

It is time to rehabilitate missionary

Written by David Dawson

Sunday, 07 September 2008 22:59

You may be surprised that missionary could be in need of rehabilitating, but some readers will have a visceral aversion to hearing this word. It is time to reconsider what we call those who represent the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in international cross-cultural mission.

The recent General Assembly unanimously approved the Dallas Invitation (Expanding Partnership in God's Mission) and affirmed the General Assembly Council's proposal to reverse the half-century decline (from 2,000 to 200) in the number of mission co-workers serving internationally. These are very significant defining moments for the PC(USA) and they provide us an important opportunity to review our beliefs and actions regarding mission.

Many readers will be surprised that using "missionary" is a no-no for some in the PC(USA).¹ Officially we have preferred "fraternal worker" (1960's – 1970's) and "mission co-worker" since then. Presbyterians are far more influenced in their thinking about missionaries by James Michener's *Hawaii* and Barbara Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible* than they are by mission education provided by the PC(USA). In addition to popular literature this bias is also deeply influenced by western scholars.² It seems that some in the PC(USA) defer to popular literature and academic writers for a critical understanding of missionaries. Maybe we should listen to international partners such as world-renowned missiologist Lamin Sanneh who twenty years ago labeled this lack of nerve "the western missionary guilt complex."³

Have missionaries been paternalistic? Have they cooperated with imperialism and economic colonialism? Have they imposed western theological and Biblical understandings as normative Christian expression? Yes (with emphasis) to all of the above! However, missionaries are no better at sinning than the rest of us. They just get to do it cross-culturally in a foreign language more carefully scrutinized than most of us have had to endure.

Robert D. Woodberry (among many other serious mission historians) reminds us that the knee-jerk, emotional, negative reaction to "missionary" is ill-founded. Woodberry writes:

"... religious freedom and missionary activity are usually synergistic; historically, places where they have advanced in tandem have seen a reduction in abuses of power and a[n] expansion of civil society ... they have also been central to the abolition of slavery, the development of mass education, and the flourishing of organizations outside state control ... the effects of the 19th and early 20th century missionaries are still measurable in the educational enrollments, infant mortalities, and levels of political democracy in societies around the world ... there were many problematic missionary methodologies in the colonial era. ... But, we should not lose sight of the positive legacy of missions in the areas of racial attitudes, education, civil society, and colonial reform."⁴

The fact of our incredible power and wealth has been particularly problematic for North Americans. Jonathan Bonk's *Missions and Money* should be required reading for any Christian obtaining a passport for a short-term mission trip. It is indeed frightening to think of how little we have learned from missionaries' mistakes of the past now that any one of us can "be a missionary" simply by buying an airline ticket.

Does that excuse us from Jesus' command to ... be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8)? Of course not! But it should put the fear of God into us. David Bosch⁵ has helpfully suggested that we should engage in mission with "bold humility." Unless we are going to give away all that we have to the poor, we will have to come to grips with participating in God's mission as part of the wealthy of the world.

The Dallas Consultation this past January gives us an opportunity to reconsider some of the missiological biases into which we have drifted. Future historians will probably consider this meeting as the most important defining moment in mission for Presbyterians since a meeting in Lake Mohonk, N.Y., in 1956. Those at that gathering fifty years ago addressed important issues including what name we would use for "missionaries." However, fifty years have passed and some of the paradigms to which we cling from that era have not worn well. They have become parochial and paternalistic.⁶

If you were to search the Internet for "mission co-worker" you would find that virtually all results are PC(USA)-specific. Outside of our denomination the term is practically unknown. We live in a very small PC(USA) world. This term is not known in other North American denominations or in the Majority World (Asia, Africa, Latin America) Church. Koreans, Ethiopians, Sri Lankans, Filipinos, Chinese, Brazilians, and countless others send "missionaries" and they do it in increasingly greater numbers. These churches want us to be partners, not overlords, but they honor the missionary legacy and they have embraced the calling for themselves in staggering numbers.

Our global partners know that there is good reason to use the word "missionary." It reminds us of our roots because it is derived from the Latin *missio* (*mittere*), which means "to send." It parallels the Greek New Testament "apostolic" *apo-* (out) plus *stellein* (to send). The wide interest today in the "missional church" suggests that we have lost our basic understanding of the "church" as a "sent people." We now need an adjective (*missional*) to remind us that we are not a chapel for the members but a community of believers gathered around Word and sacrament for the purpose of "being sent" into the world God loves, announcing the Kingdom of God.

It is time to move beyond our allergic reactions to the term “missionary.” We Presbyterians have been among the leading world mission thinkers and doers in America for more than 350 years.⁷ But in the last fifty years we have increasingly become marginalized and irrelevant. We have not kept up with missiological developments. Our official fixation on “mission co-worker” as the “correct” term is evidence of this. The Dallas Consultation and the General Assembly action on reversing the decline in the number of missionaries give us an opportunity to correct this limitation.⁸

We have ahead of us a huge task of “mission education” in discovering what God has in mind for the PC(USA)’s role in the world Christian movement. We have had our “glory days” but those definitely have passed with the emergence and re-emergence of the church in the Global South. We still have an important (although it surely will be more humble) missionary responsibility. However, the stirrings of the Spirit are quite evident in the Dallas Invitation and the re-commitment to the value of long-term missionaries.

We must not miss this kairos moment.

A good place to begin would be to listen deeply to the Biblical witness, especially as it is interpreted to us by the Majority World church. This practice does not come easy to us. But it would be wise to learn it. One place to start would be in this matter of rehabilitating “missionary.” An important voice that could help us would be Yale mission historian Lamin Sanneh, who was mentioned earlier. In his recently acclaimed book *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity*⁹ he says,

Missions were organized, funded, and directed from the West, a fact that made it easy to construe them as colonialism at prayer, and to see colonialism as the West’s moral mandate. Suitably chastened, missionary organizations have since beat a retreat by speaking modestly of ‘missioner,’ ‘fraternal worker,’ ‘cross-cultural consultant,’ ‘ecumenical partner,’ and anything else as long as it was not the offending word ‘missionary’... I am urging a revisionist history without claiming that missions and colonialism were not in cahoots.”¹⁰

With bold humility let us reclaim our missionary vocation and our privilege to recognize the particular persons who represent us as cross-cultural missionaries. There will be some in the North American mission field who will deride us for this witness, but let us humbly engage them without apology for the sake of Christ.

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1 In spite of some recent insistence on using “mission co-worker” Stated Clerk and former director of the Worldwide Ministries Division, Clifton Kirkpatrick, seems quite comfortable using the term “missionary” in his article “Is There a Future for the Presbyterian Church (USA)?” published in the Price H. Gwynn III Church

Leadership Series. Not one author in the recently published *A History of Presbyterian Missions 1944 – 2007*, Scott W. Sunquist and Caroline N. Becker, eds., uses the term “mission co-worker.” “Missionary” and “missionaries” are used almost 1500 times.

2 See also the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, July, 2008. Any doubt about the widely pejorative assumptions common to the popular definition of “missionary” will be dispelled in an internet search.

3 Lamin Sanneh, “Christian Mission and the Western Guilt Complex,” *The Christian Century*, April 7, 1987, pp. 330 – 334. Sanneh was then teaching at Harvard. Soon after that date he moved to Yale where he is today.

4 “Reclaiming the M-Word: The Legacy of Missions in Non-Western Societies,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, Spring, 2008, p. 17 – 18.

5 *Transforming Mission*, 1991; see also *Mission in Bold Humility*, Willem Saaymand and Klippias Kritzing, eds., Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1996.

6 Lake Mohonk was an important defining moment. For a fuller understanding see *A History of Presbyterian Missions 1944 – 2007*, pp. 17 – 18, 65 – 81, 181, 241.

7 What is today the Southampton Presbyterian Church (Long Island, NY) was founded in 1640. Its first pastor was a missionary to the Shinnecock Indians.

8 We now have, for the first time in decades, two World Mission staff members with a Ph.D. in mission-related fields: Hunter Farrell in anthropology and Michael Parker in mission history.

9 Published by Oxford University Press, 2008, and named one of the top five books on world Christianity by Martin Marty and mission book of the year (*Christianity Today*, April, 2008).

10 Lamin Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity*, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 131 – 132.