



Scripture Union International

Emmanuel Oladipo, International Secretary, 19 september 2001

As an international organisation, Scripture Union has many strengths. Among them are the work of volunteers and the autonomy of national movements.

In every country all over the world, the work of evangelisation and the Bible ministries carried out by Scripture Union are way out of proportion to the budgeted expenses. This is because most of the actual work is done by a devoted army of skilled volunteers. They are recruited, trained and resourced by the staff. In their hundreds and thousands, they are to be seen running the missions, the camps and the Bible clubs, visiting schools and churches and promoting Bible ministries. Without them there will be no Scripture Union.

The International Council is the supreme governing body in Scripture Union; but it does not decide how to run the movement in any country. The people who are closest to the scene make all the decisions that matter, and they are free to do so within the context of their own tradition and culture. Outsiders, however well meaning or well-informed, cannot fully enter into the norms and nuances of any culture. In Scripture Union their influence is limited to brotherly fellowship. They have no authority to interfere in the way things are run locally in any country. Scripture Union is always in the hands of local leadership.

This is one of the reasons why Scripture Union has taken firm root in many countries of the developing world. Proudly, members proclaim, "Scripture Union is Us." Decisions are not made by generous overseas donors who dispense dollars from abroad and who send detailed answers to questions nobody is asking! Indeed, if overseas financial support end tonight, most Christian organisations in the third world will die tomorrow morning. Not so, Scripture Union. There will of course be some cut back and staff retrenchment, and most capital projects will have to cease for lack of funds. The main programmes of Scripture Union, however, will continue quite strongly, because Scripture Union is firmly among the people, and most of the work depends on an army of highly motivated volunteers rather than paid staff.

At the same time, Scripture Union has many weaknesses. And among them are the concepts of volunteers and the autonomy of national movements. Autonomy can be misinterpreted to exclude inter-dependence. It then becomes like the time of the Judges when there were no kings in Israel. Everybody did that which was right in their own eyes. A minimum amount of Regional and Central infrastructure is necessary to ensure that there is internal cohesion. And so in Scripture Union we have our Regional and International structures. We are careful not to invest too much resources in servicing these essential admin structures. Still, volunteers are great when they are available, and when they are set to tasks that are best handled by volunteers. The work at Regional offices and at the international level require a certain minimum of paid staff.

Another unfortunate outworking of autonomy is that sometimes, the right hand does not know what the left is doing. A schools evangelist in one country has some brilliant material for following up new believers. Her colleague in the neighbouring country is ignorant of this and is busy re-inventing the wheel. It is not only a matter of sharing printed material which can simply be put on the Internet. We need someone to coordinate training and the sharing of expertise and the establishment and maintenance of international standards. There is also the need to liaise with other organisations outside of our own movement. This is why there is the need for competent Ministry Coordinators at International level.

We have recently concluded the International Conference of Scripture Union. It brought together 814 participants from 110 Scripture Union movements around the world. All the proceedings were translated simultaneously not only into the three official languages of English, French and Spanish, but also into Chinese, and Korean as well. One of the highlights was when members wrote down the names of children with whom they work and for whom they pray. These were placed in a box covered with gold foil and lifted up to the Lord in prayers. It was only a symbolic gesture in the manner of the prayer of the saints rising from the golden cup before the throne in the Book of Revelations, 8:3-4. It was a little foretaste of heaven.

And so is the international family of Scripture Union at its best. We are a gathering together of individual national movements each seeking to fulfill the common aims of our world-wide movement within their own national and cultural contexts. All agree the same statement of faith. All abide by the same working principles. Some, like England, France, Germany, or Australia, are very strong, with lots of expertise and resources. Some are weak and fragile, like many in the developing world or the former Soviet Union, and so they depend on a lot of support from the stronger movements. Some are in situations of active persecution. Delegates from two countries could not get exit visas to leave their country to come to the conference. We all belong together in the same wonderful family of Scripture Union, presently active in 135 countries all over the world.

Each national movement governs its own affairs. Indeed, the concept of local leadership is what makes Scripture Union to take such deep root in many countries of the developing world. All the national movements are grouped together into seven Regions. Each one sends representatives to the International Council which coordinates the world wide work. This stimulates national movements to think in terms of inter-dependence rather than to over-emphasize their autonomy

Some of our greatest areas of ministry opportunities are also the greatest areas of material poverty. This is why the International Council set up the network for the International Development Fund. Over the years, generous contribution from the more developed movements into this fund has enabled us to build campsites in the developing world, develop work with Street kids in Latin America and in the prevention of AIDS in Africa, and break new grounds in the former Soviet Union and in Asia.

The glorious experience of wonderful fellowship at the International Conference provides a most stimulating encouragement if one was ever needed. It is a wonderful privilege God has given us for ministry in Scripture Union world wide.

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