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Abstract

The author views the mission's task from the perspective of one with a global view. "Given the conditions we see around us and given the probabilities of this, that or the other eventuality occurring, what are the alternate scenarios that might unfold in the years ahead?" he says to describe this report. This article deals with key issues confronting missions at the end of the twentieth century—issues that remain challenges in the twenty-first century. *This article is based on a discussion paper Ted Ward prepared for a pastors' conference held at the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention in the late 1980s.*

Hard Realities

We cannot be sure where the world is headed, but we can at least be sure we are on the right track as Christians in response to probabilities. In looking ahead, consider three areas: hard realities, strong probabilities, and high hopes.

Three hard realities should be identified: a lifestyle reality, rich-poor gaps, and militant Islam.

Lifestyle. The "American way of life" is in a sense up for grabs. This threat to our lifestyle has the energy crunch at its root. Reduced mobility is likely to be one of its first consequences, and the economy at large is an obvious second implication. Having operated in a period of relative affluence, it has become characteristic of North American Christians, especially in the middle-class denominations and churches, to take many things for granted that now are going to become matters of deliberate choice. Disposable income, the most obvious example, will not be adequate to meet the lifestyle standards that people in your churches have become accustomed to.

This "American way of life" is not nearly as American as many Americans might think. It is highly dependent, for example, on Brazilian coffee, Ghanaian chocolate, and Saudi oil. This fact of dependency, however, allows Christian leaders to deal with our dependency on God, not dependency on the American, self-made entrepreneur. The best estimations available indicate if there is any further restriction on the international supplies of energy, we will be unable to come on line soon enough with adequate domestic energy, coal conversion, or the like. We will face from two to five years of extreme dislocation, if there is the slightest additional energy pinch.

Few people seem capable of coming to grips with the changes in lifestyle, working patterns, living standards, and church giving that will result when people are no longer able to commute to work. We need to take a hard look at what this condition will mean, even in heating or air-conditioning for our churches, let alone in mission support.

Rich-poor gaps. Recent years of development in the third world have produced a new, relatively rich middle class, though much smaller than in the United States. The gap between rich and poor has existed for years. In many countries the land, for example, is owned by three to five percent of the people. Serfdom did not go out of style in the middle ages; it is still a world condition.

As development does occur, those who benefit first are those who somehow get their hands on power. There emerges a new middle class that tends to be power hungry and not very generous. "The rich get richer and the poor get poorer."

In Brazil the condition of the poorest of the poor, about 40 percent of the population, is much more desperate than it was ten years ago. But the economic wealth divided on a per capita basis looks like so much improvement that official U.S. standards for development aid now rule out Brazil as a recipient. In the third world more of the population is rural than in the United States. True, there is increased urbanization as people are pulled out of the rural sector, but the people who are forced off the farms and into urban areas lack urban skills and thus they very soon become dependent. This is a serious, complicating problem, especially when the urban centers are controlled by the elite power structure.

Militant Islam. As recently as early 1979, conferences have begun to discuss what militant Islam will mean. People are seeing the resurgence of militancy and aggressiveness within various religious groups. Christians are growing more anxious, especially about Islam. In various periods of world history, religious themes have had political meaning but not as much as in the past century. Now it has become very clear that political conflict rooted in religious differences has returned.

Militant Islam presents some very difficult problems for Christian missions. Many are aware that the African continent has been heavily evangelized. Some even refer to Africa as being more Christianized than the United States. In terms of active involvement of God's people in both outreach and fellowship, that generalization is credible.

But Islam is even more active in Africa. All over black Africa, Islam is strong and getting stronger. It is well-supported; if there is nothing else the middle east sheiks are doing with their oil money, they are sponsoring the building of mosques. (Many mosques in the United States are being built with oil money as well.)

Some equate Islam with the Arab world: if it is Arab it is Islamic, and if it is Islamic it is Arab. That is not quite true; one other generalization needs to be added: Islam is much larger than Arab ethnicity. Consider Indonesia, Malaysia, eastern China, many of the former French colonies of Africa, and even Nigeria. There is an active Christian presence in much of Africa, but it is not as prominent as Islam. Hardly any of the Islamic regions are evangelized for Christ. This is one of the great frontiers.

But it does not follow that Islam is inherently Arab. Vast areas of the world that are not Arabic are Islamic. In Nigeria, for example, militant Islam, with new sources of money, is on the move. Watch the mosques being built in the third world. They are serving their societies in much the way Christian cathedrals and parish churches did in the middle ages—becoming a rallying point for development and the emergence of nations.

The developing world is increasingly Islamic in orientation. This fact has serious implications for missions; the most obvious is the increasing difficulty of access for Christian missionaries, even in countries formerly relatively easy to enter.

Strong Probabilities

Migration problems. Increasing difficulty in immigration is the first of the strong probabilities. American Christians have tended to take for granted that whenever enough money is available and enough motivated young people are located, it will likely be possible to send missionaries. Mission planning thus is likely to jump to premature conclusions. Take the matter of closed countries, for example. Increasingly the

matter of dealing with restrictions or finding valid alternatives is important. Some countries or regions are going to become closed almost overnight. In even more cases, the enforcement of migration policies can seem so erratic as to be incomprehensible. It seems inevitable that immigration restrictions will become a problem for missions, even in such places as western Europe. The importance of dual vocations is likely to become more widely accepted by missional Christians.

As a developing nation becomes more sensitive to economics, it learns how much a country loses when immigrant labor uses up local jobs, whether people from a neighboring country come in as cheap laborers or people from the United States come to work as technicians. Resistance arises to any foreign company that is not employing local people. The same thing is happening to all multinational corporations, and like it or not, a North American mission board is just a multinational corporation to much of the third world. We assume that in these government campaigns against foreign workers, the last to fall usually is the person doing church development, church growth, or church planting because he or she is not taking a local job. But whose job *should* it be? Further, Christians are painted from the same bucket used to paint all other Americans. Rarely can the North American Christian mission divorce itself adequately from everything else that being an American means to people of that country. And so much ugliness still abounds. Even in the so-called friendly nations today, there is much more aloofness toward Americans on the part of people in the know than in the past. It should not surprise us that this spills over into immigration policy.

Economic pressures. Financial pressure on missions hardly needs to be elaborated. If any substantial economic dislocation occurs in the North American community, the mission sector of the church probably will be one of the first to feel it. Missionary investment has been too much like a disposable item in the budget; it is seen as an option. Christian leaders must carry a prophetic message to the people of God about where missions fits into the overall economy of God's work in the world. Will foreign mission activity be the first disposable item once we reach the point where there is difficulty in scraping up enough money to pay the rent and utilities bills?

Denominations. A third factor is that denominational distinctives are not nearly as important in other countries as they are in the United States. Church denominations are more important to those who value the specifics of doctrine that underlie the beliefs and historical distinctions. American Christians commonly understand that there are different emphases in the magnificent breadth of God's involvement in His redemptive work in the world. Every denomination has strengths and weaknesses. Each represents something of the wisdom of God's total spectrum, but none embraces the whole.

Denominations have arisen out of culture. We should be more aware of how denominations in the western tradition of the Reformation church grew out of cultural realities in response to questions from western philosophy and society, particularly from the ancient Greek tradition. In much of the mission world, that is not what people are concerned about.

Christian churches are well-advised to mobilize along cross-denominational lines in the third world. Missions and church leaders in North America must help our donor public understand what it means when people stand first for Christ and secondly show respect, but not necessarily loyalty, for the denominations that brought them into the kingdom of God.

Denominational structure lines are crumbling in the third world, but this does not represent a falling away. It is, instead, a response to a new generation of Christians coming forward in churches already planted who do not see as much difference between denominations as the missionaries see.

Let us somehow find our allegiance to Christ with such clarity that we can communicate what God is doing in the world, not simply what a denomination is trying to do within its particular carved-out domain. Thank God for what Southern Baptist missionaries have been able to do. But understand that when God takes over, He draws some different lines, and He draws them in response to local culture.

Education. A fourth factor is that there will be a greater emphasis on higher education in the third world. Part of this will come from the new elite who feel they must have higher education, even if it means leaving the home country. This will be a tough issue, for many are leery of bringing foreign nationals out of culture; the education received probably will not work very well back in the home culture. But the pressure will be there.

Human need. The fifth strong possibility is the mounting pressure in human need. Conflicting stories about the food problem are heard, but we need to keep foremost the fact that the world's population problem has not been solved. Even stabilizing population seems beyond reach of most countries.

North American Christians should be responsive to the tremendous need for a world food bank. Also, a missionary specialization commodity that should be increased is rural and agricultural development.

If Jesus were to walk the countryside today in much of the third world, His work would include ministries of development, helping people to meet their own needs, for food and water particularly.

High Hopes

Development. First, there are high hopes that Christians will become even more involved in national development. It is exciting how in case after case the emerging churches in third world nations are becoming involved in national development schemes. The concern for evangelization does not blind their Christian response to human need and social challenge. (Read Matthew 25:31-46 again.)

China. A second hope is China. It will be a test of missionary creativity. The Lord is giving us one more chance to reconceptualize missions for China. It will take a very different kind of missionary deployment to take advantage of today's situation in China, which is but one example of the so-called "closed" world. There are American Christians in China today conducting English classes. There are increasing numbers of professors from North American institutions teaching in Chinese institutions. Many Christians are "on site." But even the non-monetary supports for most of these are virtually overlooked by the church. Support means more than providing money. Mobilization of prayer is far more important.

Forms in context. A third hope is to put institutions into forms compatible with the local pattern. Americans have inserted into the world a lot of out-of-context institutions, and we have not let the churches remodel these alien forms to fit the cultural settings—the local needs, circumstances, and capabilities.

As we face "contextualization" in theology—as theology is applied in the local setting—we will begin to see its implication for institutional forms and begin to be more local about what form will function.

Frontier rediscovery. Another hope is for a shift in deployment in order to rediscover the frontier. More and more, the deployment of missionaries must be in viable forms that make sense locally. We must send more people whose careers make sense in the local economy. Even if they are to be primarily deployed in one-on-one evangelization tactics, they will need some kind of responsible "cover."

Consider this illustration: Day after day I walked to work past a little Chinese man. He was dressed strangely, but he always smiled at me. I was quite sure he must be from the People's Republic. I got acquainted with him and, sure enough, he was from Canton. "Why are you here?" I asked. "I am here just because I love people," he told me. I didn't think that was much of an answer.

"What kind of work are you in?" I went on. "Well," he replied, "I'm in the work of helping people."

"Who pays your bills?" I asked suspiciously. "People back in China pay me," he said. "Pay you to do what?" I inquired. "To be here," he answered, "because I love people." It didn't add up; perhaps he is some sort of a dangerous agent.

When this story was told to a group of missionaries, their eyes got wide. If they simply changed the characters, they had heard a typical missionary described: one who goes into a place and explains that he is supported from outside; one who says she is there only because of love for people and says a lot of other things that are a real mystery. Because of the nature of the world we live in, the statements can produce anxiety and suspicion.

One independent mission welcomed almost everywhere—at least until someone accuses them of being political—is Wycliffe Bible Translators. They are honest linguists. What they do in linguistic development is available to the country, and quite often a country needs the kind of help Wycliffe offers. Their work is respected. The group has a practical and viable "cover."

Southern Baptists are now likely the largest denomination represented in the oil countries. They have the most people deployed in the Arab world, outnumbering all other Christians in those countries. They are not appointed missionaries. They are oil workers—explorers, drillers, pipe fitters, doctors, and a substantial number of scientists. Most of the families lack adequate religious training, missionary orientation, and a base of responsible prayer support. But they are in-place as potential missionaries.

Sometimes we give God very little credit for being powerful enough to help us deal with the "closed" areas. If we are to crack the frontiers of communist countries and the Arab world, we will need a new kind of deployment. Perhaps God has already provided it.

New modes. A final hope is for new modes of missions. We are seeing people go out as teams, covenanting together to work into a new area and discover ways they can minister. You don't break open new territory by sending single people or lone couples, one by one, into old enclaves. You break out by sending new teams into new possibilities.

Missions should no longer be thought of as one piece, but in terms of three kinds of fields:

1. The first is the *support systems field*. The organization, person, or group that provides funds and resources for a person from the United States under mission board support going into a situation where he or she will be part of a support system for developing national churches. The majority of North American missionaries are deployed "on field" in this manner.
2. Second is the *expansion field*—missionaries who can work with local "on site" people or organizations have a somewhat companionate relationship with "national" persons. This meaning of field presupposes that the benefits to the church in the country being served by the missionary is the important "field of service." Some say that from now on, evangelization within each country will be in the hands of the national believers. The major restraint on this outcome may emerge from the difficult reality that much of the third world is essentially tribal. For example, in many

places in Africa a white person from America will be better received than an African from another tribe. Working with the national Christians as expansion missionaries will be a continuing need.

3. The third is the *high risk field*. God will be opening many of these with missionary approaches that are very different from traditional missionary experience. China, for instance, is open to the Gospel, but not open to classical missionaries. We need to understand that “open to the Gospel” does not necessarily demand that we think in traditional terms of deploying missionaries.

Is the age of missions over? Certainly not. The outreach of the church began at Pentecost and, faithful to the Great Commission, will continue until the Lord returns.