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Abstract

Noting that modern missions have been unwilling to adjust to the changes pressing in on them, the author stresses that in order to survive into the next century, missions must develop appropriate institutional forms. *Reprinted from: Ted Ward. Christian Missions—Survival in What Forms? International Bulletin of Missionary Research, January 1982: 2-3.*

When survival depends on change, human institutions often tend perversely toward suicide. In times of social upheaval, clinging to yesterday's images provides solace. For modern Christian missions to survive, it will take brave and visionary change, not just solace.

The realm of "modern missions" shows inadequate willingness or capacity to adjust to the conditions requisite for its survival. This institutional creature of two centuries of western imagination hangs in the balance. To argue that the mission of the church will continue no matter what is beside the point. The institution of missions as we know it today in North America, Europe, and among the planted churches of the world comes out of the unique moment of sociopolitical history. The conditions that gave it birth (spiritual zeal and profound moral conviction, coupled with entrepreneurial wealth, colonial expansion, a vast-but-reachable globe, controllable others, and paternal perceptions of other cultures) are becoming less characteristic of our times. The church in North America, at least, is becoming motivated by other values.

Pessimism grows out of the apparent unwillingness to invent anew. The mission of the church has no less meaning, motive, and message in the 1980's, but the end of old models is in sight. Even as the vision of the housetop in Joppa shook Peter into a state of openness for the "unthinkable" invitations to eat forbidden meats and to visit an inquiring Gentile army officer, the need for new vision is all that stands between the present stalemates and an exciting future. The limited perceptions of what God intends to do can easily give way to fresh, invigorating, Spirit-filled renewal whenever getting on with the work of Jesus Christ becomes more important than holding onto old forms. Thus optimism is free for the asking.

The present transitional scene is full of object lessons. Shrinkage of the economy suggests that people will be forced to become more discriminating about where they put their money. The organization that cannot give convincing evidence of its bang-for-the-buck ratio will be hurting. Church people are already asking questions about who should be sent overseas to do what.

The object lesson of vast fund-raising by certain media-conscious relief and development organizations will not go forever unheeded. The *me-too* tendency will soon emerge. Some mission organizations will copy one part of this apparent formula for success: the use of television and research-based direct mail for fund-raising. Others will copy the other part: the emphasis on doing memorable deeds of kindness. Some may even get both parts together, but they will likely need new constituencies because some other donors will be quite convinced that the emphasis on verbal proclamation has been compromised.

The closing of borders to missionaries will surely continue to force mission organizations into three classes: missions that concentrate more and more of their missionaries in already evangelized centers where access is relatively free, missions that concentrate their resources in places where the frontiers of outreach demand creative, new ways to get in and validate their presence and purpose, and missions that limit their activity to the sending of national Christians and whatever else can be done to encourage and assist, short of sending missionaries.

In the world where every human act has a political meaning, the cloak of “apolitical” vagueness has been worn thin on the backs of missionaries. The demand for political consciousness and the thrusting of missions and missionaries into the spotlights of political conflict (e.g., Peru, Guatemala, Columbia, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Zaire, China) will further polarize mission organizations. Some will persist in asserting their nonpolitical nature and will thus continue to aid and abet the status quo, for good or for evil. Others will accept and acknowledge their political meaning and influence. They will be swept up in ever more complex webs of intrigue and decision-making about matters they would far rather leave alone. There are no easy choices; one wonders if, after all, the naïve may inherit the world of foreign missions. If so, the era will soon close.

Now that western thought is able to entertain the counter-mechanistic proposition of “appropriate technology,” can the discussion about *appropriate institutions* be far behind? Considering the large and still expanding proportion of missionaries sent out to take posts in ever larger and more costly institutions, has the point of diminishing returns not already been passed? As the emphasis on unreached people increases, the inappropriateness of large and costly institutions (western-style hospitals, schools, pastoral accreditation schemes, radio, aviation networks, and the like) will be far easier to challenge. Inappropriate institutions almost always depend on outside money, alien know-how, government cooperation, expatriate leadership, and rejection of the folkways of local Christians. When these challenges become vocal, the schisms will force all sorts of new alignments.

The illustrations above suggest an upheaval and reconstruction of thought within the “missionary-minded” people of God that cannot be accommodated by the older and simplistic distinctions between liberal and conservative, fundamentalist and modernist, Catholic and Protestant, or traditionalist and revisionist. The new alignment, while varying in one axis according to view of Scripture, may vary in dozens of other axes according to temporary resolutions of the theological and sociological issues. The hopeful possibilities for constructive change depend on the shifts in Christian consciousness about what is truly important.

A paper by Larry Horton¹ suggests that the important schisms among mission organizations at the evangelical core may be best explained as a choice among three options: (1) to become more withdrawn, isolationist and exclusive, (2) to follow in the footsteps of the social-activistic and politically liberal missionary experiments (especially today associated with Latin American trends), or (3) to join forces with other organizations bent on a politically conservative and zealously dogmatic preservation of manipulative forms of missionary presence. Accumulation of all these not-so-nice descriptors into this third option does not do justice to Horton’s treatment, but it does suggest the easier choices that may be made by those who reject and those who accept the proposition of verbal proclamation as the ultimate issue in missions.

¹Larry Horton, *The Issues That Fragment Missions*, unpublished, 1981

Seven “camps” of North Americans and Europeans seem to be pitching their tents along the trail: (1) *the persistent*—those who hold to a belief that God will continue to honor the approaches that have served well in the past; (2) *the overseers*—those who believe that the next generation of world evangelism will come from the “planted church” in the third world; (3) *the pushers*—those who seek new ways to put missionaries of the clerical sort² into situations that will further the outreach of the church; (4) *the institutionalized*—those who see missions largely in terms of supplying personnel for overseas institutions; (5) *the contractors*—those who cultivate amicable relationships with governments in order to establish Christian witness through compassionate action; (6) *the explorers*—those who seek new modes of entry and new sorts of deployment, including the dual-vocational options, and (7) *the politicizers*—those who see the primary issues of the gospel in sociopolitical and economic terms and thus devote themselves to arousing people to political action.

With which of these seven camps will one’s missionary society or para-church organization be counted?

To make an informed choice and self-judgment the following questions can be studied. If one is serious about putting Christ before culture, these questions must be carefully answered:

1. For what reasons should “modern missions” or “the missionary movement” deserve to survive?
2. What elements of the present images, ideals, and practices of missions are appropriate to the emergent realities in the world?
3. Into what form or forms can missions be reconstituted to better relate the gospel to human need in the world today?
4. What are the keys to entry into an increasingly “closed” world of nationalistic, defensive, and religiously polarized nations?
5. What are the modes of deployment that allow for credible presence, honest status, and effective witness among the vast areas and significant pockets of unreached peoples?
6. What are the needs of the missionaries in these new deployments that can be significantly provided by ministering missionary agencies? (What functions and forms of “sending” agencies make sense? What training and retraining are needed?)
7. What reeducation of the sending/giving communities is needed?
8. How does the Western tradition of missions relate to the emerging local understanding of scriptural mission of the church?

In each of the questions above, there are four explicit tasks: (1) research is needed to provide a more thorough understanding of the factors and issues underlying the choices to be made, (2) exploration and experimentation are needed to carve out propositional models for testing, (3) executive reorganization

²“Missionaries of the clerical sort:” Bible college or seminary trained, often ordained or working within a community where the leadership people are ordained, describing their primary occupation and identity as “missionary.”

to facilitate change must be undertaken, and (4) personnel must be retrained (from top to bottom of the organization).

Any organization currently serving as a missionary support agency ignores these tasks at its peril. The work of Jesus Christ will continue—this assertion is an issue of faith. One dare not claim this assertion for even the most persevering missionary society. It is the *church* that our Lord promised to build, not missionary societies.