

The Asia Pioneers

Dave and Mary Dawson and their magnificent obsession

By Sandy Fairservice, 2005



Small decisions can have wide ramifications that may reach around the world. People decide to travel on one day and not the next. Those decisions have saved and lost many lives. We happen to see a television programme and it changes our life. We choose a career, or a spouse, sometimes because a train of tiny decisions has led us to that point. Many give or lend books because we believe the book says something that might be amusing or helpful, or serve as a warning to someone we care about. Had not someone given Dave Dawson the famous novel by Lloyd C. Douglas, *Magnificent Obsession*, he might have shot himself.

That someone changed the course of Dave's life. In turn, Dave and his wife, Mary, changed the course of many lives toward Christ. Their influence has been felt in the United States, Singapore and in many other countries, where their ministry continues today. The fulfilling of the Great Commission of Jesus Christ through multiplying disciples is their magnificent obsession.

On the shady side of the fine house that Dave built on his return from a dozen years in Singapore we sit and chat one balmy Texan autumn. Both Dave and Mary came from cooler Illinois. Both received some of their education at Illinois State University, where they first met. Both came from Christian families, but there the similarities end and we turn the clock back almost 70 years, where we begin this story.

The tortured rebel

Dave was a middle child of "a very middle-class family" with two brothers and two sisters. He remembers being baptised at the age of five, and from that point he attended church every Sunday until he was 14. His parents did not go to church because Dave's father didn't want to go, and his mother loyally supported her husband by staying home. In his mid teens, Dave did what a lot of other young people do: he rebelled and left the church. "I did not feel that the church had any answers, though I didn't have a clue what it was all about. I thought this man Jesus lived and died a long time ago. What did that have to do with me? I saw him more like Abraham Lincoln, or Napoleon—this man in the past. But how he could have an effect on my life today I had just no clue at all."

One of the things that bothered Dave was that he was in the world, but he didn't know why he was here. He asked the questions: "Who am I? What is it that I am supposed to be doing? What is life all about?" Then he would go to bed at night and put his head on the pillow and suffer the torture of those recurring, unanswered questions. "My friends wanted to be doctors, lawyers, Indians; some of them wanted to be thieves. I didn't want to be any of those things."

Then when he was 14 he discovered alcohol. It was a "convenient escape from reality". He found that if he drank enough of it he could get to sleep without the torture. By 15 he had his own car. He lived frugally, and had a facility for making money. Now he had independence. He didn't have to ask his parents for things; he just bought them, and when he went out he just said he was going, and when he would be back.

One thing he had done right was to graduate from High School, which was a miracle in itself, says Dave, because he was afflicted with dyslexia², a severe learning disability. Dyslexia forced Dave to work extra hard just to get the minimum mark, and it put him in a practical learning stream which included carpentry. He worked part-time in a department store, selling men's clothing while he completed his schooling. Soon his teenage alcoholism caused him to move from Illinois to Wisconsin, which allowed 18 year-olds to buy alcohol. "I seldom knew what a sober day was because I just drank all the time." His whole life was built around drinking so, not surprisingly, he was fired from his job. Always concerned, Dave's parents leaned on him to join the military because they thought the discipline would reform him. But it didn't.

At the age of 20, Dave was picked up by the military and put in jail on charges of being "drunk and disorderly, a minor in possession, and disturbing the peace". He was held for a court martial for putting a black mark on the military's name.

"It was at that point in my life that I realised I was in more trouble than I had ever been. And I am praying to God, 'Lord, if you just get me out of this mess I'm going to straighten up and fly right.'" The military dropped the court martial and gave him a severe reprimand (an "Article Fifteen").

The resolution of his case was not, however, the end of Dave's anguish. "If this is all there is to life," he reasoned, "I'm not staying on for 20 more years; I would just rather check out. And I began contemplating putting my military weapon to my head and just ending my life." The trouble was that he just did not know how to "straighten up and fly right".

Prepared by a novel

In those dark, drinking days in Wisconsin, someone had given him the novel, *Magnificent Obsession*³, by Lloyd C. Douglas. It was the story of a man who did good for other people without allowing others to know about it, believing that if he kept it secret God would reward him for his deeds. Dave had never read a novel before, but he ploughed through this one, experiencing something of the joy and peace that Dr Hudson, the principal character, experienced when doing good. Dr Hudson had also begun to

live by Bible passages, which he kept in his wallet. Intrigued that someone should find something in the Bible that changed his life, Dave would try to read his Bible but, drunken and dyslexic, he failed to understand it.

Now, on Lincoln Air Force Base in Nebraska, Dave found and bought the sequel, *Dr Hudson's Secret Journal*, which he devoured. And he was moved by it.

"The next morning, I got down on my knees and said, 'Lord, I don't even know if you're there. If you are there I certainly don't know it. If you would reveal yourself to me, if you created me, it is only right that I would love you and serve you.'" For the next 30 days, that was Dave Dawson's prayer.

"God can change your life"

To show God how serious he was about reforming, Dave began to attend the chapel on the military base. "And God in his grace sent Dr James Allan Blair, a Presbyterian evangelist invited by the chaplains of our base." That Sunday morning, as Dr Blair dropped his sermon in favour of telling the story of how he had come to Christ, Dave Dawson, still a borderline suicide, learned that both of them had been looking for the same things in life. Granted, Dr Blair had not got into the trouble Dave had, but he had Dave's attention, and told how Jesus, though living on earth 2,000 years ago, could change the hearts and lives of men. Said Dr Blair, "Some of you men have come to the end of your rope, and I want to tell you that God can change your life."

"And that Sunday morning, for the first time in my life, I understood the gospel, that God loved me and that he had sent his Son."

Dr Blair offered to pray for anyone who raised his hand in commitment to Jesus Christ. Initially resistant, Dave slipped up his hand. "How my hand got up I do not know. But it was there and I wanted what he was talking about so bad for my life. But that was the day, April 8, 1956, when I gave my heart and life to Christ." One day after his 20th birthday.

Then came Dr Blair's follow up. He extracted a promise that those who had raised their hands would read the Gospel of John five times before they read another thing. Dave, a dyslexic, had never read that much in his whole life, but he had made a promise, and that's what being a Christian was all about, so in the next five days he read the Gospel of John through five times. The first time through, it might have been written in Greek. Dave understood "absolutely nothing." So discouraging, but Dave persevered, completing the book by the evening, when he went again to hear Dr Blair speak.

"I went back to the base chapel absolutely blown away by what he told us about the love of God and the mercy of God and the forgiveness of God, which set my heart on fire. When I walked out of there that night I knew I was on my way to heaven, though I deserved to burn in the fires of hell forever for the way I had lived, and for so wilfully turning from God."

That evening, Dr Blair introduced the second phase of his follow up. "I want you to get your alarm clock and turn it back ten minutes, and in the morning when it goes off I want you to get up, put some water on your face, get your Bible and go to a quiet place. What you are going to do is pray, 'God, give me understanding of what you are saying.' Then I want you to read through John, Chapter One. Then once you have read the first chapter, I want you to think what is it that God is trying to say to you from this chapter. And then pray again and ask God to help you this day to walk with him."

That is exactly what Dave did. The first couple of verses of John One gave him a lot of trouble, written as it was in the 1611, King James version of the Bible, a Bible given to the military by the Gideons in America:

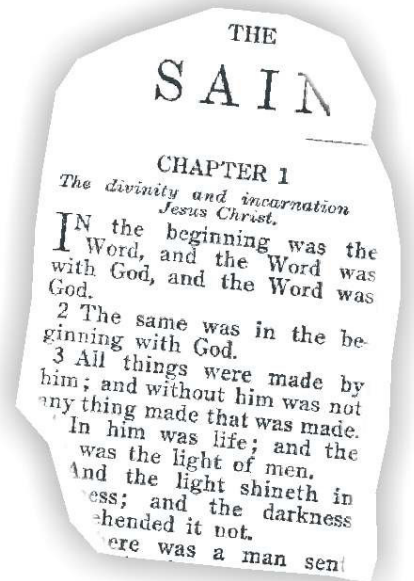
"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God."

The next morning he read more slowly and began to mark in red everything he did not understand. "So by the time I'd finished John Chapter One it looked like somebody had bled to death in the Bible!" But in a couple of places, a light went on, memories of what he had been taught in Sunday school. Meanwhile, Dr Blair continued his week's preaching in the chapel, and Dave never missed a night. About Wednesday of that week he was sitting in his room, reading the word of God, when something happened to him. "All at once I couldn't read it. And I thought, 'What has happened to my eyes?' And I realised they had filled with tears, because for the first time I was reading it, God was speaking to me and I understood what God was saying to me. And I've never been the same from that day to this."

A radical change

Dave could not put the Bible down, reading it from between one and three hours a day. When his plane was on the base and there was no more maintenance to do, he would read his Bible. Not only did he read his Bible, but he also wore a wide grin—all the time. Being converted was showing strongly. One day, after his early-morning Bible reading and prayer, Dave stood out on the long porch at the front of his two-storey accommodation block, intending as usual to survey the row of planes parked below. "I looked at the sky and I thought, 'What has happened to the sky?' And I looked at the grass and thought, 'What has happened to the grass?' And it was as if somebody had taken this dark, dirty filter from in front of my eyes."

Dave's radical change drove his friends wild. They couldn't understand what had happened to him, and they asked him. "I didn't have enough



sense to keep my mouth shut, so I told them what had happened. Well, they about laughed themselves silly.” Knowing Dave’s alcoholism they thought, “Poor old Dawson, he has flipped his lid.”

Dr Blair was still skilfully imparting knowledge to new believers, and teaching Dave more about God than he had ever known. Then Dave realised that one day very soon Dr Blair would get on a train or a plane or into a car and leave the Air Force base, and he had a crisis. He wanted to ask Dr Blair if he could live in his garage so that he might learn more about God from him; in fact, he had made an appointment to see the evangelist, but “I was just restrained by God, because I couldn’t ask him.” It would also have looked as if Dave was looking for an excuse to get out of the military. So he went home distraught and in turmoil to his room.

God speaks to Dave

As he relates this part of the story, in his Texas garden, Dave is unsure whether or not to tell it. It was an emotional event, the memory of which produces joy and pain.

“As I am sitting there in my turmoil, the room is black. And all at once the whole room became alive with light. And there are no words to describe the awesomeness of what I felt with that presence that was there. And whether that was God or an angel, or whether it was an audible voice I do not know to this day. It said, ‘Dave, everything you need to know I will teach you. And if you walk with me then some day I will use you.’ And the room receded into darkness.”

Immediately, Dave recognised that nothing had ever been so real to him, but he also knew that the day might come when he would question whether it happened, so he wrote a description of it. Later he had the opportunity to discuss his experience with Dr Paul Little, evangelist, Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship leader, and teacher⁴. While out walking with Dr Little in Colorado, Dave asked if he could help him understand what had happened. As Dave recalls, Little explained it this way:

“As you tell me about your background, you were so unstable in your Christian life. When a man is ready to blow his brains out—maybe God just did that to take and to put an anchor in your life. Because that thing is so real, this encounter with God and what that did, was just to cement your relationship with him.”

Dave comments, “It was a defining moment in my life, and I have often longed and sought that God would once again come and speak to me, but he has never done that, though he does on a day-by-day basis from the word of God. So I am sure I will not have that experience again until I stand in his presence.”

Dave was now a “religious fanatic”. “The same vengeance with which I had walked away from God was now being expressed doing the things of God.”

Sonny and The Navigators

Dr Blair left five days later but a Youth For Christ director came into Dave's life. His name was Sonny. This man, "who ought to have been a Navigator", helped Dave spiritually for about eight months. His last act, recalls Dave, was to deliver him to a Navigator conference in Omaha, in the same state, Nebraska. The speaker was LeRoy Eims, a pioneer of Navigator ministries in the United States, and proponent of teamwork and definer of disciple making. "He was praying for a contact at Lincoln Air Force Base. And I met LeRoy that day and he came down and drank coffee with me, and for the next 18 months began discipling me how to grow not only 'vertically' [in one's relationship with God], but 'horizontally', both to win and to disciple, and he held me accountable, not only for my personal growth, but for the ministry that God wanted to give me at Lincoln Air Force Base."



LeRoy Eims

LeRoy or one of his men would drive down to Lincoln, 60 miles away, once a week, meet Dave for an hour, then turn round and go home. Others from LeRoy's ministry would visit Dave, "pour their lives" into him and invite him to the Eims home for the weekend. So he would hitch hike up on a Friday night, do some work around the house, play basketball or whatever ball game was in season and then have lunch. Afterwards, LeRoy would take Dave into his office and "have a go" at him with the Bible. Much of what LeRoy taught eventually showed up in his practical books about making disciples. Later that day, Dave would hitch hike back to the base so as to be ready on Sunday to share with a group of military men he had been gathering. This group was studying the Bible, memorising Scripture and praying. They prayed, latterly, that God would send LeRoy to Lincoln. "And right after I left, LeRoy moved his operation to Lincoln." LeRoy disciplined Dave for 18 months, until he was discharged from the military.

A radar fault and a missed opportunity

When Dave Dawson was only six weeks old as a Christian, Dawson Trotman, who founded and was guiding The Navigators, came to Lincoln. He had been invited by Dr Theodore Epp of *Back to the Bible Broadcast* to speak several times at a conference. Sonny, the Youth For Christ director who had been shepherding Dave, announced: "Dawson, there's going to be a meeting by a very famous Christian, and the only people who can come to that meeting are those who are down to business for God." He continued, "Seldom have I met someone who is as down to business as you are, though you are a brand-new, baby Christian, so I want you to come to this meeting with me." Now, one of Dave's jobs was to maintain a plane's radar, and that day his plane came home with a radar fault. Despite feverish work and a lot of prayer, the radar was not fixed until five the next morning, by which time, of course, Dave had missed Trotman's meeting. It was the last opportunity he had to meet Trotman, for on June 18 of the next year, 1956, Trotman died apparently of a heart attack while rescuing a woman from a lake in New York State.

Born to reproduce

Trotman's messages lived on, however, because Dr Epp took them and condensed them into two booklets, *The Need of the Hour* and *Born to Reproduce*. *Born to Reproduce* had a profound effect on Dave Dawson. At the end of the summer of 1956, Dave returned to Lincoln and saw the booklet at a Youth For Christ meeting, and noticed that the evangelist Billy Graham had written the foreword. That night after the meeting Dave read *Born to Reproduce* from cover to cover. "I realised that everything Trotman was talking about I was already doing. I knew that I wasn't smart enough to be a minister, though that's where my heart really was, but I thought maybe I could be a YFC director and do what Sonny is doing. But when I read that book I was moved by it. I got off my bed, got down on my knees and I said, 'God, this is what I want to give my life to because this is what I am doing. And now I understand that I don't have to go and do this or that, I can just continue to do what you have taught me to do through these months of walking with you.'"

Early service and a looming education

When Dave left the Air Force, LeRoy Eims sent him to be with Navigator representative Skip Gray, who could mentor him in Southern California. Dave also spent some time studying at Los Angeles Pacific College.

Dave was with Skip for four years, three of them in California and one spent in Costa Rica, where Skip believed God would have him work as a missionary. In the style of Second Kings 2:2, in which Elisha, the prophet-in-training followed his mentor Elijah, Dave said to Skip, "If God is calling you, he must be calling me." In Costa Rica Dave, though dyslexic, studied for two terms at a language school and learned enough Spanish to think in it, live his life and to minister to students. He also attempted to get a university



Skip Gray

education, but he did not have enough of the language to succeed. However, Dave had realised that by this time that he could actually study and succeed, first at night school in Nebraska, where he passed with a C in English; at Los Angeles Pacific College, and now in Costa Rica.

The years were passing and Dave was 26. If ever he were to get a university education it would have to be soon. So he returned to the United States in 1962 and went to The Navigators' headquarters at Glen Eyrie, in Colorado Springs to serve the conference season. Warren Myers⁵ was in charge at Glen Eyrie, and spoke at the Eagle Lake boy's camp, 30 miles (50 km) away where Dave cooked single-handedly for 75 three times a day. Although Warren knew who Dave was, that was about as far as it went, and Dave discovered that the organisation did not have any plans for him, though it kept sending other people here and there.

Another of Dave's wishes was that he show his parents what a changed life he now had. The last they had known of him was as a teenage alcoholic, and that was eight years before. So Dave returned to his roots, to Illinois, enrolling at Illinois State University and living for that first year with his parents, who had moved to Bloomington.

New ministry at Illinois State University

That year, two significant things happened. The first was a call within days of arriving from Jack Mayhall, who was at that time Regional Director for Illinois, inviting him to a weekend Navigator leaders' retreat. "And I thought that Jack hadn't got the word that I was being led out to pasture. But he said, 'I really want you to come.'" Still, there was still no plan for Dave, so that year Dave began a ministry at Illinois State University.

In those days only 6,000 students attended Illinois State University. "If I can't reach 6,000 students," reasoned Dave, "then I ought to turn in my badge and quit talking about the fulfilling of Christ's Great Commission." The Great Commission had burned in the hearts of Dave's mentors, LeRoy Eims and Skip Gray, and with the direct influence of the Bible, it burned in Dave's heart too.

"For the first six months I just walked and prayed. And I went to Inter Varsity and met some people." The sixties were the time of the Vietnam War and students were in rebellion against that and many other things. It was the time of the Jesus movement and free love, and it was all but impossible to get people to structured, religious meetings. Nevertheless, Dave kicked off his ministry with a weekend conference on evangelism, with the requirement that every person who attended must have shared the gospel with at least two people. "If you don't know how to do it, come and get me and I will go with you." Eight people came to his conference.

Mary

The second significant event to happen that year was that in the autumn, on the first day of his American Literature class, he turned round in his seat and looked into the face of Mary Seedoff, who later became his wife. Dave was instantly captured, and went home praying, "Lord, how do I get a date with this girl?" As Dave recalls, God said:

"Dawson, why are you talking to me about this woman?"

And Dave said to the Lord, "Lord I have a two-fold objective.

Number One, I need this education; and Number Two, I need to reach this student body with the gospel."

And God said to Dave, "If these are your objectives, why are you talking to me about this woman?"

And Dave said to God, "I will not bring this woman's name into your presence again, unless you open the door."

But Dave saw Mary in class, and every time his heart fluttered, but he did nothing to pursue her.

One night, Dave got a call from a young lady. "Is Mr Dawson there?" It was Mary. She had got his name from hearing the lecturer address a

question to Dave, and had written it down. "I'm calling to ask you if you would escort me to this Christmas formal [dance] that we're having." Dave replied, "Yes, I would be very happy to do that." And that is how Dave met Mary, and how the two eventually married, and went as Navigator missionaries to Singapore.

Though Mary had not had such a colourful past as Dave, her arrival at the point of marriage was far from smooth. In her case, the problems seemed to be generated by her parents—traditional, religious people whose roots went back to the Lutheran church in Sweden. Mary's grandfather had come to America in 1881 as a missionary to the Swedish immigrants to the New World, where they had no pastoral care in their mother tongue.



Mary Dawson

"I had met Dave shortly after I had become a Christian," Mary recalls. "He was the Navigator representative at Illinois State University. I knew that he was helping people grow in the Lord, but I didn't really know what The Navigators was. So I remember one meeting in particular that we had at his father's and mother's house where he got together a bunch of the students he was involved with. And he talked about—he believed that the world was reachable within our generation, and he laid out the multiplication principle. And I thought, 'This is something I could give my life to.'"

Though Mary had not become a believer until college, she was a "church person", so what Dave had to say came as a challenge. "I would never have been a church person just for the sake of being in church. I never knew that there was any kind of mission or goal or objective in being a Christian except being another nice person. And when I realised that there was a Great Commission and that there was a way to fulfil it, that was exciting to me."

Mary's development continued. Shortly after the multiplication discovery she went to her first Navigator conference where she heard Jim Downing, a senior Navigator in those days, speaking about meditating on the word of God, from Joshua 1:8. As Mary recalls, Jim said, "That's a pretty good promise if you are a young person, that if you will let the word of God dwell in you, you will be prosperous and have success."

"So that's why I began doing Scripture memory, and that totally changed my life." By this time, Mary had begun to realise what The Navigators were all about. An only child, it was natural that she begin writing to her conservative parents what wonderful things had been happening to her. Dave recalls: "It scared the life out of them." So much so that they came to meet Dave, and were scared even more. "Here I am, a 26 year-old religious fanatic preying upon young college students—from their point of view. Or at least from her father's point of view."

A forced separation

Matters came to a climax when Mary wanted to attend a Navigator training programme. One day as her father, Roy, was buying petrol the minister of their church also pulled in to fill up. They fell to talking about The Navigators, because Billy Graham was preparing for a crusade in Chicago⁶. "The Navigators are the finest thing since sliced bread," enthused the minister. "Let her go to that programme." On the strength of that recommendation, Mary's father signed the papers allowing her to go, and immediately regretted it. His next action was to remove his written permission allowing Mary to study at Illinois State University, and to enrol her at the University of Wisconsin, 250 miles (400 kilometres) miles away. "Dave, what am I going to do?" Mary pleaded on the phone. "I want to be a part of what you are doing to reach that campus and I desperately need the training you are giving."

As it happened, Dave was again cooking at Eagle Lake Boys' Camp and there chanced to meet for the first time Lorne Sanny, the President of The Navigators. Lorne needed someone to drive with him to the Lost Valley Ranch where he was to meet his friend Bob Foster, and Dave got the job.



Lorne Sanny

As they made the two-hour journey they talked. Lorne seemed to know quite a lot about what was going on at Illinois State University. Dave then shared his problem. "I'm not going to let her dad force her into doing this," he concluded. Characteristically, Lorne stripped the issue into its simple components. "Could Mary get an equally good education at the University of Wisconsin?" he asked. And how far away was it from where Dave had his ministry? Four hours. The advice came: "Dave, don't fight City Hall. Let her go." Lorne was a little concerned about the liberal mores at Wisconsin, but he promised that a good friend of his, Dr John Alexander, would look after Mary. John Alexander was at that time head of

the geography department, and eventually became President of Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship. "That was the wisest piece of advice we have ever gotten," concludes Dave.

So Mary and Dave were separated. The result was just the opposite of what her father had hoped—absence made the heart grow fonder. It also gave Mary an opportunity to put into practice what she had learned from Dave, and started a Navigator ministry at the University of Wisconsin.

"I had had enough of the discipling to be dangerous, I guess," says Mary. "I thought, I'll start with one person, then each of us can go out and multiply again, and it worked. I prayed for one girl and God gave her to me, and as I began to disciple her and she went out and reached another one, and before long, we had a little nucleus of people that were meeting, praying, doing Bible study together. And we just attracted more and more people. Some young guys came in who had some knowledge of The

Navigators and we started to pray for a Navigator representative to come to the University of Wisconsin."

Eventually The Navigators saw what was going on and sent a representative, Larry Whitehouse.

Another delay: the Navigator home

Mary graduated in 1965. Mary's father had promised her that if she, a specialist in Spanish, would only graduate, she could do anything else she wanted, though he was hoping that she would undertake further study in Spain. But Mary told her father that she wanted to marry Dave, and join him in the ministry. "I've got to do it because I believe it is what God wants me to do." When Mary graduated it seemed she was now free to marry Dave and join him in his ministry at Illinois, but it was not to be. Not yet, anyway.

LeRoy Eims, who had disciplined Dave while he was still in the military, happened to come to town to speak at a conference. The encounter went like this. Jack Mayhall is driving the car, with LeRoy and Dave as passengers.

LeRoy: "Dawson, that woman ever live in a Navigator home?"⁷

Dave: "She has been with Larry and Pat Whitehouse and baby sits for them and is in and out of their home, but technically, no she hasn't."

LeRoy: "Don't marry the woman until she has lived in a Nav home for a year. Jack, what else do you want to talk about? The conversation is closed."

The trio check in at a motel in St Louis. Distraught, Dave gets on his knees and says, "Lord, you could change LeRoy's heart. You didn't. And I can either let this affect me or I can say, 'Thank you, Lord, this is the will of God, and I choose to thank you for LeRoy's counsel.'" And the matter was settled.

Mary went to live with Dave's friend and mentor Skip Gray, whom he had followed to Costa Rica. Skip and his wife, Buzzie, had been preparing to return to Costa Rica, but stayed on to recruit military officers to bolster the flagging United States Navigator work. At the end of her year in the obligatory Navigator home, Dave showed up at Thanksgiving 1966 with a diamond ring he had bought in Amsterdam. The wedding date was set for April 1.

At first, Mary's parents would have nothing to do with the wedding, but they had a change of heart in May and asked Mary to come home and get married. "So we moved our wedding two weeks back, and we were married on the fifteenth of April in Mary's home church with both sets of parents in attendance."

"And when he died, I was Roy's closest friend in life. So God really did heal Roy," recalls Dave. Once, they were travelling down from Canada, and Roy said, "Mom and I owe you an apology. We interfered in your life

and took Mary out of Illinois State and took her in an effort to break the two of you up. And we look at this beautiful child here [their first] and the marriage that you have and the work that you are doing. We were wrong. Please forgive us." And Dave replied, "Dad, there's nothing to forgive."

Intense ministry in the South West

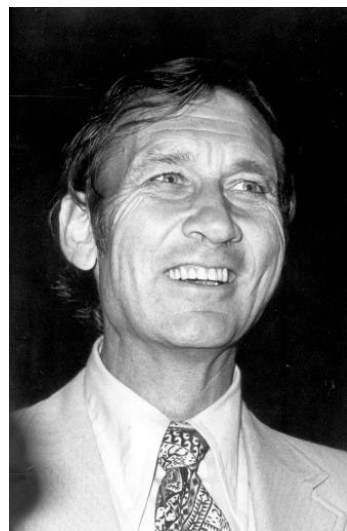
That year, Dave and Mary Dawson were assigned to the South West of the United States—Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana and Oklahoma, under the leadership of Walt and Leete Henrichsen. The Henrichsens moved to Fort Worth, Texas, and the Dawsons to College Station, in the same state. Dave clocked up 60,000 miles (nearly 97,000 kilometres) a year, trying to restart the flagging Navigator work. He worked with students at the University of Austin, the military and businessmen at San Antonio, pilots at Laredo, and with businessmen at Corpus Christi. It was a weekly circuit. Everywhere Dave went, ministries sprang up, and they endured. In those days of the Viet Nam war, when American youth was in rebellion, and Christian meetings were lucky to get 20 people, Dave was arranging meetings and getting a thousand people. Dave had been praying for missionaries, but now he began soliciting prayer from them for what was happening back home.

Roy Robertson comes to town with a challenge

One day, in the autumn of 1967, into this hectic, productive ministry flew a former Second World War pilot. He had been The Navigators' first missionary and had gone in 1949 to China. When China fell to communism, this tireless worker had gone offshore, leading evangelistic ministries and campaigns in seven Asian countries. Roy and Phyllis Robertson⁸ had moved to Singapore in 1962, sent by Dawson Trotman to start an official Navigator work there. Now Roy Robertson had come to the United States, looking for his replacement. Though by this time Asia Director, he was now being encouraged to pursue, in line with his convictions, a public-evangelism ministry in Indonesia as he saw fit. Roy came to Texas and found Dave Dawson.

"You can run a three-ring circus, and I don't see anybody else in The Navigators who can do that, and Singapore is a three-ring circus," Roy told Dave.

The difficulty was that Dave had been committed to helping Walt Henrichsen for four years. "Roy," he said, "they will not let me out of this assignment." Roy pressed him: "Will you be my replacement?" "I said, 'Roy, if The Navigators ask me to go to Singapore I will go. But they ain't going to ask me.'" "You let me worry about that," replied Roy. Meanwhile, Dave told Mary that he had been asked, and said they would go—without asking her if it was all right by her, so convinced had he been of the opportunity.



Roy Robertson

Singapore

Dave relates what apparently took place between Roy and the President, Lorne Sanny. Lorne told him that he could have any man in America except Dave Dawson. Roy told Lorne that if necessary he would wait the four years out if it meant getting Dave. Then there was a staff conference that April in San Antonio. "The Navigators realised that the work in Singapore was dwindling," recalls Dave. At that conference, Waldron Scott, at the time Pacific Areas Director, asked Dave if he would replace Roy. "I said, 'If you believe this is where I can make my greatest contribution, then yes, I'll go.'" The Dawsons were released from the United States and began to get ready to go to Singapore. But first they had to find Singapore on the map!

By the time Dave and Mary touched down in Singapore in 1968, they had their instructions from their new supervisor, Waldron Scott. Dave relates what this was:

"Scotty was saying to me, 'Dawson, we have two men for 20 years of work. Get us out of those churches. Get us into the pools of manpower and don't ask me for anything. Just get down there and do it.'"

But helping churches and working through them was what Dawson Trotman had instructed Roy Robertson to do, and he had been doing it faithfully since he arrived in the city in 1962. In his book, *Developing a Heart for Mission: Five Missionary Heroes*, Robertson explains what he aimed to do in Singapore:

"Daws Trotman had taught his men to serve others first. So instead of setting out immediately to build a Navigator ministry targetting the prestigious University of Singapore, I first made myself available to serve different local churches and other Christian organisations within their own context."

What Robertson said was his last meaningful conversation with Trotman before he died was to encourage him to do what was on his heart, which was to reach Asia through evangelistic crusades⁹. After Trotman had gone and Lorne Sanny became the leader of The Navigators, Sanny raised the Navigator flag, and promoted another aspect of Trotman's vision for reaching the world, one-to-one evangelism and spiritual multiplication. Other Navigators working in Asia, such as Doug Sparks, Gene and Mary Denler and Gene and Helen Tabor, made the change. Roy did not, believing that The Navigators had departed from Trotman's vision.

A common vision but two approaches

When Dave and Mary Dawson arrived in Singapore with 18 month-old David, they had a vision that Singapore could become a great sending nation. "God had also placed that vision on Robertson's heart," says Dave, "and I wasn't aware of that, but he had prayed for that."

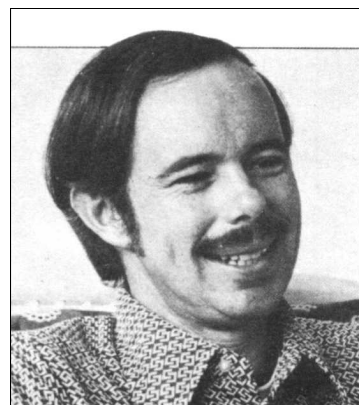
As Robertson describes in detail in his book, he prayed as he walked across the island from south to north, "O Lord, please send forth

committed disciples and missionaries from Singapore who will go into every country where these ships unload their cargoes.”

An identical aim; two different methods of accomplishing it, but it was a change that shook the existing ministry to the core. The Dawsons arrived at 11 pm, and by 9 am the next morning one of the Singapore representatives personally delivered Dave “a letter of resignation”. Shortly after, the second representative “resigned”. Welcome to Singapore! “The ministry was disintegrating,” says Dave, “because Roy had told the people The Navigators were not true to Daws’ vision.” Thirty-five years later, Waldron Scott says the ministry was in excellent health, but as redefined by headquarters it was unfocused.

During their service, Roy and Phyllis Robertson had banded together two teams of committed men and women, whom they called the Mighty Men and Godly Girls—around 30 women and 30 men. Twenty of them would not even speak to Dave, he says.

“I’m a very traditional, hard-nosed Navigator. When it comes to discipling people it is ‘commit to faithful men who shall be able to teach others also’ (2 Timothy 2:2). Men who would take and practice the disciplines of the Christian life on a daily basis and give themselves to that kind of people.” His two-month assessment of the ministry was not encouraging. “People went to set meetings. And there would be a list of churches that wanted Navigator speakers. And guys would assign the various responsibilities, have a word of prayer and go. They didn’t have their Bible study done, and hadn’t memorised their verses. I just thought, this is so sloppy, and I’m not going to build a work on this kind of thing.” So he gathered the willing together and gave them an opportunity to leave:



Dave Dawson— “a hard-nosed Navigator”

“Roy Robertson is one of the finest Navigators we have ever produced, and you have gotten some excellent training from him. But in every man’s life there comes a place where you just have to try your spiritual wings and see if you can fly. And if you are at that point I want to release you and let you try your spiritual wings. I will be as near as the closest telephone.” He also explained who he was, what he had on his heart, and what he was going to do. Twenty more left, leaving Dave with only one third of the existing ministry.

New standards

Dave set new standards for participating in his ministry. “On the night when there is Bible study, you may not come if your lesson is not done and your verses are not memorised. Stay home and do it. But when you’ve missed twice you’ll not be on this team any longer. I will work with you privately to bring you back to where you can meet the requirements.

But this team has got to stand for something. It has got to be the showcase for what it is we are trying to do in Singapore." And in the next six weeks five more left.

Not every disciple in the ministry was shaken by these events. Florence Tan was one of the key women of the Thirty Godly Girls. "Being young and fresh to The Navigators in the mid-1960s I felt it was just another step to be taken, that is, one set of leaders moving on and another set coming in to replace them, she explains. "Looking back, I see the Robertsons as having done a great job in befriending and coming alongside the local churches, and the Dawsons starting a new era and establishing a stronger Nav work, making a definite and dynamic contribution as a disciple-making organisation in Singapore."



Florence Tan

The vision takes hold; multiplication begins

Dave saw the remnants of the ministry as "a bunch of smoking sticks", and his job as a motivator was to fan them into a flame. "And the fire was the vision: the world in our lifetime is reachable." The vision took hold. As the fifteen disciples witnessed and shared the gospel with non-believers, they became 30. The 30 became 60 and the 60 became 120. The multiplication continued so that at the end of 12 years, there were over 1000 young men and women functioning on ministry teams in high schools, universities, the military and among young, working professionals.

That all sounded like a commercial for spiritual multiplication, the ideal according to Second Timothy 2:2, and Matthew 28:18-20, so I challenged Dave:

"That's the closest I have ever heard, except for one other occasion, to the theory of multiplication working so neatly."

Dave shows no embarrassment, searches for no escape route, but looks me in the eye and says, "It really does work, providing you have people who are not playing games with God, but practising the daily disciplines of growing.

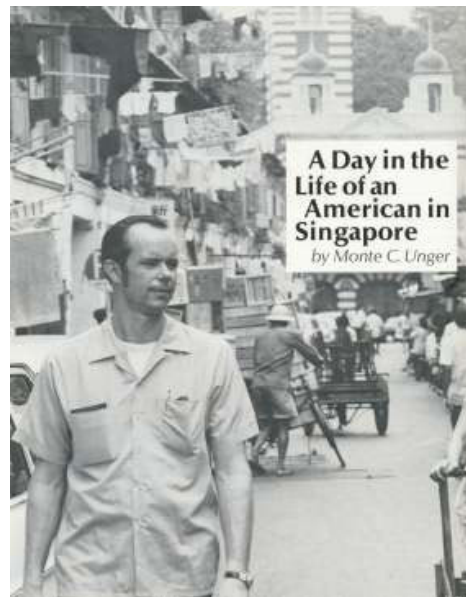
"Jesus said, 'I will make you to be a fisher of men,' and 'Go and make disciples.' Once we are in this growing relationship, when Jesus teaches you to fish you won't come back with an empty line. And when he made the imperative of the Great Commission 'make disciples' he brought a multiplying factor. If you make converts you add, but if you make disciples you are capable of enabling them to reproduce themselves into the life of the next generation. Then before you know it, you have a multiplying process.

“Jesus said, ‘Teach them to obey.’ And that’s what we are doing, and if they are not obeying we are living in a human deception of our own making. And for people to experience the joy of leading somebody to Christ and to realise their friend’s life is being transformed, and that at last I am functioning in the capacity for which God created me to function—that just turns people on, and the multiplication does happen.”

The critical factor as Dave sees it, is holding people accountable. That was one of the major changes Dave and Mary made to the Singapore Navigators from 1968.

A day in the life of...

Dave and Mary worked hard too from the day they arrived. Three years into their ministry, Monte Unger, the American editor of *The Navigators’ Log*, visited Singapore and later wrote *A Day in the Life of an American in Singapore*.¹⁰ This particular day was



nineteen hours long. It began at 4.55 am and ended at midnight. It began with an hour-long, weekly class in personal evangelism given to a church group at 6.00 am, an event accompanied by one of his key men, Ong Say Gark. Dawson covered the personal development of the Christian, spiritual reproduction, and how to organise your time. Four practical classes followed on practical, personal evangelism. The period from mid morning until lunch was taken up with office work, organising moving house, and setting up a phone call to London, not a simple task in those days. Twelve people sit down to lunch. That afternoon 100 new Christians pack the house for a seminar, after which Dave fields questions from many individuals. This lasts the whole afternoon. Dinner is at 6.00 pm, and some time is spent preparing for an evening meeting for more mature believers. After the meeting, there are more discussions with individuals. At 11.00 pm Dave helps a man change a tyre, then talks to another man who visits unexpectedly, until 11.30 pm. Then Dave gets to bed at midnight. “In those early days I paid a heavy price,” remembers Dave.

JoAnn Ray comes to help and stays ten years

In 1969 Dave and Mary wanted a single woman to come and help women there. Three women were possibilities; two did not work out, but JoAnn Ray¹¹, a California nurse with a call to missions did come, rented a house and had women live with her. The first woman she shared with was Florence Tan, one of the key women of the Godly Girls team. JoAnn thought, believed and did similar things to the Dawsons. She stayed ten

years and left behind a generation of disciple makers.

"Many a night we sat up talking about the organisation, goals and people and the course we would take," JoAnn recalls. "Dave used POLE—Plan, Organise, Lead and Evaluate. We had evaluations quarterly. I have argued, fought and cried in Dave's presence many times. The Asians were amazed we could go at it in a meeting and hug each other on leaving.



JoAnn Ray

"Mary was at Dave's side, looking after the kids and ministering with women, and gave me the best she had when I arrived. She is a gifted lady with a lot of laughter. I saw two children born and one baby lost in Singapore.

"JoAnn was a godsend and few Navigator representatives have been blessed to have someone like her," says Dave. Psychologically she and I were locked together. She was exactly what Singapore needed and her contribution was outstanding. The sun rises and sets on her head."

Did every person multiply?

So did every person in the Singapore ministries find someone else and set off another chain of multiplication?

"I don't want to sit here and tell you 'every person', but that was the norm," replied Dave. "We taught them very effective ways of doing evangelism, and we took them out and they did it and God blessed their life, their obedience, and their being fishers of men. And most of them led people to Christ. And there is nothing that turns people on like leading others to Christ. People grow ten times as fast in an air of evangelism as they do when there is no air of evangelism."

Every year the ministry agreed on targets—"what we were going to trust God for"—the number of converts, disciples, disciple makers and leaders and makers of disciple makers. There were profiles and charts, so that not one would be missed. "We knew exactly what we were doing and... every year we met our objectives. And those objectives had to do with the fulfilling of the Great Commission and growing in their relationship and in their knowledge of Jesus Christ, because we practised some basic disciplines: Bible reading, Bible study, quiet time, Scripture memory."

Mary's work and the children's upbringing

Dave and Mary brought four children into the world, David in the United States, and John, Martha and Sarah in Singapore. John was born just two and a half months after they arrived. (All four are walking with the Lord today.)

"I had my plate full," recalls Mary. In fact, she had more than she could handle, but many of the women in the ministry came over and helped with the children and cleaned the house and made meals. "And in the process I would try to share with them what I knew about evangelism and discipleship and growing in Christ, and so forth. We constantly had an open house and we hardly ever sat down to dinner just as a family. Most of the time we had Asian nationals living with us, from the first couple of months we were there all the way to the end, and it would fluctuate between two to five at any time. So it was a very active schedule and one that I had to focus pretty much on the home and the children and keeping the house and that sort of thing."

Except for occasional visits to the United States, the children grew up in this way of life and had no great problems with it.

"They loved it," says Mary. "There were trade-offs of course, things that they didn't experience that their peers did over here in America, but the general overall experience was great, was wonderful. They experienced a little bit of prejudice as the only Americans or westerners in the school—they went to the local school—which I think has made them more compassionate, more tolerant of other people. They had to learn the local languages and the culture."

Dave had been one of the many American Christians who had been critical of the amount of money spent on what he called "social structures"—schools and hospitals—rather than on pure evangelism, but his views changed when he discovered that the finest schools in Singapore were religious—Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Episcopal and Baptist. This was the fruit of 100 years' Christian presence on the island. And yet, after 100 years, the Christians could number only 10 people who had gone overseas as missionaries.

A query from the churches

Singapore had a very small Christian population in the 1960s, numbering about four per cent, and a small change was noticeable. When The Navigators required every new believer to find a church and join it, and be a blessing to it, churches on the receiving end began to sit up and wonder what was happening. They did realise, however, that the new members had been won by The Navigators and were being trained by them. After five years of this, Pastor George Wan of the Methodist Church called Dave. He is reported to have said:

"For five years we have watched so critically what you are doing and...we want to ask you this question: Could you come into a local church and help us with the training of our people so that our people would not be deficient in any way from the people you are raising up?"

Dave realised that Pastor Wan was not talking about deepening a relationship with God through the Bible and prayer, what Dave calls the vertical relationship, but horizontally, what he called "the excitement of being involved in winning and discipling other people." So from that invitation grew a six-year project that was designed initially to help Rev

Wan's church. But Rev Wan happened to be the President of the Board of Evangelism of the Methodist Church in Singapore, and not only did his denomination adopt the programme, he talked about it to others. When Dave's pastor, a Presbyterian, found out about the project, his denomination and Baptists and Brethren began to take part. This course was called "Discipleship Leadership Development Institute." From that sprang another course that was even more widely used. But that was much later.

All the while, Dave was praying, "Allow us to make Singapore into a great sending nation." The first Singaporean missionary couple, Jim and Selene Chew, had already begun work in Malaysia in 1966, but the flow grew, to Indonesia, the Philippines, Japan and elsewhere. Passionately Dawson preached the Great Commission, putting his finger on Singapore and drawing a thousand-mile circle in which lived half the world. In the twelve years that the Dawsons served in Singapore, eight missionaries went out. "It was a tremendous moving of God's Spirit," Dave remembers. And it was happening not only through The Navigators, but through other groups as well, Campus Crusade, Operation Mobilisation, Inter Varsity and Scripture Union.

Cultural eggshells and Asian dynamism

Ever the hard-nosed, down-to-business American, Dave drew some criticism that he didn't understand the cultures among which he was working. He rejects that.

"When I went to Singapore one of the assessments I made as I travelled through South-Eastern Asia was that many missionaries were walking on cultural eggshells. And for me, I believe that there are two cultures: the biblical culture and the sin culture. And the Bible cuts as much across the Western culture as it does the Oriental culture. And when people wanted to go and hide behind their culture I just said to them, 'My friend, do you want to live by your culture or do you want to live by the word of God?' And I just did not accept the things that other missionaries accepted because I could go and show them from the Scripture that they were out to lunch, and if they held [those views] it was going to be detrimental to their Christian life."



Far from being culturally insensitive, it seemed that Dave had tapped into the dynamism of Asian cultures and harnessed that power for the Great Commission.

"The Chinese and the Indians are the merchants of the world, and they have all these strong things built within them, but one of the things they lacked was the vision. I felt that the greatest gift I gave to Singapore was that I was a man who had a vision that I had learned from The Navigators, the fulfilling of Christ's Great Commission. And as I sowed

that in young people for what they were going to give their lives to, it caught fire in their heart." That fire caught on through subsequent generations, handed down through the process of spiritual multiplication, Dave says.

He lists education as another example of an Asian strength, so the education of the Great Commission produced disciples who excelled, just as they did in the secular world. "So we were teaching them to obey all that Jesus commanded, and the applications we were asking them to make they were making them, and it made Singapore the fastest-growing Navigator work in the entire world during the years we were out there."

Not discounting "the good hand of God upon us", Dave says about the time they returned to the United States nine percent of Singapore was Christian. In 2005 Statistics Singapore said that in 2000 14.6% of the population were Christian, of whom, according to the Overseas Missionary Fellowship, 6.7% were evangelicals.¹²

Time to go home

And then it was 1980 and a combination of factors signalled to Dave and Mary Dawson that it was time to go home. The first factor was that The Navigators wanted mature works to have their own national leader. The word went out from the top down, as it did in those days, to indigenise, to nationalise. And Dave Dawson was an American and had to go. The second factor was that Martha, Dave's and Mary's daughter, who had dyslexia, needed treatment that was not available in Singapore. The American specialist told the parents that one more term in the stressful Singaporean school system would destroy her. A third factor was that Mary was an only child whose parents were ageing and needed company and care. Lorne Sanny's counsel was simple: "Dave, you don't really have a decision to make."¹³

Navigator policy at that time was that the missionary had to return to home base before going anywhere else, but Doug Sparks, who succeeded Joe Simmons as Pacific Areas Director, wanted to short-circuit that process and have Dave return as a regional leader, and to work on his *Discipleship Leadership Development Institute*, which became *Equipping the Saints*. However, that did not happen, and the Dawson family left Singapore to indigenous leadership and resettled in Texas, where they were assigned.

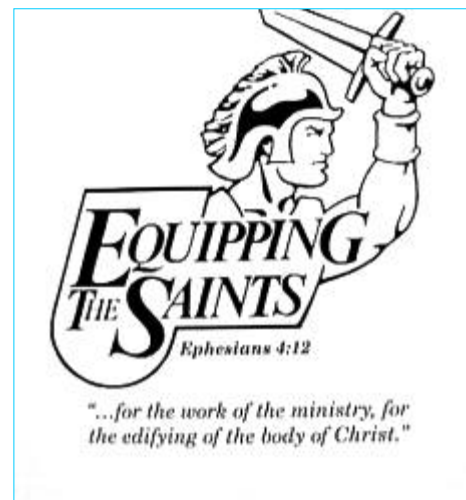
"When you grow up in the Navigator system and then you are lifted out and sent half a world away, the vacuum is filled. And when you come back years later they really don't know what to do with you. You just don't fit the system." But Lorne Sanny again came to the rescue, and saw that he was assigned to Dallas, Texas. That year, Dave built a house in the suburb of Highland Village. He also built an international ministry. For six years Dave had been refining the *Discipleship Leadership Development Institute*. Assisted by Mary, he rebuilt it from the ground up to make it more universally acceptable, and called it *Equipping the Saints*¹⁴.



The Dawson home in Highland Village, Texas

Equipping the Saints: a ministry to the world

The original course was an attempt to get on paper what he was doing, what The Navigators had taught him over the years, an attempt to document the process of building a multiplying ministry, but written in the way people normally learn. "It would be like me sitting and whispering to people who couldn't figure out all of these things on their own, 'This is what you do.'" Dave describes the course: "It contains ten subjects that make the Wheel [illustration]¹⁵ a reality in the lives of people, such as Vision—managing your life around the vision; the vision can't grow if you can't do evangelism, you can't do the basics, and so on." Dave, who graduated with a degree in education, had been able to analyse, synthesise, package and program the progress of a ministry.



The Church came to Dave. It began with enquiries from Dallas Theological Seminary, Conservative Baptist Seminary and Southwestern Seminary. Dave travelled and gave seminars. "I did not want to go and knock on people's doors and be perceived as a bookseller, so I just said, 'Lord, if you will, bring the people that you want for this, for I will kill myself trying to serve him.'"

About 25 friends had heard of the seminar, and met for a weekend conference, where Dave taught them. They took home the instruction and began doing it with others. Requests for the course began coming in from all over the USA, with early requests traceable to the 25 friends.

The ministry became known overseas. At the time of writing (2005) *Equipping the Saints* was being used by churches and organisations in 32 languages in over 60 countries. It is the Navigator vision and ministry in a workbook.

Today *Equipping the Saints* has an office just a few miles from the Dawson home. Mary, who has always been interested in song writing—her father was a songwriter—has a music publishing business, working from home. When I visited, she had a weekly radio programme for songwriters called “I write the songs”. But the Great Commission remains their passion, multiplying disciples, reaching the world in our generation. It is still their magnificent obsession.



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References:

1. Copyright 1929 by Houghton Mifflin Company
2. Dyslexia: a selective impairment of reading skills despite normal intelligence, sensory acuity, and instruction.
3. Copyright 1929 by Houghton Mifflin Company
4. Paul Little was known best for his books *How to Give Away Your Faith*, *Know Why You Believe* and *Affirming the Will of God*. He died in a car crash in 1975.
5. See *Warren and Ruth Myers: Missionaries of the Great Generation* by Sandy Fairservice.
6. Through Dawson Trotman's relationship with the evangelist Dr Billy Graham, The Navigators trained counsellors in follow up at all his crusades: *Daws* by Betty Lee Skinner, Zondervan, 1974, P322ff; *Just As I Am* by Billy Graham, Harper Collins-Zondervan, 1997, pp 211, 250-251, 300. The Chicago crusade was held in 1971.
7. Ever since the days when Dawson and Lila Trotman had servicemen staying in their home in California, Navigator couples had single people living with them. They learned many things formally and informally, including seeing the inside of a Navigator ministry, and caught the Navigator vision strongly.
8. For Roy Robertson's account of his years in Singapore read *Developing a Heart for Mission—Five Missionary Heroes* by Roy Robertson, NavMedia Singapore 2002, pp 204-220.
9. Robertson, p 225.
10. *The Navigators Log*, July 1971, pp 12-16.
11. See *JoAnn Ray: Women for her Life* by Sandy Fairservice. JoAnn is full of high praise for Dave and Mary Dawson: "Dave Dawson is a multitude of gifts and talents. He can sing, speak, and build a house (we built one for a training program in the early seventies). He can direct, plan, organise, delegate, lead, raise money, and is a visionary. He is compassionate, kind and gentle. He picked up my dog that had been hit by a car and took it to the vet. I never saw, heard or experienced him saying 'No' to anyone with a need, even if it wasn't on his do-list or goals. You could depend on him. I felt supported, loved, appreciated and an important part of the team. Only in the last several months when Dave seemed to change his philosophy of ministry about women did I really have ongoing conflict."
12. Other overseas missionaries who laid the foundations for and helped establish the Singapore Navigator work were: Joe and Bernice Weatherly of Youth For Christ; Warren and Ruth Myers; Roy and Phyllis Robertson; Jake and Vera Coombs; JoAnn Ray; Jay and Barbara Pritchard.
13. The Dawson family had three homes in Singapore. The first was 282 Stevens Close, where they spent two years. The second was 37 Siglap Drive, in the eastern suburb of Bedok where they spent nine years. The last year was spent at 35 Greenfield Place.
14. Ephesians 4:12.
15. A simplified version of the Wheel Illustration. For the full explanation, visit the United States Navigators' website <http://home.navigators.org/us/> and click on tools, wheel illustration.

