

FOREIGN MISSIONARY SISTERS IN HONG KONG: DEVOLUTION OF LEADERSHIP



by Mary Lou Martin

I have been a missionary in China and Hong Kong for over 35 years. The first Bishop under whom I served urged us always to remember our main missionary goal: "to establish the Church on a firm basis." I strongly believed in this and derived great joy and personal fulfillment during my many years of pastoral work, especially as I saw the hundreds of adult catechumens whom I myself had taught and formed reach their goal of Baptism and become full members of the Church I was helping to establish.

Now I reflect on the theme of this issue of Tripod: the changing role of foreign missionaries. I remember those many years of "direct evangelization" in which I and many other Sisters were privileged to take part, and now look around at the kind of ministries in which those missionaries and others who joined us later are presently engaged. I speak here chiefly of religious women missionaries, most of whom came to China and Hong Kong with some specific professional skill or training which we gladly contributed in service to the local church and society.

Here are some examples of changes that have taken place in individual ministries over the years. A non-Chinese speaking Sister, first a principal, then for many years a supervisor of an Anglo-Chinese primary school, now supervises a large Sunday school in an English-speaking parish. A Sister who spent many years teaching in a primary school, now gives in-service training to teachers in methods of teaching English. A

former secondary school principal is now planning programs that will further the Christian formation of primary school Catholic students and teachers. Another Sister who taught secondary school now does English language editing and secretarial work in a diocesan organization. Several former teachers, pastoral agents and medical workers have left these roles to take on assistant administrative positions in church institutions. Other missionaries work as consultants in local church organizations in such areas as finance and administration, or in the specialized fields of medical and social services. The roles of these missionaries have changed dramatically in their own lifetimes. Whereas previously they had many opportunities for direct contact with students, catechumens, the sick and others in need, and in such capacities exercised a direct influence over them, now they find themselves in more supportive and subordinate roles, where they are engaged in passing on to others the fruits of their own training and experience.

The changes in individual ministries reflect changes in the larger area of church institutions. In recent years there has been a gradual turning over of the administration of church institutions to local leadership, and positions once belonging almost exclusively to foreign missionaries are now filled by members of the local church.

Though there is still much to be accomplished here, the irrevocable trend is for foreign communities to hand over direct administration of their institutions - schools, hospitals, etc. - to local leadership. In some cases these roles are assumed by local members of the same international missionary congregation, but there have also been not a few examples where administration has passed from the religious to local lay people. Missionary Sisters involved in individual rather than congregational ministries are now seeking ways to establish teams of local Sisters and lay persons with whom they can work together. A foreign missionary Sister in one situation, who is experienced and skilled in pastoral ministry, now works side-by-side with a young Sister from a diocesan religious community. Her role is to train the Sister in those same skills with a view towards gradually turning over to her the tasks she previously did on her own. Another Sister, involved in spiritual formation programs, has invited lay people to work with her in planning and executing these programs, and some are now ready to share in the work of leading, facilitating, and teaching those programs. When this Sister is invited by a parish group to conduct a seminar or retreat, she first meets with members of the group to plan together with her in choosing the roles they themselves wish to assume and those they expect her to fulfill. Recently a group of young parishioners, after much discussion, took on so many of the assigned tasks that at their

final planning meeting one of the young men said in consternation: "But we have allotted all the tasks to ourselves. What will Sister do?" At the same time another of the group said to her: "You have built up in me enough self-confidence by inviting me to work with you, so that I am now ready to give talks, facilitate discussions, and take on other tasks you have previously had to do yourself. I could never have done this three years ago." The Sister was overjoyed at these responses for it made her feel that she was fulfilling her role as a foreign missionary by nourishing and developing local leadership.

These are some examples of the changing role of foreign missionaries, especially among religious Sisters. I know each one of the Sisters involved personally. Sometimes these new roles have resulted in less direct contact with individual people and, to an extent, they may have removed the foreign missionary from work on the grassroots level. The day-to-day contact with parishioners, students, patients, may have lessened and in its place has come more desk work, the minutiae of managerial details, and responding to the requests of local people for specific forms of service. There are also some



individual members of foreign missionary congregations in China serving as teachers, translators, cultural affairs liaisons, etc. They go there to contribute their experience and services to a vast country which has asked for help in developing its resources in order to provide its people with a better standard of living.

Religious missionary women formerly served the Hong Kong church and society through professional services in educational, medical and social work fields at a time when not enough local personnel had yet been trained for these tasks. Now Hong Kong has highly skilled and well-trained personnel in almost every profession. Since Vatican II, the Church has called upon its foreign missionaries to assume a different role than before, to contribute in new ways to the building up of the local church and society. The foreign missionaries' zeal and commitment have not diminished. They continue to be filled with the same intense desire to "preach the Gospel to all peoples" that originally led them to respond to God's call to mission in cross-cultural situations.

Vatican II challenged missionaries to quicken the pace of localization and help strengthen local churches throughout the world. The Council called on them to relinquish roles of leadership, too often held by them for too long a period of time. It asked them to seek new ways of serving the local church. Highly motivated and desiring to respond to the Council's call, missionaries in recent years have trod an uneven path. Some have found it exciting and challenging; for others the role has not been easy. Basically it has demanded of them that they develop new attitudes and points of view, often new skills. At times this has meant the letting go of long-treasured relationships and the building up of new ones. It has required creativity, courage, determination, and a willingness to try new methods and fit into new roles. For some this has meant overcoming the fears and apprehensions that come with change, and for others great personal sacrifice. For all there has been a personal living out in their lives of the Paschal mystery, as they die to old habits and rise to new modes of being.

It has been also a time of rich reward. We missioners have watched with joyful satisfaction as our local church eagerly assumes the task of responsible leadership. We have seen individuals whom we helped along their journey, mature in their faith far beyond our dreams and expectations. On countless occasions we have had the opportunity to rejoice together with our former students, catechumens, colleagues, who have responded so generously to God's call to priestly, religious or lay vocations. We also look back on mistakes we have made and methods we no longer wish to use. Times have changed and we have changed. Ecclesiology and missiology have seen rapid development over the years. We trace these developments assiduously and rejoice that sometimes we have been able to contribute some small part to that development by sharing our experience of mission with others.

As individual Sisters and as religious congregations, we foreign missioners have tried to respond to the challenge to which Vatican II has called us: open the windows, read the signs of the times and find your new role accordingly. We and members of the Christian community may see and judge our efforts in terms of success or failure. How God sees and judges them we do not know. But we continue to try to be faithful to God's call and true to ourselves and our vocation as we unite with the universal church and the multitude of local churches throughout the world in our common effort to build God's kingdom of peace, love and justice in every part of the earth, and to be a sign of God's love and care for all peoples.