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4 Heartbroken for God’s World

The Story of Bob Pierce, Founder of World Vision and Samaritan’s Purse

David P. King

As founder of both World Vision and Samaritan’s Purse, Bob Pierce may rank as the leading religious philanthropist of the twentieth century. He first visited China as an evangelist in 1947. Upon his arrival, a Dutch Reformed missionary, Tena Hoelkeboer, invited him to preach to her school of four hundred Chinese girls. Pierce agreed, but, the day after his short evangelistic sermon, one of Hoelkeboer’s students, White Jade, informed her father that she had converted to Christianity. Her father’s response was to throw her out of the house. Hoelkeboer, distressed at the prospect of taking on yet another orphan, demanded of Pierce, “What are you going to do about it?” Pierce gave Hoelkeboer ten dollars, all the money he had, and promised to send more each month on his return to the United States. After his return home, Pierce recounted the story to his American audiences, and it continues to be retold as the origin of both World Vision and Samaritan’s Purse. Pierce’s initial overseas encounter changed him. He had gone as a young American evangelist but returned as a missionary ambassador, bringing both the spiritual and physical needs of the world to the attention of American evangelicals.

Pierce soon founded World Vision in 1950 as a small American evangelical agency with a simple mission of evangelism and child care in Asia. World Vision grew in size, budget, and renown through the 1950s and 1960s under Pierce’s leadership. He rooted the organization in an American evangelical subculture while focusing on supporting missionaries, promoting evangelism, and providing emergency relief to Christian refugees, widows, and orphans. As it grew, however, World Vision began to engage new partners, appeal to broader audiences, and transform its operations. It expanded beyond evangelical missions while also interacting with ecumenical and secular relief and development nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). It pursued governmental support even as it embraced an international perspective counter to its past pro-American Cold War outlook. These tensions led World Vision to reinterpret its identity as more humanitarian than missionary, more mainstream than religiously sectarian, and, at times, more professional than pious. Lamenting the new direction of World Vision, Pierce resigned in 1967.
While World Vision was willing to deal with the new tensions it encountered, Pierce remained stubbornly committed to his initial vision. By 1970, he founded Samaritan’s Purse on the model of the original World Vision. Centered in the evangelical subculture, supporting missionary projects, and meeting emergency needs through the support of individual donors, Pierce traveled the world again as a one-man ambassador until his death in 1978. He groomed current president Franklin Graham, his successor, to follow the same model.

Both organizations’ present success has outgrown their humble origins. Both also maintain substantial differences from each other. Today, World Vision is the largest Christian humanitarian organization in the world. It maintains offices in nearly one hundred countries with around forty thousand employees and an annual budget of more than $2.6 billion. Gone are the days of crusades and orphanages. Now, the organization undertakes emergency relief, community development, justice, and advocacy. It maintains a broad Christian identity, but its leaders are no longer pastors and evangelists. World Vision now recruits professionally trained development specialists and CEOs from Fortune 500 companies. Samaritan’s Purse is the United States’ tenth-largest humanitarian organization with more than $320.5 million in annual revenue. It, too, has begun to embrace development work in recent years, but it predominantly continues to embrace Pierce’s model of emergency relief, supporting missionaries and children, and promoting Christian education. It remains outside the elite international nongovernmental organization (INGO) community while attached to its American evangelical constituency.4

Despite the similarities and differences between these organizations, Pierce remains the chief common denominator. While neither institution can be fully understood solely through its founder, Pierce’s personality, vision, successes, and foibles had an uncommon effect on the direction of each. This essay focuses on Bob Pierce as a leading evangelical mission philanthropist and acknowledges his role in the massive growth of evangelical relief and development organizations after World War II. It also uses Pierce’s story to illustrate how the tensions and evolutions of philanthropies’ particular religious identities have been and continue to be central in shaping the actual motivations, rhetoric, practice, and production among faith-based organizations.

Religious Identity

In recent years, religion has found its way back onto the agenda of the relief and development sector.5 Some development scholars, however, continue to segregate religious and secular organizations into separate camps with little common practices or purpose. Others assert that, while faith-based organizations may claim religious motivation, their actual practice demonstrates a general trend toward shared secularization.6 They posit that as INGOs come into increasingly closer contact with governments, international bodies, and one another, they exhibit a general homogenization of language, practice, and organization.7 Following in the footsteps of sociologist Max Weber, they propose
that the shaping power of religion declines as initial charismatic leadership evolves into a developed bureaucracy that becomes highly rationalized, production oriented, structured, and professionalized.8

As faith-based agencies have grown to become highly influential, the broader field of global development has come to appreciate their size, experience, and expertise. Many development scholars have come to embrace religion’s role as an asset in local communities. They have also discovered religious leaders as fruitful dialogue partners in articulating notions of the common good.9 From this perspective, development notices religion but most often simply uses it as an instrumental addition to its current agenda. Development also often idealizes religion as a static set of beliefs. In contrast to development’s ignorance, instrumentalizing, and idealizing of religion, I argue that religious identity matters. Of course, all religious identities are not the same. They may even be at odds with one another. Sometimes even a shared faith perspective produces varying responses and greater tensions within a single organization. Religious identity, however, is essential to the shifts an organization undergoes over time, the tensions it encounters from both internal and external pressures, and the actual practices and production of its humanitarian work.10

Bob Pierce’s story provides an opportunity to trace the evolving religious identity within the early histories of two particular evangelical INGOs, World Vision and Samaritan’s Purse.11 His own fluid faith perspective led to changes and greater tensions within himself, within his organizations, among his core American evangelical constituency, as well as in the larger public square. His faith also never functioned independently of the shifting religious, cultural, economic, and political forces he encountered. In this essay, I highlight particularly how Pierce interpreted his religious identity through debates between evangelical missions and development, the degree to which professionalism compromises faith, and the extent to which religious agencies partner with governments and secular NGOs.

Pierce before World Vision

To understand Pierce, one must also understand the American fundamentalist-evangelical subculture to which he belonged.12 Born in 1914 and raised a Nazarene in Southern California, Pierce began preaching by age thirteen. In his early twenties, he became the associate pastor for his father-in-law’s nondenominational megachurch while also serving as a traveling evangelist.13 Pierce inhabited a separatist fundamentalist subculture permeated by complexities, tensions, and multiple traditions. Fundamentalists agreed, however, that theological modernism, the effort to adapt traditional theology to modern culture, was a catastrophe. By the 1920s, many had pulled out of the mainline denominations and mission boards. Their aim was to separate from “the world” and an apostate liberal church, but, even as they faded from public view, fundamentalists created their own network of institutions—Bible colleges, mission societies, and radio broadcasts—that coalesced into a way of life.14
By the 1940s, however, some fundamentalists were eager to reengage mainstream culture. Theologian Carl F. H. Henry's *Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* burst onto the scene in 1947 to exemplify a new spirit of American evangelicalism. Henry chastised the isolationist and sectarian nature of an outmoded fundamentalism. The time was ripe for change. “New evangelicals” coming out of American fundamentalism optimistically embraced the spirit of the times. Parachurch organizations such as the National Association of Evangelicals, Campus Crusade for Christ, Young Life, and the Navigators all emerged in the 1940s and early 1950s to take up the challenge.

One particular group, Youth for Christ (YFC), may best exemplify this reengagement. By 1944, as a traveling evangelist, Pierce had eagerly joined YFC and quickly became a vice-president in the organization. Alongside other new voices such as Billy Graham, Pierce garnered national attention as politicians, preachers, and newspapermen promoted the rallies' success. Throughout the 1940s, revivals of thousands of young people gathered in American cities each Saturday night. As its motto, “Geared to the times, but anchored to the rock,” claimed, YFC embraced popular culture, American civic faith, and a potentially global outreach. Torrey Johnson, YFC’s first president, told *Time* magazine that his organization’s goal was the “spiritual revitalization of America and the complete evangelization of the world in our generation.” Youth for Christ sponsored hundreds of “world vision” rallies promoting the work of international missionaries. Evangelicals carefully excised any aspect of the modernist social gospel from their missions. In winning the world for Christ, concern for the social issues of the day often faded behind a greater commission to preach and make disciples.

In the wake of World War II, YFC established “invasion teams” that the organization deployed for three- to six-month evangelistic tours to win the world for Christ. In contrast to typical career missionaries, these international evangelists exported their style of American revivalism. Short evangelistic sermons alongside upbeat music, Christian celebrities, and massive promotion, coupled with America’s new global cachet, heightened international curiosity. Evangelists reported conversions in the thousands and declared the time was ripe for “greater conquests for Christ.” With little internal dissonance, the YFC evangelists exported a largely American gospel and returned to interpret the world to their American audience at home. YFC became both a mission society and a model of American triumphalism.

In 1947, Bob Pierce spent the summer holding evangelistic crusades in China for YFC. Pierce admitted being quite naïve and ill-informed about Christianity overseas, but his revivals met with intoxicating success, recording more than seventeen thousand decisions for Christ. Pierce left China, however, with a new burden for human need. He began to think of himself as a “man in the gap” after experiencing war, religious persecution, and poverty firsthand. He claimed, “I had gone there to preach the gospel, true enough, but I had also gone there to capture the need of the people and to bring that need back to America.” Pierce had envisioned himself as America’s next Billy Graham, but he instead became known as the “Billy Graham of Asia.”
Communist control closed China in 1949, Pierce followed American troops into Korea. Having obtained press credentials as a U.N. war correspondent, he commenced preaching along the front lines to Allied troops and Communist POWs alike. At the same time, he officially founded World Vision in 1950 as “an evangelical inter-denominational missionary service organization meeting emergency world needs through established evangelical missions.” He supplied emergency resources to Korea’s hospitals, schools, and orphanages while also preaching to crowds throughout the country. From its beginning, Pierce infused World Vision with a dual mission of evangelism and social concern.

Pierce's Outlook for World Vision

Throughout the 1950s, World Vision grew slowly. Its diminutive status stood in stark contrast to the more established religious humanitarian agencies born out of World War II. The “three faiths consortium” of mainline Protestants, Catholics, and Jews had built close ties with the U.S. government to play the leading role in large-scale humanitarian projects and distribution of surplus goods. Religious philanthropies such as Catholic Relief Services, Church World Service, Lutheran World Relief, and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee dominated private and public support in the 1940s and continued into the Cold War theaters of Korea and Vietnam. Mainstream relief organizations dismissed World Vision’s relatively miniscule size and sectarian evangelical theology, but, as an evangelical missionary organization, World Vision operated in a different context. Fraternizing with ecumenical mainline Protestants—much less Catholics, Jews, or secularists—was anathema. Flirting with humanitarian organizations also bordered on promoting social welfare at the expense of evangelism.

Even as a popular evangelist, Pierce faced critique for his humanitarian work from within his evangelical subculture. He shrewdly sidestepped the constant evangelical debates between evangelism and social concern by feigning theological ignorance. While a handful of evangelical theologians began to ponder how to reverse the malaise of evangelical social concern, Pierce illustrated needs through firsthand accounts of suffering overseas. He tied evangelism and social concern together with insider evangelical language that avoided the social gospel that conservatives despised.

At the same time, Pierce remained a constant promoter of “foreign missions.” By the late 1950s, a reverence for missionaries had begun to shift to negative portrayals of out-of-touch cultural imperialists. Outside the American evangelical subculture, a general humanitarianism often replaced the concern once reserved for foreign missions. Pierce, however, portrayed missionaries as forgotten heroes who met both the spiritual and physical needs of suffering people. As other relief organizations sought greater institutional capacity, Pierce insisted that World Vision was merely a bridge between American evangelicals at home and missionaries overseas. Pierce resisted creating his own programs and institutions, instead entrusting missionaries themselves with the funds.

Pierce's evangelicalism also took the form of a particular American Cold War ideology that understood the mission field as a spiritual and physical battleground. Pierce
described his mission as a “battle for souls” against communism, “a godless religion spawned in hell.” In a war between Christianity and communism, the battle would be fought with the gospel of Jesus Christ and acts of mercy, often supported by Christian civilizations like the United States. He followed the Cold War’s hot spots as they moved from China to Korea to Vietnam—believing the battle with communism would determine the fate of the gospel in Asia. In the context of the Cold War, Pierce felt, if his prayers came true, the dominoes would fall not for communism but for Christ.26

Pierce’s ministry also coincided with a distinct cultural moment in which Americans turned their attention eastward after 1945. Instead of simply containing communism, however, he portrayed commonalities between the East and the West, highlighting Asia’s integration of shared democratic and Christian beliefs.27 Pierce was not above exoticizing and demonizing aspects of Asian and non-Christian cultures, but he lauded examples of Christianity’s influence throughout Asia.28 While Pierce acknowledged missionaries as heroes, he also profiled “indigenous” Asian Christians. Often highlighting their sacrifice and martyrdom for the gospel, Pierce told their stories as a challenge to a complacent Western Christianity. He also pushed for greater indigenous leadership in missions because he feared Asia’s door closing to the West. He remarked that “the day of the white man and his missionary work is coming to a close. . . . If Asia is to be won for Christ, it must be won by Asians.”29

World Vision’s Operations in the 1950s

In 1953, Pierce was distributing more than $100,000 of support to missionary causes in Asia; by 1956, World Vision’s budget eclipsed $1 million. Even with steady success, the organization remained both relatively small and difficult to define. It was not exactly an evangelical mission agency, nor was it a religious humanitarian organization. Mainstream relief organizations like Catholic Relief Services and Church World Service, with budgets of $120 million and $38 million respectively, dismissed World Vision’s relatively small size and sectarian evangelical theology.30

Pierce, however, cared little for institutional development. World Vision simply expanded as Pierce’s own networks grew. In 1978, World Vision reflected upon its beginnings:

There was something remarkably existential and unpremeditated about our origin. A vision of need in Asia! The passion to act in the meeting of that need. It was almost as simple as that. No long-range planning. No elaborate mechanism of administration. Emergency by emergency, crisis by crisis. It was a summons from Christ to act and to act now.31

Pierce remained first an evangelist, and, as he evangelized throughout Asia and encountered a need, he would pledge his financial support and pray in faith that the money would come. When he returned to America, he would raise the required support and return overseas to deliver it. By the end of the Korean War, World Vision began to
support longer-term projects in addition to meeting emergency needs. In 1953, Pierce introduced the concept of “child sponsorship” for his work in Korea. For $10 a month, Americans could support an individual Korean orphan. Child sponsorship soon became the backbone of World Vision’s fund-raising as World Vision financed hundreds of missionary orphanages. Pierce funded anything and everything—from missionary salaries and hospital buildings to new underwear for lepers and training for indigenous Christian pastors.

As the face of the ministry, Pierce knew that his own self-promotion benefited World Vision’s bottom line. Throughout the 1950s, however, Pierce was far better known overseas than at home. Missionaries and local church leaders overseas celebrated his arrival at every stop. Foreign dignitaries also lauded his efforts. Pierce often led Chiang and Madame Kai-Shek in Bible study on trips to Formosa. He prayed with President Syngman Rhee on visits to Korea.

At home, Pierce began to achieve growing popular support. First, he succeeded among American evangelicals. Prominent evangelicals such as Billy Graham served on World Vision’s board while Pierce also became a regular speaker on the National Association of Evangelicals’ annual program. He headlined his own nationally broadcast missionary radio program, published the leading evangelical mission magazine, and produced films of his travels that he screened across the country at churches, mission conferences, and civic auditoriums for average crowds of five to six thousand. In addition, he began to gain ground outside the evangelical subculture. Pierce garnered the support of celebrities such as Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, appeared on national television programs such as the Today show and This Is Your Life, and became the subject of a best-selling book.

Even as Pierce’s public appeal grew, he continued to have limited interaction with other leading humanitarian organizations. His context remained evangelical missions, and, while World Vision shared some overlapping objectives with CARE, Church World Service, and Christian Children’s Fund, they operated in different worlds. Pierce did continue, however, to maintain good relations with the U.S. government and military leaders. As an ardent “Cold Warrior,” Pierce supported America’s global reach to contain communism in Asia. He became a field representative in the emerging International Christian Leadership (ICL) organization that networked American politicians and international Christian leaders in efforts to strengthen both foreign relations and worldwide Christian revival. Yet even as he became better connected politically, he steered clear of government funding. The leading religious humanitarian organizations received 50 percent or more of their annual revenue from the U.S. government, but Pierce insisted World Vision’s support have no governmental strings attached.

World Vision’s identity mimicked its founder’s personality as Pierce’s energetic, entrepreneurial spirit defined World Vision’s first generation. His charisma and restlessness relished the adventure of traveling to the war-torn and outer reaches of the world. Pictures of Pierce at home showed an iconic battered suitcase kept by his front door,
always ready for the next emergency and evangelistic adventure. The airline industry dubbed him one of the world’s ten most-traveled men. He earned the reputation as both firefighter, first on the scene of a global emergency, and incorrigible cowboy, set on doing things his way. He never supported work he had not investigated personally, but he often committed funding on the spot with a prayer and a handshake. He subscribed to the “faith missions” principle promoted by fundamentalist missionaries that God alone could provide the necessary resources. Pierce called it his “God room” principle. He worried that “faith isn’t required as long as you set your goal only as high as the most intelligent, most informed, and expert human efforts can reach.” World Vision’s board, however, worried how to cover checks Pierce had already written “in faith.” The organization constantly ran in the red with all-night prayer sessions to meet expenses. Pierce attributed a lack of institutionalism to living by faith, but this led World Vision to neglect its oversight of budgets and programs.

Pierce’s charisma also harbored a shadow side. His overwhelming compassion was matched by an explosive temper. His constant travel and commitment to work left him estranged from his family. On several occasions, he worked himself into intense depression and exhaustion, taking extended medical leaves. He often abdicated day-to-day responsibilities, relying on a few devoted co-workers, but refused to abide by decisions of his board.

**Shifting Contexts—World Vision in the 1960s**

World Vision emerged from the 1950s as a dynamic evangelical mission agency, but it faced new contexts by the 1960s. Pierce remained an institutional outsider to the governmental aid and humanitarian communities as he continued to promote evangelical missions and an ardent anticommunism. In 1958, *The Ugly American*, by William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick, put American foreign policy in the forefront of popular culture. The book headed the best-seller list for seventy-eight weeks, selling four million copies while also being serialized in the *Saturday Evening Post*. It noted the dangerous progress of communism while criticizing the incompetence and laziness of State Department officials and aid workers. Pierce went on record as agreeing with the book’s analysis, publicly sharing his own encounters with Americans living comfortably overseas while unwilling to learn the local language and customs. He used the book to juxtapose the “ugly Americans” with “America’s best ambassadors,” sacrificial missionaries who served as “highly effective combatants in the fight against communism.” Pierce sought to remind the American public of the political benefits of missionaries who lived among the people building trust and meeting needs. Pierce argued that, because the United States benefited from missionaries’ positive portrayal of American democracy, missionaries should receive the same privileges and prestige as aid and military workers.

Throughout the 1960s, Pierce continued to advocate for a proactive anticommunism even as the American public’s optimism of a post–World War II global engagement waned. If patriotic support for the Korean War marked the 1950s, malaise for
Vietnam defined the 1960s. By the mid-1960s, Vietnam had captured the attention of the American public, but Americans were less willing to accept a clear-cut Cold War ideology. Skepticism and apathy replaced past optimistic internationalism.

By the late 1960s, Americans had begun to question their role in the world, and this uncertainty extended to American evangelicals. New voices began to emerge to advocate for greater evangelical engagement in social issues. While still a minority within the evangelical community, the voices of activist Jim Wallis, theologian Ron Sider, community organizer John Perkins, and Oregon senator Mark Hatfield all called for a new type of engagement. World Vision's work overseas led some of its staff to sympathize with the social and political issues championed by a new generation of evangelicals at home. Yet, as a growing organization appealing to a broad constituency, World Vision attempted to walk along a tenuous tightrope in the middle of evangelicalism.

If the term evangelical was up for grabs in the 1960s, so, too, was mission. Even as evangelical missions grew numerically, evangelicals themselves debated the direction of the missionary enterprise. What was the relationship between evangelism and social action? Could they associate with nonevangelical Catholics or mainline Protestants? What was the role of Western missionaries in a postcolonial world? Internally, World Vision began to reexamine its identity as a missionary organization. While World Vision kept one foot firmly planted within evangelical missions, it also ventured slowly outside an exclusively evangelical orbit. In fields like Vietnam, it began rubbing shoulders with mainline and secular NGOs that it had previously ignored. At the same time, the aid community also began to shift its own focus away from macro structural issues toward smaller individual and community needs where evangelical groups felt more comfortable operating. World Vision was still more missionary agency than humanitarian NGO, but new interactions allowed it exposure to new conversations and vocabularies that slowly began to chip away at its insular evangelicalism and reshape its practice to fit that of the leading NGOs.

World Vision Responds to Changing Contexts

Pierce's charisma led World Vision's steady growth, but that same untamed energy became an organizational liability. Even Pierce saw the need for greater professionalization and institutional stability. He hired Ted Engstrom as World Vision's executive vice-president in 1963. A fixture in evangelical parachurch networks, Engstrom had the managerial gifts Pierce lacked. Upon arrival, however, Engstrom discovered World Vision to be a half million dollars in debt and delinquent in paying its monthly bills. Under Engstrom, projects could no longer simply rely on prayer. Budgets also mattered. Adapting principles from the corporate world, he would conduct hundreds of seminars on time management and systems-thinking for both Christian pastors and executives in evangelical nonprofits. World Vision became known for creating a style of "Christian management."

World Vision's early professionalization harnessed technology for fund-raising. It became one of the first Christian organizations to use an IBM computer to organize
mailing lists. It personalized direct mail appeals to solicit greater financial support. In contrast to the spontaneous faith of Pierce's "God room" principle, World Vision now grew as it perfected its fund-raising techniques.46

World Vision also harnessed professionalization for global missions. In 1966, World Vision partnered with evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary to establish the Mission Advanced Research and Communication Center (MARC). Headed by Edward Dayton, a former aeronautical engineer turned Fuller seminarian, MARC served as both a clearinghouse and think tank for world evangelization. MARC sought to convince other mission agencies that research and development did not take the "Spirit" out of missions but, rather, enhanced the efficiency of evangelism. Anthropological, sociological, and census data became necessary information in order to evangelize a particular culture.47

At the same time, World Vision increasingly adapted the current practices of professional humanitarian organizations. Beginning in the early 1960s, in order to provide basic relief supplies like food, water, and clothing more effectively, World Vision established sophisticated delivery networks that featured storage, transportation, and distribution systems. These new networks moved away from working directly with local churches and mission agencies that World Vision found often lacked sufficient competence and efficiency for large-scale projects. Instead, its own delivery structures sometimes hired away the best local Christian talent at higher salaries. By 1962, World Vision registered with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which enabled it to receive commodities and grants to be used for humanitarian relief. Pierce remained cautious about any dependence on government, but he pursued limited connections in order to capitalize on available resources.48

Pierce’s Reaction to World Vision’s Changes

Pierce publicly embraced World Vision’s progress, but he realized these new directions would fundamentally change the nature of his organization. As it professionalized, World Vision’s board could no longer afford to rubber-stamp Pierce’s unilateral actions. A broadening constituency as well as government grants demanded greater accountability. World Vision felt it could no longer raise support simply by appealing to the faith of its supporters. It also had to demonstrate responsibility and results. Pierce supported new technology, but he worried that progress would dampen the passion for traditional evangelism. He also feared increased association with government. Pierce relied on personal relationships for political access, often calling on U.S. secretary of state Dean Rusk for entrée into areas like Vietnam, but he worried that taking government funds would temper World Vision’s evangelical mission.49

Pierce faced a changing World Vision even as his own physical and mental health deteriorated. He remained estranged from his wife and children as well as many friends. By 1964, he took a yearlong medical leave to undergo psychological treatment while also dealing with diabetes and staph infection. Pierce wandered alone through Japan, Vietnam, Korea, and Hong Kong to visit familiar cities and former friends. In his absence,
World Vision learned it could survive without him. When he returned to the presidency of World Vision in late 1965, he attempted to reinstate unilateral control, but the board was now willing to fight back. The direction, identity, and control of World Vision remained in flux.50

Vietnam

Many of the shifting contexts that Pierce encountered in the 1960s came to a head during World Vision’s work in Vietnam. Pierce had visited and supported individual missionaries in Vietnam since 1955, but, as the country increasingly became a hot zone for American troops and the focus of American interests, World Vision turned its attention and resources to growing humanitarian needs. By 1967, Vietnam outdistanced Korea as the largest recipient of World Vision relief goods and quickly became the center of World Vision’s public appeals. Vietnam captured the attention of the American public even as America’s role in the world was now less clear cut. Similarly, World Vision’s own operations in Vietnam illustrated its hesitant future. Pierce’s actions and rhetoric in Vietnam demonstrate a man in between two World Visions: an older evangelical missionary agency and an increasingly sophisticated Christian humanitarian organization. He often appeared trapped, trying to hold these disparate influences in a single World Vision.

From the beginning, Pierce loved to profile individuals he met overseas. Most often, the “heroes” he would spotlight were forgotten missionaries, indigenous Asian Christians, American soldiers, and military chaplains who served as sacrificial models of Christian service. By the mid-1960s, Pierce also began to highlight USAID employees and other humanitarian agencies. In the late 1950s, he contrasted heroic missionaries with the “ugly Americans,” State Department officers, and aid workers. Now, Pierce made a point to list the many mainline Protestant, Catholic, and secular voluntary agencies working together to meet needs in Vietnam. Without dismissing his own missionary identity, Pierce portrayed World Vision alongside conventional humanitarian organizations.

World Vision also expanded its projects in Vietnam. Pierce continued to raise funds for typical work: sponsoring children in missionary orphanages, distributing crutches and wheelchairs through local churches, and providing medical supplies and evangelical literature for local hospitals. He also commissioned large-scale endeavors such as “Christian refugee centers” to shelter displaced Vietnamese civilians and a proposed “Christian embassy” in Saigon that he hoped would coordinate all Christian work in Southeast Asia.51 World Vision’s expanding projects in Vietnam partnered for the first time with USAID resources. World Vision bought one community a John Deere tractor and depended on USAID support to teach farming techniques to the local population.52 Even as it worked closer with the U.S. and Vietnamese governments, World Vision moved further away from reliance on the local churches. The size and growing complexity of World Vision’s humanitarian commitments, its initial reliance on government
support, as well as the limited size of Vietnam’s local Christian population forced World Vision to develop its own delivery structures that began to sideline the church’s direct role in relief efforts.

Vietnam also forced World Vision to reconsider its relationship with the U.S. government. The image of the United States as liberator in the wake of World War II had been replaced with a growing resentment of America as a new colonial power. Pierce, however, continued to rely on a Cold War ideology—Christian America at war with godless communism. In his appeals for support, Pierce acknowledged heated debate over war in Vietnam but claimed World Vision took a nonpolitical stance and only desired to meet the physical and spiritual needs that arose. His depictions of the war, however, remained unabashedly pro-American. He challenged his supporters to pray for American troops who were defending freedom and rescuing the innocent. Yet he never romanticized war. Often embedded with the military, he graphically recounted the horrors he experienced even while depicting soldiers’ sacrifice in categories akin to Christian martyrdom.53

Vietnam led other humanitarian organizations to distance their work from American foreign policy. Since World War II, agencies such as Catholic Relief Services, CARE, and Church World Service viewed their work either as supportive of America’s anti-Communist position or at least neutral in the face of international need. By 1965, however, as protest to the war escalated at home, many agencies realized that apoliticism was impossible. Any participation in Vietnam had become a politically partisan act. Vietnam ended the notion of apolitical humanitarianism and cozy church-state partnership overseas. Several ecumenical agencies pulled out of Vietnam while others sought to protest and influence U.S. military action. As a result, they lost millions of USAID dollars.54

World Vision was not dependent on USAID funds like other agencies, but it was tied to an American civic faith that mirrored the majority evangelical response. At first, it saw the war as the frontline to halt Communist advance. Later, as the war dragged on, evangelicals largely felt the need to stay the course—to achieve Nixon’s “peace with honor.” Other relief agencies chastised what they considered Pierce’s naïve apoliticism. Pierce never changed, but, as the war grew more unpopular at home, World Vision, as an organization, realized the impossibility of neutrality. Apoliticalism had become a political position. In order to become an international organization, World Vision began to reexamine its relationship with America.

New types of actors, projects, and government relations resulted in a mixed message of World Vision’s purpose, at times highlighting evangelism while at others promoting large-scale humanitarian relief work. By the early 1960s, World Vision had begun to revisit its language and practices as a missionary organization. It began to accept government aid; it paid greater attention to the criticism of its work from ecumenical and secular humanitarian groups; and it also engaged an evolving conversation around missions among American evangelicals.56 Sometimes, World Vision segregated
evangelism and humanitarian work into distinct divisions. At other times, it articulated an emerging holistic understanding it called “total evangelism.” Most often, however, Pierce’s stories merged both into his typical folksy evangelical piety. In taking supplies to a Vietnamese hospital, he witnessed Christian nurses evangelizing patients. Missionaries leading agricultural training alongside USAID officials in local villages also offered Bible classes. Despite the horrors he witnessed, he affirmed the war as Vietnam's greatest evangelistic opportunity. While not naïve to the theological and logistical changes under way in his organization, Pierce’s personal stories trumped World Vision’s otherwise uncertain transitions.

Pierce Resigns

Pierce initially left America to evangelize China in 1947, but he returned to establish what would become the world’s largest Christian humanitarian organization. He relentlessly promoted missions among American evangelicals while also persuading them to put the physical suffering of the world on their agenda. Pierce thrived on a lust for adventure, personally crisscrossing the globe and unilaterally promising funds for those in need, relying on God to provide the resources. He always welcomed a challenge, but he balked when those challenges confronted his own organization.

By the 1960s, World Vision began to rephrase its language of mission while also slowly venturing out of its American evangelical subculture. It began to interact with other NGOs, governments, and donor constituencies. It began to professionalize—embracing the vocabulary, practices, technology, and funding sources of other leading NGOs. It slowly distanced itself from a stridently pro-American bias. As future World Vision president Graeme Irvine wrote:

> Anyone looking at World Vision would see an organization that was action-oriented, centered around Bob Pierce himself, strongly evangelical, innovative, and progressive. As with most things, there was another side to the coin. The apparent strengths had corresponding weaknesses: instability, dependent on the idea and personality of one person, narrow relationships and limited international perspective.

By 1967, the strain became too much for Pierce. He was physically and mentally unhealthy. His uncontrollable temper had cut ties with family and friends. His authoritarianism had bulldozed World Vision to organizational growth, but, when the board pleaded for more stability, he stubbornly refused. He tendered his resignation in a fit of rage, and the board accepted it. From founding the organization in 1950 until his departure in 1967, Pierce was World Vision, but World Vision had outgrown him.

World Vision’s Second Generation

The 1970s marked a turning point for World Vision. Stan Mooneyham, World Vision’s second president, was an evangelist and charismatic leader recruited from the Billy
Graham Evangelistic Association. In many ways, he shared the hard-driving entrepreneurial and evangelical spirit of Pierce, but he also pushed World Vision to change in ways unacceptable to Pierce. Those changes led to massive growth. World Vision's annual income grew from $4.5 million in 1969 to $94 million by 1982. It had evolved from a small evangelical mission agency to a leading Christian humanitarian organization.

World Vision's greatest success was bringing its religious message to the new medium of television. It soon specialized in multihour hunger telethons. Images of poverty and starvation alternated with upbeat musical numbers by celebrities such as the Muppets and Julie Andrews. In the words of one producer, “World Vision productions couched the organization's Christian motivation in language the average person could understand. We did not want to hide the Christian purpose, but to express it in general terms more appropriate for a television audience.” World Vision consciously extended its message outside the evangelical orbit. Explicit language of mission broadened to general religious humanitarianism.

As it expanded, World Vision's ministry also evolved from funding individual orphans to large-scale relief and development. Eager to gain legitimacy among other NGOs, World Vision received a USAID grant in 1975 to establish its development capacity. By the end of the decade, relief and development defined the organization's direction. World Vision referred to its employees no longer as missionaries but as aid workers. This transition, however, required specialists trained in fields such as public health and agricultural development. While World Vision insisted that all employees profess a Christian faith, fewer now came with degrees from evangelical seminaries or Bible colleges. A new class of technocrats entered the ranks of World Vision, often speaking a language distinct from Bob Pierce's fiery sermons.

The INGO humanitarian community often continued to keep World Vision at arm's length, skeptical of its evangelical identity and the overlap between its missionary and relief/development work. Media, foreign governments, and other NGOs sometimes accused World Vision of blatantly pro-American policies and Western biases. World Vision's own field personnel complained at times of its paternalistic and controlling tendencies. While Pierce had fought to keep World Vision grounded as an evangelical missionary agency distinguishable from other NGOs, new leadership sought to adapt new practices in order to become a leader in the humanitarian industry, albeit a clearly Christian one. As a result, World Vision debated internally how to be both sufficiently evangelistic and humanitarian. It also expanded to other countries, and an increased international presence tempered its past pro-American biases while demanding a need for a new organizational structure of shared international leadership. It also began to rely less on American expatriates and more on an indigenous workforce. After Pierce's departure, World Vision sought to prove it could remain Christian while gaining newfound respect as a leading humanitarian NGO. While the tensions of balancing both its religious and professional identity persisted, World Vision emerged out of its founder's shadow to become a leading humanitarian agency.
Pierce Founds Samaritan’s Purse

Pierce regretted the direction of the new World Vision. After his resignation, he continued to travel the world, finding release in a nomadic lifestyle free from responsibility. Pierce’s charisma, however, despised the idea of retirement. In 1969, as his physical and mental health slowly returned, the board of a struggling evangelical mission organization, Food for the World, approached him to become president. The organization had only $12 in the bank, but Pierce accepted the job. In 1970, he renamed it Samaritan’s Purse and set out recreating the World Vision he originally established in 1950.66

At Samaritan’s Purse, Pierce reclaimed his identity as missionary adventurer, being the first on the scene ready to meet individual emergency needs. Rather than channeling resources through institutions, he personally delivered funds to the suffering. Instead of development projects, he highlighted heroic missionaries. He reminded his supporters, “I’m going to spend my life backing up people [who have] proved they care about people and God. When I could no longer do that through World Vision, that’s when I resigned and started Samaritan’s Purse.”67 As he encountered a pressing need in his travels, Pierce would promise funds and rely on his “God room” principle—that, in faith, God would provide. The board of Samaritan’s Purse never officially met. As Pierce’s friends, they simply rubber-stamped his decisions.68 He solicited support through personal letters filled with “on-the-scene” stories of need, and, having taken World Vision’s mailing list and the loyalty of many missionaries with him when he resigned, he depended on their personal support.

In establishing Samaritan’s Purse, Pierce often explicitly argued against what World Vision had become. He felt professionalization diminished World Vision’s reliance on faith. He told the Los Angeles Times, “World Vision has a new complex computer system which diagnoses the failures of Christianity and prints them on a data sheet. . . . I can’t stand it. I love the early days when I was walking with widows and holding babies. When I began flying over them and being met by committees at the airport it almost killed me.”69 He often drew on the biblical Good Samaritan to differentiate his new organization from others. On occasion, he identified the priest and Levite, the two characters indifferent to the wounded traveler on the side of the road, as representing the “organizational machinery of relief agencies, charities, and even churches with vast sums of money and effort tied up in committee-controlled specialized funds and property, which often delays concrete action.” He cautioned, “You can get your life and business down to where you don’t need God. You can operate exactly like Sears & Roebuck or General Motors or IBM—but the blessings will all be gone.”70 In contrast to Pierce’s characterization of World Vision’s “slick, market-driven” fund-raising appeals, he offered “personal identification with individual human needs.”71 Pierce believed World Vision sacrificed its religious identity as it substituted faith in professionalization over prayer.

If World Vision also began to venture outside an exclusively evangelical orbit, Pierce returned to the fundamentalism and evangelicalism where he felt most comfortable.
While World Vision faced criticism among other NGOs for its past overlap between its evangelism and humanitarian work, Samaritan's Purse highlighted the indistinguishable overlap in their ministry as a positive. Among evangelicals, Pierce promoted his evangelist credentials as a badge of honor that contrasted Samaritan's Purse with others that appeared to water down their Christian identities in order to achieve greater success. In contrast to World Vision's “do-goodism,” Pierce challenged Samaritan's Purse not to be ashamed to “fly the banner of Jesus Christ high.” He had learned from World Vision that “who pays the piper, calls the tune” and forbade Samaritan's Purse to accept government aid.72 Under Pierce, Samaritan's Purse grew modestly as a small evangelical missionary agency apart from other government and humanitarian organizations.

By 1975, Pierce was diagnosed with leukemia, but it did not keep him from continuing to scour the world for individual needs to meet. In between travels and treatments, he discovered a potential successor to mentor. Pierce’s friend and fellow evangelist Billy Graham introduced Pierce to his son, Franklin. Franklin Graham’s story resembled Pierce’s. Having rebelled from the faith of his youth, Franklin had little interest in education or Christian gentility, but he shared Pierce’s need for adventure. In 1975, Franklin Graham accompanied Pierce on an around-the-world tour designed to expose him to the world’s spiritual and physical needs. The trip set Graham on a new course, eager to follow Pierce’s design for Samaritan’s Purse to meet individual, emergency missionary needs. In 1978, Pierce died, and, a year later, Franklin Graham followed in Pierce’s footsteps as the twenty-eight-year-old president of Samaritan’s Purse.73

Samaritan’s Purse has grown under Graham into a sizable organization while adhering to Pierce’s principles. Graham attributes his success to Pierce’s “God room” principle. He is committed to Pierce’s notion that God will always provide resources beyond his organization’s capacities to plan and fund-raise. Like Pierce, Graham has also built Samaritan’s Purse around his own personality, soliciting support through personal stories of individual and emergency needs encountered through his own danger-filled travels. Evangelism also remains central. As a crusade evangelist like both Pierce and his father, Billy, Franklin Graham says that his organization is “not just a Christian relief organization. We are an evangelistic organization.” Responding to claims of proselytism, Graham declares, “I will take advantage of each and every opportunity to reach [people] with the gospel message that can save them from the flames of hell.”74 Like Pierce, who never shied away from preaching against the wickedness of all non-Christian, “pagan religions,” Graham has made headlines for his attempts to work in Muslim countries after his public criticism of Islam.75 The evangelical identity of Samaritan’s Purse remains front and center in shaping its public persona.

Conclusion

Today, World Vision and Samaritan’s Purse are both among the top ten largest INGOs in the United States. Bob Pierce planted both with the same religious identity, and both remain decidedly Christian organizations, but their relationships with their founder
help illustrate their differences. Pierce lived in times of change—an evolving American evangelicalism, professionalization, transitions in Christian missions, and new relationships with humanitarian development agencies and government relations. Yet Pierce remained stubbornly consistent with his faith perspective, and his religious commitments forced him to draw lines he was unwilling to cross.

World Vision outgrew its founder. Established as an evangelical mission agency, it is now a Christian relief and development organization. As a respected industry leader, it is known as a savvy practitioner, relied upon by governments for its expertise and extensive delivery networks around the world. It remains Christian and, in many countries, strongly evangelical. It never hides its Christian identity, but it also markets itself as a uniformly respected global INGO.

As World Vision’s own religious identity transformed, Pierce clung to his original vision and rooted Samaritan’s Purse in the same evangelical soil where he felt most comfortable. Samaritan’s Purse continues to walk in Pierce’s footsteps. While it has pursued limited governmental funding and added community development to its list of activities, the bulk of its work still supports career and short-term missionaries, individual emergency relief, and evangelism. Samaritan’s Purse remains tied to its evangelical base and promotes its work primarily through its religious identity. It is often not as readily received as a peer among other leading humanitarian organizations as is World Vision.

Some scholars have dismissed the significance of religious identity among INGOs and advocate a general homogenization of humanitarian language and practice. Others too eagerly tag all Christian agencies with the same label. Both generalizations overlook the different ways particular organizations’ Christian identities shape their rhetoric, donor constituencies, and practice on the ground. In particular, the relationships of World Vision and Samaritan’s Purse with their founder demonstrate how the tensions and evolutions within a specific religious identity play a pivotal role in shaping the history and development of religious philanthropy.

Notes

1. This question served as the last line of Pierce’s first book on his travels in China. Ken Anderson and Bob Pierce, This Way to the Harvest (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1949).
3. By development, I am referring to the field of study and network of organizations that seek to work for long-lasting change in communities. What counts as development and the nature of the


5. Currently, faith-based organizations make up one-third of all INGOs and one-half of total INGO revenue. See Rachel M. McCleary, “Private Voluntary Organizations Engaged in International Assistance, 1939–2004,” Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly 37, no. 3 (September 2008): 512–36. In 1946, the revenue shares of faith-based relief and development NGOs were 64 percent Jewish, 16 percent Catholic, 7 percent ecumenical Christian, 5 percent evangelical, 4 percent mainline Protestant, and 3 percent faith-founded Christian. In 2004, the percentages were almost reversed: 41 percent evangelical, 28 percent faith-founded, 13 percent Catholic, 7 percent Jewish, 6 percent ecumenical, and 4 percent mainline Protestant. Religious organizations dominated the INGO environment until the 1960s–1970s, when secular organizations rose to make up the vast majority of development aid. However, new religious INGOs, mostly from within the evangelical sector, have seen the most recent growth.


11. While aspects of Pierce’s story serve to substantiate Weber’s thesis of an organization moving from charisma to bureaucracy, this remains only one aspect of the institutional stories of World Vision and Samaritan’s Purse. The specifics of religious identity are also important. For another study of a religious organization, see Jerome P. Baggett, Habitat for Humanity: Building Private Homes, Building Public Religion (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

12. Following George Marsden, I adopt a historical over theological definition of fundamentalists and evangelicals that portrays a developing American evangelicalism as a self-designated

13. There are several biographical treatments of Pierce’s life. I have drawn basic details from the following: Graham and Lockerbie, Bob Pierce; Dunker, Man of Vision; Norman Rohrer, Open Arms (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1987); Gehman, Let My Heart Be Broken; “Dr. Bob Pierce Biography,” n.d., Folder 23, Box 6, Collection 506, Records of Decision Magazine, Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.


16. For the standard work on the rise of the “new evangelicalism,” see George Marsden, Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).


19. Some cite the number of evangelical missionaries as doubling from 15,000 in 1951 to 27,000 by 1955. See Ted W. Engstrom, Reflections on a Pilgrimage: Six Decades of Service (Sisters, Ore.: Loyal, 1999), 53; and Joel A. Carpenter, “Youth for Christ and the New Evangelicals,” in Reckoning with the Past, ed. D. G. Hart (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 368.


28. Pierce continued publicly to refer to non-Christian religions as “pagan” throughout his career.


30. McCleary, Global Compassion, 27–28. McCleary’s numbers were recalculated into real 1960 dollars.

32. Specifically, Pierce borrowed the child sponsorship concept already being employed by China’s Children’s Fund (later renamed Christian Children’s Fund). He hired Earl Raetz, who had worked for China’s Children’s Fund, to implement the sponsorship concept for World Vision in Korea.

33. World Vision introduced pastors’ conferences by 1953 that annually gathered together thousands of pastors from numerous denominations for education and spiritual support. By 1957, World Vision defined its ministry through five key objectives: (1) stimulate public interest in missionary work; (2) conduct evangelistic campaigns; (3) hold conferences for native pastors; (4) promote and expand social welfare services; and (5) give emergency aid to churches, missions, hospitals, and others. Gehman, Let My Heart Be Broken, 172.

34. A leading film producer noted, “Nobody in his generation had the impact on behalf of mission on the domestic audience as Bob Pierce.” During the 1950s–1960s, Pierce averaged more than one film per year. See Hamilton, “An Historical Study of Bob Pierce.”

35. Pierce hired a Hollywood public relations firm for his own appearances. World Vision became increasingly well-known through the international tours of its Korean Orphan Choir beginning in 1961. The choir sang at churches and auditoriums as well as at Carnegie Hall, the White House, and before heads of state. The popular This Is Your Life show also featured Bob Pierce in 1961. Pierce appeared on the Today show in 1965 to promote his Vietnam Profile film.


37. In 1960, Catholic Relief Services received 61.6 percent of their funding from federal sources; Church World Service received 55.2 percent; CARE received 67.8 percent; and Lutheran World Relief received 57.4 percent. McCleary, Global Compassion, 27–28.

38. Gehman, Let My Heart Be Broken, 171.


40. Pierce’s daughter, Marilee Pierce Dunker, wrote a candid biography of her parents, Man of Vision, Woman of Prayer (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1980), that provides insight into the toll Pierce’s personality took on himself as well as on friends and family. The book was reissued in 1984 and 2005 (bibliographic information for the 2005 edition is cited in note 2 above and is the edition cited throughout the notes). Dunker, Man of Vision.


43. Privileges included no income tax, reduced shipping and postage rates, and admittance to the commissary.

44. McCleary, Global Compassion, 83–84.


49. World Vision Board minutes, July 16, 1965, WVI Central Records. Pierce reports Secretary of State Dean Rusk wired officials in Vietnam requesting that Pierce be given the best possible treatment and whatever resources he needed.


56. Examples of evangelical conversations on missions include the Congress on the Church’s Worldwide Mission (Wheaton, Illinois, 1966), the World Congress on Evangelism (Berlin, 1966), and, later, the First International Congress on World Evangelization (Lausanne, 1974).


63. World Vision U.S. employees are still asked to affirm the Confession of Faith adopted by the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942, but they may choose to affirm the Apostles’ or Nicene creeds. This is not, however, always uniformly practiced or enforced. In other countries where World Vision operates, religious discrimination is illegal. In countries where there is no local Christian community, such as predominantly Muslim countries, World Vision hires local Muslims to provide relief services. See “The Christian Witness Commission Final Report,” September 1995, WVI Central Records; and Alan Whaites, “Pursuing Partnership: World Vision and the Ideology of Development—A Case Study,” *Development in Practice* 9, no. 4 (August 1999): 414.

64. The agenda of the 1982 World Vision National Directors’ Conference was taken over by global South leaders who felt Western management did not understand their perspectives.

65. It was a growing global evangelicalism, rather than secular development, that convinced World Vision of the need for organizational change. At the 1974 Lausanne First International Congress on World Evangelization, new and persuasive voices from Two-Thirds World evangelicals preached of the necessity for both evangelism and social concern without the dichotomies framed by Western Christians. Through the congress, World Vision leaders found themselves more closely aligned with the evangelicals of the global South rather than with many American evangelicals. “Report of the Internationalization Study Committee,” presented April 21, 1976, by Graeme Irvine at the World Vision Combined Boards in Honolulu, Hawaii, Central Records, WVI, Monrovia, California; Irvine, *Best Things in the Worst Times*, 78; author’s interviews with Bill Kliewer and Sam Kamaleson.


72. Graham, *Rebel with a Cause*, 149; Graham and Lockerbie, *Bob Pierce*, 83. After the promotion of funding for faith-based non-profits spearheaded through the presidency of George W. Bush, Samaritan’s Purse now does accept limited government funding.

