

Missions in the Coming Era

A Strategy for the Church in Tomorrow's World

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IT is commonly conceded that we are at the end of one era in Christian missions and at the beginning of another. Yet the traditional method of mission work followed in the nineteenth century continues to be followed almost universally in the second half of the twentieth. The methodology of missions for this new era has not yet been realized. The mandate for Christian missionary labor remains the same, to disciple all peoples, baptizing them and teaching them. But how, in the very different climate of today, this can best be done requires careful thought and planning.

Early Missions Were Exploratory

A great deal of the missionary work of the last hundred and fifty years was essentially exploratory. Much of it, though tremendously brave, faithful, spirit filled and persistent, has not established any great growing churches *and does not seem likely to do so*. During this period the best way to extend the church in non-Christian lands was to go everywhere and try every means to achieve the planting of the church, whether such means succeeded or not. It could be held that if growth had not started in the first fifty years of missionary effort it would probably start in the next fifty years. Only a mission strategy which maintained that "we plant the seed and God gives the increase" would have outlasted the terrific conditions which faced missions in many places during the last hundred and fifty years.

People were afraid of rapidly growing churches and could not recognize the facts that "people movements" were a normal way of becoming Christian and that some of the highest quality Christians had come into the church in this way. They were confirmed in this fear by the fact that such movements often occurred among primitive peoples, which, according to theories of racial superiority then current, made them inferior and second-rate movements.

Expected Little Growth

But slow growth was not a blessing. Where the resistance to the Christian message was very great, there only in the smallest numbers and with the greatest difficulty did men and women accept the new religion. Consequently a methodology which expected little growth was developed and is defended to this day.

The planting of self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating churches is the central business of missions. Every missionary activity must be measured

and its effectiveness estimated by the degree to which it is, under the circumstances of the era in which we live, *actually discipling the peoples of the world*. When Emil Brunner says, "The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning," he is not saying that the church exists by doing "mission work," regardless of whether or not a growing church is established.

It is legitimate in Christian missions to contend that a given activity is good missions because it prepares men so that they can be won to Christ, but it is not legitimate to contend that a given activity is good missions whether or not it eventuates in the growth of the church. Because missions have proliferated into a thousand kinds of good activity, each one defensible in itself, each one *good mission work*, it is especially necessary in our thinking that we cleave to the central task, that of discipling the peoples of the earth.

Turned to Secondary Aims

In this period of difficult and slow growth the missionary staff in many places, failing to achieve the primary aim of winning men to Christ, turned to secondary aims such as the carrying on of philanthropic work. In the beginning the aims were recognized as secondary but gradually they became primary and were defended as such.

We are not condemning philanthropic work, nor are we pleading for more evangelistic work instead of institutional work. Evangelism, if carried on "whether or not it eventuates in the growth of the church," is no more good missions today than are schools, hospitals or any of the thousand other activities which missions maintain which have a minor relation to church growth. To carry on mission work regardless of whether it produced a growing church may have been good missions in the years past, but we doubt whether it is good missions in the years that lie ahead.

Gathered Colony Churches

The church, too, needs to be measured by this same criterion. Many of the churches established during this period were *gathered colony churches*. Even where missions met resistance for any reason and the message of salvation through Jesus Christ was rejected by the vast majority of hearers, an occasional man or woman believed. A station with six or eight missionaries sometimes had a growth of one convert a year, or even less.

Those who were converted met with such fierce ostracism that they came to the mission compound to live and work. In addition, patients from a hospital, rescued persons, orphans, or runaway slaves came to live at the mission compound. Some of these also became Christian as they lived in intimate contact with

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the gospel. At the mission station a colony was gathered out of the non-Christian world. Out of this colony came the church.

Every missionary and every institution of the mission station served this colony. The mission schools commended Christ to the rising generation, and served this colony. The hospital ministered to the non-Christians, and it also kept the little colony healthy. Each missionary had duties assigned to him in connection with the gathered colony church.

All this looks quite ideal until it is realized that these gathered colony churches, with very few exceptions, are static. They do not multiply. As this era ends we note that many missionary forces are tied up with non-growing churches. As long as this condition was not recognized or it was believed that the gathered colony churches might start growing at any time, there seemed to be justification for continued missionary labors. But once their non-growing nature is discerned, reappraisal of the entire situation is indicated.

This reappraisal is particularly needed because during the one hundred fifty years of probing we have discovered that, under existing conditions, certain peoples are exceedingly irresponsive, while others are clamoring for the gospel. Side by side with the gathered colony churches there have arisen, in practically all the nations of the world, churches of an entirely different sort—*growing people movement churches*.

Web of Relationships

Individuals do not exist entirely separated from each other like pebbles on the beach. They exist in a web of blood and marriage relationships, as families, clans, tribes, castes and peoples. As missions have carried the gospel around the world, in some places individuals one by one have separated themselves from their social groups, and have become Christians *against* their families, their clans, their tribes and their castes. In most such places a static gathered colony church has resulted. The individual has been saved but he has not pulled in his kindred with him.

In other places a Christward movement has been induced within a people. Individuals have become Christians without separating themselves from their social groups. They have become disciples, not against, but *with* their families, their clans, their tribes and their peoples. In such places a growing people movement church has resulted. Usually it has been a church of tremendous growth.

Thus the younger churches around the world are made up of two clear-cut and distinct types of churches, static gathered colony churches and growing people movement churches. In only a few instances is there any difficulty in deciding to which category a given younger church belongs.

At present, for a variety of reasons, the static gathered colony churches are given relatively heavy assistance by the older churches, while the growing people movement churches are given relatively light aid. Put in figures this means that gathered colony churches which grow very little are assisted at the rate of one missionary to 200 Christians, while people movement churches which are growing very greatly are assisted at the rate

of one missionary to 1,000, or in some cases even 8,000, Christians.

Because those planning mission administration have failed to discern this difference, modern missions (a) maintain large staffs of missionaries where very few indeed obey the gospel and yet (b) with much of their resources tied up in non-productive stations, find themselves unable to send sufficient missionaries to disciple the peoples who are clamoring for baptism.

The whole concept of a slow, laborious, inch-by-inch expansion of the Christian church is no longer necessary. A methodology of missions should now be developed which is designed for the era ahead of us in which great growth of the church in practically every land is abundantly possible. The hill up which we toiled in low gear is passed. We can now shift into high.

Makes Two Demands

The dynamic new methodology makes two demands on us.

First, the way of people movement growth should be understood by missionaries and the leaders in the younger churches everywhere.

This is a large order because the missionaries come out of churches in America and England where one-by-one, individual accession is normal. Hence before they can understand the tremendously hopeful outlook for missions under the new methodology, missionaries, the leaders in the sending churches and the leaders of the younger churches must see how God works through people movements to Christ and learn how peoples become Christian.

Second, the resources of missions should be massed behind the growing churches.

To provide static churches with one missionary for every 200 Christians, and growing churches with one missionary for every 2,000 Christians does not make sense in this new era. In days when, in Disciple mission fields, literally scores of thousands will obey the gospel if given a chance, it is not defensible to maintain heavy concentrations of missionary resources among the rejectors while those who would accept Christ are kept in darkness.

Brightest Years May Lie Ahead

What does this mean for the Disciples of Christ? If we are willing to reappraise our missionary labors and to direct increasing amounts of men and money to those peoples where the younger churches have broken through into great growth, it means that the brightest years of our history lie ahead. The key to the establishment of great sister churches lies in our hands.

But outmoded concepts of missions must be abandoned. This does not mean the abandonment of hard-won static churches. Static work could be placed under the care of nationals, missionary assistance could be reduced, and more missionaries and money could be directed to places where the church is growing or seeking to grow.

What is proposed is no armchair theory. It is eminently feasible now in every great division of our field. We must expect great things from God and dare great things for God. The day of march has come.