

## WORLD MISSION—THE WAY AHEAD

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This paper is designed to build upon the foundations already laid in Ernest Oliver's paper. Nevertheless it must begin by drawing attention to some of the presuppositions—missiological, ecclesiastical and practical—upon which it is based.

Most of the missiological presuppositions can be summed up in the comprehensive statement that mission is the God-given task entrusted to the whole church, involving not only verbal proclamation of the gospel but also other forms of humble service rendered in Christ's name. Mark 10:45 and John 20:21-23 provide sufficient scriptural support for this statement. Alongside it must be set the assertion that the age of 'missions' (ie mission conducted by individuals linked together in para-church structures) is giving way to the age of the church (ie mission carried out by the church *qua* church). At first sight, this second claim appears to have little significance for Brethren, since we have never elaborated our para-church structures to any marked degree. But that it does have significance for us may be clearly seen if we substitute the word 'missionary' for 'missions'. The role of the missionary—like that of the apostle to which the term largely corresponds—is essentially temporary, and the fact that the church is now in existence around the world—in varying degrees of strength it is true—proclaims the fact that, missiologically, we are fast moving from one epoch to another. Church planting is being joined by inter-church relationships.

From the ecclesiological point of view, one thing which needs to be stressed has to be taken on trust since it would require another paper to substantiate! This is the assertion that, though there is no

direct biblical warrant for any earthly structure other than that of a local church, there is adequate evidence that such local churches gave expression to their unity in a number of different ways—eg inter-communion, exchange of ministries, financial aid, common counsel and, of course, correspondence. In addition, churches possessing the same distinctive characteristics shared a sense of identity as Christian communities. The ‘Macedonian churches’ (2 Corinthians 8:1) and the ‘churches of the Gentiles’ (Romans 16:4) are examples. It is true that this sense of belonging was not given any structural expression, and Paul was deeply concerned that it should not impair the overall unity of the church as a whole. Yet it does seem to have been a fact, and it is important as the basis for the suggestion that I shall make presently that, while churches founded by Brethren missionaries have profound links with and responsibilities towards other churches in the same local area, and, indeed, towards other churches throughout the world, yet they also have relationships of a rather special kind with churches similar to themselves, wherever they are to be found. These special relationships may be far less significant than those which they enjoy with *all* Christian churches, but they are not without importance and should not be overlooked.

At the practical level, I am trying to take into account factors like the following. Opportunities for traditional missionary activities are declining for a number of reasons, and are likely to continue to decline. Opportunities for global movement in the course of ordinary (‘secular’) employment are abundant, and frequently continue in areas where traditional missionary work is not possible. Needs for various kinds of inter-church aid across the world are legion. As these opportunities are grasped, traffic will not be one way (West to East or North to South!) but will almost certainly be in all directions.

With all this in mind, we turn now to the way ahead, looking first at some specific areas of concern and then making a number of practical recommendations.

### **Areas of concern**

#### **Traditional forms of missionary service**

As long as there remains a clear need for countries in other parts of the world to receive expatriate evangelists, church planters, Bible translators etc., the Brethren churches in this country should continue to make their contribution. We should, however, be aware

of the danger of imagining that they will continue to be needed in the future just because they have been needed in the past. For a variety of reasons, it may be preferable for national Christians to shoulder such responsibilities and for the expatriate contribution to consist of more specialized help in areas such as Bible teaching and the production of theological literature.

In the past, the contribution of Brethren churches in this country to missionary service abroad has been out of all proportion to their numbers. This has been partly due to the fact that the work and outreach of Brethren churches in this country has been carried on without the use of full-time workers in very large numbers. The fact that an increasing number of such churches are finding the pressures of modern life so great that they are turning to resident full-time workers to 'spearhead' their activities suggests that the exporting of spiritually gifted men and women is not likely to continue on such a scale.

Furthermore, in recent years, the number of Brethren missionaries going abroad in fellowship with traditional missionary societies would seem to have increased. In the case of one small society, one-third of its British based members come from Brethren church backgrounds. A recent survey of Brethren churches in England and Wales reveals that just over 100 churches have commended to Christian work abroad close on 200 full-time workers *in addition to* those serving in fellowship with *Echoes of Service*. In view of the growing involvement of young people from many Brethren churches in interdenominational activities (eg Spring Harvest) this is a trend that is likely to increase.

It should be borne in mind, however, that the steady decline in the number of missionaries listed by the editors of *Echoes of Service* (that number has declined by a quarter in the years 1979-84) is due, not only to the factors mentioned above, but also to the considerable decline in the number and in many cases the size of Brethren churches in this country.

Recent years have also seen the emergence of short-term missionary service abroad. Though viewed by many veterans as a retrograde development, it reflects changes in world conditions rather than Christian commitment, and has certain advantages—as well as some disadvantages—compared with long-term service. Furthermore, it frequently serves as a preparation for, rather than an alternative to, long-term service. Indeed, it is arguable that it should be used as such, and that those who go abroad should do so, in the first instance, for a term of years rather than for an unspecified period usually understood in terms of 'life'. (That term

is a reminder of the fact that in earlier days missionaries frequently went abroad with their lives in their hands.) In any 'way ahead', short-term service should be included as an acceptable option.

### **Secular employment abroad**

Traditionally this has been a feature of Brethren overseas involvement—and a particularly fruitful one at that. It calls for little comment here since it has been dealt with in Olive Rogers' paper, except to point out that opportunities have multiplied in recent years. Areas like the Gulf States that are virtually closed to the gospel are wide open to expatriates who are prepared to take 'secular' employment. Forward-looking missionary policy will take this into account, highlight the opportunities, and make provision for the pastoral care of those who respond, where this cannot be provided by local churches in the areas where they are working. With the exercise of discretion where there are political sensitivities, it should be possible for them to be prayed for and corresponded with like other messengers of the gospel.

### **Church-to-church movement**

This affects matters like personnel, funds, counsel and prayer. Just as New Testament churches related to each other in a variety of ways, so today the churches around the world—many of them established as a result of missionary work by Western Christians—should be prepared to share the resources that God has given them. Personnel are now becoming available, not only from the West, but also from other areas of the world. Western theological educators listen with respect to Latin American brethren like René Padilla and Samuel Escobar, for example. A Latin evangelist like Luis Palau reaps a spiritual harvest in Britain alongside his North American counterpart, Billy Graham. An African evangelist in the person of Festo Kivengere leads Britons to Christ. It is relatively easy for us to accept such outstanding examples or to welcome evangelists from India or Latin America who come to Britain to evangelize those of similar racial origin. But we have already entered the era when such evangelists will be teaching us how to establish churches in inner-city areas. (It was amusing to hear an Indian evangelist, working among ethnic minority groups in South Wales, report not long ago the conversion of a couple of 'natives'!) Leaders of a Peruvian missionary society have visited London to investigate the possibility of setting up evangelistic work in our

metropolis. Korean Christians have committed themselves to massive involvement in world mission and, already, Korean missionaries are hard at work, mainly in the Far East but also in the United States.

We are discussing church-to-church movement, but the sad thing is that 'Third World Missions', as they are often called, have followed the example given by Western missionaries in forming associations which are 'para-church'. Perhaps this is inevitable in view of the parochialism of most human beings. But any 'way ahead' should strive against this tendency. Once again, Brethren have an advantage over most others in that we think instinctively in terms of 'church' rather than 'mission'. But even we need encouragement to go on sharing our spiritual possessions with others around the world.

Financial aid is more difficult for some to receive than for others to give! By comparison with most others in the world, we in the West are passing rich—however poor we may feel ourselves to be—and we must go on giving even when expatriate missionaries return to us. It is deplorable that, in some cases, financial assistance to enterprises overseas commenced by British missionaries is tied to the active involvement of British personnel and is withheld when they are no longer directly involved.

Some of us may be content to allow Tear Fund to dispense our gifts to the generality of human need, but we need to be reminded of our special relationship with other churches belonging to the Brethren branch of the one Christian family around the world. As a result we may be prompted to respond to pressing needs, such as medical work or publishing, which stretch the resources of the local believers beyond their limit. At present, information about such needs comes to us largely—if not solely—through expatriates and missionary magazines. The time will surely come when more permanent organs of information will be required.

This takes us on to the area of joint consultation. A recent consultation of British Brethren was greatly assisted by the presence of a couple of Swiss Brethren, and we have reason to believe that they in their turn were encouraged by the experience. We have been instrumental in planting Brethren-type churches in many parts of the world. Do we not need to emulate Paul by keeping in touch with them after the need for continuing physical presence has passed? Without doubt the resultant enrichment will be mutual.

Mutual prayer is another ongoing responsibility. Paul taught his converts to pray for one another and to send greetings to each other

(eg Romans 16:16). So often, our prayers for believers abroad are nothing more than spin-offs from our prayers for those who preached the gospel to them and cease when the latter move away. We need to develop ways of forming prayer partnerships with national leaders and churches in other parts of the world, which are not dependent on 'missionary' involvement. In our global village, there is no reason why a church in England should not make a twinning arrangement with a church of similar size and character in some other part of the world. The link might spring from missionary involvement or even a business trip by one of the church members. At a time when overseas holidays are still feasible, some members of the churches concerned might be able to visit each other on holiday. They could certainly keep in touch with and stimulate prayer for each other by means of correspondence, exchange of taped greetings, photographs etc.

### **Missionary education**

From time to time, Brethren have excelled in missionary education. In their heyday, missionary conferences must have done a great deal to stimulate and inform missionary concern. The London Missionary Meetings long fulfilled the functions of a denominational assembly as well as discharging their stated function. Magazines from *The Missionary Reporter* to *Echoes of Service* have enlightened hundreds of churches and thousands of homes. For some years, *Echoes Quarterly* stood almost alone among missionary periodicals as a vehicle of missionary education in depth. Professor Rendle Short's missionary study class movement and the missionary workshops of Don Boak and Hugh Mackay constitute outstanding examples of enterprise and skill in presenting the missionary challenge of the day to the Brethren constituency.

Little of this remains today. It is cold comfort to point out that the fall-off in attendance at the London Missionary Meetings can be paralleled by a similar fall-off in attendance at most other missionary conferences held in London. *Echoes Quarterly* has merged with *Echoes of Service*, and, though it continues to keep established supporters in touch with their respective missionaries and provides a fuller diet than most missionary magazines, the format of the combined paper is not calculated to attract *new* readers. Missionary study classes and missionary workshops are, on the whole, conspicuous by their absence and, apart from traditional missionary deputation, little seems to be attempted by way of missionary education. There are signs, however, of growing

concern and some action, and this is to be welcomed and should be encouraged.

As for the traditional style of missionary reporting, it would not be far wide of the mark to say that it does more harm than good. To a rising generation that expects to hear the bad side as well as—or more than?—the good side, the telling of endless success stories sounds too good to be true. To those who look for the discussion of principles and policies more than anecdotes and dramatic incidents, missionary reporting can be disappointing. And those who have learned to rejoice in all that God is doing in the world today experience sadness if they are told by Brother X that he is the only missionary in the whole of the area where he is working, when they know full well that God has many more of his servants there wearing other hats!

Things are changing, however. Here and there, a local church arranges a missionary weekend and it becomes an annual event. Somewhere else, a group of churches sponsor an area conference, incorporating biblical exposition, discussion of a theme illustrated by the experience of Christian workers at home as well as abroad, and including a period of open prayer. In one or two cases, a world mission display has been arranged to serve all the churches of a town. Occasionally, a missionary conference has taken cognisance of the existence of the church overseas by including among its speakers an overseas national or two.

### **Missionary operations abroad**

Because of their view of the church as a local, autonomous entity, Brethren have a good record of planting churches which are self-governing, self-financing and self-propagating. That is not to say that their missionaries have never been paternalistic and culturally overbearing. I recall worshipping with a Brethren church in South America and forming the distinct impression that it was, in fact, a British congregation speaking in a foreign tongue! But perhaps this thought was put into my mind by the astonishing fact that one of the hymns was sung to the tune of the British national anthem!

Our aim has always been to place the scriptures in the hands of believers, trusting the Holy Spirit to guide them into all truth. But, consciously or unconsciously, we have all too often supplied reading spectacles complete with British Brethren-tinted glass! To be fair, British Brethren practices have been considerably modified in some parts of the world, and some notable examples of this could be given. Such flexibility, which is one of the hallmarks of the

church in the New Testament, is to be encouraged. There were occasions—as in the writing of Galatians—when Paul was prepared, as an apostle, to put his foot down very firmly, but he was also prepared to take risks—massive ones—in order to encourage the speedy development of mature, local leadership. The gospel must be allowed to put down its own roots in local culture.

### Recommendations

At the seminar at which this paper was originally given, a number of recommendations were made, most of which are now being implemented. Plenty of work remains to be done in all the areas covered and therefore, while this section has been revised, the recommendations made then will be repeated, together with some indication of the steps which are being made to translate them into action.

1 A survey has been undertaken in an effort to discover the number of men and women who are engaged in full-time Christian service at home and abroad, with the full commendation of a Brethren church (in addition to those working in fellowship with *Echoes of Service* and Counties Evangelistic Work) and also the number of people in secular employment overseas. To date all the churches in England and Wales have been invited to indicate the number in both these categories. Replies have been received from close on 200 churches, about half of whom have commended a total of over 200 men and women to full-time Christian work at home or abroad apart from those who are connected with EOS and CEW.

It is clear that a substantial number of people from Brethren churches in this country are being called by God to serve him abroad in fellowship with interdenominational agencies. Whatever the reasons, we should be in support of them. *Harvester's* new quarterly bulletin on world mission, *Aware*, as one of its functions, disseminates news about and stimulates prayer for them. It is to be hoped that it will be practicable to publish some form of prayer list on their behalf.

2 The Christian Brethren Research Fellowship has set up a study/action group on world mission which has held a number of meetings. It has a wide remit, and sees its role in terms of encouraging existing bodies to extend their activities in order to fill some of the gaps indicated above, as well as to initiate new activities where these are called for. It finds great encouragement in the fact

that the convenors of the London Missionary Meetings and the editors of *Echoes of Service* are increasing their activities. Some form of joint consultation on missionary matters might be a major step forward.

3 There is an urgent need for an investigation of Brethren missionary education in the United Kingdom with a view to ascertaining what is currently being attempted and what needs to be done.

4 Steps should be taken without delay to ensure that, as soon as possible, Brethren throughout the United Kingdom are made aware of the true state of Christian mission in the world today, with special, but not exclusive, reference to the part played in it by Brethren worldwide.

This will undoubtedly call for the reinvigoration of existing missionary conferences and the commencement of new ones. It may also require the holding of seminars and workshops, summer schools and the like. More importantly, churches should be encouraged to include missionary education in their Sunday school, youth work and church teaching programmes; residential conferences should be urged to place it high on their agendas; general magazines should be reminded of the need to carry articles and reports as a matter of course.

In short, world mission should no longer be regarded as a peripheral concern of the church, handled only in special conferences and weeknight meetings (attended mainly by the already committed), but should be restored to the position of prominence it undoubtedly occupied in the apostolic church.

5 Careful consideration should be given to the possibility that the transition from a 'missionary' to a 'church' situation around the world calls for a new look at the relationship between British Brethren and those churches that have come into existence elsewhere as a result of their missionary activities. Such churches may have few or no local links with other churches—sometimes as a direct result of the view of the church that we have inculcated—and, apart from their links with us, they are in danger of leading an isolated and therefore spiritually 'unnatural' life. Has not the time come when we in the United Kingdom need to

- a) develop links with their church leaders;
- b) meet personally with them for fellowship and mutual consultation (as 'equals') and
- c) publish information not only about expatriate Christian activities

but also about local church activities overseas, as a stimulus to prayer, financial support as appropriate and, in some cases, personal involvement under local leadership?

Steps are already being taken to establish direct links with church leaders in other countries. A conference of European Brethren held in September 1985 is a step in the right direction. It must be stressed that the intention is *not* to attempt to create international structures, *but* to strengthen (or create) links of fellowship for churches which have a special relationship with each other as a result of historical links, shared beliefs and common practices. This is an aspect of the New Testament practice of Christianity which is largely missing from the Brethren scene worldwide. It needs to be attended to—though not at the expense of similar links of fellowship with other Christian churches in the locality which are less closely related but nevertheless part of the one Christian family.