

# Mission in the 1980s

By Ernst H. Wendland

Whenever this world comes to a new decade, the experts in all fields of endeavor come forward with their evaluations of the past and their predictions for the future. The field of missiology also has its share of pundits and prognosticators. In fact, the *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research*, a quarterly publication of the Overseas Ministries Studies Center, invited several of the world's foremost missiologists to share their thoughts on the direction Christian mission is likely to take in the decade ahead. Their articles together with those appearing in other missiological reviews offer interesting comparisons.

## A Time of Change

Most mission periodicals agree that the sweeping changes taking place on the world scene in the fields of culture, economics and politics have contributed to growing feelings of uncertainty regarding the mission of the church. There are few remaining unexplored wildernesses for missionaries to conquer. Nations once regarded as open territory for missionary linguists and anthropologists are no longer so ready to have their cultural heritage "disturbed by Western ideas." Some are even beginning to look upon Christianity as a "Western intrusion," restricting visa-permits for foreign personnel. Third World governments are looking more and more at education and medicine as their own business rather than as the responsibility of mission agencies. National churches are becoming very sensitive about their ability to manage their own affairs, showing a strong resentment over against missionaries who still want to play a dominating role.

Apparently missionaries of all persuasions have had their problems adjusting to this new set of circumstances. Roman Catholic Thomas F. Stransky writes: "During the past two decades, that euphoric self-confidence of the Western churches and mission groups has rapidly been replaced by a general missionary discouragement and doubt, erratic and easily rationalized fumbings, masochistic guilt, and self-centered neo-isolationism."<sup>i</sup> Harvie Conn gives the results of a recent survey taken among missionaries of the Evangelical persuasion as reflecting an attitude of "increasing confusion over the theological basis for mission" as well as a "feeling of widespread failure of nerve about the missionary enterprise."<sup>ii</sup> In his presidential address to the American Society of Missiology which met in June of 1979, John T. Boberg had this to say:

This world of the missionary which is falling apart is well-known to all of us: a world of cultural superiority that all too often found expression in a triumphalism and imperialism that makes us blush today. Most important in terms of our present purpose, it was a commonly shared world of values and meaning that inevitably produced its heroes. But that world's heroes are vanishing. Instead theological certitudes are challenged by a value shift from orthodoxis to orthopraxis; a cultural superiority has crumbled under the reality of pluralism; and the missionary is seen as anti-hero.<sup>iii</sup>

In the face of these frustrations and uncertainties missionaries are asking, "Where do we go from here? What's the answer?" As might be expected a variety of answers are suggested.

## Theological Adjustment—How Much?

A theological tone for this changing scene was set at the annual meeting of the American Society of Missiology by Carl E. Braaten of the Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago. Braaten had this to say: "We are living in one world with a plurality of cultures, religions, and ideologies. Either we acknowledge the legitimacy of this pluralism, or we threaten the possibility of living together in a peaceful world."<sup>iv</sup> Today's problem, Braaten holds, is religious pluralism. Today's need, he maintains, is peaceful coexistence among all religions.

Today's answer, he concludes, lies in a "dialogue" approach to people of other cultures and religions as a means of survival.

Braaten explains that in this dialogue with people of other religions we as Christians, while holding to the "uniqueness" of Jesus, dare not lose sight of his "universality." Our approach to people of other faiths, therefore, should not presuppose that Jesus is the only way to salvation. Braaten describes such a presupposition as an eschatology which is "self-centered and vindictive."<sup>v</sup> Instead this dialogue will be "a two-way street, in which the condition of openness to the other religions will be motivated by a knowledge that they also somehow speak of Jesus Christ."<sup>vi</sup> There is, in other words, some kind of mystical "presence of Christ" in all religions.

Unfortunately Braaten's "two-way street" wants to have it both ways and ends up in being no street at all. His "theological adjustment" recommended as a method of coping with this pluralistic world simply adds one more religion to the plurality of religions already in existence. In spite of his protests to the contrary, his emphasis upon the "universality of Christ" ends up in a universalism which makes the "uniqueness of Jesus" of no effect.

### **Social Activism—How Radical?**

When theological values become less certain, churches must look elsewhere for ways of justifying their existence. This has been going on for some time among the members of the World Council of Churches, who ever since their meeting at Uppsala in 1968 have been justifying their social activist programs on a theology of the "human Christ." One can expect that when the WCC Conference on World Mission and Evangelism meets in Australia in May of this year, its theme, "Your Kingdom Come," will emphasize the importance of kingdom work in the "here and now" among the poor and the exploited of this world, and that the kingdom of the "hereafter" will receive very little attention indeed.

Liberationist Barbara Hendricks, the former Roman Catholic President of the Maryknoll Sisters Community, looks for missionaries in the 1980s who will be "sent in mission with the primary and essential goal of sharing a faith experience of Jesus Christ rather than that of teaching doctrinal concepts."<sup>vii</sup> She explains this further: "Ministries that foster justice and peace will more and more be recognized as essentially constituent of the gospel message."<sup>viii</sup>

In this same vein Desmond Tutu, African Bishop of Lesotho, declares: "The 1980s will see the churches and Christians judged by how far they have helped or hindered the final judgment of our Lord's words recorded in Luke 4:17-20." Claiming to speak for "most of the so-called Third World" Tutu adds: "The poor and exploited ones, the voiceless ones without power and influence will want their pie here and now and not in some post-mortem heaven with streets paved with gold."<sup>ix</sup>

Predictably the big debate at Melbourne in 1980 will be whether or not the churches should advocate justice, better distribution of resources, and development of poor nations by non-violent means or by actively supporting revolutionary organizations. The "liberationist theology" wing, of course, is growing in influence and supports any method whereby the social and political structures responsible for inequities and injustices can be overthrown. Others do not go along with this. W. Stanley Mooneyham, President of World Vision International, states emphatically, "I cannot endorse violence as an instrument of change.... Far from being a radical solution, violence is reactionary. It offers no new basis for fundamental change. It is merely a low-level reaction against other violence, real or perceived."<sup>x</sup>

In this connection Mooneyham offers an interesting aside against those who feel that by supporting revolutionary causes they are going to effect great social and economic improvements: "If I sound cynical, it is not without reason. History is filled with examples of the powerless, the disenfranchised, the 'outs' finally gaining power, only to become as repressive and self-seeking as the leadership group that was displaced."<sup>xi</sup> One doesn't have to look very far these days to see this kind of history repeating itself again and again.

## **Contextualization—How Extreme?**

While the World Council of Churches will attempt to set its course for the 1980s at Melbourne in May, the Evangelicals will be following up their Lausanne meeting with a Consultation on World Evangelization in Thailand in June. The Evangelicals, too, have been troubled by the rapid social changes taking place in this world and are asking what kind of adjustments, either in theology or methodology, are required to cope with these changes.

Arthur F. Glasser, retiring editor of *Missiology*, *An International Review*, sees the problem as one of determining what is required on the part of the church “to contextualize its gospel in each particularity of the human scene.”<sup>xii</sup> Glasser points up the issue this way: “Many Evangelicals feel the gospel is so precisely defined in Scripture that one must posit harsh limitations to any contextualizing process.... Those in the more liberal end of the theological spectrum fail in the opposite direction. They define the gospel in such broad terms that it tends to get lost in the contextualizing process.”<sup>xiii</sup>

A test question of how far one should or should not go in “contextualizing the gospel in our pluralistic world” is raised in the last issue of *Missiology* edited by Glasser. Phil Parshall, a missionary from Bangladesh, calls attention to the catastrophic impact of Christian baptism within an Islamic community. Through baptism one becomes “a traitor to Islamic social structures... a member of an alien society of warmongers and adulterers” and thus all but totally excluded from native society.<sup>xiv</sup> As a “solution” to this contextual problem Parshall argues that “there is no possible way to reeducate 720 million Muslims on this issue” and that the word “initiate” should be substituted for “baptize” in Christ’s mission command of Matthew 28:19.<sup>xv</sup>

One fails to see how Parshall’s answer can solve anything, even from a human standpoint, and hopes the Evangelicals don’t spend too much time in Thailand debating over this particular matter. That there are more serious problems with contextualization in these days when nationals are becoming more and more sensitive about their own cultural heritage goes without saying.

### **Melbourne or Bangkok?**

Many missiologists fear that the 1980s are getting off on the wrong foot entirely. The World Council of Churches is holding its Conference on World Mission and Evangelism in May (Melbourne, Australia). The Evangelicals are holding their Consultation on World Evangelization in June (Bangkok, Thailand). Roman Catholic Stransky expresses his misgivings about this: “I see the most ominous and depressing negative sign on the mission horizon of the next decade in the fact that the seventieth anniversary of the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference will be celebrated in 1980 by two expensive, international meetings within five weeks of each other.”<sup>xvi</sup>

Will these two meetings lead to a greater polarization between “evangelicals” and “liberals” on the mission scene? Some missiologists deplore this threat to “mission unity.” Others look forward to these separate forums, convinced that the breach between the two is already fundamental and irreparable. One thing is sure: the “great debate” over mission will continue, and will no doubt be intensified.

### **Our Own Problems**

In the meantime our own world missionaries also enter a new decade. They, too, are confronted with the same growing world instability, the same winds of conflicting doctrines, the same social upheavals. One may nostalgically look back to a “golden age” of missions. Yet one wonders if every decade did not have its own peculiar problems, problems which at the time seemed humanly insurmountable. Mission work in this changing world seems to be a matter of constantly facing new world situations and making adjustments accordingly.

Fortunately making adjustments in our basic theology is not one of our problems, and for this we can be eternally grateful. Our theological definitions of “God,” “salvation,” “making disciples,” “preaching the gospel to every creature” remain constant. What a shattering experience it must be for a missionary to have a solid

foundation upon scriptural truth knocked out from under his feet! Without “beautiful feet” how can he “bring glad tidings of good things” (Ro 10:15)?

Practical problems, however, do confront us in our task. Nationalistic governments are restricting and even denying resident permits to foreign missionaries. Is there a way of carrying on this work through nationals without the presence of missionary personnel? Escalating prices in foreign countries (we in America can’t even imagine how inflation is galloping on other continents!) together with a shrinking dollar have caused endless problems with funding what we have already started, not to speak of expansion. Must we retrench, hold the line, continue to expand? Are there less expensive ways of doing mission work? Must we take a new look at subsidies and capital expenditures abroad?

Living as expatriates in foreign situations is becoming increasingly difficult and at times even precarious the world over. This applies even more to mission personnel than to government personnel. To what extent should this play a part both in the calling as well as in the orientation of our missionaries?

These and other questions face us as we enter the 1980s. Our message remains the same. But the world conditions under which we bring this message will never remain static. May God give us the courage and the foresight to carry on aggressively his most important work no matter how much the outward circumstances in this world may change!

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<sup>i</sup> Thomas F. Stransky, “Mission Power in the 1980s,” *International Review of Mission*, LXIX (January 1980), 41.

<sup>ii</sup> Harvie Conn, “Mission in the 1980s,” *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research*, (April 1979), 53.

<sup>iii</sup> John T. Boberg, “The Missionary as Anti-Hero,” *Missiology, An International Review*, VII (October 1979), 415–416.

<sup>iv</sup> Carl E. Braaten, “Who Do We Say That He Is? On the Uniqueness and Universality of Jesus Christ,” *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research*, IV (January 1980), 2.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, p 5.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, p 7.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, p 10.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, p 11.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, p 12.

<sup>x</sup> W. Stanley Mooneyham, “The Churches and Development—Caring Can’t Wait,” *International Review of Mission*, LXIX (January 1980), 59.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*, p 60.

<sup>xii</sup> Arthur F. Glasser, “Contextualization,” *Missiology, An International Review*, VII (October 1979), 404.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, p 404.

<sup>xiv</sup> Phil Parshall, “Contextualized Baptism for Muslim Convert,” *Missiology, An International Review*, VII (October 1979), 501.

<sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*, p 508.

<sup>xvi</sup> Thomas F. Stransky, “Mission Power in the 1980s,” *International Review of Mission*, LXIX (January 1980), 48.