



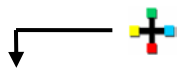
The Ordained Foreign Missionary In The Indian Church

1945

J. E. Lesslie Newbigin

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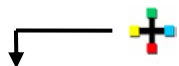


This article is based upon a short and limited experience. Many readers, even in neighbouring parts of South India, may feel at once that it does not apply fully to their situation. My excuse is that I have been asked to write, and my hope is that others will continue the discussion. I should add that I am here omitting from consideration the work of missionaries who are engaged wholly in educational institutions, and am confining myself to what has usually in the past been called the 'district missionary'.

The very phrase conjures up a picture which may form a useful starting point for our discussion. It is a picture of a bungalow set in a large compound, generally on the outskirts of a country town. The compound contains many other buildings: houses, possibly schools, and a church. The bungalow itself is one of the largest private residences in the town. Its best-known room is the office, where the district missionary sits behind his large desk, between his files and his safe. To this office come most of the problems concerning the growth of the Church in the district, and from it are paid the salaries of its leading members. As the Taluk Office is the headquarters of Government in the area, so – apparently – this office is the headquarters of Mission and Church. The missionary presumably has some books, but he rarely has a study; and if he has, it is not there but in his office that he is generally to be found.

This district missionary, slightly out of date but by no means extinct, represents a necessary stage in the planting of the Church in a new land – the stage at which protection had to be given to those who accepted Christ and were cast out of their old world, and in which control and protection were the responsibility of the foreign missionary. At this stage the Mission necessarily overshadowed the Church, and to the casual onlooker the impression given was that the whole organization (Mission-cum-Church) was a large, heavily financed organization engaged in a series of activities somewhat parallel to the government social services, and building up round itself a community of people who were the primary beneficiaries of those activities. In this organization the key posts were those held by missionaries-district missionaries, superintendents of hospitals, principals of schools and colleges. Under them was a hierarchy of Indian workers

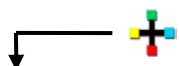
which rapidly developed the characteristics of similar hierarchies elsewhere, each member being acutely conscious of his position on the scale. In the section of the whole for which the



district missionary was directly responsible the hierarchy consisted of pastors, catechists, evangelists, teacher-catechists and teachers, each group having standards of education and salary nicely adjusted to its respective place on the scale. And at the head was the district missionary, with his desk, his files and his safe.

I have, of course, over-painted the picture, but it will be admitted that there is enough truth in it to merit attention; that in spite of all we believe and teach about the Church, to the ordinary man both inside and out it is apt to appear not very different from the caricature given above. And the crux of the matter is the position of the pastor. If we believe that the Church exists by faith in Christ, and that Christ is revealed to the Church in the word and sacraments of the Gospel, it will follow that our picture of the Church will have as its very central panel the worshipping congregation where the Word is preached and believed, and the Sacraments administered and received; and that those to whom is entrusted by ordination the duty of so lifting up Christ before His people will be held in a position of honour second to none. What has happened, however, is that the pastorate has come to be regarded as a somewhat subordinate post to which little prestige attaches, and that it is the administrative post, the post hitherto generally filled by the district missionary, which attracts the men of greatest ambition and ability in the Church. Like the missionary whose disciple he has been, the pastor calls his private room his office, not his study, and the symbol of seriousness in the service of the Church is not a shelf of books but a cupboard of files. This exaltation of the administrative over the pastoral and preaching offices is the most obvious consequence of the way in which the Church has developed in this new environment. It has taken place as much in churches whose ecclesiastical policy excludes any kind of personal episcopacy as in those which have bishops or superintendents as part of their traditional church structure. In the latter case the effect is probably less harmful, because the man who is chief administrator also has a recognized position as father-in-God to the pastors and people in his area, whereas the circle chairman or superintendent in a church of the Presbyterian or Congregational type has no constitutional authority except as the chief officer of the employing agency. In this type of case there seems to be a peculiarly grave danger that the real character of the Church, as the congregation of those who are bound to Christ by faith, should be obscured by its character as a heavily financed and highly centralized organization based on paid agents.

Missions very early took it as their duty to train men for the pastoral and preaching offices, and it is now rare to find a missionary in the ordinary pastorate. But the administrative posts were retained in foreign hands for a very much longer time. At present there are many members of the Church who have the ability and 'weight' to



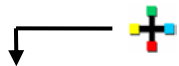
carry these posts, and many have already taken them over, but such ordained missionaries as remain in the work of the Church are chiefly in posts of this type. And there is a general and natural feeling that where there are Indians able to fill these posts they should do so, and that as long as foreign missionaries retain them for them selves, when suitable Indians are available, they are thwarting the natural growth of the Church. Thus it is assumed that the church structure which has been built up under conditions of foreign control is to be retained, but indianized; that the key post will continue to be that of the administrator; and that the office of pastor will continue to be only a lower rung on the ladder of service.

What, in this picture, is to be the place of the foreign missionary? The great majority of responsible church leaders still desire the comradeship of the foreign missionary, provided that certain conditions are fulfilled. These conditions may be grouped under three heads, concerning –

respectively the missionary's status, his character and motive and the work to which he is assigned.

1. As regards status, there is an almost unanimous desire that the missionary should work as a member of the Church in India and as its servant. This is a development which must surely be gladly accepted as soon as, and in proportion as, the Church in India is a strong enough body to make control effective. It will involve different constitutional problems according to whether the Church in India is part of the same Church as the 'sending' body, or whether it is an independent and purely Indian body. In the latter case the constitutional difficulty is greater, but is certainly not insurmountable. And the principle of identification with those to whom we are sent, a principle which derives its sanction from the Incarnation itself, surely forbids us to stop short of this step. Comradeship with the Indian Church cannot be complete so long as the missionary cannot accept, along with his Indian fellow-minister, the spiritual authority of the Church which he is himself committed to build up.

2. As regards character and motive, much has been said about the qualities needed in a missionary who is to occupy this position. He must be humble, devoid of any kind of racial arrogance, ready to efface himself and to take the humbler part, more inclined to serve than to rule. He must expect rather to take his place as a junior member in an Indian fellowship than to be the leader and pioneer of new enterprises on his own. One may safely say that this is an ideal against which every missionary should measure himself, and also that if he thought himself to have attained it he would certainly be unfit to be a missionary of the Gospel. Further, it is a right analysis of the needs of the present stage of the Indian Church's growth which leads to this picture of the ideal missionary. Yet two things have to be remembered by those who thus catalogue the specifications of the future missionary. The first is that missionaries are sinful

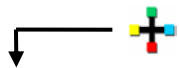


human beings and that to expect perfectionist standards of them can only lead to disappointment. The new relationship between Church and Mission demands that the Indian Church shall regard each new missionary who comes to its service as a soul in the making, needing much of the same spiritual help along the path of sanctification as the new pastor fresh from the theological seminary. To accept responsibility for such help is surely an indispensable part of the growth of the Indian Church to maturity. To expect at the outset all the gifts that are included in the specification of the ideal missionary would be irresponsible, and in effect disastrous.

The second point, closely related to the first, is that while the missionary must perpetually see to it that he is more willing to serve than to lead, to take second and not first place, it is the responsibility of the Church to see that the missionary is given definite responsibilities commensurate with his abilities. What we are is more important and influential than what we do, but we become what we are by doing what we do. The attempt to cultivate in ourselves a saintly character is the highroad to pharisaism. It is by the way we do what we ought to do that we become what God wills us to be. The Indian Church will not make saints of its future missionaries by asking them to sit in their bungalows and radiate an example of self-effacement. They must be given worth-while tasks in the fulfilment of which in obedience to God there will be wrought out in them the stuff of sainthood. The alarming number of younger missionaries who do not propose to return to India after their next furlough is due to the fact that they do not see tasks proposed for them in the Indian Church of the future which equal in urgency and significance the immense tasks which challenge Christian youth in the devastated countries of the West, in Africa and in China. It will, I trust, be part of the wisdom of Indian church leaders in the years ahead to realize that a young man newly out of college, who has given his life for the adventure of missionary service, cannot be expected to content himself with tasks which do not significantly employ all his energies and abilities, and to plan accordingly such employment of foreign missionaries as shall help them to grow to the full maturity of Christian character and to give the spiritual help and support for which the Indian Church still looks to missionaries. It should be frankly stated

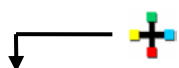
that this matter requires more consideration than it has yet received among Indian church leaders; and certainly the unfinished task of the Church in India is so vast that it ought not to be impossible for work to be found which will give ample scope for all the workers – Indian and foreign – who can be called to its service.

3. This leads us to the question of the work to which ordained missionaries are to be assigned. Judging by the public and private utterance of Indian church leaders, there is a general feeling that



while the old posts of ‘district missionary’, ‘circle chairman’ and the like should be in Indian hands, the foreign missionary would be welcomed as an advisor and as a trainer of leaders. The recent report of the National Christian Council on this subject states that the help of missionaries will be needed ‘in the important work of training, and in fostering and enriching the evangelistic and pastoral work of the Church’. Let us consider these two: (a) Certainly the older Churches have a contribution to make to the training of pastors and other leaders. But it must be stated with all possible emphasis that the needed contribution can only be made by men who have served an apprenticeship in the ordinary life of the Church, thoroughly learned the vernacular of the Church and come to know as fully as possible the ordinary life of its congregations and its homes. In a land where almost every educated man speaks English, the missionary who lacks this background can certainly establish extremely fruitful contacts. But for the task of training the ministry of the Church this thorough identification with the life of the ordinary congregation would appear to be essential, if what is taught is really to assist in the rooting of the Church in Indian soil. The Indian Church is already far too foreign. The missionary task is the nurture of a truly Indian Church, and this demands that the missionary who is called to that task must undertake in his own life the difficult labour of expressing the Christian message in an Indian tongue and the Christian corporate life in the setting of an Indian town or village. If the missionary is to serve the Indian Church by training its leaders, the Indian Church must first give him a responsible place in its life.

(b) To foster and enrich the pastoral and evangelistic work of the Church is likewise a great task. But this, too, requires in the first place integration with the Church’s life. The occasional lecturer, the ‘guest preacher’, the conference speaker—these have a useful place in the life of the Church. But the man who spends his whole life in this kind of vagrant service does not come to grips with the real life of the Church. It is the man—be he pastor, teacher, superintendent – who lives with the people day in day out for years; the man who knows them in joy and sorrow, who has to settle their quarrels, bear with their faults and wrestle with them over the daily personal, social and financial problems that confront church courts and pastorate committees; the man who is committed to them for more than an hour or a day – this is the man whose work is, in the aggregate, of greatest significance for the Church. If the missionary wholly loses this kind of relationship to the Church, and becomes merely a conductor of retreats and conferences, or a kind of ‘evangelistic expert’ to guide and advise the Church, his contribution is likely to be of less and less value. This danger is inherent in much of what is being said about the future of the missionary. The transfer

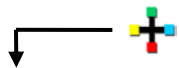


of responsibility to Indians is proceeding and ought to proceed much further. But at the same time, if the help of missionaries is still desired, place must be kept for them within the real life of the Church. They will not be able to do much good if they are relegated to a place – even a distinguished place – on its fringe.

What, then, is to be the place of the missionary in the ordinary life of the Church, apart from such specialist posts as those referred to in the preceding paragraph? At this stage, I suggest, when the administrative posts are being given increasingly to Indians, it would be a wise use of

resources to put a certain number of missionaries into the ordinary preaching and pastoral work. I have already suggested that at present this work is being overshadowed by the administrative and supervising work which has been mainly in missionary hands. Is it not now a real need that missionaries should use such gifts as their training in the West has given them to seek to raise the whole conception of what it means to be a preacher? This is a contribution which we ought to be able to give. Professor H. H. Farmer in his recent book *The Servant of the Word* has emphasized the fact that Christian preaching is an activity *sui generis*, being rooted in the nature of the Gospel itself, and his book constitutes itself one more reminder of the tremendously high standards of mental discipline and preparation which are required of the man who would effectively present Christ in the idiom of his day and generation. The Indian Church has as yet scarcely glimpsed these standards. How much study is done by pastors and missionaries in India? How many of us devote more than an hour or two to the preparation of our sermons? And how many sermons rise above the level of mere moral exhortation? And that phrase which Hindus use in these parts to describe our speech – ‘Christian Tamil’ – does it not precisely indicate that we have practically not attempted the task of translating the Gospel into the idiom of those to whom we are sent? There is an imperative challenge here to men who will firmly decide that for them the office shall not dominate the study, and that their first task shall be to devote such consecrated hours to the task of study – both of the Bible and of the language and literature of the people – as shall equip them week by week to feed the people with preaching which is Christian preaching indeed. And the pastoral work of the Christian ministry which, not less than the preaching, is *sui generis* – how far have we really succeeded in planting it securely in the life of the Church? In how many cases does it survive the throttling effect of the administrative jobs which, somehow, we have come to regard as the most important forms of Christian service?

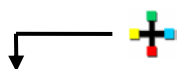
If missionaries are to perform this service acceptably to the Indian Church, in such a way as to help to raise the whole position of the Christian ministry to one of greater honour, they will require



a good knowledge of the vernacular and a sensitive understanding of Indian ways of thought and life – especially in such matters as concern birth, marriage and death. In other words, they will require to have identified themselves much more closely with the life of the people than a superintendent or administrator is required to do. But it may safely be said that this kind of identification will increasingly be the condition of any future missionary service in the Indian Church. It will also mean that in many cases missionaries will be working under Indian supervision, but this too is as it ought to be. At the present stage in the development of the Indian Church this is the point at which the foreign missionary could make a most significant contribution.

There is a further reason for stressing the pastoral office as the key to the present situation. Among the more ardent spirits in the Church there are an increasing number who, feeling that the usual posts which the Church offers are too much concerned with serving tables, are separating themselves completely from its organized congregational life and taking up the life of wandering preachers. One often – alas – hears the phrase, ‘I have left the Church in order to do the Lord’s work’. Behind this lies, of course, the whole issue between the Hindu attempt to escape from the material world and the life of ordinary society, and the Christian attempt – rooted in the Incarnation – to build up the life of the Body of Christ. Nor would one wish that the work of the ministry should become so completely separated from the ordinary economic and social concerns of Christian people as has happened in the typical middle-class congregation in the West. Yet we have been much to blame in failing to give due honour to the work of the ministry, and in showing in it a way for the highest possible exercise of the gifts of the Spirit. ‘Either office – wallah or sannyasi’ is not a dilemma with which we ought to have confronted Christian youth.

As regards the administrative type of post, at present the main work of missionaries, one has to consider first the question raised at the beginning of this article. Should the post of 'district missionary' be considered as a temporary necessity of the planting stage of the Church's life, or should it be treated as permanent and continued in Indian hands? Possibly this is an academic question, for it is doubtful whether any arguments, however valid, could dislodge this post to which so much prestige has come to be attached. But if it is to be retained, it is worth while asking church authorities to consider very carefully its, relation to their whole ecclesiastical structure. It is quite common to find a church which is in ecclesiastical theory congregational, and in administrative fact episcopal, so that the co-ordinating power is neither ecclesiastical nor pastoral, but merely financial, and so that when a congregation achieves financial independence it thinks itself justified in treating ecclesiastical authority

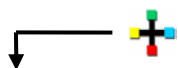


with contempt. If the Church is to retain the centralized administration which missions have built up, it should consider whether it is not more fitting to the true character of the Church that administrative power should be intimately related to the responsibility for ecclesiastical and spiritual oversight.

Assuming that the post of district missionary is retained (under whatever name it is given), it may also be assumed that it will pass increasingly into Indian hands. At the same time, I suggest, a certain number of missionaries should be retained in these posts. It would be generally agreed that they can bring ideas and energies into this work which will continue to be fruitful, and they will serve the Indian Church best not by telling other people how to do the work, but first by doing it themselves and then by encouraging and helping their colleagues.

If, then, the missionaries are to find their place in the ordinary life of the Church as pastors and superintendents alongside of Indians in the same types of post, there will be problems to be faced as regards standards of living. It does not seem possible to require of missionaries as a general rule that they should live in Indian fashion, though some have succeeded in doing so. Certainly it would not be generally possible to ask missionaries with families. On the other hand, to place all Indians who were taking the places of missionaries on the same salaries as missionaries would impose an impossible burden on the Indian Church. To meet this it is of course suggested that home boards should send out the salaries instead of the missionaries, and to some degree this is probably necessary and right. But as a total solution of the problem it is neither desirable nor – probably – possible. Missionary giving is necessarily connected in some measure with the sending of missionaries, and growing Indian control ought to be commensurate with growing financial responsibility if the development is to be healthy. Nor would it be good to treat certain pastorates and districts as 'missionary stations' and others as 'Indian stations', a method which makes for division in the Church and prevents the contribution of missionaries being useful to the whole Church. But it ought not to be impossible to solve this problem after frank recognition of all the factors involved, to permit different standards of salary for Indian and missionary incumbents in the same posts, while securing to both all the facilities necessary for the efficient discharge of their duties, and at the same time not permitting the difference to be so large as to make it impossible for Indians and missionaries to succeed one another in the same posts.

One may conclude by suggesting some of the factors which ought to be in the minds of 'sending' boards in recruiting missionaries, and of the Indian Church in receiving them. To the former one would stress, as is being already everywhere done, the fact that the



missionary calling in our day is normally more to collegueship than to pioneering, more to the patient task of helping a community to grow in love than to the task of pushing out on one's own

into new spheres and new schemes; the fact, therefore, that a certain kind of romantic missionary appeal, which is likely only to lead to disillusionment, should be firmly avoided.

To the Indian Church one would urge again the need for clearer thinking about the contribution which it is hoped future missionaries will give. The Indian Church is full of the fragrant memories of missionaries who were truly fathers in God to multitudes of people, and there is naturally a longing that new missionaries who come should step into this position. Yet these early missionaries were also the effective rulers of the Church, and there is an equally natural determination that the new missionaries shall not be so. Sometimes, therefore, the Indian congregation seems to be asking two contradictory things of the missionary – asking at one time that he shall be a father to all, as his predecessor was, and at another time and in another context demanding that he shall remain in the background and leave to others the direction of policy and programme. Perhaps it is just here that the missionary at the present day faces his greatest testing: he must be able to recognize both that it is right that he should be in the background and should leave to his Indian brethren the responsibility which they claim; and also at the same time to recognize that there is a longing for the support and strength that he can give, and to have grace to give it in ways that strengthen and do not weaken the independence and sense of responsibility of the Indian Church.

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