

## A TRIBUTE TO RALPH WINTER



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**(Delivered at the memorial service,  
Lake Avenue Church, Pasadena, June 2009)**

Ralph Winter, what can I say? I was hired at Fuller forty years ago on his recommendation. We live in South Pasadena mostly because he advised us to look for a house there. His kids and ours attended South Pas schools together. His office at Fuller and mine were next to each other. My wife, Meg and his wife Roberta kept Wm Carey Library together at a crucial time in its history. Meg made cakes for the weddings of two of Ralph's daughters. Etc., Etc., Etc.

I first met Ralph at a missionary training institute in about 1956, before we went to Nigeria as missionaries, then again at Urbana in 1967 while I was teaching at Michigan State University and he had just begun regular teaching at Fuller. I remember him at that time sharing his enthusiasm about the missions program at Fuller, never imagining that I would soon become a part of that program. Then, when I came to teach at UCLA in 1968, we invited him and Roberta to come to our home in West Los Angeles for Sunday dinner.

I've forgotten the specifics of what our discussion covered that day, but I remember very well how it ended. Ralph asked me if I would ever consider teaching at Fuller. He mentioned that there was already an anthropologist at Fuller, named Alan Tippett, but that they were looking for an Africanist who

possibly could also teach introductory anthropology. I remember mentioning that, though I loved what I had been doing in African languages and linguistics at UCLA, my original academic love was anthropology and my original commitment was to be a missionary and a return to these emphases would certainly excite me.

I had just begun my teaching in the African Studies program at UCLA and wasn't looking for another position. But I remember saying to Ralph something like, "I don't feel that God has released me from my original commitment to be a missionary, so maybe this is what He has in mind." So I allowed Ralph to take my name to his faculty as a possible candidate for the position he had in mind. This led to discussions, a lecture or two at Fuller and eventually an invitation to take a position at Fuller while still teaching at UCLA.

This led to seven exciting years on the same faculty as Ralph D. Winter, the most creative and sometimes exasperating person I've ever known. It was exciting, though, because we never knew what he'd come up with next. He usually came to faculty meetings with some new plan for revising or revamping whatever it was we were doing. Or some new idea for extending the Kingdom of God to the unreached or to those blocked from coming to Christ by present approaches.

Students would come reporting that his lectures usually lifted them to the skies but sometimes were disappointing. He once seriously proposed to our faculty that we completely revise the names of our course offerings to McGavran One, McGavran Two, McGavran Three, Tippet One, Tippet Two, Tippet Three, Winter One, Winter Two, Winter Three, and so forth. This would make his teaching style more understandable to students since his classes often consisted of whatever was on his mind at the moment, no matter what the course title might promise.

Ralph was cavalier about academic requirements, frequently challenging the system. For example, he never got his grades in on time, leading the administration to institute the rule that professors would be charged \$50 per day for each day past the deadline. He still didn't get his grades in on time and gladly paid the fine, saying this would just be a part of what he was going to contribute to the school anyway! And his way of grading was sometimes suspect, leading students at least one year to wonder why everyone in the class got a "B" and no one got their term papers back because he had lost them. He even lost the Comprehensive Exams one year so we had to pass everyone on the History Comp that year!

But when we felt we needed a publishing outlet for the research being done at the School of World Mission, he went out on a limb and started Wm Carey Library. And when the new discipline of Missiology needed a professional society, he, with others, started the American Society of Missiology. And when

we felt we needed a more practice-oriented organization to go along with the academic approach that Fuller provided, he started the US Center for World Mission at great cost and great risk.

Ralph was one of a kind, always out on a limb, challenging whatever “rational” idea or structure was in place. Willing to risk but always willing to apologize when he stepped on someone’s toes. I remember one faculty meeting when Ralph was out of town when the topic was, “Given the amount of adjustment each of us has to make to cover up for things Ralph does or doesn’t do, is his presence among us an overall benefit or a liability?” Our conclusion was that having him with us, whatever the adjustments we had to make, was totally worth it.

The adjustments we had to make aside, and there were many, we were fascinated by Ralph. None more than Dr. McGavran whose comment was, after I had reported bailing Ralph out of a situation where he had double-booked some important guests, “That Ralph! You don’t think he’s even in the ballpark, but there he goes hitting a homerun!”

A tribute of another kind came from our colleague Alan Tippett who liked to introduce people with clever plays on words. Ralph had written a book entitled, “The Twenty Five Unbelievable Years.” On one occasion, then, Tippett introduced Ralph as the author of the book, “The Twenty Five Years” by “the unbelievable Ralph Winter!”

Ralph was, of course, brilliant, constantly seeing things the rest of us missed. He regularly came up with new and better ways to do things but just as regularly underestimated the amount of effort it would take to implement the changes. This was frustrating, especially when a week or so later he would come up with a still better way to do the same thing! So we didn’t always go along with his ideas. We often lacked the time and energy to implement them all. I remember writing to him once to say, “I’m a hundred percent behind about fifty percent of what you are proposing!”

The School of World Mission was an exciting place to be in those formative days. But a good bit of the excitement of those early days left when Ralph left, though his influence on Missiology continued and, perhaps, increased as he loosed himself from the academic structures of Fuller. We were largely in support of his new venture at the US Center but, contrary to his expectations, we on the School of Mission faculty were not willing to take the risk of joining him.

Ralph was like a shooting star that came into our lives, left a trail of bright light and now has been taken from us. But none of us are the same for having had him in our lives. None of us have ever met anyone like him, a truly fascinating person, bigger than life yet very human, constantly coming up with

things we had never thought of, challenging status quo, sometimes off the wall but never to be ignored.

Now he is with the Lord he served so faithfully. Is he resting? I wonder. If there are committee meetings in heaven, I suspect he regularly comes to them with some new plan in his hands. But one thing I'm sure of is that the Lord has welcomed Ralph with that welcome we all long to hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have served Me well. Now rest and enjoy your reward."

**Published in the July 2009 issue of the multi-lingual online journal, [www.GlobalMissiology.org](http://www.GlobalMissiology.org)**