

TAKE THREE: PRAYER

Worshipping in Concert with the World

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“There is *might in mass prayer*,” averred Armin Gesswein, an associate evangelist with Billy Graham in 1980. “It is the power of sun rays and rain drops which bless, because there are so many of them.” Writing in one of the regular mailings of the International Intercessors, a prayer ministry of some 17,000 associated with the evangelical humanitarian organization World Vision, he counseled, “We Christians must learn to flash *hundreds of instantaneous prayers* at people far and near.” Although each intercessor prayed alone, her voice could mingle with others to better reach God.

Gesswein believed this united effort was indexed by bodily sensations, which he suggested readers try to identify by recalling something familiar: the affective charge when their local congregation prayed together—that “strange, strong, delightful response from all parts of the room. We feel lifted, almost as though an invisible arm held us up; our hearts burn, tears lie close.... Commonplace truth becomes incandescent and burns like liquid metal.” As this metal metaphorically poured down, it approximated the feelings at Pentecost. Gesswein quoted from Acts 1:14: “*These all continued with one accord (unanimously) in prayer and supplication.*”¹ On the page opposite was a calendar: on this day pray for students at a Bible Institute in Brazil, on another day for a World Vision employee in Kenya.

Prayer calendars have a long history in the United States. World Vision based its model on earlier bulletins, such as *Global Circle*, mailed out by the Great Commission Prayer League founded at the Moody Church in 1908.² Calendars were a tool to bring Christians from around the world into one chorus for the same need. They did so by specifying a particular object of prayer for a requisite period of time. In May 1980, for example, a World Vision Intercessor would have opened her calendar to read:

May 16: Pray for children in Zimbabwe Rhodesia who live in disease-ridden urban slums.

May 17: Pray specifically for the many children left orphaned by the atrocities in Cambodia.

May 18: Pray for the increasing numbers of Ethiopian children who are escaping the armed conflict.

May 19: Pray for children of the Vietnamese “boat people” living in cramped, temporary quarters on the Anambas Islands.³

The calendars took various forms. Some included pictures and world maps so one could follow the trajectories of prayers. Others were so plain they resembled to-do lists (Figure 1). Regardless, they offered what modern U.S. Protestants called an “intelligent” approach to prayer—one with laser-

¹Italics and brackets in original. Armin Gesswein, “Powerful Prayer Principles,” Feb. 1980, International Intercessors mailing, no page; and Norval Hadley, letter to Dear Intercessor, Jan. 1980 (for 17,000), folder 13 Ministries “Int. Intercessors” Jan.–Dec. 1980, Central Records, Global Center, Los Angeles, World Vision International Archives, Monrovia, CA [hereafter WVIA].

²Frank Ineson, form letter, Mar. 1974, folder 13 Ministries “Int. Intercessors” Jan.–Dec. 1974, WVIA.

³“Prayer Calendar,” insert with May 1980 appeal, folder 4 Marketing Sponsor/Childcare Promotions, WVIA.

<p>Sat. Nov. 8—BOLIVIA John 12:30-32 Pray for the World Gospel Mission workers who are involved in pioneer evangelistic efforts which include an airplane ministry to otherwise inaccessible areas. Pray that recent changes in government will not interfere with this important work.</p>	<p>Mon. Nov. 17—PAKISTAN Luke 14:23 Pray that God will raise up workers willing to take His Word to the 20,000 Bajania people of Pakistan, to complete the work started in the 1940's when over 500 of these people came to Christ. Pray that these receptive people will have a new opportunity to find God.</p>
<p>Sun. Nov. 9—EAST JAVA James 2:5 Pray for the teachers at the Alethia School in Blitar, East Java, Indonesia, as they bring education and the love of Christ to 168 children from poverty-stricken families in this area. Pray that this Christian witness may also bring other family members to Christ.</p>	<p>Tues. Nov. 18—CHILDREN Matthew 18:5,6 Pray for the Child Evangelism Fellowship workers among children, that they may receive strength, wisdom and guidance for their vital ministry. Today is a Child Evangelism Fellowship World Day of Prayer. Praise God for willing and able childrens' evangelists.</p>
<p>Mon. Nov. 10—REGIONAL CONFERENCE Psalm 32:8 Pray for Dr. Mooneyham and the World Vision Africa regional team as they meet November 10-11 in Nairobi, Kenya, that they may be led to plan the best way for World Vision to help meet the many needs of the people of Africa and teach them of the love of Christ.</p>	<p>Wed. Nov. 19—INDIA Proverbs 4:11,12 Pray for Mr. S.K. Paul, project manager and his staff, that they will receive guidance and strength as they attempt to care for the health needs of the 5000 people being ministered to through the World Vision/India Health and Nutrition Project in Panchpada, India.</p>
<p>Tues. Nov. 11—LATIN AMERICA 3 John 1:7,8 Pray for Geoff and Julie Renner and their children who have moved from New Zealand to Latin America where Geoff has become World Vision regional director of Latin America. Pray that the transition from one culture to another will not be too difficult.</p>	<p>Thurs. Nov. 20—MEXICO Deuteronomy 28:1,2 Pray for the Christians in Mexico, a few of whom are facing ostracism for their faith. Ask God to give them strength to face persecutions and remain faithful. Pray also for the unreached people groups of Mexico.</p>
<p>Wed. Nov. 12—INDIA Psalm 146:5,6 Pray for those working through the World Vision India Leprosy Rehabilitation Program with 40 families afflicted with leprosy. Pray that they will be able to bring these people new hope and new relationships with God and society.</p>	<p>Fri. Nov. 21—SWEDEN Colossians 1:11 Pray for Patricia Chavez as she opens a new office for World Vision in Sweden. Pray that she and World Vision will soon gain a place of respect and friendship among Christians and potential World Vision supporters in Sweden.</p>
<p>Thurs. Nov. 13—BRAZIL Matthew 9:37,38 Praise God for the work being done through the Casa da Amizade Family to Family project in Recife, Brazil as World Vision and the Southern Baptists seek to assist over 1000 children and their families with education, better nutrition, medical care and the Word of God.</p>	<p>Sat. Nov. 22—MEDICAL MINISTRY Luke 6:36 Pray for those working with REAP in this agency's vital ministry to 351 hospitals in 62 countries. They seek to provide necessary medical equipment to evangelical mission hospitals and provide better health care in developing countries.</p>
<p>Fri. Nov. 14—STUDENTS Luke 10:2,3 Pray for Christian workers in the United States to see the need for ministry among foreign students in this country. In 1979 there were 235,000 foreign students; an increase is expected in 1980. Ask God if there is something you can do to make friends with a foreign student.</p>	<p>Sun. Nov. 23—COLOMBIA Colossians 3:12-15 Pray for stronger unity among church and mission leaders attending the Andean Consultation of Church-Mission Relations, November 24-29 in Cali, Colombia under the auspices of the Evangelical Association of Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru.</p>
<p>Sat. Nov. 15—PHILIPPINES John 15:16 Pray for the World Vision Philippines staff, that they will be given wisdom in identifying needy families as they seek to expand the community development program in Mindoro. Many need to be spared from both physical and spiritual malnutrition.</p>	<p>Mon. Nov. 24—KOREA James 1:27 Pray for those ministering to the widows and their 249 children at the Jaeju Widows' and Childrens' Home on Jaeju Island, Korea. The goal of this work is to help the widows toward self-reliance and strengthen them with Christian love and nurture.</p>

Figure 1. Prayer calendar mailed to members of World Vision's International Intercessors, November 1980. Folder 13: Ministries "Int. Intercessors" January-December 1980, Courtesy of World Vision International Archives, Monrovia, CA.

focus on specific needs. Intercessors' supplications zipped across the world, pinpointing conflict and poverty hotspots that were familiar from U.S. media coverage. It let Americans "reach around the world to touch the lives of millions," wrote *World Vision Magazine*.⁴

The World Vision Intercessors were largely white, Christian women from North America, though they were assured that their group's thousands hailed from at least fifty-eight countries.⁵ "All around the world," World Vision president Stan Mooneyham told them, "prayer warriors of all races, denominations and ages have joined hearts to bring before the throne of grace the many vital matters which demanded God's interposition."⁶ Armed with their calendars,

⁴"How Busy People Can Pray for Missions," *World Vision Magazine*, July 1959, 6.

⁵"58" in W. Herbert Scott to "Dear Friends in Christ," Oct. 1977, folder 13 Ministries "Int. Intercessors" Jan.-Dec. 1980 and Jan.-Dec. 1977, WVIA.

⁶Stanley Mooneyham, letter, "Dear International Intercessor," Jan. 1976, folder 13 Ministries "Int. Intercessors" Jan.-Dec. 1976, WVIA.

American prayer warriors engaged in what they understood to be mutual prayers with diverse believers from other countries, or “native Christians” in the parlance of the time. The roots of World Vision’s project for unified prayer stretched back more than two centuries, but the form it took, and the urgency with which intercessors prayed, tracked more recent imperial and technological developments.

The Christian longing for some form of world unity traces back at least to Augustine, who interpreted Eden as the loss of ideal harmony between divine and human will. Reading Eden alongside Babel, medieval theologians made language integral to these yearnings: In both founding myths, humans began with a single tongue that expressed the accord between God and his creations. The divine punishment for sin was a profusion of languages that divided nations and peoples from each other.⁷ Unified prayers and hymns expressed a quest to revive what once was—to call forth the elusive concord that characterized God’s creation and foreshadowed the world to come.

This ideal began to take on a more practical character by the eighteenth century. Through global conquest and exchange, Christians had come to view the Kingdom of God as much larger than they had imagined just two centuries before. As Anglo-Protestants settled in far-flung colonies, Christendom was more extensible yet seemed more fragile too; the possibilities for the world’s conversion and renewal were exhilarating yet daunting. In response, a group of Scottish ministers in 1744 announced what they called a concert for prayer. For the next two years, congregations across Scotland prayed the same words each first Tuesday of the quarter, hoping that this clear expression of unity would chorus up to God and hasten his Kingdom.⁸ The scheme was so popular that it was followed by another tract, “A Concert For Prayer, To Be Continued For Seven Years,” that made its way through England and the American colonies, where it captured the imagination of famed Congregational minister Jonathan Edwards, who penned a book on the topic in 1747.⁹ Over the next generation, concerts spread to nearly every major denomination and became a regular feature of Anglo-Protestant global engagements.

The conviction that harmonized voices most closely approximated divine order was embedded into charity and missionary school curricula, where American workers trained foreign children’s voices along Protestant lines, both because they could not abide “heathen” praying and singing, especially in minor keys, and because such harmonizing seemed to attest to the children’s inner transformation—and thus to the global spread of Christianity. Vocal experiences were fundamental to the production of Christian globalism in other ways too: When people of many tongues sang together it seemed to manifest God’s all-encompassing power by flashing back to the perfect language of Eden and forward to the moment when believers from every nation would chorus around the Throne in Heaven. American Protestants sometimes produced this sound by asking groups of missionaries on furlough to simultaneously perform a single hymn or prayer in multiple languages. Audiences remarked with wonder how the disparate voices produced “not a discordant note, but one harmonious song.”¹⁰

⁷Karmen MacKendrick, *The Matter of Voice: Sensual Soundings* (New York, 2016), 71. On a similar note, Patrick M. Erben, *A Harmony of the Spirits: Translation and the Language of Community in Early Pennsylvania* (Chapel Hill, 2012), 10–11.

⁸R. Pierce Beaver, “The Concert for Prayer for Missions: An Early Venture in Ecumenical Action,” *The Ecumenical Review* (1958): 425–6; Charles L. Chaney, *The Birth of Missions in America* (Pasadena, CA, 1976), 156–7.

⁹Jonathan Edwards, *An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union Among God’s People in Extraordinary Prayer* (Boston, 1747).

¹⁰Mrs. Dr. Hibbard quoted by Frances J. Decker, “New York Branch Report,” *Heathen Woman’s Friend*, Oct. 1884, 86.

World Vision drew inspiration from these forms of hymnody and prayer. Its Korean Orphan Choir, the best known of the foreign children's choirs that fundraised in churches across mid-century America, recalled earlier missionary choruses (Figure 2). Often dressed in "native" style, the Korean children joined U.S. Christian audiences in song, moving through repertoires of "The Old Rugged Cross," "Away in a Manger," "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," and other "old familiar hymns," to quote one brochure—hymns that were familiar to Americans, that is, not to

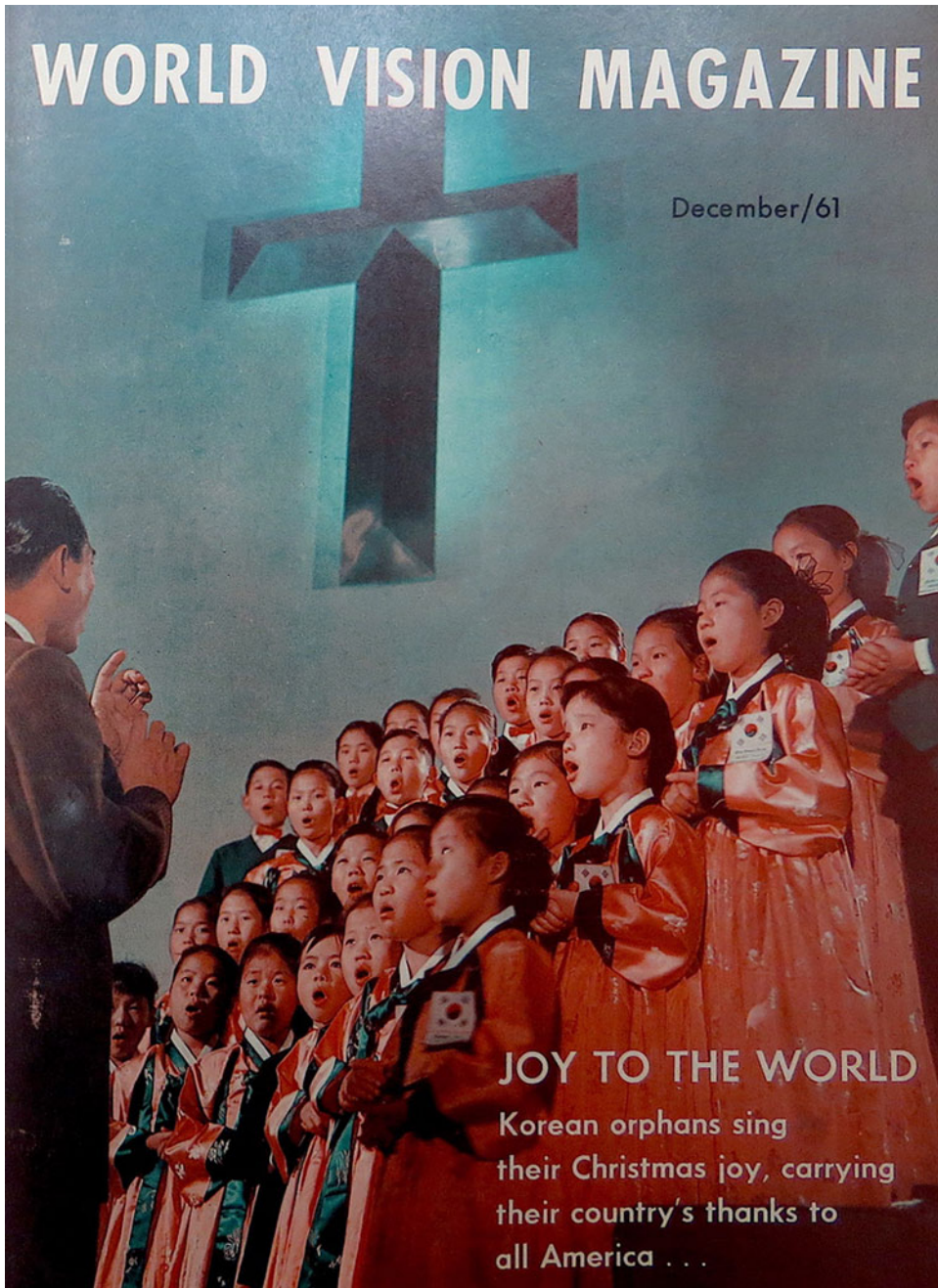


Figure 2. The Korean Orphan Choir in mid-song during their U.S. tour in 1961. Cover image, *World Vision Magazine*, December 1961. Courtesy of World Vision International Archives, Monrovia, CA.

the children who learned them by rote.¹¹ Such choirs also performed Protestant hymns translated into Korean and set to Asian-inspired music, which allowed Americans to hear their own sacred music rendered global through a prism of, to them, exotic sounds.¹² Sunday school teachers used recordings of these choirs as pedagogical tools to inculcate globalism among their students. Teachers were counseled to pick from an album one of “our wonderful old traditional Christian children’s chorus numbers ... songs American kids cherish,” and instruct their pupils to sing it. Then immediately cue up the Korean voices: “Play the record *after* your class has sung the *same* song. It’s most effective!”¹³

Just as much as trade, communications technology, or mass media—the sinews of globalization—connected humans across vast distances, so too could prayers create a “time–space compression” that rendered faraway people or events more present.¹⁴ Unified prayer seemed to extend space by constraining time; its ability to penetrate places in need around the globe was predicated upon bringing far-flung Christians into synchrony. Such prayers also conjured globalism of a particular sort, in which people marked as “diverse” by their dress, accents, or race acted in concert with U.S. Christians by doing or saying things that were familiar to Americans and thus legible to them as godly, such as when foreign children sang Anglo-Protestant hymns, or Intercessors in fifty-eight countries prayed in U.S. evangelical terms.¹⁵

This goal distinguished synchronized hymns and prayers in the second half of the twentieth century from those in earlier periods. Prayer concerts had initially developed to unite white Anglo-Protestants with each other. They had relied on the formalized prayers of their respective denominations, framed in general eschatological terms and sung in congregational settings. Thus members of a Presbyterian congregation in Scotland pictured themselves in concert with people in the colonies who looked like them, inhabited equivalent church spaces, and followed the same English hymnal. But the prayer calculus changed significantly as U.S. Christians sought to support independent “native” churches and later as they began to recognize a major demographic shift with the gospel spread across the global south. Cultural differences once thought to need “civilizing” were now celebrated as powerful illustrations of the global reach of the Christian God. Formalized prayers gave way to informal ones, which could be said in any vernacular and organized through, among other things, the loose structure of prayer calendars.

In this climate, unified prayer clarifies a broader ontological project in late twentieth century U.S. Christianity whereby bringing faraway people of any class or culture into contact through prayer was understood to make them into something new (“one new man” in Christian parlance). This monologic project, to paraphrase philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, used displays of marked racial and cultural difference to reify an essentialized core human sameness—the soul, free will, and universal rights that World Vision supporters believed all humans possessed

¹¹“Narration for Compassion slide set” (144 slides), 1965, folder 1965 Multimedia (1965–1976), box USA, Compassion International Archives (unprocessed), Colorado Springs, CO [hereafter CIA].

¹²“Free Record to all Sponsors or Contributors,” folder 1964 Publication General, box USA 1 Documents, CIA; “Compassion Recordings” (flyer), folder 1965 Publications, box USA, CIA. The citations concern Compassion’s choir, which operated on the same basis as World Vision. See also Susie Woo, “Imagining Kin: Cold War Sentimentalism and the Korean Children’s Choir,” *American Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (Mar. 2015): 25–53.

¹³*Korean Study Plan*, 1970: 6, folder 1970 Internal documents, box USA, CIA.

¹⁴Manuel A. Vásquez and Marie F. Marquardt, *Globalizing the Sacred: Religion Across the Americas* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2003), 3. See also David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, MA, 1989).

¹⁵On the construction of a Western self in relation to others, see Susan Sontag, “The Anthropologist as Hero” (1963) in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (1966; New York, 2001), 69–81; Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1979); and Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York, 1983).

by virtue of their shared relation to a single creator.¹⁶ Ultimately, of course, diversity was a model of and for God's immense global project. "One of the exciting experiences of heaven, after we've really become acquainted with the actual person of our Lord," wrote Intercessors director Herbert Scott to subscribers in 1976, "will be to meet and share with our brothers and sisters of all ages and climes" who make up the global prayer team. "What a beautiful illustration of the diversity and variety of the Body of Christ!"¹⁷

World Vision's choir performed less often after the mid-1970s and was eventually retired. The Intercessors ended in 1983. However, unified prayer and hymnody remain powerful tools in U.S. Christianity. Foreign children's choirs still embark on charity tours.¹⁸ YouTube mash-ups feature clips of Christians across the world singing the same hymn or reciting the Lord's Prayer—a concert for prayer 2.0. World Vision now distributes monthly Prayer Team e-newsletters and offers a prayer app for smart phones. Its May 2017 call for a Global Day of Prayer encouraged Americans to join Christians across the world in prayer for specific famine hotspots and the upcoming G7 summit. A chorus of voices, they hoped, would knit human beings together, foment united action, and address a common creator.¹⁹ The great project of Christian globalism reverberates still.

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¹⁶Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis, 1984), 82. Bakhtin is referring to a much broader ideological mode in the European enlightenment, but I find his general point helpful regarding Christian projects that developed out of the same period.

¹⁷W. Herbert Scott to "Dear Friends in Christ," Oct. 1977, folder 13 Ministries "Int. Intercessors" Jan.–Dec. 1977, WVIA.

¹⁸Active choirs include the evangelical Watoto Children's Choir and the liberal, secular African Children's Choir founded by Ray Barnett in 1984. U.S.-based choirs on a similar model include the International Children's Choir (founded in Utah c. 1992); World Children's Choir (Virginia, 1990), and the long-running International Children's Choir (Long Beach, CA, 1957).

¹⁹The World Council of Churches initially called the day of prayer. Supporters included "many other national partners," as well as the All Africa Conference of Churches, Caritas in Veritate International, and World Evangelical Alliance—none of which are based in the U.S. "World Vision backs global day of prayer to end famine," press release, May 3, 2017, <http://wvi.org/east-africa-hunger-crisis/pressrelease/world-vision-backs-global-day-prayer-end-famine> (accessed Sept. 13, 2017).