

# Trends in Cooperation and Common Action Among Conservative Evangelical Agencies

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The number and variety of conservative evangelical agencies in North America is considerable. Indeed, the very term “conservative evangelical” is open to a wide interpretation. For the purpose of the paper, we are concerned with those groups that are creedal, pietistic, and often uncooperative so far as the World Council of Churches is concerned. There are some groups, which may quite legitimately fall within this category, and yet about which nothing shall be said in this paper because I have had no firsthand experience in dealing with them. Such groups as the Missouri Synod Lutherans, the Seventh Day Adventists, and the Southern Baptists.

The Conservative Evangelical movement is frequently regarded as essentially divisive in nature. At this point we do well to remind ourselves of its origin and nature.

The most formative influence upon the stream of conservative evangelical agencies has been the China Inland Mission (CIM), now renamed the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF). It is important to recognize that this mission (founded, 1865) and those that followed were interdenominational in character. In no sense were they intended to be a protest against existing denominational missions. Rather, their intention was to compliment existing missionary agencies by undertaking evangelistic activity in areas that existing denominational agencies were unable to evangelize. It would be quite revealing to trace the patterns of cooperation between these older interdenominational societies prior

to 1910. For many years these societies worked in a spirit of fellowship and cooperation with the older established denominational agencies. It was only when theological differences developed after the First World War that these two movements separated and moved increasingly along divergent paths.

## DIFFICULTIES OF COOPERATION

At first glance, it might seem that conservative evangelical groups would find it easy to cooperate with each other, but cooperation is rarely achieved easily. Cooperation in North America has been more difficult than in Britain for a variety of reasons:

1. Theological controversy in North America has been more violent than in England; even among conservative groups much less flexibility has been demonstrated. It is usually possible to determine whether a mission originated in Britain or the United States simply by looking at the eschatological clauses in its creedal statement. Few if any British missions will insist upon agreement on details of eschatology beyond requiring belief in the expectation of the personal return of the Lord Jesus Christ. In many agencies in North America, agreement on far more detail is required.
2. The vigor of American individuality often allows less room for compromise than would be the case in a British situation.
3. Ethnic differences in America have led to the establishment of agencies as diverse as the Mennonites, the Reformed churches, and many other groups transplanted from European settings.
4. Personalized financial support of the missionaries has led to more sensitivity to the convictions of their supporting churches than would be the case otherwise.
5. It is the nature of conservatism to be less permissive in terms of alliances. Many who are conservative in theology tend to be conservative in other areas of conviction also. Cooperation is always easier to achieve on the mission field than at home. Cooperation is

often stronger in informal situations than in formal alliances.

## LANDMARKS IN COOPERATION

In 1917 the Interdenominational Foreign Mission Association of North America (IFMA) came into being, and has since proved to be one of the most influential groupings of missionary agencies among the conservatives. It was formed so that mission leaders could get together for prayer, consultation, and the mutual exchange of ideas and information. Its first president was Dr. Henry W. Frost, Home Director of the China Inland Mission. The IFMA now comprises some 46 member missions representing some 89,000 missionaries. For its first thirty years of existence, it did not even have an established central office or an office secretary. It did not set out to be a service agency. Today all is changed. Its activities are many and diverse. True, it still caters to a constituency that is relatively limited, in that it will not accept a denominational agency, however conservative it may be. Neither will it accept an agency that is Arminian or Pentecostal in nature. It has even come to be an accrediting agency. Indeed, some churches will not support any mission agency that is not a member of the IFMA.

In 1945 the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association (EFMA) was established as the intermission agency of churches and denominations associated with the National Association of Evangelicals. In a number of ways, the EFMA is broader in scope than the IFMA. It accepts many groups into its membership that would not be acceptable to the IFMA, such as denominations and Pentecostal missions. The majority of its groups are Arminian in doctrine. At the present time, 59 missions are in fellowship with EFMA, with an aggregate of 6,452 missionaries working in 120 fields. From its formation, the EFMA has been more of a service agency to the societies that belong to it. It has a full-time staff and performs such duties as obtaining visas for missionaries, operating a purchasing office, a travel agency, etc. The EFMA tends to be a good deal broader in its approach to cooperation, although its essential theological position is virtually identical with that of the IFMA.

The associated missions of the International Council of Christian Churches (ICCC) represents approximately 1,000 missionaries and in terms of cooperation, is the most conservative of all, its members having very little to do with those of other groups.

## COOPERATION IN SPECIALIZED MINISTRIES

Perhaps one of the most effective influences in promoting cooperation has been the need that specialists in one particular missionary society have had to confer and work with like specialists in other societies. This, as we shall see, has led to perhaps the highest degree of cooperation that has been achieved to date. The need for these joint ventures was felt prior to the Second World War. Actually, most of them have come into existence or have flourished in only the last ten or fifteen years.

### Linguistics

The American Bible Society (ABS) has done a great deal to further cooperative work in this field. Since its work is well known and its contacts with agencies apart from conservative evangelical agencies are well developed we need do no more than mention it in this paper.

Wycliffe Bible Translators (WBT) – alias, the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) – has exercised a very wide cooperative ministry. Its first Summer Institute of Linguistics was instituted in 1934. In the years since over 5,000 missionaries from over 40 missions have passed through these institutes: In addition to the countries where they are doing field work SIL operates institutes of linguistics in North America, Australia, Germany, and Britain. Four out of every five missionaries who take their courses undertake missionary work with agencies other than the Wycliffe Bible Translators.

So cooperative has this mission agency been with Roman Catholic as well as the total spectrum of Protestant agencies, that WBT increasingly came under mounting criticism, as a result of which it withdrew from IFMA some six years ago. Today, it belongs to no inter-mission agency, but continues to pursue its policy of wide cooperation in the interest of language reduction and Bible translation.

### Missionary Radio

Conservative evangelicals moved into this field early in the 1930's. Almost from the outset they recognized the absolute necessity for cooperating with other agencies, in programming and engineering and, above all, in the follow-up of evangelical broadcasting. It was in 1954 that the International Christian Broadcasters (ICB) came into existence as an organized fellowship for promoting cooperation among the 53 missionary broadcasting station complexes operating overseas today. Many of these

use personnel loaned from other mission agencies, air programs recorded in other studios, and work closely with other agencies in the provision of correspondence courses to follow up their broadcasts. This has led to a great crosspollination among conservative evangelicals that is fruitful in ministry and healthy in itself.

## Literature

Almost every mission agency has been quick to realize the significance of literature in its ministry. But until relatively recently very little was done on a cooperative basis; much overlapping took place. At one time, no fewer than twelve different editions of *Pilgrim's Progress* were being published simultaneously in Japan. In the decade of the 1950's literature first began to attract the attention of many who saw that its problems could be solved and its potential recognized only with a maximum of coordination. In 1953 Evangelical Literature Overseas (ELO) came into being. At that time there were only a half dozen functional literature fellowships operating. Today there are 32 such groups in operation. The Evangelical Literature Fellowship of India, organized in 1954, already has more than 30 agencies involved in its varied and significant program.

The advantages of such cooperation on the practical level are obvious. There is avoidance of overlapping, a pooling of resources in money and manpower, the allocation of literature priorities, and the sharing and harnessing of technical specialists in writing, production, and distribution. A less direct but very important by-product of cooperative literature work is the understanding that missionaries in various agencies come to have of the work of other agencies. This understanding is helpful to them personally and glorifying to the Lord.

## Aviation

Although, it was conceivably possible for every mission agency to have its own literature work, however inadequate, aviation demanded capital investment and resources of skilled and experienced manpower that made it completely impractical for many of the smaller conservative mission agencies. After the Second World War, the Missionary Aviation Fellowship came into existence in the US, then extended to Britain and Australia. MAF now works in 14 countries, serves between 40 and 50 different missions, and operates 36 aircraft. The decision on which missions are to be served is made in terms of the local field situation rather than on a worldwide basis. It has been very useful in establishing

better communications, in more senses than one, and has brought together various societies for fellowship in service and in worship. In at least one country, an inter-mission fellowship came into being as a direct result of this aviation ministry. The inter-mission fellowship itself has enlarged into an alliance of both mission societies and national churches.

In these circumstances, the pilot becomes far more than a chauffeur. He must be sensitive, articulate, and able to act as a liaison agent, not only between one mission society and another but between those societies and the national government.

The Jungle Aviation and Radio Service (JAARS) primarily serves the missionaries of Wycliffe Bible Translators, but it too helps other groups and performs a function similar to MAF.

## Evangelism

Evangelism has always had a high priority in the conservative evangelical movement. Although much of this is undertaken by individual mission boards, they have also been increasingly drawn together to engage in united evangelistic efforts. In some parts of the world, Billy Graham has conducted evangelistic campaigns that have tended to draw conservative missionaries into cooperation. More recently, the Evangelism-in-Depth program of the Latin America Mission has operated in a number of countries and has drawn virtually every mission society into its cooperative evangelistic ventures. EID campaigns carry on for usually at least one year and provide opportunity for extensive and prolonged inter-mission and inter-church cooperation at a variety of levels. The Latin America Mission has always conceived of itself as a service agency to other missions in the field of evangelism. These EID campaigns are merely an extension of the ministry it has been performing for 45 years. Within the past year, two of the leaders of LAM's department of Evangelism-in-Depth have undertaken a world tour visiting many countries and working with many mission agencies in advising them on similar programs. Churches and missions in at least 14 countries in East Asia are interested in holding similar protracted campaigns.

## Students

Student work has always tended to cross-denominational and other boundaries. This has been true among the conservative evangelical groups. The International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES) was organized in 1947 as a fellowship of these conservative evangelical student

organizations that had already come into existence in a number of different countries of the world. At present the IFES operates in more than 60 different nations.

One aspect of the work of the IFES is that in those countries where student work is in its beginning stages, mission agencies of various types loan qualified missionaries to the IFES for this specialized work. At least eight mission boards have this arrangement with the IFES at this time.

In the US and in Canada, a strong missionary interest exists within the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship. Because of the conservative evangelical creedal position of the IVCF, it was to be expected that its closest contact would be with those mission agencies that share its same theological convictions. Many students in these IVCF groups, however, have come from denominations that do not necessarily share these same theological views. However, these students are encouraged to undertake missionary service wherever possible with the mission board of their respective denominations. In connection with this missionary program of the IVCF, a student missionary convention is held every three years at the University of Illinois where some 100 separate missionary agencies are represented. By this means students have been introduced to many different mission agencies. These agencies themselves have found it a very fruitful source of contact with potential candidates. In addition, it has proved to be a valuable meeting ground for missionaries of agencies that normally would rarely be exposed to one another.

## IFMA AND EFMA RELATIONSHIPS

For some years there was relatively little cooperation between these two groups on the practical level even though there was, of course, no hostility between the two. The last ten years or so have seen a marked change in this regard; the two groups have undertaken a number of ventures together. The first of these was probably the Evangelical Committee of Latin America (ECLA). This was followed by an Africa Fellowship, which soon led into the establishing of an Africa office with a full-time secretary. Both of these regional committees had their beginnings in the 1950's.

In 1963 IFMA and EFMA combined to hold a united conference for mission leaders. More recently, each of these organizations has appointed a youth committee and the two youth committees work in close collaboration.



Working jointly in October of 1964, they began a publishing venture, the *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, and this is in the process of being broadened to an evangelical information service.

The most recent and ambitious project of these two groups working together was the Congress on the Church's Worldwide Mission held April 9-16, 1966 at Wheaton College. One hundred fifty missions were represented, 937 delegates took part, there were 39 special interest groups and 13 overseas organizations.

## EVANGELICAL ALLIANCES AND ASSOCIATIONS

The number and scope of these is beyond the limitations of this paper and the organizational affiliations are sometimes quite involved. In some parts of the world, regional evangelical associations are affiliated with the World Evangelical Fellowship and in other areas they are not. One of the most successful has probably been the Evangelical Fellowship of India, which has been responsible for coordinating literature, correspondence courses, radio, evangelistic crusades, church renewal campaigns, and a theological seminary.

The conservative evangelical groups have generally been somewhat distrustful of organizational unity and of the emphasis upon associations because of their insistence that true unity is spiritual. At the same time, they have benefited very much, particularly in recent years, from cooperative action in world evangelization.

Studies and negotiations are under way at present in an effort to amalgamate a number of small missions and even larger missions in the interest of reducing overhead and the unnecessary duplication of services.

True, these cooperative efforts have not been without their detractors. Currently, there is a right wing among the conservative evangelicals that has been quite bitter in its antagonism. At present, it represents but a vocal minority.

## FACTORS IN COOPERATION

Conservative evangelicals would be of the opinion that when the Church is in a spiritually healthy condition, true cooperation and fellowship result. In times of spiritual revival, barriers are shown to be trivial and the things that unite prove to be far more important than those things that divide. In the early days of the interdenominational missionary



movement, which we regard as beginning in 1865, such cooperation was taken for granted. As we have seen, this state of affairs changed after the First World War. It is significant that the 1950's saw the rapid development of a great number of cooperative agencies among these groups. Although in many ways cooperation is usually easier to attain in Britain than in the United States, it is significant to notice that these associations originated in North America. This is because such cooperation came in the realm of specialized ministries such as literature, radio, and aviation. The American church has far greater resources in these specialized methods than has the Church in Britain. It is also true that Americans tend to think more readily in terms of organizations than do the British.

A number of factors have contributed to the great growth in evangelical cooperation during the last ten years:

1. The increasing importance of technical specialties.
2. Broader education acquired by many missionaries in these groups than was the case 20 to 30 years ago.
3. The very organizational activity of the World Council of Churches has given to some evangelicals the impression that they cannot afford to be unorganized themselves.
4. The improved communications that make it easier to hold conferences and to share ideas.
5. The influence of a generation of missionaries that through military experiences in the second world war often saw the provincialism of much of their own background and the importance of teamwork.

## CONCLUSION

The trend among conservative evangelical groups today is undoubtedly toward increased cooperation. In the process they are learning valuable lessons from one another. It is to be expected and hoped that this process will continue and develop. But at the same time, many are beginning to recognize the danger of trusting in associations and organizations rather than in the common spiritual life that is the gift of God to each of His children.