

IAMS
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“Listening in on the Conference”

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I want to thank the executive committee for inviting me to share with you at this closing session my response to the week we have just been through together. The task to which I was assigned was to listen in at the conference as a participant, and to reflect upon what I heard us saying all week, but also to try to reflect upon what I did not hear us saying. I understand that this is in part an effort to help us think about the future agenda of the Association.

This is my first IAMS conference. Although a member for nearly 10 years now I have not attended previous gatherings. You are unique community with a particular history, and I found it fascinating to see you working on renewing it through the week. It is my impression that there is a great deal of continuity among you as members of the Association, with considerable institutional memory lodged throughout this room. Often I felt like I was joining a family re-union and sitting in on conversations that some of you have been carrying on for decades or longer.

We were reminded throughout the week that this particular gathering of the IAMS family was being held in Asia. The opening strands of music played by the Chinese orchestra on instruments such as the *yangqin* and *erhu* set the tone well for the week. The visual presence of the *tudung* worn on the head by many Muslim women whom we encountered during the course of week; the smell of *durian* that is lingering still in my nostrils; and the sight of the Malaysian Theological Seminary on the opening web page on the middle computer in the conference office room all helped to reinforce this remembrance .

On the other hand we were also reminded all week of just how global and interconnected we all are. Who among us will forget the global community that gathered at the computer terminals each day, sometimes queuing up two and three deep in the conference room, and lingering late into the night as we waited to get back on internet to read our email or check the news pages back home?

The global economy made its presence known in the language that we spoke throughout the conference. A new global English is emerging, one which is spoken with diverse cultural accents but serves the purposes of the global business community. This was the language of our conference. Other tongues were heard, but English is our commonality. We need to return to our reflections upon this, especially as it figures into issues of exclusion and access to knowledge and power.

Local immersions have become over the past four decades an integral part of international missions conferences. Several of you noted for me that they are a distinguishing feature of liberation and contextual theological methodologies, and for this reason have become integral to the IAMS experience. One among you, when I asked why the immersion was important, answered: “If we don’t go out and see something of the local context, why bother to come here? We might as well hold the conference anywhere.”

The immersion experience was in part an effort to frame our global missiological musings within a local missiological context. In doing so it reverses to some extent the normal practices of scholarship which often seek to frame the local within a wider global or universal (methodological) construction.

A portion of our exposure engaged us in face to face meetings (I don’t know if I would call them dialogue) in Islamic institutions of higher education. I was struck during this experience by the manner in which Islamicization was offered to us self-consciously as an alternative globalizing

narrative or framework, a meta-narrative that challenges and yet is closely related to the meta-narratives of both Christianization and globalization.

The effects of this encounter, and the subsequent realization that there was much more going on in both face to face meetings that took place that day reverberated into Tuesday. The realization that political tensions in this region of the world, and in Malaysia in particular, might be greater than they appear to be on the surface seemed to grow through the early part of the week. The effects of our presence here, as Christian missiologists in an officially Islamic nation, seems to me to be something that we have not yet understood fully. I fear it will fall to those who are left behind to continue their work in this place after the rest of us are gone to do so.

Throughout the week I heard the conference searching for the right tone for our approach to Islam, as well as to the other religions of the world that are prominent in our context here. I found unresolved the tensions that exist among evangelization, dialogue, witness and presence as being the primary task of Christian missions, or between models of pluralism versus exclusiveness concerning salvation. I don't know if we came any closer to resolving some of these questions, but we did raise them again to be considered.

Islamicization was one of the meta-narratives of the contemporary global context that we encountered here this week. The other that we encountered through the week was that of globalization. As I was walking into the KLCC mall last Monday, I was met by another member of the conference who was already coming out. "It's just a MALL!" he exclaimed with what appeared to be a bit of shock. It almost sounded to me as if he felt betrayed, as if he was expecting a local encounter but met instead the global economy.

What seemed to me to remain inadequately reflected upon during the week was the degree to which globalization is a local cultural reality here in Malaysia and elsewhere throughout the world; and the degree to which it has become the medium of global theological gatherings such as ours. The mall we visited is a Malaysian cultural reality, even if it is at the same time a local expression of a global cultural phenomenon. We encountered the culture of globalization in its local Malaysian cultural form. But more than that, we have been fully immersed in the culture of globalization all week. This is a Regency Hotel, owned by a U.S. corporation. As I sat here during the week looking at the screen in front of us, I could not help but see the word "Regency" lodged like an icon just beneath each speaker, with images of the persons sitting on the front row reflected back between the letters of the brass plate. Likewise our representations of culture, purpose, identity and mission are often found in the reflecting mirrors of globalization and economy.

Globalization is a hyper-culture, functioning something like a hypertext transfer protocol (http) on the internet. We can easily take it for granted that it has facilitated our gathering. The fact that English has become the near-exclusive language in which we work is directly related to the dominance of American business throughout the world today. I don't have any suggestions for how we respond to this challenge, but I think we ought to do more reflection as an Association upon the questions posed by globalization today; and upon the effects of our near-exclusive use of English as the medium of communication.

Missions, I heard several times during the week, is about crossing boundaries. Some boundaries are easier to cross than others. Culture-crossing work often seemed to me to go on with relative ease. Crossing those that have been forged by historical forces of injustice seemed to me, on the other hand, to be more difficult.

To this end we talked several times about the issues of mission and the poor, but without much depth of reflection. Issues of gender inequalities in mission and in mission studies seem to me to be likewise under-addressed in our work as an Association on the whole. I heard a great deal of sensitivity to these issues all week long. I thought at times that the problems that we heard addressed stem to a great extent from historical and ecclesiastical forces that lie far beyond our immediate location. I

commend the Association for its efforts to address these concerns and would hope that we continue in our commitment to do so forcefully.

One of the areas of great ambiguity that I encountered all week concerns the colonial heritage and the lingering impact of Western forms of thought and identity in missions. I thought this week that there is still much work to be done in decolonizing missions. And what about this issue of secularization? On the one hand, we criticized the West for its secularization, rationalism, and scientific world-view. On the other, some of us at least (and not all from the West) are attracted to the West for its institutions and wealth and leadership. Separating the wheat from the tares in what is the grand complex called “the West” is not easy. It has been a part of the project of post-colonial theory. I certainly think it is a task that mission studies must continue to pursue.

The theme of the conference – “Integrity of Mission in the Light of the Gospel” – was kept before our eyes all week, literally so by the raised letters on the wall behind us. The conference seemed to me in some ways to be a laboratory attempting to formulate the meaning of integrity. We worked on this especially in the morning sessions, with echoes of it lingered through the afternoons and evenings.

The 20th c. Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas once said that to study holiness one must first practice holiness. I gathered from this conference all week that for one to study missions with integrity, it helps that one has first practiced missions, or served as a missionary with integrity.

I found us working through the week on three inter-related levels of integrity, and often these were not entirely clear. For the sake of my own clarity, I identified them as such:

1. The integrity of missional practices and theology. One person called this integrity on the ground.
2. The integrity of mission studies as a discipline
3. The integrity of IAMS as an academic society

Integrity at the first level entails missional practices and mission practitioners. It was summed up for us one morning by four terms or phrases as honesty, comprehensiveness, fidelity to the heart of the Gospel, and relevance. The issue was forcefully placed on the agenda for us that same morning as a call to recognize the dignity of all persons.

Not all matters of integrity were noticed with equal clarity. In one of the morning testimonies in “Authentic Witness” the issue of churches and land ownership was raised. This is a lingering part of the colonial missionary heritage that clearly needs to be addressed at least in certain parts of the world. I did not hear much more about it during the week.

The other part of this level seems to me to entail the integrity of our theology. Integrity “refers to the church’s faithfulness to the content of the Gospel” one person said early in the week. A challenge was later raised: “we all take for granted that we know what ‘in the light of the Gospel means.’ ” Integrity means “being transformed by Christ” said someone else. But what does such transformation look like in practice? Is it social, structural, individual, or corporate? If we say yes to all of these, we still have not addressed questions of priority or of the particular character such transformation assumes in its various historical contexts.

Time and time again I heard integrity pointing away from the church and toward Jesus Christ, a theme that has been heard in mission studies for the better part of a century. But I also consistently heard something else. I heard articulated an effort to link mission to the church in a fresh way, and not just leave it at communicating the Gospel. I think this is significant. Over the past 50 years, due in part to the influence of the concept of *Missio dei*, mission theory has tended to move in the opposite direction,

away from a focus on the church and toward a focus on Christ. I wondered this week if a shift is not in the making.

“Mission begins in the church with the worshipping community,” one speaker said. For many of us here, the end of mission is church growth, be that understood in quantitative or qualitative terms. It seems to me that in light of the renewed appreciation for ecclesiology in missiology that was heard this week that we cannot escape asking not just about the integrity of the Gospel, but must ask about the integrity of the church as well in our endeavors at this level.

Here a number of things passed unsaid. We did not raise clearly enough the continuing problem of the disunity of the churches of the world, and the manner in which such disunity hampers the witness of the church.

In this regard I believe we missed an opportunity to make the connection again between unity and mission in the life of the churches worldwide. Most of you know that the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC was meeting this past week in Kuala Lumpur only 90 minutes away from us. It would have been symbolic at least for us to have at least brought greetings to one another’s gathering. Perhaps this is but one more indication of what some of us perceive to be a deeper crisis that is afflicting the ecumenical movement these days, and an indication of the degree to which efforts to reality unity have become divorced from efforts to realize the mission of the church.

I heard several times allusions to the notion that the church is to be evangelized by cultures or histories from outside of its self. Someone said that mission entails the conversion of those who are sent as well as the conversion of those to whom they are sent. During one of the plenary sessions someone noted that we are still looking for the contribution of first nation peoples to world Christianity. What are the ecclesiological implications of conceptualizing mission as two-way traffic? What does this have to say about the integrity of the Gospel?

At its second level the integrity of mission studies as a discipline comes into view. During the week much of the disciplinary discussions were relegated to the study group sessions. From the reports that I heard, and the conversations with many of you about what was accomplished in them, I think the study groups were among the most important aspects of the conference in this regard.

On the other hand, as an Association, questions of the nature of our common discipline seemed at times to befuddle us. It was interesting for me to watch the question play out the first day as we went outside the conference into a university setting, specifically to an Islamic university setting. Our general secretary twice had to introduce not only us as a body of scholars, but the discipline that our scholarly society seeks to promote, that of mission studies. Once he called it a conglomeration of disciplines, of theology, history, social sciences and more. As an academic field, mission studies is elusive and some would say still insufficiently defined. One of the purposes of IAMS is to provide professional academic credibility for its members. This is the reason for the concern to maintain the academic level required for membership. The heart of any academic discipline resides in the rigor and depth of its methods.

Several of you noted that while there was a rich and enriching discussion of methods in study groups, you found it missing in plenary sessions. I heard frustrations around the edges at times that people didn’t seem to be learning much that was new, or were not able to interact as much as they would have liked on a more scholarly intellectual level. At this second level where the question of the integrity of our intellectual methods comes into play we as an Association seemed to work best by breaking off into sub-themes and study groups where we can continue our work separately together.

It is interesting to me that when we engaged an outside intellectual partner questions of academic integrity and method rose immediately to the surface. At both ISTAC and at the International Islamic University of Malaysia the first questions that we asked had to do with methodology. We also addressed them in table conversations and elsewhere in relation to our various academic institutional

locations, and in discussion of our relation to other mission study societies. But again it was brought into view through our engagement with institutional structures outside the society. The energy and enthusiasm that poured out this morning in our two-hour session precisely on this subject tells me that there is a need for us to do more work on this as an Association.

What I heard expressed throughout the week was the need to integrate these two levels or dimensions: that of the integrity of missional *practices and theology* (reflection on missionary practices in light of the meaning of the Gospel), and that of the integrity of the *study* of missionary practices (intellectual methods).

Our desire is to be deeply spiritual and deeply academic at the same time. The challenge is how to do so.

Finally, the integrity of IAMS as a society: This I heard discussed in the business meetings, at tables in the dining rooms, and over beverages during the evenings.

It took place with a great deal of interpersonal interaction among you all. From attending this meeting I would be tempted to say that the ecumenical movement's efforts to realize the unity given to us in Christ has been achieved.

I heard an effort all week to balance tradition and innovation, although tradition seemed to me to win out more times than not. I heard people talk about the financial integrity of the organization in light of the differential in the global economy – this was behind Thursday's discussion of 2-tiered structure in corporate membership fees.

"One of the nice things about these meetings is that you can always find a kindred spirit" I heard someone say.

There was dissent, mainly regarding institutional structures and affairs, but the dissent did not override the friendships.

You all genuinely like one another. That is critical for maintaining the overall integrity of this association.

What I did not hear anyone explicitly say, but what I think is true, is that integrity at this level assures the Association has a future.

I look forward to seeing you all in Budapest in 3 or 4 years.

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