

MISSIONOLOGISTS DEBATE THE INTEGRITY OF CHRISTIAN MISSION

'The Integrity of Mission in the Light of the Gospel – Bearing the Witness of the Spirit' is the theme set for the 11th quadrennial conference of the International Association for Mission Studies, that brought together just over 200 IAMS members from 44 countries (Asia with 71 providing the largest number from a single continent), and from a wide range of Christian churches, including Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant and Pentecostal, in Port Dickson, West Malaysia, from July 31 to August 7, 2004.

Two major addresses between them set out many of the key points. Revd Dr Hwa Yung, former Principal of the Malaysian Theological Seminary in Seremban, now leading the Centre for the Study of Christianity in Asia at Trinity Theological College in Singapore, chose to look away from any general analysis of Western missions of the last 200 years in favour of close attention to the evidence of the ways actual people and communities have responded to the power of the Gospel as and when it truly reached them. In particular he picked out three types of effect:

- 'signs and wonders' in regard to healings and to a new authority to dismiss evil spirits, both responding to the profound needs of people feeling themselves trapped by 'supernatural powers' that westerners have long since ceased to be aware of;
- 'the gospel's power to change individual and personal circumstances' – in particular a quite new spiritual liberation and the freedom to launch out in fresh civilisatory endeavours which the previous dominant culture(s) could never have permitted;
- helpful results of the lasting 'guilt complex' among Western intellectuals, based on deep roots in Western culture, which lead Western missionaries to listen attentively to the voices from the Two-Thirds World telling of the way the good news of Christ has spoken convertingly to those longing for a new future for themselves and their communities.

He ended by telling of a chance encounter in England with a leading Chinese academic woman, herself a sophisticated expert in Information Technology, who startled him by remarking "You people must come to China and preach the gospel." ! "I asked whether she was a Christian. When she said 'No.' I was even more amazed. I then asked her why she said what she had. I will never forget her reply: 'China needs God. If China does not know God, there is no hope for her future!' "

Professor Dr Pablo Sues, outgoing IAMS President, a Catholic priest of German extraction long identified with the original peoples of Brazil, as with various movements growing out of the 'liberation theology' of the 1970s, focussed in his presidential address on what "the Holy Spirit, God's gift in the gesture of giving" is saying to today's Christians as "they encounter the Spirit side by side with the oppressed, the excluded and the marginalized. These reveal the unrecognized God in the world, as guests of Abraham (Gen. 18) and as a stranger to the disciples of Emmaus (Luke 24: 13ff). They are aware that the comforts of the gilded cage do not weigh up the suffering that it causes. They live the gifts of the Spirit in their community. Dancing and singing, suffering and struggling, they create a network of responsibility. At their festivities they remember a victory of the past and anticipate the dream of a world that can't be bought by individuals but belongs to everybody."

"The universality of mission today", he said, "has to be understood as an alternative to the globalization under the dictates of a social-Darwinistic liberalism... Mission and missiology are universal, and their universality is an aspect of the integrity of mission because it does not exclude anybody. Christians do not have the status of a 'redeeming class', or of an 'elected race'... Hope for redemption and liberation is given us because of the hopeless. It is because of the universality of victims that our mission is universal. Mission follows the suffering servant of God into the most remote areas of the world... The missionary project in its contextual universality can be understood as an alternative to cultural colonization and social exclusion."

Four morning plenary sessions each focussed on two addresses prepared by different IAMS members - one Catholic, one Protestant – on the demands of integrity for today's missionary obedience in four continents. Significant that in no case was there any clear disagreement or a major difference in approach. In particular, both a senior Bulgarian Baptist, Dr Parush Parushev, child of Communist parents, now teaching at the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague, Czech Republic, and a French Catholic laywoman, Edith Bernard, a staff member of Missio-

France in Paris, were each clearly delighted, indeed moved, to discover how much their culturally so different approaches actually agreed in substance:

- mission belongs inescapably to the heart of human obedience to the Holy Spirit's call into the body of Christ;
- obedience also consists in serving the needy, in the discovery of friendship across human and social barriers, in the pointing to the cross and rising of Jesus of Nazareth as signs of an unconquerable hope, as to the never-failing possibility that God can bring reconciliation and peace;
- this obedience needs to be pursued primarily at the local level by communities of persons joining in worship of the creator God revealed in Jesus, and therefore responding to the needs and circumstances of their neighbours and partners in ways suggested by the Spirit in that specific context.

Earlier two Africans had insisted that Christian mission is addressed to the "totality of human living, not just to do with words" (Dr Tite Tienou, citizen of Burkina Faso teaching in the USA). Dr Philomena Mwaura, a university teacher at Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya, offered after a careful survey of Africa's current troubles - "the 'bleeding continent' where the impact of the economic policies of the Bretton Woods institutions and the perennial problems of corruption, impoverishment and oppression of the masses through inept and bad governance have been well documented" – five "suggestions to enhance the integrity of mission in the light of the Gospel:

- the Church as mediator of peace, healing and reconciliation;
- providing visionary leadership and discipling the nations;
- the need for courageous, empowered and effective leadership committed to evangelization and ecumenism;
- recognizing that in a pluralistic context, religions and denominations can only fulfil their prophetic role in collaboration;
- integrity of mission as shalom to the marginalized."

The two speakers from Latin America both focussed on the revival of ancient 'Indian' cultures, and on the recent political movements such as those of the Quichuas in Ecuador and their counterparts in Bolivia and Peru (Dr Ruben Paredes of the Latin American Theological Fraternity, Peru) and the way that the Roman Catholic Church, especially but not only in Mexico (where Revd Fr Eleazar Lopez Hernandez, a member of the Zapotecan people of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, serves in the Centro Nacional de Ayuda a Misiones Indigenas), is learning to heed the theological wisdom of the indigenous peoples and to pray once more in the words of their ancestors to Ometeotzin, Ometecuhtli and Omecihuatl.

On the morning of August 3rd Prof. Chun Chae Ok, President of the IAMS from 1986 – 2000, and now Professor Emeritus of Ewha University in Seoul, S., Korea, spoke of the "Missiology of Emptiness – mission from the poor to the poor" as a distinctive contribution of women in Asia. "The reality is that women in mission without names and in most cases without writings have been vehicles of the gospel in the Korean churches and throughout Asia. Their roles have been just giving, life-giving, without any demand for receiving and for recognition. They are always behind and hidden in life-giving work. It is because their experience of life being given as a gift from God and their love for life itself make it possible to give without ceasing, as seen in the life of a mother for her children." "The hostility between evangelism and feminism must end for the sake of realizing the full co-operating potential of the gospel. The existence of a female majority in the world church must no longer be ignored. Rather it should be celebrated and become a source of inspiration for a more authentic form of mission."

She was followed by Fr Leo Kleden, from Indonesia and a senior member of the Society of the Divine Word, who insisted on "listening with full respect to what God has done to different people, in various cultures and religions – an awareness which will slowly, but radically, transform our way of thinking and doing mission." He ended his address with a moving story from a training session for human rights activists in East Timor in 1997. The extent of suspicion and tension between the participants had been such that it was agreed to spend an evening in the chapel in prayer and sharing:

"A very thin woman stood up, walked to the middle, sat beside the candle and told us a long story of suffering. Her name was Alexandrina. We called her Adina. When she was about 6 years old her parents were arrested by the Indonesian soldiers. She never saw them again.... She was left behind with her elder brother, who had joined the Fretelin freedom fighters struggling for the independence of E. Timor. Some years later he too was captured by the Indonesian soldiers. They tortured him .. and let him slowly die a horrible death. When Adina was in senior high school, the military arrested her while giving food to a young man. They accused her of being a collaborator of Fretelin. They tortured her until she was half-conscious and raped her.

At this point Adina could not finish her story.... There was a long silence ... Then Adina gathered all her strength, looked at me, and said in a faint voice: 'Father, where is that salvation promised by the Lord ?' Again there was silence. I could not answer her question. Tears flowed. Slowly I raised my eyes and saw a wooden cross on the wall. I saw it and understood the solidarity of the Crucified One, but I could not utter a single word. Adina needed my solidarity, not my word. For several years I have been living with her question."

Only in the ensuing discussion did he mention that since writing his paper he had had a middle-of-the-night phone call from that same Adina, to tell him she was now happily married and had built a new life, longing to thank him for the new hope and vitality which the Holy Spirit had communicated to her on that unforgettable evening in the chapel.

The first two days of the conference had been spent in 'exposure visits'. On the Sunday four different groups travelled respectively to Buddhist temples, to an Orang Asli (native people's) village to learn of the circumstances of these Malaysians, to Melaka to learn more of the history of Christians in Malaysia, and to Kuala Lumpur to learn of two social concerns, at a Catholic centre meeting several groups of migrant workers from nearby Asian countries, of whom there are some 2 million in W. Malaysia at present, and at a Protestant hostel for ex-prisoners which is doing impressive work with the rehabilitation of drug-abusers.

On the Monday the whole conference then travelled to Kuala Lumpur, to visit the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation, and then the Internatinonal Islamic University of Malaysia. At the latter we were received by several university teachers, in a strikingly beautiful council chamber, for a notably warm welcome and ensuing discussion. In particular, these teachers repeatedly spoke of their interest in more frequent occasions for meeting with Christinas, as in the growth of exchanges and friendships from which both communities could be enriched by mutual understanding, respect and learning.

Finally, in the regular business sessions that form a small part of the programme for a quadrennial conference, Professor Dr Darrell Whiteman, of Asbury Theological Seminary, Kentucky, USA, was elected IAMS President for the four years ahead, and the next quadrennial provisionally planned for mid-2008 in Hungary.

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