The Surprising History of the Urbana Missions Conference

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A student movement that swept across U.S. college campuses 75 years ago continues to have a profound effect on the spread of the gospel. Columbia International University was an integral part of this movement, and nearly every student who has attended CIU has been influenced by it.

The roots of the movement go deep. As the United States was recovering from the Civil War, missionary fervor grew among college students spawning the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM). By the dawn of the 20th century, it became a major force in sending missionaries to unreached areas of the world. Yet by the end of World War I, the social gospel and theological liberalism was beginning to shift campus missionary organizations away from their original purpose. When the Great Depression hit in the late 1920s, the SVM was in a tailspin as conservative Christians focused on combating theological liberalism. Missions became an afterthought.

The CIU Connection

In this rocky soil, Columbia International University, then called Columbia Bible College (CBC) was born in 1923. It was an answer to the prayers of a small band of ladies who convinced well-known Bible teacher R.C. McQuilkin to lead their dream of a Southern Bible school focused on missions.

In 1936, R.C. McQuilkin was scheduled to speak at a missions conference at Wheaton College in Illinois, but he became ill shortly after arriving and wasn’t able to deliver all his messages. Evangelist Dr. Walter Wilson took McQuilkin’s place on Wednesday. Following his message, students stood and publically confessed sin in their lives. Classes were canceled as the students continued to repent throughout the day and into the night.

When McQuilkin returned to speak on Thursday, he found a different audience. He challenged the students to consider world missions, and many responded. That same year CBC launched a master’s program to train students in Bible and cross-cultural ministry. Over the next several years, many Wheaton students who intended to be missionaries followed McQuilkin south to CBC for further study.

Student Foreign Missions Fellowship

The convergence of these students and schools led McQuilkin to suggest an idea: a student-driven movement promoting foreign missions among Christian colleges. The following summer, the Student Foreign Missions Fellowship (SFMF) formally began when students, mostly from Wheaton and CBC, gathered at the Ben Lippen Conference Center in North Carolina, and at America’s Keswick Conference Center in New Jersey. CBC student Joe McCullough was
named the first leader of the SFMF. He challenged fellow students with the “pressing obligation to make Christ known in their generation to the 700 million who had never heard the gospel.”

As SFMF chapters increased, so did the need to focus that momentum and provide organization. The result was a conference held between Christmas and New Year’s Day where students involved in SFMF chapters could be further challenged to consider missions. It also served as an ideal platform to conduct the necessary business of the growing organization.

Enter Intervarsity

In 1938, McCullough left for Bolivia. He was succeeded by Will Norton, who had participated in the Wheaton revival and had been drawn by McQuilkin’s message to missions and CBC. That summer, Norton and a group of CBC students drove up the east coast sharing about SFMF. At one of their stops, Norton connected with fellow Wheaton alumnus, Stacey Woods who was the new director of Intervarsity in Canada. This meeting set the stage for future collaboration.

By the end of World War II, SFMF had 47 chapters with over 2,000 participants and greater organizational needs. In the first 10 years of the SFMF, six leaders left to become missionaries. All of them were either CBC or Wheaton alumni. Four of them attended both schools. Intervarsity was also growing and by 1945, Intervarsity chapters were in several states.

On his return from missionary work in the Congo, Norton was asked to participate in a conversation between the SFMF and Intervarsity regarding a merger. Eventually, SFMF became Intervarsity’s missions mobilizing arm with a continued focus on Christian college students.

Christy Wilson, SFMF leader after the merge, proposed another way to infuse Intervarsity with fervor for missions: open SFMF’s winter conference to all of Intervarsity. They couldn’t find a site in the United States, so they held the first winter conference in Toronto in 1946. Among the speakers at Intervarsity’s first missions conference were R.C. McQuilkin and Samuel Zwemer, for whom the Zwemer Center for Muslims Studies at CIU is named.

The First Urbana

CBC alumnus Norton Sterrett, a missionary on furlough from India, was asked to lead the next Intervarsity missions conference. A site was located at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, and in 1948, over 1,300 college students attended the first “Urbana.” Intervarsity has been holding Urbana missions conferences every three years since – the largest student mobilization conference in the United States.

The students who launched the SFMF left a lasting legacy. As a result of their work, many believers have answered a call to missions or become valuable senders. In 2006, Urbana outgrew the available space at the University of Illinois, and moved to St. Louis. In 2009, attendance was over 30,000.
This year’s Urbana ’12 is scheduled for Dec. 27-31 in St. Louis. And just like the first Intervarsity meeting in Toronto in 1946, it will feature worship with thousands of people, dynamic speakers from around the world and representatives from missions agencies. It is a long-running, multi-cultural and multi-national experience that started with a band of students committed to impacting the nations with the message of Christ – a purpose shared by CIU students today.

For more on Urbana ’12 visit: www.urbana.org.