

CHANGING MISSION - CHANGING CHURCH

by Dr. Charles A. Maxfield

What would your congregation look like if there had been no missionary movement? For starters, you would not have an offering in morning worship, would not have a Women's Fellowship, and perhaps not a Sunday School. Your annual meeting would not adopt a budget, and you would have no financial drive in the Fall. Your Conference (regional body) would not have paid staff. Your denomination would not have a unified budget (called OCWM in the United Church of Christ). Your denomination might not advocate for human rights. There might be less people in ministry and less local mission. Church would be less exciting.

Some of these things might have developed from other causes, but the fact is that they all arose as a result of the missionary movement.

I have two questions:

1. Given that the missionary movement has shaped the American Protestant church as we know it;

Given that the nature of mission has changed;

What changes can we expect in our churches as a result of the changes in mission.

2. If we value some of the characteristics of the church that have developed as a result of the missionary movement, and the original cause for these things is no longer there, can we find other motives to justify these activities?

My reflections are based on my experience of, and knowledge of the history of, the United Church of Christ. However, the experiences of other denominations are similar.

So how did the missionary movement shape the American church?

Finance

The missionary movement needed a source of funds for which there was no readily available source. Before missions, the principal expense of the local congregation was the pastor's salary. In New England the minister was paid with the "minister's tax," an assessment added to the local property tax. In some places, such as Virginia, the church owned a "glebe," a piece of land rented out, the income from which supported the pastor. Some churches "rented" their pews - a symbolic way of

representing a family's support of the church. Many congregations had "subscriptions": each member was asked to sign up for the amount they were willing to give; the money was often collected following the harvest. Pastor's salaries were supplemented by abundant "in kind" giving.

The missionary movement appealed to spiritual motives for giving. Rufus Anderson, long time Senior Secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), instructed collectors in 1835 to "Rely solely on proper motives."¹ He instructed collectors to "Read often the eighth and ninth chapters of the second epistle to the Corinthians," and to think on the motives to be drawn therefrom. He lifted up, "The love and condescension of the Lord Jesus Christ, who, though he was rich, yet, for our sakes became poor, that we, through his poverty might be rich."²

The early promoters of missions appealed to devotion to Christ, the concept of stewardship, disinterested benevolence, the holy cause of missions, self-denial, and the spiritual struggle against covetousness. They consistently advocated for *proportion* and *regularity* in giving. What we speak of today as a theology of stewardship was first popularized by the missionary movement.

Collections in worship were rare when the missionary movement began. Many objected to the handling of money on the Sabbath. However a collection for the poor did often accompany communion. The seventeenth century Westminster *Directory for Worship* allowed, "The Collection for the Poor is so to be ordered, that no Part of the Publick Worship be thereby hindered."³ As the missionary movement progressed, and with it the proliferation of agencies for missionary causes, special offerings became more frequent. I found a Presbyterian sermon preached at Charleston, South Carolina, in 1850, that advocated for a weekly collection as part of worship,⁴ and a

¹[Rufus Anderson], *Hints to Collectors*, 6th ed., (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1827), 5. From 1825 to 1835 the ABCFM produced at least 47,500 copies of this tract, in at least eleven editions.

²*Ibid.*, 4. The reference was to 2 Corinthians 8:9.

³Church of Scotland, *The Directory for the Publick Worship of God, Agreed upon by the Divines at Westminster* (Philadelphia: B. Franklin, 1745; reprint, New York: for Robert Lennox Kennedy, 1880), 29.

⁴Thomas Smyth, *Collections for Charitable Religious Purposes, a Part of the Service of God, a Means of Grace, and Therefore an Essential Part of Christianity*

Congregational Quarterly article in 1876 made the same argument.⁵ I would guess that the practice gradually spread after that date. The Sunday offering was not restricted to missions, but missions were a major beneficiary; the missionary movement had given legitimacy to including monetary contributions in worship.

The Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, beginning in 1886, produced large numbers of young people desiring to be missionaries. The denominational mission boards did not have adequate funds to send them all. This led to the Laymen's Missionary Movement, 1906-09, which promoted more business-like practices in church fund raising. First, they encouraged local congregations to adopt a budget. Then they designed an "Every Member Canvass," to secure pledges from members. They introduced the *offering envelope*, which had two compartments, one for the local church, the other for missions. Then they encouraged each denomination to adopt a "unified budget" (called OCWM - Our Church's Wider Mission - in the United Church of Christ), which included each agency in the church. Formerly each church agency made its own appeal to every congregation.

Mission agencies had historically experienced persistent anxiety over how to meet a steady payroll with sporadic contributions. The desire to put the church on a more business-like footing motivated the Laymen's Missionary Movement.

Women's Fellowship

Women had historically gathered for prayer (women were not allowed to speak at "promiscuous assemblies"). In more liturgical churches, women often formed an "alter guild" to care for alter decorations. But with the coming of the missionary movement, women began to gather for the express purposes of praying for and raising money for missions. Returned missionary David Abeel in 1835 proposed that women organize local missionary societies to raise money for women in mission to women. "Women's Work for Women" it was called. This idea met with resistance in the United States, but Congregational women organized in 1866 and German Reformed women in 1877. They sent funds to the male-run mission boards for the support of female missionaries. Practically every women's fellowship in a local church today can be

(Charleston: Walker and James, 1850), 6-33.

⁵H. S. DeForest, "Giving as an Act of Worship." *Congregational Quarterly* 18 (1876):43-51.

traced back to this movement. On a denominational level the church women's organizations advocated for an increased role for women in the church and lifted up women's issues.

Sunday School

The Sunday School was a parallel movement to the missionary movement. It began about the same time, with the intention of reaching mostly unchurched children, many of whom worked on other days. At first it was thought that the children of church families did not need it; they had parents to teach them the catechism. However the Sunday School very soon caught on as a place for religious instruction for church-related children as well as the unchurched. As the American frontier pushed westward, Sunday School missionaries established Sunday Schools in remote communities, some of which evolved into churches.

Conference Staff

The Home Missionary Societies sent agents to the different regions of this growing country, with the assignment of organizing churches. The societies then sent pastors, and the agent was matchmaker for pastors and churches, and advisor and mentor to the pastors. The society also subsidized the pastors, and pastors and churches organized a state missionary society that supervised the disbursement of those funds. Over time, the state missionary society evolved into the Conference, and the agent became the Conference minister. The agents of other national societies (Sunday School, Foreign Missions, Women's Mission, etc.) that had been sent to the area combined with the Home Mission agent to become the "conference staff." In the 20th century, Congregationalists, and then the U.C.C., worked to have the churches send their mission giving to the Conference, which would use a proportion for their own needs and then forward the remaining portion to the national church. Before this, local churches sent all their mission offerings to national agencies, which employed the agents in their area.

Human Rights

Missionaries to the Cherokee were upset, and deeply concerned, when the Andrew Jackson administration began actions to remove the Indians to west of the Mississippi. The mission executive organized mass meetings, promoted petition drives, and lobbied in Washington to prevent removal; but to no avail. Several missionaries

went to jail, one accompanied the Cherokee on the “trail of tears.” Missionaries identifying with the people they served led to mobilization of the missionary constituency to champion their rights. After the failure of the movement to prevent Cherokee removal, many persons activated by that movement, turned their attention to the problem of slavery. Because missionaries identified with the plight of those among whom they worked, they often took action to inform their supporters and to encourage political action in the cause of justice.

Romance of Missions

There was something exotic and fascinating about the missionary movement. People became more engaged with the world and the work of the church in the world. Religious journalism became adventure literature. Many persons felt a call to be missionaries, but most, for one reason or another, could not go. They channeled their missionary spirit to closer quarters, becoming pastors, participating in numerous domestic missions, and seeing motherhood as a mission.

So do you understand why I say the missionary movement has shaped the North American Protestant church as we know it today?

Missions have changed. Those changes were clearly expressed at the International Missionary Council meeting in Jerusalem in 1928. Some of their new directions are as follows:

1. There is no more Christendom. Every land has both Christians and non-believers. Every land - every parish - is a mission field. It follows that missionaries could go from any land to any other land.
2. We are called to preach Christ, not Christianity. We have been too attached to a particular version of civilization. It is not as Christian as we thought. Only a relationship with Jesus Christ bring life in fullness, not the adoption of certain cultural practices. The proclamation of the gospel must be detached from cultural imperialism.
3. The Christian faith will find its own unique forms of expression in every culture. This is called indigenization.
4. There is today a more benign attitude toward other religions. Regardless of your theology on the uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ, Christians have gained greater respect for the gifts and integrity of other religions.

5. The real challenge to Christianity is not other religions, but secularism, which must be addressed strongly.
6. All facets of the promotion of the kingdom of God, not just evangelism, are legitimate mission activities.

How do these changes in mission policy affect the local congregation?

1. Every church is a mission church. This attitude was making progress during the earlier days of the missionary movement. Some people who felt a call to missionary service, and could not go, directed their missionary spirit to local concerns. The local congregation exists not to perpetuate itself, but to witness to the love of God in the community where it is located. Involvement of the local congregation in local mission is today seen as the principal mission activity of the church.
2. As church participation declines, Christianity is less of the culture, and more of a counter-culture. People no longer come to church because it is the thing to do, but because of what they believe. We can see that our culture is not Christian, and must sometimes witness against it.
3. We celebrate the diversity of culture in the church, in our hymn books, art, and fellowship with immigrant Christians from other cultures. Our congregations are becoming more diverse.
4. We are beginning to relate to other religions in our communities with a respect that does not require agreement on all things.
5. The rising interest in spirituality in our churches can be seen as a way of addressing the emptiness of secularism.
6. Evangelism of the spoken word has become less of an element in what we think of as missions.

So what problems does the church face in the midst of changing attitudes toward mission?

1. The missionary movement created a sense of identification and connectedness with other Christians around the world. As we focus on mission at our doorstep are we losing a sense of global connectedness?
2. The Conference (regional body), given shape by the Home Missionary

Movement, is now in crisis. Decline in membership has led to less financial support (factoring in the rising cost of living). Conferences reduce staff, which leads to a reduction in services to the congregations. At the same time, they hold back more of the mission giving from the congregations, passing on a smaller proportion to the national church. Survival mentality is pushing out the missionary spirit. We need to re-think the Conference. How can a cut-back mentality be transformed into a new missionary strategy?

3. The OCWM system of the UCC is not working. As conferences claim a larger and larger proportion of the congregation's mission giving, the national level of the church is being strangled. Less national and international mission is being done through the traditional channel (OCWM). As a result congregations sometimes select mission projects to support directly, bypassing the usual channels of mission giving. Consequently there is no overall plan, design or strategy to the denomination's mission work. Is it possible for the denomination to develop a mission strategy with clear goals and objectives, and a strategy for financially supporting it?