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THE FUTURE OF ABORIGINAL MISSIONS

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THE FUTURE OF ABORIGINAL MISSIONS

PREAMBLE

The Mission Boards and Societies which have responsibility for work among Aborigines in Northern and Central Australia have given much thought and study to the effect of rapidly changing conditions on the Aborigines and on the future of the missions. Some results of that process are now made available in this form as a commonly agreed statement.

It begins with a brief historical summary which is followed by a description of the present situation. These lead into a statement setting out some important points to be kept in mind in planning about the future and, particularly, in relation to negotiations by missions with governments.

YESTERDAY AND TODAY

One of the most important developments for Aborigines, since the arrival of the white man, was the setting aside of the reserves in the centre and the north of Australia and the establishment of missions and government settlements on or near them. On Cape York some missions began in the last century; but many of the others were much later. Some are only thirty years old.

In more recent years, similar communities have been established by governments. They are usually called settlements. There are 27 of these in the Northern Territory, South Australia and Queensland and 42 missions in the same areas and in Western Australia.¹

The missions were established out of Christian concern for the people. This concern was for both their spiritual and material well-being, so the missions provided religious instruction and worship and centres for community life, for education and medical care. They were also places where the Aborigines might gradually adjust themselves to the pressures of the advancing white civilization. Some were begun in the 1930's quite deliberately to be buffer areas and adjustment centres for nomadic tribes. In some, many Aborigines chose to adopt a settled life where food and goods they valued were available. As a result, many mission stations have taken on the characteristics of small urban communities.

In the words of Mr. J. P. M. Long, the Senior Research Officer of the Northern Territory Administration:

"The communities are largely self-contained and the people substantially dependent on the supervising authority. The people live

and work there, producing some of their own food needs under direction; the children go to school and basic medical services are provided on the spot. Only where large-scale industrial operations have been established on the reserves, as at Weipa and Groote Eylandt, is there another employer or any Europeans other than the staff of the settlement. From most some men have gone out to work in towns or on cattle stations and elsewhere."²

Interestingly, and significantly, the development of a settled life has not meant the complete loss of traditional culture. Much of it remains intact "but in most places marriage customs have changed and traditions of retributive justice been abandoned, even in places where the authorities have tolerated the performance of traditional ceremonies".³

A total of 25,000 people or about one quarter to one fifth of the total Aboriginal population is to be found in these missions and settlements.⁴ Over 12,000 of them are in missions and about 11,600 in settlements. "About another 1,000 children and young folk are accommodated in mission hostels and homes"⁵. Of the total of 25,000 there are about 9,000 along the northern coasts and 3,500 in the central deserts.⁶

The population is increasing rapidly and is likely to double in twenty-five years. As Mr. Long has pointed out "In most places the increase began within five or six years after the 1939-45 war and in a number of these places in the Northern Territory more than half the population is under 15 years old (compared with 30% of the total Australian population). Rates of natural increase of over 2% per year (or double the increase rate of the Australian population) are not uncommon, in spite of relatively high death rates, particularly among children under four years old and especially in the central desert area."⁷

In reading his paper at the seminar on the Problems of Aboriginal Employment, Wages and Training arranged by the Centre for Research into Aboriginal Affairs of Monash University, Mr. Long added: "It was only because missions went into 'Aboriginal Australia' that there are any Aborigines left. Otherwise there would probably have been none." Later in the same seminar, Mr. C. D. Rowley made a similar comment: "Without the missions, and to some extent the settlements, there would not have been a population to worry about." This is an achievement that is little recognised by the white community either in the north or the south, or even by many informed persons. Even when one allows for the growth of immunity to European diseases and the gradual adjustment to cultural shock as important contributing factors, this remains a major contribution.

TODAY AND TOMORROW

Now the situation is changing rapidly. The main factors in the change are the exploration for minerals and the exploitation of new discoveries; the new contact and wage opportunities created by mining which open formerly self-contained communities to new ideas, patterns of behaviour and wage levels; the increase in the size of towns and of the white population in the north; the growth of popular and academic interest in the Aborigines, resulting in more newspaper articles, and in research work which assesses and questions much that has been done; the rapid growth in money-hunger and in interest in education on the part of Aborigines in the north; and various political pressures for Aboriginal advancement or Northern development.

In this situation the missions are confronted with many difficult decisions both in the realms of policy and of programmes. Already, important decisions have been taken and implemented. For example, the Church Missionary Society at Groote Eylandt obtained a mining lease some years ago, in order to ensure to the Aborigines some bargaining power. As a result of that and of the enlightened policy of the Broken Hill Proprietary Company, important advantages were gained for the Aborigines, and they were enabled to move easily and happily into an industrial situation. As a result, a good proportion of them have moved right out of the mission situation satisfactorily.⁸

At Roper River, the CMS has made important changes without the impetus of a nearby mining venture. Aborigines receive direct by post their social service cheques. The cattle work is managed by an Aborigine. The full government subsidy is received by them. In a word, the era of the mission institution as the controlling, paternal authority has ended and that of local Aboriginal tribal autonomy has begun.⁹

Again, in view of the drift of Aborigines to Darwin, missions have altered their strategy from a purely "holding operation" on reserves to one which includes the provision of hostels, a trained social worker, an annual course of leadership training, in Darwin, and an ecumenical approach to such developments.

Similar changes are taking place in all the missions. It is significant that we have had several reviews of policy by, at least, four of the larger missions since 1964, with a view to discovering what the new lines of development should be. As indicated above, important changes have been made already.

The new situation not only imposes a strain in terms of policy change and re-orientation, there is a mounting burden in terms of finding and training staff. The missions went into the reserves on their own initiative or at the request of governments. In either case, they were originally in a simple, initial contact situation. However, since World

War II, they have found themselves under a mounting pressure. This has been created by the changing situation, by rising standards of education, health and hygiene, by the change from semi-nomadic to village life and by government policy which has relied on the missions for carrying out educational, health and social programmes.

The consequences have been that mission superintendents and others have become involved in what is virtually the civil administrations of a town. In some cases, it is a town with an airport. And mission boards have to recruit all kinds of technical personnel to maintain the 'town', as well as find the teachers, nurses and ministers they normally require. Government subsidies are available for such salaries, but this does not remove the strain of diversion of thought and energy from the main educational, medical, social and evangelistic work of the mission. For example, one mission board had 57 missionaries in the Northern Territory in 1964 and 30 other adult staff. 60 more were needed to fill all vacancies according to the requirement of the Government. In 1963-64, this board had to handle \$410,000 of government grants for buildings and salaries, plus \$260,000 for the Social Welfare Department, making a total of \$670,000 — no small administrative job itself.

A further problem is that even at this level, there is a serious question as to the adequacy of the Government's capital grants, particularly when these are compared with equivalent expenditure on government settlements.

It is such factors as these which have brought mission boards to review the nature of the partnership with the Government. Already some actions have been taken. The school on a Methodist mission is now staffed by the Education Department. The Bishop of Carpentaria transferred the Anglican missions at Edward River, Mitchell River and Lockhart River to the Queensland Government on May 1, 1967, and the Australian Presbyterian Board of Missions transferred Weipa Mission to the Queensland Government on February 1, 1966.¹⁰ Much thought has been given to the principal problems involved in such changes of relationship.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Division of Mission considers that the following points should be kept in mind.

1. The alternative is not simply one of substituting government control and administration for that exercised by the mission. The development of indigenous local government is a real, and preferable, alternative in the case of most of the mission stations of Central and Northern Australia.

There are two main ways in which this could be achieved:

(a) By the establishment of a tribal or village council, where none exists, or the development of an existing one so that it can be an effective local governing authority controlling the corporate life and policing their decisions within their own community. This would, of course, involve a proper programme of training for such responsibility and an agreed series of progressive steps in the acceptance of responsibility. It would also mean the development of land utilization schemes, and possibly industries, under the control of the tribal council or its modern equivalent. They would be free to seek and obtain capital and technical advice both from the government and the private sector as they saw fit. It is relevant, and significant, that American Indians have been able to undertake such responsibilities through the help of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and others, in setting up tribal councils on a modern basis and in obtaining technical advice and capital assistance.¹¹

(b) By the legal incorporation of an Aboriginal company. This company would include all the Aborigines on a Reserve. It would give them a legal identity and person. It would give them the right to own and work the land. It should also give them a 10% interest in any mining operations that might develop on or under the surface. Such a company would need financial assistance by means of grants or loans. This should be the responsibility of the Government. It might be, however, that the mission board would make available some funds, which would previously have been used on the mission stations for other purposes. Alternately, it might raise money for this purpose as a programme of economic aid, by establishing or contributing to a capital development fund. In addition to anything like that, it should offer the Aboriginal company a fund for legal advice, so that it can always afford to be well-advised. This could be one of the most important contributions to the people at this stage.¹²

3. If there is no alternative to government management, then the mission should see any handing-over in the light of its continuing obligation to ensure the best interests of the people. These interests include the following rights:

- i) their right to autonomy as a group, including the right to choose for or against separate development;¹³
- ii) their right to ownership of the land¹⁴ and the minerals within it,¹⁵ on the basis of prior occupancy or natural right;
- iii) their right to spiritual development, in the context of their freedom to believe or not believe;
- iv) their right to preserve their own culture, customs and language, within the limits of Australian law.^{13 16}

These rights themselves imply, and demand, that no process of handing-over should be planned or undertaken without full, prior discussion with the Aborigines concerned and their participation in it. An outside observer has said, "Only missions can do this and prevent it being simply a white man's scheme". While this may be an exaggerated comment, it stresses the responsibility of missions (and missionaries) which have been in close touch with Aborigines for a long period. Similarly, missions should involve Aborigines in thinking about the land issue, the significance of the South Australian Aboriginal Land Trust Act of 1966, and the provisions of the Northern Territory Land Ordinance.¹⁷

The mission should stand for these rights, realistically recognising that few governments in Australia have clearly accepted them as the rights of the Aborigines. Therefore, guarantees of a binding nature (and not merely spoken or even written consent) must be obtained. There is great danger in the tendency of missions to rely on "gentlemen's agreements". Their leaders may have got on well with Government officials; but if the mission is withdrawing, only proper legal agreements carefully drawn will be of any value to the Aborigines. To stress this is not to ignore the important changes in governmental policies represented, for example, by the South Australian Land Trust and Discrimination Acts or the new policy in Victoria.¹⁶ It is simply to underline the seriousness of the responsibility.

It should not be forgotten that when a mission was on a reserve, that land was assured to the Aborigines for their residence and use. Although, in law, neither they nor the mission had any title, nevertheless there was reasonable assurance that the people could remain on the land. The presence of the Church was a further assurance that if, at any time, pressure was brought to bear on the Government from any source, the people could have the support and advice of the Church and if necessary the counter-pressure of the Church as an institution. It is, therefore, desirable when the Church relinquishes its management of a mission station to the Government, that there be a written agreement, i.e. a legally-drawn instrument, assuring to the people title and tenure of the land involved. This should be permanent title and tenure for them and their successors. If, however, the Government refuses that, then a 99-year lease should be negotiated. If that is refused, then tenure of the land should be guaranteed to them for at least, a generation — say 30 years.

It may be said by the Government, that such an arrangement will create a "black enclave". The answer is "Why shouldn't it? Haven't the Aborigines as much right to retain these relatively small parcels of land as the whites have to the rest of the country?"

Or again, enlightened persons may fear the development of an apartheid in practice. But, in fact, that is to confuse terms and situations. Apartheid is a policy of separate development which is decided on by

a dominant white group and enforced by their legislative and police powers. In the present Australian situation, however, to use such dominant powers to prohibit the possibility of separate development may be just as repressive. An Aboriginal community should have the right to decide whether or not it wishes to continue as a group. And individual Aborigines within it should be free to move out of it and return freely into it, depending on their own decision in regard to assimilation into the larger community.

Adequate consideration needs also to be given to the psychological aspects of the land situation in Australia. As C. D. Rowley has pointed out: "For the first time . . . Aborigines would be in a position to meet unfair prejudice with contempt, turn their backs on the offenders, and go home to their own place. With a secure base established, there is some hope of a reasonable coming together of Aborigines and other Australians; for the whole psychology of the situation is altered."¹⁸

If today the Australian churches and the governments, refuse to the people their right to this measure of self-determination, they will be condemned by world opinion and tribunals. A policy of forced disinheritance and forced assimilation is viewed today as little better than the earlier policies of dispossession and destruction for they have the same effects — the degradation and disappearance of a people.¹⁹

In the light of these considerations, it is recommended that:

(1) the mission board or church should ask the Government for a full written statement of their programme for the reserve over the next ten or twenty years. What are their plans for development? Do they plan to dispose of it? Do they plan to remove the people from it? If so, why?

(2) the mission board or church should not rush into transfer, but would be wise to insist on sufficient time for negotiation, so that it can —

(a) consult fully with the people as to exact plans and proposals, if this has not already been done;

(b) obtain legal advice on the right of the Aborigines concerned;

(c) place the negotiations in the hands of legal advisers.

(3) the mission board or church should consider, when making arrangements for the continuation of evangelistic work and pastoral care after the transfer of management to government, whether there might also be a continuing responsibility on the part of the mission for education and health.

FOOTNOTES

1. Department of Territories, *The Australian Aborigines*, 1967, Canberra, p.74.
2. J. P. M. Long, 'The Numbers and Distribution of Aborigines in Australia' in *Aborigines in the Economy*, the papers and discussion at the Seminar on Aboriginal Employment, Wages and Training, at Monash University, edited by Ian G. Sharp and Colin M. Tatz, Jacaranda Press, 1966, p.6.
3. J. P. M. Long, op. cit., p.6.
4. Exact figures for the total Aboriginal population are not available but the Department of Territories states in its book, *The Australian Aborigines*, published in 1967, that "the figure of about 44,600 for Aborigines can be accepted as fairly accurate" (p.62) This is for full-bloods. The enumeration of Part-Aborigines presents greater problems and includes a larger element of estimates based on local knowledge and Departmental records. The figure for 1966 is given as 77,495, making a total of 122,100. Some persons would regard this as conservative. On the other hand, Mr. Long, working on similar (but lower) figures from the 1961 census and the 1964 Departmental estimates, considers the estimates to be too high (see *Aborigines in the Economy*, p.1-3). Whatever the exact figure, it is in the area of about 1% of the total population.
5. Department of Territories, *The Australian Aborigines*, p.74.
6. J. P. M. Long, op. cit. p.5.
7. *ibid.*, p.5.
8. P. McKenzie, *Aborigines in the Economy*, p.251; *On Aboriginal Affairs*, No. 12, p.11.
9. J. A. Brook, *Aborigines in the Economy*, pp. 188-190.
10. See *Brisbane Courier-Mail*, 29.3.67, for announcement by the Minister for Aboriginal and Island Affairs of impending transfer of Anglican missions.
11. See Indian Reorganization Act, Public Law No. 383, 73rd Congress of U.S.A., 18.6.1934; Theodore H. Haas, *Ten Years of Tribal Government under I.R.A.* U.S. Indian Service 1947; and W. Zimmerman, Jr., The Role of the Bureau of Indian Affairs Since 1933 in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, May 1957, pp. 13-40; P. G. Albrecht on "giving back to the Aborigines authority to deal with his own problems", *Aborigines in the Economy*, p.184.

The Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders Affairs Act of 1965, of Queensland, provides that Aboriginal Councils may be established by regulation. The appropriate Regulations of 1966 established sixteen on government settlements and mission stations; but considerable powers are retained by the Director of Aboriginal and Island Affairs and by the appointed manager of an Aboriginal reserve or community (or by persons acting as such for the time

being). The type of council envisaged in this present statement is one which is autonomous in the same manner and framework of law and administration as any other local government or incorporated body.

C. D. Rowley has written in "Aborigines and Other Australians", in *Oceania* Vol. XXXII, No. 4, 1962: "A forward step would be to transfer control, and the assets of the welfare settlement, to the group for whose benefit it has been set apart. The central administrative change in the Collier policy (in U.S.A.) was to give the right to Indian tribes to set up their own councils to control their own group assets, and the incorporation of the Indian Councils, with municipal powers. As Aborigines have no group assets we would have to take an additional step, involving transfer of rights to land and other assets (p.261) . . . I think it quite important that any transfer of assets be made only on request from a particular group, or combination of groups which wish to link their destinies through a common council . . . The way to self-respect and re-integration is through 'assistance on request.'" (p.262).

12. See N. Smith, *Maori Land Corporations*, A. H. and A. W. Reed, Wellington, 1962; C. D. Rowley op. cit., pp. 247-266. See also his comment on P. G. Albrecht's paper, *Aborigines in the Economy*, p.361.

F. G. Engel. the section 'Two Important Failures' in *The Land Rights of Australian Aborigines*, Australian Council of Churches, Sydney, 1965, p.11.

The proposal for a fund for legal advice has been made verbally by C. D. Rowley.

13. See *The Meaning of Assimilation and Four Major Issues in Assimilation*, National Missionary Council of Australia, Sydney, 1963; I.L.O. Convention 107; A. B. Pittock, "Compare Overseas" in *Crux*, June-July, 1965, p.4.
14. See F. G. Engel, *The Land Rights of Australian Aborigines*; R. M. Berndt, "The Gove Dispute" in *Anthropological Forum I*, Nov. 1964, pp. 258-296; A. B. Pittock, "Aborigines and Land Tenure", *Australian Journal of Science*, XXIX, July 1966, p.20.
15. See *On Aboriginal Affairs* No. 12, p.9; A. B. Pittock, "Submissions Concerning the Aboriginal Lands Trust Bill (S.A.) with Particular Reference to Mineral Rights" made on behalf of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, Melbourne, 1966.
16. *Aboriginal Policies of the Aborigines Welfare Board*, Victoria, 1966, p.2.
17. See A. B. Pittock, "Submissions to the Northern Territory Sessional Committee on Integration, with particular reference to the Aboriginal Land Titles Bill" made on behalf of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, Melbourne, 1967.

18. C. D. Rowley, *Oceania* Vol. XXXII, No. 4, 1962, p.262.

19. See T. G. H. Strechlow, *Assimilation Problems: The Aboriginal Viewpoint*, W. R. Geddes, *Maori and Aborigine: A Comparison of Attitudes and Policies*, Aboriginal Affairs Information Paper No. 1, Melbourne 1962; *The Meaning of Assimilation*, National Missionary Council, Sydney, 1963.

D'Arcy McNickle, *The Indian Tribes of the United States: Ethnic and Cultural Survival*, OUP, 1962.