoton and Walter Borchard, then still in their teens, drove down Route 66 from Chicago towards Mexico City in a beat-up 1949 Dodge truck filled with Spanish gospels and tracts. This was the beginning of what was to become Operation Mobilisation (OM). An unlikely spiritual revolution had started.

This spiritual revolution was noted in a remarkable report written at the beginning of the 1960s to the Board of Emmaus Bible School, Illinois, USA, by William MacDonald, the evangelical school's respected President. He described 'a most welcome movement of the Holy Spirit among students mostly at Moody, Wheaton and Emmaus'. He noted how this had started in 1957

and how the group had grown and 'blanketed vast areas of Mexico with the gospel'. The young people from three colleges, all in the Chicago area – Moody Bible Institute, Wheaton College and Emmaus – had, he explained, banded together under the name 'Send the Light'. Some witnessing this movement, MacDonald continued, considered it a twentieth-century work of the Holy Spirit, with something of the power and fervour of Pentecost. He agreed. His summary of what he had seen in these students was dramatic: 'I must say that their reckless abandonment of everything for Christ is the most refreshing exhibition of New Testament Christianity I have ever seen.'²

We should go to Mexico

The leader of the group was George Verwer, who from 1958 to 1960 was a student at Moody. At the time William MacDonald was writing about the movement, George Verwer, as the director of Send the Light, was telling his own story. 'At the age of 14', he wrote, 'I was given a Gospel of St John in my high school and on the first page I signed a pledge promising to read it each day. I did this for three years before I was finally converted to the Lord.'³ The gospel was given to him by Mrs Dorothea Clapp, an elderly lady who had prayed for eighteen years for the students in her local school, Ramsey High School – a school established in 1909 and regarded as one of the best in New Jersey. Mrs Clapp prayed that students would come to know Jesus Christ in a personal way; and daringly asked God that they would be witnesses for Christ in many parts of the world. In 1955, George Verwer made a personal commitment to Christ in Madison Square Garden, New York, at a rally organised by Jack Wyrzten, the founder of an organisation called Word of Life. Billy Graham, who was to become the best-known evangelist in the world, was the speaker.⁴

It was obvious following his commitment to Christ that George Verwer was going to make a significant impact on others. He took advantage of his position as President of the Ramsey High School Student Council to connect with other students and

distribute Gospels of John. Within a year, about two hundred of these fellow-students had made commitments to Christ. Already a budding entrepreneur, he went to the Grand Canyon on a fire extinguisher sales trip – and made what he later described as ‘a deeper, more radical commitment to global missions and Christ’. For a time, Ramsey High School became a ‘sending base’: students who left it for further education continued to meet every day for prayer and to evangelise. George Verwer was struck that in the USA almost everyone owned *some* portion of the Bible, but this was far from the case in other countries. The first Gospel of John that George had received (through Mrs Clapp) had been made available by the Pocket Testament League (PTL) and he had started to raise money for the PTL even before his experience of personal faith.⁵ By 1956, a vision was taking shape which George Verwer would carry forward with amazing results – a vision for the distribution of Christian literature on a massive scale.

In the autumn of 1956, George Verwer began studies at Maryville College, near Knoxville, Tennessee, and it was here that his convictions began to clarify. Maryville College, a private liberal arts college, was one of the fifty oldest colleges in the United States. George Verwer’s parents, George and Eleanor, were connected with the Reformed Church of America, and Maryville’s association with the Presbyterian Church (USA) made the college a natural choice.

At Maryville, George met two other students who were to launch out in mission with him: Walter Borchard, a fairly new Christian, and Dale Rhoton. Others soon became caught up in this work. Walter Borchard had never experienced the kind of vision and leadership he found in George Verwer. To be with George was to be caught up in a whirlwind of activity. Soon a small group was visiting schools, prisons and other places in the community. The emphasis was increasingly on books and literature. George’s vision was expanded by attending a mission conference. The group also linked up with Youth for Christ (YFC) in Knoxville. YFC’s verve and contemporary approach formed a key element in the growing strength of American evangelicalism.⁶ Some Presbyterian leaders disliked the way the Maryville students

carried out evangelism, but George was invited to speak in several local churches, especially Baptist churches. A number of students from this group went into full-time Christian ministry.⁷

Friendship with George Verwer altered the whole direction of Dale Rhoton's life. In 1960, in his report on *Send the Light*, George described how he had learned, while at Maryville, that 'south of the border, in Mexico, over 70 per cent of the people had not one portion of the Scriptures'. On reading this, he felt 'that God wanted me to dedicate my summers to distributing Gospels there instead of the United States'. Always a team-builder, he immediately presented the challenge to Dale and, as he put it, 'we bowed in prayer to commit the entire matter to the Lord'.⁸

Dale Rhoton's version has more colour. He wrote: 'After one of George's typically fiery passionate loud prayers I began a rather phlegmatic prayer. I was stunned when in the middle of my prayer he suddenly stood up and shouted, "I got it!"' Not surprisingly, Dale asked what he had got.

His [George's] answer: 'We should go to Mexico in the summer.' That was the first he had mentioned Mexico to me and he wanted an immediate positive response. I said I would have to pray about it. We were quickly back on our knees and a few minutes later he again put the question to me, 'Well, are you ready to go?' 'George, it takes longer than that.' I'll never forget the pained look on his face as he lamented, 'Why does it take people so long to see it?'⁹

The incident is revealing. George Verwer had an amazing assurance, even in his late teens, that he was in touch with God's will and that others should follow his lead. He questioned himself frequently but there were also many very significant moments when he simply felt that he had grasped what had to be done and expected others to 'see it'. Dale Rhoton's experience was often to be repeated. He wrote: 'I did "see it" and I did go.' Yet, as with many of the developments associated with George Verwer, at the time there was no longer-term strategy. In 1957 Dale saw the trip to Mexico as a strictly one-off trip – a short-term mission outreach.¹⁰ But a number of those who were involved, including him,

also had long-term aims in mission. Although Operation Mobilisation, which developed out of these events in 1957, has been perceived as essentially 'short-term', many of its earliest members were in fact committed to career Christian service from the start.

It is also worth noting that others in the USA had been involved in short-term mission before, including mission in Mexico. Jim Elliot, a student at Wheaton College, whose missionary service led to his death, worked in Mexico for six weeks in 1947, learning from a local missionary family.¹¹ Another example is Loren Cunningham, who in the summer of 1954, aged eighteen, joined a group of Christians on a short-term mission trip to Mexico. In 1960, after Bible school and university, he started a mission aimed at sending out large numbers of young people for shorter and longer periods – Youth With a Mission (YWAM).¹² In the 1960s, a meeting between George Verwer and Loren Cunningham began a friendship that would impact both movements, OM and YWAM, in years to come.

Moving one step at a time

In 1957, George Verwer believed he was being led to pioneer rather than copy others. He, Dale Rhoton and Walter Borchard, all students without financial resources, sold some of their possessions to raise money for a mission trip. George was later to see 1957 as one of the most important years in his life, both because of Mexico and because in the early part of the summer vacation he began to evangelise door-to-door and in other ways in New Jersey.

The door-to-door evangelism included what was to become a long-term hallmark of OM – selling Christian books. Often these sales financed the outreach. At this early stage in his missional thinking, George Verwer took steps to set up Send the Light (STL), which was formally established as a publishing and literature distribution company in 1958. His mother did most of the administration for several years. Among the books being sold in 1957 was the recently published *Through Gates of Splendor* by

Jim Elliot's widow, Elisabeth.¹³ Also in 1957, the huge Billy Graham Crusade was underway in Madison Square Garden – by June 1957 the total attendance had passed the half-million mark and the closing service attracted one hundred thousand people to Yankee Stadium.¹⁴ George Verwer seized the opportunity this afforded to organise buses to take people to hear Billy Graham.

The weeks spent in New Jersey in the summer of 1957 also provided the young students with further important contacts. For example, they met the sister of John Beekman, a Wycliffe Bible translator in Mexico. A number of New Jersey businessmen gave financial support to George Verwer's proposals. In 1958, when a Board of Trustees for Send the Light was set up, several became Board members. Another crucial contact was Kenneth Taylor, then at Moody Bible Institute and later to become internationally famous through his production of *The Living Bible*.¹⁵ Moody had been established in 1886 by the great American evangelist, D.L. Moody, and in 1894 Moody Publishers had been founded. In the 1950s those working at Moody were still committed to the vision of publishing books to reach a large audience, including non-Christians. George Verwer was able to tap into this strategic resource, and Taylor helped to provide ten thousand Gospels of John in Spanish for the Mexican outreach. Filled with anticipation, George, Walter and Dale set off for Mexico in 1957 in what was to become their legendary 1949 Dodge truck, having managed to add twenty thousand tracts to the ten thousand Gospels.¹⁶

George Verwer later described what happened on that first trip to Mexico:

Within seven days, almost all of our literature was gone. We saw people fight to get a Gospel of St. John. We saw people run across fields to pick up a Gospel tract. As we travelled along the roads, we saw and talked with hundreds of people who had never even seen a portion of God's Word. After that first summer in Mexico, I knew that God wanted me on the mission field as soon as possible.¹⁷

In the meantime, there were further short-term mission ventures that could be pursued. George Verwer immediately began to make

plans to return to Mexico, in the summer of 1958. 'At that stage,' he said fifty years later, 'I didn't have a global dream; I was moving one step at a time, thinking especially of those parts of the world where people had never received a gospel.' Although there was a spirit of 'reckless abandonment', there was also realism. The 'step at a time' approach has been characteristic of OM. Although the dream George had in 1957 was not a clear one, as he himself explained, it was a dream that the Scriptures, the word of God for all people, should be made as widely available as possible.¹⁸

Maryville College was now too restrictive for George Verwer. In January 1958 he transferred to Moody Bible Institute. Dale Rhoton had already transferred to Wheaton College and Walter Borchard, whose career was to be in social work, followed suit. They were now close to a whole network of evangelical connections in the Chicago area. Walter has described George as being 'in heaven at Moody'.¹⁹ As part of the new generation of evangelical leaders emerging in America,²⁰ George Verwer shared their confidence that the evangelical message was utterly relevant to the contemporary world.²¹

Among the influences on the group at Moody was Oswald J. Smith, of the People's Church, Toronto, whose book, *Passion for Souls*,²² had a powerful impact. The Navigators, founded by Dawson Trotman, with their stress on Bible study, memorisation of Scripture and discipleship, were growing significantly in the 1950s. Their emphases and their booklet *Born to Reproduce* also helped to shape OM. In addition, in the late 1950s the Wheaton College community in particular was feeling the enormous impact and challenge of the death of Jim Elliot and his four colleagues, who in the course of their mission to reach the Waorani (Auca), an indigenous people of Ecuador, had all been killed in 1956. Many who joined OM, and especially early OMers, were familiar with Jim Elliot's words, 'He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.'²³ Elisabeth Elliot was later to become a friend of OM and a speaker at OM conferences.

As well as absorbing these influences, George Verwer began to exert his own remarkable influence on a circle of students and

others whom he met. From time to time, he was given the opportunity to speak for a few minutes in the Moody Chapel.²⁴ In the summer of 1958, three Moody students went with him to Mexico and met Baldemar Aguilar, a young Mexican, who agreed to work with them. This step was to lead to a crucial element marking OM's international development – the early recognition, affirmation and support of local leadership. Baldemar Aguilar became the Mexican director of the STL work. The Bible Meditation League of Columbus, Ohio, donated over twenty-five thousand pieces of literature, including one thousand Gospels of John, for distribution. During this summer mission a modern Christian bookstore was opened in Saltillo, the capital of the state of Coahuila. Other Mexican evangelical bookstores were to follow. A prayer letter issued in 1958 by STL, from New Jersey and Mexico, described how the team found one bookstore containing literature that attracted their attention. 'We were greatly impressed', said the letter, 'with the fine quality printing we found.' Then the team realised that it was communist literature.²⁵

The need to reach out in the countries where communism was a significant force, and especially in countries that were dominated by communist governments, became a major theme in OM. George Verwer highlighted not only the need for witness but also the global threat of communism. The *New Jersey Paterson Evening News* of 16 November 1961 reported: 'Verwer says, Reds plan to dominate world!' This was in line with much of the anti-communist rhetoric that marked North America in this period. At OM events, examples of the tremendous dedication of communists to their cause were used to challenge evangelical believers to even greater dedication to Christ and to mission. The printed page was a major way of communicating in this period, used internationally by both communists and evangelical Christians, with OM being at the forefront of the global evangelical literature campaign.

Two other new Mexican STL initiatives in the summer of 1958 were a free Bible correspondence course and a broadcasting venture. These were patterned on the Emmaus Bible School method. In 1949, William MacDonald saw the potential of study courses

not only for Christians but also for use in evangelism, and so the course *What the Bible Teaches* was launched. Following this, sections of the material were broadcast over the radio. Moody Bible Institute had also pioneered Christian radio (as early as 1926). The STL correspondence course started in a small way but the number of students grew rapidly, among them a group of inmates from the Monterrey prison.²⁶ The radio programmes were, like the opening of the first bookstore, regarded as something humanly impossible. It was commonly believed that the Mexican government did not permit religious broadcasting anywhere in the country. This broadcast was allowed, however, because it advertised the items on sale in the bookstore and was regarded as commercial broadcasting.²⁷

Believe God

The Mexican connections now began to expand. Initially very few evangelical churches in Mexico were involved, but the number grew rapidly. Links were made with Methodist, Baptist and Pentecostal congregations. George Verwer found it especially encouraging to preach in Pentecostal churches, where despite his broken Spanish his messages were received with great enthusiasm.²⁸ Transdenominationally, Youth for Christ was expanding internationally – Billy Graham had been YFC's first and very effective field representative – and at a Youth for Christ Congress in Mexico City, George Verwer's team was asked to handle the literature.²⁹ The desire to cooperate with a range of churches and other agencies was to be another feature of OM.

In the autumn of 1958, back at Moody and Wheaton in particular, the students who had been to Mexico met together daily for prayer. Crucial themes now began to emerge in the area of spirituality, such as 'forsaking all' to follow Christ, as the early disciples did, and spiritual 'victory'. In this context, the truly committed life was contrasted with the life of the 'chocolate soldier' – the title of an uncompromising booklet by a missionary hero, C.T. Studd. At the same time, there was an insistence on 'esteeming others'

better than oneself and on 'believing the best' about others. Young people who were interested in becoming part of the emerging movement had to listen to several hours of 'orientation tapes' on OM themes.³⁰ Among the subjects covered were prayer and the word of God, love for Christ, the importance of unity and good relationships, and the necessity of self-discipline in the work of the Lord. William MacDonald referred to this orientation in positive terms as something 'that leaves one humbled, inspired and invigorated'.³¹ The orientation was intended to foster an approach to spirituality that was owned by the whole group.

The vision espoused by the student group was attractive. Jean Hall (later Davey), a student at Moody, found George Verwer 'loud (and) dominant' when she first met him in 1958, but she was inspired by his weekly meetings at Moody – in particular by the stress on spiritual struggle, prayer and love as motives for mission. She saw in the meetings a combination of humour, joy and fervour. Since she could speak some Spanish, she expressed interest in the next Mexican mission, but initially girls were not invited. However, it was decided a carload of girls could become part of the Christmas 1958 mission. Jean was not included at first, but one girl dropped out and Jean asked George what she would need in order to go. The reply was: 'Believe God for \$90.' This was a considerable sum, but two days later a cheque for precisely this amount arrived.³² The principle adopted in OM was that each person joining the movement should find their own finances, 'believing God' for provision and not telling others about their needs.

The language of 'believe God' was to become common, sometimes in the form of a question: 'What are you believing God for?' At one OM summer conference George said: 'This work is so geared that even one day of unbelief can set us back weeks.'³³ Jean wrote a letter in early December 1958 which captures the excited, faith-filled atmosphere of the first Christmas outreach: 'Not long ago I met a group of fellows who had been doing missionary work in Mexico during their vacations. I was amazed to hear how God had wonderfully blessed their work... They are going into Mexico again over Christmas and I feel definitely that God is leading me

to go with them. This is a big step of faith for me.' Taking the 'step of faith' was crucial. She asked for prayer for the three Mexican STL full-time workers, other Mexican part-time workers, the bookstore and the radio broadcasts.³⁴

STL letters stressed the support coming from Protestant pastors.³⁵ Working with local churches in seeking to fulfil the vision was to be another theme of OM. The movement sometimes spoke of itself as an 'outreach agency of the local church'. However, financial needs were not shared with churches – unless the churches enquired.

Greg Livingstone, a student at Wheaton who was intent on becoming a lawyer, was another person who was challenged by George about 'believing God'. In 1959 Dale Rhoton invited Greg Livingstone to an all-night prayer meeting at Moody. Such a thing had not been part of Greg's experience at his little Baptist church in Aspen, Colorado, but he decided to attend. The focus was on 'The Muslim world'. When he arrived, he found a group of young men, on their knees on hard wooden floors, praying over maps of various countries. He reached out to shake hands with George Verwer, who immediately demanded, 'What country are you claiming, brother?' Not wanting to be perceived as less spiritual than the others, Greg asked, 'What's left?' 'Libya ... you got Libya,' was the reply. Libya was pointed out on the map, and Greg spent the next several hours in a prayer circle asking God to send workers there. 'That night in October 1959', Greg Livingstone said later, 'God opened my eyes that my ambitions were too small.'³⁶

The first Christmas STL mission in Mexico saw Dick Griffin, a student at Moody, also joining the movement. George Verwer challenged Dick: 'Pray about going down to Mexico.' As Dick Griffin recounts the story, he replied by asking what it would cost. In typical style, he was told by George: 'It'll cost you your life.'³⁷ Dick and his wife Helen were to remain in Mexico for the whole of their ministry. In total, twenty-eight people were involved by the end of 1958. Someone in Chicago who had recently become a Christian donated a two and a half ton truck to carry the large amounts of literature being transported to Mexico. George

Verwer later wrote: 'One mechanic said [the truck] would not make it out of Chicago, but by the power of God it went to Mexico City and back with a quarter-million pieces of literature and ten young men.'³⁸

The use of unlikely and unpromising vehicles such as the Dodge truck was to be a continuing – indeed central – theme in Operation Mobilisation. Jean Hall wrote in her diary (20 December 1958) in typical terms about her transport to Mexico – in an 'old dusty car'. This stress on the basic nature of the transport was in line with the overall vision of simple living and, in addition, the unlikely vehicles in some ways mirrored the idea of using inexperienced people who would not have found a place in other missions. Jean also noted the place of the women on the team she joined. 'The five of us girls', she wrote, 'are packed neatly into the car under coats, blankets and sandwiches.' She stressed that the truck came 'as a direct answer to prayer'.³⁹ A later report described seven girls 'crushed into a Chevrolet sedan' on the way to Mexico. The boot (trunk) was filled and there were blankets and packages of literature taking up every bit of space.⁴⁰ Much longer journeys would characterise OM teams in the future, and sleeping in vans and trucks would become a common feature.

The emphasis on prayer has to be taken fully into account in order to understand the spirituality of OM. At Moody a classroom was made available to the STL group and daily prayer meetings were held. Prayer was the heartbeat. George Verwer suggested people get into little groups to pray, which was a new style of praying. Maps were used to direct intercession for countries. There was also confession: the group used the New Testament language of 'walking in the light'. George Verwer was always ready to acknowledge his mistakes, and this had a powerful impact on the group. All-night prayer meetings were held, and George asked Alan Redpath, a British Baptist minister who was pastor of the Moody Memorial Church in Chicago, if all-night prayer could take place in the church. Alan Redpath not only permitted this, but participated, and was later to be an OM conference speaker. William MacDonald commented: 'When these young people get on their knees before God, it is a sheer

privilege to be present. The prayers are short, fervent and specific. Some are punctuated by a cry from the heart, "Lord, break me." There were 'faith-filled' prayers for the world. 'To them', he added, 'it is faithless to speak of countries being closed to the gospel. Such an attitude, they feel, degrades God as being powerless. When one of them finished praying for Russia at an all-night prayer meeting, Krushchev looked like a midget, according to a visitor.'⁴¹

As this new movement was beginning to grow within the student community in North America, in other parts of the Western world there was a decline in traditional missionary activity. In wider Western society, especially from the early 1960s, secularism was advancing. There were also significant moves towards independence among national churches in what had been traditional missionary locations.⁴² The gradual decline of Christianity in Europe meant that there was something of a crisis in the West – could Europe still be a mission-sending area? The 'mission base' seemed increasingly to be a 'mission field'.⁴³ By contrast, it was with a feeling of confidence – 'believing God' – that George Verwer and his young associates launched out. Western decline in world mission commitment does not appear to have been a major factor motivating them.⁴⁴ Rather they saw a general need, and their response helped to change the face of world mission. The decline of Christianity in Europe was, however, important in one respect: it presented George Verwer with a challenge, and was to lead to his departure from the USA to set up mission bases in Spain, Britain and Belgium.⁴⁵

Spiritual Pied Pipers

The Christmas 1958 mission to Mexico was a turning point. Instead of George Verwer travelling south with two or three other students, nineteen mission members from outside Mexico participated. A similar number returned in June 1959. Over the summer the Mexican correspondence course enrolment rose to three thousand and the Mexican staff of Send the Light increased to ten. By

the end of the summer, 150 churches across the country were co-operating in the STL mission.⁴⁶ A modern bookshop was opened in the centre of Mexico City (The Bookstore of the Abundant Life) and in the course of seven months, over half a million evangelical books and tracts were sold or given away. Supporting missions included Moody Bible Literature, Back to the Bible Broadcast and Christian Literature Crusade. Increasing numbers of students linked up with George Verwer at Moody, and a number of these were to stay long-term with OM. The closest links beyond Moody, Wheaton and Emmaus were with other well-known American evangelical schools such as Taylor College, Houghton College and Asbury College.⁴⁷

Christmas 1959 saw forty-nine students going to Mexico, including Jonathan McRostie, who had studied at Moody and Wheaton and who would become a central OM leader, based in Europe. Among the other STL leaders were Bob Cook, George Verwer's Spanish teacher at Moody, and Jean Hall. Other girls on the 1959 campaign included Betty Snavelly (later Holt), Barbara Bowker, who later married Mainard Tom, and Helen Scantling, who married Dick Griffin and remained in Mexico. A few months after the mission, Jean and Betty graduated from Moody: they were among the considerable number of Moody graduates who would serve with OM. In the Christmas 1959 outreach, seven thousand Gospels of John were sold, along with several thousand books, all in the space of ten days. A bookstore opened in Guadalajara, the second largest city in Mexico.⁴⁸ William MacDonald wrote: 'These young people are spiritual Pied Pipers. There is something alluring and winsome about lives that are so sold out to Jesus Christ, and everywhere they go, they find some others to face up to the claims of Jesus Christ.'⁴⁹

To be 'sold out to Jesus Christ' was to take very seriously what it meant to be a disciple. It meant acting on what Jesus said. If his instructions were to give away your coat to someone in need (Mt. 5:40), then there was no alternative to giving away the coat. Dale Rhoton offered an example of how George Verwer implemented this teaching:

While preaching in a small church in greater Mexico City, [George Verwer] was overwhelmed by the generosity of a collection that was taken. It was not so much money but he knew the people had given sacrificially. The pastor accompanied George to his van to say good-bye. George asked the pastor if he had a suit. 'No', he replied. George responded, 'I have plenty of clothes.' It was night and the pastor could not see what was going on. George took his suit off, handed it to him and drove off. It was quite a sight to see a young, skinny George Verwer in his underwear around midnight knocking on the door of the Christian bookshop where the team was staying.⁵⁰

This incident was typical of George, and he drew around him others who embraced the same revolutionary and sacrificial outlook.⁵¹ 'Don't try to get the biggest apple' was a common saying. A key verse used in thinking about discipleship was Luke 14:33. The one who wanted to be a disciple of Jesus had to 'forsake all'.⁵²

Disciples were also in the business of training more disciples. The radical nature of the discipleship in the STL group constantly drew others. From the very beginning, the movement that became OM was characterised not only by mission work but also by equipping leaders. Often new Christians – usually young people – were given demanding responsibility very quickly. Reporting on the Christmas 1959 mission, George Verwer stated: 'A young man named Daniel accepted Christ in the streets of Guadalajara and became a full time worker.' His report also talked about a Mexican, Fortunato, who 'after reading the Gospel, asked Dick Griffin (who will take over my work in Mexico) how he could find Christ as his Savior. He, too, received Christ and is now working full time in our correspondence school.'⁵³ Perhaps in an unconscious way, what was happening through some of these students in the 1950s was an outworking of D.L. Moody's original vision – but in new forms. D.L. Moody wanted to train Christian workers – 'gap-men' (although they included women) – who would, as he put it, function 'in the gap' between the laity and ministers. Relatively few of those who gathered around George

Verwer became ordained ministers, but several became pioneers in world mission.

Perhaps it was precisely this 'fast track' into active ministry that had special attraction for young people in the post-war period. Entry into ordained ministry in one of the major denominations, and indeed into quite a number of missionary societies, was often possible only after more extended theological training. Students at Moody, Wheaton and Emmaus were clearly not against training, but as they recruited others into their movement, there appears to have been no particular emphasis on formal theological study. This was in line with the thinking of the 'faith missions' and was also influenced by the Brethren movement. At the core of Brethren thinking was the desire to connect directly with and seek to restore the pattern of the New Testament church.⁵⁴ The Brethren saw no distinction between clergy and laity and believed passionately in local churches – usually termed assemblies – encouraging members (usually male) into ministry.⁵⁵ George Verwer's own instincts were transdenominational, but he was baptised (by Dale Rhoton) in a Brethren assembly. William MacDonald, who was a leading Brethren figure, wrote that several of the student group (perhaps not all) 'seek to labour with a view to gathering converts together according to the teachings of the New Testament'.⁵⁶

Another feature that attracted the young people who went to Mexico was the idea of 'living by faith', an idea closely associated with nineteenth-century Brethren leaders such as George Müller and Anthony Norris Groves, or faith mission 'father-figures' such as Hudson Taylor of the China Inland Mission (CIM) – who was influenced by the Brethren.⁵⁷ It was commonly believed that Müller never made known the financial needs of his massive orphanage work, although in fact his way of operating was quite complex.⁵⁸ However, in the early days of OM, questions about finances would probably be answered by a statement like: 'Our great need is for prayer.' This was later to change, as we will see, and indeed from the beginning of OM, people in business contributed significantly to the work. But there was a radical challenge in the early period to abandon all securities, especially guaranteed

income, and to rely on God. Compared to the Iron Curtain or Bamboo Curtain, the 'luxury curtain' of the USA was seen as a bigger barrier to mission. The lure of luxury had to be resisted: in Mexico, for example, many team members were living on one dollar per day.

This idea of living by faith and in very simple ways was initially being worked out in the 1950s among single students. In January 1960, however, George Verwer and Drena Knecht were married. The background was that one day in autumn 1958 George went to the Moody Science Films office, met the very attractive secretary, Drena, from Wisconsin, and was smitten. By the summer of 1959, they were engaged and Drena joined the STL group going to Mexico City. Drena longed to be on the mission field and she was not put off, even when George impressed upon her that if she married him, she might find herself doing mission among 'cannibals in New Guinea'.⁵⁹ That was the kind of mission she was expecting to do.⁶⁰ Dale Rhoton was a speaker at George and Drena's wedding reception, and his prediction that George would give away the wedding gifts was to be proved correct.⁶¹

Where others have not gone

By autumn 1959 the work in Mexico was taking root. Indigenous fellowship groups were emerging. For example, in Monterrey a group was meeting at the *basurero* – the city's garbage dump – to learn to read and to receive the message that 'God so loved the world'. Reports from the team – Dick Griffin, Dick Stevenson, Ruth Ford (later Nuscher) and Jean Hall – spoke of local people like Perfecta Ivarra, a mother of ten, being taught to read. STL letters noted that the stress on the love of God and practical living was resulting in personal commitments to Christ.⁶² By 1960 there were more than four thousand students enrolled in STL's Bible correspondence course and students wishing to go further were encouraged to think about 'Concentrated Bible Study' through Emmaus. The combination of social and evangelistic ministry was associated by many evangelicals in the 1950s with a 'social

gospel' which they rejected, but the combination was to become characteristic of OM and other evangelical agencies.⁶³ Mainard Tom, whose roots were in Hawaii, became leader of the STL group at Moody. By this time George Verwer wanted to move beyond Mexico. He wrote: 'We definitely feel God is leading us to go to places where others have not gone and to pray for things that others have not prayed for.'⁶⁴

After their marriage in January 1960, George and Drena Verwer spent a few months living in Mexico City before moving to Spain. *Moody Memo* reported (on 18 March 1960) on events in this period that became legendary: 'George Verwer, a January graduate, and Drena Knecht, former Film Department secretary, were married in January and immediately set off in an old International truck (which mechanics said would never get out of Chicago) to continue the mission in Mexico.' Having no money and running low in petrol, they stopped at a filling station. George explained to the proprietor about their wedding and their mission and asked if they could exchange the wedding cake (in fact this was one of their two wedding cakes) for petrol. The proprietor said: 'I'm a Christian. I'll fill your tank and you keep the cake.' The same thing happened a second time. The report concluded: 'But the third time the proprietor was not a Christian so he took the wedding cake.'⁶⁵

George Verwer had set his sights on work in Europe and in the Middle East, and in October 1960 Jean Hall received a letter from Mainard Tom, written on a Moody Bible Institute table napkin. It read: 'George says you and Betty Snavely should go to Spain as soon as you see your money come in. PS: Benjamin Baldemar Verwer born.'⁶⁶ The features of this early period are marked: people were being mobilised for global mission; money was being saved – hence the napkin; and the birth of a young Verwer was certainly important, but for Mainard Tom it was (as suggested by the 'PS') secondary.

If the aim was to 'go to places where others have not gone' then Mexico and Spain were not obvious destinations. There was a history of Protestant mission in Spain. However, like Mexico, Spain was a Roman Catholic country in which the Protestant

evangelical presence was relatively weak. Also, those who had learned Spanish in order to engage in the mission in Mexico could transfer that skill to Spain. The STL reports from Mexico highlighted the issues that came up in Catholic settings. For example: 'In one area the priest sent notices threatening the people with excommunication if they so much as retained literature from the "extensive Protestant crusade".' One woman was interested in buying a book by Billy Graham, *The Secret of Happiness*,⁶⁷ and commented: 'Is there such a thing as happiness?' She was apologetic when she turned down the book: 'I'm sorry. I am a Catholic and we aren't permitted to read your books.' At times a more ecumenical note might be sounded. In western Mexico 'the Mother Superior of a Catholic Convent in San Pedro bought our books for all the priests to read'. One lay person said: 'I bought this book several months ago and have recommended it to the Padre Superior.'⁶⁸ On the whole, there was very limited recognition (if any) among either Catholics or Protestants of a common Christian heritage. Spain was viewed as 'closed' to active missionary work. For STL this made it a magnet.

Spain was not, however, the only country in view. There was an awareness of the massive challenges for Christianity posed by Islam and communism. Two Wheaton students began to plan to move to Turkey. One was Dale Rhoton, who was a member of a Brethren assembly that met near the Wheaton College campus. He had originally imagined he would become a Wycliffe Bible translator and had gone through their summer programme. The other was Roger Malstead, also in the Brethren. Roger had already been involved in YFC activities and work among migrants in southern California and Mexico before coming to Wheaton in 1959. He became involved in George's meetings. By 1961 both Dale and Roger were in Turkey, and they are rightly regarded as helping to pioneer a new stage in the growth of the evangelical presence in that country. In 2005 the Brethren magazine *Uplook* commented that 'in 1961 at age 19, Roger Malstead and Dale Rhoton (Wheaton students, sent from assemblies in the US and working with OM) began the modern era of outreach in Turkey'.⁶⁹

Roger Malstead achieved fame, or notoriety, during his presidency of the freshman class at Wheaton in 1959–60. He resigned from this office in protest over the way money was being spent, money that could have been given away. He then transferred, in 1960, to Biola College, California, to continue his studies before joining George Verwer in Europe and going to the Middle East.

Conclusion

Richard Tiplady, in *World of Difference*, speaks about three waves in Protestant mission.⁷⁰ The first, in the eighteenth century, is associated especially with William Carey and the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS), although Carey himself drew from the earlier Moravian movement in central Europe.⁷¹ The mid-nineteenth century saw the rise of the second wave, the faith missions, most notably the China Inland Mission (later the Overseas Missionary Fellowship).⁷² Tiplady sees the third wave as coming in the 1950s and 1960s, with mission organisations such as YWAM, Operation Mobilisation, Frontiers and World Horizons, all of which have combined training, mission and discipleship within their programmes. He draws attention to whole generations of students being trained through these movements.⁷³ There have been other waves: for example, in America in the later nineteenth century Arthur T. Pierson and the Student Volunteers were very important, with their motto ‘The evangelisation of the world in this generation.’⁷⁴

There is no doubt, however, that something new and dynamic developed in the 1950s. From small beginnings, George Verwer and others pioneered the idea of short-term mission projects utilising large numbers of young people, many of them students. Some of the ideas were drawn from elsewhere and in the late 1950s there were no fully worked-out plans. Nor was it the case that ‘short-term’ was seen as an end in itself. An important goal was that from among the short-termers there would be those who would make mission their life’s work. In terms of practicalities, the availability of faster modes of transport was a crucial factor in

enabling short-term mission to take place, and transport was to figure largely in OM's story. But woven through all of this was a fresh spiritual energy, and the energy generated among the young people who came together around George Verwer was to contribute to a spiritual revolution in world mission. 'Some Christians', commented William MacDonald, 'call them fanatics'. His view was: 'They are – in every good sense in which the word can be used of humble, energetic, dedicated believers.'⁷⁵ The impact of the members of this group, and of the many others who subsequently joined OM, was to be of great significance for the direction of world mission.