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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

The Present Crisis in the Christian Ministry Overseas

BY DOUGLAS WEBSTER

DURING the last six years my Society has sent me on eight special missions to different parts of the Church overseas. Four have been in Africa, four in Asia. These journeys have taken me into eighteen different countries from Sierra Leone and Ghana to Hong Kong and Japan. It has been an immense privilege and an enriching experience to make a host of Christian friends in all these places, to enjoy most generous hospitality, to meet a very large number of missionaries from many societies and above all to see the church of Jesus Christ, and to discover where it is and where it is not.

There are few things more moving than to see the little churches of Jesus across the world. They can move one to the heights of praise and to the depths of concern; they can drive one through every spiritual mood from agony to ecstasy. There are few things more disturbing than to realize what vast areas are still not only without a church or mission of any description or denomination, but without any kind of Christian witness whatever. There are plenty of cities where the youth will know more of the latest pop singer than they know of Jesus—if they know anything about Him at all.

In some of these countries the Church has to adjust itself to living under a form of dictatorship which is gradually removing many of the liberties we take for granted; in others the pattern of feudal rule persists; in a few the experiment of democracy is still being worked out, most notably in India and Nigeria. In some of the countries, such as Israel, Kuwait, and Japan, material progress is startlingly rapid; in others, burdened with poverty, it is slow; but in all of them there are social changes which nothing can stop. In some of these countries the Church has considerable influence and Christians are to be found in high and responsible positions, especially in East and West Africa; in others its influence is negligible and there is little prospect of Christians finding their way to the top of anything except a cross.

But despite the many variations of political and social context the churches in all these lands have a wide range of common problems. Without exception they are all in environments which are basically hostile to the Christian faith and suspicious of foreigners. They are all minority communities—in Pakistan and Persia extremely small minorities. Many of them are still dependent on western help to a terrifying extent. Some of them are sampling subtle forms of persecution and privation, especially where local officials are unfriendly. All of them are being beset by pernicious sects of American origin, supported by American big money. In none of them is the ordained ministry adequate in numbers or in training for such a time as this.

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It is about this ministry that I wish to speak. For the real crisis in all the younger churches is to be seen in the ministry. In emphasizing the ordained ministry I am not forgetting the priesthood of the whole Church, nor am I assuming that leadership in the Church must necessarily and exclusively devolve upon the ordained ministry. In the Eastern Churches of the Orthodox tradition the flower of theological learning and creative thought has for a long time been with the laity. Nevertheless, ministry as such is essential to the Church, and our Lord in creating His Church provided it with a ministry which He Himself had trained. The ministry is Christ's gift to His Church. He appoints servants for His people. The ministry is made up of those servants, and their supreme and indispensable role is to serve and *service* the Church.

I deliberately use the verb "to service" in its recently acquired modern sense, and I need hardly say that "to service" means a great deal more than to take services. The function of the ordained ministry is so to equip and service the Church, that the Church in its turn may be able to serve the world in the name of Christ. It is because the Church's calling in the world is so important that the ministry's calling in the Church is urgent and crucial. Where the ministry is inadequate the Church can hardly help being inadequate also. This is the nature of the crisis. Almost every need and problem in the churches of Africa and Asia, within and beyond our own Anglican Communion, leads back in the last analysis to the sufficiency of the ministry.

I have found that the clergy tend to be the same the world over. We have the same sins, the same vanities, the same weaknesses, the same topics for talk and gossip, the same limitations. But there are certain differences; for the clergy in the Church overseas have temptations, opposition, problems, and discouragement of an order seldom known to their brothers in the West. Let me mention some of them.

First, many of them have to endure great loneliness and isolation. Eight weeks ago this very day I was in Bannu on the spectacular north-west frontier of Pakistan. The only pastor there is 120 miles away from his nearest clerical neighbour. A year ago in Khartoum I spent some time with the only two Sudanese Anglican clergy in the whole of the Northern Sudan. One of them works in the Nuba mountains, the other is the only indigenous priest in the three great towns, Khartoum, Khartoum North, and Omdurman. They are separated by a distance of 600 miles. They meet once a year. Even in Uganda and South India where there are many more clergy, the opportunities for fellowship or contact are rare and the easy transport and communications on which we rely do not exist.

Another problem is the huge size of so many pastorates. One parish which I recently visited in the Punjab has 225 villages, in all of which there are Christians who need a ministry, but it has only two clergy. Yet in England people still complain when two villages are united into one parish, even if the parish priest conducts services in both churches every Sunday. In most of Africa and Asia this is a luxury unknown and undreamt of and probably unthinkable for another hundred years.

The poverty of many clergy in India, Pakistan, and East Africa would

be a greater scandal than it already is, if it were not that most of their congregations are poorer still. By western standards our missionaries accept a simplicity of life and a relative poverty. But a single woman missionary, who had just enough money to make ends meet and no more, confessed to me recently her dismay that she was being paid three times as much as the local pastor who had a wife and eight children.

Apart from Japan and Ceylon the proportion of clergy with a university degree is infinitesimal. In many dioceses there are none at all. Even in highly progressive areas such as West Africa, where both secondary and university education are expanding at a remarkable pace, the majority of clergy are of peasant stock, of village background, and with only six years or perhaps eight of schooling behind them. Today they are being called to minister in great urban centres of population where the speed of life baffles and overwhelms them, to men working in great industrial enterprises facing profound moral and psychological problems which are beyond the understanding of themselves or their pastors, and to the bright boys and girls who fill the sixth forms of secondary schools and who graduate from British and African universities and who want to know how to relate their faith, if they have not lost it by then, to the vital issues of our time, issues of whose existence most of the clergy are blissfully unaware.

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What is going to happen to this new and intelligent and most promising of all African and Asian generations, if their clergy are dumb and cannot meet their needs? As Bishop Newbigin recently remarked after an extensive tour in Africa, "we are rapidly approaching a point of no return". These are only a few of the tantalizing problems of the ministry in the younger Churches. There are scores of others. What can we do? How can we help? I offer six suggestions.

First, we must do our utmost to find men of theological competence and pastoral experience to staff the theological colleges of the Church overseas. This must still be our top priority in recruiting, for no work is more pressing and no posts are harder to fill. The Church Missionary Society has responsibilities to help seventeen theological colleges and at present we need immediately seven men for such colleges in Africa and five for Asia.

Second, we must try to find clergy with experience of industrial areas in this country who can give themselves to tough pioneering work in the vast industrial areas of cities like Lagos and Nairobi, Karachi and Bangalore. In no other way can the clergy of the younger churches be trained for industrial evangelism which as yet is virtually unattempted.

Third, there is a need for us to help these churches to launch a campaign to encourage their young men to offer for the ordained ministry. This means that there must be chaplains in some of the principal universities, colleges, and high schools, who will make it their business to put the claims of the ministry before the student world. There is a grave lack of effort and vision at this point. But some dioceses in Asia are so poor that they will never be able to train ordinands unless we provide them with grants towards the cost.

Fourth, there ought, *in every diocese*, to be one experienced priest whose whole-time job is to work among the clergy, whether by taking retreats and refresher courses for groups of them or by conducting missions and teaching weeks in their parishes. The need at this level is too great to be exaggerated. This is a calling that can best be fulfilled by a missionary in most instances.

Fifth, in all the major regions of the non-Christian world there should be study centres where research can be undertaken, where the language and the national religion can be studied at a deep level, where literature of merit can be produced and some approach made to the neglected intellectuals. This requires men of dedicated and disciplined scholarship, linguistic and theological, who will give their lives to this work.

There is a sixth category that I would tentatively mention. All the evidence suggests that there is room for a small team of clergy available for special missions of varying lengths of time in different parts of the world. They would need to be men of some experience, apt to teach, ready to take a good deal of rough and tumble, able to interpret one church to another, willing to serve in a number of capacities, sometimes just for a few weeks of intensely concentrated work, sometimes perhaps filling a gap for several months. They would have to be unmarried and untied, highly mobile, and prepared to go anywhere in the Anglican Communion and possibly outside it. This type of ministry makes heavy demands and can be very lonely and unsettling, because one belongs nowhere. But it is a piece of pioneering which brings immense rewards.

Is it too much to hope that this can be developed and extended, that other societies as well as our own may seek for such men to be flung into orbit, and that one day we who do this work might become a missionary brotherhood, each with the special loyalties and responsibilities to his society, but also with strong links to a diocese or a cathedral in this country?

When some of our English cathedrals have on their chapter canons whom they are willing to give for some months every year to the Church overseas, the Church of England may come nearer to fulfilling its great missionary vocation and seizing some of the magnificent opportunities which could be ours today.

And so I ask: when will we as a Church begin to *feel* the sufferings and needs and weaknesses of Christ's other little churches across the world? When will we begin to *burn*, as St. Paul did, under the crushing weight of all this need, and exclaim with him: "If anyone is made to stumble, does not my heart blaze with indignation?" The Church of England could do with several thousand blazing hearts, linked up with the Church overseas and lit up with that light of Christ which once strangely warmed the heart of John Wesley a mile from this room where we meet. It is only the love of Christ that warms cold Christian hearts. And it is only the hard facts of real need that make warm hearts blaze. And it is only blazing hearts which can produce the kind of Christian action in the parishes, universities and theological colleges of this country, which will affect the life and growth of the Churches overseas with which God has partnered us.

The highest contribution we can make to them is still in terms of

missionaries who go with the vowed intention of remaining for life, if God permits. The missionary movement depends not on bargaining and contracts but on solemn vows and pledges at every level. To find and train, to pray for, pay for, and care for such missionaries remains the supreme calling of our Society. As we discharge this calling with a devotion and determination exceeding anything that has been known in the past, we may be granted the privilege of supplementing and strengthening the weak and sparse ranks of the Christian ministry in the Church overseas.

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But if ours is a generation that is allowed to give, we must not expect to be allowed also to see the results of our giving or to receive gratitude for it. What can be destroyed in a day cannot be built in a day, nor can the damage of past neglect be repaired overnight. It may well be our task to sow in tears that our successors may reap in joy. Let no one be impatient or presume that we are approaching harvest time. There can be no harvest where there has been no sowing.

The plain facts are that among millions of people there has been no sowing of the Word of God and there are none to sow. Yet, if we do not help the Church to present the Gospel to all our own contemporaries in a way that is meaningful, adequate, and relevant, they will be drawn away to gods that cannot save. And if we do not prepare the soil of our age for the life-giving seed, there will be spiritual erosion on a tragic scale.

Did we not know what the Lord once did with loaves and fishes, what He goes on doing with ordinary bread and ordinary wine, how He takes and uses average and sub-average men and women, how He transformed a handful of simple Galilean fishermen into courageous evangelists and devoted pastors and inspired teachers, we would have no alternative but to give up in despair. But the Church belongs to Christ who holds it in His hands, and the ministry is ordained and given by Him, and the resources are His, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from Him, and He is sufficient and cannot fail.

But *we* can fail. And fail we will, unless we realize the lateness of the hour, unless we wake up out of torpor and the drugged sleep of our national complacency and our shameless affluence, unless we interpret the times aright, unless we seize the opportunities now while it is day and work superlatively before the night comes when no man can work.