

**A Legacy of Faithfulness:
US Assemblies of God Pioneer Missionary Work in China Part 2¹**
by Michael Berley

Introduction

Missions served as a primary reason for the founding of the American Assemblies of God (AG). When the first General Council gathered for business on Monday, April 6, 1914, all delegates knew the primary discussion points. The primary reasons for meeting had been listed in the December 1913 issue of *Word and Witness*: (1) establishing unity in the faith, (2) discussing the work, both at home and abroad, (3) gaining a better understanding of and methods for doing foreign mission work, (4) legalizing the work, and (5) providing for training of future leaders.²

A subsequent council meeting later that same year at the Stone Church in Chicago, Illinois, reaffirmed the AG priority for world evangelization. The commitment to the “greatest evangelism the world has ever seen” was exemplified by statements from early leaders of the movement. J. Roswell Flower in his missionary treasurer report in 1920 said, “We have a distinctive mission in the world. . . . An apostolic ministry in apostolic power and fullness is the aim of our Pentecostal missionaries.”³ In 1923, John Welch stated: “The General Council of the Assemblies of God was never meant to be an institution; it is just a missionary agency.”⁴

Scriptures such as Matthew 24:14, Mark 16:15, 17, and Acts 1:8 supported the belief in the imminent return of Christ, the conviction that world evangelization would hasten that return and the belief that the recent Holy Spirit outpouring empowered the Church for witness with accompanying signs and wonders. Motivated by these scriptural

¹Part one of this article was published in *AJPS* 25.2 August 2022 and is available at www.aptspress.org. This is drawn from my PhD dissertation that will be published by APTS Press in 2023.

²E. N. Bell, “General Convention of Pentecostal Saints and Churches of God in Christ, Hot Springs, Arkansas, April 2-12, 1914.” *Word and Witness* (December 1, 1913), 1.

³J. Roswell Flower, “Report of Missionary Treasurer for Year Ending September 1, 1920.” *Pentecostal Evangel* (October 16, 1920), 8.

⁴Gary B. McGee, *This Gospel Shall Be Preached: A History and Theology of Assemblies of God Foreign Missions to 1959* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1986), 81.

convictions, between 1914 and 1952, a total of 214 USAG missionaries went to China.

The purpose of this article is to introduce the reader to three of the pioneer USAG missionaries to China. These three missionaries Victor Plymire, Anna Ziese, and Leonard Bolton, exemplify the foundational commitment of the US Assemblies of God to “the greatest evangelism the world has ever seen” to be accomplished by “apostolic ministry in apostolic power.” In addition, The USAG committed to follow the indigenous church principles. The following stories serve to review whether they adhered to those foundational principles, and to provide a discussion starter concerning their applicability to current Christian work in China.

Victor Guy Plymire (1881-1956)

Victor Plymire was born in Loganville, Pennsylvania, on January 10, 1881. At the age of two, he became deathly ill and doctors held out no hope for him to live. His mother, refusing to accept the doctor’s diagnosis, carried him into another room where she dedicated her son to God and prayed for his healing. God answered her prayer.⁵

At the age of sixteen, Victor committed his life to Christ during a street meeting. He joined the Mennonite Brethren. Less than two years later, he volunteered for missionary appointment. Since no one responded favorably, Victor assumed that missionary work was not for him and stopped praying about it. However, he later received an invitation to meet with the foreign mission board of the Christian Missionary Alliance (CMA). Following that meeting, he received missionary appointment, with most of his support coming from the Mennonite churches. He remained affiliated with the CMA until 1919, when he received the baptism of the Holy Spirit while on furlough. Since the CMA did not recognize Spirit baptism this led him to join the young Assemblies of God fellowship.⁶

Plymire felt called to work among the Tibetans. Plymire described the challenge of work among the Tibetans in a 1931 report to Noel Perkin, the executive director of the American Assemblies of God foreign mission program. These challenges included difficult geographical access, a shamanistic state religion, and the nomadic nature of Tibetan culture.⁷ Tibet was surrounded on three sides by either high mountain

⁵Victor Plymire, “Crossing Tibet with the Gospel Message.” *Pentecostal Evangel* (November 7, 1931), 1.

⁶Ibid. These events occurred between 1897 and 1908.

⁷Plymire, Victor, “Synopsis of Missionary Efforts in Tibet by V. G. Plymire Covering Years 1908-1931. Springfield, MO: AGWM Archives, 1931, 1-17.

ranges or deserts and swamps. The only easy means of access was from Tibet's eastern border with China.⁸

Buddhism has been the primary religion of Tibet since the eighth century.⁹ The traditional shamanistic Bon religion has greatly influenced Tibetan Buddhism. The Bon religion ascribes sickness and natural disasters, including storms, blizzards, and avalanches, as well as sacrifices to appease demons and spirits, in order to bring relief to the sufferers. People frequently consulted practiced at night.¹⁰ These believes were incorporated into the Tibetan version of Buddhism.

Plymire viewed the monasteries as the strongholds of Lamaism. He discovered three primary lamaseries near Lhasa: (1) Drepung, the largest in the world with approximately 8,000 resident lamas; (2) Sera, the second largest in Tibet; and (3) Ganden. These three monasteries combined contained almost 20,000 lamas. Farther north and east, in what many considered during Plymire's time as Tibet proper, were two other prominent lamaseries: Kumbum and Labrang. Kumbum was located in China's Qinghai province not far from Tangar (Huangyuan) where Plymire lived. Labrang was located in Gansu province where W. W. Simpson and his son, Willie, based their ministries.¹¹

Another challenge with Tibetan ministry was the nomadic nature of Tibetan culture. Plymire's youth in challenging economic times in the US had prepared him for his lengthy evangelistic trips, some lasting for several months. His trips required preparing cooking utensils, bedding, food supplies, tents, and miscellaneous items to be used in bartering for needed supplies along the way. He carried equipment to repair shoes as well as tools for horseshoeing and mending clothes. In addition, each trip included large quantities of New Testaments, Bible portions, and tracts to leave with those he visited. The length of each stop on the evangelistic trips was determined by the number of tents in the individual nomadic encampments. On several occasions, he would find special religious gatherings around sites of special religious significance. Plymire knew that the nomadic nature of the culture meant that he would not be able to determine when, if ever, his next visit to that group of people would

⁸Ibid., 2-3.

⁹The Buddhism practiced in Tibet differs from that practiced in both SE Asia and China. Theravada and Mahayana strains of Buddhism are dominant in those regions. Tibet, however, is known for Vajrayana which also goes by the name of Tibetan Buddhism or Lamaism.

¹⁰Ibid., 12-13.

¹¹The figures contained in Plymire's report to Perkin reflected the statistics as Plymire knew them in 1931. Also, during that time period, Tibet encompassed a greater area than it does today and extended into parts of neighboring Chinese provinces. Tangar (today known as Huangyuan), where Plymire based for much of his China/Tibetan ministry, is a part of Qinghai province today.

occur. Therefore, whether many or few, he would always make sure that he visited every tent and presented each person with the story of Jesus. He would leave gospel literature in every place where he found someone who could read.¹²

Plymire labored for sixteen years before he baptized his first convert.¹³ Local superstitions, as well as the enmity of local priests, contributed to the difficulty in developing relationships. However, the warnings of the local priests sometimes served to arouse the curiosity of several local Tibetans. On one occasion, Plymire enticed a visiting Tibetan priest into his home. Those in authority over this individual priest warned him that he would die if he entered the Plymire home. Plymire stood at the entrance of his home talking with the priest and gradually, step by step, moved backwards into the reception room. The priest, without realizing what was happening, slowly followed him inside to continue the conversation. Once inside, Victor took a picture of the priest and later presented it to him as a gift. This broke the ice, and he, as well as others, became more willing to sit in the Plymire home for conversations.¹⁴

Plymire committed himself to the necessity of making sure as many as possible would have the chance to hear the message of Jesus. But despite the imperative of sharing that message with everyone he met on his evangelistic trips, he remained deeply committed to the importance of relationships. An approach that placed emphasis on developing personal relationships rather than holding formal meetings led to his adoption of playing an organ, singing songs in the Tibetan language, and playing records on a phonograph. A combination of these methods attracted people to the Plymire home.¹⁵

During the latter part of his second term of service, Plymire had begun to sense the need for greater power in ministry among the Tibetans. This hunger for greater spiritual power to combat the satanic spiritual forces arrayed against him drove him to search for a closer walk with God. While his and his wife traveled across the United States during their deputation cycle, some Pentecostal believers encouraged them to seek the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This encouragement led to Holy Spirit baptism and joining the American Assemblies of God.¹⁶

Following their baptism in the Spirit, they joined the young Assemblies of God organization, receiving ordination in 1920. In

¹²Ibid., 15-16.

¹³Edith Blumhofer, *"Pentecost in My Soul"* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1989), 248.

¹⁴Victor Plymire, "Crossing Tibet with the Gospel Message," 1-2.

¹⁵Ibid., 1.

¹⁶David Plymire, *High Adventure in Tibet*, rev. ed. (Ellendale, ND: Trinity Print'n Press, 1983), 53, 59.

February 1922, they set out once again to work among the Tibetans.¹⁷ This time they settled in Tangar, a city which served as an important trade center on the caravan route from China to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. Located about twenty-seven miles west of Kumbun, the most famous lamasery in northeastern Tibet, it placed the Plymires in both a propitious religious and economic center. A representative from the Dalai Lama himself lived only two doors down from where Victor and Grace settled.¹⁸

The two major lamaseries of Kumbum and Labrang with a combined 6,600 lamas in residence were within five days journey of Tangar, which is located in modern Qinghai Province in China. In addition to these two primary lamaseries, twenty-two other lamaseries operated in the province with 200 to 1000 lamas each.¹⁹ The strategic choice of establishing a base in Tangar provided access to thousands of lamas in addition to the large caravans of traders forced to base in the city over the harsh winter months.²⁰ Furthermore, the period from late spring to early autumn provided opportunities for evangelistic trips among the nomadic Tibetans in the area.

Two events in 1925 on the opposite side of China led to a wave of nationalistic fervor among the Chinese. First, British police killed thirteen Shanghai demonstrators on May 30. Second, Anglo-French marines killed fifty-two demonstrators at Guangzhou on June 23. Anti-imperialist fever swept through China in 1925-26.²¹

Many foreign governments began advising their citizens to leave the country as tensions mounted. The Plymires received the news and prayed about what to do. They strongly felt that the time was ripe for Tibet to hear the gospel, yet, for safety's sake, they decided that Victor's wife and son, Grace and John David, would prepare to return to America.²² Victor, not knowing if there would be future opportunities for work in Tibet, would attempt to exit by crossing Tibet and sharing the gospel with as many Tibetans as possible.²³ An outbreak of smallpox in the Tangar area during the first week of January 1927 changed their plans. Within a few short days, several residents of the city died. Both John

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Victor Plymire, "Sowing and Reaping" (Springfield, MO: AGWM Archives, n.d.), 17.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Victor Plymire, "Crossing Tibet with the Gospel Message," 1.

²¹John King Fairbank, *The Great Chinese Revolution, 1800-1985* (New York, NY: Harper, 1986), 212.

²²John David Plymire had been born while the Plymires had been pastoring a church in Lancaster, PA, prior to their return to China/Tibet in 1922.

²³David Plymire, "High Adventure in Tibet," 69-70.

David and Grace contracted the disease during the second week of January. Despite Victor's care and prayers, both died later that month.²⁴

When the local cemetery refused permission to bury the two Americans, a Chinese friend came to Victor's assistance agreeing to sell him a piece of land on the side of a mountain outside of town. Because it was the middle of winter, Victor was only able to dig one grave in the frozen ground before placing both coffins in the one grave.²⁵

George Wood²⁶ later penned an interesting epilogue to this story. When Victor purchased the gravesite for Grace and John, he purchased it in the name of the church. Many years later, that deed in the name of the church enabled the Christians in Huangyuan (formerly known as Tangar) to reclaim property lost to the Communist Party following 1949. The property and buildings are now used by the church in that city.²⁷

Victor continued with his plans to cross Tibet on an evangelistic expedition. Due to the uncertain political situation in 1927 China, many foreigners had already evacuated. Plymire planned to cross the length of Tibet and exit into northern India. He began his journey on May 18, 1927, with two Tibetans and three Chinese. That morning he wrote this prayer in his diary: "Through this trip, O Lord, let me touch as many lives as possible for Thee; and every life I touch do Thou by Thy Spirit quicken—whether through the word I speak, the prayer I breathe, or the life I live."²⁸

Plymire's 1927-28 evangelistic expedition across Tibet took almost an entire year. For almost eight months no word of his whereabouts reached the outside world. One of three dead bodies found in the country was assumed to be Victor's.²⁹ Plymire's diary of this trip reveal some of the challenges and difficulties: "Grass almost nonexistent for the animals," a "burning, sun-baked desert," and "finding water in stagnant, scum-covered pools. . . ." Plymire wrote, "I thought of turning back," and wrote of suffering, "I have never felt so cold in my life," and hunger.³⁰

²⁴John David died January 20 and Grace passed away a week later on the 27th.

²⁵George O. Wood, "Reward—To Eclipse All Sorrow." *Pentecostal Evangel* (January 24, 1993), 4.

²⁶George Wood, whose father also served as a missionary in this part of China. George O. Wood, later served as General Superintendent of the American Assemblies of God.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 5.

²⁸David Plymire, "High Adventure in Tibet," 78.

²⁹W. W. Greist. Letter to Secretary of State in Response to Letter of Inquiry from Victor Plymire's Brother (Springfield, MO: AGWM Archives, 1927).

³⁰A copy of Victor Plymire's personal journal detailing the events of this expedition can be found in both the Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center and AGWM Archives in Springfield, Missouri.

Plymire's letters and journals also reveal his motivation and his heart for the Tibetans. "So that all may hear it [the gospel] at least once. . . ." "Until the farthest nook and corner of Tibet has heard. . . ." "Until the last man has heard the gospel witness, my work is not done."³¹ All of these statements find expression in the current American Assemblies of God World Missions' purpose statement: "So *all* can hear."³²

At the end of this evangelistic expedition, Plymire had distributed 73,396 Gospels and Bible portions as well as 46,542 tracts in the Tibetan language.³³ Although Victor had not gone on furlough for eight years and despite the long and difficult expedition across Tibet, he immediately returned to China arriving in Shanghai on May 11, just a few days shy of one year of his departure.³⁴

Since Victor's first wife had died, he remarried and Victor held his final service in China, together with his new wife, on Sunday, June 19, 1949, with twenty-five new converts receiving water baptism. They returned to the United States where Victor died on December 8, 1956. At the beginning of his missionary career, he had claimed Isaiah 41:10 KJV as God's special promise for his life. "Fear thou not; for I am with thee; be not dismayed for I am thy God. I will strengthen thee, yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee by the right hand of my righteousness." Four decades later, he could look back over a missionary career where he had repeatedly seen God's faithfulness to that promise as he carried the gospel to those who had never heard.

Anna Ziese (1895-196?)³⁵

Anna Ziese, born in East Germany in 1895, went to China in 1920 and, with the exception of one furlough from 1928 to 1930, served there

³¹Ibid.

³²Greg Mundis, "Vision and Purpose of Assemblies of God World Missions." In *Mission, Vision, and Core Values*, edited by John L. Easter, Paul W. Lewis, Alan Johnson, Anita Koeshall, and Bob Friesen (Springfield, MO: AGWM, 2016), 21-28.

³³Victor Plymire, "Letter to Miss A. C. Reiff of Chicago, IL written April 1, 1933" (Springfield, MO: AGWM Archives, 1933), 4.

³⁴David Plymire, "High Adventure in Tibet," 133-134. Note that Tangar (Huangyuan) is in Qinghai Province which is China. Originally Tibet covered not only the land area of the current country of Tibet but also included major portions of Qinghai Province as well as parts of Sichuan province. Victor Plymire when arriving in 1908 settled first in Gansu Province which was China but next to the old borders of Tibet currently in Qinghai Province.

³⁵There is no accurate date for Anna's death. She continued to serve in China until sometime in the late 1960s. Her death has been approximated as occurring sometime between 1965 and 1969. Her death occurred in China.

until her death. Although commissioned as a USAG missionary, she never became an American citizen. Her birth in East Germany allowed her to remain in China post-1949.³⁶

Anna worked primarily with women and prisoners. Many of her letters which were published in *The Pentecostal Evangel* reported news of her prison ministry.

In July 1933, she wrote “Please pray for the prisoners. We have three jail meetings a week and they are so open to listen but we long to see them get really saved.”³⁷ In February 1934, she added “The work in the prison is very encouraging. We go to the big prison every week where there are 800 men and also many women.”³⁸ “We had another baptismal service in the prison,” she wrote in January 1935, “when five women and eighty-one men followed the Lord in water baptism.”³⁹ Then in August 1935 she said, “While Brother Hansen was with us, we had another baptismal service in the prison. Thirty-eight men and nine women were baptized.”⁴⁰

Japanese aggression combined with the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists, made the 1930s a decade of political turmoil in China. The Communists had ended their Long March in Yan’an, located in neighboring Shaanxi province. The Communists sought to expand their influence eastward from their base camp. At the same time, the Japanese continued their move both westward and southward. Both Anna Ziese and Marie Stephany’s team were caught in the middle. One of Ziese’s letters, written in 1936, revealed the conditions under which these women missionaries worked:

Conditions are very bad now, and the war clouds are hanging low, so we never know what another day may bring forth. People’s hearts are failing them for fear and they don’t know which way to turn. They are afraid of the enemy’s airplanes, and, of course, one cannot blame them. . . . I am glad that we, as children of God, know and feel that He is our refuge and strength.⁴¹

³⁶David Bundy, “Anna Ziese: For God and China.” *AG Heritage* 20, no. 3 (Fall 2000), 12-19.

³⁷Anna Ziese, “Tai Yuan.” *Pentecostal Evangel* (July 1, 1933), 9.

³⁸Anna Ziese, “8 Baptized in North China.” *Pentecostal Evangel* (February 24, 1934), 9.

³⁹Anna Ziese, “Eighty-six Prisoners Baptized.” *Pentecostal Evangel* (January 12, 1935), 10.

⁴⁰Anna Ziese, “North China.” *Pentecostal Evangel* (August 24, 1935), 8.

⁴¹David Bundy, “Anna Ziese: For God and China.” *AG Heritage* 20, no. 3 (Fall, 2000), 16.

Despite the difficult conditions, Ziese apparently never considered evacuating to the United States or to a safer location in the country. Ruth Melching, who also served in northern China during this time period, remembered that B. T. Bard intended to send Ziese to the United States on furlough. He managed to get her as far as Beijing in 1940. She evidently became suspicious of his intentions and excused herself to return to Taiyuan under the pretext of picking up some forgotten items. She refused to return to Beijing.⁴²

Similarly, in 1949, when told by the Communist Party that she must leave China, Ziese traveled as far as Shanghai and had her trunks put on a ship. However, at the last moment, she felt she could not leave and, getting off the ship, returned to Taiyuan. Her trunks arrived in the U. S. without her.⁴³

Melching, in an oral interview with Adele Flower Dalton, remembered that Ziese enjoyed good relationships with other missionaries. However, she chose to work independently in Taiyuan. In addition to her expanding prison ministry, she took responsibility for a large church in Taiyuan as well as a smaller church and several outstations. Several Chinese co-workers assisted her with these ministries.⁴⁴

Ziese's unique situation as a missionary with a German passport stood her in good stead. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, most American missionaries still in China were either repatriated to the United States or confined to concentration camps. Germany and Japan, however, were allies in the war. Anna, despite the challenges of living in both a foreign and civil war zone, did have limited freedom for ministry.⁴⁵

The February 11, 1950 *Pentecostal Evangel* printed one of Anna's letters in which she wrote:

When I was young and in Bible School we used to sing, "If Jesus goes with me, I'll go anywhere," but now after these many years I gladly say, "If Jesus stays with me, I'll stay anywhere," for when we are in His will we find His grace ever sufficient. Thus far I am very glad that I remained in China. The Lord gave me the portion of Scripture, "Be thou faithful unto death." By His grace I want to be faithful at any cost. Please pray for me; also, pray for the dear Chinese.⁴⁶

⁴²Ibid., 17.

⁴³Adele Flower Dalton, "The Woman Who Stayed." *Memos* (Fall 1993), 5.

⁴⁴David Bundy, 19.

⁴⁵Ibid., 16-17.

⁴⁶Anna Ziese, "Letter." *Pentecostal Evangel* (February 11, 1950), 11.

Harlan Park, missionary in Hong Kong, received one of Ziese's final letters, dated March 22, 1966. Some of her comments indicate an inability to write extensively due to censorship and security concerns. It does, however, convey that she had no regrets in continuing her commitment to her missionary call:

We used to sing a song at home, "The Lord has done so much for me throughout the passing years, *I cannot tell it all, I cannot tell it all*" [emphasis mine] and that is the song in my heart today. But you know there are times in life when to speak is silver and to keep silent is gold. I know you are praying for me, and please continue to do so.⁴⁷

Few details exist regarding Anna's last years. Limited available information indicates that she lived in a one room house and raised goats for a living and for food. In addition, she received a monthly stipend from the Chinese government of \$3.00, the average monthly wage for that time period. Although not confirmed, it is believed she died during the summer of 1969, an example of a woman who gave her all for the people she loved.⁴⁸

Leonard Bolton (1900-1961)

Leonard Bolton was born in January 1900, the third child and first son of William and Ada Bolton in Bournemouth, England. The turn of the century brought waves of Pentecostal revival throughout the world. In 1906, William Bolton received healing for a serious lung condition in one such revival sweeping across England. Upon relocating the family business to Bournemouth, Leonard's parents set up one room in their new home for people to seek the baptism in the Holy Spirit.⁴⁹

Many of William Bolton's neighbors misunderstood and ridiculed the family's Pentecostal experience. When William and Ada went to church with their ten children, some neighbors mocked and jeered. "There goes William Bolton and his congregation."⁵⁰ Leonard recalled that his father often prayed, "Lord, keep us where the fiery fire burns, and in the place where Thou art glorified."⁵¹

⁴⁷Anna Ziese, "Letter to Harlan Park." (Springfield, MO: Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center), 1966.

⁴⁸David Bundy, 18.

⁴⁹Elsie Bolton Ezzo, *Watchman, What of the Night?* (Springfield, MO: Book Manuscript in AGWM Archives, n. d.), 12-15.

⁵⁰Leonard Bolton, *China Call* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1984), 16.

⁵¹*Ibid.*

Leonard accepted Christ in 1912 when his older sister decided to lead the Bolton children in their own church service while the parents attended a prayer meeting. This impromptu service resulted in Leonard's salvation.⁵²

Pentecostal experiences and the miraculous marked Leonard's teenage years. At the age of thirteen, a visiting missionary from Egypt prayed over Leonard and he began to speak in tongues. At the same time, he received healing from a serious eye condition. Smith Wigglesworth, a renowned English evangelist, frequently visited the Bolton home and young Leonard frequently accompanied him as he visited and prayed for the sick in the Bournemouth area.⁵³

The infilling of the Holy Spirit, with the evidence of speaking in tongues, gave Leonard a passion for evangelism. Immediately upon receiving Spirit baptism, he went next door to tell two of his friends of his experience. Leonard hungered to read and understand God's Word and also assisted in a mission outreach in Bournemouth by teaching a Sunday school class and reaching out to gypsies in the area. During the gypsy outreaches, he met and fell in love with another worker, Olive. However, when he proposed marriage to her, she refused, indicating that she could not consider marriage to anyone who did not share her missionary call to China.⁵⁴

Vicky Bolton, Leonard's older sister, had already committed to go to China after Mary Lewer's challenge of the tribal people's needs in southwest China. During Mary's 1922 visit to England, she prayed for three new workers to join her and her husband Alfred in their mission work. When Leonard surrendered to God's call to China, Olive accepted his proposal for marriage and three new workers had joined the team for southwest China.⁵⁵

Olive and Leonard sailed for Rangoon, Burma in 1924. Alfred Lewer planned to meet them and guide them through Burma to southwest China. However, when the Boltons arrived in Rangoon, no one came to meet them. After three days with no sign of Alfred, Leonard decided to check for any news at the local cablegram office. A message from his father in England delivered the fateful news that Lewer had drowned on his way to meet them.⁵⁶

As newcomers with no language skills or cultural understanding, they faced the daunting challenge of navigating jungles, rivers, and mountains between Rangoon and southwest China. Realizing that the

⁵²Ezzo, *Watchman, What of the Night?*, 16.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 16-21.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 20-21.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 28-31.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 32.

personnel challenge in southwest China would now be even more critical with Lewer's death, they committed themselves to move forward. An American Baptist missionary lady suggested that they travel with her group up the Irrawaddy River as far as Bhamo, which would put them closer to their destination. Arriving in Bhamo, they noticed a man looking intently at all of the arriving foreigners. He identified himself as David Ho, one of the national workers who had accompanied Alfred Lewer when he drowned. He had been sent as far as Bhamo to see if he could meet the Boltons.⁵⁷

Leonard and Olive joined the Assemblies of God team in Wei-his, who had begun work among the Lisu, an ethnic minority group in southwest China. Wei-his is located in southwest China in Yunnan Province. Ancestor worship played a prominent role in the Lisu animistic worldview. They worshiped spirits thought to reside in nature. Keeping guardian spirits happy, they believed, would prevent calamities from malevolent spirits who could bring sickness, natural disasters, and other troubles. Rectifying the trouble required sorcerers who could identify the source of the problem as well as determine how to exorcize or propitiate the appropriate demons. To placate the spirits, the Lisu lined the paths leading into the villages with small altars containing food offerings.⁵⁸

Tragedy struck soon after the Bolton's arrival. Olive died in childbirth along with the baby. Leonard walked through a dark valley of discouragement as the cost of his missionary commitment came crashing down on him. Alfred Lewer had died coming to meet them. Olive died in childbirth. The baby died a day later. The depth of Leonard's despair and grief can best be summed up in his own words:

Wave after wave of agony poured over me. . . . Was there to be no end to the sacrifice? All that day I lay on my bed unable to move with the suffering of my heart. Why had God done this? Why had he called me to China only to lose my wife? One day, I rose from the bed and decided to take a walk for diversion. . . . I walked to the city wall and climbed up the steps to the top. . . . As the evening shadows fell, gloom once again encompassed me. I stopped and looked over the other part of the wall that dropped about thirty feet. Suddenly the enemy seemed to whisper to me, "Why don't you just end it all? You could throw yourself down over the wall and that would be the end of your misery." Then I heard another voice, "I'll never leave thee nor

⁵⁷Ibid., 27-34.

⁵⁸Leonard Bolton, 108.

forsake thee. Have I not promised? Be strong and of a good courage. I'll possess the land before thee."⁵⁹

Later, Leonard received a letter from a Christian woman in England who stated she had spent a sleepless night praying for the Boltons. The time of her prayers coincided with the time of his walk through the valley of despair.⁶⁰

In 1926, the Wei-hsi team consisted of Mary Lewer, Ada Buchwalter, and Leonard Bolton. Political uncertainty, banditry, and the early stages of civil war that affected other sections of China also touched the southwest corner of the country. During this season of almost continuous crises, romance blossomed between Leonard and Ada, and they began to make plans for a wedding in Hong Kong following her upcoming deputation in the United States. However, events in 1927 changed those plans. Domestic turmoil caused several foreign consuls to order the evacuation of their citizens. Over 2,000 missionaries left China during this time.⁶¹

Leonard and Ada decided that Ada would evacuate first. Leonard would join her later in the United States for their wedding scheduled for April 7, 1928. Following the wedding, Leonard met with the Foreign Missions Committee and received missionary appointment with the American Assemblies of God.⁶²

The American AG missionary team working with the Lisu expanded with the birth of the Boltons' first son, Robert, who was born in Kunming in February 1929. Clifford and Lavada Morrison, who also joined the Lisu work, significantly impacted the Lisu ministry on both the Chinese and Burmese sides of the border.⁶³

In addition, the missionaries experienced an evolution in their missionary strategy. Leonard and Ada traveled with national workers. During the early morning hours the team taught the youth the choruses and songs from the Lisu hymnals, which they distributed in every location. They planned to stay in each place several days, which provided ample time for holding evangelistic meetings and teaching basic Christian doctrine to the local community. Older men would be appointed as elders with responsibility for teaching and oversight of the new converts. They would then leave for another village, promising to

⁵⁹Elsie Ezzo, 63-65.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Danie Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 112.

⁶²Leonard Bolton, 96-97.

⁶³Ibid., 98-101.

return the following year for further teaching and to conduct baptismal services.⁶⁴

This practical methodology developed into a Lisu people movement where whole families came into the churches and some villages were almost entirely Christian. As entire communities received teaching from the Word of God, church leaders examined local customs in the light of biblical truth. If practices did not conflict with scriptural teaching, they continued unchanged. Within fifteen years, over 1,000 Lisu had received water baptism.⁶⁵

The strategy of training Lisu for leadership in indigenous churches was bearing fruit. Lisu Christians began traveling to surrounding villages to preach, teach, and pray for the sick. The Boltons prepared a simple catechism for teaching new converts. The main points of the catechism covered the subjects of true repentance, tithing, baptism of the Holy Spirit, and healing. Teaching of believers expanded beyond the catechism to include short-term Bible training seminars where students set aside several weeks for concentrated teaching and study. These short-term training seminars led to the formation of the Ling Kuang (Holy Light) Bible Institute in October 1948, under the oversight of James Baker, son of H. A. and Josephine Baker. Twenty-two students enrolled for the first year of study. The imminent threat of a Communist victory in China fueled the urgency for training of young Christians.⁶⁶

In November 1949, one month following the declaration of Communist victory in China, Leonard and Ada Bolton left China. The Boltons had served for over 25 years among the Lisu. Departure from China, however, did not mean the end of their missionary ministry. Their foreign service record includes terms of service in Jamaica, Bangladesh, and Taiwan, where they served alongside their son and daughter-in-law, Robert and Evelyn Bolton.⁶⁷

Five words summarize the Bolton's missionary methodology: prayer, sacrifice, identification, mobility, and training.

Prayer. It is impossible to separate intercessory prayer from the Lisu revival. Its beginning can be traced back to the China Inland Mission (CIM) missionary James Fraser who, when told he must relocate to another part of China to work in a more receptive area, requested a few more months to see what God would do. Fraser was able to persuade CIM leadership to allow him to stay at his station a little longer. He adopted a prayer strategy with the help of his mother in England. She

⁶⁴Ibid., 63.

⁶⁵Ibid., 155-156.

⁶⁶Ibid., 130, 185.

⁶⁷Ibid., 196-206.

invited a few key people to pray specifically for Lisu needs. Fraser would provide them with detailed prayer requests, including the names of specific places and people. As they prayed, the Spirit began to move among the Lisu.⁶⁸

From the beginning of the Pentecostal movement, prayer occupied a priority position in methodology. Native Lisu Christians joined their prayers. The intercessory cries of God's people watered the gospel seed that missionaries and indigenous Christians planted.

Sacrifice. Workers among the Lisu paid a heavy cost. They faced the constant companions of inconvenience in travel, long family separations, sickness, and death. Among the Bolton's relatives, nine graves in China and one in Taiwan bear testimony to the price they paid.⁶⁹

Identification. Jesus provided the model with his incarnation and coming to live among people as Immanuel, "God with us." In the same way, successful work among the Lisu required messengers willing to learn the language, translate the Bible, and culturally acclimate themselves to Lisu life. Walking with them, eating their food, sharing their problems, and doing life together earned the messengers the right to be heard.

Mobility. Short-term seminars and a Bible school could be set up in a centralized location, but reaching the Lisu required a willingness to travel to their remote villages. Frequently, when the Christian witnesses ministered in a village, requests would come from villages farther into the mountains or beyond the next mountain range to come and share the message.

Training. The missionaries may have provided the initial spark that sparked revival, but that revival could not continue without the training of local believers who would take the baton and continue carrying the message to others, especially in light of the remoteness of many of the villages. Visiting the churches once a year would not succeed in establishing strong churches. Commitment to the principle of teaching and training provided the means for the Lisu movement to continue in both China and Burma following the initial work of foreign missionaries.⁷⁰ In 2016, Joshua Project listed almost 916,000 Lisu living in China. It also claimed that 80 percent profess to be Christians.⁷¹

⁶⁸Eileen Crossman, *Mountain Rain: A Biography of James O. Fraser* (Singapore: OMF Books, 1982), 75-76.

⁶⁹Bolton, 220.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*

⁷¹Joshua Project. "Language Lisu." <https://joshuaproject.net/language/lisu> (accessed October 19, 2016).

Conclusion

The young USAG organization prioritized missions. Its goal was the “greatest evangelism the world has ever seen.” In the opening decades of existence, the writings of Roland Allen, Alice Luce, and J. Roswell Flower influenced the developing mission philosophy of the organization. The AG committed itself to the indigenous church philosophy following the Pauline model. Flower described it as “apostolic ministry in apostolic power.”⁷²

This foundation has resulted in the current vision and purpose statement of the U. S. AGWM: “Christ will be proclaimed and His Church will be established in all nations through the power of the Spirit. . . . So *all* can hear.”⁷³ The lives of W. W. Simpson, H. A. Baker, Les and Ava Anglin, Marie Stephany, Victor Plymire, Anna Ziese, and Leonard and Ada Bolton exemplify that vision and purpose. Their lives challenge us to take up the baton and extend their legacy.

⁷²J. Roswell Flower, “Report of Missionary Treasurer for Year Ending September 1, 1920.” *Pentecostal Evangel* (October 16, 1920), 8.

⁷³Greg Mundis, “Vision and Purpose of Assemblies of God World Missions.” In *Mission, Vision, and Core Values*, edited by John L. Easter, Paul W. Lewis, Alan Johnson, Anita Koeshall, and Bob Friesen (Springfield, MO: AGWM, 2016), 23.

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