



The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization

The Whole Church taking the Whole Gospel to the Whole World

Lausanne Occasional Paper 16 Christian Witness to Traditional Religionists of Asia and Oceania

The Lausanne Occasional Papers (LOPs) are historically important documents that have emerged from global consultations involving widely recognized evangelical leaders. The LOPs have been placed in the Lausanne Website to make more accessible and understandable the historical context and development of the various aspects of world evangelization.

Christian Witness to Traditional Religionists of Asia and Oceania
Report of the Consultation on World Evangelization
Mini-Consultation on Reaching Traditional Religionists (Asia & Oceania)
held at Pattaya, Thailand from 16-27 June, 1980
Sponsored by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization

Prefatory Note

This report, *Christian Witness to Traditional Religionists of Asia and Oceania*, is one of a series of Lausanne Occasional Papers (LOPs) emerging from the historic Consultation on World Evangelization (COWE) held in Pattaya, Thailand, in June 1980. The report was drafted by members of the "Mini-Consultation on Reaching Traditional Religionists of Asia & Oceania," under the chairmanship of Dr. Paul Hiebert.

The major part of this report went through a draft and a revised draft, which involved all members of the mini-consultation. It was also submitted to a wider "sub-plenary" group for comment, but the responsibility for the final text rests with the mini-consultation and its chairman.

The report is released with the prayer and hope that it will stimulate the church and individual members in reaching this large segment of the population.

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Introduction

In a time of rapid urbanization, the revitalization of Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism, and the spread of secular materialism, it is easy to overlook the fact that there remain many millions of people on the fringes of the great religions in Asia and Oceania. These include tribes scattered across mountains, forests, islands, and waste lands; marginal peoples such as untouchables, gypsies, and migrant bands who live in symbiotic relationships with peasant and urban societies; and common folk who are nominal members of one or another of the world's great religions, but whose deep religious commitments are to the worship of local gods and goddesses, respect for spirits and ancestors, and use of magic, astrology, and witchcraft.

There is a great diversity in the specific religious beliefs of these (for want of a better term) "traditional religionists." Yet they share certain characteristics that permit us to treat them together in planning the evangelization of Asia and Oceania.

First, they focus on supernatural beings and forces of this world, and on the involvement of these in the crises of human life in an uncertain world. Consequently they usually seek demonstrations of power more than cognitive truth.

Most are non-literate in character. Their beliefs are encoded in rituals, stories, dramas, proverbs, songs, and dances, rather than in scriptures and the written word. Religion often centres more in the act than in the thought.

Finally, they tend to have fairly simple religious institutions. There are generally no great temples and pilgrimage centres, and no priestly elite trained in schools and committed to systems of orthodox belief.

These similarities should not blind us to some fundamental differences between the three types of peoples we have defined as traditional religionists. For example, religion among tribal peoples tends to be woven into the whole of their culture. Marginal peoples and commoners, on the other hand, are frequently nominal members of some great religion, and their animistic beliefs serve narrower functions in their lives.

It must be noted here that, although broad generalisations can be made about traditional religionists in Asia and Oceania, the region is so broad, and the peoples so diverse, that exceptions can be pointed out to most of them.

How, then, are we to reach traditional religionists for Christ? In part, a strategy must take into account the people, the messengers, the message, and the means of communication.

1. The People

"Seeing the people, he was moved with compassion (Matt. 9:36). Ministry to traditional religionists calls us, like Christ, to see and to love them as people as human beings created in the image of God, marred by sin but still loved by God who gave his Son to die for their salvation. We are sent to identify ourselves with them in an incarnational ministry and to accept as full members of the Body of Christ those who are saved. Our goal is to lead people to Christ and to plant living churches that are a testimony to his love and salvation.

There are three stages we must consider in planting churches among traditional religionists. First, we need to analyse the beliefs and practices of the people prior to conversion; then we need to look at the conversion process itself; and finally, we need to examine ways for establishing living churches that are indigenous to the society.

A. Pre-conversion Factors

Three areas of consideration relating to the pre-conversion stage require our careful attention. These are the world view of traditional religionists, the phenomenon of culture change, and receptivity of the people to the gospel.

(i) World view

One of the most important factors influencing the communication of the gospel is the world view of the people receiving the message. By world view we mean the fundamental beliefs and values that underlie the whole of their culture.

(a) *Characteristics of world view*—The world views of traditional religionists centre around a transempirical world filled with gods and goddesses, ancestors, ghosts, and spirits of many kinds. Some are aloof. Others are active in the everyday lives of the people: interfering, helping, hindering, and influencing the events in their lives. Some are good, others are evil, but most tend to be capricious. It is important to emphasise that, for most traditional religionists, elements of that spirit world are present and active in this world. Although they may be unseen, they are *not* unknown or removed from the everyday affairs of people.

In addition, this transempirical world is full of power that can be both beneficial and harmful, depending upon uses to which people put it. To those who know how to handle it, it can be manipulated to personal ends.

The world view of traditional religionists in Asia and Oceania is not a religious *tabula rasa*, a blank slate devoid of any understanding of God. We believe that, in nature, God has revealed himself to them in limited ways. Many societies have a concept of a creator spirit—a supreme being who may be only dimly recognized. In many societies there have been individuals who have had dreams and visions of the coming of a greater revelation of God. The existence of a strong sense of morality, concepts of sin and reconciliation, feelings of guilt and shame, beliefs in sovereign, life-giving spirits beyond human manipulation, all point toward God at work in the lives of the people prior to the coming of the gospel. For example, among the Amis of Taiwan the spirit "Longie" is sovereign in the daily life of the people from conception to death, offering protection, guiding and bringing joy without respect of persons. This spirit cannot be manipulated.

While acknowledging the positive attributes of their world views, we must also state that traditional religionists are frequently motivated and compelled by fear—by terror of the power of evil spirits in their lives. Fear of places, of situations, of the evil eye and sorcery, and of particular events, often oppress the people. For example, the Lambarda Gypsy women in India sew small mirrors on their blouses so that evil spirits seeing their own reflections will flee in fright.

Another characteristic of traditional world views is relationalism. People see themselves as living in relationship to other persons, to their physical environment, and to the spirit world. Because they have a strong corporate sense and experience deep and personal relationships with other persons in social groups, personal decisions are frequently made in terms of these groups.

Sin, in this context, is seen as the lack of respect for the concerns of the large family, the clan, the village or the tribe. It produces more a sense of shame than of guilt. Sin is also seen as the violation of one's relationship to the world. The punishment can be disease, drought, and floods. By observing the taboos that regulate human relationships with nature and by performing prescribed rituals, people can maintain harmony in the world, keep at bay the evil forces of the spirit world, and avoid the anger of the ancestors. The custom of visiting ancestors' graves, for example, has occupied a central place in Japanese religious thought. Opinion is divided about whether or not this constitutes ancestor worship or is simply a way of paying respect to one's ancestors. Western missionaries and most Evangelical Christians reject the practise, but have not provided an alternative way of filling this void. The whole concept of one's relationship to ancestors needs to be thought through in order to reach traditional Japanese.

A further characteristic involves the way in which people communicate with each other and with the spirit world. To understand this, we need to know the lines of communication (who talks to whom), and the media through which ideas and information are expressed—such as oral history, riddles, proverbs, legends, orations, rituals, and festivals. For the message of the gospel to be communicated most effectively, it must be expressed through channels appropriate to the culture.

By seeking to understand the world as the traditional religionist sees it, the missionary (any cross-cultural message-bearer) may be able to find cultural bridges, indigenous imagery and symbols for communicating the gospel in terms the people understand. For instance, the Nissi of Northeast India used the blood of a human sacrifice applied to a bamboo cross to seal the peace between warring tribes. The peace thus secured is meant to last forever. This analogy has been used with great effect to present the gospel truth to the Nissi, resulting in a breakthrough with this hitherto resistant people. By careful searching in other societies, similar indigenous analogies may be found to help explain the Christian faith.

A final characteristic of the world views of many traditional religionists is holism. All aspects of life and culture are related to each other within a single integrated system. Customs and cultural practices do not occur in isolation, divorced from one another. Consequently, missionaries should avoid unilaterally abolishing customs that may be offensive to them. We believe that indigenous converts are the ones who should change parts of their culture as they are led to do so by the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the light of biblical teaching.

(b) *Theological Implications*—The world views of traditional religionists have several important theological implications for the missionary to consider. First, since the people perceive themselves as part of the natural world instead of divorced and alienated from it, a theology of creation is frequently meaningful to them as a starting point for presenting the gospel. God should be presented as the Creator, and humans as his special creation.

Second, a theology of history should be taught, in which God is shown communicating and working with a people in real time and space. Many traditional religionists live in a world with many cultural similarities to that of the ancient Hebrews; and, for this reason, the Old Testament stories are especially meaningful to them.

Third, since traditional religionists live in a world dominated by powerful spiritual forces and beings, it is important that the gospel be communicated as a gospel of power. The visible demonstration of God's power over the powers of evil, in what has sometimes been referred to as "power encounters," is far more convincing to them than an intellectualized sermon on the doctrine of atonement. Propositional statements are often not understood, but a demonstration of power is convincing evidence of the supremacy of God. Thus, Mizo people in northeast India signalled their decision to give up traditional beliefs by removing the sacrificial goat tails worn on their necks (to placate the evil spirits) and throwing them into a bonfire. The failure of the spirits to retaliate became evidence that Jesus Christ is more powerful than the evil spirits and was now in charge. Such a gospel is indeed good news to people caught in a world dominated by spirits and supernatural forces.

Fourth, traditional religionists often have concepts of sin and mechanisms for reconciliation that can be used as analogies of God's redemption of

humankind. An example of this is the annual sacrifice of a water buffalo by the Bentian of Indonesia. After being speared, the animal is killed and its blood applied to the foreheads of all adult males who represent their families. The analogy to the atonement of Christ can readily be made.

Finally, the people have a keen awareness of death and after-life. Consequently, the message-bearer should bring them the message of eternal life.

(c) Recommendations—World views have strategic significance for communicating the gospel. Two areas are of particular importance to any missionary approach.

Missionaries must acknowledge and affirm the people's world view. Rather than dismissing their views as unscientific, missionaries should take seriously their belief that the world is full of spirits and forces. Often missionaries, influenced by their own world views, refuse to believe that for traditional religionists the spirit world is a living reality. Consequently, the gospel is presented in ways that ignore this reality, and bypass questions that arise out of it. The gospel is then seen to be only partly relevant to the important needs of the people's lives. Because some missionaries have not taken the world view of the people seriously, the people have found it difficult to take the missionaries' message seriously.

Second, basic Christian doctrines should be related to practice and demonstrated in terms of everyday life. If the gospel is proclaimed only in abstract terms, it is not likely to become a living reality to the people. For example, the Kenyah of Kalimantan must utilise a sacrificial animal in order to communicate with spirits. A chicken or pig is sent on the errand by first giving it instructions to convey to the spirits; it is then killed. By death, the soul of the sacrifice is freed to make the necessary journey. To them, the Christian privilege of unrestricted access to God in prayer is a powerful attraction.

(ii) Culture Change

The reality in which we find most traditional religionists today is not one of static isolation from the rest of the world, but rather one of dynamic interaction and change. Such changes are the result of new ideas and of contact with other peoples. Consequently, the traditional religionists' world today is often very different from what it was in the past.

It is important to understand that culture change is taking place, but also that people, in the face of great social change, continue to hold tenaciously to their traditional religious beliefs and practices. We must not be misled into thinking that because there have been great economic and social changes, there have necessarily been corresponding changes at the deeper level of people's beliefs and world view. For example, most of the Pacific islanders have been influenced by Christianity and Western culture, and the church is planted on probably every inhabited island. Despite this great change on the surface, there are many Pacific islanders who continue to hold to traditional beliefs and practices that find expression especially during times of personal crises.

Therefore an understanding of traditional beliefs and practices is intended not only to help in communicating to isolated peoples, but also to help in dealing with the deeper level of world view for those whose cultures have changed dramatically.

(iii) Receptivity

Another important factor influencing the communication of the gospel to traditional religionists is their receptivity to change—specifically change in religious allegiances. Clearly, not all groups practising traditional religions are receptive to Christianity, and we must avoid generalisations. Nevertheless, a far higher percentage of such peoples have responded, and are responding, to the gospel than is the case with adherents of the world religions. For instance, even though the Karen are a tiny minority in Thailand, there are more Christians among the Karen in that country than among ethnic Thai.

For those groups which are receptive to change, the following characteristics are usually present.

(a) Cultural dislocation—Under conditions of cultural contact that have induced severe socio-cultural change in a group, it is not uncommon for members of the society to lose confidence in their culture. Their traditional religious systems of explanation begin to fail them and cannot help them deal with such things as new diseases, rapid social changes, urbanisation, and exploitation by powerful oppressors. As the people begin to question their traditional assumptions and allegiances, they often become open to the message of the gospel as a more meaningful system of belief. An example of this is that of the Kampuchean refugees living in Thai camps, who are becoming Christians in great numbers.

Urban life is particularly harrowing for many. Used to the security afforded by close-knit village or tribal societies, people are unable to cope with the dissonant realities of urban life in terms of their inherited world views. The Christian gospel offers them the support of a loving community, access to God in prayer, divine protection and guidance, an accepted pattern of belief and behaviour, and resources for coping with unfamiliar and stressful situations or crises.

(b) Personal advantage—Receptivity may be due to the people's belief that they may advance materially or socially by becoming Christians. This is true particularly in situations where the missionary is a member of a society that offers educational and material advancement.

(c) Marginality—Marginal groups and individuals are often more receptive to Christianity. This is especially true if they see the adoption of Christianity as a means for preserving their identity, or for improving their status in society, as, for example, the Harijans of India.

B. Conversion

Conversion among traditional religionists is influenced by several socio-cultural forces.

(i) People movements

Traditional religionists often turn to Christ as a group, rather than as isolated individuals. They come together with their tribe, village, clan, or family. The more isolated or internally cohesive they are, the more likely it is that they will respond to the gospel as a collective body. People movements should be encouraged, for they are the natural way of making decisions for many traditional religionists. Although people come to Christ as part of a larger group movement, this does not negate the importance of individual discipleship.

When tribal customs are threatened and the authority of the group undermined by contact with other cultures, or when larger groupings are broken up and individuals drawn out of their traditional settings, as in the process of urbanisation, for example, they may appear to respond individually, but the influence of the group may still be dominant. Permission and endorsement will often be sought, and the decision reinforced by vigorous efforts to win over other members of the group. This need for approval and validation by the group and its leaders may be a powerful incentive to evangelism.

Cross-cultural workers seeking to evangelise traditional religionists should accept the validity of group decisions as authentic expressions of the will and desire of most of the group members, even in a decision of conversion to Christ. They should also seek to understand the decision-making process of the particular people and culture. Appeal for conversion should be made to the appropriate group and its leader or leaders. The mistake of dividing the group and causing unnecessary resistance to the message by pushing for decision prematurely should be avoided.

(ii) Conversion as a process

Conversion among traditional religionists is better understood as a process rather than as a single point of decision. While it may occur at a point in time on the basis of their understanding and acceptance of the gospel, more often it is a dynamic process. The process may often begin when Jesus is perceived as the all-powerful Lord who delivers the people from fear and bondage to spirits. Conversion is a reorienting of life around a new centre, a turning from idols to the living and true God, and a transferring of allegiance to Christ as Lord and Saviour.

The genuineness of this turning should not be judged by conformity to imported standards of behaviour and belief. However, it would be expected that certain practices connected with the old life would be abandoned—such as idol worship, sorcery, head-hunting, and ritual prostitution.

The turning of a people to serve the true and living God is normally a response to some evident and convincing demonstration of the power of Christ over the spirit powers (experiential), rather than a mental assent to truths about Jesus Christ (cognitive).

Traditional religionists often come to know the Lord more in the Hebraic sense of relationship (i.e., knowing him in terms of experiencing his power, love, goodness, etc.) than in the Western sense of giving assent to certain propositions about him (intellectual understanding). The appeal is more to the heart (or liver!) than the head. The gospel must, therefore, be presented "not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction" (1 Thess. 1:5, NIV).

However, when a group is giving thought to whether or not they should turn to the living God, they must have some understanding of the nature and work of God and their relationship to him. There should be enough information given so that they can understand the human predicament as well as how the living God provides deliverance. Their grasp of essential Christian truth may be very limited, but what is communicated should be an adequate framework in which to experience God's power and presence.

C. Establishment of the Church

The New Testament portrays the church as a worshipping, witnessing, and serving community. This model is dynamic and flexible, thus giving room for the church in every age and place to express its life in the cultural forms of particular peoples. Every society has systems by which the control, direction, and purpose of community life are maintained. Church planting among traditional religionists, therefore, needs to be patterned after organisational and leadership forms that closely reflect the culture of the people, but that are based on clear biblical principles.

(i) Priesthood of all believers

As soon as there are believers, they should be incorporated into the body of Christ, and organised into local congregations.

Since the New Testament identifies the church as a living organism, care should be taken to teach all Christians to use their gifts within the body of Christ. The use of indigenous media such as drama, stories, songs, and poetry, should be encouraged. The *Willowbank Report on Gospel and Culture* suggests that the emerging church among a newly evangelised people should be dynamic equivalent to the New Testament church; but its forms of worship should be developed by the church in harmony with its culture.

The believers should be taught biblical principles of responsible stewardship so that they need not be dependent on outside support. However, biblical principles of mutual dependence and accountability should not be overlooked.

(ii) Leadership in the church

From the start, leadership from among the people should be encouraged and developed. Much prayer should be focused on the need for people singled out by God who are aware of God's call on their lives, and thus convinced of the authority they have in their calling and in their message. Only people with this kind of motivation are prepared to challenge the authority of the local mediums, able to captivate the hearts of the group, and to demonstrate authentic leadership. They should be encouraged to maintain personal face-to-face relationships with their people.

Without the call of God and a genuine confidence in their message, leaders will soon find themselves becoming mere functionaries of a new system of religion. They will resort to manipulative methods to increase their flocks, structure the church, and maintain membership.

Local leaders should be trained for the purpose of maintaining theological integrity and the effective functioning of the church. This training can be carried out at three different levels and can be provided in churches, schools, and extension centres.

(a) *Basic biblical training*—As soon as people are brought to faith, care must be taken to nurture them. They should be given instruction in such areas as assurance of salvation, the Lordship of Jesus, the importance of prayer and the Word of God, worshipping in a group, the nature of the church, and their responsibilities as Christians. The natural leaders should be trained from the beginning to serve as leaders among the believers. Either a national leader who had advanced Bible training or the missionary will need to give pastoral guidance to the initial group of lay leaders, giving them additional teaching as required.

(b) *Intermediate training*—Training at an intermediate level should be designed for mature Christians who are ready for additional teaching and challenge in areas of Christian doctrine, and principles of evangelism. Some of those trained at this level may become pastors of the church.

(c) *Advanced training*—Advanced training should be designed to prepare church administrators, pastors of urban churches, and Bible teachers. They would receive advanced Bible training and instruction in church planting.

(iii) Mission-church relationship

When believers in a new area establish themselves into a church, it is natural to expect that the closest possible relationship will emerge between the mission and the church. While this is good and needs to be encouraged, the mission needs to guard against imposing its church government pattern on the newly established church. The mission and the church should jointly seek the mind of the Lord in determining an appropriate pattern of church government. From the start, the church should be given the freedom to make its own decisions and run its affairs.

(iv) Immigrants

Among immigrant peoples we include such groups as refugees, soldiers, students, and migrants into towns and cities. Special ministries to these groups should be initiated. It would be good to establish community centres and hostels in big cities on an interdenominational basis to care for them. Christians who live in urban areas can do much to help such people by ministering to them in Christian love. Care should be taken to follow up migrants to the cities. Church services can be conducted either for tribal or linguistic groups.

2. The Message-Bearer

In reaching traditional religionists, the message-bearer is of paramount importance. The reception and acceptance of the message is dependent to a considerable extent upon his credibility.

A. Theological Considerations

The representative message-bearer is the Christ of God, who was born into the Judeo-Roman world. His incarnation establishes the pattern on which all our endeavours to communicate should be based. He was the Word become flesh, living among us, declaring himself the model for all future mission: "As the Father has sent me, so send I you" (John 20:21).

The implications of the incarnation for the message-bearer are clear. He is to be the embodiment of Christ, the vehicle through whom Christ reveals himself to the world despite the reality of the message-bearer's inadequacies. Realizing the extent to which he is shaped by the non-Christian elements in his own culture, the message-bearer must continue to shed these accretions as he is conformed to Christ.

New life, as expressed in the gospel, is to be seen in him as well as received from him. No effective proclamation can take place if this essential element is missing.

He must recognise the need to sublimate his own cultural inheritance, so as to enter as far as possible into the life of the people to whom he is sent. Hand in hand with the awareness of this need must be a real willingness to undertake this course of action. The outworking of this sublimation would be an expression of the life of Christ in a form recognisable to the people.

Message-bearers ministering within their own cultures have to be aware of the tendency to withdraw from the non-Christian members of their communities. This tendency is present also when they minister to other cultures. Such withdrawal is a serious handicap in the fulfillment of their mission.

Acceptance of the realities of the prevailing culture and their importance to the lives of the people is essential. For example, harmony is an essential element in Japanese society, and leaders are expected to promote this within the group. Christian ministers are defenders of the truth and permit no compromise, but people of an uncompromising spirit are condemned as selfish. If truth disturbs the harmony of the group, traditional Japanese are likely to compromise the truth.

The message-bearer must be a learner seeking a comprehensive understanding of value systems, behavioural patterns, and motivational forces of the people to whom he is sent. Premature judgements and derogatory attitudes are extremely harmful, but are easily formed. He must recognise that traditional religionists (among others) have an awareness of, and an interaction with, the spirit world that is a vital part of their existence. He must reformulate his own perceptions concerning the spirit world.

The message-bearer operating in a cross-cultural situation should recognise that essentially he remains an "outsider," even though he may achieve a high degree of understanding and rapport with the people to whom he is sent.

Therefore, he should seek appropriate identification with them to win their acceptance of his presence in their midst. The following are two important criteria for identification. Proficiency in the heart language of the people is crucial for an understanding of, and involvement in, their real concerns. Acceptance into the community largely depends on knowledge of socially approved behaviour patterns and their consistent practise. This requires the acquiring of correct etiquette and social skills, thus avoiding giving unwitting offense in sensitive areas. For example, among traditional Japanese, real human relationships are more important than the abstract truth. Japanese have developed wisdom to keep harmony with others by politeness and systems of etiquette. Paying proper respect to elders and authority figures is essential in Japanese culture, and throughout most of Asia and Oceania.

Appreciation of local skills, art forms, and products must be demonstrated by their utilisation.

B. Recommendations

We strongly recommend that, in the discipling programmes of sending churches and in the theological and missionary training institutions, the following be implemented:

(i) Message-bearers and sending churches should be helped to see themselves in the context of their own culture and history. This broader understanding of their own values and biases enables them to accept more readily the values and biases of others. They also will be better equipped by this to understand the perceptions others have of them.

(ii) Skills in dialogue should be taught. These skills will prove invaluable in helping the message-bearer to gain insight into the culture of the people. The growth of meaningful relationships depends on such an understanding, and on a mutual appreciation produced by the meeting of minds and hearts. The ability of the message-bearer to communicate the truths of the gospel will be enhanced. Moreover, meaningful interchange will provide reliable checks on his perceptions as well as the impressions he creates.

(iii) Communities should be developed in which loving relationships can be experienced and practised. An emphasis on relationships can do much to balance the emphasis placed upon verbal proclamation. We recognise that inter-personal relationships are of greater significance than the spoken word among traditional religionists. It is necessary that the message-bearer express the gospel in terms of his relationship with the people to whom he is sent. Any deficiency in this area tends to undermine the impact of the message.

(iv) Sensitivity to people and their cultures should be fostered through study and interaction. This can be achieved through internship programmes in either ethnic or socio-economic groups other than the message-bearer's own, where he is exposed to an alien environment. Such internship programmes will aid in determining the adaptive capacities of prospective message-bearers for cross-cultural ministry, as well as providing a sense of confidence for the task ahead. These programmes should lead to on-field training in partnership with the receiving church, since crucial aspects for ministry—such as an understanding of the spirit world—can only be covered adequately there.

3. The Message

A. The Whole of the Gospel and the Core

We are called to declare the whole of the gospel. There is no part of the Bible and its teachings that we dare omit. However, we can speak of a "core" of the gospel—the essentials to which all other parts are linked, and through which the Scriptures as a whole must be interpreted. This must be central to our preaching and teaching from the outset.

This core message should include an understanding of the one, true, and living God as Person, Creator, and Lord. All forms of idolatry are an offence to God. Humans are God's creatures and God guides their affairs. God cannot be manipulated. Man has fallen short of God's standard and is called to repentance. God has come to man in Jesus Christ. Through his death on the cross and his resurrection there is forgiveness of sin and reconciliation to God. The power of God is seen in his creation and sustaining of the universe. His love and mercy are revealed in Christ and his victory over Satan, the spirit world, sin, and death.

The new believer's knowledge of Jesus and the gospel may be minimal at conversion. But conversion is only the beginning. Believers are to grow steadily in knowledge and obedience to the full claims of the gospel. Discipleship and Christian maturity are essential to the growth of believers as responsible members of the church.

In cases where people turn to God as part of group movements, care should be taken to explain the meaning of conversion and discipleship to the people, and to lead them personally to affirm their corporate decisions. Follow-up and instruction are essential to people movements and will determine the extent to which such movements result in authentic Christian life.

Though important, conversion and personal spiritual growth do not constitute the whole of the mission task. The church, as the people of God, is called to be God's continuing witness in the earth. Its leadership must be equipped to instruct the church in sound biblical understanding so that it will fulfill its mission from generation to generation.

B. A Holistic Gospel

Traditional religionists rarely divide their world into sacred and secular domains. Rather, their religion underlies and pervades all of life. Consequently, the gospel must be shown to be relevant to all levels of human problems both by teaching and by a living demonstration (see [Table 1](#)). At the highest level, the message of salvation, reconciliation with God, and human destiny should be made plain. At the middle level, a theology of healing, guidance, protection, and divine power is needed to deal with fears of spirits and forces, and with the uncertainties of human life. Finally, the relevance of the gospel for everyday human experience must be shown.

A theology of social relationships—of family, clan, community, and tribe; of ancestors; and of the unity of all humankind—should be developed, as well as a theology of history and of nature. Programmes of medicine, education, relief, and development have sometimes failed to contribute significantly to the building of the church because of the secular form in which they were introduced. Missions to traditional religionists must avoid a false dichotomy that separates the sacred from the secular. A holistic gospel that speaks to people in all their needs must be proclaimed.

Where traditional religionists are nominal members of some universalistic religion, particular attention should be given not only to conversion from the high religion on the level of ultimate concerns, but also to dealing with human needs in a world of spirits and forces. Neglect of this domain often leaves a church with a veneer of Christianity over a sub-stratum of traditional beliefs. Special care should be given not only to evangelising new peoples, but also to bringing to completion the conversion of all areas of their lives.

Table One

Human Need	Theological response
“a sense of ultimate meaning, purpose, sin, and human destiny.	“a theology of creation, salvation, and fellowship with God and heaven.
“decision-making in the uncertainties of life; dealing with spirits, and forces; handling crises of life.	“a theology of divine providence, guidance, and power over evil.
“dealing with problems of human and kin relationships (dead, living, and unborn), and with nature.	“a theology of human relationships; of history, both corporate and personal; and of nature and the place of humans in it.

C. Individualistic and Corporate Theologies

Many traditional religionists belong to societies in which there is a high degree of corporate identity. In such societies, a theology that speaks only to persons as individuals is often not understood. A theology is needed that deals with the corporate nature of humankind. For example, sin is often seen as a violation against the group, leading to a sense of shame“rather than as a violation of self, or a moral law, resulting in a sense of guilt. The Scriptures provide us with many analogies and examples of how God deals with people corporately. In many ways traditionalists understand the significance of *koinonia* better than do Western individualists. This understanding should be used to strengthen the church.

4. Communication Principles and Methods

The task of evangelising an unreached people group is a serious undertaking. God has entrusted to us the gospel. While this revelation of divine truth is supra-cultural, God has made it relevant to all peoples. He desires that this message be presented to each people group in the cultural manner most likely to secure understanding and acceptance. Our responsibility, then, is to select and employ the best possible means.

A. The Planned Approach

If the proclamation of the gospel is to be kept from becoming haphazard, careful planning is essential. Efforts must be made to understand and apply sound principles of communication. Attention must likewise be focussed on the entire communication process. This involves not only the communicator, but also *the message, the form, and method of communication* and the *receptor audience*. Frequent evaluation of these elements can facilitate good communications. Plans for proclamation should include the following factors (among many):

(i) *The felt needs and aspirations of the audience*

The gospel will be good news indeed if it speaks to the troublesome issues in the lives of the people. These may include poverty, sickness, death, insecurity, fear, doubt, and low self-image.

(ii) *The appropriate setting for proclamation*

A study of the context can help determine the most suitable times and places for sharing the gospel as prescribed by local customs and culture. Even the matter of securing the right audience is important. In the early stages of evangelisation, proclamation should be purposefully directed to opinion-molders and decision-makers of the community.

(iii) *Use of the vernacular language*

In many parts of Asia and Oceania, trade or national languages have been introduced as the medium of communication between tribal groups. While this may be useful in some situations, it is doubtful whether a second language is best for local evangelistic proclamation. Whenever possible, the local vernacular and heart language of the people should be used.

(iv) *Translation of Scripture*

The translation of the Scriptures should be done from the beginning. This will need the assistance of specialists. In the early stages of Bible translation, consideration should be given to preparing selected portions from both the Old and New Testaments. Those portions selected should assist the new converted community in developing the framework of a new Christian world view and life-style.

(v) *Preparing people for decision*

The process that leads to conversion should be carefully guided. People must have an adequate understanding of gospel truth before making a decision. Frequent questioning of people is needed. The use of a model, such as the “Engel Scale” will be helpful in measuring changes of attitude and readiness for decision.

B. Contextualisation

To be fully understood and to be persuasive, the gospel must be expressed within the cultural and historical contexts of the people. Every culture has been abundantly blessed with “forms” and “meanings” for communication. We affirm the “dynamic equivalence model” as one which can be useful in holding in tension the unchanging aspects of the church’s message and mission, and its sometimes changing forms.

We recognise the danger of syncretism in the use of forms that may be associated with non-Christian religious meanings. Nevertheless, we believe the church must take that risk. We affirm that the Holy Spirit is present in his church, and that he can provide the proper corrective when the church is in danger of falling into syncretistic practises.

One area of contextualisation to which the church in each culture should give serious thought is that of preaching and witness. When appropriate, the church should make use of the people’s own history and myths, their well-known leaders of the past and present, their present social situations, and other matters relevant to their lives“in order to illustrate and interpret the gospel to them, and to call for discipleship within their cultural context.

Church music and hymnology, dance and drama should be produced in forms indigenous to the culture. Often words can be provided for well-known tunes and used within the church. Similarly, when appropriate, dance and drama can be used to convey the message of the gospel.

Church art, symbols, and architecture should be indigenised to reduce the foreignness of Christianity. For example, three-tiered roofs have been used in Bali to symbolize the trinity. Symbols such as grain and fruit may be used in agricultural societies, and fish and nets in seafaring societies.

Particular care should be given to developing indigenous rituals. Traditional rituals should neither be rejected nor accepted uncritically. Rather, after careful analysis of the biblical meanings of such events as births, marriages, and deaths, the traditional rites and symbols should be critically examined to determine whether or not they can appropriately convey those meanings, or be re-interpreted within the Christian context. Traditional rituals, such as child-naming, blessing of seed prior to planting, and harvest thanksgiving, are obvious possibilities for being transformed with biblical meaning. New rituals can also be created using indigenous symbolic form.

C. Multi-media Approach

Effort should be exerted to broaden the spectrum of the communication patterns. While direct oral teaching and preaching have their rightful place, these media as used in the West often lack the cultural flavour and richness essential to good communication in other societies.

For traditional religionists and especially for non-literates, a programme of teaching the Bible should use the content of indigenous stories, epic poetry, proverbs, etc., as illustrative material. In like manner, the local forms and methods of communication should be employed. These may include dialogue, story telling, song,

dance, chants, and even picture drawing.

Literacy is a useful means of accelerating evangelism and Christian nurture. Reading and studying the Bible in one's own language can greatly strengthen faith and reinforce lessons first received through oral and visual methods. However, part of the training of local leaders should focus on writing tracts, sermons, stories, and teaching materials that emerge from the cultural context. If translation of borrowed literature is necessary, great care should be taken to follow the principles of dynamic equivalence. When a society becomes literate, however, care must be taken not to strip away the layers of rich cultural heritage that contribute to its wholeness. Good cultural values can and should be preserved. But Christ at the centre will enhance the dignity and enrich the life of every people.

Conclusion

"The one thing required of a steward is that he be faithful (1 Cor. 4:2). As stewards of the gospel, we are called to be faithful in our continuing ministry to the traditional religionists of Asia and Oceania. We thank God for the many who have become members of the Body of Christ, and we commit ourselves to join with them in this ministry to those who have still not heard or believed the Good News.

Appendix A: Short Bibliography

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Appendix B: Participants

Charles Bennet	U.S.A.
Robert J. Callaghan	Australia
Lovell Cary	Hong Kong
Chun San Cho	Korea
David J. Cho	Korea
William W. Conley	U.S.A.
James E. Cummings	Taiwan
Joshua K. Daimoi	Papua New Guinea
Otto Dilger	West Germany
Harold Dollar	West Indies
Virginia Fey	Taiwan
C.L. Hminga	India
Max Jacob	Indonesia
Paul G. Hiebert	U.S.A.
Eisuke Kanda	Japan
Charles Kirkpatrick	U.S.A.
R. Don McCall	Taiwan
Haruo Mitsumori	Japan
Paul A. Rader	Korea
C. Lal Reme	India
Robert Skivington	Philippines
Theodore Srinivasagarn	India
Munshi Tudu	India
Doris Wagner	U.S.A.
Darrell Whiteman	Papua New Guinea
Peggy Yeo	Hong Kong