

RURAL EVANGELISM IN ASIA

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Politically, economically, and religiously, Asia is the focus of the world's attention today. Militarily, the East and West power blocs are in a dangerous confrontation everywhere, and we are in the situation of not knowing when the confrontation will begin. The oil problem is making economic sparks fly which are endangering the whole world economy. Religiously, in Asia the pagan power of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam are strong. But in 1973 in Seoul, Korea, for the first time in its history, occurred the amazing explosion of Holy Spirit power through the Billy Graham Crusade. And this happened in Asia.

But we must not overlook the fact that in the midst of all of this movement the farming villages of Asia both politically and economically, and especially evangelistically, were forgotten and passed by. Through the report of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) we know that the population of Asia in 1971 was 2.1 billion — and 1.4 billion (67 per cent) of them were farmers. We must pay attention to these 1.4 billion who live in a cultural valley, and without ever hearing the Gospel pass from this earth like a wide river of lost souls.

1. *The present condition of Asian farm villages.*

In Asia there are twenty countries having a farm population of 60 per cent or above. And in most of those countries the farming people still do not have any modern cultural benefits. Also, the farming technique is low, and the farming income is so poor that it is very difficult to compile statistics relating to it. Not only this, but the differential between city and farming village in culture and economics is growing greater year by year. In one country of Asia the farming population is 70 per cent. In that country the city dwellers' yearly expenditure will average \$90 per person, but the farmers' only averages \$20 per person. The city dweller spends 53 per cent of his money on food, but the farmer spends 85 per cent of his meager funds on food. This means that the farmer just barely manages to eat. But this figure does not mean that their stomachs are full. The percentage of illiterates is 30 per cent in the cities, 60 per cent in farming villages. This shows us how far from the civilized world they are.

If we take an illustration from Japan, where the differential between city dweller and farmer is smaller than other countries: among the wage earners in the chief industries, the farmer ranks lowest, receiving only half of the average wage for all industries. The production index of the farming family in Japan comes to less than thirty per cent of that of the city laborer. Yet the birth rate in the city is 2.9 children per married woman, whereas in the farming villages it is four children per mother. In

other Asian countries the average for city mothers is 3.5 children, and for farm mothers six children.

2. *The present condition of Gospel evangelism*

In the countries of Asia the farm villages not only are given the cold shoulder politically and economically, but are neglected in evangelism. Christian evangelism in farming villages is confronted by many obstacles. Even in Korea where there have been many effective results of Gospel evangelism, the farmers are still hungry for the Gospel. Most of the pastors are in the cities, and although several hundred students graduate from theological seminaries every year, there is still only one pastor for every two to three farming village churches. This is one of the better rural situations, because most of the villages of Southeast Asia still have not even heard the Gospel. In 1971 I took fourteen students from my college and did research on conditions in the farming villages of Japan. This was in a farming area that could be reached within two hours by train from Tokyo. In five days we researched 700 farm houses. We were very surprised to discover that 97 per cent of those farmers had never heard the Gospel. The other three per cent had heard through radio or by receiving a tract when they had been in the city. The nearest church to that farming village was about a one-hour walk, and it was a weak church of about twenty members. Hardly any of those village children had heard the familiar song "Jesus Loves Me." Sitting down in the garden of one of those farm homes, and thinking of the billion-and-a-half farmers in Asia, I couldn't help but pray.

3. *The social organization of the Asian farm villages*

There are many differences according to the country, but let us think in general about the social organization of Asia's farm villages. In most countries the farm villages consist of a group of thirty to forty homes formed into a community centered on the land being farmed. The village is occupied mainly in private production, but the community is organized in the same way we find in primitive societies. In addition to the privately owned farm land, there is community or collectively owned mountain, woodland, and water resources. Therefore there must be some collective labor and production, so it is natural for the farming village to have a very tightly knit community character. In the nations where agrarian reform has not been achieved, the character of the collective community is connected with the system of the absentee landlord. In other words the vertical relations between landowner and tenants, and the horizontal relations of common ownership and collective labor make up the basic structure of the farming community. One other element of the social organization of the Asian farm village is the family system. In America and Europe the family most commonly comprises husband and wife and unmarried children. But the Asian farm family consists of all members and the position regarding relatives is very complicated. In Asia the idea is not that a man and woman get married and start a new family, but that the woman marries into a family that already exists. In principle, the newly married couple live in with the husband's parents and grandparents. Thus in the farming family the vertical household concept (a line of descent from the husband's ancestors) is widespread, and

the more important relationship is not husband and wife, but parent and child. The absolute power of the head of the family and the importance of lineal descent is the basis of the farming community structure.

We must understand the importance of "the home" which is ruled by the strong authority of the head of the family as the center of everything. "The home" does not include only the members of the immediate family, but also the house, furniture, family land, domestic animals, and even the tools. And it includes all the past ancestors as well as the present living members. Therefore "the home" is more important than the human rights of the individual, and sometimes for the sake of "the home" an individual's personality is ignored, and it is considered natural that a person be willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of the family. The lineage and social standing of the home means that the family members are expected to honor the family name and conform to the family customs.

And even if the home starts a branch family, the head home is still the center, and a "same family society" is constructed. Added to this is the family connection on the wife's side — so the circle gradually becomes wider. As outlined above, the farming village is a complicated social structure made up of the land-relationship connected with production and the blood-relationship connected with the home.

4. Difficulties of farm village evangelism

Every Asian country recognizes that evangelism in farming villages is more difficult than in the cities; indeed, many feel it is impossible. Apart from countries where for reasons of ideology or national policy Christian evangelism is not permitted, I want to list the problems of evangelism in Asia generally.

a. Each village has its own peculiar and historical tutelary deity, or local god. For example, according to the survey of the Agriculture Ministry of Japan in 1970, 63 per cent of all farming villages had their own village god. And 27 per cent of the villages had a god in cooperation with an adjacent village. And only ten per cent of villages did not have a local deity. Religiously speaking, the villagers are the parishioners of the local god, and the chief home of the village serves as the chief priest. In addition to this traditional faith group, each home is a member of some Buddhist temple because of the order given by the Tokugawa government in A.D. 1600, when the ban against Christians was given. They feel no contradiction in believing both Shintoism and Buddhism. To people in this kind of religious grouping, it becomes very difficult to receive a different religion like Christianity.

b. As explained above, the farm village is a strongly-bound community formed by land and blood relationships. They have been fused into this closed society for a long time, and this makes them very obstinate and exclusive, and they have a negative reaction to strangers: they do not wish the latter to come into the collective community that has functioned well since the time of the ancestors. It is very difficult for a Christian or a pastor to enter into this closed group.

The following survey will show how important their community life is to them and how they will suppress the autonomy of the individual for

the sake of the community. In the 1963 survey by Professor Fukutake of Tokyo University into the consciousness of farmers in Okayama Prefecture, 62.5 per cent of the people felt they should suppress their individual opinion for the sake of the peace of the community; 15.7 per cent felt that it was better to ignore any personal opinion; 6.6 per cent remained silent and would express no opinion; 13.2 per cent felt that a person should express his opinion, if he felt it was correct; and 2 per cent had various other views. This means that 86.8 per cent of all the village people felt that for the sake of the community peace an individual should not express his opinion. This is village society in Japan. To become a heretic (a Christian, for instance) in such a social structure would mean an immediate threat to a person's position in that society. In such a context, it is very difficult for a person to become a Christian.

c. The feudalistic idea and family system that says it is natural that an individual and his opinion should be ignored for the sake of the "home" is generally held to in all farming villages of Asia. In this system the power of the head of the family is very strong. The income from the family industry (farm) is not considered as an individual's income. The income from the labor of the entire family goes into the hands of the head of the home. And no expenditure can be made without his permission. He has not only complete authority over production and consumption, but also over the social life of the family members — concerning such things as entering school, marriage, and friendships.

Against such a system, to convert from the ancestral faith of the family to another one is the same as deserting the "home." The offender becomes a sinner who blackens the family name, brings sadness and shame to the whole family, and makes them feel humiliated and embarrassed.

It is anticipated that a new generation with new education will gradually bring in a new system to the farming villages. But at the present time the farming villages are very difficult compared to the cities.

d. In every Asian country the economic difference between city and farming village is enormous. Not only is there a difference, but it is very difficult for the farmers to escape from poverty. One of the great obstacles to rural evangelism is that the farmers are all poor. When the Gospel seed is sown it does not grow, but not only that: the local village church never seems able to attain self-supporting status. This keeps evangelism from taking root. The young evangelist tries very hard for a few years, but disappointed at the lack of results, or for the sake of his children's education, he moves to the city where conditions are at least a little better. Thus the fact that the Lord's church is unable to support itself but depends on outside help, even after many years of work, is not a good testimony, and becomes an obstacle to evangelism.

e. Finally, a perennial problem in farm village evangelism is the fact that the young people always move away to the city. They always leave the village when they finish middle or high school to get additional education, or to find work. For them, there is no charm or vision in the farming village which has many disadvantages and lacks cultural benefits, therefore they leave the village when opportunity offers. Every time I go to survey the farming villages I hear the older farmers complain

about losing the young productive power. The problem is really, however, losing succession to the "home." This is the same problem for the village church. Even if English classes are used as a means of getting middle and high school young people to come to church, within two or three years all of them move away to the city — and cannot therefore be brought up to become pillars of the church.

5. Needed: a special kind of worker

For the farm villages where the harvest is great, the Lord is seeking and needs specialized workers. The farming village is certainly not good soil for sowing the Gospel seed, establishing churches, and training believers. Until now missionaries, pastors, denominations, and theological seminaries have not been interested in this unproductive field of farm village evangelism. But we cannot forget the salvation of 1.4 billion farm people in Asia. Someone must take the Gospel to them. Someone must carry God's Word — that gives joy, hope, and eternal life into these dark valleys. These 1.4 billion are waiting for and really need God's love and salvation.

The farm village evangelist must be a Gospel worker and at the same time a leader of the farm people in many ways. First, evangelistically he must know the Lord's pain of heart for these souls. Then he must be a true friend of the farm people, and pray for them. Then he must be qualified to be a leader of the farmers in many ways. In other words, a leader of the farmers in technique, socially, and evangelistically.

More than ten years ago, a young Japanese evangelist got a vision of rural evangelism and decided to go into a farm village. First, he learned the technique of growing strawberries on hillsides. During the winter, on the south side of a hill he would make stair-type rock walls and plant strawberries in between them. The strawberries that were planted in the fall would bear fruit just about Christmas and New Year. Since this method did not need a hothouse or fuel for heating it was a very economical method. And since the strawberries were sold in a cold season when there was a high demand for them, the profit likewise was very high.

After learning this technique he purposely went to a poor farm village far from the city. This village was very poor, so in the winter all the men went to the city to work in construction projects. These were people who could not get enough to eat without this seasonal labor. The evangelist chose this village because land was cheap, and in order to obtain good results in a place everyone thought impossible. Thus would glory be brought to the Lord, and it would be a good example of effective Gospel presentation.

At first he did not say he was an evangelist or even that he was a Christian. But silently he made a new strawberry patch, and grew his berries. The farm people noticed this peculiar stranger and watched him curiously. At Christmas he harvested many fine strawberries, and made a greater profit than any of the farmers could have imagined. They gathered at his house and begged him to teach them how to grow strawberries in this way. For the first time, he told them that he was a Christian. He arranged that if they would come to his house every Sunday and hear what he had to say, he would teach them how to grow strawberries.

Now that entire village is Christian, and he is not only the pastor of the church, but head of the village. Not only has evangelism had good results, but that village has become famous for strawberry-production.

When I have gone into the various villages of Japan on survey, the farmers do not open their hearts and talk to me at first. But when I start talking about cows and chickens, and when they know that I am a specialist on these subjects, their attitude quickly changes and they ask me to teach them various things, and come to me to talk about this and that. And in the end they open their hearts and listen to the Gospel. They say that if someone like me who is a pastor as well as a specialist on agricultural matters comes to live among them they would gladly receive him. And they say that with such a leader they would be willing to build a new village structure with the church as the center.

I think that the ideal evangelistic worker for the farming villages should be able to increase the income of the farmers, build up their cultural life, and actually become one with them in their community life. He should plough and live and suffer and cooperate with the farmers, and love their souls and lead them to the Cross. The farm villages need workers who will touch them skin to skin and communicate to their hearts.

6. The need for special training institutes

As long as human life continues on earth, farmers will be needed. Farming is a very fascinating and hopeful industry from the viewpoint of enterprise and continuance, according to how it is managed. The farm is neither physically nor spiritually a barren land, but a place where with hope and vision you can have much success. Especially spiritually, it is a golden and fruitful field.

Workers suitable for farming villages are needed, as are educational institutions to produce such specialists. Of course we need workers for evangelism, not just consultants and advisers or pioneers who are simply farming village leaders. We need people who are first saved, and who dedicate their lives for the Lord's glory and the salvation of souls. Then in order to enter into the farming villages they receive the technical education so that they are armored on both sides. For instance, they can lead in the techniques of farming, and when the animals get sick they can treat them along with the farmers, and at that time evangelize.

In some Asian countries there are already institutes for rural evangelism for this purpose. For these I have several suggestions. First, let us form a mobile international staff. This staff should consist of a Christian specialist in each of the main departments of farming — horticulture, animal husbandry, veterinary medicine, management, etc., and also a specialist in evangelism, and pastor of rich experience. This staff would move around Asia, cooperating with national evangelistic institutes, teaching high-level techniques and training in practical ways. The graduates of these institutes would go into the farming villages and become local leaders and evangelists. These people, with the church as the center, would form a new farmers' movement, and make an organization in a central location to lead systematically in jointly purchasing productive materials and selling agricultural products.

Second, in one of the Asian countries an international institute should be founded and from the various countries selected young farm village evangelists would study theology and advanced agricultural technology; and then go back to their own countries and become leaders in their own training school. Farm village evangelism will not succeed without a native leader; he can do much more than a missionary from a foreign land.

Third, I would like to propose something like an international rural evangelism alliance. We should call conferences of specialists in rural evangelism from various countries so that rural evangelism might be done more effectively. This international organization would carry out specialized study and plan for permanent evangelism. Such a project should be supported internationally. Again and again I say that for the 1.4 billion farmers in Asia we need organization, funds, and workers. From now on is not too late. We must study and then carry out this work.

RURAL EVANGELIZATION STRATEGY REPORT

Secretary: Alistair Kennedy

The small, but geographically representative group, which met to discuss Rural Evangelization and to hear Prof. Cho's paper relating to rural Asia was staggered at the immensity of the need.

Cho stated that 60% of the world's population is unevangelized. In many cases due to social structures these people are very resistant to the Gospel, though often the degree of resistance is not known since the Gospel just has not been preached to them. One participant suggested that what we need is a congress on rural evangelization alone!

There was much appreciation of Dr. Cho's excellent paper and time was given to discussing the problems it highlighted and the suggestions it made regarding evangelism through agriculture.

The usefulness of the institutions which Prof. Cho suggested be established was questioned by some. It was suggested that their effectiveness would depend on whether they developed from grass roots and were run by people with direct experience of church planting in rural areas.

It was pointed out also that married family men already acceptable for leadership in our area would carry more weight if trained than an outsider. Training should not be at university level for the people.

Another speaker referred to the difficulty in many subsistence farming areas of people leaving their land for more than a few days at a time for training. From experience in Sri Lanka one participant emphasized that evangelists should know agriculture, but others felt there was a danger in approaching evangelism through agricultural development where government was already heavily involved in this field. There was a danger of competition and confusion especially if government was doing the job better.

Dr. Cho said that there was this difference that whereas the government people were doing it with cold minds the Christians were doing it with warm minds and hearts. The scope for trained Christians working in government agricultural programs was noted.

Since the group comprised people from five continents it was felt improper to confine the discussion to Asia alone. In broadening the discussion there was much useful interchange of ideas which are proving fruitful in various situations. A participant from Malawi, where many workers migrate seasonally to South Africa or Rhodesia, noted that a very effective work of evangelization is done among these men while they are away from their villages. Men from Mozambique where missionaries have little access are reached as migrant laborers and then return home to spread the Gospel. This contribution drew attention to the fact that individuals from areas which are resistant due to family structures or other problems can be evangelized when modern life uproots them even temporarily.

This is seen also in Ghana where 80,000 people uprooted in the construction of the Volta Dam are being reached by evangelists who are teaching them to become fishermen as a new way of life.