



Leading the way

The legacy of IMM

By Randy Hurst

Christopher Gornold-Smith,
scriptwriter and director for the *Bible
Stories Video Project* at IMM, checks
progress on a scene.

Every week hundreds of children and parents gather around their televisions to enjoy a high-energy adventure program. The creative plots and colorful settings hold the attention of young and old alike. Running as a thread throughout each episode are a message of hope and instruction in biblical principles.

This program might seem standard fare to an American Christian family. But this children's program airs in a nation of Southern Asia where Christians make up only a tiny fraction of the population. While restrictions often limit what the church can do there, the action program — prepared by believers trained through International Media Ministries — consistently ranks among the station's most-watched programs.

Worldwide, television is steadily increasing as a vital tool in sharing the gospel. Through television, people who have not been physically reached by missionaries still can have the opportunity to hear the good news of Jesus. In remote or hard-to-reach areas, it is not uncommon to see a satellite dish outside a small house, hut or even a tent. The airwaves are bringing the hope of Christ where access to the spiritually lost is limited or restricted. Advanced technology is opening untapped possibilities for advancing the gospel. As with every ministry opportunity, however, this technology must be diligently and skillfully utilized.

The birth of IMM

As television emerged throughout the world, it presented a great challenge — and required a new kind of technical expertise — among missionaries. AG World Missions leadership saw the importance of responding to the electronic media needs of missionaries and national churches. The result was the formation of International Media Ministries (IMM).

Few had the background and skills to lead this new ministry venture. But God had already prepared someone to help the vision take shape. While serving as a missionary in Colombia for three years in the late 1970s, David Lee started a daily radio broadcast that still continues three decades later. Already experienced in media, he had learned of its importance firsthand as he and his wife, Jimmie Ruth, pioneered a church in Winter Haven, Florida, in the early 1960s.

While teaching high school in nearby Lakeland, David had directed a federal government project designed to study educational television. Partnering with a local station in nearby Tampa, he set up a TV studio in the high school. While creating educational programming for two years, he studied a comparison of progress among students taught only through traditional classroom methods and those who had access to educational TV.

Knowing of David's background in media and his fruitful ministry in Latin America, the World Missions Board asked him to lead IMM in 1981. At first, programming was prepared from studios in Lakeland, but in September 1985 the ministry moved to Brussels, Belgium. At that time Brussels was the unofficial capital of Europe and home of the emerging Economic Union. The Assemblies of God already had a strong infrastructure there, with an international church, Christian school and Continental Theological Seminary. The ministry continued to develop under David's leadership, with IMM staff working multiple shifts and producing about 250 programs a year. IMM also assisted missionaries and national churches in building and operating radio and television stations in several locations around the world.

David and Jimmie Ruth led IMM for 17 years before coming to Springfield, Missouri. David now serves as director of U.S. Relations for AG World Missions and chairman of the AGWM Media Commission.

God's preparation of His servants

At the same time that God was preparing David and Jimmie Ruth to be the first IMM directors, He also was preparing the couple who would eventually succeed them.

In 1963, John Merrell was a high school senior in Lubbock, Texas. On Easter Sunday



David and Jimmie Ruth Lee



(above)
John and Ruth Merrell



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(above)
Jonathan Cooper is audio and systems engineer for IMM.

(right)
The *Bible Stories Video Project* (BSVP) is a visual video library of reenacted Bible stories designed to make the Scriptures come alive. They include stories of the life, miracles and parables of Jesus.



morning, he was sitting in his 1954 Ford in the parking lot of University Assembly of God before the morning service began. Suddenly, he heard a booming voice outside his car window say, “Well, how are you and God getting on this morning, son?”

John turned and looked up into the face of a total stranger. “Well, we’re fine,” he replied. “Who are you?”

“I’m a missionary here for the service this morning,” the man replied. This was John’s introduction to Walter Kornelson, a missionary to Nigeria, West Africa.

That morning in the service, Walter described how he struggled to find time to teach in the Bible schools and plant churches because it took so much of his time just tending to everyday living in the culture.

As John listened, God spoke to his heart. After the service, he went up to Walter and said, “Brother Kornelson, I’m not prepared to be a missionary, but God made me a strong young man. Maybe I could come alongside you and relieve you of some of the manual labor that’s taking so much of your time. That would give you more time to do what God has called you to do.”

Walter looked at John quizzically and said, “I’ve never heard of an offer like that, but let’s pray about it and see if this is really God.”

At that time, no program for short-term volunteers existed in AG World Missions. John worked all summer to raise enough money, sold his 1954 Ford, bought a plane ticket and flew with Walter to Nigeria in September. After 30 days however, John’s visa was not renewed and he had to leave the country. During the next year he worked for a time at the New Hope Town leper colony in Liberia, maintaining a jungle road, hauling in supplies and driving a D-2 Caterpillar. He preached in little villages along the river that separated Ivory Coast and Liberia. By the time he returned to America a year later, he knew he was called to be a missionary.

John attended Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he met Ruth Groot. After they married, they directed a full-time traveling music ministry team before John became a producer at Tempo Records in Kansas City, Missouri. He also worked part-time on staff at Central Assembly in Raytown, Missouri, with Pastor Bill Newby.

Ten years later John was in a barn watching his father-in-law, who was a pastor and dairy farmer, milk cows. “John,” his father-in-law began, “it looks like your life is headed in one direction with recording, and the mission field is in the opposite direction.”

“I know, and I can’t explain it,” John replied. “Ruth and I have prayed about every decision we’ve made and felt like God has directed us.”

The Merrells had no idea that what seemed like diversions at the time — traveling with the music group and working as a producer — were, in fact, equipping them for what lay ahead.

A month after John’s conversation in the barn, he was helping a missionary with a recording project. The missionary told John about ICI University (International Correspondence Institute) in Brussels, Belgium, and John and Ruth applied to serve there. In this way, God opened the door of opportunity for John to use his electronic media skills in world missions.

At ICI, he served first as an audio producer and then as the director of the media division. Later he and Ruth founded the Center for Illiterate Outreach, including audio and print resources. These opportunities further prepared him for the next step in ministry.

God’s faithfulness

When David Lee returned to the United States, AGWM leadership began looking for someone to take over responsibility of IMM. Their attention turned to John and Ruth Merrell. At that point, the Merrells had worked at ICI University for 20 years and had proven capable of directing the media outreach. In August 1999, they were named IMM directors and moved to Brussels.

The Merrells could not have anticipated what was in store for them only two years later. In February 2001, the Belgian government announced that IMM could no longer operate in the country. IMM had to close down production, and for six months the



ministry team wondered what the future would hold. After much prayer and consideration, the decision was made to move the ministry to Madrid, Spain.

“We would pray every morning,” says Jonathan Cooper, who serves as audio and systems engineer. “I have seen John and Ruth be rocks of stability during the time of transition until we had a permanent facility. I really respect them for holding us together.”

The missionaries and national Assemblies of God fellowship in Spain not only welcomed IMM, but also made an astounding contribution to the ministry. The Spain field even contributed \$1 million from the sale of a property to help IMM build a multi-purpose facility that holds not only offices and production facilities, but also housing for three missionary couples and two singles. The planning, construction and moving of equipment took three and a half years to complete. The Merrells overcame many obstacles and led the entire effort with exemplary determination.

IMM’s overarching commitment is to produce quality Christian programming. To meet the specific needs of each culture, the IMM staff also trains missionaries and nationals and helps them establish radio and television stations and production facilities in their home countries.

“One of IMM’s foundational principles is to provide training for nationals and missionaries to use media, which takes many different forms,” says John.

IMM staff members have traveled throughout the world to Bible schools to conduct training sessions and have brought people to the facility in Europe. To keep up with changing technology, they have put together a package of digital video and audio equipment to take to training centers so that students can have hands-on experience. Such training is now in place in Russia, Ukraine, England, Bulgaria, South Africa and India, with another site soon to open in Romania. Equipment for the centers is provided by Speed the Light.

In some areas of the world, television airtime can be purchased for as little as \$200 for a half hour. One of the goals of IMM is to send people into a culture to train an indigenous media team for nine to 12 months, taking them through every phase of production and teaching them to use computer editing software. In many countries, young people are developing a passion to reach their own culture and are media-driven.

Michael Helin, who serves as training manager, says, “Our goal is to accelerate the church’s ability to utilize these tools by sending

someone to stay until people are trained to a level of competence to produce programs for broadcast.”

Missionaries who use electronic media have the challenge of reaching a generation that is heavily influenced by what they see and hear. In our rapidly changing world, this requires constant flexibility and change.

After nine years of directing IMM, the Merrells felt strongly that the Lord was leading them to turn leadership over to someone who would bring fresh vision and new ideas to this significant ministry. The Lord spoke to John and Ruth separately about this change, which further confirmed to them that this was the right step to take. John will continue to work with an IMM project called *Open the Bible*.

“I sincerely believe a younger-thinking person will help carry this ministry into the future and open a new chapter for IMM,” John says. With this confidence and the Lord’s guidance, World Missions leaders recently asked missionary Jerry Gibson, who has served in Latin America for 14 years, to take over leadership of IMM in January 2009.

The impact IMM will have on the future is largely influenced by the obedience of David and Jimmie Ruth Lee and John and Ruth Merrell, who have served with determination and innovation. Their leadership has built a legacy that will help IMM continue to reach people in the next generation. Through the powerful tools of media, the message of Christ is being presented to those who have not yet heard about Him.

To read all about IMM, visit www.imm.edu. **tpe**

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Christopher and Ragna Gornold-Smith have worked with IMM for five years. Their primary focus is the *Bible Stories Video Project* — Christopher is a scriptwriter and director and Ragna designs and makes the costumes. Both of them also do research for the stories, having a keen interest in archeology and history. They have already produced 30 video stories.