

# THE BIG QUESTION: YWAM SUCCESSION

March 2023 – Lynn Green

Dear YWAM leaders,

There were many tears at the Founders' Circle meeting earlier this month at Loren and Darlene Cunninghams' home, as we met for the first face-to-face gathering in more than three years. Loren had just undergone extensive health scans and tests and the results reached them as the FC began. (The Founders' Circle is a group of about 15 mature YWAM leaders invited by Loren and Dar to take responsibility with them for guarding the vision and values of YWAM and to exercise eldership for this movement, especially in the area of prayer.)

The reports from the specialist came in two parts. The first one gave us notice that the results were not good news. With the second report came the doctors' verdict: Loren's condition was cancer that had spread throughout his body, and it would be terminal.

Loren's focus as he shared with the FC during those days was on delivering his primary message, which has been developing for most of his life, but has accelerated over the last 20 years. With unexpected energy and clarity, he spoke about the importance of translating the Scriptures orally for every person on earth, in their mother tongue. We were all deeply convinced that this is our God-given task, along with thousands of current YWAMers and tens of thousands to come. Loren was encouraged to know that we embraced the spirit of what he was saying and will pass it on. After his extensive input over the space of three days, Darlene asked him if he was satisfied. He replied with a big smile and affirmation.

But although the FC received his message and made commitments to do it, *OUR* central focus was on the implications of the news from the doctors. We couldn't avoid it.

We surrounded Loren and Darlene with prayer and tears. Paul Dangtounda, leader of YWAM Port Harcourt, Nigeria, wept and prayed, "The doctors have given their verdict, but that is not God's verdict. We will believe what God says."

The medical team said that Loren's cancer "has not presented as a classical case." What they explained is that when cancer is discovered in the lungs, it usually moves very fast but, in this case, it is moving more slowly. We thanked God for that good news and prayed that Loren will have every day on earth that God has ordained. This was not a faithless time; it was a faith-filled time, because God has always been faithful.

Of course, we all knew that the day of Loren's departure would eventually come; it does for everyone. And what a glorious hope and promise eternity with Jesus contains! Loren often revels in proclaiming "Heaven is for real!"

But this sobering cancer diagnosis provoked us to examine the more immediate personal implications. Grieving and a sense of impending loss are appropriate – and when the time comes, we must take time as a global family to grieve and honour this amazing man that God has privileged us to follow.

### **But what comes next for YWAM?**

For the past several years, I have often been asked, "Does YWAM have a succession plan for when Loren is no longer with us?" When Darlene wrote on March 1<sup>st</sup> about Loren's cancer diagnosis; that letter raised the succession question in many more conversations around the world.

My purpose in writing this letter is to answer that question.

The answer has been in plain sight for the past 60+ years but we almost always wear cultural blinders that prevent us from seeing YWAM leadership plans for a future without Loren.

The fact is, the days without Loren are coming. Are we ready? I maintain that Loren himself started preparing us for this from the start of YWAM in 1960, when he had a clear word from God that "YWAM is to be decentralized." Then the entire mission began preparing from the early 1970s. I was there in 1972 when the amazing Munich Olympics outreach finished and about 100 YWAMers gathered for the biggest staff gathering ever up to that point in time. The main purpose of that meeting was for Loren to announce the membership of the <sup>1</sup>International Council. He made it clear that he had never intended to lead YWAM alone or sit at the top of an organizational hierarchy. He initially

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<sup>1</sup> 1972 The first International Council members were: Loren Cunningham, Leland Paris, Don Stephens, Wally Wenge and Jim Rogers; later added Floyd McClung, Kalafi Moala, Lynn Green and Jim Dawson. (Source: YWAM Founders' Timeline.)

appointed five others to join him as an eldership for YWAM as it rapidly became a global, multicultural movement.

That group grew, changed, grew some more and consistently gathered at different locations globally to provide wise eldership for the movement. Loren was the obvious “senior among equals,” but the other members and many other leaders grew in wisdom and impact across the nations. We eventually developed a <sup>2</sup>Global Leadership Team with an executive group.

But that somehow didn’t seem right. We were following the model of almost every other mission and denomination, but our sense of family and unity suffered. The usual hierarchical approach didn’t seem to fit us.

In 2002 and 2003, we started a journey back to the decentralized way we saw ourselves 40 years earlier. Loren went on an eleven-day fasting and prayer retreat and then joined the GLT gathering in Nanning, China. There he presented a teaching on Spiritual Eldership that became known as the “Tripod Message.” You can remind yourself of what he taught by going to <https://ywam.org/for-ywamers/spiritual-eldership>

We are meant to exercise leadership within a BODY model. Look at Ephesians 4 or, Romans 12, or 1 Corinthians 12, or reread Acts 15 to see how the early leaders of the Church resolved difficult issues and provided secure leadership.

As we review the book of the Acts of the Apostles, we see that some foundational leaders were martyred in the early years, but the Church continued to grow dramatically. Some have suggested that Peter was the senior leader of the early Church, but an attentive reading of the early story demonstrates otherwise. The apostles, then the Jerusalem elders and prophets and deacons led as a body.

Leadership in the body metaphor results in different leaders leading at different times, according to their gifts and callings and the need of the moment. When an evangelist with boldness was needed, Peter was the leader of the moment. When a very sensitive issue with huge implications arose, James took the lead. He had the ability to process the issue in such a way that everyone had a chance to make their position known; then he allowed Peter to

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<sup>2</sup> 1995 At the International Council/International Executive Committee meeting in Einigen, Switzerland, YWAM formed a new Global Leadership Team (GLT), broadening its structure to incorporate more non-westerners, women and young leaders. Jim Stier was chosen as the YWAM International President, receiving that role from Loren, and Loren Cunningham became the International Chairman. (Source: YWAM Founders’ Timeline.)

speak, followed by Paul and Barnabas. No further discussion was allowed; James simply stated the decision of the gathering of leaders, then prescribed a wise process of implementation. His leadership averted a huge crisis in the young Church and Peter's preaching was the catalyst for thousands of conversions.

I could go on, but I want to apply this to YWAM at the point when we are faced with developments that prompt us to consider YWAM without Loren.

I first want to say that Loren's passing will have a personal impact on me, and upon every individual YWAMer, that we cannot predict. His intervention at several decisive points in my life has been crucial. I can only say that if Loren Cunningham had not come into my life, my life trajectory would have been completely different and much less fruitful, rich, and satisfying. Probably all of us can echo the same.

Some have asked, "Who will be the global visionary?" My response is another question, "Must we have one?" Loren has left enough vision for several more generations! But if we do need one (or more) global visionaries, God will raise them up! We cannot appoint such a person, but if the hand of God rests on one or more people to point the way ahead for the entire mission, we will discern that and recognize them.

YWAM will be well led if we have a good BODY of leaders who love one another and guard the oneness that Jesus has created for us. This most recent meeting of the Founders' Circle was marked by easy harmony and oneness. Let's pray for that oneness at every point of leadership in the mission!

Most of us spend most of our lives in hierarchical leadership structures. Most families are hierarchical, as are schools, universities, jobs, clubs and civil organisations, government at every level, as well as most churches and denominations. It is no surprise that we struggle to understand a body approach to leadership. This way of looking at it is not perfect because everything we do in this fallen world has weaknesses. But I believe we will lead better and follow better as we aim for body life in all aspects of what we do.

Do we have a plan for succession? Yes! <sup>i</sup>It's the way God has directed from the beginning.

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<sup>i</sup> "[In 1972]...the International Council (IC) was the recognized global eldership of the mission. Since that time the senior circle of global elders has functioned under several different names. First it was

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Throughout these many decades, a primary role of the body of global spiritual elders (whether the IC, GLT, GLF or FC) has been to confirm, steward and safeguard the foundational documents of the mission. Though the FC does not have the governmental oversight of earlier leadership frameworks, it does carry this role of protecting and clarifying our foundational documents." Source: [Historical Note](#) at the end of "The Youth With A Mission Statement of Purpose, Core Beliefs and Foundational Values" (January 2022).

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