

A PHILOSOPHY OF MISSION

by Edwin I. Weaver

I.

Beginning

Our mission began working with the independent Mennonite Church in 1958. There were 50-60 unorganized (disorganized) congregations by 1959 for which the mission accepted some sponsoring responsibility. When some few minimum standards were set up by 1960 there were 10 weak congregations left, all with untrained and really unqualified leaders. With these our work began.

Our churches wanted schools, hospitals and institutions, such as other missions gave to their churches. They wanted and were already receiving allowances for their leaders. It was expected that we too would follow the usual pattern of a denominational mission. They expected us to also compete with the many, many missions and churches already established, some for a hundred years or more -- as did all the newer American missions.

To about all their expectations we said, "No." Emphatically, "No!" This seemed to us to be a late day in the history of missions to now start building schools and institutions, responsibility for which governments of the newer nations are everywhere in the world taking over. We simply had to accept the day.

The pattern of the missionary paying allowances directly to church leaders was changed to the mission paying a maximum of \$20-0-0 monthly to a central fund of the church, and administered by the executive committee of the church, of which the missionary was already a member. Effort was made and a program worked out whereby the church at large was challenged to participate in the support of leaders. From time to time as we gained experience, methods of support have had to be revised. And now after 7 years, support of leaders is

still one of the major problems. It is in all churches. Repeated effort has been made to challenge the mission on their attitude to the support of leaders. There is still hope that some day, somehow, the mission will give in. But whatever may happen we must boldly hold our position. The church must support its leaders, but missionaries must work with the church in teaching and guiding so that the best answers to the problem may be found. The whole question of leadership is basic to the future of the church. Therefore, we as missionaries cannot be negative or refuse to participate in positive ways in working out the problems of the Church. In everything from the beginning we felt the need to work in fellowship and in cooperation with the church. This does not mean that we are to be controlled by the church. The church is free and self-determining. ^{to} So/a degree, so are we. But the mistake of former years, of separation of mission and church must not be repeated. From the beginning the mission and church must work together.

II

Finding the Answers

We had to have an answer to the request of the church for schools. They expected us to build schools. There seems to be no stronger desire expressed by Africans than the desire for progress through education. For us not to have schools was unthinkable to our churches. To say "no!" to schools and still work out a positive, constructive answer, this was our problem. The pressure on us was very great.

Rightly or wrongly, we believed that a positive answer might be found by helping to train some of the young people of the church. We firmly believed that this was a better answer to the needs of the church than for the mission to spend vast sums of money to build various kinds of educational institutions, even if that would have been possible, schools which the Government would eventually take over.

So from the time of our arrival in Nigeria the mission has given various kinds of scholarships: for trade training, for secondary schools, for nursing, for agriculture, for Bible and theological training, etc. Most of the money was spent for secondary school education. Later we have, we believe, rightly given more emphasis for trade training and theological training.

The scholarship program has experienced a history of changes. We tried different ways of working it out. Many times we have failed. We regret things that have happened. It has been the most difficult part of our program to work out by far. If we took the old way of fully controlling it ourselves and not involve the church in working it out it would be relatively easy. But if we mean what we say in section "I" then in this too we must work in cooperation with the church to find the best way through the difficult problems involved. We believe that to help educate and train African young people is still today justifiable mission motivation. We do not have all the answers on how best to do this. We must seek God's guidance and keep learning from experience.

III

Cooperation or Competition?

We suddenly found ourselves on a confused mission field with many, many churches of a great variety of kinds, already here on the field, working in the old familiar patterns. That was back in 1959. More new American missions are still coming. This is a famous, fertile field for proselytizing. We were long enough on another mission field to know some of the motivation of the people who called us. How could we best give a Christian witness in such confusion? We knew that it would not be best to limit our testimony to a small group of Independent Churches when there must be actually different Independent Churches running into the hundreds. Here itself was a vast mission field that the Older Mission Churches refused to touch. There are historic reasons.

On the other hand we also could not neglect the Older Mission Churches and do respectable, acceptable mission work, by disregarding them, or working in competition with them. We were placed squarely in the middle of a church, or mission, situation in which we could do no other than work in a role of reconciliation. This only made sense to us. We therefore began seeking open doors of relationship to both the Mission Churches and the Independent Churches. We are most grateful to God for the way He worked in preparing the way we should take.

In line with our objectives the Mission Board sent teachers, medical and agricultural personnel. These missionaries are mostly working in a supportive role in the institutions of the Mission Churches. We are cooperating with them in work established and administered by them -- with some few exceptions.

In a similar way we received some acceptance on the part of the Independent Churches so that we can also work among them with much freedom. They are a vast field for mission work. Certain of the Mission Churches are definitely interested in the Independents and certain of the Independents are more and more seeking an understanding of and relation with the Older Mission Churches.

IV

Conclusion

We can summarize our mission objectives into three simple statements.

1. We are working in relation with, rather than dominating the Mennonite Church of Nigeria; or we can say, we are emphasizing the church rather than the mission.

2. We are giving priority to persons rather than to institutions; or to put it another way, we are giving scholarships to young people rather than building schools.

3. We are working in cooperation with and support of existing mission institutions rather than in a program of competition; or to put it another way,

we are working towards reconciliation rather than in competition; or to put it still another way, our approach is an inter-denominational one, rather than strictly denominational.

We keep praying for further guidance!