

"Rethinking Missionaries" from 1910 to Today

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In 1910, 1200 representatives of Protestant missionary societies met in Edinburgh, Scotland, to consider the meaning of Christian mission for their generation. In 2010, we gather as part of a worldwide network of meetings asking the same question. What has been the shape of Christian mission over the past century, and what is its future? Because human beings are God's hands and feet at work in the world, we must also ask the related question: What has it meant to be a missionary over the course of the last century? And most relevant to our gathering today, what does it mean to be United Methodist missionaries today? To "rethink mission" requires that we also "rethink missionaries," both for our own generation, and for those who will follow.

Although apostolic vocation is a timeless calling, the work of mission takes its cue from its contemporary sociocultural context. Nobody expressed this as well as the great 20th century Methodist missionary E. Stanley Jones, who wrote in *The Christ of the India Road*, "Evangelize the inevitable." In other words, the missionary must bring the Gospel into contact with whatever is going on in the world. To "evangelize the inevitable" requires crossing boundaries to witness to Jesus Christ. But the nature of those boundaries changes according to the circumstances of each age. In this address, I will reflect on a few of the changing definitions of "missionary" from 1910 to today. "Rethinking missionaries" means asking what it means for *us* to "evangelize the inevitable." Except for the proverbial death and taxes, what seemed inevitable a century ago does not seem inevitable a hundred years later. And yet, the accumulated decisions of past generations continue to shape our understanding of the missionary vocation today.

I. *The missionary under colonialism.*

A. Missionary as Professional

A century ago, the 1200 delegates who gathered at the World Missionary Conference knew exactly how to define a missionary, and there was no doubt in their minds about their importance. Study Commission Five on the Preparation of Missionaries stated as follows: "the word 'missionary' must be taken in its widest signification to include all those European and American agents whom the Missionary Societies directly appoint and use on the mission field in any capacity connected with the work of a station. Hence we must think of ordained missionaries, medical missionaries, educationists, nurses, industrial teachers, Bible readers, zenana visitors, secretaries or business agents, etc."¹

The report described the core functions of the "missionary force":

1. Presentation of the Christian message, i.e. direct evangelization and the making of converts.
2. Manifestation of the Christian life, e.g. "medical, educational, and industrial work." While such work was seen as acts of Christian love, the report noted that in some countries promoting Christian life would require introducing "elements of civilization."
3. Organization of a Christian church and nation. "A living and effective Church in a Christian nation is the end of missionary work."²

¹ *World Missionary Conference, Report of Commission V: The Preparation of Missionaries* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson, & Ferrier, 1910), 13.

² *Ibid.*, "97-98.

These expectations of mission work in 1910 show that missionaries saw themselves largely as evangelistic westerners embedded in colonial-era structures such as mission stations, medical and educational institutions, and the emerging nation-state. The missionary was both to make converts and to establish Christian churches and civilizations. In other words, the major role of the colonial-era missionary was to create leaders for both emerging churches and emerging nations. The report did note that "indigenous churches" were beginning to appear, with evangelists, leaders and teachers who would someday take control of "developing Churches" from the missionaries.³ But in the meantime, the missionary remained in charge.⁴

The 1910 missionary was thus a paid professional, either male or female, who needed advanced graduate training in theological disciplines, or in medical and educational administration. A survey of active missionaries showed that given the complexities of the colonial contexts in which they worked, they overwhelmingly supported the raising of their own intellectual standards. Like other foreigners posted abroad in colonial administration, the missionary needed to be educated.⁵ Uneducated missionaries were perceived as inflexible trouble makers. In addition to the basic theological course, necessary subjects for missionary study included the science and history of missions, religions of the world, sociology (i.e. culture studies), pedagogy, linguistics and languages.⁶ Following the 1910 conference, new courses and schools for missionary training were established in the United States and Europe, including groundbreaking anthropological and linguistic training at the Kennedy School of Missions at Hartford Seminary, and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London.

B. Missionary as Ambassador

New definitions of the missionary task rose from the horrors of the Great War of 1914-1918. World War I killed millions, ripped apart the social fabric of European Christendom, destroyed missions the world over, and sucked Asians and Africans into its vortex. Even as the Great War discredited western Christendom, new hope for Christian unity took hold. The attempted genocide of ancient Christian communities by the dying Ottoman Empire provoked a massive foreign aid operation administered by missionary networks throughout the Near East.⁷ When President Woodrow Wilson called for equality among nations, the self-determination of peoples, and the founding of a League of Nations, he was expressing the dreams of the denominational missionary community. Enthusiasm for internationalism—including the ideals of peace, democracy, and the cooperation of nations-- swept through the younger generation of Christian leadership.⁸

³ Ibid., 11-12.

⁴ Methodists should note with pride, however, that one of the few Asians accorded the title of "missionary" and who represented a missionary society at the World Missionary Conference was Miss Grace Stephens, an Anglo-Indian from Madras, who headed the zenana work for the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church. For more on Grace Stephens, see Dana L. Robert, "*Faith, Hope, Love in Action: United Methodist Women in Mission Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow.*" Unpublished paper delivered at the UMW Assembly, St. Louis, Missouri, April 29, 2010.

⁵ See quotations from James Stewart of Lovedale, *Preparation of Missionaries*, 157.

⁶ Ibid., 161.

⁷ For the overview of this foreign aid operation, written by the missionary administrator who headed the effort, see James L. Barton, *Story of Near East Relief, 1915-1930* (NY: Macmillan, 1930).

⁸ On the missionary contribution to Wilsonian internationalism, see Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How it Changed the World* (Knopf, 2001); Dana L. Robert, "The First Globalization: The Internationalization of the Protestant Missionary Movement Between the World Wars," in Ogbu Kalu and

Before the war, missionary conversations about ecumenical unity focused on world evangelization. After the war, many American mainline missionaries of the 1920s and 1930s saw themselves as "ambassadors" of the Kingdom of God. The fusion of political internationalism with an optimistic reading of the Kingdom of God as world fellowship dominated American Methodist ideas of Christian mission in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1925, North American mission societies held a "Foreign Missions Convention" in Washington, D.C. in 1925. Eighty-five mission organizations, eleven missionary training schools, and 3419 delegates attended the convention. President Calvin Coolidge opened the meeting with an address urging missionaries to counteract the evils of western civilization by carrying the best of Christianity to other cultures, and by bringing back to America the best of other cultures. Papers on the "present world situation" reviewed the situation of missions in different parts of the world. A number of the distinguished missionary speakers addressed aspects of internationalism. One of the most explicit was Charles Brent, Episcopal bishop of the Philippines for 16 years before becoming senior chaplain of the American Expeditionary Forces during the war, and then Bishop of Western New York. Appealing for the conversion of those in so-called "Christian nations," Brent noted that the shrinking distance between East and West meant that Christians would only be made in the East, if Easterners saw Christian behavior in the West. Said Methodist statesman John R. Mott, chairman of the International Missionary Council, "Christian missions are indeed the great and the true internationalism. Our 29,000 missionaries are ambassadors, interpreters, and mediators in the most vital aspects of international and inter-racial relationships."⁹

While in retrospect the limitations of missionary as ambassador are apparent, it is important to mention the idea because of its importance for Methodist missionaries in the mid 20th century. Ambassadorship takes its scriptural warrant from 2 Cor 5:20: "Now then, we are ambassadors of Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you, be reconciled to God." Ambassador missionaries saw themselves as representatives of God's coming kingdom of equality and justice. To be Christ's ambassador meant to speak on behalf of the oppressed, to call the powerful to judgment, and to act as intercultural messengers between East and West.

Although time does not permit me to explore these ideas in detail, it is important to note that the idea of missionary as ambassador of the kingdom encouraged human rights work by Methodist missionaries in the mid twentieth century. For example, the spread of fascism in Asia and Europe gave greater urgency to combating racism as central to the establishment of a new world order for peace and unity. One of the groundbreaking race studies of the twentieth-century grew from seminars on racism held in conjunction with a 1943 conference on "Christian Bases of World Order." The organizer of racism seminars and author of the volume *Racism: A World Issue*, was Edmund Soper, the mission professor at Garrett Biblical Institute in Chicago. Soper was a Methodist missionary kid born in Tokyo, and former field secretary of the Missionary

Alaine Low, eds., *Interpreting Contemporary Christianity: Global Processes and Local Identities* (Eerdmans/Curzon, 2008):93-130. Earlier version in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, April 2002.

⁹ John R. Mott, "New Forces Released by Cooperation," in Fennell P. Turner and Frank Knight Sanders, eds., *The Foreign Missions Convention at Washington, 1925* (New York: Foreign Missions Conference of North America, Fleming H. Revell, 1925), 209. See also John R Mott, "The Christian as Ambassador," in Denzil G.M. Patrick, ed., *Christus Victor. The Report of the World Conference of Christian Youth* (Geneva: Conference Headquarters, [n.d.]), 227. For a biography of Mott that traces his work in building the global Christian movement, see C. Howard Hopkins, *John R. Mott, 1865-1955* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).

Education Movement. Author of *The Philosophy of the Christian World Mission*, Soper represented mainstream North American ecumenical mission thought of mid century.¹⁰

Soper argued that the global reality of racism prevented an international world order of freedom and peace.¹¹ The unity of the world meant that news of racism in one part quickly spread to another. Racism was a global problem, interconnected with issues of economics, land, politics, and health. He predicted, "No power in the world can prevent the colored races, the peoples of Asia and Africa, from uniting because of common grievances against centuries of domination by the white man and ending this domination by the use of means we have taught them so well to use."¹² The only way to avoid the coming violence was to offer "the hand of fellowship and co-operation" to persons of color.¹³ Christians must study the situation, break the color bar, and purge racism from their hearts and minds. The churches must repent of racism and then lead the struggle against it. Soper concluded his book with the vision that called Christians to reject racism--the Revelation vision of believers gathered from every nation at the "consummation of human history," standing before the throne and praising God.¹⁴

When anti-colonial struggles spread worldwide during the 1950s and 1960s, Soper's systemic analysis of racism proved prophetic. From around the world, missionaries wrote moving testimonies against local and regional forms of racism that together influenced church people to link civil rights and anti-colonial movements as actions against a common problem.¹⁵ Missionary ambassadors believed that educating people about racism and other aspects of colonial injustice was a major part of their calling as missionaries.

One of the clear limitations of the idea of mid twentieth century idea of missionary as ambassador was its roots in colonial paternalism, a time in which it always seemed necessary for white people to speak on behalf of the oppressed subaltern. This tendency has been roundly critiqued by postcolonial theorists. At the same time, it is indisputable that one of the most important contributions of the mid twentieth century missionary movement was the passage of

¹⁰ See William R. Hutchison, *Errand to the World: American Protestant Thought and Foreign Missions* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993).

¹¹ Edmund D. Soper, *Racism: A World Issue* (New York, Nashville:Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1947), 247. Soper's book on racism took a systemic, global approach. He first challenged arguments that rejected equality on the basis of innate racial differences, and argued that all humans were fundamentally the same. The bulk of the book was a world survey of racism. Soper felt a global view was essential to make people realize the breadth of the problem as a barrier to peace and harmony among nations. (p. 49) He began the survey with Germany, the Nazi doctrine of a master race, and attempted extermination of the Jews. From there he proceeded to describe Russian pogroms, untouchability in India, Asian exclusion acts, Japanese imperialism, European colonial extermination of indigenous peoples in the South Pacific, forced labor in Africa, and the range of practices regarding racial mixing in the Americas. In addition to his examination of African slavery and its legacy of racism and segregation in the United States, Soper explored the treatment of various racial minorities, including the internment of the Japanese during World War II and anti-Semitism.

¹² *Ibid.*, 272.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 273.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 295.

¹⁵ From South Africa, Anglican priest Trevor Huddleston's *Naught for Your Comfort* exposed the evils of forced removals under the apartheid system. In the United States, Congregationalist missionary educator of African-Americans Buell Gallagher wrote a searing exposé of white racism in the United States, *Color and Conscience: The Irrepressible Conflict*, that labeled segregation a form of caste system. Anglican priest Michael Scott collected the oral history of the massacred Herero peoples of Southwest Africa, and for 36 years repeatedly brought their petitions to the United Nations to resist their incorporation into South Africa. For this section on missionary anti-racism, see my unpublished Alexander Duff Lecture "Mission Visions of Worldwide Christian Fellowship." (delivered Edinburgh, Scotland, May 2010).

the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, and the way in which some visionary mission leaders connected the civil rights movement in the United States with anticolonial struggles around the world.¹⁶

II. *Missionaries and Postcolonialism*

By the 1950s, the global context for western missionaries was changing rapidly. Some of the best theological minds of the age turned their attention to the meaning of missions in a post-colonial, post-Christendom world. With the independence of African and Asian nations, missionary societies gradually and painfully devolved control of mission institutions. Devolution required that western missionaries turn over leadership of schools, hospitals, ecclesiastical and social service ministries to national churches. Another factor that impacted the meaning of the missionary was the growing theological conviction that mission was the task of the whole church, and not just the work of trained professionals. The migration of peoples displaced by World War II and nationalist struggles lent urgency to defining the role of the laity as boundary crossers in a changing world.¹⁷ By the 1960s, the role of the full-time vocational missionary was in crisis, especially as anti-colonial movements lumped him or her with other discredited colonial agents. Despite the rhetoric and debates, of course, many missionaries kept on doing their work, increasingly guided by formal policies of "partnership." Denominations experimented with sending different kinds of non traditional missionaries, who could adapt to the new realities.¹⁸

The idea of the unidirectional western missionary was laid to rest at the Mexico City meeting of the WCC in 1963, with the conviction that missions were "to and from all six continents." It is in the context of postcolonial transitions that one must place the surging influence of Donald McGavran and later Ralph Winter with the church growth and unreached peoples movements. As denominational missionaries transitioned out of older missions, evangelical emphasis on the unreached opened up fresh mission fields in which westerners could still function as traditional evangelistic missionaries.¹⁹

A. Critiques of Colonial Missionary "Myths"

Vigorous discussions over the meaning of the missionary during the 1960s carry relevance for us today. One of the most succinct critiques of missionaries was published by Friendship Press in 1965, entitled *Mission Myth and Reality*. The author, Keith Bridston, had spent fifteen years abroad as a missionary teacher in Indonesia, and working with the WCC. Bridston exploded what he called the "myths" of missions. He argued that the old missionary age was finished, now replaced by the ecumenical age. The idea of the foreign missionary was anachronistic. The first obsolete myth was that of the geographical frontier. In scathing tones, Bridston wrote that expansionism gave rise to the "myth of salt water," that being a missionary meant crossing a geographical frontier. "Water and word—together they cover and conquer the

¹⁶ Lack of space prevents me from considering other notable mid-twentieth century missionary models, such as missionary as community worker, and missionary as friend.

¹⁷ Reflection on the meaning of non-professional and lay missionaries began decades earlier by Roland Allen and Kenneth Grubb. The most helpful mid-century study of the lay missionary "frontier" was Paul Löffler, *The Layman Abroad in the Mission of the Church; A Decade of Discussion and Experiment* (London: WCC, CWME, 1962).

¹⁸ Examples of experiments with nontraditional missionaries included the "3" program of the Methodist Church, the "Frontier Intern" model of sending youth on lengthy immersion experiences, and the Papal Volunteers. These experimental lay missionary models need to be fully researched and documented.

¹⁹ See Dana L. Robert, "Mission Frontiers from Geography to Justice," Alexander Duff Lecture, Glasgow, Scotland, May 2010, forthcoming in *Missiology*, 2011.

world."²⁰ Missionary wanderlust, according to Bridston, used foreign missions as a way to avoid facing the complexities of radical changes in western civilization.

The second myth was that of the holiness of the mission that divided the world between Christian and pagan. In this scenario, "The missionaries began to think of themselves not only as ambassadors of Christ but also as embodiments of the 'Christian way of life.'"²¹ Bridston called for new more secular forms of holiness, including theological creativity from younger churches, rather than the stultifying pietism of traditional missions. The third myth was that of ecclesiological paternalism that assumed so-called "younger churches" needed the tutelage of missionary patrons. Quoting William Smalley about the changes in mission relationships, Bridston wrote, "Paternalism in missions is in danger of changing to puppeteering. The fathers have become brothers, but they are brothers who pull strings."²²

The fourth myth Bridston called "vocational." The sacred mystique of the missionary was being undercut through increased widespread travel and knowledge of other lands, the making of missions into the bloated financial big business of denominations, boring bureaucratization, and the white missionary as the symbol of foreign control. The myth of the missionary's special vocation, said Bridston, was an individualistic concept that robbed the entire church of its awareness of its apostolic nature.²³ The mission frontier was not the property of the obsolete vocational missionary. Rather, "Wherever the church meets the world, *there* is the missionary frontier. And when it crosses frontiers, horizontal or vertical, it does so, not as a 'mission,' but as the church. Indeed, it is thus that the church proves that it *is* the church."²⁴

Although Bridston expressed the conviction that the end of colonialism marked the end of the missionary era, he did not see it as the end of missionaries. Rather, the primary importance of the missionary was as a symbol of the church's collective missional vocation. Because missionaries are symbolic representatives of the apostolic nature of the church, "they may still have a place in the unintelligibility of God's hidden working. . . it is unthinkable that the universal church, with its apostolic calling to the ends of the earth, will not always have those strangers and foreigners in all parts of the Lord's dominion who simply by their presence (in the French connotation) symbolically represent the apostolicity of the whole Body and what Jacques Ellul called the 'Presence of the Kingdom.'"²⁵

In his remarkable yet strident little book, Bridston made two key points that serve us today. First was the almost sacramental importance he attached to the missionary, as symbolic of the missionary nature of the whole Body of Christ. Second was the postcolonial understanding that mission frontiers were not merely geographic, but represented multiple social, cultural, and political boundaries: "The missionary frontier is found wherever the world is confronted with God's love. The missionary frontier is, therefore, multidimensional. . . The Christian mission, as an expression of God's mission, means not only going *out to* but also *into* the world."²⁶

B. Missionary as Apostolic Witness

Bridston's enumeration of missionary "myths" had opponents, notably Peter Beyerhaus at the University of Tübingen, who gave convincing theological arguments for the continued importance of the geographic frontier. While these debates are fascinating, I must turn my

²⁰ Keith R. Bridston, *Mission Myth and Reality* (New York: Friendship Press, 1965), 24.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

²² *Ibid.*, 72.

²³ *Ibid.*, 96.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

attention to one of the most imaginative and sensible mission thinkers of mid century, who has a lot to offer for our current situation. This was Ronald Orchard, secretary of the London Missionary Society for twenty years, and the chairman who guided the LMS into the innovative and multidirectional Council for World Mission. In his book *Missions in a Time of Testing* (1964), Orchard outlined a timeless definition of mission as witnessing to the Christ event. In his view, the missionary was a witness bearer, who crossed the frontiers between belief and unbelief. Because the communication of the gospel must be conveyed by persons to other persons, Orchard argued that it is important for the church to set aside apostolic witnesses who embody the church's corporate identity in this regard.²⁷ The ongoing importance of apostolic witnesses, however, neither meant the continuation of the missionary paternalism of the past, nor the continuation of the colonial-type missionary society.

In his chapter on "Missionaries," Orchard disagreed with the view that renewed emphasis on the apostolate of the laity eliminated the need for persons "called and commissioned" to mission service. These apostolic witnesses serve as "points of concentration" for other Christians, whether at home or abroad.²⁸ Flexible and diversified, the missionary should "emphasize the responsibility of all Christians to participate in mission, to help them to discover what that meant in practical terms in their own particular situations, and to assist in providing them with whatever training they needed to carry it out."²⁹ Instead of the missionary society and the missionary being the narrow conduit through which mission work passed, their role is to enable the mission of the whole people of God. To this end, Orchard envisioned a covenanted "order" of missionaries consisting of persons vocationally called to a lifetime of mission service, and bound together by common purpose. To become part of the order would require "a clear and definite calling to special service in the focal point of mission, the proclamation of the name where it has not been heard or is not acknowledged, and a willingness to be committed to that task without reservation, to receive whatever training the task required and to go into any geographical area or area of human living to serve wherever there was a need in mission which they could fulfill."³⁰ It goes without saying that this order would be international, made up of persons called into mission from around the world, and going from everywhere to everywhere. Members would be rooted in their local churches, engaged in a variety of work, and bound by a simple common rule. Orchard's efforts to move beyond colonialism neither assumed the existence of European Christendom, nor the monopoly of mission by the colonial-style missionary society.

III. *Missionaries and Global Networking*

To read Orchard from the perspective of our 21st century context shows how prophetic he was in anticipating aspects of our current situation. Orchard envisioned a global network of persons called to witness to the "Christ event" across multiple frontiers or boundaries. He assumed they would be ecumenical, diverse, and flexible. He shepherded the venerable missionary society of Robert Moffatt, John Philip, David Livingston and other missionary "greats" into a postcolonial form, the Council for World Mission. The new self-definition of the missionary would be based on lifetime commitment to God's call, and by relationship with churches and intentional covenant with other missionaries who shared the apostolic call. The definition of missionary

²⁷Ronald Orchard, *Missions in a Time of Testing* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964),164.

²⁸ Ibid., 167.

²⁹ Ibid., 169.

³⁰ Ibid., 171.

would not be defined by salary, or by nationality, or by foreign mission field, or even by specific job description through a mission board. From his context, what he saw as "inevitable" was the death of the western missionary society as he knew it, and the missionary as paid agent of such society.

Orchard did not anticipate the internet or cheap air travel, or the shift of Christian population to the global South, or economic globalization, or contextual theology, or the short-term mission trip movement, or the decline of western mainline Protestantism relative to the whole of Christian population. Today, forty years after the end of colonialism, we find ourselves living in a different generation, with a different set of inevitabilities that we must evangelize. Some of Orchard's visions fit our contemporary situation. Mission is now a multidirectional enterprise. Young North Americans called to mission today are global and local networkers. They are flexible and entrepreneurial, and grounded in local church communities. They are committed to deep personal intercultural relationships. They use technology to connect themselves to a global community of like-minded persons. Many have moved from denominations to local megachurches. Of course in their rejection of denominational structures they are busy reinventing the wheel. I agree with Harry Truman here, when he said "There is nothing new in the world except the history you do not know."

It strikes me when I read Orchard how unfortunate, in some ways, was the timing of the creation of the United Methodist Church during the 1960s. Just at the point when visionary mission theorists like Orchard were conceptualizing radical new ways in which mission might function flexibly in a multi-directional postcolonial context, United Methodists put the finishing touches on a centralized administrative bureaucracy through which all mission was supposed to flow. The mission agency baked one huge pie, and mission activism consisted of trying to get as big a piece of the pie as possible for your own group to eat. Despite the important policies of partnership and mutuality that were enacted, our mistake was in thinking that making rules about how to carve up the pie was the same thing as being in mission. Now we have eaten the pie, and what is left is the plate and a few crumbs. Put another way, the past forty years have represented the winding down of the colonial structures of mission that U.S. Methodists built so well a century ago, and were in many ways propped up by the formation of the United Methodist Church in 1968.³¹

And so where does this leave us? Who is a missionary today in the United Methodist Church? Is it the dwindling number of people actually paid salaries through the GBGM? Where are our young people on fire for mission? Why do so many feel they must leave our rule-ridden church in order to live out their apostolic vocations?

Friends, I think our problem is that we are suffering from a lack of imagination. This came home to me at the recent Edinburgh 2010 conference, undoubtedly the most representative meeting of the churches since the Protestant Reformation. Ecclesial stakeholders sent carefully selected representatives. Catholics, Orthodox, evangelicals, Pentecostals, mainline Protestants, and indigenous churches were all represented. In my mind the Anglicans had the ideal team of representatives. They were allotted ten people. They sent nine mission-minded and missiologically-trained young people from around the world, coordinated by one middle-aged bishop as leader of the delegation. On the other hand, our official United Methodist representatives were some of the oldest people at the conference. I have great appreciation for

³¹ The dismantling of colonial structures was an extremely difficult task that faced the new denomination. But from an historical perspective, it seems that the task of deconstruction took precedence over other priorities.

the individuals who represented our church, but why didn't we plan for the future? Have we lost our missionary vision? Are just sitting here belching, having now eaten the pie baked in 1968?

Obviously we in this room cannot solve the structural problems in the United Methodist Church. Also, it needs to be said the GBGM has reinvented itself since the 1990s and its staff are doing incredible work. God bless these good folks. The point I am trying to make here is not to accuse us of unfaithfulness, but to argue that over the past forty years we have not paid enough attention to forming and affirming people for apostolic vocations. The lifeblood of the United Methodist Church is not identity politics and turf battles between boards and agencies, but our people.³² And young people need to be encouraged and inspired by their mother church, or else they vote with their feet and go elsewhere.

IV. *Re-thinking Missionaries*

In Luke 19:37, as Jesus rode the colt into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the "whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen." When some Pharisees asked Jesus to silence his disciples, he replied, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." (verse 40) If United Methodists stop praising God through mission and outreach, and if we allow fractured structures to silence us, we can be sure that the stones will cry out. If our beloved church should disappear, God's mission through Jesus Christ will continue.³³

Amid our need to "rethink missionaries," United Methodist congregations and conferences are experiencing a creative groundswell of missional vitality from the grassroots. Yes this groundswell is often disconnected from denominational structures. Yes it often lacks the theological depth, cultural sensitivity, and critical reflection that church leaders might like to see. But nearly 100,000 United Methodists are participating in short-term mission trips every year. Congregations throughout the connection are reaching out to immigrants, and feeding the homeless, and conducting evangelism. Thousands of United Methodists are reaching across cultures to establish relationships with people unlike themselves. Millions of dollars are given to UMCOR for disaster relief. Bishop Schnase's "5 practices" have struck a chord with many. Clearly United Methodists care about mission activity as an essential aspect of Christian discipleship.

And what of United Methodist missionaries? What about persons with specific apostolic calls to cross-cultural witness and service? Sociologist Robert Wuthnow, in his recent book *Boundless Faith*, analyzes the participation of today's "transcultural congregation" in mission and outreach. He finds that the leading way in which American congregations are participating in cross-cultural mission is through supporting missionaries. Despite our sense of crisis around this issue in the United Methodist Church, the trend in North America is to support more missionaries than ever before. Anecdotal evidence to the contrary, Wuthnow has found that overall the rise of mission trips does not detract from the support of full-time missionaries.³⁴

But given the shrinkage of our traditional denominational missionary-sending structures, United Methodists are not necessarily connecting the dots. We are not doing a good job of

³² GBGM staff have done groundbreaking work and have led the way in theologies and practices of partnership and mutuality. Yet the corporate structure of boards and agencies, each in its own silo, has proven to be a costly use of resources at the expense of creative flexibility and mission innovation.

³³ Our own meeting today is part of a global 2010 conversation by multiple stakeholders on the meaning of mission in the 21st century. It is a sign of hope that United Methodist missionaries are determined to engage in this larger process of reflection.

³⁴ Robert Wuthnow, *Boundless Faith: The Global Outreach of American Churches* (Berkeley: University of California, 2009). In 2001, the U.S. sent 43,000 missionaries.

linking the activism in our local churches, to the cultivation of mission vocations. Short-term mission trips do not address the larger issues of structural injustices, linguistic and cultural training, and evangelistic hard places that full-time missionaries are best equipped to tackle. Unless we plow the surge of grassroots mission activism back into the cultivation, support, and training for apostolic vocations, then the old issues of paternalism and colonial superiority can creep right back into the church through short-term missions.³⁵

Today I urge those of us gathered in this conference to reassert the apostolic imagination of the United Methodist Church for the 21st century. Being a missionary is a biblical vocation. As it states in I Cor 12:27-28, "And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues." *Apostollein* is the primary biblical Greek word used for "sending." Thus the apostle is "one who is sent." The word "missionary" is a Latinized form of the Greek terms for "sending." Not only is sending a major theme in the New Testament, with 206 biblical references, but the entire New Testament is the story of mission—the story of God sending Jesus to make Godself known, and of people sent to spread God's message of compassion, salvation, and liberation through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Rethinking missionaries, let us go into the world and evangelize the inevitable! The apostolic vocation is a calling ordained by God. To be a United Methodist missionary is not defined by human structures. To be a United Methodist missionary is to embody the biblical "sending" on behalf of a whole people called into mission. United Methodists called by God to a missionary vocation must covenant together in solidarity, and not tarry for denominational structures to be fixed. We must claim the name "United Methodist missionary" whether we are salaried by the denomination or not. We must spiritually form young people into apostolic vocations. We must provide intercultural expertise for guiding the leaders of short term mission teams. We must witness to the heavenly vision of global unity, peace, and justice. We must be the yeast in the loaf, inspiring and reminding our people that Methodism is at heart a mission movement, ready to share Jesus Christ with all the world.

United Methodist missionaries will share the Good News across the frontiers of injustice and human need. We will cement partnerships and friendships and provide hospitality across cultural, racial, national, and interreligious boundaries. Some will be called to sing the Lord's song in a strange land, and others will be missionaries in their own neighborhoods. And some, like Clint Rabb and Sam Dixon and Daniel Terry, will pay with their lives for their faithfulness to God's call.

Rethinking missionaries means witnessing again and again to the triune God--Creator, Son, and Holy Spirit--who sends us into the world in joyful celebration of God's love.

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³⁵ See the growing literature on the strengths and weaknesses of the short-term missions movement, notably Robert J Priest, *Effective Engagement in Short-term Missions: Doing it Right!* (Pasadena: William Carey, 2008).