

## **THE WORLD IS WAITING**

THE UNITED STATES IS UNIQUELY RELIGIOUS. A study of "Work & Religion" reported in Business Week (Nov. 1, 1999, pp. 150-154), found that 98% believe in God or some higher power, 78% feel the need of spiritual growth, and 48% said they had spoken of their faith with someone at work within the last 24 hours. A Gallop poll found US teens, 13 - 17 years of age, have an interest in knowing more about religion (Emerging trends, Sep. 1999, p. 5). A Yankelovich survey asked, "If you could direct a question to God and get an immediate answer, what would the question be?" The largest block (34%) would ask, "What is my purpose here?" (Pastor's Weekly Briefing, Sept. 10, 1999). Great evangelistic challenge may be seen in the finding that 31% of all adults in the U.S. are unchurched, up from 27% in 1997 (Barna Research Group, Feb. 25, 1999, p. 1).

In addition, this is a time of unusual opportunity in the world, especially among 3rd world nations. The two largest congregations in the world are found in Nigeria with 120,000 at Sunday worship (Prayer Net Newsletter, Apr. 14, 1999, p. 1), and at the Choong Hyun Presbyterian Church in Seoul, South Korea with 25,000 members (Religion Report, Dec. 28, 1993, p. 1). South Korean believers support 3500 missionaries in 90 countries. About 10,000 students per year graduate from South Korea's 300 theological colleges and seminaries (Mission Today, Part 2, 1995, pp. 214-216). It is reported that South Korea has 20,000 missionaries and Christian workers ready to relocate in North Korea for evangelistic purposes once North Korea opens up (National & International Religion Report, Dec. 25, 1995). According to IMVO, a secular South African newspaper, 70,000 new believers were baptized in the Tsomo River in a single service in November of 1992 (Religion Report, Jan 11, 1993, p. 1). Latin American churches are presently supporting 4000 missionaries. 89% of the citizens of Nigeria attend some religious gathering as compared to 44% in the U.S., 3% in Japan, and 2% in Russia. Hundreds of Christians from Ghana have migrated to Italy and are bringing evangelistic strength to Italian churches in cities such as Palermo, Catania, Vicenza, Verona, Brescia and perhaps others.

It has never been so easy to get the Word out with TV, radio, and other mass media approaches. The computer with e-mail, internet, and web pages offer new and previously unparalleled means of almost instantly presenting the gospel to the whole world. Many churches have web pages, and a number of our Christian universities are offering courses online. Harding will begin offering two courses online in January of 2000. 25% of homes are now online in the U.S. 41% of teens have at

least monthly access to internet. Internet religious selections now number 600,000, second only to the 750,000 selections on sex (Wall Street Jr., Mar.26, 1999, p. W1).

However, the competition is very active. In just 30 years Muslims in the U.S. have grown from 1/2 million to more than 6 million (Christian Science Monitor, Aug. 18, 1999). Present in our midst are almost 2 million Buddhists, and almost 1 million Hindus (Brookings Review, Spr. 1999, pp. 10-13). The largest Buddhist temple in the world is in Boulder, Colo. the largest Muslim training center in the world is in New York City. The Mormons with 60,000 missionaries have, since 1989, converted 300,000 persons annually (New York Times, May 23, 1999).

While we have the mandate to preach the gospel to the world, our performance is of low quality. On a national scale, the American people spend more on chewing gum than on mission work (Servant, Sum. 1999, p. 8). More money was spent on one bombing raid on Iraq than has been spent on evangelizing Muslim countries by all American churches over the past century. (Uplook, Mar. 1999, p. 24). Americans spend four times more money yearly on weight reduction than is spent nationally on missionary work.

Juan Monroy, a noted Spanish minister and author in a speech given many years ago at one of our Christian universities, said that our fellowship thinks we are few in number because we are so faithful. "On the contrary," he said, "you are few in number because you are so unfaithful." I think he was right! It would be difficult to demonstrate that as a church, we consider world evangelism to be a basic responsibility of all the church!

Bailey E. Smith in his book "Real Evangelism" (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1978), said that churches tend not to be evangelistic because evangelism has been substituted by other things. He includes: "seeking a stronger, deeper spiritual life before evangelizing" (which results in ever learning and never arriving at a point of being able to teach and to lead others); something he calls "motion without meaning," (where a lot of activity is going on without anything being done which leads to outreach); investing great energy in "becoming friends before evangelizing" (but never seeming to get to the evangelizing part); being "very concerned about the right way of doing nothing;" "theoretical earnestness with no commitment to work"; and "Jesus excitement without commitment."

We also hear of many solutions which do not seem to touch the real problem. Some of the expedients include fine tuning the worship services, adding commit-tees, hiring more ministers, having more or

less meetings of the church, changing Sunday school to the evening, or eliminating it, and such like. These may be indicated, but in the end it seems much like taking a car with a broken carburetor to a mechanic who "fixes" it by putting on a new muffler.

Many are beginning to realize that churches of Christ will not be more successful until they return to the Biblical model of how the church is to function. According to the New Testament, every Christian is a priest (1 Peter 2:4-9). The "great commission" rests upon the shoulders of every member (Matt. 28:18-20). Dramatic growth will occur only when each "body part" fulfills its function (Eph.4:14-16). It is the role of church leaders to work so that every member is equipped for the fulfillment of his/her ministry (Eph. 4:11-12). While the church does well to employ as many ministers as possible, no Christian can employ another to fulfill his/her own personal ministry to the Lord!

Included in the ministries received from the Lord is that of announcing the "good news" to others (2 Tim. 2:2). The fact that early disciples were faithful to this charge brought great success to the church of the first century (Acts 8:4). Once more the exhortation to return to the "old paths" given by God through Jeremiah is indicated (Jeremiah 6:16). As George Barna has written, "Myths about evangelism persist. Some still believe that evangelism happens on Sundays during morning worship. Others think that church professionals are the ones who are supposed to "do" evangelism. Others think the task in the information-rich age we live in has already been done. Wrong on all counts."

"Myths are exposed for the falsehoods they are. America is ripe for revival. In many ways, the postmodern American culture is similar to the Palestinian/-Jewish culture of Jesus' day. The political systems of both eras are characterized by widespread corruption. Serious Christians face the scorn and ridicule of the ruling elite. Most people believe in salvation by works. Poverty is pervasive, and education is no guarantee of success."

"Thus, Christians should remember that although they are separated by 2000 years of history, the secrets to successful evangelism are still the same. The message is divine and unchanging. God is still willing to use those who offer themselves for service. The most effective method of proclamation is "living" the good news. The most successful evangelism efforts are not those accompanied by a lot of bells and whistles, but those which are offered in simplicity and sincerity....What is needed is the commitment to use the models and methods we have. In commercial jargon, when it comes to evangelism, what is important is--just do it!" (Evangelism that Works, Regal Books, 1995, quoted in Current Thought & Trends, 22 June 1999, p. 23). Rick Warren in "The

Purpose Driven Church" claims that all that is needed to grow a great church is a commitment to the "Great Commission," and to "The Great Commandment." He states that people open to being evangelized are surfaced through friendship, prayer and looking for openings.

Bill Easum in an article entitled "How to Kill Your Church" (Net Fax, Sept. 15, 1999, p. 2) writes that there are four things which will keep us from killing our churches: a shift from growing churches to growing people, a shift from volunteers to servants, a shift from a volunteer coordinator to a facilitator of lay mobilizers, and a shift from control to permission giving. It is his claim that if we attempt to control the church, it will be killed within 25 years, and that it is all over when we attempt to manage the church. If I understand the point that he is making, he is insisting on moving from dependence on organized programs to "individual member initiative" in the sharing of the gospel and in the doing of the work of the church.

There is little question that over the years "services" to members have taken priority over teaching and leading individual members to serve and to fulfill individual stewardships for which each has been gifted (1 Cor. 7:7, Rom. 12:4-8), and for which each will respond to God (1 Cor. 4:1-2, 2 Cor. 5:10). There is also little question that eagerness to offer more and more services to members has resulted in a decreasing emphasis on world evangelism, especially as pertains to individual member involvement.

For some time, State Farm Insurance advertised that people were in "good hands" when they insured with their company. Can we say that that world is in "good hands" because the Great Commission has been entrusted to churches of Christ?

What is painfully visible is that religious groups which emphasize individual initiative in propagating their beliefs are growing in spite of how strange or unbiblical their teaching may be (Mormons, Witnesses, etc.). This should lead churches of Christ to some very fundamental repair work... repair work that will hit at the heart of what is ultimate in God's concern for the church....that we return to an insistence that world evangelism is not only the task of the church, but it is the task of every individual member of the church!

**Carl Mitchell**