

Periodic Paper # 2

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RETHINKING MISSION

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Fr. MacMahon was born in Booterstown, Ireland in 1938. He was ordained in 1962, and soon after was appointed to Korea, and attended language school in Seoul. Spending his career almost entirely in Korea, Fr. MacMahon has worked in parishes, with lay missionaries as a regional coordinator, and with the Apostolic Nunciature. His writings have been published in numerous mediums, from newsletters to the "Korea Times". He has been active with AITECE and serves as a Board member. In 1999, he was appointed Vice-Coordinator of the China Mission Unit.

Thanks to restrictive cultures, such as those of China, India and the Islamic countries, we are reminded of how narrow our vision of mission has become. They do not permit what we had come to see as the normal means of mission (parish and welfare ministries run by foreigners) but that does not mean mission is impossible there. Rather we are led to rediscover the original and precise task of mission. This is fortunate because in the immediate future the number of missionaries is likely to be small and they have to be aware of where and how they can be most effective in the modern world. The following article outlines the present dilemma of mission and where the future lies.

Over the past forty years Catholic missionaries have known considerable success, the challenge of change and, finally, doubt about their very future. Most remain convinced that there will be mission as long as there is a Church but few new candidates are joining them and their energy is diminishing. Instinctively they turn to the latest theologies for direction and reassurance but are slow to recognize that their own valuable experience on the front lines is more likely to provide the answers they are seeking.

My own involvement in the traumatic changes in mission was in Korea and, more recently, China. By the end of the 1980s, the main missionary societies in Korea (the M.E.P., Maryknoll, Guadalupe and Columbans) could look back on a job well done. In the previous thirty years they had established hundreds of new parishes, seen the number of believers double, and then double again. In 1967 there were 707,000 Catholics in Korea, in 1989 there were 2,613,000 and by 2002 they had risen to 4,348,000. The missionaries had helped form a strong local clergy and both at home and abroad the Korean Church was respected for its courageous stand on human rights and social issues.

This success posed a dilemma for the missionaries: had they worked themselves out of a job? Should they stay on in supporting roles or move on to where

they were needed more?

By then few other countries were seeking foreigners for key ministerial or evangelising roles. Indeed major non-Christian populations like China, India and the Islamic world prohibited direct evangelisation by foreigners. Mission, as it has been known in recent centuries, was running out of options and had to be rethought if it was to continue.

A CUTTING EDGE OF THE LOCAL CHURCH?

At first it seemed that a future might lie in introducing a variety of new ministries to Korea. An example was the apostolate among the urban poor in Seoul which a number of Columbans undertook in the early 1990s. The team involved lived in a typical shack in a temporary settlement area and worked with the local Catholics and people for the wider community. Their goal was to develop a Catholic community centered on *Scripture, service and cultural sensitivity*. It could have been ground-breaking missionary work but the agenda of the local people was different and soon questioned this assumption.

BIBLICAL BASE

To deepen the people's scriptural awareness, Bible reflection gatherings were organized each month for the 15 area groups into which the Catholic families were divided. The meetings were held in one of their homes. It soon became apparent that the real interest of the people was not in Scripture but in their everyday health, family and economic concerns. Their preferred religion was one that would enable them to control good and bad fortune (and spirits) and help them forget their anxieties. Building Scripture study around miracle stories or encouraging charismatic-style prayers and singing might have satisfied their felt religious needs but the Gospels do not indicate that this is what Christ came to give them.

SERVICE FOR WHOM?

With encouragement the community became involved in a number of projects for the locality: a credit union, resettlement issues, medical clinics, night schools and care for children, invalids and the aged. On the leadership level there was close cooperation with a local Protestant church and a Buddhist center.

At the same time, the better-off Catholics were looking forward to the day when the community would have an imposing church, and a convent, kindergarten and doctrine halls they could be proud of. Eventually economic progress led to their being raised to the status of parish and a local priest took over. Despite his desire to continue the former tradition of service, a five-story church had to be built and the emphases moved from involvement in the wider community to fund raising and maintaining the ecclesiastical structure. Collaboration with other religions became a formality.

The realities of Korean society brought about this transformation but is that what is meant when we speak of establishing a truly Korean Church?

HOW LOCAL THE CHURCH?

The final goal of the urban poor apostolate was to form a community that reflected Korean tradition and spirit. Again the local people showed a limited vision of what this called for. Most Catholics were content with their Church's foreignness — they liked its progressive and Western image. The fact that the Western liturgy, publications and catechetical works had been translated into Korean seemed to satisfy them.

Only a few were aware that their Church was a duplicate of a Western model which was rapidly declining in its lands of origin. In Korea itself the youth were already showing it did not meet their needs. Its emphasis on externals overshadowed its spiritual message and its efforts to draw on Korean culture were largely decorative.

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DASHED HOPES

The Columban apostolate among the urban poor in Seoul came to an end when the Catholic community with which they worked became a parish. However, the difficulties encountered in trying to make it Scripture based, service centered and inculturated had shown the limitation to missionary work in a Church already firmly developed on traditional Western lines and under local leadership.

There was still hope that a role remained for missionaries in the young but vigorous Korean Church by raising mission awareness. But if mission had reached its limits in Korea where were new missionaries to be sent? The old forms of mission were no longer needed so what was the next generation of missionaries being called to do? This missionary stalemate raised questions which few understood at that time. Later, in the context of China, I could get a better view of where the problem lay.

CHINA: FACED WITH THE BASICS

Today mission to China is viewed as impossible by many missionary societies because there are no openings for parochial ministry, or directing social and educational projects. This shows how narrow our thinking has become. In modern China the foreign missionary contribution is made through quiet presence and personal service. This is not a second-class way of doing mission, rather it is a reminder of how mission began and how it is best achieved.

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The original role of missionaries was to sow the Gospel seed, form local leaders and hand over to them the responsibility for the growing Church. Then they moved on. It was only later that they saw their task as that of establishing churches on the Roman model and taking on the responsibility for running those churches till, sooner or later, a local clergy could share that responsibility with them. Often that took many generations and there was

a reluctance to leave at all. Mission became "ministry in another culture". It took the challenge of entering "closed" cultures like those of China, India and the Islamic countries to renew modern mission and return it to its basics. That in itself might not have been sufficient to make mission societies change their thinking but the

contemporary shortage of missionary vocations forces them to consider how they can make the best use of their reduced membership. The fulltime missionaries that do exist should not be hidden away in minor roles but be placed where they can make most impact.

Before expanding on the three primary goals of mission (sowing, forming and handing over) a prior question must be addressed: is mission still necessary at all today?

MOTIVATION FOR MISSION

The old inspiration for going on mission — to save souls — has lost its value and the need to spread the Kingdom by defending human rights and creating sufficiency has been taken on by professional and dedicated NGOs.

What Christianity offers is at the most basic level. People are not going to adjust their life-style — even if they know it makes others poorer and destroys the environment — unless they have a radical transformation of heart and this is the area in which Christianity specialises.

Reflection on the life and death of Christ, and his/her own experience, has led the missionary to find God as the living and moulding force in their own life. Because this means much to them they wish to share the discovery with others, encouraging them to change their lives if necessary. This liberating challenge of Christianity has to be asserted in all cultures but missionaries see their task as that of focusing on those who historically have had little or no opportunity to hear it. Now we can return to the manner in which this is done.

SOWING THE SEED

In order to influence others one must be present among them and the most appropriate form of Christian presence is personal service. Those who are attracted by its unselfish example will want to know the reasoning behind it and its simplicity will not distract them by seeming to offer any institutional benefit — social, educational or economic.

To answer initial enquiries the bearer of the message must be able to articulate his/her convictions in simple terms.

**IS
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TODAY?**

Young people, in China and elsewhere, recognize propaganda in any form and are impressed only by a sustained life-style that challenges the superficial values around them. When they seek written materials to deepen their understanding of Christianity it should be primary sources such as the Gospels, and not doctrinal works, that are offered to them. It is the Holy Spirit that guides the seed to fruition and missionaries should be in no hurry to assume that role.

While missionaries need to be clear on what they have to offer, familiarity with the local language and culture is also essential so that local concepts and symbols are used to deepen communication and draw the seeker into dialogue.

FINDING LEADERS

The timing of the urban poor project in Seoul in the 1990s was too late to succeed in forming communities on personal, Scripture-based spirituality. The people had already found a certain attraction in a Catholicism based on church fellowship and a set of practical religious regulations. It provided continuity with the formality and hierarchy of their Confucian background.

At the same time, a number of people were looking for a closer relationship with God and sought Bible study and meditation groups to help deepen their spirituality. Earlier missionaries should have sought out and concentrated on such candidates. However, the theological context of the age and the widely accepted drive for rapid Church expansion encouraged missionaries to opt for large numbers. They used catechetics and public devotions to cope with the crowds and this also solved the problem for them as foreigners to share on a serious level.

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ENTRUSTING THE CHURCH

The missionary ideal would be to gather in communities those who showed an awareness of what Christianity is about so that they could support each other and enable group witness and worship. In due time such communities — in communion with the universal Church — would be the ones to develop the institutions, sacraments and theologies of a truly local Church. They would be the ones to take evangelisation on to its later stages.

However in many countries, including China, the Church already exists in some form and even those who have found Christianity outside it will eventually come in contact with its present day reality. They may be disappointed by what they find so the missionary will have to help them cope with the situation and show them how they can contribute to the renewal of their Church.

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involved in long-term “hands-on” ministries they will concentrate on finding committed Christians to take on those tasks.

Their witness will be personal rather than institutional and articulated in scriptural and spiritual language rather than theological.

Foreigners can also broaden the formation of local clergy, Religious and lay leaders by providing them with opportunities to experience alternative forms of Church.

FINALLY

Mission will be by small groups of well motivated and specially trained missionaries. Rather than getting

Their efforts will be addressed, not to large numbers, but to potential servant-leaders who are attracted by the spiritual basis of Christianity. Their goal will be to encourage communities of reflecting Christians to take on the responsibility, in communion with the wider Church, of developing a local Church that evolves its own theologies, liturgies and Christian identity.

If they succeed, their model of mission will have much to offer their home Churches in their efforts to recreate the Church in the modern world.

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