

1107 East Hernandez Street
Pensacola, Florida 32503
August 31, 1977

Dear PCA Missionaries,

It has been my privilege and a source of joy and thanksgiving to God to read every one of your letters sent through the Committee on Mission to the World, and some personal letters besides. You are the cutting edge of the work of our Church abroad, and as moderator during the past year I have been very conscious of all of you and your work, and continually pray for each of you. Before my term of office expires I want to send you this word of encouragement, and if you are willing to read through it, a little advice on experience and observation.

Most of you are new on the field with your first furlough still ahead of you, a few of you have not had years of experience on the mission field before being in the PCA, and a few have not yet reached your fields. There are several of you who through early background, like myself, found yourselves at home in regard to language and customs from the moment you arrived on the field as a missionary. What I have to say, however, is principally to you to whom these things are still new or have not yet lost their strangeness. You with more experience will be able to reinforce or correct what I say.

Most of you have had the experience, or will soon have it, of being born suddenly into a new world whose sights and sounds and smells – especially if your country is non-Caucasian – are almost entirely different and strange. And you are going to spend years there – perhaps, even probably, the rest of the active years of your life. You are to live in this atmosphere, and your body, mind, and spirit must be adjusted to it in order to survive in it and through the grace of God be used to give its people the Gospel through which they can be brought to birth into the new life that will carry on into the perfect atmosphere of heaven.

Your great needs beyond the basic assets of faith, love, determination and patience are: ears to distinguish the sounds, a mind to understand them, and a mouth to duplicate them. For the hearer must hear from you the sounds that he recognizes and understands. You are a baby and must learn by imitation, but your hearer won't have the patience of your parents to spend much time figuring out what you are trying to say. Correct, understandable pronunciation is the prime requisite for you. Learn to be a good mimic. Then add thought-patterns, idioms, grammar, more and more of the words you will need. But if you give an uncertain sound when you talk, who can tell what language you are speaking, much less what you are trying to say? Your hearer who has never been with foreigners before has his problem too? His first idea is that whatever you say will be in your own language, and it takes him a while to realize that you are trying to talk his own.

An old story among missionaries in Japan was about the countryman who went to hear the foreign speaker at a meeting. When he got back home he told his people, "I heard a foreigner speaking in English, and I was really surprised because it isn't as different from Japanese as I thought it would be. I think I could learn it myself, because once in a while I could understand some of it."

Learning to use a new language is a very humbling process. Not brains, but trying to imitate, over and over, is the key. Insist on your teacher's keeping after you until anybody can understand at once what you are saying. Many a gifted missionary whose Japanese sentences were meticulously correct has been handicapped all his life because of his faulty pronunciation. His hearers could not keep up with him because they were bogged down trying to imagine what some of the words he had used really were. Also, once in a while a missionary who really speaks well is afflicted with a few words that he learned wrong when he first arrived and by with, but that now occasionally mar his otherwise excellent speaking. But the one whose pronunciation is consistently good will be understood even if he makes grammatical and other mistakes. Keep perfection as your aim, and don't be ashamed to ask for help, and keep your ears and eyes open for hitherto unnoticed ways of saying things, and for the idiomatic proverblike phrases that embody the wisdom and common sense of the people.

Now I have said all this, and it sounds hard, though it can become more and more interesting. Language is from God, and every language has remarkable treasures. But suppose you have really worked hard and practiced and been corrected until you are in despair, yet somehow keep on stumbling, and feel as if there is no hope of learning to talk to the people you love. Remember that this, even if it should all be true and not just your feelings, doesn't mean that you can't be a good missionary. Language is not the prime prerequisite. The love of Christ is. It is generally conceded that the most fruitful worker among the pioneer missionaries to Japan was Dr. James Ballagh. When he reached Japan there were no dictionaries and helps. The missionaries had to dig the language out, and they compiled the first dictionaries and grammars. But this young missionary never seemed to get hold of the baffling complications of the complex and sometimes inverted Japanese language. To the end of his days there he spoke his own peculiar mixture of Japanese words and English syntax that became famous as "Barago" (Ballaghese). But the earnestness and love of Christ shone through this language to the salvation of uncounted numbers led to Christ.

The language used in greetings, unexpected contacts, and requests are usually much more important in most cultures than among us Americans. With us "Hi!" has almost taken the place of all our fast-disappearing forms

of polite salutation in the English language which were once prized and important. Of course there can be sham in elaborate forms, but apart from that one should learn and use what is considered polite to everybody.

In old Japan there were several grades of politeness shown to others, depending upon their relative social or official position. Now there is much less use of them. But when my father went to Japan in 1889 they were standard practice. Some years later he told me that the great pioneer missionary, Dr. Verbeck, had said to him soon after his arrival, "Some missionaries will tell you that you should talk very politely to people of high rank and down to the lower classes. But I have found that that isn't necessary. Just be polite to everybody regardless of his rank. People will soon find out that you are a gentleman." Some thirty years after those words spoken a rickshaw man complained to me almost weeping about the way a prominent older missionary had talked insultingly to him. I had a hard time explaining to him that the man had been badly advised in his early days. "Give no offense to any man." Even the most degraded beggar yearns for respect, even though he may have long ago given up of receiving any. Remember always that you are a guest in your adopted country, and that often what would be ordinary usage from a fellow-national might seem rude from a foreigner.

And don't be afraid to apologize or to admit error in what you said or mistakenly taught. In the culture common to the Far East a superior was never to apologize to an inferior, and so a father was never to apologize to his child or a teacher to his pupil. But I have seen a Christian teacher's admission to his class that he had been in error, or his apology before the whole class for undue severity in correcting a student transform a whole class from resistance to respectful wholehearted cooperation.

I feel sure that you are always conscious that you are ambassadors of Christ, identified in the minds of those who see you as being not merely foreigners but representatives of an alien religion and even of its Founder and Lord, Jesus Christ. You are under constant observation by those who may resent your presence and would love to find some serious flaw in you, as well as by those who want to know whether what you are offering is really better than what they have heretofore known, and by new brothers and sisters in Christ who look at your daily walk and conduct under all sorts of circumstances to learn how they, too, may follow Christ. Who is sufficient for these things? None of us in himself. But we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.

And so in every aspect of life be beyond reproach as becomes ambassadors of Christ: in work diligent; in all matters scrupulously honest; always observing the rules of etiquette and conduct, especially in relationships involving the opposite sex; treating everyone with courtesy and respect; careful always to keep from impatience and uncontrolled anger and any sense or appearance of superiority; and always being available to see and help everyone coming to you. Though often you may be asked for something impossible or that it would be wrong to give, you there have the opportunity to offer God's greatest gift and perhaps to show something of the Gift Himself in the way you deal with your visitor. Your great privilege is to be the servant of all, remembering that your King served to the extent of laying down His life in order to give life. And you know that prayer and ever increasing familiarity with God's Word are prerequisites for this task that is impossible except for the power of the Holy Spirit given to us.

I have said nothing about how to word your presentation of the Gospel, or methods or planning. These matters are variables. You will learn as you begin to give it. You will meet some who are eager to hear because they know that they need help, others out of curiosity. Others you may have to persuade to listen. And often the most unlikely prospects will become the most faithful Christians. May God by His Holy Spirit enable you in every way, especially by the honesty, purity, and love evident in your life and words, to commend the Gospel to all around you, giving you the understanding and the opening of your mouth that you need. And (I am using words that I think give the meaning of this benediction more accurately than the A.V. that we are familiar with does), "May the God of peace, who brought again from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep, our Lord Jesus, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, prepare you completely in everything good for doing his will, working in you what is wellpleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen."

Please continue to pray for us at home and for our whole Church, that we may be faithful in upholding you as well as in our life and work here. And please pray for our General Assembly during its meeting from September 12 to 16, at Smyrna, just outside Atlanta, that the decisions made may all be for the glory of our Lord and the advancement of His Kingdom.

Sincerely yours in Him,

W.A. McIlwaine