

FEEL GOOD MISSIONS

by Dr. Charles A. Maxfield

Do we engage in mission to make a difference in our world, or do we engage in mission to make us feel good?

When I have raised this question, I often get the answer, “Well, both.” But it’s not that simple. Let’s think about this.

A mission agency needs funds to do its work. To get funds, it must appeal to current and potential supporters. The mission agency must present its work in such a way that people will want to respond by giving money. The agency will highlight those projects that are the most popular. They may even choose to undertake projects because they are popular. In this way, the likes and dislikes of the agency’s constituency will influence its mission strategies, for better or for worse.

A local congregation says, “We need a mission project.” Perhaps they say this in the hope that it will generate some excitement. Perhaps their thinking is that it will get the congregation thinking about the world outside its walls. How does a congregation select a mission project? Perhaps it will be something that makes them feel good. Perhaps it will be something well publicized, that they have seen advertised on TV or in the mail. Sometimes they are motivated by guilt: feeling bad about how a particular people have been treated in the past. Sometimes the motive is pity: pictures of starving children covered with flies. Yes, children in need can arouse our pity and move us to act. Few congregations will do the work of serious study of our world and its needs, and then evaluate their resources to meet those needs.

I was approached by a member of another faith community: “Our congregation would like to do something for the Indians. Do you have any suggestions?” I went home and prayed over this question. How could that congregation most effectively impact life on the reservation? That particular congregation included many professional people, including college professors, some retired. I thought about the struggling tribe-related community colleges, with limited resources and an important role to play in improving life for the people on the reservations. Perhaps some educators in that congregation could offer their services on a short term basis to one of those colleges? A relationship between that congregation and one of the reservation community colleges could be productive. When I got back to that congregation, they had already gone ahead and made plans for a well packaged work camp to an Indian community in Mexico. They would feel good about the project; but was it the best way for them to make a difference?

A church group wanted to “do something for the Indians.” Working through denominational channels, they came to a Reservation and built a ramp to make a small Indian church accessible to all. It is a beautiful ramp, much appreciated by the congregants. The host church invited the workers to a picnic and softball game, but the workers were too busy “going to town for supplies.” Getting to know the people was not on their agenda. It is much easier to give than to receive. But until both communities have the opportunity to both give and receive, we do not bond together as one community.

When I was called to pastor an American Indian congregation, I believed it was important for me to listen, in order to learn the concerns of the people. From the outside, I could see the deep problems that dragged down the community: alcoholism, unemployment, low self-esteem. But how did the people see their problems? I soon learned that the hot political issue at the time was the re-interment of human remains. The remains of a remarkably large number of persons had been dug up by researchers, and filled the back rooms of various museums and research institutions. These were, of course, Indian remains. A deep core value of the American Indian community is respect for elders. A bill before the state legislature calling for the return of these human remains to the earth, in a respectful manner, caused much excitement. Energized by this positive core value, people from the community attended public hearings in large numbers. I also attended and testified at these hearings. “Honor your mother and father,” is also a core value of Christianity, and we have historically interpreted this to be a respect for all of our elders. Yes, we would battle the other issues - alcoholism, unemployment, low self-esteem - but first I had to listen.

Mission agencies have used “special objects” from the beginning. A special object is a particular project to which a person may contribute, rather than, or in addition to, general support of the mission agency. The earliest special object, begun in 1815, was the sponsorship of a child. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) soon regretted this practice, as it produced time-consuming administrative problems, and supporters were often discouraged when the child did not behave as they expected. Corresponding Secretary Benjamin Wisner wrote to permanent agent of the ABCFM William Armstrong in 1834:

The selection of specific objects has an advantage in starting in people or individuals an interest in benevolent operations; but has so many disadvantages attending it, that it should not be advised except when

necessary for that purpose, + then should be discontinued as soon as practicable.¹

The Board wanted people to support the missionary enterprise as a whole and commissioned its permanent agents to prioritize that goal. Yet today special objects predominate. Perhaps we do not have a vision, or have not successfully communicated a vision, of the work of missions as a whole.

Why do we engage in mission? The original reason was to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to the world. That missionary movement succeeded. Today there are Christians in every country of the world. The believers in those countries are better able to proclaim the gospel in their culture than we are. Evangelism is no longer the grand object of missions.

In time, our understanding of mission broadened. We thought in terms of advancing the kingdom of God. Missions therefore included medicine, education, and the promotion of economic development, peace and justice. Too often, these noble goals got mixed up with colonialism. The void in morality that led to two world wars led many to question the right of the West to rule the world, and with it, the validity of the missionary enterprise.

But we are still called to live as citizens of a kingdom whose values are not of this world. Having received grace from God, we are empowered to live that grace in relation to others.

But who are *we*? Being part of a global Christian community, we can no longer think of *us* doing something for *them*. We are one people; we seek to work together. By the grace of God we will find the humility to receive from others as well as to give. Before we engage in mission we must study and we must listen. Then *we* can work together.

Do we engage in mission to make a difference in the world or to make us feel good? Perhaps neither. We engage in mission because *we* are one. We have sympathy for the struggles of others as they have sympathy for our struggles. Like cells in a body, when there is pain in one area, it effects all, and the whole body mobilizes its forces to fight the cause of that pain.

Perhaps missions in the 21st century entails being part of the unity - the

¹Benjamin Wisner to William Armstrong, 11 June 1834; box 1, folder 21, Central Board of Foreign Missions Papers, Union Presbyterian Seminary Library, Richmond, Virginia.

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wholeness - of the Universe. We seek unity with God, which brings us into unity with all persons and all Creation. Perhaps mission happens when there is no more *them*. Just *us*, all of us. With one Lord we are one people, with one calling - to love God and neighbor as ourselves.