

## THE CHURCH: A MISSIONARY SOCIETY

Is the church a missionary society? That has been the historic affirmation of Presbyterians, and it needs to be claimed anew in our day.

It was the General Assembly in 1837 that first declared that the church, by its very nature, is a missionary society. That General Assembly, which created our denomination's first Board of Foreign Missions, lifted up for the whole church a central gospel truth. As Christians we have been baptized into a community whose central reason for existence is to share the love of God in Jesus Christ in word and deed with all the world. What unites Presbyterians is not only our polity, confessions, and form of worship, but also our faithful witness to the gospel as members of a missionary society.

Prior to 1837 Presbyterians had certainly been involved in mission - both in this country and overseas. However, mission involvement had often been understood as an "optional" activity that was usually carried out through voluntary (para-church) organizations rather than the structures of the church. The 1837 General Assembly made it clear that mission was not "optional" for Presbyterians and that the carrying out of mission should be at the very heart of the life and structures of the Presbyterian Church (US A). It was this vision that launched the Presbyterian Church (USA) as a major force in the national and world mission of the Church.

That vision is alive and well in the Presbyterian Church (USA) today! It needs the enthusiastic support of every member of our church. For the last fifteen years it was my privilege to be involved in the leadership of the world mission enterprise of our church. In that role I have seen first hand the Holy Spirit at work in the lives of countless women, men and children on all six continents. We live in a time in which there both are incredible human need and suffering and an incredible growth of the church and its witness, especially in Africa, Asia and Latin America. As one part of the body of Christ (and a very affluent one at that!), this is not the time for Presbyterians to pull away from the partners with whom we are privileged to share in mission around the world. I am delighted that the 214<sup>th</sup> General Assembly sensed this call and is launching a Mission Initiative, which I hope every Presbyterian will want to be a part, to raise \$40 million to support Christ's mission through international mission personnel and through new church development, especially among racial ethnic and new immigrant groups in the U.S.A.

We have learned much about mission in the last 165 years. We have learned:

- that *it is not our mission, but God's mission*, that is important,
- that the church in each nation has the primary responsibility for mission and evangelism *in that place*,
- that evangelism and social justice are two sides of the same coin,
- that respect for people and their cultures is always integral to an authentic sharing of the gospel, and

- that mission is a two-way street in which we have as much to receive as we do to give in our partnership with Christians around the world.

But, I hope that most of all we have learned - that the church truly is a "missionary society" and that mission is never optional for Christians. Through our baptismal vows we are all a part of a missionary society that has received the love of Christ to share it with all the world.