

THE  
NEW MISSIONS  
AND THE  
MISSION OF THE CHURCH

RALPH D. WINTER, Ph.D.

[The following article is not an attack on denominational boards nor upon independent mission agencies, although it is an attempt to suggest something to each of them, and as a basis to give a bit of historical background plus the now international context of the discussion. Comments are welcomed by the author: c/o Fuller School of World Mission, 135 No. Oakland, Pasadena, Calif., 91101. Additional discussion of these matters is found in greater detail in the article and the book mentioned in Footnote 12. Since the book also contains the article, you can get both, postpaid, by sending \$1.95 to the publisher, William Carey Library, 533 Hermosa St., So. Pasadena, Calif. 91030, or to the author.]

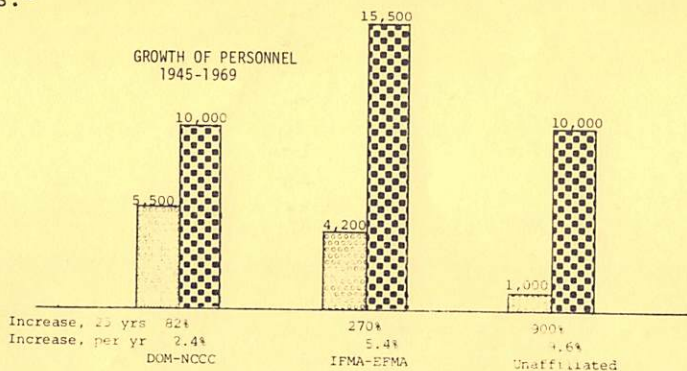
## THE NEW MISSIONS AND THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

Ralph D. Winter\*

### INTRODUCTION

We must try to understand what is behind -- and what is ahead -- of the amazing burst of new mission organizations that have appeared in the United States since the Second World War. The trend is impressive whether you measure it in terms of the number of new agencies or the number of additional workers sent abroad.

The chart<sup>1</sup> below shows the enormous post-war increase of overseas mission personnel, especially in the second two categories.<sup>2</sup>



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These data provide the basis for deducing the fact that NCC-related missionaries constituted 53% of the total in 1945, but only 28% by 1969. The number of new agencies is even more startling. While the number of agencies related to the National Council of Churches was virtually at a standstill during the twenty-five year period, sixty-four agencies (half of them being newly organized) joined either the IFMA or the EFMA, and there appeared an additional 104 brand new agencies in the totally unaffiliated group.<sup>3</sup>

The most prominent single characteristic of these nearly 150 new agencies is the fact that almost without exception they are not part of the official government of any church denomination. Thus not only their number but their structure leads us to ask about the relation between these new "missions" and the "mission" of the Church.

It is important to note that the phenomenon of "new missions" is by no means unique to the U.S.A. from which the above illustrative data happen to come. Just as we properly speak of mission in six continents so we must also face the fact of mission in six continents from six continents. At this very moment there is already an amazing proliferation of new missions being born in the new nations of the non-Western world. Those nations are now becoming sending countries in the same sense that the Western nations have been. There has been much discussion of the confusion that results when a bewildering array of missions descend upon a country; it is time we turned our attention to the root of the problem in the sending countries, namely the U.S.A. but also India, the Solomon Islands, Korea, and the Philippines, etc.

#### STRUCTURE VERSUS SPONTANEITY

I suppose that the question ultimately is how structure and stability can be related to spontaneity and change. It is an old question, at least as old as that tense moment when Jesus remarked to the Jewish establishment that God could raise up children of Abraham "from these stones," and then proceeded to build something new on the lives of the apostles. It is as old as the time when the local bishops as far from Ireland as the Alpine valleys were irritated by the Irish Perigrini, whose faith and life style simply did not fit into their diocesan pattern.<sup>4</sup> Six hundred years later, skipping over countless other parallels, the same question arose with regard to Peter Waldo, and much later again John Wesley, and most specifically --in regard to cross-cultural mission -- William Carey, who only with the greatest effort and the greatest of patience was able to persuade even the non-conformist Baptists that a new structure was necessary for mission.

Indeed all down through history, structures for mission have, by and large, been greeted with great reluctance by church governments, even among the free churches, and have generally required the additional impulse of Pietism, Wesleyanism, or revivalism, even though "today more than three-fourths of the Protestant missionary staff and resources stem from churches of free church parentage."<sup>5</sup> Somehow the older and more settled a denomination, the more likely the church government itself is going to be fully occupied merely with the task of staying on top of things. As I write these lines I am involved in the annual meeting of the Southern California Synod of the United Presbyterian Church. Even this one little corner of a relatively small American denomination (3,000,000 communicant members) has over the years accumulated so many institutional concerns that it is almost unthinkable for the church officially to add anything new. It is a great task to stand still without trying to move forward. Even so, no matter how daring and ingenious the officialdom of my church might be, it seems more and more impossible for headquarters initiative alone to write a fully satisfying program of activity for 200,000 Southern California Presbyterians.

The problem is even more complex and severe at the national level. No matter how hard the leaders of the major agencies (such as our Board of National Missions and our Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations) try to develop a diverse program with many different objectives, they are less and less able to please everyone, and it seems increasingly difficult to harvest more than a relatively small part of the potential creativity and financial resources that are well known to exist in this one denomination. This fact explains in part the great amount of ferment in many churches today as all kinds of organizational restructuring are under consideration in order somehow to free the sleeping giant of Christendom for more effective mission.

#### MISSION VERSUS UNITY

At no time in its history, for example, has the National Council of Churches been undergoing more drastic self-evaluation. The NCC has in effect acknowledged the implications of the above statistics about the profusion of new mission organizations: Christian concern (can it be the Holy Spirit?) is creating more new activities outside the NCC (and its member denominations) than within it. The leaders have decided that the NCC must be restructured if it is even going to begin to catch up with all the new growing edges of the Christian movement. The crux of the problem, as it came out in the September, 1970 meeting of the General Board in Phoenix, Arizona,<sup>6</sup> is what to do when there is less than full consensus for some project or some proposal

for meeting a certain need. Now under study is a new policy that will quite deliberately discard the goal of full consensus where necessary. What is good for the NCC may also be good for the larger, older denominations. But does this mean choosing mission instead of unity? I would prefer to think that we are now beginning to talk of a new post-ecumenical type of mission diversity-in-unity.<sup>7</sup>

It has long been my conviction that my own denomination could mobilize a good deal more manpower and money by frankly allowing unprecedented decentralization of mission, and by employing the kind of organizational wisdom well known in the Catholic tradition whereby the diverse interests and concerns of a vast, heterogeneous community of believers may be expressed in a multiplicity of semi-autonomous orders. I have recently discussed this with officials of my church,<sup>8</sup> and I find that our church constitution not only provides for the possibility of new organizations being created at the initiative of the church governments themselves, but also clearly provides for the spontaneous emergence of other organizations which organize first and ask approval later.<sup>9</sup> The practical difference between these two procedures for establishing new organizations is highly significant. In the past few years there have been only six new, relatively small organizations on the General Assembly level that have fallen into this latter category, even though it would seem likely that there would be room for sixty if all the vitality, commitment, and Christian zeal of my church were to be fully expressed. In any case, there does at least exist the lawful and orderly opportunity in my tradition for the appearance of many new mission orders. Such missions, although representing both geographical and sociological decentralization of effort, would officially express the mission of the church.

In apparent contrast to this type of opportunity within my communion, the proposed plan of the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) only barely mentions this kind of order, and the reference to it appears in three lines almost as an afterthought in the chapter on membership;<sup>10</sup> nowhere is such a thing mentioned in the lengthy chapter entitled "organizing for Mission." Apparently the architects of the COCU structure are not thinking along these lines. Except for their short-term "task group" idea, they apparently feel that the only way for the church to be in mission is for the quasi-political bureaucracies of the church to take the initiative. In COCU terminology, this would mean that all mission would have to be the function of a parish, a district, a region, or the national assembly.

In curious contrast, of course, is the whole history of the Roman Catholic church. Until very recently in its experience in the United States only the various orders have undertaken the

mission tasks of the church. In the opinion of Clement J. Armitage, S.J.<sup>11</sup> "the development of the diocesan mission is one of the most revolutionary changes in the mission picture." Even so, this new feature is as yet an exceedingly tiny element in the Catholic picture. It is still true (and has always been the case) that almost all mission work in the Catholic church has been based upon the mission-order structure. If we think of the usual Catholic missions in terms of Gregory the Great sending Augustine to England, we gain a very false impression. The initiative has rarely been with the Pope.

#### THE RISE AND FALL OF AN AMERICAN PATTERN

It is one thing to notice, somewhat abstractly, an almost inevitable tension between the diversity-producing spontaneity of Christian growth and vitality and the requirements of a unity based on organic centrality. What, however, is the explanation for the particular crisis of this hour and the uniqueness of the problem posed by the emergence of the new missions in the present circumstances? It would be possible very briefly to say that never before has a flurry of new missions appeared that have been so organizationally distant from the churches, and that the problem consists precisely of this unprecedented degree of alienation between mission and church. However, a bit of background may not only define the present circumstances more clearly but also shed light on what can be done about them.

My own analysis<sup>12</sup> goes like this: by the time of the Reformation the Catholic church had achieved some sort of balance between the unity of the hierarchical structure of the church and the diversity in mission represented by the Catholic orders. The Reformers at first rejected both the hierarchical and the order structures, but soon developed a church structure that was similar if not equivalent to the hierarchical. The need for orders was confused by the issue of the undesirability of mandatory celibacy, and as a result only after a lapse of more than two centuries did a functional equivalent to the Catholic orders eventually appear, even in the areas of the Protestant state churches. The very heterogeneity of the Catholic tradition and of the Protestant state churches has practically demanded this kind of decentralization in mission.

The American experience now introduced a new element of complexity, and may have delayed the reassimilation of at least American Protestantism to the Catholic pattern of a diversity of mission orders within a hierarchical church unity. Immigrants coming from various territorial state church backgrounds found themselves in competition within a single territory on American soil. In such circumstances state church traditions could have been transformed into sects by merely crossing the ocean;

instead, over a period of time they became denominations -- that is, "unsectarian sects" which recognized the validity of each other. Compared to each other, these churches had a self-conscious homogeneity which at first tended to be ethnic and even linguistic. Eventually their homogeneity, as H. Richard Niebuhr pointed out,<sup>13</sup> became more and more sociological than ethnic. In any case, this relative homogeneity allowed many churches to express their mission quite happily by means of centralized denominational mission structures called "church boards" - or so it was for quite a long time. Churches tended to take over mission responsibilities as fast as new mission concerns developed. A flurry of new missions in the early nineteenth century, almost all of them originally interdenominational, became replaced by a prevailing tendency for mission to be conducted by churches as such. This established an American pattern, different from that of Europe, which still works well for any homogeneous new denomination, but which grows less adequate as the church grows older and more heterogeneous in membership. In America some church traditions have postponed heterogeneity through fission, and many a church split has resulted precisely at the point of tension over disagreements between different sub-groups within the church as to the kind of mission that should be pursued.

Among Presbyterians in America the New School-Old School split in 1837 resulted to a great extent because of the emergence of two competing mission societies, one of which made a bid for an official, exclusive church control implying the illegitimacy of voluntary societies.<sup>14</sup> Later the Christian and Missionary Alliance broke away around a mission society which now has eight hundred overseas personnel. In the Baptist tradition the 1814 Baptist mission interests in effect produced a Baptist convention which formed around it. Later the GARBC broke away to form a new denomination around another Baptist mission society. When the Conservative Baptist Foreign Mission Society was formed and could not gain recognition in the ABC, it too provided the basis for a breakaway of the Conservative Baptist Association.<sup>15</sup> Can another Baptist mission society form without the CBA breaking in two? According to this theory, the most likely reason for the 11,000,000 member Southern Baptist Convention to break up (it too began around a mission interest) will be the persistence of the American pattern of church-dominated centralization of mission. The SBA must either develop multiple societies along the European pattern or face a decline of loyalty and giving and possible fission.

The American pattern was seen at work as a strong, nationwide, interdenominational young peoples movement (Christian Endeavor) became almost wholly replaced by denominational young peoples programs. The amazing Student Volunteer Movement became replaced by denominational campus ministries. For a time the

American Methodists even resented the interdenominational American Bible Society and attempted to set up a Methodist Bible Society. A classical case for church boards as opposed to voluntary societies was spelled out by the Protestant Episcopal Bishop Hobart in 1818, who emphasized that the Church, after all, was a "sacred institution ... founded by a divine hand ... and governed by him, (while the voluntary) associations ... have no higher origin than human power and no object but human policy."<sup>16</sup>

Growing heterogeneity in the older denominations has simultaneously increased diversity within them and reduced differences between them. The social differences between the Methodists, the Presbyterians and the Episcopalians become daily more trivial. As a side result, theology, which has long served the purpose of giving creedal reasons to justify cultural self-determination, now has the novel new task of reducing creedal differences in the absence of cultural distances. Once massive merger takes place in the COCU, however, some predict that the whole thing will spring apart along new alignments, and theology no doubt will be desperately needed to justify these new groupings and their separation from each other.<sup>17</sup> A more likely possibility is that the majority will stay in one, large heterogeneous church, and that the American pattern of "fission for mission" will merely take away hardy sub-groups that choose not to water down their mission vision by seeing it immersed in an ever larger conglomerate budget.

#### MISSION PLUS UNITY MINUS CENTRALIZATION

One of the primary lessons of the emergence of the new missions is the observation that the vision of individuals is inevitably more specific than the total vision of any aggregate of individuals, and most certainly falls short of the scope of the mission budget of any large, heterogeneous church. A reflection of this fact is that the raising of the money for such a budget becomes a process increasingly similar to, and as unpalatable as, the collecting of income tax by the state -- with the one fatal difference that the church member has no legal obligation to participate. By contrast, the new missions have highly specific programs and are apparently able to survive -- even thrive and multiply -- insofar as those individuals who support them cannot participate in church-approved structures with comparable singleness of purpose.

It would appear that Americans at this moment in history need somehow to get over or to go beyond their home-grown, now mainly out-dated concept of the monolithic church-in-mission. If this were possible, they might even reduce some European misgivings about the apparent separation of church and mission on the continent. Furthermore, it would be possible for American missionaries all over the world, working amidst the pro-



fusion of younger churches, to help them to avoid the complete repetition of the American experience. Is it too late for younger churches to avoid the tragic "fission for mission" tendency which seems to be enhanced by centralized church-in-mission once a movement becomes heterogeneous? Why was it that only in the southern Solomon Islands could a mission order like the Melanesian Brotherhood be launched?<sup>16</sup> Was it not simply that the southern area was Anglican and the northern area Methodist? The New World pattern is apparently not essential. The phenomenon of burgeoning new missions totally unrelated to any church communion is not confined to the United States. Many Christians in non-Western lands have followed consciously or unconsciously the American pattern with its polarization between a centralization of mission in the churches and a rash of totally independent mission organizations unmonitored by the churches. It is rumored that there are over one hundred independent mission societies originating in India alone. Is India already repeating U.S. experience? Let us welcome the vitality of all this activity, but we must be aware of the role our example has played and will play.

The COCU discussion has already proposed an extensive modification of the geographical aspect of centralization in the American pattern. Considerable regional decentralization is proposed for authorities and functions which in America have tended to be on the level of national denominational headquarters. Most home mission operations will be regionally administered. Overseas mission, on the other hand, apparently will still lie on the national level. Is it to be a single colossal agency, or can it consist of a group of semi-autonomous mission orders comparable to the CMS and the USPG of the Church of England? Cannot this latter type of sociological rather than geographical decentralization be achieved, even prior to merger by existing denominations? Must we insist on mistaking such diversity for disunity? Rarely has it been considered that the alternative to a single church board is not merely an uncontrolled interdenominational society; the CMS and USPG structures are intrad denominational societies, and avoid most of the usual objections to interdenominational societies. Certain kinds of centralization confuse unity with uniformity and diversity with disunity. Mission and unity can exist without such centralization.

#### MISSION PLUS UNITY MINUS INDEPENDENCY

Even granting that it is undesirable to continue the American pattern of polarization between centralized church-based missions and totally independent missions, and that some progress is possible in the churches and formerly conciliar structures for the decentralization of mission, the problem

still remains: what can be done about the tremendous momentum in America today tending toward the creation and support of totally independent missions which in no way answer to the churches? State and federal laws will no doubt continue for some time to give freedom bordering on license to non-profit religious organizations. Independent missions have not disappeared due to adverse churchly attitudes. They have long faced coldness and intentional ignorance of their existence on the part of the older denominations and outright hostility and total exclusion of them on the part of most newer, still homogeneous denominations.<sup>19</sup>

However, once the churches can bring themselves to encourage multiple mission orders that are both specific in their appeal and acceptable to the churches, denominational giving for mission can be allowed to flow into programs which are both loyal to the denominations and which routinely render reports and ask for approval of their programs. As a result, the new missions will suddenly face a kind of competition they heretofore have not known. Logically, the existing new missions will be invited to follow the same procedure for gaining approval. Some of them will gain the approval of one denomination and not another. Some will refuse even to be bothered. In some cases missions will find that the routine demands of the churches (e.g. that there be no budgetary secrets and that salary structures be as public as that of a denominational board) will be unacceptable conditions. Such agencies will not gain the approval of the churches even if they fulfill all other conditions. It must be very clear that in proposing the decentralization of Christian mission we are certainly not proposing that the churches be derelict in their responsibility to the people of God to provide the full light of evaluation and review of all mission activities. Right now, however, the churches provide this for only their own boards leaving their members generally unadvised regarding the new missions. Indeed the most deplorable feature of the present situation as regards the new missions is the fact that the only obligatory review to which they are subject is the result of the very loose relationship they sustain to the secular government. Thus, in a list of the new missions it is possible to find organizations of high integrity listed alongside others some of whose activities would not bear the scrutiny of their supporters for an instant.

The mandate for the modern church is therefore not so much to keep ahead of its constituency by trying to please everyone from a central office, but to provide the proper climate for the development of the maximum creativity and participation of its membership in the many missions of the Christian mission, that is, in the necessarily many responsible mission orders of the world church. The line between domination and encouragement

will always be hard to draw, but at least the distinction between the two must be clearly understood. Only in this way will the many new missions of today and tomorrow share fully in the mission of the church.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Winter, Ralph D., *The Twenty-Five Unbelievable Years, 1941-1969*. South Pasadena, Calif.: Wm. Carey Library, 1969.
2. A distinction is drawn between three categories of agencies: those related to the Division of Overseas Ministries of the National Council of Churches of Christ (DOM-NCC), those affiliated to either the Interdenominational Foreign Mission Association, or the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association of the National Association of Evangelicals (IFMA-EFMA), and those agencies unaffiliated to any association of mission bodies.
3. Winter, *op.cit.*, p. 55.
4. Latourette, Kenneth Scott, *A History of Christianity*. New York: Harper and Row, 1953, p. 333.
5. Durnbaugh, Donald F., *The Believers' Church*. New York: Macmillan, 1968, p. 238.
6. Kucharsky, David, "A New Ecumenism Takes Shape," *Christianity Today*, October 9, 1970, p. 38.
7. Up to now *ecumenical* unity has tended to refer to the fellowship and collaboration, and perhaps organic union, of church governments. A new transliteration of the Greek word may allow us to describe the kind of unity now sought as *oikoumenical*, a term which we may choose deliberately to define as collaboration and fellowship between all *church governmental structures* (e.g. parish and diocese, etc.) and all *mission orders* (e.g. voluntary societies) and other *non-ecclesiastical organizations* which are nevertheless part of the overall structure of the Christian movement, the people of God. A National Council of Churches is thus *ecumenical*, while a National Christian Council is *oikoumenical*. This distinction is discussed in further detail in *The Twenty-Five Unbelievable Years, 1941-1969, op. cit.* pp. 62-73,78.
8. The Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, William P. Thompson, and of the same church the General Secretary of the Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations, John Coventry Smith.
9. *The Constitution of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, Part II, Book of Order, Section II, "The Form of Government," Chapter XXVIII, "Of the Organizations of the Church: Their Rights and Duties,"* paragraphs 58.90-04.
10. "As part of its internal diversity, the united church will recognize a call to some of its members to associate together in a common life under a rule for growth in the ways of

- prayer, and in order to serve God and men." *A Plan of Union*. Princeton, New Jersey: The Consultation on Church Union, 1970, p. 24.
11. Goddard, Burton L., General Editor, *The Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Missions*. Camden, New Jersey: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1967, p. 119.
  12. Winter, Ralph D., "The Anatomy of the Christian Mission," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, Winter 1969, 74-89. Note: This article appears reprinted as part of the appendix of *The Twenty-Five Unbelievable Years, 1954-1969*, *op. cit.*
  13. Niebuhr, H. Richard, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1929.
  14. Marsden, George M., *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970, pp. 59ff. Also, Rycroft, W. Stanley, *The Ecumenical Witness of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.* Philadelphia: Board of Christian Education of the UPCUSA, 1968, pp. 57ff.
  15. Details with regard to the Baptist story are found in a 1969 Yale dissertation (unpublished) by Donald Tinder, Ph.D.
  16. Smith, Handy, and Loetscher, *American Christianity, Vol. II, 1820-1960*. New York: Scribners, 1963, p. 77.
  17. This is not to imply that theology performs no other function.
  18. Tippet, A. R., *Solomon Islands Christianity*. London: Lutterworth Press, 1967, p. 45.
  19. It is important to note that while most of the new missions possess some kind of conservative and perhaps evangelical cast, the opposition of denominations to their type of structure does not follow conservative versus liberal lines. Often the newer, highly conservative denominations like the Church of the Nazarene are quite opposed to the support of interdenominational mission structures. On the other hand, the quite conservative Christian Reformed Church, despite the fact that it has its own denominational mission board, actually lists several interdenominational missions in its annual synod minutes, thus commending them to its membership for their support.

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