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Will Green Lake Betray the Two Billion?

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WILL GREEN LAKE BETRAY THE TWO BILLION?

By 'Green Lake' I mean, of course, the great gathering of evangelical mission leaders - perhaps 600 of them - September 27th to October 1st, 1971 - at the famous conference grounds in Wisconsin. Over a hundred missionary societies - both denominational and interdenominational will be represented.

The meeting is convened to consider Church-Mission Relationships and to hammer out policies regarding those which are theologically sound, practically possible, and edifying to Churches and Missionary Societies. The fire under the meeting is the increasingly difficult and complex matter of right relationships between Missions and Churches which they found.

What is right in relationships varies enormously. When a mission first arrives, there is no church and hence no relationship. As congregations multiply, relationships arise. The stronger and larger the Church, the more natural it is for the Mission to fade out of the picture. What needs to be done in each situation is different. Some Missions have nothing to turn over to and ought therefore to continue in charge. Some ought to turn over today. Some ought to have turned over years ago. Some Churches have taken full charge - and stopped evangelizing. Some Churches are in charge and multiply congregations in New Testament fashion.

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A missionary in Latin America writes in May 1971, "Too many Missions here control everything - finances, program, form of worship, and hymnology. The Church is firmly under the Mission. Paternalism and religious imperialism rampant."

As a result of all this, many Missions are being diverted from their main task to frustrating and endless discussions with the leaders of the new denominations. Many African Churches turn from their God-given duties and turn on their founders in a 'struggle for independence'. Is there some way out of this morass? This question underlies Green Lake '71.

By 'the two billion' I mean those multitudes of men and women who do not know Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. They are found in all six continents, but by far the largest numbers are in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In these lands, blocks of humanity are found (numbering tens of thousands and sometimes millions in each block) in the midst of which can be found no church, no Bible, and no Christian. In the whole world, only about one billion call themselves 'Christians'. Two billion have never heard His name effectively.

True, the two billion exist in the neighborhood of the African Churches - but this fact must be understood with exactitude. In most places in Asia one finds a few Christian congregations - with a small combined membership, often less than five hundred - surrounded by hundreds of thousands of non-Christians most of whom have never heard the name of Jesus. One often finds a whole denomination, whose total membership is less than 5,000, as the sole Christian witness in the midst of a million people.

In some lands a large younger Church (with membership of several hundred thousand, let us say) has come into being by the union of smaller Churches. But the fact remains that in its neighborhood large blocks of humanity exist whose members have no real chance to accept Jesus Christ. To see this clearly let us observe Japan.

Japan, with a population of about 100,000,000 has in it the United Church of Christ (the Kyodan) with a membership in 1968 of 193,455 (total community). Despite this large denomination, with many ordained ministers, church buildings, seminaries, and colleges, one would not have to travel far to find a block of a million in which were only a few small, weak Kyodan congregations - each averaging, let us say, 35 in attendance at Sunday worship. To imagine that this "great national Church", is proclaiming the Gospel to all the people of Japan - let alone proclaiming it effectively would be naive.

The largest of the "United Churches" are only one or two per cent of the total population in their lands and leave great blocks of humanity unevangelized.

In most lands, the Church has grown from the underprivileged, the masses, and the victims of the social order. It is not only small, but also weak. Furthermore, it has often grown in one segment of society only, so is cut off by geographic, ethnic, and linguistic barriers from the rest of the people in its own land. Thus in Burma, the strong Baptist Church (membership 222,000) is largely tribal (Karen, Chin, Kachin) and is not evangelistically potent among the twenty million Buddhist Burmese. The great Church of South India has arisen very largely from the Scheduled Castes (the former Untouchables). Consequently though it has some educated members, it finds it difficult to evangelize the middle and upper castes. The conclusion of the whole matter is

that as far as reconciling the two billion is concerned, it would be the height of irresponsible optimism to count on the AfriAsian Churches alone to do the job. They will play an important part; but so must "specially sent ones" - missionaries. The evangelization of the world will continue to require the combined resources of Eurican and AfriAsian Churches. Whitby said a true word about 'partnership in obedience.'

By 'betray' I mean that it is possible for Churches and missionary societies to act in such a way that those to whom God sends them remain with no knowledge of the Saviour. In 1968, Church Growth Bulletin asked the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches: Will Uppsala Betray the Two Billion? I wrote, "By 'betray' I mean any course of action which substitutes ashes for bread, fixes the attention of Christians on temporary palliatives instead of eternal remedies, and deceives God's children with the flesh when they long for the spirit. By 'betray' I mean planning courses of action whose sure outcome will be that the two billion will remain in their sins and in their darkness, chained by false and inadequate ideas of God and men."

Because of the pressure of church-mission relationships, today in many mission circles, it has become fashionable to withdraw missionaries. The half-truth that missionaries work themselves out of a job is popular today. Some executives talk as if, when they withdraw missionaries, they have done well. The erroneous belief spreads that when we turn over to some weak small Church - of 25,000, it may be - and diminish the number of missionaries, we please God. This noxious miasma affects all missionary societies and deafens youth to the cries of the perishing. To be sure, withdrawing missionaries from limited territories in which a vigorous Church is adequately discipling men and ethne is good. And withdrawing missionaries, when expelled by the State, is unavoidable. But these are exceptions to the rule. Unless the Church sees them as exceptions, she will sleep instead of march. Unless Green Lake trumpets abroad the need for more missionary resources, she will leave most of mankind worshipping the Baals not Jehovah.

Of course, Green Lake will not deliberately turn from the discipling of the nations. Yet long range goals are often forgotten in fierce opinions concerning short range objectives. It is abundantly possible to work for "splendid church-mission relationships whether the Gospel is communicated or not."

Is the over-riding goal cordial church-mission relationships? If Green Lake answers 'Yes' and piles argument on argument, failing to emphasize the compelling purpose which demands the vast outpouring of life which is mission, then the two billion will be betrayed. If principles governing cordial relationships are stated regardless as to whether they guarantee an ever more effective evangelization, the two billion will be betrayed. If those formulating findings, do not constantly advocate relationships which drive Churches and Mission out into ceaseless sacrificial "reconciliation of men to God in the Church of Jesus Christ", their findings are likely to betray the two billion. If church leaders, reading the findings, are not led to multiply missionizing, then - no matter what else happens - Green Lake will have betrayed the two billion.

A famous meeting of Asian leaders took place a few years ago in Thailand. For three days they considered Asian Mission to Asia. They discussed a burning question - the relation of their missionaries to the churches!! "Our missionaries must be members of the churches where they work," they said. They said little about bringing the ethne of Asia "to the obedience of the faith" (Rom. 1:5).

The relation of missionaries to churches is important, but mainly as it enables effective discipling to take place. It has little importance in itself. If Churches and Missions enjoy cordial relationships, if ministers of any land and missionaries from abroad work harmoniously together - while millions starve for lack of the Bread of Heaven - what profit?

On the verge of Green Lake '71, it must be said: Church-Mission relationships have little importance in themselves. They are important chiefly if they enable effective discipling of men and ethne to take place.

Church Growth Bulletin hopes that Green Lake will recognize that there are many church-mission relationships, each correct in a given situation. Time should not be wasted trying to name the one solution which is theologically or theoretically correct. Delegates hold many theologies of 'church' and 'mission'. Endless discussions can take place as to which are correct. We believe all are correct which enable the passion of our Saviour for the salvation of men to be fulfilled. None is 'correct' which looks on contentedly while Macedonia - and Philistia - languish for the Gospel.

Returning to the comment of the Latin American missionary, we dare say that the enemy is neither 'paternalism', nor 'religious imperialism'. These would be forgiven by both national leaders and missionary theorists, provided multitudes were being 'added to the Lord'. And, if multitudes were being added, religious imperialism would disappear like the morning mist. Paternalism is particularly onerous in static little denominations. Growing Churches bear it easily and outgrow it rapidly. To a considerable degree, the basic problem is not faulty relationship, but lack of growth. When Churches get stuck at a few hundred or a few thousand members, they and their Missions haggle about church-mission relationships. What many Missions and Churches need is Spirit-filled growth. As this happens, better relationships will come about more easily.

A most effective contemporary block to evangelization is the silly assumption that when a new denomination has been established in a land, the founding mission should either withdraw from that whole land, or work as an agent of that denomination. For example, one large American Church has a daughter of 4,220 communicants in one of the Philippine Islands. The American Church is now turning authority over to that tiny denomination and withdrawing from the Philippines! The new denomination and the old, both think that this is correct procedure. Were the founding mission to go into an adjacent island and vigorously plant churches, its daughter would feel aggrieved. "If you work anywhere in the Philippines," it says, "you must work under us." This little denomination cannot keep the Roman Catholics out of "its territory." It cannot prohibit the Adventists, the Methodists or Brethren from planting churches within a hundred yards of its congregations, but it bravely prohibits its own father from evangelizing the neighboring island!

This strange error is everywhere observable. It has become a new orthodoxy. Green Lake should rectify it. Correct church-mission relationships must disavow 'dog in the manger comity'. Each African Church should be sole authority in all that territory where it is actively evangelizing. There the Mission should either keep out or assist the Church to evangelize. But all territory where the Church is not evangelizing should be open. Any Mission should be able there independently to proclaim the Gospel.

The fathering Mission advancing on new ground may ask ministers of the national Church to advise it. Under episcopal church government, the Mission will no doubt operate under a national bishop. But the desideratum is not suitable relationships. The desideratum is effective advancement of the Gospel. In places, the Mission evangelizing on new ground will work entirely independently - exactly as would an incoming Roman Catholic Mission. In places it will act under close supervision of its daughter Church already established on old ground. In both places it will multiply sound congregations and turn them over to the national Church.

God grant that Green Lake '71 terminates the costly, frustrating and interminable discussions between Church and Mission concerning jurisdiction, so that both can turn to their real business. Mission is neither inter-church aid nor right relationship. Mission is bringing men and ethne to a saving knowledge of Christ in His Church. The time has come to take off the winding sheets which tie Missions and Churches into introverted, non-growing ecclesiastical organizations. Unbind him, the Lord commands, and let him go. I have work for him to do

Better, sweeter church-mission relationships are essential. God has, I am persuaded, guided those who are convening this gathering. In all the urgent problems facing His servants there, let them, however, work out solutions which establish "church-mission relations which encourage churches to multiply." Then history will record that, far from betraying the two billion, Green Lake strode forward to redeem them.