

## **Current Issues in Mission Practice**

Report on a Mission Study Group at the IAMS XIth International Conference, Port Dickson, Malaysia, 31 July – 7 August 2004

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### **Introduction**

The first objective of the International Association of Mission Studies is “to promote the scholarly study of theological, historical and *practical* questions related to the mission of the Church”. During the Xth IAMS international conference, held in Hammanskraal, South Africa, in 2000, some members met informally to discuss the possibility of giving greater attention to the third set of questions indicated in the first objective: the practical ones. An occasional exchange of emails over the following four years identified a number of themes which call for attention. This emerging agenda formed the basis for the Mission Study Group which met over four sessions at the XIth international conference held at Port Dickson, Malaysia, in August 2004. As well as giving attention to some of the particular themes which had been identified ahead of the conference, the Study Group was able to deepen the general question of the relation between mission study and mission practice.

### **Ways of Working Together**

Recognising that the international mission community has been quite divided over the past century, it becomes necessary to ask what are the most fruitful ways of working together? Felix Enogho grounded this topic in a recognition that mission is God’s and that there is therefore a theological imperative for those engaged in mission to act in a united, rather than fragmented, way. In practice, however, mission has more often been understood as the growth or expansion of our particular church or movement – an approach which invariably turns out to be divisive. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century Catholic, Conciliar, Evangelical and Pentecostal streams of mission engagement found it very difficult to go very far in responding to the imperative for unity. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the problem is compounded by the emergence of many new movements of Christian faith which tend to be disconnected from each other. A question which calls for further study is how “traditional” Western-based mission agencies and newer southern-based agencies can relate to each other to maximum effect.

### **Migration as an Avenue for Mission**

We are living today in a great age of migration, with diasporic communities emerging in many different parts of the world. In particular, it is noticeable today that religions, including new Christian movements such as Pentecostalism, are on the move from South to North. They form global intercontinental links and play a role in constructing diasporic identities. They challenge historical patterns and may contribute to the renewal of Christianity. Roswith Geldoff presented a shortened version of a paper which appears in full on the IAMS website on the subject of the African Christian diaspora in Europe.<sup>1</sup> She highlighted the religious and missional significance of the

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<sup>1</sup> Roswith Geldoff, “The African Christian Diaspora in Europe: Religious and Cultural Aspects”, [www.missionstudies.org](http://www.missionstudies.org)

“transatlantic cycle” between West Africa, the Caribbean, North America and Europe, noting the role of African spirituality in the emergence of Pentecostalism and its vibrant expression today at all points in the cycle. Most Africans, both at home and in diaspora, are living and working on the underside of the globalized economy and face social instability, unemployment, exclusion, want of cash and housing, AIDS and other life-threatening illnesses, violence and even war. In these circumstances they need a spirituality of resistance and it is this which Pentecostalism offers. Its oft-criticised “prosperity gospel”, when properly understood, indicates a fundamental decision to construe the world differently and to become the subject of one’s own destiny. It has application not only to the individual but to the entire social context. As Roswith Geldoff concluded: “A movement which, by the power of the Holy Spirit and in discipleship to Jesus, is non-violent, overcomes ethnic, cultural, social and doctrinal barriers, and encounters God in the *here and now*, has a tremendous potential to bring about peace to this polarised, restless, revengeful and unforgiving world, and to change ourselves and our communities into vessels of God’s grace. What is at stake is the recovery of the Gospel of Christ for the redemption of humankind at a time when everything seems ‘to fall apart’.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Antagonism and Reconciliation**

Widely reported in the Malaysian press at the time of the conference was an address by Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi to the World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order which happened to be meeting in Kuala Lumpur the week before the IAMS conference. The Prime Minister stressed the need for inter-faith harmony and reconciliation. A typical response was that of a correspondent to the *New Straits Times* who wrote: “We have seen that in every crisis it is the politicians who have championed a just and stable world order, while religious leaders have been full of empty rhetoric, if not mute. All of the killing is done in the absolute certainty that God wants it so. Where are the voices of inter-faith reconciliation in all this turmoil?”<sup>3</sup> Such questions provided the immediate background against which the role of Christian mission in antagonism and reconciliation was considered. There is an issue of integrity to be addressed. Is Christian mission a divisive force fomenting conflict in the world or is it able to live up to its claims that it stands for peace and reconciliation?

The Group agreed that the church is called to be actively engaged in reconciliation, following what Archbishop Desmond Tutu described as: “the difficult but ultimately rewarding path of destroying enemies by turning them into friends”.<sup>4</sup> A case study of how this could be achieved in practice was presented by Archbishop Thomas Menamparampil, reflecting on his own experience with the Kuki-Paite clashes in Manipur in 1997 and the Bodo-Adivasi conflict around Kokrajhar, Assam, India during 1996-97.<sup>5</sup> Lessons learned include the following:

- The peacemaker cannot afford to condemn either side. Rather genuine sympathy and understanding must be shown to both sides.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> N. Gangadharan, Letter “Commitment to Peace”, *New Straits Times*, 6 August 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, London: Rider, 1999, p. 138.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Menamparampil, “Becoming Peace-makers”, unpublished paper 2004.

- The peacemaker must be prepared to fail many times but must be determined not to give up. Persistence should be a particular characteristic of the Christian peacemaker who has theological resources to sustain hope.
- The peacemaker should recognise that long periods of frustration and failure might well have to be faced and should patiently await the moment of opportunity.
- It is often very useful to begin with senior and respected members of the communities involved, even if they are not directly engaged in the conflict, since they can exercise important influence as the process unfolds.
- When it comes to negotiations it is important for the antagonists themselves to converse. The role of the peacemaker is a facilitative one in the background – “doing things as though not doing them”.
- Most often it is only by means of compromise that a conflict is resolved so the peacemaker should be prepared to search for a workable compromise.
- The entire process must be bathed in prayer. For peace is the gift of God.

Through active engagement in the practice of peace-making the church can show its true credentials and demonstrate that it is not empty rhetoric when it claims that its witness is one of peace.

### **The Agency of Mission**

During the past two centuries much of the energy and organisation of Christian mission has revolved around the preparation and deployment of full-time professional missionaries. Stan Nussbaum’s presentation made it clear that until fairly recently the identity of the missionary was clearly distinct from that of the constituency which provided the support base. Today the line has become much more blurred as many people participate episodically in overseas mission. Many young people work as short-term volunteers on “the mission field”, seasoned professionals offer their skills for short periods on a recurrent basis, congregations organise groups to participate in mission projects overseas during their vacations, business people use overseas postings to share in the task of Christian witness in another country. These are not life-long career missionaries following the classical model but their active involvement in cross-cultural mission is a major component in their life story. To use Nussbaum’s phrase, there are now many “sort of” missionaries. Looking no further than the historic base of missions in the West, the question of agency has become much more complex than it once was.

When the question is asked within a global framework it becomes more complex still. Economic globalization and the migration needed to support it have introduced a vast army of people who move to a new context with Christian mission as a major part of their purpose. As the “centre of gravity” of Christianity has moved from north to south and from rich to poor, the nature of the missionary has changed. Rather than being a full-time, formally trained, fully equipped and fully salaried staff member of a well-organised Western agency, he or she is more likely to be a migrant worker or “tent-making” missionary working through networks of informal contacts and connections. A question to which the group returned at this point is how can the older model link effectively with the newer one? What is clear is that today cross-cultural mission is carried out by a wide variety of agents and the definition of “the missionary” calls for renewed attention.

## **Missiology Relating to Mission Practice**

A core question for the group is the need for good missiological thinking to be made accessible to mission practitioners. It is acknowledged that missiologists do not write with the aim of being inaccessible but, as in the case of any other highly developed discourse, there is the possibility that shorthand expressions and coded language refine the discussion for the benefit of the academicians but, in the process, inadvertently exclude the practitioner who is not initiated into the form of discourse being used. Mission executives and enablers then have the frustration of reading excellent journal articles which they know will not be read by practitioners to whom their insights are highly relevant. Ways of addressing this problem include:

- Providing short summaries giving the main thrust of erudite articles.
- Offering a practitioner's response to each academic article.
- Publishing more case studies which set missiological thought in narrative form.

Most important, however, is the challenge to missiology to “begin at sunset” (Gutierrez) as a matter of reflection on the mission engagement which has taken place in the heat of the day. Then, without sacrificing its academic integrity, it will have a grasp of the issues and be familiar with the language which are being used in mission practice. There needs to be constant two-way traffic between the action and the reflection. Missiology must arise from the mission engagement on the ground while mission engagement on the ground needs to be informed by the critical reflection offered by missiology. Identifying and seeking to overcome the obstacles which impede this continuous exchange is the major task to which the Group intends to apply itself.

### **Future Steps: Method and Content**

The Group will apply to become an IAMS Interest Group on “Missiology Relating to Mission Practice”. It will aim to keep clearly in focus the methodological question of how missiology can best be related to mission practice. Working with this general approach, the Group will aim, from time to time, to identify specific mission practice topics to which it will devote sustained attention.