

For a Moratorium on the Word “Partnership”

Towards a Paradigm Shift in the Relationship Between Japanese Protestant Churches and Overseas Missions and Churches*

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IN RECENT YEARS, North American mission boards have been withdrawing personnel and financial support from Japan on a large scale. The same development may also be observed among European mission boards. It is obvious that Japan's economic success, especially the high yen, has been the major cause for this retreat. However, it is also clear that these trends fundamentally change the relationship between the Japanese churches and the churches overseas. Consequently, the hasty reaction of the mission boards, the inactivity of the Japanese Protestant churches and, finally, the difficult situation of the missionaries being trapped in between raise some serious questions that call for honest reflection, public discussion and, eventually, clarification. This paper is an attempt to initiate serious dialogue. I shall first consider critically the problems of the mission boards, the Japanese churches and the missionaries. Then I shall suggest some directions where possible solutions might be found.

BASIC PROBLEMS

North American and European Mission Boards

It is surprising to discover that the changed economic situation has caused remarkably similar reactions by mission boards from North America and Europe although they are independent of each other. That is, we observe here not an accidental event or an accumulation of accidental events but an

underlying structure that seems to be at work.

These structurally similar reactions are characterized by the following typical pattern of behavior.

1. The boards respond very quickly to financial situations.
2. The reaction of the boards seems to be motivated purely by financial concerns. The utter lack of any theological deliberations and concerns in this respect is conspicuous. A missionary friend formulated this way of thinking as follows: “How many missionaries do we get for the buck?” In the time around the JNAC (Japan-North American Commission on Cooperative Mission) Mission Consultation, held in October/November 1992 in Hiroshima, it was frequently said that, for the cost of keeping one missionary in Japan, a board can send ten missionaries or more to Africa or Southeast Asia (now Russia is added to the agenda). Whether the boards are really acting accordingly remains a question that needs to be investigated further. Here we may state, however, that this purely economic reasoning lacks any theological consideration.
3. The boards react to this situation by deciding unilaterally at home to withdraw support without prior consultation with the so-called “partner” churches on other options, although such consultations would likely have fostered mutual understanding and trust and could have brought forth possibilities of sharing the

financial burdens. The reoccurring pattern of hasty and unilateral decision-making, however, reveals only too clearly that crucial terms such as "cooperation" and "partnership," used for many years to describe the relationship between the missions abroad and churches in Japan, is nothing but rhetoric. As one missionary friend said, the relationship is still characterized by Western paternalism. Or in other words, the one-sided decision-making process reveals a serious lack of trust in the "partner."

4. The boards react to the new situation by making decisions without prior consulting with the missionaries in Japan. In this case also, prior consultations might have brought to light alternatives to unilateral withdrawal. In this case too, other popular terms in mission circles, such as "fraternal worker" and "co-worker," have proven to be nothing more than empty words. The high-handed behavior of mission board officials certainly does not build trust on the side of the missionary, although trust is probably the decisive condition for mission work.

Japanese Protestant Churches

In reaction to the changed economic situation, the Japan side has exhibited, roughly speaking, two kinds of behavior. The so-called Christian schools and universities employ missionaries from abroad and pay their salaries and other costs. However, the churches and congregations, which also benefited from the cheap labor of missionaries for quite a long time, do not seem to respond at all. Almost passively, without any public discussion, they just let things happen. I have heard of only one case in all of the Japanese Protestant churches where the missionary pastor was employed and paid locally. Given this situation, Japanese churches should be challenged about their passive attitude. They have to express

and formulate good reasons why they still need foreign church personnel (apart from having cheap labor). If they really do not need missionaries, or if they cannot afford to pay them, then it is clear that the missionaries will have to leave as soon as possible. If there is still a need for foreign church personnel, the churches must, first of all, state clearly the reasons and the required qualifications and, secondly, find funds to share the financial burden.

Missionaries

The missionaries are more or less trapped in between the pattern of behavior of the Japanese churches, on the one side, and of the overseas mission boards, on the other. They, and consequently the local Japanese congregations, suffer most. Their superiors at home make unilateral decisions without consulting the other two parties involved. Recently, for example, a colleague received by FAX a notice stating that he will be fired in half a year, the minimum time required by the law. After 15 years of missionary work here in Japan, this is surely not the right way to tackle such issues that involve individual human lives and whole congregations. A few years ago, a Scandinavian board suddenly decided one day to cut the salaries of its missionaries to Japan by half. Of course, this implies the requirement of only half-time work. Such a decision reveals either complete ignorance of the problems of part-time pastoral care or a calculated exploitation under a religio-economic pretext. In any case, it shows a serious lack of concern of the employer for the employee. I have heard other such stories from colleagues and am sure there are many more, which reveals that the utter incompetence of mission board officials is causing deep disappointments plus much frustration and bitterness among missionaries. In recent decades, mission boards have developed into big administrative bodies that not only

swallow large sums of money themselves but also degrade the missionary to the position of a general employee who is expected simply to follow the authoritarian orders of the home office. At the same time, more and more board officials have less experience in the field and are less qualified than previously. Also, the home offices seem less and less prepared to listen to the missionaries at all. From what I know about relationships a few decades ago, boards placed great value on the judgment of missionaries. To my knowledge missionaries today are terribly under represented on decision-making bodies. Mission boards too quickly forget that the place mission becomes a concrete reality is not in the home office but in the place where the missionary actively lives and works.

DIRECTIONS FOR POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Now in such a situation, what should or could be done? There are two possibilities. Either the parties involved can allow mission relationships to continue to follow the same course, or they can start a public discussion of the issues and possible solutions. I opt for the latter and suggest that the United Church of Christ in Japan (Kyōdan) organize a consultation to which representatives of the partner churches, especially the East Asia regional secretaries of the respective mission boards, a number of experienced missionaries and Kyōdan representatives are invited. Such a meeting should be held with a minimum of cost and organizational effort, for example at the annual Kyōdan Missionaries' Conference. Regional secretaries visit Japan every year or every other year, so if they are informed early enough, they can adapt their schedules accordingly. At such a consultation, the East Asia secretaries or representatives of the mission boards should describe the situation they face and what possible solutions they envision. The Kyōdan represen-

tatives should present their views on why they do or do not expect missionaries to be sent, and if they still want their presence, how the Kyōdan is prepared concretely to share the financial burden. A considerable number of experienced missionaries (in any case, much more than at the JNAC Mission Consultation 1992 in Hiroshima) should get a chance to present their views on the issues and possible solutions.

Japanese Churches

The following suggestions are intended to suggest the direction I think solutions could possibly be found. It would be very difficult for the Kyōdan to pay for foreign missionaries in Japan because the Kyōdan itself cannot, or does not want to, pay even for its own missionaries abroad. I understand that these Japanese missionaries are paid, in the case of the so-called "third world countries," by voluntary local supporters in their former congregations in Japan or by the churches abroad where they work, as in the case of America and Europe.

There are two underlying, psycho-theological problems here: Firstly, among most pastors, Christians and congregations of the Kyōdan, one does not find a real consciousness of the Church beyond one's own local congregation. The sense of responsibility reaches only to the borders of one's own local congregation. The consciousness that local congregations form a part of the body of Christ—which becomes visible, for example, in the Kyōdan as a whole and the worldwide Church—is remarkably underdeveloped. On the one hand, the history of the forced unification of various Protestant denominations at the time of Japanese militarism has to be blamed for this fact. On the other hand, we live today, therefore church leaders must take responsibility for today's situation and try to find solutions. The present church rather resembles a form of sectarianism. This sectarianism has to be

understood in the context of Japanese groupism that can be observed widely in social, religious, economic, cultural and political life in this country. As such, the sectarianism of the Japanese churches represents one of the forms of an unconscious enculturation of Christianity in Japanese soil that went wrong because the necessary process of indigenization was not reflected on theologically and discussed sufficiently. One example of this factionalism is to be found in the conflicts between the three theological schools in Tokyo, Kyoto and Nishinomiya that train Kyōdan students of theology. In theological education, pastoral work and church organization, the Kyōdan has to overcome these fundamental problems of factionalism and sectarianism if it does not want to remain in provincialism and finally end up in obscurity. Both the present tendency of declining church membership and the growing emergence of Japanese indigenous churches clearly points in that direction. To give a concrete example of one consequence of this factionalism: An Aum Shinrikyō member once confided to me that previously he used to attend a Protestant church but eventually left because he was disappointed with the lack of unity. Such a lack of unity is, in other words, a lack of love. I am sure he is not the only one who has left the church for such a reason. By way of contrast, it is indeed telling that the Christian idea of love is presently appropriated by the Japanese secular public, as can be seen in the popularity of Christmas (the "feast of love") and Christian style weddings. Surely they are popular for more than commercial reasons.

The second basic psycho-theological problem is that the Japanese churches have been on the receiving side for over a hundred years. It is time, as also strongly indicated by the economic situation, that the Japanese churches should move ahead and put at least one foot on the giving side. To put it bluntly, besides invaluable spiritual

gifts, the Japanese churches have also received abundant material gifts, such as land, schools and church buildings. In the case of European mission boards, these were mostly financed by then quite poor Christians who regarded mission work as so important that they sacrificed greatly for it. Gradually, this property was appropriately handed over to the newly established churches. It must be added that this land is quite often prime land. A look at the map of Kyoto, for example, shows this quite clearly. However, the important question of stewardship remains: How are such holdings administered and used for the sake of the kingdom of God? Jesus taught us the parable of the talents, which I think, is valid also for material things. I have heard of several cases in which church officials embezzled expensive church land. These cases were swiftly swept under the carpet, which is a misunderstood form of Christian love. I know also of certain local congregations and Christian institutions that are quite rich themselves but do not share what has been entrusted to them for use by the whole body of Christ nationwide and worldwide. This group-egoism and sectarianism is quite widespread in the congregations. Japanese Christians always complain that the church is poor. That might be correct if applied to the Kyōdan as a whole. However, it is not true of many local congregations. The impressive figures of donations for financing their own church buildings and pipe organs give more than ample proof of this fact. In Kyoto alone, a considerable number of new churches have been constructed during the last few years. Japanese Christians donate impressively, but mostly for their own local church, not for others. This is a grave psychological and theological problem. American and European churches should challenge the Kyōdan and ask for "returns," not in a cheap mercantilistic way of thinking, but for the sake of a healthy church that lives from both receiving and,

paradoxically, giving. Also, instead of investing so much in buildings, the congregations should spend more money for human beings, in social welfare for the needy, for training and education especially of the young and lay people.

One of the major reasons for the stagnation of mainline Japanese churches is that they have not moved forward to the giving side. Luther would say they are still curved in upon themselves. If they really open themselves up to the whole Church and to the secular world, they will become free and attractive, which naturally will lead to church growth. This would enable the Kyōdan to play a full role in the ecumenical partnership and to share its part materially and spiritually. Foreign churches and mission boards should challenge the Kyōdan in this respect.

Foreign Mission Boards

On the other hand, foreign churches and mission boards are more or less unable to name what they receive from their "partnership" with the churches in Japan. I searched for quite some time, however, I did not find any satisfying answer to this question. (I am sure that if the mission boards and mission theologians would ask the missionaries, they would find some answers.) Churches and missions abroad only give and give. They provide much financial support and human service, but at this point they stop. They do not go on to the receiving side. In other words, they stick to a seemingly superior position which necessarily requires a receiving "partner," psychologically situated on a lower level. In practical theology (pastoral care) this problem has been discussed as the "helper complex." Such a behavior causes many psychological injuries, inferiority complexes and resentments in Japanese Christians. Most mission board officials and missionaries are not aware of it; it lies mostly hidden

under the surface. A Japanese pastor, after having spent a sabbatical at a theological school in North America, told me: "Church and mission representatives there say we are your friends, but they never respect us."

Because of these psychological complexes on both sides, Western mission boards have serious trouble trying to express what they receive from Japanese churches, and Japanese churches, it seems, have considerable difficulties to formulate what they can give to their partners. A friend said that missions got stuck in pure "charity." Today, they cannot give freely such "charity" anymore, that is, they cannot continue to play the paternalistic role, consequently they become irritated and finally completely withdraw in panic. This is one essential aspect of the current identity crisis which plagues the missions belonging to mainline churches. It is obvious that such an attitude of only "giving without receiving" has to be radically challenged as well.

Missionaries

Finally, I think that the missionaries as well have to be challenged. Missionaries have to ask themselves honestly and have to be asked pointedly whether their place is really in Japan. I have the impression that probably between 50 and 70 percent of missionaries presently serving in Japan would be better off working at home. Too many are not really open to the situation here; too many project their own expectations, behavior and framework of mind onto the situation here which causes many unnecessary troubles. Too many missionaries still resemble the profile of the nineteenth century "pioneer missionary" who had a very strong and quite often an authoritarian character. Such a person is not able to cooperate with others on equal terms. On the other hand, not every Japanese church official is able to work together with a foreigner in partnership. I know of many cases

where either the foreign missionary or the Japanese person in charge, or both together, have been unable to adapt to a concrete situation of international and ecumenical cooperation.

When considering the consequences of such a "lone ranger" mentality, we find that even though these missionaries created many outstanding institutions such as social welfare centers, hospitals, schools, international student dormitories, research institutes and universities, (I refrain here from giving names), these were never properly integrated into the whole life of the church. Instead, they are run independently of the church bodies. The fundamental problem of all these institutions stems, first of all, from a certain missionary type who is unable to integrate himself/herself and his/her work into the local congregation and the national church. Christian schools, social welfare institutions, research institutes, et cetera that have formed an integral part of the church life in other parts of the world during its 2000-year history are in the Japanese case like legs and arms that are severed from the body of the church. The second reason for this regrettable fact is the absence of any attempt by foreign mission boards to transcend their denominationalistic or parochial way of thinking and integrate these special and important institutions into the whole life of the local church. A third factor in this situation is the above-mentioned Japanese group "group-egoism" mentality that is unable to recognize the necessity for integrating particular parts into the whole body. This basic problem has to be openly discussed in the Japanese churches and institutions together with mission boards.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

Economic developments in recent years should not cause a retreat but should rather be taken as a challenge. In fact they pose

the first and unique chance to develop a real partnership between Japanese churches and mission boards and churches abroad. Instead of the simplistic either-or behavior—either foreign churches pay their own personnel or the missionaries have to go home—all sides involved should search together for possible alternatives. The concepts of partnership and cooperation imply that all kinds of situations have to be shared. If partnership means sharing, then partners should search together for solutions to bear the burdens, including the financial ones.

Therefore I suggest that today a "paradigm shift" in the relationship between Japanese churches and foreign mission boards is necessary and possible. The churches and missions abroad must begin to see themselves not only as the main giving side but also as on the receiving side. Japanese churches must change their role from being receivers to being givers as well. The body of Christ is only living as long as an exchange of energies takes place. The current role behavior of both sides has to be fundamentally changed. I further suggest that, for the next ten years or so, we put the word "partnership" under a moratorium in order to avoid its ideological abuse. Too many officials in churches and mission boards who talk about "partnership" are nullifying it by their own behavior. This important term should not be used until it has been validated by reality. Finally, I suggest that the voice of the missionaries should be heard more attentively, especially by their own mission boards.

I hope that these deliberations will lead to open discussions among all parties involved. Commenting on this present paper, a friend wrote: "We have three worlds in collision here and self-interest is still, unfortunately, the modus operandi of each of the three." Considering this warning, a public discussion of the issues at stake becomes all the more important. I do not know of

any alternative. However, public discussion and mutual criticism have to be conducted in honesty and in the spirit of love. It begins with true self-reflection and leads to honest criticism of others involved. After all, sincerity or truthfulness have always formed the starting point of any religious reform. Thus such a discussion eventually may lead to a considerably improved relationship between the Japanese Protestant churches and the churches and mission boards overseas, a more effective carrying-out

of the worldwide mission with which all Christians are entrusted, and a relationship that in the end might truly be called partnership.

* This article is written from the perspective of a Kyōdan missionary. However the issues should also be relevant to other churches in Japan and related mission boards abroad. The author also gratefully acknowledges his indebtedness to helpful conversations with Japanese pastors and foreign missionaries, from whom he gained many insights which became part of this paper.