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Abstract

How North Americans can relate to global missions in the years ahead will depend on three factors: how well the lessons of history are learned, what the planted church wants to do with us and what happens to the human condition in general. None of the three of these factors is predictable except in the most general of terms. *This article was based on a 1982 unpublished manuscript.*

What will the political world be like ten years from now? If there were a clear answer for this question, many recommendations could be made and preparation for the future could proceed with greater confidence. But we do not know. Not even about next year or next month. We just do not know.

So we must make informed estimates, not as wild guesses but as careful extrapolation from existing evidences; the estimates must take into account what we already have seen. The future is apt to be a continuation of trends that are already in place, complicated of course by events that cannot be adequately anticipated. These unpredictable events produce “discontinuities” which will send the trends off their trajectories in various ways. A futurist then is a user of data that show trends; but a futurist also takes account of possible discontinuities and projects the data about trends into alternative scenarios reflecting possible encounters with various discontinuity producing events.

For the literal-minded person all of this sounds like so much wasted time, but the probabilities for the occurrences of particular discontinuities loom so large that the data about the trends themselves seem almost insignificant.

Givens and Options . . . And Knowing the Differences

The Gospel is central to Christianity. Living and proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God, now and yet to come, is the joyful privilege of the faithful. Whether it is called proselytizing, evangelizing, witnessing, or making disciples, and whether it is judged by human society as welcome or unwelcome, it will continue as long as there are those on earth who know salvation in Jesus Christ. As an extension of the presence and proclamation of the church, mission will continue as an inseparable part of the outreach.

Such reassurance, though representative of no new theological insight, seems to be missing from certain discussions of mission and the future. It is an unfortunate reading of the history of the church to confuse the current models of mission with the New Testament models, rooted in the intrinsic outreach of the Gospel. The issue at hand is not whether the mission of the church will continue but whether North America’s organizational and institutional initiatives will continue and if so in what ways.

Mission methodology, strategy, and modes of deployment of missionaries are always debatable matters. There are no mission strategy guidebooks dangling on golden cords. Missionary activity is always negotiable, rooted in Scriptural principles and faithful to the person and work of Jesus Christ, but always a creature of the times. If the era is one of colonial expansionism, this reality is reflected in mission practice, whether it should be or not. If the era is technological, then the mission of the church is carried out in technological terms of purpose, methodology and “evaluative criteria.” So it is today.

But a new factor has entered the picture. Since the days of colonial militarism in the New World and slave-commerce in Africa, the world of the missionary has been dominated by the posture of the sending country. In the short period since the mid-twentieth century the advent of nationalism has re-colored the world according to the many hued kaleidoscope of national prides. No longer can the missionary from the United States or Canada think and act like an American or a Canadian and get away with it. The ways and means of the missionary must take into account the values and the outlook—official and unofficial—of the people to whom she or he has been sent. It can be observed that some of the best missionaries of an earlier era also went to pains to hear and respond to the aspirations of the host society. Then humility was an option; today it has become a necessity.

One reading of social trends sees selfishness and isolationism on the increase and being reflected in the church and in missions. A more hopeful scenario is premised on the increased contrast between Christian and non-Christian values. As Christians come more and more to accept their distinctive role as representatives of the kingdom of God, missionary “neutralism” and the consequent benign neglect of issues of social justice may become less acceptable. Whether or not the Christian community as supporters of missions becomes larger, the “voices crying in the wilderness” can be expected to increase. Christians of the future can be expected to be more involved in the whole of human condition.

The despotic and inhumanly cruel regimes that the United States has propped up in the name of anti-communism have become our greatest national disgrace. That our side in Guatemala is the 2% who own 70% of the land is, in fact, a loud and clear foreign policy, but it is not compatible with Christian values.

The Christian concern for refugees and widows and orphans is about ready to come of age. The American people in general and Christians in particular are ripe for hearing just why there are refugees and widows and orphans. There is even a readiness to reconsider war itself. The new social revolution could begin with a sensitized conscience of Christian compassion; then it would be nourished by a contrite spirit, humbled by the recognition that “of the people” means us. Where is the government we could trust to wage a just war? That fervent prayer seems to be at odds with the bellicose belligerence of our new experiment in so-called “conservative” government. (It is hard to imagine anything less conservative in foreign policy than kicking one’s enemies and many of one’s friends just to see if their fondness for us is greater than their annoyance.)

This is no time to go it alone. The era of hero figures with silver bullets is over. It will not come back. The North American missionary of the future must be nurtured in a totally different orientation. It will take genuine selfless, humble, committed love to function cross-culturally for Jesus Christ in the days ahead. This is no option. It is a given.

The Trends in Place

The post-colonial period of nationalism is giving way to a period of inter-third world pragmatic alliances. The practices and policies in many if not most missions still reflect the values and assumptions of the colonial period. Few have made their peace with the nationalistic values of the post-colonial period. To do so has become an urgent agenda because many of the values of earlier times are persisting into the emerging period of pragmatic alliances. Even as we have seen the end of colonial empire we can now see with great anxiety the new power, that of economic empire.

Rather than being liberated, the developing nations find themselves colonized once again, this time by a more generalized and hard-to-target master, economic tyranny. It is difficult to imagine how any of the weaker two-thirds of all nations will weather the economic storms. Rich nations must lend; poor nations

must borrow. It is almost that simple. Thus all sorts of pragmatic alliances, now so necessary to ward off economic slavery, are apt to give way to a heavy-handed subjugation of the poor by the rich. The world groans for Jubilee.

The very term “third world” was the harbinger of the period of pragmatic alliances. The sense of autonomous nationalism is offended by the proposition that a nation must line up with this or that major power. Since the Second World War, western nations have taken the stance that communism is a monolithic threat and must be contained. The Russians, on the other hand, have promoted communism as a supranational ideology that transcends national boundaries. Thus their use of surrogates (Cuba, Angola, Vietnam, for example) has been a natural and pervasive process, often subtle and usually beyond the reach of the simplistic solutions offered by American politicians operating as they tend to do in good-guy/bad-guy models of political thought.

Third world nations have resented being called anyone’s ally, because weak allies tend to be used as “lackey” nations obligated to follow the leading of their sponsors. Feeling good about being someone’s servant went out with colonialism. The U.S. has managed to sustain the formal linkages of “favored nation” status with any number of “friendlies” until, one by one, their old-style dictatorships of money and family are overthrown by popular uprisings, frequently replaced by dictatorships of the left. The United States has watched the process over and over again, often intervening in exactly the wrong ways. Nevertheless, there is persisting hope that our national leadership will one day put together a policy of constructive assistance for people who want to get out from under tyranny and economic oppression. Reflect on American dealings with Cuba, Zaire, Angola, Nicaragua, and now El Salvador. One wonders . . . someday the Philippines? Korea? Argentina? Saudi Arabia? South Africa? Brazil? Reflect on the “guns not butter” trend in foreign assistance under the current administration. And do not underestimate the popularity of the power formula within a society whose ethos is so securely represented by a national gun manufacturers association.

Small wonder that the emerging nations are less ideological than pragmatic. They live in a world of little compassion. They form alliances on grounds that seem petty or peevish to those in the grand nations of the east or west. If they have any sort of raw material needed by the grand nations, they try to put the squeeze on it. OPEC is the most apparent of these pragmatic alliances. Indeed, what else could unite Kuwait and Nigeria? Comparable alliances to control scarce raw minerals (cobalt, titanium, manganese, lithium, tin, bauxite, for example) or alliances to control waterways, gulfs, and strategic landforms, no matter how impractical, may emerge. The human social need to affiliate is persistent, but antipathy for the richer nations will surely cause the developing nations to grope for ways to affiliate with one another whenever possible to exclude the “have” nations. Is there a nation in the western bloc that could emerge with sufficient in common with developing nations to become the new “white champions?” For example, will Australia be to the twenty-first century what the United States was to the twentieth? By the year 2000 Australia could emerge as the organizing leader of a half dozen mineral-based OPEC-type alliances for the third world; for sure, none would be as powerful as OPEC, but even as the Arab nations have triggered a turnaround for the Nigerian economy, cartels that could assure a stronger world market price for other third world minerals could provide new hope for the hopeless in many places.

Speculation? Yes, but the scenarios of the future bring such possibilities into focus to assist in more effective planning. There are all sorts of trends to watch, and they do not all go the same direction. No longer can you count on anything in international relations. The disappearance of coherent policy, an increasing weakness of the western nations since the dissolution of the British, French, and Dutch colonial empires, has left a troubled sea with no navigational stars. The pragmatic amorality of the United States has further confused the picture. When it suits Uncle Sam’s pleasure and business interests, this nation is for

this and against that. But you have to follow it all closely day by day to find out whether dictatorship is good or bad, whether even trade union solidarity is right or wrong for Poland. The Russians do it the same way, but their notion of what is good for their interest is not quite so whimsical. Their self-interest is perhaps more blatant and easier to predict.

We can predict that certain trends now in place will continue and that missions in the years ahead will have to accommodate these realities. Is the U.S. playing into the hands of extremists of the left who are telling third world opinion-makers that the U.S. cannot be expected to comprehend anything complex?

It strikes Latin America watchers as ironic, even absurd, that those who accepted Samosa are now concerned about democracy in Nicaragua. God, make us humble! Our history is too much with us. When Nicaraguan leadership plays on the people's fears of invasion by the United States, they have the facts of established habits to illustrate their point. The United States Marines have been garrisoned in Nicaragua for a total of 24 years. Why not once again?

Political naiveté is common among missionaries. These lambs are being set up for slaughter. In many situations many of them say such foolish and inaccurate things. When will North American mission sending agencies start looking for a modicum of factual knowledge of American social history, political affairs, and global awareness in their candidates?

The question is rhetorical, but the answer had better be forthcoming. The time is running out. Central and South American *campesinos*—yes, even Indians—are more politicized than most missionaries can comprehend. African liberationists are appearing even among the Protestants. Few of our relief and development groups take into account the ways they are being used in genocidal plots.

Consider the way Somalia refugee camps keep the hearts of Americans warmed and divert the attention from the systematic Amharic purges of the Oromos. Our Oromo brothers in Christ get very little understanding or attention. We create benevolent refugee camps for their widows and children, but we do not even discuss openly the underlying political problems. And just what is happening? Disillusioned Oromos are turning to Marxist philosophy in order to compensate for the defaults of Christian awareness and conscience. Now the leftist Oromo Liberation Front has emerged to do battle against the Russian dominated Amharic central government. A strange world.

The fascination with China will be a blessing or a curse to North American missions. It can be a blessing if the unfolding story is carefully studied. The history of missions in China provides a great opportunity to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the western institutionalizing model of missions. The data stare us in the face: Christianity was put to the test against proletarian revolution; the godless foundation of communist dictatorship, though a bludgeon of horrible evil, was unable to wipe out the church, but the institutions and organizations crumbled. When survival is at stake, the Christian community can go underground and persevere; our God is powerful. Should organized missions be too busy or too proud to come to grips with the meaning of China's surviving church, the old fascination will likely seduce American money and "cleverness" into some sort of foolhardy adventurism. The Bible smuggling movement suggests how misguided this could be.

Jonathan Chao and John C. Wang (CCRS Prayer Letter No. 18 February, 1982) report that K. H. Ting, the head of the Three-Self Movement, persists in painting an overly cautious picture of the church in China, but greater misunderstandings occur when western churchmen make short visits and long speeches.

Like it or not, the ideology of the Chinese “Three-Self Patriotic Movement” speaks to a deeply felt issue in many parts of the third world. The sense of dignity and valuing of one’s own worth should not be denied to a human being for any reason, surely not in the name of Jesus Christ. The “three-self” term strikes the North American as a sort of self-centeredness and thus hardly Christian. Wanting one’s church to be *self-governing* is dear to the heart of every congregationally-oriented Christian. The ideal of *self-supporting* is surely a valid goal, at least for every responsible fellowship in the west; why should it not also be for the Chinese? And the idea of *self-propagating* is exactly what we respect most in church outreach, evangelism and, ironically, in third world missions.

The Three-Self Patriotic Movement has been manipulated and to some extent subverted. And even more surely it has been an instrument of divisiveness and anti-westernism. Sadly, the three- self movement is more Christian in its original ideology than in its actual practice.

But we should not be drawn into yet one more misbegotten anti-communism drive. Christopher Morris argues that outsiders should hold an attitude of objectivity not hostility (*China and the Church Today* Vol. 4, No.1, 1982)

The Status Becomes Less Quo

The future of North American missions is hard to predict. Any prediction is sure to be at least partly wrong. Estimates made on the basis of today’s confusing evidences are unreliable at best, misleading at worst. Nevertheless, mission planning has never been more important. We must have some sort of image of the future. There is no merit in flying blind.

All sorts of predictions about the future are being made. Futurism has become an urgent pursuit of social scientists and a popular topic for editors of Sunday supplements. Considering the potential calamities—nuclear accidents, political chaos, genocide, starvation, economic collapse, global war, just to skim the top of the long list, it may seem to be “tempting fate” to explore the future; maybe it is better not to know what hit you!

The most dangerous prediction one might choose to believe is that things will continue much as they are today. Surely any other view of the future is better than that one. Better, in the sense of more accurate and, more important, better for missions inasmuch as an awareness that the days ahead will be different helps to reduce confidence in the status quo. The one sure prediction is that today’s ways are tomorrow’s failures.

Nor can the immediate past in the history of modern missions be regarded as the pattern for the future. When the world was simpler and the patterns unfolded over longer periods of time, keeping pace was easier. Today, long-range planning is a challenge to the human imagination. Planners must make estimates, educated guesses, and take into account whatever the observable trends may suggest.

Three major facts of life constitute a possible view of the future. First, control by donors is a changed phenomenon. In the past there was a sort of gentleman’s agreement that whoever pays the piper calls the tunes. Never look a gift horse in the mouth was the standard advice for recipients. The matter is far more complex today. Donors still wield substantial influence, but recipients are more shrewd. Donors find themselves bargained, coerced, and manipulated, sometimes with such subtlety as to escape attention. And at the bottom line, control is with the receiver. Knowledgeable mission strategists who have watched the twists and turns of manipulated “invitations” to build schools and medical facilities in Haiti have been seeing this process. The habit of newcomers to establish themselves by building and “giving”

local folks institutional structures patterned on their own traditions and culture is a worldwide phenomenon. Two issues are thus embedded: Who really owns it? Whose concern is its maintenance?

The second “fact of life” is that the prestige of the West, especially of the United States, is substantially lower than ever. Inability to control our economy, the vaunted showcase of free enterprise, added to a muddled and ambiguous foreign policy have combined to dismay and disappoint even our historic friends. In the third world, the new “let them eat cake” sort of economic advice is a poor substitute for much needed technical assistance and burden-sharing. For sure, no nation can buy friends. But among the nations maintaining friendly relations, those most needed are those who stand alongside in difficult times. For sure, these are *terrible* times for many a small nation, especially for those that are energy poor and find themselves helplessly caught up in the tug-of-war between OPEC and the industrial giants.

The third “fact of life” is the mounting probability of nuclear holocaust. Whether by accident or deliberate act, whether in the preemptive strike of a superpower or a brushfire war as in Iran, India, or the North of Africa, sooner or later an atomic device is going to go off. It may not end the world. Indeed, the sobering possibility is that it will not, but it surely will rearrange everyone’s priorities. When this happens, depending much on who does what thereafter, life on earth will be a waking horror.

Though we sit side-saddle on the fire monster, Americans contemplate and discuss this issue far less than many another society. Regardless, all futures are up for grabs whether we want to talk about it or not. What is the mission of the church to the remnant of civilization whether 10% or 90% of the population survive? How can you plan for that scenario? Or, better yet, does the church of Jesus Christ have a redemptive role to play in taking apart these engines of horror? God help us act on our responsibilities in time!

When “Modern” is Passé

A mimeographed letter just arrived from a friend who has served over a dozen years as a missionary in Bolivia.¹ Now at the close of a furlough year, he is expressing his hopes and concerns for his next term of service:

During our last term, my wife and I, along with several other missionaries, worked with the Bolivian Highlands Church to set up an organized film and cassette ministry....

I would like to see this organization completely Bolivianized during my next term. I believe it is possible to do this.

Here is an apt illustration of a missionary caught mid-stream in change. He is apparently aware that the new rules of the game call for less dominant initiatives by the outsiders. At the same time, the zeal of entrepreneurial “ownership” of the original idea persists. He “believes” not only in his idea (his, his wife’s, and that of other missionaries) but also he believes in the new motive of nationalizing. For sure, this missionary, in the flesh, is no stereotype; he is aware that Bolivianization is no easy task. But, frankly, it is not clear that he is willing to consider the possibility that his “organization” will very likely be seen as an outside representation. Perhaps it already too late to “Bolivianize” it.

¹ Names of person and place have been changed to reduce the possibility of offence.

In case after case, missionaries report that the national Christians resist the turning over of certain activities. Today's major insensitivity of missionaries is toward the embarrassed national Christians who know full well that their economy and/or socio-political situation make it impossible to continue certain activities that missionaries have started. Especially in reference to western-style institutions (schools, hospitals, large-scale broadcasting, publishing houses, bookstores, aviation services, for example), national Christians are often happy to see the services continue, but the very thought of taking over managerial and financial responsibility can seem like the ultimate folly and embarrassment.

One of the tasks that missionaries should undertake is the realistic scaling down or discontinuation of culturally inappropriate institutions.² Leaving the landscape littered with the relics of well-meaning beneficence isn't Christian, especially since it is generally understood that the Americans are likely to back off and complain, "You see, they really aren't ready yet."

North American missions in the years ahead will need to pull away from the blighting notion that modern is better. The mad dash toward westernization, from television to automobiles, is a trend not to be turned back. But its secular roots, values, and its godless economic aspirations are surely strange bedfellows with Christian missions. This is no plea for a return to goatskins and locusts, but it does suggest that the North American missionary in the years ahead might better be recruited from among those who take Ron Sider seriously.

Christianity Today (March 19, 1982) reported that 13,000 missionaries were "sent out" by third world churches last year. WEF reports 15,000. Less than a dozen years ago the number was 3,000. Perhaps even more important than the quantitative increase is the fact that relatively few of these people are deployed and supported in the ways that North Americans associate with missionaries and mission agencies. True, some handful of these are under financial support or assistance from the west, but informants are reporting that far more are "tent-makers," supported more in the Biblical sense of prayer and sacrificial sharing in substance. A smaller portion than before are primarily engaged in institution-building and management. It is difficult to assess the substantial increase in missionaries from non-western nations, especially the upsurge of third-world missions, since the data are so meager. But surely something is going on that will have a substantial impact. If North Americans had trouble with comity agreements among Anglicans, Europeans, and the like, just wait until it becomes clear that the third world missionaries are getting closer to peasants and fisherfolk than the North Americans generally do!

The "modern missionary" movement may be over. It may be that its own converts have found the new ways and ushered in an era of missions which the North American missionary agencies have yet to learn about.

Wishful Thinking: A Necessary Danger

With tail feathers in the air and head in the warm sand, the ostrich symbolizes naive response to danger. Many animals employ the rollover-and-play-dead defense, using helplessness as a strategy. But the ostrich is almost human about it: "If I don't see the danger coming maybe it won't see me either." Perhaps the ostrich's behavior is better than the chicken's: flying off in all directions at once is bad for the heart.

² Borrowing from E. F. Schumacher (*Small Is Beautiful*), it is suggested that even as there is a distinction to be made between "appropriate technology" and inappropriate technology, there is also such a thing as an *inappropriate institution*.

There is surely danger ahead of many sorts. But the times call for strength and hope. Defeatism and pessimism are apt to be terminal ailments.

Hopefulness is most important. Not only is the Christian's hope in ultimate fulfillments of eschatological promises, but there is hope because the Lord God holds all things in His hands. Nothing is inevitable except that God's plan will prevail. And God's plan is redemptive. The purpose of the church is to lay claims on behalf of God's redemptive purposes. Christians are intended to make a difference. The mission of the church reflects that hope. One need not be motivated by starry-eyed visions of social evolution to believe that being the light of the world is a very hopeful existence.

The old tension between "presence" and "proclamation" arises out of a mistrust of this hope. If it persists into the years ahead the prospects for the North American mission of the church seem less. The times we face will require careful integrating of faith and works. The choice between faith and works is an anachronistic luxury from easier times when Christians could more afford to pull the Gospel apart as an intellectual exercise. No more. Faith without works is dead. Words without deeds are dead. Though deeds alone can speak, ambiguity is reduced when deeds are gently explained to the credit of Jesus Christ, Redeemer. Perhaps there is no particular basis for an empirical claim that Christianity in North America will "get its act together" to put word and deed into a Christ-centered context. But one must hope.

In any case, it will surely be the church that embraces the *whole* Gospel that will prevail in missions in the years ahead. Given a spiritual revival and methodological renewal, the North American church may well be part of the continued action.

So goes the wishful thinking, but it is profoundly dangerous. The times call for both sober reflection and zealous action. The dilemma drives us toward confused frustration. It's easier to be an ostrich.

Back to Basics

When things go wrong human beings tend to turn back to old habits, whether in individual personality or in society. No one denies that the world is in desperate shape. So now again it is popular to look back and to seek values in older ways.

For the church of Jesus Christ, this could result in miraculous transformations. The history of the faithful saints is a display of effectual power, transcending persecution, and the tragedies of human bondage. We can go back to our basics for renewal. From the New Testament tradition of mission and outreach any number of principles can be drawn—especially from the Acts of the Apostles.

Appropriate to the theme of this paper, there are four conclusions in particular:

1. *A Scattered Community.* In the fullness of time, as the young church at Jerusalem had become prepared, there was a persecution and the Christians scattered, "chattering Jesus Christ's Gospel" as they went. The outreach had its origins not in the cleverness of human planning but in the life-changing transformation that made the Christians of that time the bearers of the Good News wherever they went. And God saw to it that they did go. Let us renew this tradition: may the new life in Jesus Christ work its transformations in each of us.
2. *An Infiltration of Pilgrims.* Quite surely the scattering resulted in infiltration for witness, conversions, and new churches. The Christian community was intended to go *into* communities. The infiltration of secular society, as the salt and the light, was fulfilling the metaphors of Jesus' promises to His followers. May the Holy Spirit work through His people today not to isolate and

separate us from the world, but to cause us to go outward and thus to infiltrate, to invite all people to Christ.

3. *A Collective of Helpers.* As Christians, we help one another. The incident of aid and relief for the Christians in Judea and the gracious characteristics of Barnabas provide a clear illustration: Barnabas traveled to Tarsus searching for the recently converted Saul (Paul) and brought him as a partner in ministry among the exciting new believers in Antioch, thus extending Barnabas' usefulness. Paul moved quickly into this new service, ministering among other new converts in the new churches and reflecting the very personality of Barnabas, the encourager. This clearly illustrates the ancient model of New Testament mission and missionary. The church at Jerusalem learned that the Gospel proclamation in Antioch had resulted in many coming to Christ. Barnabas was sent to inquire and observe. (Not to "check up," mind you; an "encourager" would likely not have been chosen for such a task.) Barnabas, ever the outreaching missionary, saw that indeed the Holy Spirit's work was evident and he promptly traveled back to Antioch bringing poor bruised Saul, much in need of spiritual reassurance. And they stayed for dinner! Just what transactions may have transpired is not stated, but clearly they didn't "take over" the Antioch church. They helped. And the Antioch Christians knew how to use their help. May God raise up churches that send true helpers and establish among Christians everywhere a fellowship that can effectively use helpers.
4. *The Holy Spirit Speaks.* The era of "modern missions" has been marked more by planning than by the intervention of the Holy Spirit. It takes both, but outreach *starts* when the Holy Spirit speaks in a church where cross-cultural helpers are already accepted and at work. Or so we should learn from the first interventional "calling" incident. "Separate for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them," the Holy Spirit of God spoke *to the church* at Antioch. And when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them they sent them away, onward...to Seleucia...to Cyprus...to Salamis...to Paphos...to Perga...to Pisidian Antioch...to Iconium...to Crete...to Greece...to Rome...and onward to Spain, to England, to the New World...to the nations....

May it never cease. The Holy Spirit, through God's people, bears witness of Jesus Christ, Creator, Redeemer, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Hallelujah! Amen.