

## Editors' Message

### Missionaries, Multiculturalism, and Mainline Protestantism

Missionaries have been the subject of diverse stereotypes. At the high tide of support for their work in the late nineteenth century, American backers glorified them as heroines and mighty men of God. Along with other Protestants, Presbyterians sang in martial rhythm the lines that Laura Copenhaver penned in 1894:

Heralds of Christ, who bear the King's commands,  
Immortal tidings in your mortal hands,  
Pass and carry swift the news ye bring:  
Make straight, make straight the highway of the King.

Yet within a few decades, many no longer viewed missionaries as heralds of immortal tidings but rather as perpetrators of cultural imperialism. Missionaries, historian Paul Varg argued in his 1958 study of Protestant work in China, were animated by a sense of superiority as they sought to remake the world in their own image. Best-selling novels have conveyed a similar message. James A. Michener's *Hawaii* (1959) portrayed missionaries as harsh, unbending people doing at least as much harm as good; and Barbara Kingsolver's more recent *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998), set in the Belgian Congo of 1959, creates a missionary protagonist whose obsession with converting Africans to the truth—*his* truth, of course—wreaks destruction upon them and his own family.<sup>1</sup>

Mark Banker, who teaches at the Webb School (Knoxville, Tennessee) and who writes the major article of this issue, tells how he moved beyond these stereotypes. More than twenty years ago as a graduate student looking for a dissertation, he came upon the records of Presbyterian missions in the U.S. Southwest. At the beginning of his research, Banker tells us with disarming candor, he held many of the negative images of missionaries and “anticipated some type of satisfaction in bashing” them. Yet his inquiries gradually moved him toward a deeper appreciation of his subjects. He did not, of course, return to simplistic glorifications of missionaries, for he found too many instances when they were indeed insensitive and arrogant. But what Banker also found was complexity. Missionaries could not be reduced to stick figures or clichés. They were, he discovered, “no less varied and diverse than any other subgroup of humans.” From that discovery Banker went on to produce one of the most important studies of Presbyterian missions written within the last generation.<sup>2</sup>

The editors have encouraged Banker to recount his intellectual pilgrimage because it parallels that of so many other scholars. In the last couple of decades, a renaissance in the study of missionary history—Banker mentions many of these works in his essay—has significantly deepened our understanding. The editors also want a wider public to have a chance to read and react to what some may judge to be a startling conclusion. Missionaries, Banker insists, fostered a more profound appreciation and acceptance of the diversities among various peoples and nations. To put it simply, missionaries helped create multiculturalism. Unless we understand this fact, Banker avers, we will not understand one of the important dynamics of the history of Presbyterianism—or of mainstream Protestantism in general.

At our request five scholars have responded to Banker's essay. They include Sherron George, who has served as a Presbyterian missionary in Brazil, taught at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, and is now working in the World Wide Ministries Division, PC(USA), as a consultant stationed in Brazil; Lian Xi, who teaches history at Hanover College and has researched the U.S. missionary enterprise in China; Dana L. Robert, the Truman Collins Professor of World Mission at the Boston University School of Theology; Andrew F. Walls, who has been a missionary in Sierra Leone, professor of the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World at the University of Edinburgh, and Guest Professor of Ecumenics and Mission at Princeton Theological Seminary; and David Yoo, the chair of the History Department at Claremont McKenna College and a student of the Asian American experience. The respondents, while supportive of Banker's basic thesis, also question and prod at various points. Rather than summarizing their observations, we shall let them—and Banker—speak for themselves. We believe that their conversation attests the liveliness and contemporary relevance of current studies of mission history.

This issue contains other interesting features. "Our Documentary Heritage" introduces a remarkable Presbyterian woman, Mabell Sammons Hayes, who spent much of her life as a medical missionary in India. "News for Congregational History Committees" discusses the importance of creating congregational photo albums and provides practical guidelines for the task. Finally, this issue notes an important milestone. Fifty years ago on 21 October 1953, the General Council of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. issued "A Letter to Presbyterians Concerning the Present Situation in Our Country and In the World." Written at the height of what is commonly called McCarthyism, this letter is regarded by many historians as one of the most important documents of Presbyterian social witness in the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Albert Christ-Janer, Charles W. Hughes, and Carleton Sprague Smith, *American Hymns: Old and New*, 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), I: 538; Paul A. Varg, *Missionaries, Chinese, and Diplomats* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958); James A. Michener, *Hawaii* (New York: Random House, 1959); Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible: A Novel* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998).

<sup>2</sup>Mark T. Banker, *Presbyterian Missions and Cultural Interaction in the Far Southwest, 1850–1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup>For examples of the work of our commentators see Sherron George, "The Mission of the Church," in *A Passion for the Gospel: Confessing Jesus Christ for the Twenty-first Century*, Mark Achtemeier and Andrew Purves, eds. (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2000); Dana L. Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1997); Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002); Lian Xi, *The Conversion of Missionaries: Liberalism in American Protestant Missions in China, 1907–1932* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997); and David Yoo, *Growing Up Nisei: Race, Generation, and Culture*

*among Japanese Americans of California, 1924–49* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).