

V. How Many Tragedies? A Commentary

by Gottfried Oosterwal

At the time when the People's Republic of China was formed, the China Division of Seventh-day Adventists had a membership of some 20,000 believers, spread over 285 churches and 254 companies. There were also 15 training schools, 12 sanitariums and hospitals, two dispensaries and two publishing houses. Twenty-five years later, none of these institutions, and very few churches or companies of Adventist believers remain.

Why? Was it because of persecution or religious intolerance by the new regime? That is only one part of the answer, Elder David Lin tells us. A much more powerful factor, in his eyes, has been the very nature of Seventh-day Adventist mission work in China. His view deserves serious consideration.

Since Adventist mission work today is still basically guided by the same policy that Pastor Lin has so vehemently rejected, the danger is not at all imaginary that "what has happened to Adventist missions in China could be repeated more or less after the same pattern in other (former) colonial areas." The aim of the report, says Lin, is to help "to avoid the mistakes made by others in the past." All this takes on a much greater significance in light of the "Time of Trouble" that will soon come over all Adventist churches and believers, in Asia and Africa, as well as in the Americas, Europe and Australasia. What kind of mission work could best prepare us for that time of trouble? What are the lessons

from China—and Vietnam—for the church today and its work of mission in the immediate future?

When David Lin's report was first received—in December of 1956—Adventist church and mission leaders rejected it as being "written under duress," "to satisfy the accusation committee" and "as a propaganda pamphlet for the Communist regime." This negative attitude prevailed even after Pastor S. J. Lee came out of China saying that he had been with David Lin when he wrote his report, had discussed it with him at length, and that none of the "suspicions" about Pastor Lin's statement were true. David Lin wrote the document after he had been cleared by the police, and it did not prevent them from later arresting and rearresting him. The testimony of his work and life, and that of S. J. Lee, are a solid basis for accepting David Lin's report for what it is: an honest attempt by a respected Adventist leader* to help the church learn from its past mistakes.

The time is more than ripe for the church as a whole to engage also in an honest self-evaluation of Adventist mission. The issues raised by David Lin are no longer confined to our work in China or Vietnam; they live in the minds of workers and members everywhere. If we fail to take stock of past mistakes now, the tragedies of the China and Vietnam experiences will be repeated, only on a much larger scale.

*David Lin was elected secretary of the China Division in 1950 and put in charge of our radio and MV work. S. J. Lee served as the division treasurer.

The strategies of Adventist mission receiving the greatest criticism are: 1) taking institutions and church structures developed in America and in the West, and transplanting them to Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania; 2) relying primarily on such institutions and established church structures to build the church in those areas.

The picture one gets of the Adventist Church in China is that it was never really rooted in Chinese soil. To this day, the same can be said of most of our work in Asia. Hospitals are established that are patterned after western models: the same specialization of the physicians, nurses and staff; the same facilities and equipment; the same pattern of individualized care and orientation toward curative medicine. But this kind of health care in the West came at the end of a long process. Transplanting such institutions to China or Vietnam or any area in the developing countries of the world where 60-70 percent of the people still die from malaria, hookworm, amebiasis, trachoma, yaws, diarrhea, filariasis, pneumonia, schistosomiasis, dysentery and influenza is like finishing the roof before the house has been built. The result is that 90 percent of Adventist medical work is concentrated in hospitals rather than in dealing with the truly basic health needs of the millions in the developing nations: sanitation and hygiene, polluted drinking water and malnutrition, disease-infested environment and disease-promoting acquired habits. All the larger Adventist hospitals, moreover, employ a very high percentage of non-Adventist nurses and physicians, which makes it difficult for these institutions to become wholly evangelistic in their orientation.

The same applies to many of our schools. David Lin—and others—have raised the question: Where are the many thousands of students who have gone through our schools? They were trained in many branches of science and education for which American schools were well known. But since these schools were not really rooted in the basic needs of Asian society, they tended towards elitism, alienated the students from their surroundings, and failed to prepare the students for being Christians in their own environment. It is noteworthy that so many of the educated and of the young in the church

gave up their faith, whereas the uneducated and the older members by and large remained loyal to Adventist principles.

Our publishing houses similarly failed, Lin says. Concern for profits prevented them from producing the kind of literature most needed. Copying American models produced a lot of translations from American books and pamphlets, but not the literature needed for the Asian mind. Though much has been improved since Lin wrote regarding the production of literature for our own members, especially the writings of Ellen G. White, Adventist mission in Asia is still

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suffering from the fact that no publications have been prepared that reach out to the hundreds of millions of Buddhists, Confucianists and Muslims, for whom these publishing houses ought to have been established in the first place.

As a result of this kind of mission work, the church has remained alien to the Asian soil. Mission work means, in the first place, planting, and not transplanting; the laying of new foundations, not the moving of institutions. To the Asian people, the institutions were part of the culture of the foreigner. This has led not only to a stagnation in mission work; it has also created a rather strong antichurch feeling because of the close association between these western institutions and imperialism.

The recent events in South Vietnam have brought that clearly to the fore. When the first negotiations between Adventist church leaders and the U.S. government began about the mission's take-over of the Third Field Hospital, our Vietnamese church leaders wrote a rather strong and extremely well-reasoned letter to the union, with copies to the division and the General Conference, urging the brethren not to

take over the hospital. That was in December of 1972!

Though many good reasons were given in the letter, the one elaborated at great length was that:

SDAs, by this act of succeeding the U.S. Army in operating the Third Field Hospital, may be misunderstood as tools of the U.S. government. This misunderstanding may have an impact not only on our work in Vietnam, but also on the work of our church in countries behind iron curtains as well. Religions have been regarded by the public . . . as tools of political forces—Catholics are accused as tools of French colonists, and Protestants, of American imperialists. We might be mistaken by both foes and friends as continuing the Third Field Hospital, under a new guise, in the new phase. . . . The aforementioned misconception of the people may have an adverse effect on the attitude of the masses toward our evangelical mission. They may question our objectives. The peculiar experience of the Vietnamese people in their long history of foreign domination makes them highly suspicious of religions of foreign origin. More than once we have been labelled as pro-Americans. This move of ours may appear to substantiate their so far groundless suspicion. Our act, while well meant, may have an appearance of evil.

The letter concluded “that it would not be very beneficial to our cause to be allured into this deal with the U.S. government.” This was not a statement by some radical extremists, but by responsible and experienced national leaders, whose only concern was the advance of God’s mission in their country. But 15 years after David Lin wrote his report, we still had not grasped the importance of his words. How many other tragedies must follow before we shall see clearly that the transplantation of western institutions does not help the church? Institutions ought to be built according to the needs and mission focus of local believers.

This leads to David Lin’s second criticism: that the weakness of Adventism in China was a result of putting the establishment of institutions ahead of building and nourishing local churches themselves. He describes the over-

emphasis on institutions as a “short-sighted mission policy.”

David Lin is right in stressing that the church is not, in the first place, programs or structures, institutions or organization. The church is people, believers. The aim of all mission, therefore, must be to win people to Christ and to plant churches. Organization and structures should grow out of the needs of these people and churches; their need to be strengthened in the faith and to be better prepared to carry out their own mission. That is how the Adventist church organization and departmental structures gradually developed in North America.

In overseas mission, however, the policy has been to start first with these structures and organizations already developed in the West and then let the local churches grow around them. The result of putting primary emphasis on institutions is a very top-heavy administrative structure, continuing and heavy financial dependence on the sending churches, and a lack of missionary development at the grass-roots level. It is true that institutions do give the church continuity and depth. But they do not lead to many conversions or create strong mission churches. Church structures and institutions, therefore, should be built on converted Christians and missionary churches, not the other way around, as has been a practice. Emphasizing institutions has had the advantage of creating uniformity in our worldwide work, and easy control by a central authority, factors that have greatly contributed to the strength of Adventist world mission. But the disadvantages of this missionary methodology far outweigh the advantages, as we can learn not only from our experience in China but also by looking at our present work in all of Asia.

If institutions grow out of the need of the believers and the churches in the given area, the mission fields will be self-supporting, self-propagating and self-governing. It may be true that for a while mission fields developed from the grass roots up may have little to report in office buildings, departmental organizations and large institutions, but the result will be a church firmly rooted in the life and work of believers, particularly lay believers. A church established in this way will be able to rely solely on God and His Word. Such a church will be able to stand firm when the floods rise and the storms come.