IV. Frank W. Price

Looking Ahead in Rural Missions

"A Rural Church Program for the Next Fifty Years" was the title of an able address delivered last year by Mr. Alexander Dunn, Executive Editor of The Progressive Farmer. In our rapidly changing world situation prophecies regarding rural missions require even more daring than forecasts about the Church in America. Nevertheless, we can and we should try to look ahead; and this is what Ira Moomaw, John
Reisner, and Ralph Felton have done in their contributions to this symposium. The developing philosophy and program of rural missions must be based on careful thinking, tested experience, and a real insight into emerging needs and problems.

Many factors enter into the studies and planning of Christian rural workers today; two examples may be given. First, the extraordinarily rapid growth of the earth's population (probably 3.5 to 4 billion by the end of the twentieth century) will place severe demands upon available food supplies. Already one-half the world's people are undernourished. Robert Brittain calls this population increase "the great invasion," Second, the application of modern science and technology to agriculture and other rural occupations, already well begun in the United States and Europe and now extending over the globe, will bring about a major economic and industrial revolution. Even now in this country every farm worker can feed himself and about seventeen other persons. The rural population of the world may grow proportionately smaller while its importance to mankind will be relatively larger.

Within the past generation we have seen agricultural and rural missions become a strong religious force in the mainstream of the Christian movement. Long ago a great churchman, Bishop Grundtvig, revolutionized the agriculture and social education of Denmark; and John Frederick Oberlin of Alsace showed what could be done by the Church in rehabilitation and regeneration of a depressed rural community. During the past thirty-five years the literature of agricultural missions and of the rural church has enormously grown. We are the possessors now of a rich mine of material—surveys, studies, reports, discussions, books, and periodicals. The publications of Agricultural Missions, Inc., since 1930, and the many writings which it has stimulated, form an impressive and invaluable body of resource data and experience. In Great Britain the Institute of Rural Life at Home and Overseas has made an excellent beginning in research and reporting. The creative work of some indigenous younger churches is being recorded in magazine articles and occasional outstanding books. The Missionary Research Library will soon publish a comprehensive, annotated bibliography of the most important publications in the area of agricultural and rural missions.

"Where do we go from here?"

(1) All the writers in this symposium see the vital relation of technical assistance programs to the work of rural missions. Such programs include plans of national governments with which rural churches may cooperate and, also, aid given through United Nations organizations such as FAO and WHO, or from the U.S. Technical Assistance program. What role should Christian rural institutions and churches play in encouraging and supporting these official agencies and in making more widely available their resources and techniques for rural reconstruction? To what extent should Church World Service offer technical services?

(2) The policy of missionary societies and of national church organizations needs constant revaluation in the light of rapidly shifting conditions. Growing urban centers always tend to attract attention, personnel, and funds away from rural areas. Yet most of the world's problems are still basically rural and cannot be solved with urban methods. If the rural community is as important as ever, perhaps more important than before, in the life of nations, then the building of strong Christian rural centers and churches should be given top priority in all missionary thinking and action. What kind of witness should such Christian groups make to the societies about them as they preach the everlasting Gospel and at the same time minister to man's physical needs? In an era of revolution should the Church strive
to offer "Bread, Beauty and Brotherhood," as Edwin Markham phrased it, as well as spiritual salvation, to rural peoples? Christian testimony in these times should involve not only service in local communities but also a clear and brave Christian stand on great social issues such as land tenure, high interest rates, denial of fundamental human freedoms, racial discrimination, to mention only a few. The Christian Church cannot afford to let anti-religious social movements appear as the major champions of social justice and rural welfare.

(3) Ira Moomaw, John Reisner, and Ralph Felton have all stressed the central importance of qualified, trained personnel for Christian rural service. Dr. Moomaw indicates the increase in number of agricultural missionaries and specially prepared rural missionaries. However, in proportion to the total number of Protestant missionaries today, about 35,000, the number is disappointingly small. In addition to technical training for some missionaries who are to serve rural needs, it should be possible to enlist a much larger percentage of rural evangelistic missionaries in a broader philosophy and program of rural work. An even greater number of Christian nationals are needed with special training for village service. The drift to the cities can be arrested only if the rural ministry is presented as a thrilling and challenging opportunity and if adequate preparation is given to men and women who dedicate themselves for life to the planting and nurture of rural churches. Then we must ask - are the theological institutions and Bible schools in various lands qualified to undertake this supremely important task? Should there not be an increase in both the number and quality of rural seminaries?

(4) In the past the contribution of western churches to agricultural and rural missions has been made largely through mission boards and agencies. In the United States, a large number of such boards have worked together for many years in the Rural Missions Cooperating Committee. Another channel of service is opening up with fascinating possibilities, by way of direct relations between rural churches of one country and rural churches of other countries. For example, a far-visioned and generous town or country church in the United States may establish with a rural church in Asia, Africa, or Latin America, people with similar agricultural outlook and problems are bound by a spiritual link of friendship and mutual service. The brotherhood of men and women on the soil is strengthened, and the world-wide Christian fellowship becomes more real.

(5) The field of agricultural and rural missions and of rural church movements everywhere calls for continued research and study. Forward-looking and experienced rural missionaries and national rural workers should be encouraged to participate in this research and in new experiments and adventures which will shed light on the way ahead. Biblical teaching and theology undergirding the rural mission need re-interpretation to make them more relevant to the contemporary situation.
Notes


3. Rural Missions (formerly Agricultural Missions), Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin, Agricultural Missions Mimeographed Series, etc.


7. Dr. Richard Comfort, Secretary of the Town and Country Division of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S. has been invited to assist for several months in a survey of rural churches in Pakistan. Agricultural Missions, Inc., the Rural Missions Cooperating Committee, the Missionary Research Library and similar organizations are glad to suggest problems in rural missions policies and methods that need further study.

Biographical Notes

Ira C. Moomaw, Ph.D., is Executive Secretary of Agricultural Missions, Inc., and Secretary of the Rural Missions Cooperating Committee. He is a member of the Church of the Brethren, and, for nineteen years, served as an agricultural missionary in India. For much of that time he was Principal of the Vocational Training College at Ankleshwar. At present he is making a study of rural missions in South America.

John H. Reisner, M.Sc., was Executive Secretary of Agricultural Missions, Inc. from its founding in 1930 to 1953. He is now consultant to this agency, observer for the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, and Adviser to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. From 1914 to 1931, he was Professor of Agriculture and Dean of the College of Agriculture and Forestry in the University of Nanking. He has travelled widely over the world in the interest of agricultural missions and has written a large number of pamphlets and articles.

Ralph A. Felton, B.D., Ph.D., is Professor Emeritus of the Rural Church at Drew Theological Seminary. His students are serving rural churches all over the world. Dr. Felton spent two years, 1936 to 1938, teaching and travelling in the Far East. He is author of Our Templed Hills, Hope Rises From the Land, That Men May Plow in Hope, The Rural Church in the Far East, and many other well-known books and monographs.

Frank W. Price, B.D., Ph.D. is now Director of the Missionary Research Library, New York. He was a Presbyterian missionary in China for thirty years, professor at Nanking Theological Seminary and head of its Department of the Rural Church and Rural Training Center at Shunhwauchen. During his last term of service, he was Rural Church Secretary of the Church of Christ in China. He has written The Rural Church in China and other books. After two and a half years in a rural pastorate of Virginia, Dr. Price assumed his present responsibility on February 1, 1956.