

Review Article

'God gave the Holy Spirit' – the missionary writing of Roland Allen

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Missionary Methods – St Paul's or ours? (MM)

1912, 2006; foreword Michael Nazir Ali, 188 pp
£15.00 ISBN 9780718891688

Missionary Principles – and Practice (MP)

1913, 2006; foreword Brian Stanley, 168 pp
£15.00 ISBN 9780718891701

The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church – and the causes which hinder it (SEC)

1927, 2006; foreword Michael Turnbull, 168 pp
£15.00 ISBN 9780718891718

The Ministry of the Spirit (MS)

1960, 2006; ed. David Paton; foreword Lamin Sanneh, 224 pp
£15.00 ISBN 9780718891732

Reform of the Ministry (RM)

1968, 2003; ed. David Paton, 236 pp
£17.50 ISBN 9780718891039

The reissue of Roland Allen's major works is a welcome and timely project by Lutterworth Press. Conscious of a missionary vocation from youth, Allen (1868-1947) served as a missionary in North China until ill-health sent him home. After a few years in parish ministry, he spent the rest of his life in research and writing. Largely ignored by Anglicans in his lifetime as he himself had predicted, by the sixties Allen had become a household name among missiologists because his strategic thinking pointed a new way forward at a time when church leaders, like national ones, had grown tired of being told how to do things by foreigners, however well-meaning. And now that Western Europe has become one of the world's neediest mission fields Allen speaks to us again today.

Not that Allen had any thought of predicting future social change. Arguing from Scripture, he showed how the churches of the New Testament were planted in local culture and left with Gospel, sacraments and ministry. Endowed with the Holy Spirit, they possessed all that was necessary for their health and growth. Their ministry was home-grown and their mission overflowed naturally out of the grace they had received. After only a few months, missionaries could leave churches to be self-reliant under God (MM 84). Links with the wider Church would be

maintained by regional oversight through local bishops (MS 178; SEC 156; RM 111).

Allen showed that no one view of ministry or organization could be read out of the New Testament, where local autonomy within different cultures was bound to throw up different church structures, none of which could be universally normative or made a condition for sacraments or inter-communion. 'God gave the Holy Spirit... nothing more was needed for salvation, nothing else was needful for communion' (MS 57).

Four of our present volumes have forewords written by well-known church leaders or missiologists. All recognize the value of Allen, but most treat his inexorable logic with as much caution as his first readers – except for Lamin Sanneh, who appreciates Allen's relevance to 'the culture clash that has now erupted between a post-Christian West and a post-Western Christianity' (MS x). Another valuable theological essay on Allen was written by David Paton in 1968 (RM 19-45).

MM, reprinted eight times since its first appearance, is the best-known of Allen's works. Its Epilogue dramatizes his message in terms of what it would actually mean for a missionary to follow New Testament principles. Allen himself however regarded his short essay *Pentecost and the World* (MS 1-61) as the foundation of all his thinking. MS also contains *The Case for Voluntary Clergy* which may offer valuable prescriptions for the better health of the Church of England today.

The Foundation

Allen felt that missionaries had founded missions but never planted churches because, unlike St Paul, they could not believe that the Holy Spirit was present in believers giving gifts of wisdom and leadership. Even if the Holy Spirit was present, the capacity of new converts was so low that they would need missionary guidance for many years to come. Allen complained that mission churches all reflect the parent body but not the indigenous culture around them. He, however, had boundless confidence in the power of the Spirit to create indigenous churches, and pointed to those founded through the ministry of William Wade Harris in West Africa (RM 103-111), an early example of the now pervasive African Initiated Churches.

Allen had equal confidence in the natural offspring of the Spirit, the Church. The Spirit creates the Church and gives it the right to Word, Sacraments and unity (MS 56f) with the wider church. The Church is both an organism and an organization, with all the gifts needed to direct its own life and outreach. Para-church missions and agencies have arisen because of the Church's failure to be true to itself.

Voluntary Clergy

Allen's argument for voluntary clergy is immensely significant for mission and church, not least for Western churches today. But it has been much misunderstood. Followers of Allen have promoted 'Auxiliary Clergy', but he resisted any suggestion that volunteers are somehow second-class helpers. 'Non-Stipendiary Ministry' is now an essential part of the structure of the Church of England, but even this

would not have satisfied Allen. His contention was that fully-fledged priests, ordained to a sacramental ministry, should be not merely non-stipendiary, but *local* and *indigenous*. This, explicit in the New Testament, is needed not just in new churches but in old ones as well. In some parts of the Anglican Church 'the sacraments of Christ are occasional luxuries...Where in the Bible can we find such a thing? Where in the early Church?' If the sacraments of the Gospel are 'generally necessary to salvation', then the Church has no right to deprive people of them until a special person can be found to bring them. Higher academic training is not necessary for such a ministry. Indeed, 'the presence of a great teacher [can] prevent smaller men (*sic*) from realizing themselves' (MM 93). A church with its own natural leaders expanded spontaneously, but 'the expansion was stopped when the official Church ...provided 'proper, trained leaders'' (RM 30).

The foundation of the argument was the call, in baptism and through the gift of the Spirit, of every Christian to be a missionary and of every Church to be a mission society. If this is the case, every local Christian community has within itself those who are both recognized and equipped as leaders. They emerge not as individuals responding to an inner voice but as a team called by their community. Unlike traditional Anglican clergy, they are (a) not shipped in from outside (for they belong to and are recognized by the local Church) and (b) need no payment (for their support comes from their daily work). They are often older people whose wisdom, learned in the university of life, is locally acknowledged. They are already fitted to administer the sacraments. Unpaid, their disinterested motivation is obvious to all. They will desire gradually to equip themselves for the ministry of the Word through home study. Their sermons are likely to 'be far more intelligible to their hearers than many of the sermons preached by the clergy trained in the theological schools' (MS 176). Importing young, highly educated outsiders as leaders can alienate the Church from its roots. Allen (SEC 8f) cites the example of the Church in Madagascar where 'for 25 years all missionaries were driven' away and during the 'persecution the followers of Christ had multiplied ten-fold.' Had he lived long enough, he would have seen a similar Church growth in his beloved China once the foreign leadership had been expelled. The experience is common for local parish churches while they wait for a new minister to be appointed and to do for them what they have just started to do for themselves but will not in future be allowed to.

In 1968, the Lambeth Conference agreed that 'in some parts the part-time non-stipendiary minister could become the norm' and accordingly, the full-time professional is the 'helper'. But has the penny dropped in the Church of England? 'The stipendiary system sets the clergy over against the laity. The Church is torn asunder, Christians are as lost sheep, utterly helpless, unless a stipendiary can be found to go and look after them; they are babies...spiritual paupers here in our own land. They are not really such, but the stipendiary system insists that they shall be treated as such' (MS 188). Is it possible that the Church of England needs to lose even more professional clergy, colleges and money before it can once again 'start from scratch' and rediscover the resources of the Spirit? Most young people have not forgotten the Christian story; they never knew it. They recognize the image of the Church as power or establishment, but not as the bearer of good news for the

poor. In such a new mission field the discovery of 'fresh expressions' may be a welcome sign of change.

Influences on Allen

The centrality of Christ and the Spirit in Allen's thought led many evangelicals, especially Pentecostals, to claim him as one of their own. But in fact Allen's spiritual home as a student was Pusey House, the centre of Anglo-Catholicism in Oxford, which inculcated in him a high view of Church, sacraments and ministry, but not much anxiety about ceremonial and liturgical details. It was a tradition which read the Bible with great seriousness.

Allen's experience in 1900 of being under siege in Peking by the Boxer rebels who resented foreign influence in China started his reflections about missionary methods. In 1903 he formulated three key principles:

- 1) Never do for the natives anything that they can do for themselves;
- 2) Avoid the introduction of any foreign element unless it is absolutely essential;
- 3) Be always retiring from the people and patiently watch while the Holy Spirit transforms strange forms of life into Christian forms of life unlike our own.

It is often assumed that Allen was much influenced by Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson's call for the 'euthanasia' of missions, so that churches might be self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating. But this policy 'is tainted with the same evil [and is] imposed from above.' It was as paternalistic as day-by-day control from the Mission compound. The missionary, having handed over Bible, Baptism, Eucharist and the seeds of an indigenous ministry, must then leave.

Allen's Influence

Few have ventured to practise Allen's strategies on the field, partly because few have been able to start from a *tabula rasa*. They have inherited ecclesiastical or missionary society tradition which cannot be set aside without revolution and schism. But many missiologists and movements find their roots in Allen's insights. The Church Growth movement adopted Allen's faith in people's ability to receive and incarnate the Gospel in terms of their own cultures. Church Planting echoes his challenge not to start missions but to plant churches in the apostolic style – recently developed by D. Garrison in his *Church Planting Movements* (1999). Bishop K.H. Ting traces his influence in the creation of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement in China. John Gatu's call in 1971 for a moratorium on missions so that the African Church could find its own identity, value its own culture, set its own priorities and discover its own resources without interference would have been endorsed by Allen, who saw that this is the way to promote true mission. The Student Volunteer Movement in the USA and Anglican churches in Hong Kong, the Philippines, Alaska and Ecuador were nourished by Allen's writings. Slogans used by today's urban and charismatic missiologists seem to echo Allen, e.g. 'Give ministry away' (Ray Bakke) and 'Give God back his Church' (John Wimber).

Missiologists like Harry Boer (*Pentecost and Missions*, 1961) and Lesslie Newbigin acknowledge deep indebtedness to Allen. Half Boer's chapters are built on

quotations from Allen. Newbigin owes to him his insight that mission is not a task but a gift: 'I fought against his ideas – but it was a losing battle...you could not shake them off.'

Vincent Donovan was a Roman Catholic missionary in Northern Tanzania who found a copy of MM in the 1960s. He asked – and got – his bishop's permission to try out these theories among the Maasai people. After all nothing else had worked in spite of enormous expenditure on educational, medical and livestock ministries. So Donovan went with nothing except his Bible and started telling stories about Jesus. They, unable to read, retold them to one another. He taught them no doctrine, Christology, liturgy or ecclesiastical order. Tanzanian missions were buzzing for years about what a Catholic priest had learned from an old Anglican. His best-selling book, *Christianity Rediscovered*, 1978, tells his story. It is crammed full of theology, liturgy and ceremonial, reflecting not Roman Catholic but authentic Maasai tradition. 'We must pray for the courage,' wrote Donovan, 'to go with them to a place where neither of us have ever been before...where we can "rediscover" Jesus in a new way.' So the convert becomes teacher and missionary becomes learner – exactly what Allen had perceived in Peter's encounter with Cornelius in Acts 10, but which, he felt, few missionaries had the excitement of discovering because they ignored New Testament models.

Evaluation

Allen is described by Paton as 'some kind of pentecostal catholic' (RM 25). Conservative in his use of Scripture, his mind was penetrating and visionary. He forced his readers to question received tradition, but he was accused of being both idealistic and irritating. He enjoyed the luxury of theorizing while leaving to others the hard task of struggling as best they could in an imperfect world. In the words of Bishop Headlam, 'I quite agree with your main principles, though they are a little difficult to carry out. There is no reason at all why you should not put forward your criticisms... though they are unpalatable to some of the bishops... Perhaps you sometimes do it in a way which may cause a certain amount of unnecessary irritation' (RM 94). He was scrupulous in his refusal to compromise, as was evident in the painful experience of explaining to his beloved parishioners in Chalfont St Peter why he felt no longer able to conduct baptisms, marriages and funerals for unbelievers and must resign his living. His arguments beg a number of questions – but Allen was a perfectionist and expected others to be also. This accounts for the focus of all his life and work: an unwavering trust in the Spirit of God and, consequently, complete confidence that he is a transforming power in the life of the Church whose members, however simple, have all the gifts required to carry forward the mission of God in the world.

All of Allen's works repay study. Modern readers may find the style, though crystal clear, at times repetitive. If a choice has to be made, MM is basic but MS and RM will, perhaps, be the most rewarding. But all demonstrate that Allen's call to return to first principles was then, and is now, nothing short of a call to revolution.

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