

Have We Lost Our Way in Missions?

By DONALD ANDERSON MCGAVRAN

EDITOR'S NOTE:

AFTER almost 2000 years, only one-third of the world's population is Christian. Today's high birth rates are almost everywhere far outpacing the convert rate. We are losing the fight to win the world for Christ. Why? Is it because churches and churchmembers no longer have an urgent, compelling sense of mission? One's convictions regarding the nature of the Christian mission determine the zeal one brings to the task. The times demand that each of us frankly evaluate those convictions. It is CHRISTIAN HERALD's hope that Dr. McGavran's article will stimulate such an evaluation.

ADONIRAM Judson knew precisely why he went to Burma: he believed that Christ had sent him. He went to do what he believed Christ had commissioned him to do—preach the Gospel and make disciples.

Do we still know precisely why we send out missionaries? Do we still have strong convictions about what missionaries are supposed to be doing? Do we know unmistakably at this moment in history what is the mission of the Christian church?

Much of the evidence indicates that we do not. Our primary objective has become diluted. Many churchmembers are, in fact, reluctant to believe unequivocally that for this era the Christian mission is indispensably unique.

Judson believed that in America and all the world no man comes to the Father except through the Son. The only thing that saves, he understood the Bible to say, is faith in Jesus Christ. Hence in 1820 as he looked out on the millions

in Burma, he saw lost men—Buddhists and Animists—needing the Saviour.

Judson and his fellow Baptists concentrated on winning men to Christ and multiplying churches. There were other good things they could have done—heal the sick, educate the ignorant, champion the oppressed. They did some of these as auxiliary tasks.

But they stuck to propagating the faith as their main task, holding that among all the good things possible to bring to their beloved Burma, none was as great as salvation. They also held that as men become disciples of Christ and live as Bible-knowing and -obeying Christians, God adds to them, as needed, food, clothing and other blessings. Because these Americans knew their way in missions, they planted a Church in Burma now having about 200,000 members, which has been called "one of the strongest Churches in Asia—self-supporting, self-reliant, evangelistic."

Once the churches were established and growing, missionaries founded schools and seminaries to educate laymen and ministers for the churches. Many Christian young people graduated from Judson College. They themselves now carry on many schools. Love of education has become a strong trait among Christians in Burma. It grows out of a fervent Christianity.

Today conditions in many parts of the world are much more favorable than they were in the Rev. Adoniram Judson's day. Laymen and the missionary societies they support and the missionaries they send should now be able greatly to extend the Church.

We live in a ripening world. This is perhaps the most revolutionary and encouraging fact in missions. More populations today are responsive to the Gospel than ever before. Many younger Churches can double their membership every few years.

Movements which multiply churches are now possible in land after land, not only in backward tribal peoples but in advanced-culture populations.

This is true, despite many irresponsible populations which can also be found in every land. The world is full of a great variety of communities—some ripe and some unripe. Many populations have, indeed, set their faces like flint against the Gospel. But many others are forming living churches of Christ.

Consider the encouraging growth of Evangelical churches in Chile where one in ten of the population is now said to be a Biblical Christian. Look at the trebled membership of some denominations in Brazil. Ponder the five-fold growth of the Disciples of Christ in only twenty years in Puerto Rico. In Formosa weigh carefully the current substantial growth of Presbyterians among the Amoy-speaking Chinese and the increase from 100 to 7,000 recently achieved by the Baptists among the educated Mandarin-speaking Chinese.

In Japan recall that, between 1948 and 1956, of the millions who paid admission to hear Dr. Kagawa, 286,000 signed cards saying they wished to become Christians. Most of these were not followed up and did not become confessed disciples; but that they signified genuine responsiveness is suggested by the fact that the Oriental Missionary Society, which made church establishment its chief aim, increased its churches from 12 to 86 in those eight years.

And we have not yet mentioned ripe tribal populations. In Africa alone, a hundred million Animists are going somewhere in our life time—to Islam, Communism, Roman Catholicism or the evangelical faith. Similar conditions but with much smaller numbers obtain in parts of Burma, Indonesia, Oceania and India also. Indeed, in land after land we find mission after mission facing numbers of winnable so large that the few missionaries hesitate to bring them in lest the resulting churches, lacking instruction and guidance, be sub-Christian.

Cultured and backward, urban and rural, many populations are winnable today. As never before, churches can be multiplied among them.

General conditions too are highly favorable. When Judson went to Burma, not a word of the Bible was available in Burmese. Today the entire Bible has been translated into 210 languages and the entire New Testament into 270 more. Modern transportation makes sending missionaries incomparably easier. Many early missionaries died of malaria, cholera and other diseases. Today's medical knowledge renders all lands fairly safe. Then, there were no friendly younger Churches. Now,

numerous younger Churches and throngs of fellow-Christians abound. The advantages these conditions offer for church increase are tremendous.

Yet, despite this blaze of opportunity, adequate church growth is not occurring.

Christians comprise two per cent of the population of India, one per cent of China, one-half of one per cent in Japan and even less in many other lands. In many places the younger Churches have *stopped* growing.

A Church of 120,000 in 1930 has only 130,000 members twenty years later in 1950. One of 2,500 in 1925 has only 300 more, thirty years later—and is assisted more greatly than it was then. A Church of 51,000 communicant members in 1930 has not grown significantly since then. One "great mission work" turns out to have nine little congregations connected with it. These average 163 members each, made up chiefly of employees of the mission. Membership has remained at about this figure for the last fifteen years. We must not despise "the day of small things," but neither need we condone them when larger things may be reasonably expected.

Scores of such illustrations can be given. If a Church conserves even its own children, it will normally grow at about 20 per cent a decade. Many younger Churches are not obtaining even this growth.

There are, to be sure, encouraging exceptions (some of which I have already mentioned) which suggest that growth is far more possible than we think. But let us frankly recognize that, taken broadly across the Churches and continents, church growth is commensurate with neither the effort applied nor the opportunities God gives us.

Even worse, lack of growth is passing for good churchmanship and good missions. It excites no adverse comment. We often defend it as "breadth" in missions.

Many missions and younger Churches work complacently at perfecting what they have, failing to search for ripe populations and trusting that a sound Church will later on grow automatically. This might be good missions if we had a thousand years and no competition. But we do not have a thousand years. We possibly have only today—and tremendous competition. If we do not win responsive people, Communism, Hinduism or Islam will.

Yet we display neither perceptible sorrow over small increase nor resolute action to replace it with New Testament growth. Commonly a feeling prevails that great church growth is *per se* unsound and somehow discreditable.

God's people often become content with carrying on "good" church and

mission work, whether church growth results or not. Other things than harvesting ripe fields capture our attention. Organizational changes from foreign to national leadership, the drive to church union, meeting the multitudinous physical needs of mankind—all desirable activities—come, mistakenly, to be thought of as the essence of missions. God has ripened many populations, but the chief forces of His Church are busy at useful tasks other than harvesting.

If it is true that many opportunities (even for good reasons) are not made to yield maximum church growth, have we not indeed lost our way?

In a multi-million dollar enterprise (which is what the mission enterprise is) the right road is a matter of enormous importance. Laymen and laywomen, who have the Christian mission so greatly at heart and who in the long run provide both the funds and the missionaries to carry it out, must face the alternatives and make up their minds. For themselves they must decide: "Have we lost our way in missions?"

There are many ways of getting lost; indeed, the difficulty is not in losing our way but in keeping our sense of direction. It is a rare mission which escapes all the deviations. And it is a rare church which itself has the main direction unabashedly in mind.

The first deviation is the imagining that in some vague way *other* religions confer salvation and hence their followers do not need the Saviour. Any person who believes this weakens his own will to propagate the Christian faith. The Christian mission becomes to him something like UNICEF. Christians get off on this trail while looking for that excellent commodity—a genuine respect for other men's opinions and a humble, Christian way of commending Christ.

But *do* other religions confer salvation? Can we correctly say, "You follow your way, I'll follow mine, and we'll both get to God"? Must not all of us follow God's way? Religion is a matter of truth. The world's religions teach important doctrines directly opposed to those of Christianity. All cannot be equally true.

Our Lord said, "No man comes to the Father but by me." He made many similar statements. If what He said about Himself and what the Church has always claimed about Him is true, then all without Him—whether they be our own children or men in far-off lands—are really lost. Missions then become a matter of winning lost men to belief in the Saviour and to the abundant eternal life resulting from such belief. It cannot be "co-operating with religious men everywhere in furtherance of good ends." That is a road leading somewhere else. Christians walking on it have lost their way in

missions.

The second deviation substitutes good deeds done to men for the winning of lost men to Christ. The Christian mission becomes charity on the other side of the world.

These good deeds today fall into three categories. First, those done among men we would win to Christ. We heal the sick, teach the children and serve the unfortunate—to commend the Gospel. Second, those done among immature younger Churches. We run schools, hospitals and agricultural works that our sister Churches may grow up literate, have more health, grow more food and be more vitally Christian. Third, those done exclusively as service to man. We feed the hungry, clothe the naked and rehabilitate victims of disaster simply as a Christian response to human need.

Beyond question, in this needy world good deeds in each of these categories should be done. Christians should overflow in good deeds! We would not be disciples of Christ unless we did.

Yet, equally beyond question, the physical and educational needs of mankind are so limitless that we can pour into them ten times the present total resources of missions and neglect entirely disciplining the nations, which is the unique benefaction that Christianity has to offer. It is easy to stress good deeds so greatly that in the midst of a ripening world the Churches make minor advances. In many areas exactly this is happening.

Today the difference in standard of living between America and less fortunate countries makes American Christians uncomfortable. Pressed by this difference, "serving men" comes, one way or another in all three categories, to absorb the lion's share of mission resources and even to supplant winning men to Christian faith. Missions become charity to unfortunate men of lower standards of living. But our distinctive task is to bring lost men of both lower and higher standards of living into redemptive relationship to Jesus Christ, who alone is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

We should unquestionably do good deeds—as long as they do commend the Gospel. But we should recognize that often we go on putting disproportionately large efforts into good deeds, particularly of the institutional variety, long after it has become clear that these do not commend the Gospel enough to lead men to espouse it. When this happens, missions at that point have lost their way. We have substituted good deeds for the better deed of bringing men to Christian commitment.

WE should unquestionably do good deeds—as long as they nourish a living

Church which grows and brings men to salvation. But we should recognize that we often get tied up in aid to contentedly static younger Churches which take large amounts of aid without manifesting ability to reproduce. A mission which for forty years happily spends the bulk of its resources in aid to a younger Church which increased only from 4,000 to 4,500 members has, in my opinion, lost its way. It has substituted good deeds for mission.

We should unquestionably do good deeds—as long as such welfare work does not leave us exhausted and unable to search for and win ripe populations. But we should clearly recognize that many missions put forth such disproportionately large efforts in welfare work that they find themselves indifferent to lost men and women who can be won.

There is a greater need than lack of food, clothes or education. It is lack of salvation. No famine is as devastating as a famine of the Word of God. No destitution is as weakening as that of people destitute of churches, Bibles and Christ. Consequently, while we shall continue to do many good works, *bringing winnable men to Christ should have priority*. If, busy in various charities, we have little time, strength or inclination to win the winnable, we have lost our way.

A third deviation occurs when Churches and missions become wedded to unproductive ways. An exploratory evangelistic, medical, or educational approach started 30 years ago in an attempt to plant churches, carries on indefinitely even though not yielding church increase. It becomes the accepted "mission work" and is defended on the same grounds that Point 4 would be.

Earnest Christians enter upon this deviation fully intending to leave it as soon as possible, but it often becomes their permanent way of life.

The fourth deviation may be labeled "Passion to Perfect." Many churchmen stress "teaching them all things" in place of "make disciples of all nations." They emphasize perfecting to the exclusion of disciplining.

All sensible churchmen acknowledge the need of teaching Christians to practice the deeper meanings of Christianity. More consecration in more and more aspects of life is obviously essential in this complex world. But when, in making such emphasis, our churches cease growing, have we not lost the way? When we build budgets which direct nine-tenths of our resources to perfecting members already in the churches and one-tenth to evangelism, and fail even to see ripening fields, have we not lost our way in missions?

Missionary training centers and seminaries of both younger and older Churches, too, I think, should consider

whether they are training for plowing or harvest. Some centers, I find, educate their missionaries and churchmen in anthropology, sociology, agriculture, horticulture, chicken raising and ecumenics, without teaching them how to win lost men to Christ and multiply churches. Missionary candidates graduate without learning what methods of increasing sound churches have proved successful in the lands to which they are going. In a day when many populations are ripe, if any seminary fails to make its missionary graduates *experts in ingathering*, can we believe that it is really on the main road?

A fifth wrong turn—failure to gather and use accurate meaningful reports on membership increase—almost guarantees staying lost.

Statistics are, to be sure, published annually. But since all the membership figures for each land are lumped together, statistics are not meaningful. Cases of no growth cancel cases of great growth. The owner of fifty stores, if he knew only that his chain made one per cent profit, and did not know the profit or loss of each store, would have similar statistics.

Supporters of missions are usually given general aims, interesting incidents, a few victorious examples and are left unaware of the size of the Church concerned or of its rate of growth. Many a board of missions meets annually and votes hundreds of thousands of dollars to its missions without being aware of the degree of church growth achieved by each. The businessmen on the boards would scarcely treat their corporations in this manner.

All this is commonly defended by saying, "We are not interested in mere numbers. Ours is a spiritual task." All of us would agree that numerical increase is not the whole story. Ours is in truth a spiritual task. There should be growth in grace, self-support and Christian action as well as in numbers. Yet numbers of the redeemed are never mere. They are not the only factor, but they are one chief factor. They should not be ignored.

To carry on missions paying no attention to increase of Christians and churches is like farming and paying no attention to how many bushels per acre are produced. Failing to secure meaningful records of actual church growth and to take these into account when working for and administering the church or mission is an excellent way to stay lost.

Christians should calculate over the last 30 years for each field in which their denomination has work, the amount of church increase versus the amount of money as well as missionaries expended. Often there would be no correlation. But can we win the world for Christ unless there is correlation; that is, unless we direct

maximum resources to maximum opportunities for church growth?

A missionary society has four missions on which it has spent \$100,000 a year for the last 17 years. The four churches have grown from 24,000 members to 27,000 members. It has a fifth mission which received \$3000 a year during this period. Its church grew from 6000 to 15,000 in the midst of a responsive population of 125,000. Christians who contributed \$1,751,000 to those five missions probably never troubled to discover how much they were spending on each mission for how much church growth. If they had, they might have put enough more into Mission Five to enable it to disciple a much larger part of the 125,000.

Let us now look at three actual fields. Missions today often mean situations like these.

First, take Puerto Rico. Lutheran, Congregational, Presbyterian, Evangelical, United Brethren, Baptist and Episcopalian Mission Boards carry on work here, obtaining slight, or zero, church growth. Their churches all told had about 15,000 communicants in 1940 and have about 18,000 today. Methodists and Disciples are obtaining substantial church growth. From 6,000 they have increased to about 13,000. The Assemblies of God, the Church of God and the Seventh Day Adventists have increased even more, from about 6000 to 23,000.

Each board assists its static or growing churches in one or more of the following ways: subsidy to ministers, educational and medical work, rural reconstruction, building grants, training ministers in seminaries.

In a land where it is abundantly possible to win men and women to faith in Christ, several mission boards are settling for "good work" which adds very few members.

A second arresting case comes from Formosa. About 100,000 highlanders in six tribes, speaking six languages, live in its eastern mountains. A tremendous people-movement to Christ started among them in 1945. By now about 40,000 have been added to the Presbyterian Church. Four hundred new congregations have arisen. All in all, a memorable achievement.

But for a more adequate discipling and perfecting of this great body of converts in six separate language groups with not one gospel in any of their languages, twelve families of missionaries could well have been devoted in 1948 exclusively to a crash program of Bible translation, two to a tribe. Twenty-four families could well have been assigned, four to a tribe, to live in tribal centers, to shepherd the Christians and help bring in the whole 100,000 people. Twelve families could well have been located, three each, in four theological training schools, in the four chief language areas. Twelve

medical missionaries were urgently needed to stop inroads of disease.

At least sixty missionary families, at the rate of one person to 2000 of the winnable population, were needed—*yesterday*. But the missionary enterprise, because of prior commitments in other lands to many younger Churches which were not growing, had by 1958 assigned only ten families to the highlanders. Of the ten, only two knew any of the highlander languages or were living among the highlanders.

We cannot dismiss the highlander case as Canadian, English or Formosan Presbyterian business. It might have happened in any of our Churches or missions.

A striking example comes from Burma—Judson's land—in a recent influential book, *Christianity and the Asian Revolution*. One of the authors points out that the Baptists in Burma now number 195,169 adults, or a total community of about 383,000. He goes on to say: "The Karen Baptist Church is one of the strongest Churches of East Asia; its record of self-support has been the envy of many Churches in this part of the world. Strong, self-reliant and vigorously evangelistic, it has produced some very fine Christian leaders." This author says it has grown largely from the Animistic tribes, whereas from the Buddhists all Christians (Anglican, Wesleyan, Methodist and Baptist) "do not exceed 12,000 at a generous estimate."

He then goes on to say that Burma has many as yet uncommitted tribesmen and a Buddhist mission was organized in 1946 to win these to Buddhism. This mission now has 14 stations and 65 missionaries. The tribesmen are so ripe that they can be won—so the Buddhists think—for either Buddhism or Christianity.

On the basis of these facts one would expect a ringing call to back up the "strong, self-reliant, and vigorously evangelistic church" of 195,000 as it pressed forward to the evangelization of its responsive relatives. On the contrary, the following extraordinary conclusion is found, parentheses and brackets ours: "The Church in Burma must *not* in the days to come, follow the line of least resistance or *most response* [i.e. among the Gospel-accepting tribesmen] but devote more of its attention to the presentation of the Gospel to the [Gospel-rejecting] Buddhists."

To work where God is granting harvest, there to multiply churches—says the author—is "to follow the line of least resistance"! When men are not being won, there to spend precious resources is—he says—good missions!

A conviction that something else is better than harvesting souls and planting churches lies one way or another at the bottom of much of our lostness in missions. Something else, be it "sowing

in hope," "building world friendship," "feeding the hungry," "creating an educated Church," "making the Church socially effective," or a hundred other good aims, is to many Christians more important and more urgent than winning the winnable.

How shall we find our way in missions?

Leaders of younger churches will give one answer, missionaries another, board secretaries a third, and lay supporters—important members of the team—a fourth. Yet there are courses of action possible for each of us.

The following, carried out by each in his own sphere of responsibility, would help enormously.

Think of missions as, specifically, winning men and multiplying churches. Realize that while there are many other good aims, church growth is the central continuing business of *mission*. Mission succeeds only as churches multiply in land after land.

Each of us can without apology regard Christ as the only Saviour. There is salvation in no one else. He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son has not life.

Each of us can find out how much church growth is resulting from missions for which we share responsibility and how much it is costing. The degree of fulfilment of the Great Commission is subject to analysis. We all ought to know how we are progressing.

Each of us can become aware of "ripe" areas. They are more numerous than we think. They exist in many lands. Some churches or missions in almost every land are achieving vigorous church growth. They can show us the way. Even in populations supposed to be unresponsive, some Christians are demonstrating how men can be won. If we start looking for ripe areas we shall find them. By looking, we shall focus attention on the main task.

WE can each pray that church growth may recover its primacy. That all concerned in mission, at every level, may be deeply concerned about church growth, be quick to recognize responsive populations, be sensitive to ways in which men may be won.

We can each give to missions. Churches which do not grow should of course not be abandoned; some day they may become the "ripe" field. But the most desperately needy fields are those where great ingathering puts tremendous strain on churchmen who need all the resources they can get.

Steps like these will bring us back from our deviations, back to the highway leading to the City of God. The most certain way—and possibly the only way—to reach that City is to multiply Christians and churches everywhere.

That is the world mission of the Church. THE END