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FOREIGN MISSIONS IN THE BRETHREN CHURCH

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The program of missions is the very heart of the Word of God. The challenge from God to His people to preach the Gospel to the world runs through the entire Bible. The history of The Brethren Church is the history of a people who love the Word of God and have taken their stand from the very beginning for a forthright preaching of the Word. Today the motto of The Brethren Church continues to be "The Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible."

It is only logical that such a Bible-loving people would be responsive to God's appeal to preach the Gospel to all nations. But for many years the missionary program of The Brethren Church was practically non-existent. When once the program got under way, it was carried forward with real enthusiasm. Several principles are basic to the carrying on of foreign missions in The Brethren Church.

THE PRINCIPLE OF THE GREAT COMMISSION

There is no greater command in all the Word of God than that outlined in Matthew 28:19: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations . . ." From the beginning, The Brethren Church recognized the Word of God as the only basis of faith and practice, and yet did not seem to recognize the imperative spirit of the Great Commission! Activities in the realm of foreign missions were practically nil prior to 1900. Perhaps this was due to the fact that a considerable number of Brethren people shared one of the three following viewpoints with respect to foreign missions: (1) If God had desired that the heathen should know of the Gospel, He would have arranged for them to hear. This is much the same philosophy as that of those who tried to discourage William Carey in 1792 in his efforts to reach the people of India for Christ; (2) The Great Commission to "Go" was fulfilled in the Pentecost experience; (3) When the United States is all evangelized, and we have Brethren churches in every area, it will be time to think of foreign missions.

Yet, as the nineteenth century drew to a close, there was a brief stirring toward foreign missions in The Brethren Church. In the year 1897 the Brethren national conference took action, approving India as a mission field:

Dr. Russell D. Barnard is General Secretary of the Foreign Missionary Society of The Brethren Church. Rev. Clyde K. Landrum is Assistant General Secretary of the Society.

At this conference (1897) for the first time the minutes of National Conference contain a caption of a paragraph reading "Foreign Missions," under which there was the following resolution: "The hour is come for foreign missions by The Brethren Church. We endorse Brother J. C. Mackey and commend him to the work in India, with our prayers and support."¹

However, nothing was done to implement this decision, and things went on as they were.

On September 4, 1900, God moved fifty-three missionary-minded Brethren souls to action! This group met under the trees at Winona Lake, Indiana, and The Foreign Missionary Society of The Brethren Church was formed! The purpose of the newly-organized group was "To carry out the Great Commission of our Lord in Matthew 28:19." This continues to be the purpose of the Society today.

Because of this primary purpose, the Society has never entered into industrialized or cultural missions. In even the medical and the educational work the purpose is disseminating the Gospel and establishing and stabilizing churches in the various lands.

THE PRINCIPLE OF FAITH IN GOD IN CARRYING OUT THE GREAT COMMISSION

The Society fully realizes that in order to have the blessing of the Lord, we must look in faith to God alone. This principle was laid down very concretely in an action having its origin in the Mission Oubangui-Chari (now Central African Republic):

We, the missionaries of the Mission Oubangui-Chari, and the Board of Trustees of The Foreign Missionary Society of the Brethren Church, declare our hearty sympathy with its faith basis, believing, first, that the silver and gold belong to God; second, that we may depend upon Him to supply our every need; and, third, that each individual should be guided by the Holy Spirit regarding what, where and when to give.

Therefore, the Mission Oubangui-Chari trusts in God alone for the necessary funds for the maintenance of the work, and while faithfully teaching the duty of Christian stewardship and presenting the general need of the Mission and of the unreached fields, and while soliciting prayer for the work, does not present any personal needs nor ask men for money for the work.²

Members of the Society--and missionaries in particular--look to the Lord, not only for the supplying of the missionaries' personal needs, but also trust Him to supply the needs of the entire Society in its work on all fields.

On the basis of complete faith in God for direction in service on the field, as well as for the supply of financial needs, Brethren young people go forth to serve the Lord.

Brethren testimonies which continued for only a few years began in Iran (Persia), Montreal, Canada, and in two different undertakings in China.

However, our first Brethren mission which continues activity to the present time, began in Argentina in 1909 under the authorization to serve in "the Argentine Republic and neighboring states of South America." Over the years a strong testimony has gone forth through a number of vigorous Argentine Brethren churches, as well as through the witness through radio, literature, bookstores, and Bible institutes.

The mission in what is now known as the Central African Republic, began with the sailing of the "Gribble party" in 1918. Many sorrows and a number of deaths occurred before the work was well established. A great story of Christian perseverance was written at "Camp Wait-Some-More" near Brazzaville and while the pioneer party waited at Carnot to get in to God's appointed field. Through the years the Africa mission has been a fruitful field, reporting at present over 40,000 baptized believers who are members of African Brethren churches.

Approximately thirty years later--in 1949--the third Brethren field was opened, near the mouth of the Amazon River in Brazil. Then, four other fields were opened in rapid succession:

Mexico - 1951
 France - 1951
 Hawaii - 1953
 Puerto Rico - 1959

Fully organized churches are now in operation in most of these fields. District and national conferences are coming into being. They are getting the vision not only to evangelize their own people, but to reach out into other areas.

THE PRINCIPLE OF COMMITTING RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE GREAT COMMISSION TO FAITHFUL MEN

In the incipient stages of missions development, it is necessary that the missionaries do most of the evangelizing. However, it seems logical that as the work is established, the nationals of the various countries will assume more of the responsibility. From the early years our missionaries have recognized this, and have felt that if great progress is to be made, it must be because the national believers in the various lands do accept responsibility. Finally in 1962 the Board of Trustees of the Society brought together and presented the "Statement of Mission Policy in Relation to the National Churches":

1. General purpose - The purpose of the mission is to evangelize with the goal of establishing local churches.
 - a. Definition of a local church: A local church is a constituted body of baptized believers who (1) meet regularly for worship, prayer, and study of the Word; (2) determine their own membership; (3) discipline their members; (4) choose their leaders; (5) observe the ordinances; (6) handle their finances; (7) carry on a program of evangelization; (8) determine their external relationships.

2. The individual missionary's relationship to the local church.
 - a. The goal of the missionary shall be to lead groups of believers into full New Testament organizations having a trained leadership adequate for the needs of each local group.
 - b. He shall recognize the autonomy of the local church, once organized, and shall not hold membership nor office in it.
 - c. He shall recognize the spiritual equality and potentiality of this church and its members.
 - d. He may, at the request of the church, assist by teaching the Word and training leaders.
 - e. He may counsel and warn the church.
 - f. He will make a gradual and definite withdrawal from these functions while continuing in a ministry of intercession.

This policy, affirming adherence to the indigenous church principle, was approved by all fields.

THE PRINCIPLE OF PERSISTENCE IN ACHIEVING THE GOAL OF THE GREAT COMMISSION

Two pertinent problems in this area are (1) the enlisting into the program of both the missionaries and the members of the church at home, and (2) the securing of funds for carrying on the work.

Involved in the enlistment of young people for missionary service are several problems. First, the church must be fully taught that the missionary program is a Biblical program. Or, putting it another way, we must come to see that the Bible is a missionary book. With the motto of "The Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible," it seems only natural that Brethren people should enthusiastically embrace this Biblical missionary program. Secondly, our young people must be caused to understand that the Great Commission is for all Christians. Too often the responsibility is shifted to the other person. Third, young people must be taught, and must have experience in an aggressive program of personal witness and soul-winning. Dr. Harold Cook says: "The church should help create among its own young people a real concern for others--especially for the non-Christian. When it does this, missionary recruiting becomes easy, for this concern for lost men is the very heart of missions."³

Fourth, we must have a successful program of conserving decisions for missionary service, bringing these young people to the point of applying to the board, and to service on the field.

As to the securing of funds, from the very early years support was indicated for missionaries personally. Then for a number of years donors were encouraged to give to the general fund. This was good, but led to rather an impersonal support of "Missionary X."

In recent years a personal support plan was presented by the board of trustees, and has been enthusiastically accepted by many Brethren churches. This commitment to support missionaries personally is arranged congregationally--that is, gifts from the congregations are designated for the missionaries, but given to the Society to administer.

With the total personal support almost complete, and with an outfit plan by which hundreds of people assist in the sending out of new missionaries, we will soon be ready to say to any approvable missionary candidate who applies: "You can go as soon as you have your total support and outfit funds." This in itself should supply workers for our present fields and those needed for the opening of new fields.

The enlistment of full-time supporters at home seems to be about as difficult a problem as the recruitment of missionary candidates. However, through challenges from the Word, missionary conference programs, and well-prepared publicity materials and periodicals, the members of churches at home can be challenged.

Possibly the greatest victories in enlisting financial support from our constituency are coming through the faith-promise plan of foreign missions giving. This is a plan greatly blessed of the Lord through the ministry of Dr. Oswald J. Smith, as outlined in his pamphlet "How God Taught Me to Give." It is simply asking God what He would have one to give, and then trusting God to supply the means necessary to make that gift possible. Dr. Smith says of the plan: "A faith promise offering is between you and God. No one will ever ask you for it. No official will ever call on you to collect it. No one will ever send you a letter about it. It is a promise made by you to God, and to God alone."⁴ This is a plan which looks to God vertically rather than to man horizontally. It witnesses to a life that is an open, unclogged channel through which God's blessings can flow. Faith-promise giving is the recommended policy by which an increased number of missionaries can be sent to an enlarged number of fields.

Brethren Foreign Missions will continue to be guided by these principles from "The Book," anticipating the continued guidance and blessing from God. God has given sixty-five great years to the Society. Now, the view is to the future ten years in a "Decade of Decision," looking forward to 1975, the 75th Diamond Jubilee year of service for our Lord. As the future is contemplated, we could do well to remember the words of the old Brethren hymn, supposedly sung by the Brethren upon the eve of their departure from Holland to America in 1729:

The past we leave behind us,
And faithfully we turn
To brighter things tomorrow,
And joys we have not known.

DOCUMENTATION

1. Kent, Homer A., Sr. 250 Years . . . Conquering Frontiers. Winona Lake, Indiana: Brethren Missionary Herald Co., 1958, p. 119.
2. The Handbook of Missionary Facts, Foreign Missionary Society of the Brethren Church pp. 47, 48.
3. "The Missing Link in Missionary Recruitment," Harold R. Cook, pamphlet, p. 7.
4. "How God Taught Me to Give," Oswald J. Smith, tract, pp. 7, 8.