

A Personal Reflection on the Legacy of Ralph Winter



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My personal encounters with Ralph Winter over the past twenty years have been short and infrequent, but never casual. Sometimes we sat at the same banquet table at the annual meeting of the American Society of Missiology, yet our conversation never remained at the superficial, dining chit-chat level. Ralph always carried with him an intensity of focus, continuously challenging those around him with new perspectives, pushing others to consider alternative ways of thinking about issues and strategies. Whenever he put his hand up during discussion times in the ASM meetings, there was a hush in the room as we strained to listen to what was always an unconventional contribution to the subject at hand. It was this creative, entrepreneurial spirit that drew many mission-minded people into his circle of influence. During my first term as a missionary in Nigeria I was appointed Director of Theological Education, a concept that was conceived and developed by Ralph Winter during his service in Guatemala. Through this innovative delivery system I was able to offer theological education to

nearly 200 pastors and lay people in 25 different centers spread across the rural Mambilla Plateau region.

I was more fully brought into Ralph's world while on furlough from my first term of service. I took up residence at the US Centre for World Mission in Pasadena and enrolled in six weeks of intensive courses through the Samuel Zwemer Institute of Islamic Studies. While living on campus in the mid 80s I became familiar with the think tank of research and innovation of the USCWM and the William Carey University and Library that were also housed there. Other agencies such as Frontiers, Frontier Fellowship, Global Mapping and Global Opportunities (plus dozens more) formed a network of organizations that shared a radical commitment to find new ways to faithfully reach the world's least reached peoples. Ralph's unconventional spirit of innovation seemed to infect the many agencies that found a home on Elizabeth Street in Pasadena.

It was during that same period that I became familiar with the *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* curriculum which has served to inform, equip and mobilize the church around the world in the task of world mission. Subsequently, as a mission educator, I have had numerous opportunities to teach this material.

In the early 1990s I returned to Pasadena as a student at Fuller Theological Seminary, both in the Master of Theology in Missiology and PhD in Intercultural Studies programs. The influence of Ralph Winter could be seen in Fuller's focus on unreached peoples as well as the school's support for innovative strategic initiatives.

As I reflect on my teaching in Canada over the past sixteen years, I can point to a number of concepts in my courses that are indebted to the genius of Ralph Winter. From provocative articles and editorials in *Mission Frontiers* to his differentiation between modality and sodality

structures, his sympathy for insider messianic-Muslim movements, and his unique way of outlining the various frontiers of the world Christian movement. Above all, his passionate call for making unreached peoples a priority of mission focus and allocation of resources will continue to exercise a shaping effect on congregations and agencies long into the future as they seek to define their calling and mission.

Thank you, Ralph, for leaving your imprint in my life!

