2. A Household in Mission

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Even one who, in the idealism of youth, strongly resists the theory of economic determinism and its materialistic implications is likely to come, in adult years, to the more mature realization that economic considerations do in fact have strong influence on human goal-setting and decision-making. Ends and means can be distinguished, and need to be; but they cannot be completely separated. Means are essential to achieving desired ends and even determine them to some degree, since achievable ends are based on "what can be" as much as on "what should be."

The church in mission is finding itself increasingly constrained by economic limitations. These, in turn, have contributed to a new understanding of other limitations—cultural and theological—on what the mission of the church both can and should be. A one-way missiology of proclamation by Christendom of "the truth" is giving way to more acceptance of the reality of pluralism. Without giving up their own convictions and experience of Christ as the way, the truth, and the life, Christians are learning to acknowledge the active presence of God in human experience mediated by other religions and cultures. A healthy humility is growing in the church as the "great century of Christian expansion" yields to the "century of dialogue."

Undoubtedly one of the many factors in this change—and an important one—is the economic fact of limitations on the relative financial resources being allocated to "foreign missions" by the Western churches. Particularly in North America, where the drop in the value of the dollar has been so precipitous, notions about what the church should do are being modified by what the church can do.

Counting the Cost

In its May 24, 1978 issue the Christian Century indicated the effect of the shrinking dollar on missions.

The declining value of the dollar coupled with skyrocketing inflation around the world is cutting deeply into American missionary activity. The dollar has declined 54 percent in value over the past seven years and 20 percent since last spring in the foreign exchange market. It has dropped about 20 percent against the Japanese yen since the beginning of 1977 to a postwar low.

Going on to spell this out in concrete terms, the article states:

In 1967 United Presbyterians supported more than 1,000 missionaries in 44 countries at an annual cost of under $6,000 per person; in 1977 that cost had risen to $13,400 per person for 356 missionaries. In some cases it costs ten to fifteen times more to support an American missionary rather than a nationalist counterpart. In response to this situation, churches appear to be stepping up a move already under way to transfer activities to native churches.

Missionaries in Japan, at least those working with the United Church of Christ in Japan (UCCJ), are likely to take exception to the last sentence above because of the implication that an American church has any current involvement in "transfer of activities to native churches."

The control of its own activities has been in the hands of the Nihon Kirisuto Kyodan (the UCCJ) since its formation in 1941, and in the
hands of many of the Japanese denominations making up this union before that. Even so, the sharp decline in the value of the U.S. dollar is having a pronounced effect on the relationship of North American denominations with the Kyodan and its related institutions.

One result in Japan is a new way of perceiving the North American churches and the missionaries they send. As former Kyodan General Secretary Kiyoshi Takai expressed it:

We used to see American missionaries with the almighty dollar and wealthy churches in the background. Now it is easier to see and relate to you missionaries as individual persons with financial problems like ours. We can appreciate your presence in terms of your personal Christian witness and service without the distraction of financial power always behind you.

This insight has been demonstrated in far more telling fashion for years by Murray Rogers in India, who recently pointed out that the present financial crisis of the World Council of Churches (WCC), caused mainly by the dollar’s devaluation, may turn out to be

... one of the Council’s most creative happenings.... God carries his world on the backs of the poor and if we in the WCC mean in fact what we say and want to carry a corner of that weight, with the Lord and with the poor and the oppressed, then it may well be a most exciting moment if—in Philip Potter’s words—we become “a fellowship of penury.”

Some of us—the most fortunate ones in my estimation—have over decades had the privilege of sharing the joys and sorrows and struggles of some of the poorest of the children of God, in my case in India. We have begun at least to experience in our own flesh and blood what it means to live from poverty and weakness, from inadequacy and small or non-existent bank balances rather than from our own riches and status, from our impressiveness and from power and influence over others.

Murray Rogers’ words, like his life, are a judgment on the life-style of most missionaries and most Christians—especially in North America and Japan. But are they not also a challenge to us? Do they not point us toward a silver lining in our financial cloud? Do they not lift up a value scale which, while it gives lower priority to the resources symbolized by the dollar sign, gives more weight to other values relating to mutuality, two-way sharing, and faithful dedication—becoming the richer thereby?

In the world of business enterprise, making money (and accumulating the knowledge, skills, energy, and power-base to make more money) is accepted as a legitimate central goal. This involves the expenditure of financial resources, along with exploiting the world’s natural resources, on a scale that far outstrips the usual expectations of any Christian church. The average cost of $13,400 per missionary reported by the United Presbyterian Church in 1977 (which should be revised upward for missionaries in Japan today to close to $20,000) seems trifling when compared with the $200,000 or more per year that an American corporation expects to spend to support a middle management executive in Japan!

These figures do not, of course, represent actual income. They include the high expenses of travel, housing, and children’s education. A different perspective is revealed by the recent discovery that an American lieutenant colonel stationed in Japan receives a lower salary than does a Japanese guard at the air base gate. Again, comparing salaries only, the income of an executive secretary of the Kyodan is now about double that of a Kyodan missionary supported by a North American denomination. One such missionary who teaches in a church-related high school recently calculated that on the school’s salary scale for Japanese teachers his annual income would be tripled.

But the point remains that the available resources of many North American churches are so strained by inflated costs and the shrinkage of dollar resources that a radical reexamination of the allocation of these resources is inescapable.