

Missions in the Churches of Christ: Trends in Theology and Strategy*

Monty Cox
Harding University
Searcy, Arkansas

It is notoriously difficult to generalize about trends within the Churches of Christ, given the diversity of thought and practice in local congregations and the lack of any central organizing body. But it is possible to discern and describe missiological currents with greater certainty since the smaller community of missionaries and returned missionaries enjoys more regular interaction than “the brotherhood” at large. About eighty professors of missions and other missions leaders gather each February at the Teachers of Missions Workshop, co-hosted by Abilene Christian University and Harding University, the two Church of Christ- affiliated liberal arts universities with the largest enrollments. Since the majority of new missionaries in Churches of Christ are recruited by these schools and their sister institutions, it is reasonable to assume that the theology of mission and the missions strategy it inspires that they teach represents the predominant view of mission theology and strategy in this branch of the Restoration Movement.¹

This paper begins with a statistical overview of Church of Christ missions based on a recent census of full-time, long-term North American missionaries, and recent data collected in a nationwide survey on the churches that send them. The main body of the paper presents an evaluation of thirteen key elements of the theology of mission that undergirds what most of our new

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missionaries-in-training in the United States and Canada are being taught. It concludes with a more “user-friendly” list of ten strategic questions raised by those theological shifts and by changing global circumstances.

The Numbers

At our annual Teachers of Missions Workshop in February 2008 in Irving Texas, the eighty-plus participants reviewed every entry in the missionary data base maintained by Missions Resource Network, a network that was established by these same “Teachers of Missions” at their Workshop in 1998. As a result, the numbers in Figure 1 represent the most accurate census of missionary personnel in Churches of Christ in at least a decade. In this census “missionary” is defined as any full-time (at least a two-year commitment) American or Canadian church worker who is currently residing outside of the U.S. and Canada. Missionary spouses are included in the count as “missionaries.”

CONTINENT	NUMBER OF MISSIONARIES
Africa	180
Asia	260
Central/South America	238
Europe	265
Oceania	63
TOTAL	1006

Figure 1. Full-time, long-term North American missionaries serving abroad (2008).

Comparing this total (1006) to other reports illustrates the difficulty of counting missionaries in our fellowship. The *Missions Handbook 2004-2006* shows that in 2004 Churches of Christ supported 816 U.S. missionaries in 91 foreign countries,² making them the ninth largest missions sending agency in North America.³ Another 90-yearreckoning, (Figure 2) begins in 1906 with a total of

12 missionaries, peaks at 800 in 1975, and drops to 500 total missionaries in 1996.

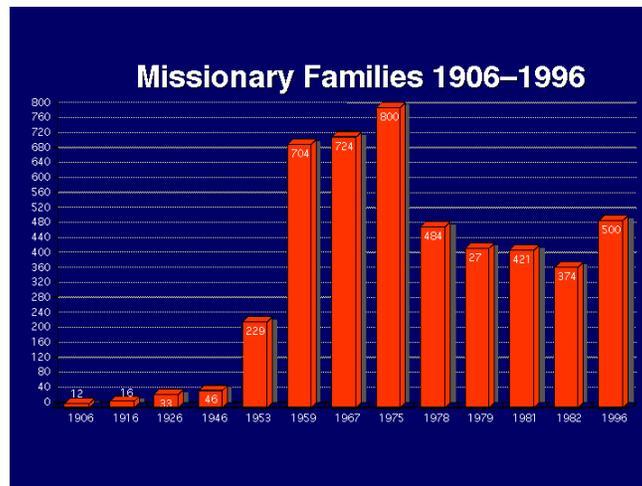


Figure 2. Full-time, long-term North American missionaries serving abroad (Harding University Center for World Missions).

How do we reconcile the discrepancies in these statistics? Have the Churches of Christ really experienced a 23% increase in the number of missionaries since 2004? Has the number of missionaries more than doubled since 1978, despite the fact that the entire fellowship grew only 2.8% over the same time period?⁴ It is more likely that the different numbers reflect different methods of defining and counting “missionaries.” One census may include foreign nationals on U.S. support and another won’t. One census may include spouses, another might not. We cannot know for certain whether or not the number of missionaries is increasing or declining.

Missiologists Gailyn Van Rheenen and Bob Waldron conducted a nationwide survey of the philosophy and practices of local church missions committees within Churches of Christ in 1998-1999. Specifically, they gathered data at the congregational level regarding missions interest, the level of satisfaction with the missions efforts, the role of missions leaders, missions strategies, inspiration for missions,

financial support, and the selection and care of missionary personnel. The results and their analysis were published in a small volume entitled, *The Status of Missions: A Nationwide Survey of Churches of Christ* (ACU Press, 2002) and inform today's presentation.⁵ They found, for example, that 70% of the church missions committees that responded reported that they did not have a written missions policy.⁶ Assuming that written policies articulate missionary strategies, the lack of such policies at the sending-church level may be telling.

To the extent that missions giving is a barometer of the health of a fellowship's missions emphasis, the news is not great. Perhaps Tom Telford of the Association of Church Missions Committees (ACMC) sets the bar high when he suggests that a church should give at least 33% of its entire budget to missions in order to feel "the [positive] effects of sacrificial giving."⁷ The study conducted by Van Rheenen and Waldron revealed that only 9% of the churches that responded give more than 25% of their budget to foreign missions, 27% spend 15-25%, 50% devote just 14% or less, and 26% commit less than 7%.⁸

Theology of Mission

David Bosch's *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis, 1991) is arguably the most thorough treatment of current trends in the theology of mission in Christendom in general in the last twenty-five years.⁹ Here I will offer a brief summary of each of Bosch's "thirteen elements of an emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm" along with an appraisal of each of those elements as I perceive them in Churches of Christ.¹⁰

1. *Mission as the church-with-others.* Bosch wrote that "partnership" between "older" and "younger" churches was replacing historical models of interaction now considered condescending. "Partnership" ideally means genuine interdependence and mutual responsibility. The term "partnership" is commonly used in missions discussions in Churches of Christ, but it is often reduced to financial partnership, where the churches in America provide the funds and the "foreign" churches supply the personnel. My own PhD dissertation was entitled, "Euthanasia of Mission' or 'Partnership" (1999) and traces these developments in missions supported by Churches of Christ, particularly in Kenya.¹¹

2. *Mission as Missio Dei.* Like others before him, Bosch argued that “missions” is a subset of God’s greater mission, to reconcile the world to Himself. It is *His* mission; we are merely participants. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this truth is sinking in. Church of Christ missionaries are much more likely than they once were to see themselves as God’s instruments through whom God does His work.

3. *Mission as mediating “salvation.”* According to Bosch, enlightened Christians now define “salvation” holistically; “being saved” means more than simply having one’s sins forgiven. Churches of Christ have been slow to embrace a more holistic understanding of salvation, due perhaps to a lingering suspicion of the “Social Gospel” and resistance to the theological “liberalism” that drove it. Younger missionaries are catching on, however, seeking training in development ministries of all kinds and implementing more holistic approaches.¹²

4. *Mission as the quest for justice.* Bosch concluded that the emerging missionary paradigm includes more concern for engagement with the world on two fronts: a) increased involvement of the church in matters of state, and b) the integration of evangelism and social concern. There is a discernible increase in political activism (usually conservative) in this branch of the Restoration Movement. There is also evidence, as noted above, of a reversal of the “Great Reversal,” Bosch’s phrase which describes the evangelical rejection of the “Social Gospel.” For example, younger members in large numbers, especially missions students, are supporting the cause of the “Invisible Children” of Uganda, are advocating for Fair Trade policies, joining the International Justice Mission, and so on.¹³

5. *Mission as evangelism.* Bosch maintained that evangelism is being redefined in the emerging paradigm. Among his eighteen points of re-definition, Bosch wrote that a) mission aims at response but is not legitimized *only* by a positive response; b) evangelism means witnessing, not judging; c) evangelism is more than the verbal proclamation of the gospel. Christians must flesh out faith for evangelism to be effective; d) authentic evangelism aims at transforming people, not just satisfying them; it focuses on truth, not just on the rewards of obedience; e) evangelism does not equal proselytism; and f) evangelism should not be equated with church

extension, preoccupied with numerical growth or exclusively individualistic.

Generally speaking, this new understanding of evangelism is being embraced and taught by teachers of missions in most of our missions training institutions. But such talk would raise the suspicion in many congregations (and our more conservative schools) that the teachers have bought into a liberal theological agenda and become “ecumenical.” A sectarian identity is staunchly defended in some circles. For such members, Christians in the “denominations” are still targets of “evangelism.”

6. *Mission as contextualization.* Bosch applauds the new emphasis on “theology from below,” but cautions that it tends to elevate context over text. Missions teachers in Churches of Christ accept the “self-theologizing” of Paul Hiebert, but many members would still be hesitant to “allow” younger churches on the mission field such freedom.¹⁴

7. *Mission as liberation.* Bosch believed that the “liberation theology” of an earlier generation (represented by Gustavo Gutiérrez’s 1973 book, *A Theology of Liberation*) is now being moderated to address, in this order, liberation from a) sin; b) the oppression of individuals; and c) the systematic oppression of whole groups. As noted previously, the younger generation in particular demonstrates increased awareness of worldwide injustices; they are much more likely than their forbears to participate in attempts to right such wrongs.

8. *Mission as inculturation.* Bosch believed that the emerging missionary paradigm would usher in a new understanding of inculturation (or “indigenization”). There are reasons to believe that many missions leaders in the Churches of Christ are realizing the shortcomings of the “old” conventional wisdom on inculturation (for example, “accommodation” never included a critique of Western theology as a “prefabrication” imposed on non-Westerners; any form of inculturation was considered a concession that was “allowed”) and embracing the new understanding of inculturation that stresses, among other things, that the Holy Spirit and the local church, not the missionaries, are the primary agents of inculturation, that inculturation is all-inclusive; i.e. touches every aspect of life and culture, and

that inculturation is a two-way street; i.e. we need “interculturalization”—Christians from different cultures learning from each other.

9. *Mission as common witness.* Bosch noted that more Catholic and mainline Protestant missionaries are realizing that unity and mission are inseparable. Churches of Christ have been slow to join other fellowships in cooperative efforts, though a growing number of members acknowledge the “invisible unity of the church.” For example, many “sending churches” have no trouble sending missionaries to plant Churches of Christ even in highly churchied places (what Bosch labeled the “Protestant virus”). New, young missionaries, on the other hand, demonstrate a clear preference for launching new church planting ministries among “unchurched peoples,” a preference that more and more “sending” congregations affirm. Veteran missionaries since the 1970’s have typically reported much fellowship with missionaries of other denominations. Cooperation—a step beyond fellowship—is less common, but on the rise.¹⁵

10. *Mission as ministry by the whole people of God.* Bosch believed that the new paradigm will include an expanded role in missions for the “laity.” He pointed to the proliferation of house churches and small groups as a reflection of this trend. He also notes that Protestant churches in general exported the “clergy” model to the “younger” churches abroad. Such is the case in Churches of Christ where the typical missionary and missions committee would understand the “one-paid-preacher-per-congregation” approach as indispensable, despite their historically harsh criticism of the “clergy-laity” distinction in other fellowships here at home.

11. *Mission as witness to people of other living faiths.* Bosch believed that respectful dialogue will characterize the relationship between Christian faith and other religions without diminishing the mission to non-Christians. He recognized the increasing popularity of the inclusivism and pluralism that are displacing the exclusivism of an earlier generation. A shift from a “christocentric” view of salvation to a “theocentric” view makes the shift theologically tenable to those who still take the Bible seriously.

12. *Mission as theology.* Before the term “missional” surfaced in the literature, Bosch made the case that when missiology is separated from theology, both suffer. Yet the traditional “fourfold pattern” of theological disciplines (text, church history, systematic theology and practical theology) did just that; it separated missions from theology. There is discernible movement within this branch of the Restoration Movement to correct this problem, particularly by revising curricula to emphasize the missional nature of theology.¹⁶

Before Bosch, Harvey Conn, in his insightful book, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds* (1984), challenged theological educators to redesign theological education to fit non-Western contexts.¹⁷ Western ideas of ministry training that should be challenged, he argued, include a) the professionalization of ministry (which separates “clergy” and “laity”); b) the cognitive (as opposed to practical) focus; c) the one-pastor-per-congregation model; d) ideas about “ordination”; and e) the “schooling” model which separates theory from praxis.

Many of our schools, including Harding University, are wrestling with the implications of these insights for our own American contexts.

13. *Mission as action in hope.* Bosch believed that the emerging paradigm will include a renewed eschatological emphasis, but one in which “already” weighs more than the “not yet.” Sadly, the eschatological expectations that fueled missions in the 19th century (including missions in the Restoration Movement) faded by the 20th century as eschatological hope devolved into a secular Social Gospel agenda driven by evolutionary anthropology and theological liberalism. Bosch believed that living “between the times” (“already” and “not yet”) means we avoid extremes—either preoccupation with the life to come (and thus, too little emphasis on mission) or such a sense of urgency that we act as if it is all up to us.

Missions Strategy

The theological shifts outlined in the previous section reflect changing global circumstances and raise serious strategic questions for missionaries and missions sending agencies. In recent years I have been posing the following ten questions to missions leaders in local congregations to stimulate strategic thinking.

How will we respond to the pluralism and relativism of our culture? I hope our response will be to “speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15) and to “set apart Christ as Lord” (I Pet. 3:15). Such love inspires us to learn more about people and to seek to understand their philosophical commitments, including their attraction to popular spiritual “alternatives.” At the same time, the Lordship of Christ will motivate us to defend the Truth, namely the exclusive truth claims of Christ and His followers.

Will we send our sons and daughters to an increasingly dangerous world, especially among the major blocs of unreached peoples? I am referring to the “unreached peoples” not considered Christian by anyone’s definition, including Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Shintos, and others. It is among these peoples that Christian preaching is most “out of season,” that it meets with the greatest hostility. But looking at a map of the world from a missionary point of view, the “easy” places have all been taken. Do we want our children to choose fields like those? I sense that many young people in this generation of prospective missionaries are willing to accept this high calling, but face resistance from many of their parents.

How will we respond as more and more nations close their doors to Western missionaries? Some would say that vocational missionaries are the answer. Yet how realistic is it for someone with a full-time job to do what it takes to plant a viable church in a foreign setting? Others would say we should just get behind the national missionary movement. “Look at what the Ghanaians are doing to evangelize neighboring countries!” Yes, there are success stories, but elsewhere there are serious limitations, due to a lack of preparation and resources. So we must find ways to fan the flame of national missionary movements without crippling them with dependency on foreign support.

How will we respond to the urbanization of our world when our churches are mostly suburban or rural? Half of the world’s population is now urban. But Churches of Christ haven’t built many strong urban churches either at home or abroad.¹⁸ A strong fifty-year push for planting large urban congregations in Latin American cities has not produced the growth we hoped for there.¹⁹ In the U.S.

Churches of Christ have many inner-city ministries, but very few multicultural, multi-class urban congregations.

Will we commit to cross-cultural ministry in our own communities? A *USA Today* report (March 2004) from the U.S. Census Bureau shows that by the year 2050, the majority ethnic group in America will be Hispanic, not Caucasian (though Hispanics actually represent many different ethnic groups). I hope we're not still talking about "Anglo churches" and "Hispanic" churches in the year 2050! It is cause for concern that in 2008, in Churches of Christ, we still have "black churches" and "white churches." Members of Churches of Christ must be much more intentional about stepping out of our comfort zones right here at home and building bridges into communities filled with people not like "us."

Will we do what it takes to be more intentional about the way we do missions? "Doing what it takes" means, among other things, establishing criteria for missions decision-making in advance, and putting the criteria in the form of a mission policy statement. As noted previously, the Van Rheenen/Waldron study revealed that only 70% of Church of Christ missions committees report that they operate according to a written missions policy. Those that said they did have a written missions policy were much more likely to report that their congregation enjoyed a "high level of involvement" in missions.²⁰

"Doing what it takes" also means being more serious about missions education at the congregational level. In the Van Rheenen/Waldron study, 65% of the respondents reported that they had never studied world missions in an adult Bible class; only 12% said they had (2002, 46-47). Less than 10% of the respondents said they had devoted at least a quarter to missions at either the elementary or high school level. No wonder that, when asked about their "level of satisfaction" with their own congregational missions practices, only 52% of the respondents said they were satisfied with their congregation's efforts in missions education.²¹ Missions Resource Network is strategizing to correct this problem by publishing more materials for missions education in Sunday Schools and training more Sunday school teachers in missions.²²

Church leaders must be more personally invested in missions if their congregations are to become more intentional. According to the Van Rheenen/Waldron research, churches that could identify at

least one “missions elder”—that is, one elder who served as a liaison to the missions committee— were twice as likely to say that their church was “highly involved” in missions.²³ Likewise, the “involvement” score doubled in the congregations where the preacher preached at least one to three sermons per year on world missions.²⁴

Intentionality also requires that overseeing churches hold their missionaries accountable to do the work they are sent to do. Yet 56% of the respondents in the nationwide survey reported that they knew of no written goals for the missionaries they supported.²⁵

Will we commit to long-term, personal evangelism rather than short-term, less personal evangelism? The tremendous increase in short-term missions in Churches of Christ in recent years is both positive and negative. On the positive side, perhaps nothing energizes a congregation for missions like short-term missions trips for members. Van Rheenen and Waldron found that 72% of the congregations in their nationwide survey had sent their own members on short-term mission trips; 65% of those trips were to foreign countries. Sixty-four percent of the churches said that each campaign had involved twenty or more of their members.²⁶ But on the negative side, we must be careful that short-term missions don’t draw resources away from more effective, long-term workers who can be the Word made flesh dwelling among people in ways that short-termers cannot. Short-term mission efforts must be organized with long-term goals and strategies in mind.

How can we partner with nationals in ways that help and don’t hurt? Or put another way, how do we balance the need to share our wealth with our brothers and sisters with the crippling effects of dependency? Our goal must be the establishment of churches that are “locally owned and operated.” Unfortunately, an emphasis on short-term missions seems to bring with it a tendency to build churches abroad with large amounts of financial support which can do more harm than good.

Will we commit to holistic ministry that transforms without “watering down” the message? “Holism” is still a scary word to some in Churches of Christ who remember the days of the “social gospel” in which “liberal” churches decided that, since we can’t be sure that Jesus alone is “the Way, the Truth and the Life,” then at least we can

still pass out cups of cold water in His name. Some still fear that any talk of “holism” means evangelism is no longer the priority. Others say “holistic ministry” is legitimate only insofar as it opens doors for evangelism. We still talk about “spiritual” and “physical” in modern, dualistic ways, not in biblical terms. But there is reason to believe that a more holistic emphasis taught by the teachers of missions and others is resonating with more of our missions students and the churches that send them.

On the other side of the reorientation occurring at the moment in Churches of Christ in America, will we unite to be a “light to the Gentiles”? What I have labeled “reorientation,” others call “an identity crisis.” But I prefer to think of it more positively as a reorientation to the central truth of Christian faith—Jesus, the Son of God! Churches of Christ need more open dialogue about this identity issue, though widespread anxiety about the future of our fellowship inhibits the conversation. Thankfully, self-appointed brotherhood watchdogs either aren’t barking as loudly anymore or no one is paying attention! The younger generation certainly won’t. If we, the older generations, insist on perpetuating the sectarian spirit that has come to characterize “us” in some places, we will lose the next generation. At the very least, we will have a hard time finding prospective missionaries among them.

We must repent of this sectarian spirit and unite around the common purpose of being “a light to the Gentiles” (Is. 49:6).

Conclusion

The level of cooperation between missionaries, the institutions that train them, and the churches that send them in Churches of Christ is perhaps higher today than it has ever been. Today, the majority of Church of Christ missionaries work together in teams. Many of the churches that support missionaries in the same foreign field gather every year or two in meetings they call “Together for Togo,” “Balkan Summit,” or “China Forum.” In July of 2008, the whole brotherhood will convene its second “Global Missions Conference” in Arlington, Texas. Such cooperation—a much healthier alternative to the strict autonomy of the past—is enhancing missionary effectiveness in observable ways.

I thank God that the same spirit of cooperation is now extending to the other branches of the Restoration Movement and beyond. May God continue to heal the divisions of the past and unite us to be “a light to the Gentiles.”

Endnotes

¹ For example, in 1998, the Center for World Missions at Harding University listed 656 missionaries in its missionary data base. More than 200 of those listed were Harding alumni.

² Dotsey Welliver and Minnette Northcutt, eds. *Missions Handbook 2004- 2006: U.S. and Canadian Protestant Ministries Overseas* (Wheaton, IL: Billy Graham Center, 2004), 35.

³ The statistics were provided the editors by Missions Resource Network. In the same listing, Christian Churches/Churches of Christ ranked sixth with 1015 U.S. missionaries in 66 countries, (35).

⁴ According to Flavil Yeakley’s recent report, *Good News and Bad News: A Realistic Assessment of Churches of Christ in the United States 2008* (published privately by the author, 2008), 10.

⁵ They sent a written survey to 955 Churches of Christ in the U.S. with a Sunday morning attendance of 100 or more and received responses from 116 congregations. These 955 congregations were randomly selected from a list of all Churches of Christ in the United States. Every fourth congregation listed, with a Sunday morning attendance of 100 or more, received a survey.

⁶ Gailyn Van Rheenen and Bob Waldron, *The Status of Missions: A Nationwide Survey of Churches of Christ* (ACU Press, 2002), 35.

⁷ Mike Pollard, 1988. *Cultivating a Missions-Active Church* (Wheaton, IL: Advancing Churches in Missions Ccommitment, 1988), 54.

⁸ *The Status of Missions*, 62-63

⁹ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991).

¹⁰ From Bosch’s Chapter Twelve entitled, “Elements of an Emerging Ecumenical Missionary Paradigm,” (368-510).

¹¹ Monte B.Cox, ‘Euthansia of Mission’ or ‘Partnership’?

An Evaluative Study of the Policy of Disengagement of Church of Christ Missionaries in Rural Kenya. Ph.D. dissertation (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1999).

¹² I see support for this claim in the growing popularity of the Development Ministry course taught at Harding University's H.U.T. missionary training facility near Searcy, AR. (See www.harding.edu/cwm/hut).

¹³ For example, Kenneth Starr, Dean of Pepperdine Law School, recently reported (in an oral presentation at Pepperdine University, May 1, 2008), that 300 students (of 900) at Pepperdine Law School were members of the International Justice Mission.

¹⁴ Paul Hiebert introduced the term "self-theologizing" in his book, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985).

¹⁵ To cite one example, Pioneer Bible Translators, founded by Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, openly recruits workers from the *a cappella* branch of the Movement.

¹⁶ The College of Biblical Studies at ACU, for example, is involved in a process of revising their entire curriculum to make it more "missional," as a product of their participation in the Gospel and Our Culture Network.

¹⁷ Harvey Conn, in his insightful book, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Dialogue*. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P and R Publishing, 1984).

¹⁸ To illustrate, of the 116 congregations that responded to the nationwide survey conducted by Van Rheenen and Waldron, 64% of them were in cities of under 100,000 population (2002, 7).

¹⁹ This "main avenue" strategy has been preferred since 1960 by Continent of Great Cities, a parachurch organization that recruits and trains Church of Christ missionaries for Latin America.

²⁰ *The Status of Missions* 36

²¹ *Ibid.*, 11

²² *Ibid.*, 48.

²³ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.