

Questionable Proposals¹

The Christian Reformed Board of Foreign Missions has drawn up a new Mission Order which it aims to present to Synod 1974. The purpose of this article is to reveal the responses of one missionary on active duty to the proposed order. This proposed order has gone through a development and missionaries have been given the opportunity to criticize an earlier version of the proposal. A mere superficial comparison of the earlier version and the present one will convince one that the committee in charge of composing the new order has been responsive to much of the criticism missionaries have advanced. Nevertheless, my estimation is that there remain a number of important changes and additions to be made.

A comparison of the proposed order with the order presently in effect easily demonstrates that the composers of the new document have tried to move along with the times. Many new factors have been taken into consideration that either did not exist at the time the present order was composed or were ignored. Examples of advancing with the times are the basic theological insights offered as the foundation for the mission enterprise, the possibility of a liaison committee as a live option, the recognition of potential contributions coming from the national churches. Though there is obvious advance in missionary thinking, yet the advance, in my estimation, is insufficient. The proposed order brings us to somewhere between the past and the present, but it does not take realistic cognizance of the present missionary situation. The proposed order represents a half-way house.

Half-Way House

The main reason I call the proposed order a “half-way house” is that it wavers between the past in which the mission and her representatives felt free to establish their own policies and priorities without serious consultation with the official church *in loco* and the present in which these churches demand the

¹ CC, 27 May/1974. *Every Square Inch*, vol. 2, pp. 151-152.

structural absorption of the mission into the church. I am not speaking solely of the CRC mission effort, but have the global picture in mind.

Illustrations are in order. The proposed order attributes to the CRC Synod “jurisdiction over the foreign mission program.” In an earlier draft of the same proposal there was mention of “ultimate jurisdiction.” Fortunately, the first word has since been eliminated. I, for one, expressed objections to their earlier phrase for two reasons, one which has not yet been satisfied. One of the main causes of friction between national churches and missions has been that the latter have consciously or unconsciously attempted to make unilateral decisions. I know from personal experience that we, CRC missionaries in Nigeria, are hardly free from this vice. Missionaries are becoming increasingly conscious of this tendency and are eager to overcome it. The eradication of this missionary vice must begin on both the missionary level as well as the highest levels such as Synod. Beginning at the synodical level down to the lowly missionary, we must consciously and officially reject this stubborn tendency by speaking of joint jurisdiction, the other partner being the national church *in loco*. The notion of unilateral decisions militates against our recognition of the maturity of these national churches. These churches have an even greater stake in the outcome of this mission endeavour than does the CRC itself and they are better suited to determine priorities of the mission of God in their culture than is the mission. Art. 1 section 2 needs to include recognition of this joint jurisdiction.

Another illustration concerns that of supervision of missionaries. The Board is instructed to “recruit, appoint and supervise all personnel.” The first two of these functions, performed as they are in the home countries, are necessarily performed by the Board. The last function, however, relates to activities of personnel, the majority of which operate in the context of national churches. These churches should therefore be officially recognized as having a major role to play in the supervision of missionaries entrusted to them.

A third example concerns that of mission organization in a foreign country. The proposed order suggests two forms of organization. The first is called “Field Council,” a strictly missionary organization designed to carry out all the mission’s

functions in that country. Basic to this notion is the separation of the local church and the foreign mission. In cases where the national church has reached a certain stage, provision is made for a joint organization called liaison committee. These two structures are the only possibilities foreseen or allowed in the proposed order. It is an advance over the present order, but it does not go far enough. One acquainted with mission literature will be aware of the strong tendency to have foreign mission bodies absorbed into the local church in order to do away with the strange anomaly of two separate Christian bodies working hand in glove, yet frequently at odds with each other as to methods, finances and priorities. Too frequently it is the mission that wins out in such struggles simply because of superior resources. Traditional Reformed missiology has rejected the notion of mission organizations outside the official church. Yet, the new order suggests the continuation of such separate existence in foreign countries, while, as we shall see, it insists on working along Reformed lines!

Visits

Another indication of such unilateral approaches is the proposed provision for “periodic visits to the fields by Board representatives in order to encourage the missionaries and the national churches, keep abreast of current developments, and cultivate mutual understanding.” This provision is a continuation of a long-established practice of the Board’s sending her representatives to the missionaries and national churches. That the proposed order should insist on the basic functions here listed is proper, but why should such one-way traffic become canonized? If such visits must be included in the order, then provision should also be made for visits from the national churches to the Board and the CRC as a whole. Present practice is for the Board to send two men on such a visit, usually one experienced person and a novice. The novice visits perhaps about a month and can receive only very superficial impressions. Would it not be more useful to alternate such visits to the national churches with visits from the national churches? The presence of leaders from these national churches could serve a very significant educational function in the entire CRC, not to mention the Board

and its Executive Committee. It would provide both the Board and the church at large with first-hand impressions from the point of view of these churches, not our own. Such mutual visitation would “promote reciprocal interchurch contact,” as Article IV. 3 proposes, better than the present unilateral visiting program.

The point, I believe, is made clear. It is not necessary to describe at length the anomaly of a missionary’s doctrine and life being under the supervision of his home church (VI, 3), while he is envisioned to be a member of the church where he resides (VII, 3). By now it is also clear that when a missionary is assigned to his task by the Field Council and the Board (VII, 3), without any mention of the church, we are at best in a half-way house that needs remodeling rather badly. But why remodel what has not yet been built?

There is a second problem that characterizes the proposed order. It concerns the question of clarity and definition. The proposed order is designed not for just any church, but for a specific denomination, the CRC. Embedded deeply in the traditions of this church is a distinction between the church as institute and as organism. However, as one reads the Introductory Statement concerning the church, it is difficult to know what church it is speaking of. The question can hardly be suppressed in the mind of a CRC missionary-pastor. Perhaps the distinction is rejected by the authors? It would have been helpful to have some indication, for it does make a difference in how to read the introduction.

Kingdom and Church

There is the mention of the Kingdom in the Introductory Statement, but only once. Immediately the document switches to the church. What is this Kingdom and what is its significance to the church’s mission? The document is silent on this issue. Let it be remembered that the Reformed tradition does not allow such a casual treatment of the Kingdom. One receives the impression that this single mention of the Kingdom is a concession to the constituency, but is of no real significance in missionary thinking or practice. This is even more surprising when

one remembers that the concept of the Kingdom is very prominent in missionary discussions in ecumenical circles.

Throughout the proposed order one finds also the strong insistence that all mission work be done “according to the Word of God.” No Christian can object to such insistence. However, should one be led to inquire as to what this restriction means concretely in terms of missions, he would be left hanging in mid-air. It is a term nowhere concretized in the document. One can hardly escape the impression that the term and its variants is little more than a shibboleth, a slogan to please, without it having any concrete value as guidance for the missionary. The inclusion of such vague, undefined and traditional terms might convince the constituency of the trustworthiness of the CRC missionary effort, but it is of little value in the concrete missionary situation.

Another case in point is the Board’s intention to encourage the formation of “truly indigenous and Reformed” churches. Here again we have two loaded terms that are conspicuous because of their indefiniteness. The word “indigenous” is part of daily missionary parlance that has undergone historical development and is frequently used in the context of an unacknowledged and/or unconscious philosophy of culture. Is it even possible to build a church that is truly indigenous in Asia or Africa and at the same time Reformed? Is it, dare I ask, even desirable? Is the Reformed tradition applicable in wholly different cultural situations or is it any expression of Christianity in a certain cultural context? These are questions CRC missionaries wrestle with, but the proposed order does not offer any concrete aid beyond asserting an intention.

Is it possible also to ask what it means to be a Reformed mission? Does it mean that the CRC mission program is different from that of others? If so, how? If not, then why insist upon it? This question becomes more acute when it is realized that the CRC missionary force, in Nigeria at least, consists of sons and daughters of the CRC, but whose thinking ranges from that of Navigators to that of higher criticism. The point at issue is not their legitimacy, but, rather, in that context what does it mean to be Reformed in our mission work?

The new order requires that missionaries be in sympathy with Board policies, but how can he judge this when these basic issues are left undefined?

The Work of the Missionary

So far, my comments have touched upon matters contained in the proposed order. My gravest objection, however, has not yet been expressed. It is that the proposed order is more of an administrative document, though not exclusively so, than a missionary guide. I am not suggesting that there is no need for rules affecting administration; there is, to be sure. However, most of the matters many a missionary has to deal with during the course of his daily work are basically left out of the discussion. Statements concerning mission work are few. How are we to evaluate non-Christian religions? What is the relationship of missions to development? What is the relationship of Christ to culture? How do kingdom and church relate to each other in a mission situation? Where do we stand in the McGavran vs WCC controversy? One could produce a long list of such basic missionary questions that missionaries are forced by the situation to solve on an individual level, and often in ways that conflict with the answer a colleague may have reached. The result is an uncertain mission and an uncertain program.

In conclusion, I do not suggest that Synod reject the document in its entirety. I do recommend that final acceptance be deferred until some of these weaknesses are corrected and the vacuums filled. Terms need to be defined and the basic missionary issues of the day need clarification for the sake of the missionary on the spot as well as for the well-being of the entire team. It is likely that the issues are too deep for a mere sub-committee of the Board to deal with; they probably require a full synodical study committee, for the very basics of our faith are at stake.