

2010

## John R. Mott, 1865-1955: Mission Leader Extraordinaire

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### Recommended Citation

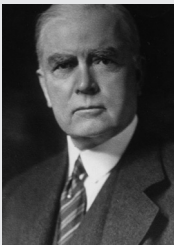
Doss, Gorden R. (2010) "John R. Mott, 1865-1955: Mission Leader Extraordinaire," *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*: Vol. 4: No. 1, 72-81.

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# LEADERSHIP LIVED

*GORDEN R. DOSS*  
**JOHN R. MOTT,  
1865-1955:  
MISSION LEADER  
EXTRAORDINAIRE**



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## Introduction

2010 marks the 100th anniversary of one of the most significant organized events in Christian history: the Edinburgh Missions Conference. Its organizer was John R. Mott, then one of the

most revered mission leaders. Even though his name has slipped somewhat from the collective memory, missiologists still regard him as the missionary leader extraordinaire. Who was he? And what is his legacy that prompts many Christian organizations to celebrate Edinburgh in 2010?

Born shortly after the American Civil War, which ended in 1865, his life spanned almost ninety years, ending in 1955 when Dwight Eisenhower was president. During his life Mott interacted with eight American presidents, most notably Woodrow Wilson,

who called him “one of the most nobly useful men in the world” (Hopkins, 1979, p. 435). When Mott declined to succeed Wilson as president of Princeton University, Wilson commented, “Mr. Mott can’t afford to take the presidency of a great university; Mr. Mott occupies a certain spiritual presidency in the spiritual university of the world” (Allison, 2004, p. 14). Although he declined several diplomatic positions, he did serve on Wilson’s Root Commission to Russia in 1917 and became the president’s most trusted advisor on Russian affairs. In 1946, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his humanitarian work.

Mott was active in Christian mission leadership from his early twenties all the way into his final years. As a young man he founded the Student Volunteer Movement and the World Student Christian Federation. In his middle years he chaired the famous Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910. As an old man he was honorary chair of the World Council of Churches at its founding in 1948. Mission historian Ruth A. Tucker is of the opinion that Mott was more responsible than any other single person for the great surge of university students who became overseas missionaries in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century (2004, p. 319-320).

John Mott deserves to be considered an exemplar because he was a leader who was both “born” and “made.” He was truly a “five talent” man who used what he was given to make another five. “A tall man for his time at six feet, with a strong, bold chin and serious eyes, he was a commanding personage” (Allison, 2002, p. 15). People were attracted by his charisma and he was blessed with excellent interpersonal skills. But he

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did not use his natural gifts cheaply for quick and shallow successes. The gifts he had were matched by “his almost infinite capacity for hard work and care for details” (Hopkins, 1979, p. 31). Throughout his long career, Mott used and developed his God-given leadership skills at a very high level.

### Early Years

John R. Mott was born in New York State on May 25, 1865, six weeks after President Lincoln was assassinated. Shortly after his birth, the Mott family moved to Postville, Iowa. The family farmed for a while but then started a retail lumber yard in Postville, eventually becoming the small town’s leading family. The Motts were Methodists who attended the local church and used Methodist materials for religious instruction in the home. When John was thirteen, a Quaker evangelist working with the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) led him to accept Christ. His early contact with the interdenominational YMCA, combined with the influence of Dwight Moody and others, pointed him toward a lifetime of interdenominational lay ministry. His later role as

a leader in ecumenical circles was rooted in his early decision not to seek ordination or to serve in a particular denomination.

Mott lived in Postville until 1881 when he went away to Upper Iowa University. His second college year found him at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, studying history and political science. At Cornell he came into contact with a perfectionist Holiness movement within Methodism. He pursued and achieved the Holiness “second blessing” or “entire sanctification” experience in his first winter there, although he did not claim to be sinless (Hopkins, 1994, p. 81; 1979, p. 19). The Methodist emphasis on “unity in diversity” and his experience with the Holiness movement became the “base for Mott’s mature thought on race, ecumenism, and the social gospel” (Hopkins, 1994, p. 81). He would promote a balanced approach that called for conversion to Jesus Christ as the unique Savior of humankind, alongside service to address a wide range of social problems and material needs.

Another “decisive moment” occurred when J. E. K. Studd, the famous English cricketer and associate of Dwight Moody, visited Cornell. Mott arrived late for one of Studd’s meetings, just in time to hear him read the text, “Seekest thou great things for thyself; seek them not. Seek ye first the Kingdom of God.” After spending a sleepless night wrestling with the meaning of these words, Mott went to Studd for guidance. Studd’s wise advice was to “look Christ-ward” into the Bible to cultivate a relationship with Jesus (Hopkins, 1994, p. 19). Spirituality would become a defining focus of Mott’s life and ministry.

Mott’s gift for leadership started to become apparent at Cornell. Before

long he became vice-president and then president of the campus YMCA. Under his leadership, the Cornell chapter became the “largest and most active student YMCA” in the nation (Hopkins, 1994, p. 79).

Mott was willing and ready but not yet certain of how or where he should serve. In 1886, he was with a group of 251 university and seminary students who spent twenty-six days at Mount Hermon, Massachusetts, where Dwight Moody had a conference center. The students listened to ardent calls to world mission by A. T. Pierson and others. Mott was among the one hundred students who responded by signing the pledge, “I purpose, God willing, to become a foreign missionary,” and became known as the “Mount Hermon Hundred.” The Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions (SVM) and a wider emphasis on world mission would grow out of the commitments of the Mount Hermon Hundred. Interestingly, Mott never actually served as a cross-cultural resident missionary in a foreign land. His mission post truly was the whole world.

Upon graduating from Cornell, Mott yielded to the persuasion of the North American Student YMCA to become their travelling secretary—but only on a one-year trial basis, he said. In his new role, the twenty-three-year-old Mott was an immediate success. He excelled as an evangelist, organizer, fund raiser, administrator, diplomat, and appraiser of people. Thus commenced a lifelong traveling career centered around youth and missions that at one time included being president or chairman of six major missions coalitions simultaneously (Allison, 2002, p. 17). As for the YMCA, Mott’s first trial year extended into forty years of service, sixteen of them as general secretary.

## Major Leadership Roles and Achievements

Founding the *Student Volunteer Movement* was the great achievement of Mott’s early professional career. The influence of the Mount Hermon Hundred set off a “gusher” of enthusiasm for world mission that quickly produced two thousand volunteers. Organizing these enthusiastic volunteers became a major challenge that led to the organization in 1888 of the Student Volunteer Movement. Mott served as chairman and Robert P. Wilder was travelling secretary; Robert E. Speer later joined the leadership. The famous SVM motto coined by Wilder was, “The evangelization of the world in this generation.” For Mott, the motto did “not mean the conversion, or the Christianization, or the civilization of the world, no matter how much the volunteers may believe in each of these. It does mean that the Christians of this generation are to give every person of this age an opportunity to accept Jesus Christ” (Mott, 1897, vol. 1, p. 141).

Mott would go on to establish SVM chapters in many nations. Among those recruited in SVM’s early years was Samuel Zwemer, famed missionary to the Middle East. “By 1920 nearly one-third of the world’s missionaries serving on the field at that time had been launched into missions through the SVM” (Allison, 2002, p. 35-36). They served in many different denominations and agencies, but SVM put them on the path to missionary service. One of the main features of the SVM was its quadrennial mission conference, which first met in 1891 in Cleveland. The 1920 Des Moines conference marked the high water mark of the organization. By the 1940s the SVM had lost most of its energy and influence. But over a period of some fifty years it recruited over 20,000 young missionaries, who

played a highly significant role in modern missions. David Howard believes that the SVM “has had perhaps the most far-reaching influence on the worldwide outreach of the church in North America” (Winter, Hawthorne, Dorr, Graham, & Koch, 2009, p. 307). Mott did not start or lead SVM alone, but his leadership played a major role in its massive impact on modern missions.

Mott’s work and travel expanded, until in 1890-1891 he traveled 31,000 miles, visiting thirty-eight campuses and conducting or being part of “twenty-three conventions, conferences and summer schools” (Hopkins, 1994, p. 89). In 1891, he took his first European trip to attend the World Alliance of YMCA Conference in Amsterdam.

The weight of his growing responsibilities led him to start wishing for an associate. The Lord heard his prayer and led him to Leila Ada White—who became both his wife and associate in 1891. Leila was a school teacher who graduated from Wooster University “at the head of her class. . . . She has an unusually good education and a remarkable mind,” John reported to his parents (Hopkins, 1979, p. 84). Leila and John began their marriage with a lengthy trip to campuses on the West coast, and went on to become “one of the unique husband-and-wife teams of their times,” (Hopkins, 1979, p. 85) departing dramatically from Victorian-era gender role expectations. They would travel the world together, with Leila serving as John’s associate, editor, critic, and secretary as needed. Leila also had her own ministry to college women, women’s groups, and women missionaries around the world. Their union was blessed by two daughters and two sons, all of whom made distinguished contributions to Christian service in

America and abroad.

A second creative achievement of Mott’s younger years was the formation of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) in 1895. In that year he and Leila started a twenty-month tour that took them to Europe, the Near East, India, Australia, China, and Japan. As they traveled, John preached evangelistically, met with leaders of all branches of the church, visited resident missionaries, and challenged students to become missionaries. The YMCA was very helpful in providing networking and connections along the way. A conviction developed in his mind that the American-based SVM was a useful model for organizing Christian students globally. He promoted the concept, and when the Motts were in Sweden, the World Student Christian Federation was founded, with John as general secretary. Because of his cultural sensitivity and global awareness, he led WSCF to become a loose federation of youth groups that gave each chapter freedom to organize and function in contextually appropriate ways. At a time when colonialism and paternalism were at a peak, WSCF policies called for equality and collegiality between men and women, members of all cultures, and chapters in all places. The WSCF motto was “That they all may be one.” Eventually, WSCF chapters were established on three thousand campuses.

When the Motts were in China on their first global mission tour, prospects among the Chinese elite on university campuses did not seem good. However, on a 1901 trip the reception was warm. In Canton, the largest available hall, seating 3,500, could not contain the crowd. Fifty leading scholars were on the platform with Mott. When the series of meetings ended, 800 had become “inquirers”; a month later 150 were either

baptized or committed to baptism (Tucker, 2004, p. 321). Mott's work in Japan, China, and other Asian nations was an important part of his global mission leadership over the decades.

Upon returning from his epochal global tour, at age thirty-two, Mott published his findings in *Strategic Points in the World's Conquest*. His "points" were university campuses linked as constituent members of the WSCF for mission. He approached mission strategically, with college students at the center of his strategy. The historically effective role played by the student organizations Mott worked with in promoting world missions demonstrates the continued validity of placing them at the center of mission strategy.

If being founder and leader of the SVM and WSCF were the great achievements of the young Mott, organizing and chairing the Edinburgh Missionary Conference to Consider Missionary Problems in Relation to the Non-Christian World of 1910 is considered the high point of his career as a mature missionary statesman (he was forty-five). Edinburgh was a watershed event that was the culmination of important mission conferences of the previous half century and the launching of a sequence of mission conferences extending to the present day. The Edinburgh Conference launched the modern Protestant ecumenical movement.

### **1910: The Edinburgh Conference**

The Conference was convened in the pre-First World War atmosphere of great optimism. Science, technology, and education were on the march. Steam ships, railroads, and telegraph made travel and communication possible as never before. Christian mission was making unprecedented glob-

al progress. This was the time to study missions in a new way so as to capitalize on the new possibilities of the age, and Mott intended to do just that.

Conference chairman Mott was assisted by secretary Joseph Oldham, a person with whom he had an unusually effective personal chemistry. If Mott was the mastermind, Oldham was the chief engineer. Oldham used his masterful diplomatic and organizational skills behind the scenes, having no speaking role. The leadership and organizational skills of Mott and Oldham can be seen in the way the ten-day conference was planned and organized. Eight commissions worked for two years and distributed their reports to the delegates before the Conference. This level of pre-conference preparation was unprecedented in previous mission conferences. *The Statistical Atlas of Christian Missions*, published by Commission I, analyzed world mission demographics as never before. Mott noted that the Conference was "the first attempt at a systematic careful study of the missionary problems of the world" (Walls, 2002, p. 59). Andrew Walls observes that "there had never before been such a systematic conference as Edinburgh. . . . Edinburgh sought to survey and assimilate the accumulated experience of the interaction of the Christian and non-Christian worlds with a view to bringing the encounter to a new stage" (Walls, 2002, p. 59).

Once the Conference started, daily papers were distributed at breakfast to the 1,355 delegates, eliminating the necessity for announcements from the podium. In an age of verbose speech making, speeches from the floor were strictly limited to seven minutes, forcing speakers to come quickly to their main points. These and other proce-

dural details, along with the optimism about missions, gave the conference a sense of excitement, urgency, drama, and achievement.

The topics of the eight Commissions comprised the main agenda for the Conference: Carrying the Gospel to All the Non-Christian World, The Church in the Mission Field, Education in Relation to the Christianization of National Life, The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions, The Preparation of Missionaries, The Home Base of Missions, Missions and Governments, and Cooperation and the Promotion of Unity.

The influence of the Conference can be seen in numerous ways. First, the missionary movement gained new respectability. Edinburgh was a conference of mission agencies, not a conference of denominations. This was because Protestant missions had been primarily conducted by independent mission agencies. Within the churches, mission agencies had often been regarded as peripheral and eccentric. The Conference became “a moment of recognition for the missionary movement. . . . Now its assembled delegates heard no less an ecclesiastical leader than the Archbishop of Canterbury, Randall Davidson, stating that ‘the place of missions in the life of the Church must be the central place, and none other: that is what matters’” (Johnson, Ross, & Lee, 2009, p. xvi).

Second, Edinburgh brought Western Christianity into contact with the “younger churches” that existed outside of the political-religious-geographic sphere of “Christendom.” “It was at Edinburgh that Western Christianity . . . first caught a clear sight of a church that would be bigger than itself” (Walls, 2002, p. 61). This new self-awareness paved the way for Western Christians

to understand the transformation of their faith from a religion of America and Europe into a truly global religion.

Third, the Conference gave a boost to missiology as a formal academic discipline. The pre- and post-conference publications comprised a massive new collection of mission studies. *The Statistical Atlas of Christian Missions* brought a new sophistication to missiometrics that is celebrated by publication of the *Atlas of Global Christianity: 1910-2010* (Johnson, Ross, and Lee, 2009) for the centenary. Two significant mission journals, the *International Review of Missions* and *The Muslim World*, began publication in 1912 in the wake of Edinburgh.

Finally, Edinburgh 1910 started an ecumenical movement that would eventually lead to the organization of the World Council of Churches in 1948, with Mott as honorary chairman.

The Conference ended on a note of high optimism. Sadly, that optimism would be undercut by world events like the two World Wars, the Great Depression, and the rise of Communism. Before long, the “Christian” or “missionized” nations that were supposed to work together to evangelize the “unmissionized” nations were themselves locked into the senseless slaughter of World War I. There would come a massive Christian “recession” in the West in parallel with a massive Christian “accession” in the non-Western world (Walls, 2002, p. 64). Interest in missions by the mainline denominations waned in the decades following Edinburgh. The prediction that the Protestant missionary workforce of 45,000 would triple in thirty years was not realized (Tucker, 2004, p. 324). The goal of Christian cooperation for the sake of mission was not fulfilled. Yet Mott and his colleagues can rightly be credited with having organized an amazing, epochal mis-

sionary conference with many far reaching positive influences. Mott and Oldham emerged from Edinburgh firmly established as world missionary statesmen, while also bringing a cluster of younger leaders with them into prominence.

The coming of the Great War of 1914 was a shattering experience for Mott because it undercut the purposes to which he had committed his life. A fascinating appeal came from his contacts in the Orient—"Could not Mott inspire some action to stop 'this barbarous murdering' of Christians by Christians, asked a group of Japanese" (Hopkins, 1979, p. 431). Instead of yielding to his despair, Mott commenced the most intense period of his career. His wartime work included constant international travel that included active war zones, diplomatic work on behalf of president Wilson, meeting with numerous heads of state, building ecumenical relationships with the Russian Orthodox Church, organizing the YMCA and other groups to relieve suffering on all sides of the War, major fund raising with people like John D. Rockefeller, Jr., organizing support for German missionaries caught up in the conflict, and working with the Continuation and Emergency Committees set up at Edinburgh.

Under Mott's leadership, the YMCA became for World War I military personnel what the United Services Organization (USO) would be in World War II. Besides serving soldiers on both sides of the conflict, the YMCA served between five and six million prisoners of war in the camps. When the War ended, Mott focused his efforts on healing the material, existential, spiritual, and relational wounds of Europe. Hopkins says that between 1914 and 1920 "Mott was instrumental in raising more than a quarter of a billion dollars" for relief

ministries during and after the War (Hopkins, 1979, p. 535). In 2010 that would be about \$5 trillion.

The 1920s saw Mott resuming his role as ecumenical statesman. His intimate knowledge of the world, made possible by his extensive travel, allowed him to perceive better than most that he lived in an "absolutely new world" (Hopkins, 1979, p. 598). The old pillars and foundations were gone. In the new post-war era, Mott would make ecumenism his major focus because of its potential for uniting a badly fragmented world. During World War I the Continuation and Emergency Committees had tried to maintain some of the momentum of Edinburgh 1910. In 1921 the pieces came together under Mott's leadership to form the international missions organization that he and Oldham had envisioned long before Edinburgh. The International Missionary Council (IMC) would have a forty-year life span before being absorbed by the World Council of Churches in 1961. Mott chaired the IMC until 1941. His travels continued as he organized national councils of churches in some thirty nations.

The early twentieth century was a time of fierce conflict between fundamentalists and modernists in which extreme positions were taken. Some fundamentalists took the mission-as-evangelism-only position, while some modernists adopted the social gospel with little emphasis on evangelism and the conversion of non-Christians to Jesus. Religious pluralism, with its assumptions that all religions are equally valid pathways to God and that conversion to Christ is not a necessary goal, gained momentum. This position was anathema to fundamentalists.

Mott's desire for Christian unity and his involvement with ecumenism



complicated his response to the fundamentalist-modernist conflict, and he tried to stay above the fray. He consistently advocated and practiced a holistic, balanced approach to mission, never accepting the false dichotomy between social action and evangelism. Social service, he said, was intrinsically tied to personal evangelism. "There are not two gospels, one social and one individual. There is but one Christ who lived, died, and rose again, and relates himself to the lives of men. He is the Savior of the individual and the one sufficient power to transform his environment and relationships" (Hopkins, 1979, p. 276). Mott organized and led many social ministries without losing his lifelong passion for bringing non-Christians to faith in Jesus Christ, the unique Savior.

For his leadership in the ecumenical movement, he was roundly criticized by fundamentalists. But his ecumenism was not one in search of a contrived unity based on theological compromise. Rather, he saw unity among Christians as the basis for the most effective evangelization and conversion of non-Christian peoples. He worked to form communities of Christians "transcending denomination, race, nation, and geography" (Hopkins, 1994, p. 80) who would be most successful in mission. For his insistence that mission must include an evangelistic call to accept Jesus, he was criticized by modernists who saw him as out of touch with the enlightenment of the social gospel. In the face of these criticisms, Mott continued to model the Christian leadership skill of working effectively within one's time and place without surrendering core theological commitments.

Mott was as devastated by Pearl Harbor as he had been by the guns of August 1914. His long friendship with the Japanese made their attack on

America especially sad for him. During World War II, his work on behalf of military personnel and prisoners of war with the World Alliance of YMCA resumed, although on a smaller scale than in World War I.

The Nobel Peace Prize in 1946 came as a total surprise to him. The trip to Oslo to accept the prize was his first transatlantic flight. An amazing cluster of awards from around the world was given him in connection with the Nobel Prize. Then in 1948, Mott was made the honorary president of the World Council of Churches at its founding in Amsterdam, but his role was not merely ceremonial. At eighty-three he was deeply involved in the planning, gave the opening speech, and participated in the sessions. When he made his first appearance the audience arose to give him a three-minute ovation.

His final years were spent completing his six-volume *Addresses and Papers* (1946), which remains a definitive historical resource of his own life and work and the institutions with which he was associated. In 1952 John's remarkable marriage and service partnership of sixty-two years ended with the passing of his beloved Leila. He married Agnes Peter, a long-time family friend, in 1954, and she accompanied him on several trips, including his last public appearance at the World Council of Churches in Evanston, in 1954.

John R. Mott went to his rest on January 31, 1955. He was buried in the National Cathedral in Washington, DC, following a state funeral with representatives from around the world.

## Life Themes

Several life themes are observable in John R. Mott's long and distinguished life. The first life theme is evangelism and its call to be converted to Jesus

Christ. Neither his status as a friend of presidents and occasional diplomat, nor his friendships with the super wealthy, nor his encounters with leaders of the non-Christian world religions, nor his work with ecumenical leaders who were embarrassed about evangelism weakened his conviction that every human needed to be given an opportunity to accept Jesus. Evangelism, he said, “is incomparably the most important work for every Christian” (Allison, 2002, p. 26).

Spirituality was another major life theme. Spiritual discipleship was part of Mott’s early life and it matured along with his other gifts. His personal life included daily prayer and Scripture reading. His instruction about “Morning Devotions” transformed many youth groups. For almost fifty years he met with a small group of soul friends on December 26 for a “Quiet Day” to take stock of their spiritual journey. The conferences he led began each day with prayer sessions.

Student mobilization for mission was another life theme. As one who started a distinguished ministry as a young adult, Mott understood the potential of young people in mission. He liked to quote Benjamin Disraeli’s statement that “it is a holy sight to see a nation saved by its youth” (Allison, 2002, p. 35).

Christian unity as a life theme was worked out in Mott’s leadership of ecumenical organizations. He saw Christian disunity as an impediment to mission and unity as an integral part of effective evangelization.

The life themes of travel and reading could be treated separately but they went together in Mott’s life. The amazing extent of his travels is difficult to comprehend. He “. . . travelled 2 million miles enthusiastically, his motto [being], ‘With God anywhere, without him, not over the threshold’”

(Moreau, Netland, Engen, & Burnett, 2000, p. 664). Two million miles is a lot to travel even by air, but air travel became common only toward the end of his life. “At one stage, [Mott] was calculated to be the most widely travelled of any [person] to that date in human history” (Yates, 1994, p. 17). His travel gave him the global exposure that approached what television would provide in later times. One might say that Mott was like a televangelist before television because of his travel. Reading went along with travel because trunks of books always accompanied him on the trains and ships which were his main vehicles. Ocean travel gave him time to develop his depth dimension. He read voraciously in history, current affairs, and culture to prepare himself for the places he visited. When he started his one-year trial of ministry with the YMCA, he was a provincial American, but as an old man he was truly a world citizen with a profound knowledge that encompassed the world because of his travel and reading. Mott’s life was spared numerous times during his travels, perhaps most notably when he decided to sail on the *Lapland* instead of the *Titanic* in 1912. In 1943 he narrowly escaped death in a South Carolina train wreck.

Balanced living would not seem a likely life theme for a busy man like Mott, but it was. Karl Barth once commented that Mott was “an essentially healthy person” (Allison, 2002, p. 17). The slower pace of his travels by land and sea, with the time for study and reflection it provided, probably helped. Another factor was that his wife and later their son, John L. Mott, travelled with him a great deal. His focus on spirituality promoted inner health. Mott was a dedicated family man who made a special effort to compensate for long periods away from his family. For the family, the

high point of each year came in the summer at a lake cottage near Montreal, Canada. In that tranquil environment “Mott threw off his official personality, dressed in old clothes, read aloud, played and clowned with the children, fished, swam, and luxuriated in leisure and companionship” (Hopkins, 1994, p. 79).

## Conclusion

One of the potential pitfalls to avoid when writing about missionaries and other famous Christian leaders is that they can be made to look so good that they don't seem authentic. On the other hand, one should not search for flaws in a misguided effort that diminishes truly great people. The research for this article did not discover flaws that went beyond the level of personal foibles and eccentricities. Mott's life was apparently never soiled by unethical business transactions or moral lapses. To God be the glory.

C. Howard Hopkins (1994), Mott's leading recent biographer, sums up the great man's life in this way:

Perhaps the unique feature of his genius was an unusual combination of spiritual insight and leadership with hardheaded administrative ability. A hero to thousands, he was also trusted by businessmen and philanthropists, and was sought out for his organizational acumen. Yet to him the directing of organizations was secondary, really only a means to the main business of evangelism, mission, and the ecumenical thrust. Asked to say a word at [the World Council of Churches in Evanston at] what was to be his last public appearance, he declared, ‘while life lasts, I am an evangelist.’ (p. 84)

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