

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Christian Brethren Review* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_christian-brethren-review.php

PART ONE

THE WORLD SITUATION

1 THE RESPONSE OF CHURCHES AROUND THE WORLD TO THE CHALLENGE OF WORLD MISSION

Ernest Oliver

THE WORLD IN WHICH WE SERVE

The subject of world evangelisation grows more complex as the years pass. Our Lord's commission to his disciples was 'Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation' (Mark 16:15), but because of the absence of 'global consciousness' those disciples could not have known what that commission meant in demographical and logistical terms. By working backwards from today a fairly reliable estimate of world population at the beginning of the Christian era is put at 170 million. Such figures would probably have had little meaning for that first band of disciples, whose immediate problem after Pentecost was the discipling of 3000 converts. The Lord gave them some hint of the vastness of the task when he spoke of their being his witnesses first in Jerusalem, then in all Judea, on into Samaria and then out into the wide unknown expanses of the inhabited earth. The fact that when Britain cedes Hong Kong to China in 1997 the population of the world will be about 6000 million, thirty-five times the size it was in the first century, may be equally beyond the comprehension of the church today.

It does serve to give us some idea of the size of the task, but the complexity is not confined to size. The world in which the church's movement for world evangelisation presses forward in a very different world in the number and variety of ideological, political and religious options being increasingly and attractively offered to the world. The multiplicity of 'Christian' cults alone is confusing. The resurgence of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam is no longer confined within the countries

of their origin. They are making headway in those countries from which the modern Christian missionary movement began. There are over 1500 Islamic mosques in Britain today. Atheistic Communism and Humanism present themselves over against any form of theistic religion as the only intelligent way out of universally accepted materialism.

Along with that great numerical, sociological and religious difference between the first and twentieth centuries is the phenomenally different means and speed of communication. We must thank God for the world-girdling, massive and instantaneous methods and means of communicating the gospel. The almost insurmountable problems of time, distance and comprehension that beset the evangelist and teacher in the first century and indeed which prevailed well into the nineteenth century, have now been overcome. The communication revolution continues to accelerate and deepen as we approach the end of the age. We have perhaps ceased to wonder at the marvels of communication satellites floating in space, bouncing off millions of signals to millions of peoples every minute, but it should serve to remind us of the revelation given to John, one of the original band to whom the Lord Jesus gave his worldwide commission, 'Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him' (Rev 1:7).

While it is good and right that every believer should be striving through the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit to buy up every opportunity afforded him or her, it is high time for the church to awake to the challenge of available facilities for world evangelisation on a scale consonant with the general speed, intensity and penetration of news and information around the world today.

The most significant difference between the centuries, however, lies in the existence of the church worldwide. Today the nominal Christian church is put at 1,563,000,000, 32.4% of the world's population. According to *Operation World*¹ those who could be defined as evangelicals number 245,451,000 or 5.1% of the world's population. That is an arbitrary figure and, as the editor of *Operation World* notes, 'The Lamb's book of life would make fascinating reading!'. When it is estimated that about 20% of that arbitrary figure of evangelicals live in Africa, it will be seen that the strength of the church and, therefore, the worldwide potential for 'mission' is vastly different from what it was at the end of the eighteenth century when the modern missionary movement began. Thanks to the courage and faith of the great pioneers the past two centuries have witnessed the building of 'bridgeheads for mission' through and from the church in every land, and it is only a very blinkered view of the missionary task which considers its own particular denominational missionary effort in isolation from that being carried on by other churches, missionary societies and individuals. Having said that, however, I know of only one missionary society which includes

workers of other churches and organisations in its prayer diary because those workers are in the same physical area.

THE TOTAL 'MISSIONARY' STRENGTH

This is a misleading heading. The distinction between those sent out by churches and missionary societies to engage all their time in evangelistic and teaching ministries, and those who, while engaged in a 'secular' occupation are active members of a local church overseas witnessing alongside their fellow members, is now much less clear. In fact it would probably be true to say that it was always an unrealistic distinction. William Carey was truly a missionary of the Baptist Missionary Society, but so infrequent was the financial and pastoral support of that society, that he was compelled to seek employment in Bengal in such roles as plantation manager and college professor. We thank God for those Christians who are qualified to take up useful and salaried appointments in Government, commercial or international service agency but at the same time, because of their calling from the Lord to engage in the church's ministry of evangelism and teaching, play an important part in that ministry in many parts of the world. We do not have statistics for such 'missionaries', but it is hoped that a survey will be made shortly to measure their contribution.

For the sake of this paper, however, we must measure the force available to the churches facing this new day of challenge in 'mission' in terms of the statistics of 'full-time' workers available from churches and Christian agencies concerning work outside their own countries. Had I been writing this paper prior to the end of the First World War the statistics would almost certainly have related exclusively to the 'Western' countries, and the figures would probably have shown that between 75% and 80% of missionaries came from Europe, South Africa and Australasia and between 20% and 25% from North America. The figures now are very different and complex, although it is the complexity which is their most encouraging feature. *Operation World* gives as accurate a table as is possible, and reports the present world total of Protestant missionaries to be 81,008. It divides that figure into Westerners and Non-Westerners by area (see table on p 10).

The increase of Westerners by about 13,000 is encouraging, but over the past ten years the number of missionaries from Britain, including those on the *Echoes* list, has declined from 5861 to 5263 according to the *UK Christian Handbook* (1987/88 edition).² That in itself is discouraging, but when it is realised that 5% of the 5861 in 1976 were short term workers, but in 1986 25% of the 5263 were on short term assignments, we see that there was a decline of 30% in the number of long term missionaries from Britain in the course of ten years. This surely reflects among other things, a growing lack of the presentation of the worldwide 'mission' to our local churches.

Area	Westerners		Non-Westerners	
	Number	% of Total	Number	% of Total
N America	49,000	60.5%		
Europe	16,047	19.8%		
Pacific (inc. Australasia)	4,250	5.3%	343	0.4%
Africa	960	1.2%	1,755	2.2%
Asia			7,107	8.8%
Latin America			1,314	1.6%
Caribbean			121	0.1%
Middle East			111	0.1%
<hr/>				
Totals	70,257	86.7%	10,751	13.3%
Comparable Totals in 1978	56,600	90.0%	6,600	10.0%

Political factors have also contributed to the decline. The modern missionary movement from Britain throughout the 19th century³ was clearly forwarded by the growth of the British Empire in Africa and in Asia, and it may well be argued that the break-up of that empire after the Second World War and the change from colonies to independent nations has resulted in a growing resistance to the entrance and continuing residence of 'foreign' missionaries. Should that scale of the decline of 'full-time' British missionaries continue for another decade it will not be long before we have to confess that long term overseas missionary service is no longer an option seriously considered by the young Christian in Britain.

By contrast the North American response, so far as evangelical mission boards are concerned, is accelerating to an extent that attracts national attention. The 16 February 1987 issue of *TIME* magazine includes an article entitled 'Protestantism's Foreign Legion'. This gives statistics exceeding those given in *Operation World*. It states that, including short term workers, the missionary total for North America is 67,242 sent out by 764 mission boards, whose combined annual income is \$1,300,000,000. Response from students attending the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship's missionary conference at the University of Illinois in 1984 was, 4,683 students filed written pledges that they would go overseas and 10,153 more vowed to pray about taking the step. On the other hand the mainline denominations in North America have 'consciously decided to send more cash and fewer people . . . "American missionaries overseas cost a lot of money", and it is far better to send support to workers in indigenous churches.'

Related to the growing response of the African, Asian and Latin American

churches to worldwide 'mission' (now reckoned at 13.3% of the world's total missionary force) is the *Operation World's* table on the harvest which has come from the modern missionary movement which began at the end of the 18th century. It gives the comparable percentages of 'evangelicals' in, on the one hand, the West (including Eastern Europe) and the Third World:

	1800	1900	1960	1970	1980	1985
The West	99%	91%	68%	64%	50%	34%
The Third World	1%	9%	32%	36%	50%	66%

The rapid increase from 1960 reflects the Church Growth movement in the countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America, but it also indicates the potential for 'mission' throughout the world, which waits to be tapped and trained in the churches of those countries. The growth of the churches among Chinese people in 38 countries of the world, including Europe, is evidence of the evangelistic zeal and teaching ability of Chinese workers who have come from Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia and Taiwan. Indian and Pakistani missionaries are at work in the Middle East and in Europe. Korean workers are in the Middle East, North Africa and the United States of America, while Brazilians are in Portugal and Angola.

There can be no doubt that the ability to send increasing numbers of Christian workers out from North America is related to the financial resources of their churches. Churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America do not have such wealth, and this raises the whole issue of the principle of 'self support' that has been such an important pillar of the policies of most evangelical missionary societies. The belief that 'giving money' robs churches of their independence certainly has validity. It has in the past been used as the main reason for keeping missionary societies from integrating into overseas churches. But with the growing together of evangelicals around the world with a common commitment to world evangelisation under the direction of the Holy Spirit, it is surely time to subject such a policy to much prayerful and careful scrutiny. I believe that the opportunities for the use of all the facilities of communication in a world of increasing depravity and deprivation, calls for the subjection and, possibly, sacrifice of our preconceived ideas and plans to the overwhelming need and potential of cooperation. We should take great encouragement from the undoubted fact of the Holy Spirit's being at work to bring men and women everywhere to faith in Christ, as evidenced in the phenomenal growth of the

church in China during the past thirty years of the direst possible persecution. The church worldwide should cooperate to ensure that teaching materials through radio and literature are available to the thousands of evangelists, pastors and teachers involved in this movement in China.

THE CALL FOR COOPERATION

The vital role of the churches

There are still areas of the world where the expatriate missionary is able to carry out an overt evangelistic ministry without prohibition or limitation set by the Government of such areas, but they are certainly diminishing in number. Where such areas exist, as many helpers from other countries as possible should take advantage of the freedom to assist local churches in their ministries. The openness of the Western European nations in the European Economic Community is an example right on our own doorstep. The unprecedented response to the Billy Graham Crusade in France should challenge evangelists and teachers from Germany, Holland, Denmark and Britain to assist the churches in France to further the momentum of the crusade. Such cooperation with the churches contributes to their lasting witness within the country concerned. It is the church that is the permanent factor in witness, not the expatriate missionary or missionary society. The key to the growth and effectiveness of the church in those areas, as indeed in all areas of the world, is not the number of expatriate missionaries, but the quality of life of the Christians and their corporate service and witness to the communities from which they have been drawn.

There are parts of India which yielded a big harvest from the outcastes in the 1930s, but because expatriate and national Christian leaders failed to cooperate in the discipling of the converts, the resulting churches did not become a vital Christian influence upon society. Tragically they became in some cases a cause of reproach. As director of TEAR Fund's Overseas Evangelism and Christian Education Department, one of my greatest encouragements was the increasing number of requests from churches in underdeveloped countries for funds to set up and maintain Bible training courses at all levels for leaders and lay people. Kenneth Latourette, the American historian of missions, said that the greatest question for missions now is 'What will most contribute to an ongoing Christian community?' To me that can only mean the teaching and discipling of those Christian communities in the Word of God. That fits in with Paul's recognition of what the church in Ephesus needed: 'I commit you to God and the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.' (Acts 20:32) It is sad, and a mistake, that so little of many missionary societies' resources are being applied to the upbuilding

of the churches founded by them. The churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America, which are growing rapidly and, as we have seen, now represent 66% of the total number of evangelical believers in the world, are so often unable to provide adequate Christian literature and teaching materials for their potential leaders. Let us all remember that many of them are situated in areas of dreadful physical need, which they could help to alleviate. We can cite the example of the Kale Heywat Church in Ethiopia, the largest evangelical church in the country. Throughout the dreadful famine affecting millions of their compatriots, and in spite of bitter persecution by the Marxist Government, that church has shown the compassion of Christ and became deeply involved in emergency relief and development projects. In view of this, Western relief and development agencies have been able confidently to entrust large sums of money and supportive personnel to them.

The challenge of unreached peoples

A recently issued brochure by the Interdenominational Foreign Missions Association in the United States is entitled 'Reaching the World for Christ' and serves to underline the movement started among missionary societies in the late 1970s to plan ways and means of reaching those great ethnic and religious groupings of people who, for various reasons, have been out of reach of the gospel. These are in lands where either the Government forbids Christian witness or are too remote to be reached by a Christian church, or simply have been neglected. Studies have been made of these peoples and some missionary societies have assumed the responsibility of reaching one or more of them before the end of the century. They include millions of nominal Christians (Roman Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants) over a billion Chinese living under Communism, 300 million Buddhists, 700 million Hindus, 800 million Muslims and 300 million animists. Plans are also afoot for what is called 'Strategic Evangelism Initiatives'. This is the selection of certain areas which have been neglected or have shown little response. A coordinated programme involves the nearest church on the ground, assisted by projects focused on that area by radio and literature organisations and by relief and development projects supported by Christian missions and aid agencies. Provided this is worked out in Holy Spirit acknowledging prayer and intelligence, it could prove to be a serious and fruitful way of reaching those who have never before given thought to the gospel message.

Patterns of cooperation

We have already considered the fact that the areas where the expatriate

missionary is able to carry out an overt evangelistic ministry without prohibition or limitation set by the Government are diminishing. We can rejoice that in some of those areas the churches are proving themselves able and effective in forwarding the witness to the gospel and seeing unprecedented growth. In India there are two examples of cooperation across denominational and territorial lines. The Friends Missionary Prayer Band and the Indian Evangelical Mission, both members of the Indian Missions' Association, a still wider body of cooperation, are recruiting increasing numbers of Indian evangelists and teachers, supported by Indian churches, with activities spread across the second largest nation in the world. The Indian branch of TransWorld Radio, now well on the way to being supported by Indian churches, has stated that their broadcasts are resulting in one new church being planted every other day of the year in India.

As we consider advance in areas where the overt evangelistic ministry of both national and expatriate worker is either discouraged or disallowed, the insistence of the Spirit's call for Christians to reach those who live in the areas cannot, indeed must not, be denied. We praise God for the cooperative efforts to reach tribes in Central Asia, like the Uzbeks, by radio, for those who are encouraging teachers of English to enter parts of China, like the largely Muslim province of Xinjiang, under contract to the Government of China, and for the plans already made by the missionary churches of South Korea to establish and revive churches in North Korea as soon as restrictions are relaxed.

The pattern of the international, interdenominational united mission set up and sustained during the past thirty years provides an outstanding example of modern missionary method. It has been my privilege to be involved in all five of the current united efforts, three in Asia and two in Africa. The United Mission to Nepal, HEED in Bangladesh, ACROSS in Southern Sudan, the International Assistance Mission in Central Asia and the most recent, the ACT organisation in North Africa. In all five cases they are in countries traditionally opposed on religious and, more recently, on political grounds to the spread of Christianity. They vary in size, but they all have the one common feature of being a group of Christian professionals in medicine, education, agriculture, engineering etc, covenanted together under an agreed biblical statement of faith, providing under a well defined and documented contract with Governments to give assistance to those Governments in their medical, educational and development programmes. The spread of nationalities working together is broadest in the United Mission to Nepal, the oldest and largest of the five. The 350-plus expatriate workers include evangelicals from China, Japan, India, Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Germany, Holland, Nigeria, The United Kingdom, Ireland, The United States and Canada. There appears to

be no limit to what the Governments will ask these groups to do, and while the liberty of expatriates to engage in any form of overt evangelism varies from complete prohibition to a very limited freedom, they are all free to worship and bear personal testimony. In Nepal, I believe their presence has encouraged Nepali believers who entered the land in the early 1950s. There was no church in Nepal in 1952, but now there are over 230 congregations across the land, some of which are growing very rapidly.

The Holy Spirit will provide the means of access and utterance to those who are called by him, and we have a ministry to the churches of our land to provide the information from which the Spirit can stimulate interest and the deepest involvement along with those of churches in other lands for the evangelisation of the world.

- 1 *Operation World*, edited by Patrick Johnstone, published by STL and WEC (1986).
- 2 *UK Christian Handbook* (1987/88 Edition), edited by Peter Brierley, published by MARC, Evangelical Alliance and Bible Society.
- 3 Max Warren, *The Missionary Movement from Britain in Modern History* published by SCM (1965).