

FUTURE OF THE MISSIONARY



by David M. Stowe

This is an attempt to discern the future of a world-changing vocation - the vocation of a Christian missionary. Missionaries have played an enormous role in secular as well as religious history. Missionary-planted churches, by their liturgies and sacraments, their teachings and festivals, their ways of nurturing the young and initiating adolescents, by providing a new community, have deeply influenced the style and quality of human existence. Missionary translations have made the Bible available in thousands of languages. As that translation work continues, it helps preserve the cultures centered in those languages, affirms their importance, and at the same time modifies their systems of value and their understandings of life by introducing them to what Karl Barth called the "strange new world within the Bible". By their massive programs of education, medical care, and social and economic development missionaries have played a major role in the diffusion and development of cultures. Consciously or unconsciously, they have fostered global modernization and westernization. Missionaries have had something to do with the extension of empires and with resistance to them; they have helped to foment revolutions and sometimes helped to repress them.

Who are these "missionaries"? Traditionally, they are Christians who leave their native place and culture in order to communicate the gospel and plant churches where they do not exist, or assist them to

function more effectively. In Latin "missio" is related to "sending". "Missionaries" are "sent", both by their own sense of being called to go and because they are commissioned by some Christian community. They go out from their own place to try to serve the purposes of God which are for all persons and all cultures, everywhere.

Today there are many questions about the future of this remarkable vocation. Recently the U.S. Catholic bishops strongly reaffirmed its importance and validity: "We challenge young people to consider following Christ as missionaries...Jesus is calling many of you to serve the church as priests and religious in foreign lands." Lay missionaries are also greatly needed and important. [Pastoral Statement on World Mission, International Bulletin of Missionary Research, April 1987, p.50 ff.]

On the other hand, the missionary's calling has come under attack, even from fellow-Christians. One well-known Western Christian, working in India, advised missionaries: "Go home! A superiority complex and the corruption of money are unavoidable within the missionary system." A Filipino church leader complained that the "missionary represents money, white racism, a master-complex, and an 'expertness' which shames the native." Missionaries are "privileged ghetto dwellers" said a Japanese working in Thailand. "Give us money for mission without attaching people to it", was the request from Kenya. All this led to a vigorous debate in circles related to the World Council of Churches about a "Moratorium on Missionaries". What do the facts about current missionary activity suggest about the future?

RESPONSE TO THE MISSIONARY CALLING TODAY

In ecumenical Protestant circles the number of missionaries has dropped sharply in recent decades. After a postwar peak of 10,042 in 1968, the missionary personnel sent by churches related to the National Council of Churches in the U.S.A. decreased throughout the 1970s and early 1980s to 4,349 in 1985. Conciliar churches in Canada showed a dramatic reduction from 1,873 to 234 - 7/8ths of the missionary force disappearing in less than 20 years.

Roman Catholic figures for the United States show a somewhat comparable profile. Catholic foreign missionaries grew from a very few in 1918 to over 9,600 in 1968. Since that year there has been a decline to slightly over 6,000. European Catholic statistics also show a decline, although in proportion to their numbers European (and Canadian) Catholics send many more missionaries than do U.S.A. Catholics.

But there is other evidence to consider. The total number of North American Protestant career missionaries rose from some 18,500 in 1953 to about 39,300 in 1985. While the ecumenical contingent was dropping by half, the total more than doubled. The difference is due to the remarkable increase in missionary sending by non-conciliar evangelical and fundamentalist churches and mission organizations. In 1953 they sent about 8,200 missionaries overseas; in 1985 almost 35,000.

Short Term Service

To the total of U.S.A. Protestants who invest several years, if not a lifetime, in missionary service must be added almost as many more "short-term missionaries". By the early 1970s the number of Protestants serving overseas for short periods of time - from a week to a year - began to rise rapidly. Currently about 28,000 persons who serve at least a month constitute 42% of the total of 67,240 who are estimated to be working in the U.S.A. Protestant missionary system. Many thousands work with groups which specialize in facilitating short-term service, often at the volunteers' own expense. Youth With a Vision and Have Christ Will Travel Ministries are just two of some 40 agencies working in this way. [All the data in this section, unless otherwise attributed, is from the Missions Handbook, 13th edition; Monrovia, Ca: Missions Advanced Research and Communications Center, 1986]



Pentecostal/Charismatic Missionaries

In the report of David Barrett, "Status of Global Mission, 1988" [IBMR January 1988, p.17] the line for "foreign missionaries" of all churches in all countries reads: "1900 - 62,000; 1970 - 240,000; 1980 - 249,000; 1988 - 262,000". Of those totals, Pentecostal/charismatic foreign missionaries accounted for 100 in 1900, rising to some 34,600 in 1980 and an estimated 74,000 in 1988. This means that while Pentecostal figures have risen since 1980 by some 33,400, non-Pentecostal missionaries, mostly of the Roman Catholic and conciliar Protestant churches, have declined by over 26,000.

In a leap beyond "facts" to a well-educated guess, Barrett projects a foreign missionary total in the year 2000, at the beginning of the third Christian millennium, of 400,000. He expects the non-Pentecostal groups to show a spurt of new life and increase their sending by about 93,000 in 12 years, while the Pentecostal/charismatics increase by a comparable number.

Non-Western Missionaries

In popular understanding the typical missionary is a white European or American from a long-established church in a society at least nominally Christian. That was never quite accurate. Before the Hawaiian church had lived one generation after 1820 it was sending missionaries west to other Pacific Islands. When the first European missionary arrived in Samoa in 1835 he found 2,000 Christians meeting in small groups in 65 villages, the fruit of eight Tahitian missionaries. First-generation Karen Christians of Burma began their missionary outreach in 1835, and in 1850 they founded the Bassein Home Mission Society which worked among other tribes in Burma and Thailand. Joseph Merrick set sail from Jamaica in 1843 to work among the Isubu people of the Cameroon coast.

Such non-Western missions have developed rapidly during the last 25 years. In 1961 a study identified 48 non-Western Protestant agencies sending at least 217 missionaries. Ten years later a study confirmed 203 agencies sending over 3,000 missionaries. And the latest complete survey (1980) found 368 agencies sending 13,000 missionaries and projecting over 15,000 within a few years. Non-Westerners are increasingly prominent in the missions of Roman Catholic orders and of international Protestant agencies like the Overseas Mission Fellowship. But many more are involved in the work of agencies based in the third world. [IBMR October 1986, pp 156f.] At Sao Paulo, Brazil, in November 1987, 3,000 Latin American leaders and 500 from Asia and Africa met in the Congreso Misionero Ibero-Americano to plan for vastly expanded cross-cultural and international missions involving Third World missionaries, supported by Third World funds. [Mission Frontiers, January 1988, p.7 f.]

Since 1983 the majority of Christians in the world have been non-white persons. By the end of the century at least half or more of the world's missionary force may also be non-white.

Lay Missionaries

"The missionary" has generally been thought of as a priest or minister. For Catholics this is still relatively accurate; almost half

of North American missionaries are priests or religious brothers, half are women of religious orders. Only some 5% are lay persons. However, among ecumenical Protestant missionaries from North America only a minority are now ordained. Only one in ten is engaged in church planting evangelism; another 40% work as "ecumenical deacons" to assist in the life of other churches. The work of a majority is essentially professional service in a wide variety of "secular" occupations such as education, health care, economic development, community organizing, social services, or technical work in communications or administration, inside or outside of ecclesiastical structures. Women have always made up more than half of the Protestant missionary force and few have been ordained. With the current vast increase in women seminarians (now over 50% for many of the conciliar churches) many more of them are likely to be ordained in the future. They may increase the church-related component in conciliar missions.

Among conservative evangelical North American missionaries a far larger percentage work at church planting and church nurturing (almost two thirds), with the remainder in the more "secular" fields.



These lay missionaries are, however, persons within the church-related "missionary system". A generation ago there was a flurry of interest in the potential for Christian witness by people entirely outside that system, working in international businesses or governmental programs. In the mid-1950s it was estimated that there were two million such Americans living outside the US. Many Britishers had long worked abroad, and British churches had earlier set up special training courses for them. In America similar conferences were planned and a book, Assignment Overseas, was published. However, these efforts proved disappointing. Few lay people were interested in such training or

in seeing themselves as intentional although anonymous missionaries. Attention was then shifted to strengthening the English-language congregations in which such lay persons might worship and work while stationed overseas.

Shifts in the Missionary Resource Base

Traditionally, missions have been in part a system for redistributing Christian resources. The sending churches and countries were wealthy, both in human resources of committed persons capable of mission and in the material resources to support such persons. A dollar or a pound or a franc went a long way in Asia or Africa. But that becomes less true each year as a global economy develops.

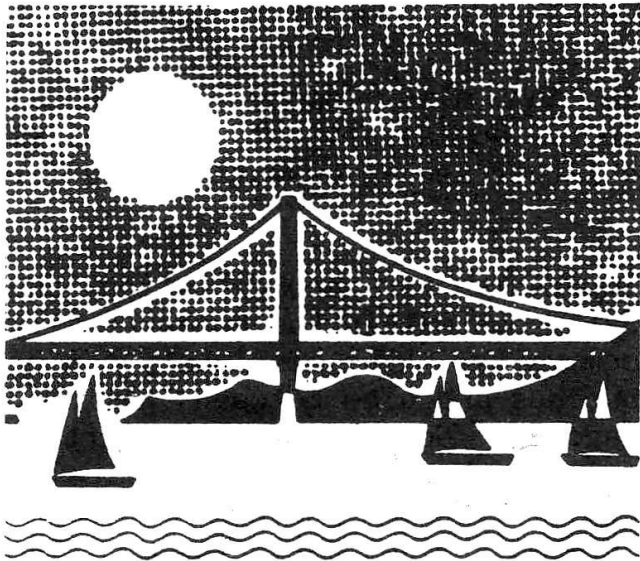
The fastest growing churches, rich in human resources of zeal and talent, are now found in the former mission fields. We have already noted the spectacular growth of Third World missionary activity. This trend will almost certainly continue and increase. It will undercut any suspicion that missionaries are welcomed because they bring subsidies for poor churches with them.

However, it will remain true for the foreseeable future that different churches in very differing situations will have different strengths and weaknesses. Missionaries who can redistribute strengths and provide mutual ministries to weaknesses will always have a useful function.

OTHER FACTORS LIKELY TO AFFECT THE MISSIONARY FUTURE

Restrictions on access: In recent years it has become difficult for missionaries to enter many areas. Barrett estimates that some 25 countries are entirely closed, 24 are partially closed, and another 18 restrict missionary activity significantly. More than 3 billion persons are thus beyond the reach of unrestricted cross cultural mission. [World Christian Encyclopedia, p. 17] It is reasonable to speculate that this situation will worsen in the current international climate and in view of the renewed self-consciousness and zeal of non-Christian religions. The only missionaries able to work in many areas will likely be anonymous ones, persons performing desired secular services. They probably would have to come from countries without the high political and ideological profile of North Americans.

China is the largest "closed country". Its billion persons make up a third of those "off limits" for Christian mission. Yet there are positive indications. The Chinese animus against the missionary is diminishing. The government increasingly recognizes the major contributions that missions have made in the past to China's modernization and welfare. Moreover, a number of "service" missions,



especially in higher education and also in health care, are now being welcomed by the authorities and channeled through the churches, especially the Amity Foundation related to the China Christian Council. There is no present prospect of large numbers of expatriate Christian personnel, and no use of the term "missionary". But the mission is certainly reviving in a modest and largely anonymous form, opening up opportunities for personal witness and giving the Christian church increasing and favorable recognition.

Ecclesiastical Nationalism:

Christian mission has been dramatically successful over the last 200 years in producing "the great new fact of our time" as Archbishop Temple called it, a worldwide Christian community. Securely rooted in almost every country on earth and increasingly freed from its earlier white-European image, the church is now truly global. The local-national branches of that church, whether rooted in Roman Catholic or Protestant denominational missions, are increasingly determined to fulfill the missionary hope that they would be self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating. China's Catholic Patriotic Association and Protestant Three-Self Movement are only two examples of an impulse which is strong everywhere. The churches of China are opposed as strongly as the government to any missionary activity or relationships which would conflict with their aim to be a truly Chinese church with fully indigenous self-hood under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This same impulse toward self-hood in other churches accounts for much of the criticism of the missionary system we noted earlier.

Many Christians in traditional mission-sending countries are sensitive to these criticisms. All right, some of them say, let us agree that the "foreign missionary era" has ended. Let each branch of the universal church get on with its own local missions of evangelism and service to society. The historic mission-sending lands of old Christendom are now neo-pagan societies where missionary energies and resources are needed. Missionaries no longer need to be sanctified by salt water: they can fulfill their calling at home.

REAFFIRMATIONS OF THE BOUNDARY-CROSSING MISSIONARY

Among conservative evangelicals and also among ecumenical Protestant and Roman Catholics this kind of ecclesiastical nationalism and localism is strongly resisted. The latter see an essential role for missionaries as ecumenical links.

At the heart of the missionary imperative is reconciliation and unity, not only between humanity and deity but within the human family and particularly within the Christian community. The missionary can be an important personal link between churches and also between nations, cultures and regions. A few years ago the North American partner churches of the United Church in Japan found that with a dramatically worsening exchange rate and growing cost of missionary support in Japan they could no longer sustain all the present missionary force. The United Church (Kyodan) was asked to indicate which missionaries could be withdrawn with least harm to the mission. The Kyodan, itself the union of many former denominations, replied by making three points:

- The presence in Japan of missionaries from churches abroad will continue to be important in the future.
 - They are important as a witness to the very nature of the church as transcending nation, race and class.
 - They also continue to be important for the implementation of mission in Japan.
 - Many missionaries feel their work in mission in Japan is a calling from God; to force their return would be a failure of responsibility to Jesus Christ who sent them.
- Therefore the church in Japan will itself assume part of the cost of their continuing support.

As a result substantial funds have been made available by this church, which is not affluent, in order to continue a higher level of missionary presence.

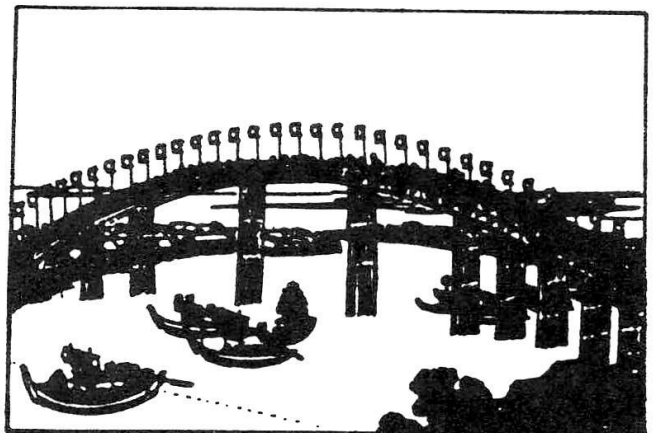
A somewhat similar reaffirmation of missionary interchange across national and ecclesiastical boundaries occurred after the call for a "missionary moratorium" in the 1970s. When specific inquiries were made about how and where the moratorium was to be implemented, most replies indicated that it was primarily the abuses in missionary relationships -

paternalism, racism, undue pressure of outside funds, missionary insensitivity or missionary affluence and life-style - for which a moratorium was desired. In many cases the validity and even the necessity of foreign missionary presence was affirmed.

Among conservative Protestants there is vigorous objection to the proposal that churches now exist in every society and each one can take full responsibility for mission in its place. The human world is not made up of a few hundred national societies; it is made up of scores of thousands of "people groups". Each "people" is defined by some combination of history, language, vocation and geography, which creates a special identity and affinity. Only within such "peoples" can the gospel move without encountering high barriers. Therefore, a viable church must be planted by some "foreigner" within each "people" before the missionary task is completed. Then that church, indigenous to that people, can take responsibility for its full evangelization. Such "peoples" are the ethne, the "nations" to which Jesus directed his disciples in Matthew 28:19-20. By one widely publicized calculation, there are 17,000 "unreached peoples", and each should have at least two missionaries working within it to plant the church.

CROSS-CURRENTS IN MISSIONARY THEOLOGY

Those who press the "unreached peoples" view of missionary responsibility appear to do so out of a theology which has provided much of the historic motivation for mission - a theology centered in concern for the salvation of souls. Most missionaries have believed that "there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12) Only by knowledge of the name of Jesus Christ, confession of faith in him, and incorporation into his mystical body the church, by baptism and other sacraments, can one hope to escape God's judgment and eternal condemnation and attain the blessedness of everlasting life. Such convictions persist strongly in conservative Protestantism. Some would argue that they account for the high degree of missionary motivation there.



In many Roman Catholic and ecumenical Protestant circles these convictions are much debated. Is God fundamentally a punisher of sin, particularly of sinfulness inherited from our first ancestor? The lineaments of Adam and his original sin have been greatly blurred by evolutionary science. God is the abba - Father - of Jesus Christ. That this God of love is bound by rules and retribution at the end of life and the end of time seems doubtful to many.

There is also a major reconsideration of the salvific meaning of other faiths than Christianity. More attention is being given to such assertions as in Acts 16, that God is not far from anyone, for all persons live and move and have their being in him (v. 27 f.). Or to the surprising statement in Romans 2 that "When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires....they show that what the law requires is written on their hearts and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day" when judgment is given by Jesus Christ. (vv 14 f.)

A third theological tendency is to shift away from emphasis on eschatological salvation - salvation at the end of life or the end of the world - to salvation in the midst of this life, within the history of the world. Conciliar Protestants and Roman Catholic missiologists seem to have an increasing concern, not so much that men and women may die without Christ, but that they may have to live oppressed by need, greed and violence because the transforming power of his Spirit is blocked by their circumstances and societies.

There is no necessary contradiction between a concern for personal and eschatological salvation and concern for social and historical salvation; but there is contrast. Which concern will prove more convincing and more fruitful as the 21st century approaches? Which will be most effective in generating missionary commitment and energy? What is the Holy Spirit saying to the churches?

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE MISSIONARY

The New Testament makes clear that the Holy Spirit is the Missionary. Decisions about human missionary service are transactions, within individual souls and in the corporate life of the church, with the Missionary Spirit. The risen Christ tells his disciples, "When the Holy Spirit has come upon you...you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and...to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). "Being sent out by the Holy Spirit" Saul and Barnabas set out on the first recorded missionary

journey (Acts 13:4). Sometimes, on the other hand, the Spirit forbids his messengers to speak (Acts 16:6).

The history of missions bears out this understanding. Calling to mission and concern for missionary sending increases or decreases with the ebb and flow of spiritual life. On the rising tide of the 16th century Catholic Reformation the ships of Francis Xavier, Roberto de Nobili, Matteo Ricci and thousands of their companions were launched. In the revivals of Pietism in Germany the Moravians became a church of missionaries; the Wesleyan revival and the Great Awakenings kindled the missionary fire in British and American hearts; as did the revival movements of the 19th century, and the Pentecostal/charismatic movements of today. The question of motivation is the crucial question about the future of the missionary; and the depth and power of motivation ultimately depends upon the depth and power of spiritual energy in Christians.

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