

# **Covid as Crucible**

## How God Harnessed a Pandemic to Strengthen Cooperative Sending of Global Missionaries

Jennifer Waldrep, Amanda Dimperio Davis, and Hal Cunnyingham

Six Christians in Taiwan aimed to do something about the number of unreached people in the world and the lack of missionaries going to them. The six included two national pastors, one of their wives, and three IMB missionaries. Baptists in Taiwan had a 70-year history plus freedom to proclaim the gospel and make disciples, but no official mission-sending structure. Moreover, many defined missions broadly to mean any ministry done outside their borders, even cleaning up a beach with no end goal of sharing the gospel or establishing churches.<sup>1</sup>

On January 13, 2020 they launched Huayu International Missions (H.I.M.)—a Taiwanese national sending agency. Although IMB workers were among the catalysts, local leaders soon took charge, and the Taiwanese Chinese Baptist Convention quickly joined the effort. H.I.M. was set to mobilize missionaries.

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<sup>1</sup> Jarod Davis, IMB APAC Affinity Globalization Strategist, interview, mp4, video call, March 28, 2022.

But now the COVID-19 pandemic was raging. Jarod Davis, one of the Huayu founders, recalled, “Our IMB folks were saying, ‘Wait.’ . . . I was wondering, Will things ever get going?”<sup>2</sup> Davis, his two IMB colleagues, four national board members, and a few local pastors took two and a half days for their annual retreat. Faced with both a burden to send Asians to the nations and a global pandemic, the group sought the Lord with fervor. There was “much talk, prayer, Bible reading, wrestling. Sending is a big responsibility,” Davis said. “God was telling us to move ahead; to go anyway. . . . He told us this through our Scripture reading. The Lord told us in one voice. We were very unified.”<sup>3</sup>

Strengthened to move forward, these leaders used pandemic down time to shore up the local church. They went through the IMB’s 8 Steps, a consultancy designed to help churches expand their capacity to send and support missionaries, several times.<sup>4</sup> H.I.M. deployed fewer missionaries than anticipated due to closed borders and stalled activity. However, “we had time to learn on a small scale so we did not make mistakes on a larger scale,” Davis said. “We’re very grateful for that.”<sup>5</sup> Wiser and stronger for the extra prayer, consultancy, and small-batch experience, the agency is building momentum toward a fruitful future. H.I.M. has assessed, trained, and sent 14 missionaries thus far. Eight more are ready to be sent as of September 14, 2022.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> See endnote.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Jarod Davis, APAC AGS Report, September 2022.

## Global Mandate, Global Ownership

H.I.M. is a fresh example of the Great Transition of the locus of Christianity and Christian missionary sending from the West to the South and East.<sup>7</sup> Agencies in Brazil, South Korea, and Nigeria, for example, have been sending missionaries for decades. 21st Century missionary sending patterns reflect the concurrent increased number of Majority World Christians and decreased number of Western Christians, with more missionaries sent out from the Majority World than Europe and America, and the sending disparity increasing since 2007.<sup>8</sup> This shift has prevailed against a Great Century template, prominent across the hemispheres, of the West as mission font and elsewhere as mission field. It took an act of God to mobilize the Western church in the 18th Century, and God has acted again to move the Majority World church to disciple the nations. Together, the church global is owning the Great Commission.

The IMB was founded midway through the Great Century<sup>9</sup> and has facilitated missionary sending ever since. In 2009, responding to the Majority World's emerging prominence in missionary sending, the IMB began a focus on "internationalization," aspiring to mobilize and partner with multinational senders. By 2017, the organization was using the term "globalization" as shorthand for their now-robust effort to help globalize missions sending.

The Globalization Team, formed in 2019, helps national partners develop sustainable missions sending and support. Affinity Globalization Strategists and Missions Catalysts assist in the formation of national sending entities, mobilize missionaries, and match Global Missionary Partners (GMPs) to IMB teams. In 2020, the IMB set a strategic objective to mobilize 500 GMPs to

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Borthwick, *Western Christians in Global Mission: What's the Role of the North American Church?* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012), 36-7. Here Borthwick describes and names the Great Transition.

<sup>8</sup> Missio Nexus, "World (Protestant) Missionary Force" missiographic, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> As the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, in 1845.

serve on IMB teams by 2025. IMB President Paul Chitwood said, “There are 140 Baptist conventions and unions around the world that . . . are the fruit that remains from 175 years of work. We want to work with those partners and help them send their own missionaries. By strategically inviting and involving 500 global missionaries to work alongside IMB teams, we believe we can help push forward not only the task, but the globalization of the task.”<sup>10</sup>

As 2020 began, momentum was building for missions globalization. Trainings, consultancies, and meetings were set to move GMPs and expand partner sending. Two were large-scale, involving leaders from Latin America and senders from all over the world, respectively. The IMB was to help form new sending agencies in five Majority World regions. 20 GMPs were set to deploy to IMB teams.

But COVID-19 spread rampant; officials closed borders and mandated quarantine. The IMB and its partners canceled gatherings. Along came a long, hard season. The Lord wielded the time and hardship to smith this century’s new senders.

## **Covid as Crucible**

While churches in the Majority World do send missionaries to open countries, most senders who partner with IMB focus on groups hostile to the gospel, where new life in Christ can come with a mortality gap—where missionaries must be strong and senders must hold the rope.

The pandemic was intense. The scope of trauma was something new. Nobody remembered living through a global crisis that so altered daily life. Its consequences formed a crucible the Lord used to strengthen his people. The testimonies of Majority World GMPs and senders reveal how God built

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<sup>10</sup> Myriah Snyder, “Global missionary partners vital to Revelation 7:9 vision,” <https://www.imb.org/2021/07/08/global-missionary-partners-vital-revelation-79-vision/>, accessed June 2, 2022.

their endurance, faith, and capacity to serve under duress. He bolstered qualities necessary for the marathon of mission work in hostile fields. The following stories detail how the Lord tempered senders and goers through Covid's fiery trials, forming them for further mission service.

## **Stronger Senders**

### **Ecuador**

Ecuadorian mission-sending agency Impacto Mundial, founded in 2009, is headquartered in Guayaquil—dubbed Latin America's Wuhan,<sup>11</sup> as the pandemic's severity there mirrored that of the city where COVID-19 originated.

Covid was more severe than anyone had expected. "Three days into the pandemic, Ecuador closed its borders, but it was too late," Impacto Mundial Founder Julieta Murillo recalled. "People started dying—family members, friends, friends' family members . . . and there was no money, not for oxygen, nor for medicine. People died for lack of resources to treat the disease. Corruption kept the treatment from people, too. There was overcharging and hoarding, making supplies inaccessible to many."<sup>12</sup>

Most GMPs and their supporters endured the pandemic in countries with limited medical infrastructure. They worried for loved ones, ministry partners, and themselves. Afraid for her immunologically vulnerable ministry partner and housemate, Murillo did the shopping, dressed in personal protective equipment. When Murillo's uncle died of Covid, his body remained in the house eight days instead of being buried within the customary 24 hours. The death toll was astonishing in Guayaquil that March and April. Murillo's

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<sup>11</sup> Maria Lola Moreno, Impacto Mundial, interview, mp4, video call, May 10, 2022. See also, Dominic Waghorn, "Coronavirus: How a city in Ecuador became 'Latin America's Wuhan,'" Sky News, <https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-how-a-city-in-ecuador-became-latin-americas-wuhan-11981836>, accessed September 19, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Julieta Murillo and Maria Moreno, Impacto Mundial, interview, mp4, video call, May 10, 2022.

father contracted Covid. In his neighborhood, Murillo recalls seeing “two or three cadavers on the street outside each house, three or four stacks of them per city block; traveling across town . . . 2,000 cadavers could be seen on the curbside awaiting pick-up. There was a line that wound 6 blocks long outside the cemetery. I felt a sense of panic!”<sup>13</sup>

Added to the trauma of death and illness, lockdown interfered with wage-earning. Financial security is elusive for many in the Majority World. Subsistence wage earners felt the impact of lockdown more than salaried people. Many members of the churches supporting mission agencies were not food-secure, much less financially secure during the pandemic. Households deprived of wage-earning opportunities translated into lost income for GMPs and their agencies. Half of the support Murillo and fellow-leader Maria Moreno receive comes from consistent donors, while the other half comes from speaking at churches, conferences, and trainings. When the pandemic paralyzed travel and gatherings, they had to cancel speaking engagements. They no longer had that means of raising support.<sup>14</sup>

Such was the crucible senders in Ecuador endured. Each of Impacto Mundial’s five full-time and 18 bivocational staff suffered loss. Yet the Lord continued to provide for them and their families, and through them for others in the community.

Moreno saw the blessing of having nothing in terms of infrastructure, “Sounds weird, right? But the only thing we have is God. We survived because we don’t have anything.” Their building is loaned (they rent it for a dollar a year from a ministry colleague), and their projects run on faith. “It sounds foolish, but we begin our projects without a monetary estimate or budget—we just delve in. We start without money and the Lord provides. It is his project after all. Our part is to get out of the boat and start walking, and the Lord

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<sup>13</sup> Julieta Murillo, Impacto Mundial, interview, mp4, video call, May 10, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Julieta Murillo and Maria Moreno, Impacto Mundial, interview, mp4, video call, May 10, 2022.

calms the sea and makes it firm for us to walk on it.”<sup>15</sup> So the agency did not worry about folding, and the Lord provided.

Moreover, the Lord strengthened Impacto Mundial throughout the pandemic by “the clear call of God upon us,” Moreno notes. Murillo pivoted from pandemic-related obstacles into alternate ministry, leading the organization to serve their “Jerusalem” when closed borders limited work abroad. Impacto Mundial partnered with outside agencies to supply oxygen tanks to Covid victims. The organization moved missionary trainings and meetings online. After the Lord healed Murillo of a two-month Covid bout, she would sing praise to the Lord, read the Bible, and pray for her neighbors out on the patio. After quarantine lifted, some neighbors asked if she was in the house where the sisters sang. She said yes. When they had had Covid—all ten in their house, they had followed her example and had prayed, praised the Lord, and read the Bible. Not one of them had died. “This gave me so much joy,” Murillo said; “To know my prayers had encouraged others to seek the Lord.”<sup>16</sup> God kept Impacto Mundial in shape, sharing Christ in their community until the borders opened to send again. As of May 2022, Impacto Mundial has eight candidates fundraising to deploy to various mission fields.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Philippines**

Filipino Baptist entities sponsored missionaries independently, but with the founding of One Sending Body (OSB) in 2008, they discovered that cooperation expands their capacity to send. Still, the system needed refining. The pain and sudden free time that came with the pandemic underscored the necessity of *koinonia* and provided time to shape that fellowship to sustain global missions.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Pain stemmed from illness, death, and sudden destitution as commerce stopped. "The degree of impact is different here than in the US," OSB founding president Jimmy Fundar explained. "In the US I believe when somebody is hit by the virus, the government has support or at least other facilities, but here in the Philippines, no. It is very hard for us."<sup>18</sup> Isolation was a particular hardship. "The church wanted to minister to those affected but we could not meet face to face, only leave groceries for them."<sup>19</sup>

The impulse to be together fueled missions momentum as OSB opened online meetings, arranged for missionaries quarantined on the field, for anyone interested. Word spread. Church members participated in mission field "tours" and prayer. Enthusiasm grew. Viewers organized themselves to support missionaries. They established KALMA—the Member Care arm of OSB—and they assigned two "champions" to each missionary to encourage, pray, counsel, and generate funds among the churches for personal and ministry needs. This grassroots support system and enthusiastic missions focus (derivatives of a pandemic in the Master's hand) strengthened missions sending in the Philippines.

APAC Globalization Catalyst Steve Hagen describes further developments:

In the course of the last two years the really exciting part has been a relaunching for them as far as working together. . . with a vision in mind of what they're trying to accomplish—of actually sending out people who know what the missionary task is and getting them to the places that are needing missionaries. . . . I feel we are in a lot better place moving forward. It has slowed down our timeline of how many I would have said we'd already have in the field by now, but it feels like we're going to be moving

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<sup>18</sup> Jimmy Fundar and Precy Caronongan, OSB leaders, interview, mp4, video call, May 10, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*



forward together now with a lot more buy-in. . . . There is a much higher level of recognition of what can be accomplished by working together as well as a Biblical goal, as opposed to just calling everything ‘mission.’<sup>20</sup>

OSB led an Eight Steps Consultancy during their 5th National Congress for Global Missions, held in Koronadal City August 16-18, 2022, to equip attending churches to embrace their role in the Great Commission. In addition to hearing reports from current missionaries and meeting appointees about to go out, attendees witnessed 12 more Filipinos answer the call to missionary service.

## **Cuba**

The church in Cuba understands long, hard seasons. They know God strengthens his people “for such a time as this” to declare his glory to the nations. Some 30 years ago, the Eastern and Western Baptist Conventions of Cuba began to experience church planting movements amidst outpoured prayer in the context of sociopolitical hardship. Now the Holy Spirit was moving Cuban Baptists to make disciples of the nations. Then came Covid, and lockdown, and another outpouring of Spirit-filled prayer.

“I would emphasize again that the greatest movement in Cuba is prayer,” Missions Catalyst Dirce Cooper said.<sup>21</sup> “When the pandemic hit, they did what they have always done: pray. They expanded their prayer networks and continued to pray for the nations and their missionaries.<sup>22</sup>

[They] started new prayer groups for the missions movement, for the nations, via [social media platforms] that continue to this day,” Missions

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<sup>20</sup> Steve Hagen, IMB APAC Affinity Globalization Strategist, interview, mp4, video call, March 28, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Roy and Dirce Cooper, IMB AMP Affinity Team Leaders and Missions Catalysts, interview, mp4, video call, May 2, 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Dirce Cooper, text message, May 6, 2022.

Catalyst Roy Cooper adds. “That’s the great thing . . . when God’s people are sensitive to what God is doing. Sometimes we see closed doors and really what may seem to be the biggest impediment to the work may be that God is just wanting to retool us or refocus us on what’s really important.”<sup>23</sup>

Cubans did take the opportunity to retool. “Cubans are very proactive and excellent in contextualizing, and teach others what they learn. It was their idea to offer . . . training to the next group of candidates when everything stopped because of Covid. They met weekly [via social media] and even the bad connections did not stop them,” Dirce Cooper reported. “As a result, a second group has completed their cross-cultural training and is now going through the selection process.”<sup>24</sup>

Within the last eight years, the two conventions officially formed their international missions agencies. The *Agencia de Misiones Mundiales 'Cubanos a las Naciones'* of the *Convención Bautista de Cuba Occidental* has eight GMPs serving in Colombia and one in Africa; and the *Junta Cubana de Misiones Transculturales* of the *Convención Bautista de Cuba Oriental* has two GMPs serving in Mexico and two leaving soon for South Asia.<sup>25</sup>

## **Stronger Sent Ones**

Strong agencies sustain missionaries. But the reciprocal of that is true, too.

## **Persistence in Adversity Catalyzes Support**

From 2006 on, a Mexican pastor emphasized missions education in his church through scripture study and ministry opportunities. There, Rose\* was formed in ministry and called to missions. “We are a small church with

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<sup>23</sup> Roy and Dirce Cooper, IMB AMP Affinity Team Leaders and Missions Catalysts, interview, mp4, video call, May 2, 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Dirce Cooper, text message, May 6, 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Roy Cooper, text message, September 19, 2022.

just a hundred members, counting children. We are not rich people. . . . But God shared with us his will to see people go to all nations. . . . I am the first person that my church has sent overseas.”<sup>26</sup> In 2018, she served in the Middle East, but had to evacuate. Visa rejections complicated transfer to another team. A way opened to another field in 2020. But the pandemic and civil war delayed Rose and her team in the capital of their host country. Government forces overtook the compound where they were staying, confiscated their devices, accused them of working for the revolutionaries, and detained them under guard. Eventually, they were released. They made plans to leave for their field.

That very day, Rose tested positive for Covid and had to stay behind. She also received word that day that her brother-in-law had been murdered back home. Missions Catalyst Dirce Cooper offered to bring her back to Mexico, but she declined, saying God had called her to the field and, come what may, she was staying.<sup>27</sup> “Because I have been sent,” Rose testified, “it has impacted my church in different ways. First, my church has shared this vision with other churches across Latin America, so there are now ten churches who support me.”<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, church members increased their monthly giving, cared for her widowed sister (who is not yet a believer), and the eldest generation in the church now gathers weekly to pray for Rose.<sup>29</sup>

### **Strength through Consistent Engagement**

Rita Kim,\* a Korean TCK GMP raised in Taiwan, and her new teammate quickly became close in the weeks of missionary orientation. With much in common, they looked forward to serving together among a UPG. In response to the pandemic, though, their field country stopped granting visas. Kim

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<sup>26</sup> GMP Rose (\*name changed), “President’s Call” live report, April 29, 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Dirce Cooper, Missions Catalyst, interview, mp4, video call, May 2, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Rose, President’s Call.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

needed no visa to enter, but the rest of her would-be team never got in. “It was very disappointing,” she admitted, “but God has his plans.”<sup>30</sup> She was enfolded into another team, but the team leaders and some other members were stuck in the US for months. She served her entire term without seeing her family.

Despite hardship and uncertainty, Kim did not alter what she would have done if there had been no pandemic. She walked strong in the Lord and fulfilled her call, engaging the lost with the Good News. Kim describes the daily outings of her two-year term, served in its entirety during the pandemic,

I walk in the street and talk to strangers . . . whoever is sitting by themselves, looking bored; and I’ll just sit down . . . Most of the time they are very welcoming, and they’ll talk to me. It is very easy to get into spiritual conversations, so that’s when I talk about Jesus and they listen. It’s an exchange conversation. They tell me what they believe, I tell them what I believe. . . . Ninety percent of the time, they’ll hear the whole Good News all the way through, fully.<sup>31</sup>

Kim’s team has seen several Muslims come to faith in Christ.<sup>32</sup>

### **Stronger Majority World Senders, Sustainable Engagement**

The Lord strengthened the agencies and missionaries mentioned in this article through the extra time afforded to work through issues that hindered sustained missionary presence or rendered mission work ineffectual, and through a deeper communion with the Lord through corporate prayer and Scripture reading provoked by hinderances lockdown posed to missions

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<sup>30</sup> Rita Kim (name changed), interview, mp4, video call, May 4, 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

sending, but moreover by upheaval and pain. Thus strengthened, Majority World senders press on.

As for Western sending agencies, they do not take for granted their own sustainability. Although their nations' affluence buffered Covid's consequences, should another trial by fire burn, will missions sending from the West be strengthened or incinerated?

Whether or not another disaster of pandemic proportions befalls within this century, already Majority World senders are drawing on their renewed strength in the Lord. With the pandemic not even over, Impacto Mundial navigated new threats in Guayaquil last May. "These days, people do not go out much for safety reasons," Moreno explained. First, due to the pandemic; now due to "increased violence from Mexican drug cartels that have moved into the area."<sup>33</sup> So the agency adapted, holding hybrid trainings to maintain their sending momentum.

The Lord strengthens his people through tough times to make his gospel known. To early Christians, the Roman Empire was disastrous, but the Lord moved the gospel along Roman roads to, among other places, Britain, where the Great Century later began.

On the heels of the pandemic, Russia declared war on Ukraine. The Missions Committee of the Baptist Union of Ukraine had 28 missionary units in 18 different countries. Six of the Baptist Union's seven seminaries had missions preparation programs with internships. Vitaliy Sorokun, Missions Committee Director since 2019, had built a sending structure and cast vision for support. He had hosted a pastors' forum in 2021 to show local churches how to partner with the Missions Committee, and Hal Cunyningham had given them an overview of the 8 Steps. 85% of missions funding now came

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<sup>33</sup> Julieta Murillo and Maria Moreno, Impacto Mundial, interview, mp4, video call, May 10, 2022.

from churches within Ukraine, and 100% national funding for nationally sent missionaries was attainable.<sup>34</sup>

“February 24, 5 AM. . . with the first explosion, everything changed,” Sorokun said. “We immediately lost 100% of the finances that were coming from local churches. Now churches had to deal with devastation, humanitarian needs. We lost all support. Second, the churches immediately lost all interest in foreign missions;” their attention now riveted on lost homes, dead husbands and fathers, incoming missiles.<sup>35</sup>

Ukrainian senders are in the crucible. Other afflictions will assail other senders. And God will hone his church to reach the lost. “Many people told me foreign missions is over,” Sorokun said. “But I told them the war changed our circumstances, but it did not change the character of God or the essence of the Great Commission. Our God is still the God over the nations, and he still calls his people to go on mission. King Jesus reigns; we will keep missions going.”<sup>36</sup>

## Endnotes

The *Eight Steps of the Missions Continuum* consultancy is designed to help a pastor, church, or sending agency expand their capacity to fully embrace the Great Commission. The Eight Steps are as follows—The Mission Field: Defining the Missionary Task; The Local Pastor: Expanding the Vision of the Local Church; Church Mobilization; Local Ministry: Establishing Healthy Churches; Raising Up Missionaries; Planning for Cross-Cultural Missions; Selecting and Training Cross-Cultural Missionaries; Developing Partnerships. See Hal Cunyningham and Amanda Dimperio Davis, *Eight Steps of the Missions*

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<sup>34</sup> Vitaliy Sorokun, Director of the Missions Committee of the Baptist Union of Ukraine, telephone interview, September 21, 2022.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

*Continuum: Building a Bridge from the Church to the Mission Field* (Richmond: International Mission Board, 2022).

*As of September 2022, IMB personnel have mobilized and received 66 GMPs onto IMB teams. Churches and agencies in Cuba, Taiwan, Korea, Mexico, Ecuador, Philippines, Kenya, and Brazil have sent GMPs to IMB teams. They are engaging unreached people groups in both open and closed countries.*

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