

“Edinburgh 1910” World Missionary Conference
Commission Six
“The Home Base of Missions”

Introducing the remit of Commission Six, the Report states its concern as being “the whole subject of the means by which the Church at home may adequately discharge its responsibility for the evangelisation of the world.” The titles of its eighteen chapters indicate that the subject was understood as “scientific”, not merely practical: “mission intelligence” and “the science of missionary societies” are the terms that define the opening and concluding chapters of the Report, setting out the conceptual framework in which issues of missionary recruitment, funding, home leadership, and administration are discussed. “The science of the home base”, and “the science of the operation of Missionary Societies” were to be understood as essential to the science of missions as a whole – a science yet in its infancy, to which the Report aspired to make a formative contribution.

Commission Six was chaired by a US American, James Levi Barton. After distinguished missionary service in Turkey where he manifested a combination of administrative and scholarly talents, he was appointed Foreign Secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. His experience and thinking imbues the Report. Its espousal, at this early point in the 20th century, of today’s “management science” makes it a very American report in its provenance, principles and prognoses.

“In every point in our investigation”, Barton told the plenary conference, “the Commission has been confronted by the one stupendous fact, that there is not a Missionary Society in any of the countries named that is properly supported today for the conduct of its work.” At a time when the home Church enjoys abundant material resources, the paucity of its giving to missions “deadens the life of the Church that sends them forth.” With this remedied, “the Christian Church...possessed, mastered, and dominated by the faith which it professes, could easily evangelise the world.”

The root problem being thus diagnosed as spiritual, “the science of the home base” begins with prayer: “the necessity of intercession, and of securing a widespread and intelligent scheme of intercession based on knowledge.” While encouraging churches to commit to the practice of intercessory prayer for mission, and recommending several methods, the Report emphasised that “multiplication” is not in itself sufficient: “proficiency in the practice of prayer”, and above all prayer that avoids nominalism, is required. “*Learning* (original italics) to pray” in this way, “from first to last with the Holy Spirit of God”, opens human instruments to the Divine Spirit, and teaches the Church what makes for “the coming of the Kingdom.” In this manner “a revival of missionary interest must wait upon a spiritual revival.”

“Missionary intelligence”, as the Report uses the term, is neither primarily concerned with, nor confined to scholarly interest. “Systematic study” has its place, but anchored in “the power of prayer” it is quickened with spiritual enthusiasm that inspires effective application. “‘Knowledge’ is what is needed – knowledge of the obligation to evangelise all men, knowledge of the open doors, the imperative call, the rewarding service.”

In light of its opening chapter on “The Spiritual Resources of the Church”, the following seven chapters each deal with “the Promotion of Missionary Intelligence” in particular areas of activity: church services and agencies; religious and secular newspapers and periodicals; special literature; mission study classes; educational institutions; visits to mission fields; conferences and exhibitions. Four promotional targets emerge. Firstly, the pastors among whom missionary enthusiasm, once fostered, ensures that their “people...gain much the same spirit and become a missionary force.” Secondly, “the training of youth in the Church and throughout Christendom”, through Sunday schools, secondary and college education, with the aim of shaping young people to become future recruits for missionary service. Thirdly, “laymen” (*sic*), especially the young educated elite, were given extensive attention; considered a yet “unoccupied field” for missionary recruitment, the Report praised the successful methods of the Laymen’s Missionary Movement, founded a few years earlier (1906) in the

United States (the General Secretary, John White, being brother-in-law to the Conference Chairman, John Mott.) The Report also recognised the special role of women in missionary promotion: “in not a few congregations the only missionary interest discernible is that engendered and kept alive by devout women, while most communions are indebted to women for large measure of their missionary activity.” In a chapter devoted to the role of women’s missionary organisations, the Report acknowledged that the day has passed when the 19th century watchword “Women’s Work for Women” could still be applied. “Women have been real leaders, both in wide plans of organisation and in details of execution” across a wide range of missionary activity. The separation of women’s work from the general missionary task was an “artificial division.” The future called for women to be included, alongside men, in the leadership of mission societies, and for existing women’s missionary societies to be associated with the missionary councils and societies of the Church.

The chapter of the Report dealing with women’s missionary societies was one of seven devoted to issues of missionary administration. These touched repeatedly on the problem of missionary funding, a subject that received detailed analysis in two chapters. Should missionary societies decline suitable candidates for lack of funds? Should initiatives in the mission field be constrained by budgetary stringency at home, or should the home churches be allocating greater proportions of their budgets to mission? Recognising the value of “faith missions” that trust the Spirit of God to provide the material support necessary for work that the Spirit approves, the Report was at pains to avoid a polarisation between these and centrally-funded missions; “in both cases the entire work is one of faith”, the difference being only on whom a deficit fell. The Report recommended “a medium ground” that expected financial sobriety on the part of missionaries, and an increase of financial provision by home churches “that they more nearly reach the standard required.” Drawing again from recent American experience, the Report commended the success of the “Apportionment Plan”, whereby a denomination made annual budgetary provision for mission, and apportioned the funding responsibility to its regional synods or their equivalent, who in turn subdivided the apportionment among local churches. This gave local congregations a “share” in mission, often connecting them directly with missionaries overseas.

The Report ended as it began, with the spiritual value of mission. As intercessory prayer for mission is the hallmark of a spiritually intelligent church, material support for missions brings spiritual vitality to home churches. Quoting the Scottish theologian and missions’ advocate, Thomas Chalmers, the Report stood on the principle that “charity works not by a process of exhaustion, but by one of fermentation.” Churches that give generously are spiritually renewed and extend their generosity further. The fundamental value of mission for the home Church can be measured in terms of education, international sympathy – for example, in the struggle against racism and negative facets of imperialism, the promotion of Christian unity, a “new spirit of beneficence” in which mission takes the place of war, a quickening of evangelical zeal, and a strengthening and deepening of the faith of the Church itself. “It is as we see the Gospel demonstrating its power of universal appeal that we receive confirmation and fresh evidence of its essential truth.”

The Report appended “The Findings of the Medical Conference” that medical delegates and medical missionaries convened on the fringe of the main Conference. Complementing the many references to medical missions in the eight Commission Reports, this conference re-affirmed “that medical missions should be recognized an integral and essential parts of the missionary work of the Christian Church,” and asked Commission Six to recommend “that there should be a definite Medical Department in connection with all foreign missionary societies.”

A second appendix, nearly two-thirds the size of the Report itself, comprised a *Bibliography: Missionary Publications* classified under nine sections covering the main fields of missionary science as defined in the Report: “the study of the extension into the world, among non-Christian peoples, of the principles of Christianity and the results that follow.”

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