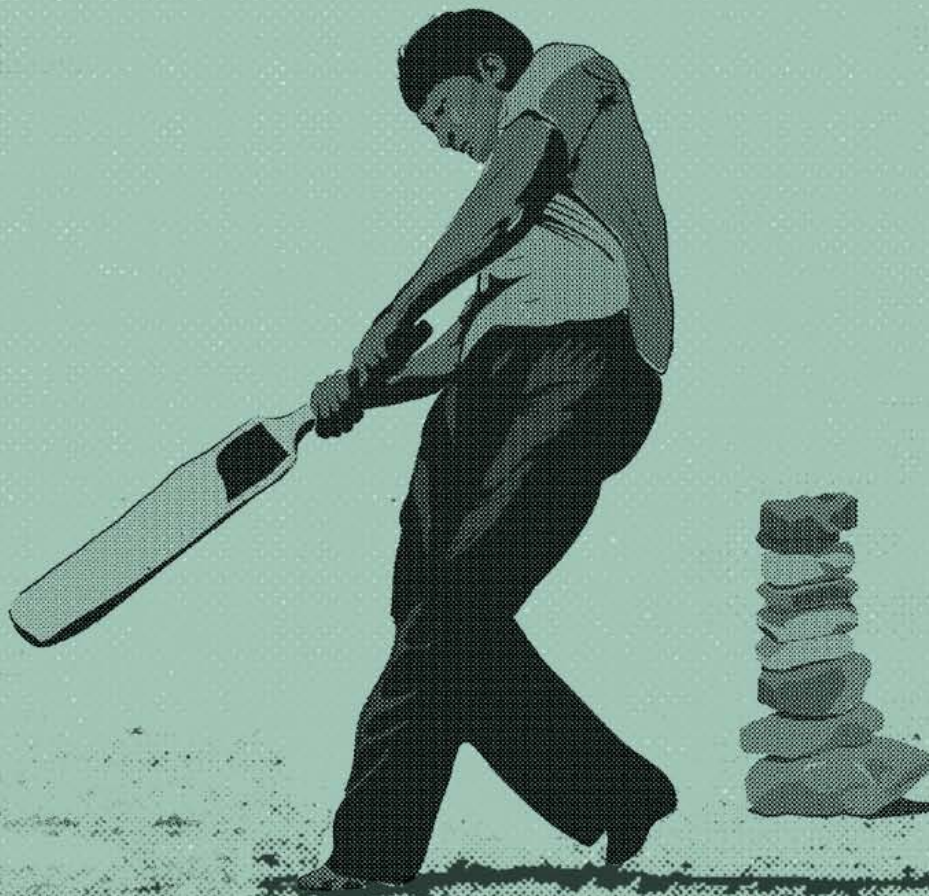


Putting
RUNS ON THE
BOARD

Naomi Gilbert



*It's been a long day's play,
but the runs are flowing in Asia*

IN A SMALL POCKET OF ASIA¹, WHERE GAMES OF BACKYARD CRICKET HAPPEN ON EVERY SPARE PATCH OF GRASS, GLOBAL INTERACTION'S CENTURY-LONG PARTNERSHIP IS PUTTING RUNS ON THE BOARD. AND LIKE A WELL-TIMED COVER DRIVE, THE MESSAGE OF JESUS IS MAKING ITS WAY DEEP INTO THE MISSION FIELD.

This is the region where Global Interaction took the pitch more than one hundred ago years ago. A few single, gutsy women, all in their 20s, put up their hands to serve God in this remote country. Despite some Aussie church leaders being unsure about whether the women were up for the gig, the pew sitters got behind their gals and raised the dough to get them there.

In time, more Aussies joined them and saw some of the smaller ethnic groups revolutionised with the message of Jesus. However, for 99% of the population, a few barriers seemed to stop the gospel from taking root.

Fast forward to the 70s, before Clarke was a pup, and Global Interaction refused to accept the long-held logic that this least-reached people group would not respond to the gospel. While there was little progress using traditional methods (like building tall steeples, Billy-Graham-esque rallies), one lone follower of Jesus challenged the team to be a bit more innovative.

Introducing Mordecai²: an energetic and engaging man from an Islamic background who had decided to follow the ways of Jesus. However, he soon found that the practices of his new-found faith didn't quite fit with his culture and way of life. He thought it was unusual to eat pork, to drink alcohol for communion, to worship on a Sunday, and to be told to change his name to a good Christian one like Peter, Paul or Mary.

It seemed that for someone to become a Christian, they would have to change a lot of their cultural practices and identity, which would often result in being ostracised from family and friends. Like Tendulkar donning the baggy green: it just doesn't quite fit.

Mordecai approached the Global Interaction team with a challenge: was it possible to encourage people to follow Jesus without having to follow the Western church rules? (Not everyone plays tippity!)

The Global Interaction guys sure stepped up to the crease. It was this thinking that got them out from behind the walls of the mission compound and on to the streets.

No longer is it about bringing people into the church building, structures and culture. Instead, they're learning the local lingo, eating the right food with the right hand (literally!), and being up with the latest fashion. It's about eating a meal with the neighbours, talking about the cricket, and getting along to the community events. Because it's there, in the foundation of a trusting friendship, that conversations about the weather can turn to discussions about life, faith and Christ.

They share Jesus' story of hope in ways that are meaningful to the people. It's more than just translating word-for-word; it's figuring out what stories, concepts and ideas already exist in the culture that can help people meet Jesus.

More recently, together with Mordecai, the team helped set up a community development organisation. It now has a few hundred local staff running a variety of projects across the country. **These guys believe there's no point preaching the Kingdom of God if they're not playing an active role in bringing it about here and now.**

It's like when John the Baptist thought Jesus was having an identity crisis³. In response to the question: "Are you the one?" Jesus doesn't hand over his CV with dot points outlining the ways he meets the Messianic position description. Instead he shows what he's been doing: the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. He shows who he is and what he's on about.

The team in Asia is hitting some cracking shots of their own, getting involved in a range of relevant and life-transforming projects that focus on education, justice, income generation and health.

In some villages, the organisation runs literacy classes, where women not only learn their ABCs (or the local equivalent), but also discuss issues of self-worth, gender equality and family values. Many women participate in their own mini credit unions, each chipping in about 20 cents a week. They take out a small loan from the group to buy a sewing machine, a cow or seedlings and, with a bit of hard work, get a small business up and running. With the money they make they can send their kids to school. Surely more life-changing than Warnie's latest weight loss plan!

The leaders in the development organisation are Islamic-background followers of Jesus and are passionate about sharing Jesus with their colleagues and the villagers. They're not preaching fiery sermons to the masses, but chatting with those around them about the difference Jesus makes in their lives.

One guy took a game-changing classic catch when he realised Jesus is more than a prophet; he's the real-life, real-deal mediator between God and man. This turned his life around. He now understands, at a whole new level, the meaning of what he'd been previously reading. There is a faith that is relevant to him in his society.

The good news has spread faster than a Brett Lee yorker! Believers are springing up here, there and everywhere.

The local people are none too shy at taking this faith movement and making it their own. Not fussed about The Old Rugged Cross and Hail Marys – they're figuring out how to follow Jesus in their own style. They're deeply passionate about seeing their team of Jesus-followers grow. Rather than allowing themselves to be hidden away in a Christian bubble, believers are staying engaged with their family and community so that they can share about their own beliefs in a way that makes sense. Howzat?

A community which may have otherwise had little opportunity to know Jesus is being transformed physically and spiritually. **People are empowered to develop their own distinctive ways of following Jesus. And they're keen to make sure it doesn't stop with them – they're going to share it with anyone who's willing to hear, just like Jesus did.**

The Global Interaction team might not quite be ready to pull up stumps in Asia, but they're excited to no longer have the captain's role and now cheer from the sidelines. It's like watching a kid you coached in Under 11s make it big time with Cricket Australia.

¹ Can't tell you exactly where, but picture one of the world's poorest, overpopulated countries.

² It's a bit like the CIA with the secret identities, but gotta be careful

³ Check out Luke 7

