

THE PROBLEM OF MISSIONARY VOLUNTEER DROP-OUTS

J. PAUL DOWDY

In recent years the high school drop-out problem has become a matter of some concern, and is receiving serious attention in some quarters. In view of the serious consequences for both the drop-out and the community, parents and civic leaders as well as educators must work together in seeking a solution.

There is another kind of drop-out who deserves some serious consideration. This is the missionary volunteer drop-out. Obviously the whole community will not become concerned with this problem. It is a problem for the church, and every church member should help to solve it. Unfortunately not all are even aware that there is a problem. Worse yet, it appears that no organized, concentrated effort to cope with the situation is under way on a denominational or missionary society scale. The Brethren Youth Council is now developing a registry or file card system for the purpose of maintaining vital contact with volunteers for full-time Christian service. This is commendable and should prove to be very useful. Most Christians who attend church regularly will be aware of the fact that in youth rallies, camps, and evangelistic meetings a goodly number of young people offer their lives for service. Then from time to time they also hear of how few there are who actually become candidates for the mission field.

By way of comparison it can be seen that this kind of drop-out is a more serious matter than the high school drop-out. The student who fails to finish high school or college will find it difficult to secure profitable employment. The results of such a situation are largely personal and mainly in the economic realm, though frequently also producing moral problems. The missionary volunteer drop-out does not escape the personal consequences which, in this case, are mainly spiritual. In addition, the failure to go on to the mission field will affect the eternal well-being of perhaps hundreds of other people. His failure to go with the gospel to the lost of the world results in irreparable consequences.

For several years the shortage of candidates has been causing concern among mission leaders. In a special missions issue of Moody Monthly magazine last year it is said that the director of TEAM "asserts that evangelical missionary societies need no less than 7,500 new

Rev. J. Paul Dowdy, served as a missionary to Argentine for twenty-five years under the Foreign Missionary Society of the Brethren Church. He is presently Instructor in Missions at Grace Theological Seminary.

missionaries to meet present demands."¹ To recognize such a need raises the question, "Where are the applicants?"

Since there are statistics to show the general picture of just about everything, it might be assumed that reliable statistics regarding missionary volunteer drop-outs would be a matter of interest to most church denominations. Apparently no exact records have been kept over a period of years to show exactly how many young people offer themselves for missionary service and how many of them fail to go on even to the point of filing an application with a mission board. Dr. Harold R. Cook, head of the Department of Missions of Moody Bible Institute and the author of several books on missions, says he knows of no authoritative statistics on this subject. He says that there are some "floating around," but that he has not been able to trace them to their source and thus check their reliability. Ruth I. Johnson, in her booklet, The Years Between, says, "If you have checked statistics at all, you have probably learned that out of every fifty young people who volunteer for foreign missionary work, only one actually becomes a missionary."² She seems to feel that statistics on the subject are available, but cites no source.

In the attempt to secure information on this subject a hasty survey was made among a small number of pastors who have had some years of experience and with special concern for youth work. Fourteen returned the questionnaire but four of them gave no answer to the question about the number of drop-outs. The others gave mainly approximate numbers, as accurate records had not been kept.

The results of this small-scale survey will serve, however, to give a crude picture of what has been happening. Of a total of one hundred and fifty young people who had responded to the invitation to dedicate their lives to missionary service, only fifteen were known to be continuing in preparation with the mission field in view. These figures correspond roughly with those previously mentioned as found in Ruth Johnson's book.

So, for the present, if we may assume that the proportion of fifteen out of one hundred and fifty is more or less accurate, then the situation is serious. It is even worse when we remember that some of these are in the very early stages of preparation (in high school and college), and all may not continue to the candidate stage.

Without a doubt all of those who made decisions for missionary service did so with sincerity. Then what happened to the great majority of them? The pastors who returned the questionnaires gave several reasons to account for the fact that so many turn aside from their purpose to become missionaries, and settle for other types of occupation. Whether or not all of the reasons are valid or justifiable will not be considered here. They should be known to all Christians as things which hinder young people from going to the mission fields of this needy world. They must be given prayerful and constant consideration by all who may have an opportunity to help, instruct, or encourage volunteers to be steadfast in the purpose to which they commit themselves. Here are the reasons given (numerical order in this list does not imply order of importance):

1. Materialism
2. Marriage
3. Morals
4. Financial burdens
5. Improper understanding of their commitment
6. Afraid of the personal sacrifice involved
7. Failure to see missionaries who are really thrilled and excited with the work on the field
8. Lack of constant encouragement and help from pastors and families
9. The attraction of more profitable and less taxing work
10. Unable to do the school work required
11. Lack of initiative
12. Later decided that the mission call was a mistake on their part
13. Lack of emphasis on missions in college
14. Unwillingness of parents to have them go to a mission field

It will be readily seen that apart from the personal responsibility of the individual concerned, a grave responsibility rests upon parents, pastors, Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, college teachers, and missionaries to help young missionary volunteers remain on their course until they arrive at the time for an interview with a mission board.

It is true, our Lord said: "Pray ye . . . the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth laborers into his harvest." But at the same time we must remember that the Lord of the harvest has laid the responsibility for worldwide evangelism upon His followers, upon men and women. Whatever reason the Lord might have for making frail human beings so largely responsible for the task of making His grace known to the lost, we must accept the fact that it is so. The apostle Paul implies this when he asks: "and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent?" (Romans 10:14b, 15a). Even Paul himself was not sent as a missionary by the Holy Spirit apart from the ministry of the church (Acts 13:3, 4).

There is one other matter which deserves attention in the treatment of the subject of missionary volunteer drop-outs. One of the reasons cited above is that of uncertainty as to the missionary call. Strange as it may seem, this remains, after so many centuries, a very vague and perplexing matter to many Christians. Able writers have set down the factors involved in recognizing the call to the mission field. Authors differ as to just what these factors are, but in general their explanations are simple and practical. Dr. Harold R. Cook sums it all up in one simple statement: "The missionary call is the 'great commission,' plus the assurance in your heart, no matter how it comes, that God wants you as His witness abroad."³ Viewed in this way, the missionary call consists of two elements: obedience and assurance.

Quite clearly this matter of assurance is the core of the problem. The volunteer who in all sincerity desires to obey the Lord, yet fails to obtain this assurance quite soon, is easily turned aside into other occupations. Assurance is very important and most writers treating the missionary call will include some statement about it. Dr. Glover says: "Nothing could be more vital to anyone setting out for the mission field than to be clearly assured of the call of

the Lord in taking that step."⁴ Another writer, referring to his own experience as a student, says that a missionary talked to him personally and said: "David, do not go to the mission field if you can possibly help it." Other statements similar to the one just mentioned are sometimes made by missionary speakers, e.g., "If you can be satisfied doing anything else, don't be a missionary."⁵ Such statements are usually spoken in a very solemn and serious manner to impress the would-be volunteer with the awful consequences of making the mistake of going to the field without the assured call of God.

Without questioning for a moment the importance of such a warning, we should ask ourselves if it may properly be included in an appeal for volunteers for mission service. Frankly, I am convinced that it should not be. One pastor says: "The real problem today as I see it is the fact that so very, very few even offer at all." Should we be surprised if few or none volunteer for service after being solemnly warned not to risk making a mistake? The effort to protect the mission field against the danger of the "misfit" easily becomes a block in the way for those who would offer themselves for missionary work. One young lady, believing that she ought to become a missionary, went to her pastor for advice. She was immediately warned that if she were not absolutely sure God had called her for such work, she should forget it. To her question as to how she could be sure there was no satisfactory answer. She continued teaching and later in another city sought counsel from her new pastor and received the same kind of answer. Discouraged and not knowing where to go for help, she continued teaching but always feeling that she should be on a mission field.

Let the warning about the absolute assurance of the call be left until the volunteer has had an opportunity to find out what it is all about, and has been counseled, encouraged, and made the object of much prayer. There is little need to worry so much about the assurance of the call. The long years of preparation accompanied by the providential leading of the Lord will take care of most cases. Mission boards have their own very thorough screening processes.

The appeal should be made for missionary volunteers with the idea of encouraging them on to preparation, application, and finally to the field. A careful review of the above reasons given for drop-outs should help in making definite plans for systematic follow-up and help for those who offer themselves for mission work. Thus, by avoiding entirely the frightening subject of absolute assurance when dealing with young volunteers, and then following a careful plan for helping them achieve their goal, the rate of drop-outs should be greatly reduced.

DOCUMENTATION

1. Robert Flood, Moody Monthly, (July-August 1965) p. 23.
2. Ruth I. Johnson, The Years Between. (Lincoln, Nebr.: Back to the Bible Broadcast, 1964) p. 94.
3. Harold R. Cook, An Introduction to the Study of Christian Missions. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1954), p. 95.
4. Robert Hall Glover, The Bible Basis of Missions. (Los Angeles: Bible House of Los Angeles, 1946), p. p27.
5. David H. Adeney, The Unchanging Commission. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1955), p. 101.