

LISTENERS' REPORT

MEETING OF THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR MISSION STUDIES

August 19, 2012

Introduction

From August 15 to 19, 2012, some one hundred eighty women and men from almost every part of the world gathered together in Toronto, Canada—at Wycliffe College and the University of St. Michael's College in the beautiful university area of the city—to attend the Thirteenth General Assembly of the International Association For Mission Studies. We have been beautifully and wonderfully hosted by our Canadian sisters and brothers from local churches and schools. We have been graciously welcomed by both elders and young people from among Canada's First Nation Peoples. We have worshipped with lively and appropriate music and prayer. We have been served by the excellent organization of the IAMS Executive lead by President Jonathan Bonk. We have been nourished with delicious and abundant food. We have been stimulated and inspired by excellent presentations and exposure sites. We have been encouraged, challenged, and engaged in our dealings with one another. In sum, these have been memorable, holy days.

What follows is a report from a group of participants whom the organizers of the Conference asked to be "listeners" to what has taken place in these last four days. The group's members are Atola Lungkumer from India; Valentin Kozhuharov from Bulgaria; Susan Nganga from South Africa; Jacob Kavunkal from India, working in Australia; Pavol Bargar from the Czech Republic; and Stephen Bevans from the United States, who chaired the group and is the principal author of this report. The group met several times during the Conference and had lively and interesting meetings as we sorted out what we had heard and seen during the days of the Conference. We enjoyed being together, even though being part of the group meant doing extra work.

Our report has four parts, based on four questions that we asked ourselves at every meeting:

1. What were significant themes and issues that emerged during the conference?
2. What were the terms, themes, and issues that seemed to require further discussion and missiological reflection?
3. What were terms, themes and issues that seemed to lack consensus?
4. What were themes, issues and realities that were missing or not adequately dealt with at the Conference?

We will reflect on each of these questions in turn.

WHAT WERE THE SIGNIFICANT THEMES AND ISSUES THAT EMERGED DURING THE CONFERENCE?

Perhaps the strongest theme that emerged during the Conference—present in almost every one of the major presentations—was the strong link between the biblical narrative and the narratives and dramas of present-day migration. As Bible study leader Daniel Carroll Rodas put it eloquently, migration and diaspora thinking is not just a missiological trend but a theological imperative. It is fundamental to being Christian. Indeed, migration needs to be at the heart of our theological reflection. We believe in a God who has revealed Godself as a migrant God, who migrated to earth, as it were, to be incarnate among us, and was most likely at one point in his life an illegal alien in Egypt, and who sent the Spirit to push us beyond boundaries in mission and imagination as we live the Christian life as a pilgrim people. Whether in Genesis, or Leviticus, or Romans, or Exodus, or in the Gospels, migration takes a central place in biblical thinking, and should therefore be central in missiology—so much so that we became curious to know how other books, such as those in the Wisdom tradition, might contain wisdom for us as we care for migrants and equip them for mission.

Which leads us to highlight a second set of themes and issues that emerged during our time together. Migrants are not and should not be simply *objects* of our mission, hospitality, and pastoral care. They are also *agents* of mission, or as Jehu Hanciles has said, every migrant is a potential missionary. Migrants are not problems to be solved, but gifts to be received, challenged by, savored. A theme that emerged in many of the Conference talks—both in plenaries and in study groups—was the theme of *mutuality*. We should not *romanticize* migrants, as both Daniel Carroll Rodas and President Jon Bonk warned us, but we have as much to learn from their vulnerability, heroism, and strength as we have to share from our own safety, stability, and affluence. Just think of the African migrant who responded to Dan Groody's evangelizing testimony with "Yay, God!"

A third theme that emerged as we listened was what we might call an insistence on a missiology not only of theory but one of action—or better, of praxis. Jon Bonk's and Danny Carroll's insistence on not just *talking* about migration but getting to know and be friends with *migrants* was an early challenge that we hope has stayed with the entire assembly throughout the Conference. Many participants were deeply touched and inspired on our exposure trips on which they encountered migrants and refugees from various cultures in the world. Several of us in the listening group went to the nearby city of Kitchener, where we experienced the work of the Mennonite Coalition for Refugee Support and met Joe Mancini, founder of The Working Place. Joe spoke about how his organization utilized the "Pastoral Circle," a method of reflection that listens deeply to people's experience, engages in social analysis and moral reflection, and then plans for faithful and effective action. If migration is to be at the heart of missiology and theology, it should shape a theology that results in action.

Finally, a number of connected themes were heard to emerge as well, that we'll simply mention here. First, the role of language in working among and with migrants—the necessity to learn *their* language as well as teaching them ours, the

recognition of the power dynamics involved when the language of the host is being used. Second, the issue of the identity of migrants. Should they simply assimilate into another culture? Should they maintain their own cultural and ethnic identity? Does that risk isolation and ghettoization? Some of the complexity of this was illustrated in Dr. Dr. Okome's presentation on Saturday evening. Third, the effect of migration on indigenous peoples in areas into which migrants move. This is a major issue, for example, in North East India, in the Amazon region of Brazil, and certainly in many other areas of the world as well. Fourth, how immigration impacts on the lives of women, who make up, if not half, then a good proportion of the world's migrants.

WHAT WERE THE TERMS, THEMES, AND ISSUES THAT SEEMED TO REQUIRE FURTHER THEOLOGICAL AND MISSIOLOGICAL REFLECTION?

During the Conference a number of terms emerged—both in the plenaries and in the workshops—that we listeners thought should be mentioned as terms deserving further theological and missiological reflection. Not all the terms are brand new, and in fact some have been used regularly in missiological discourse in the recent past. Nevertheless, reflection on these terms might make up part of missiological agenda for the future.

Two of these terms or themes came from Dan Groody's presentation on Saturday evening, although Danny Carroll mentioned one of them as well on Thursday morning. Migration, said Danny and Dan both, is in our DNA, both biological and spiritual. Dan's story of his DNA test was striking, and his illustration of the migration of his family over the millennia from Africa through the Middle East through Central Europe to Ireland—not to mention the United States is amazingly thought-provoking. But, as adopted daughters and sons of a migrant God, migration is in our spiritual DNA as well, and this points to the fact that being in touch with today's migrants is to be in touch with the God who "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave," as Paul writes (Phil 2:7). All of this demands more reflection and discussion to fully grasp its importance.

Dan Groody's second striking phrase was that the incarnation was an illegal act. This certainly perked up many ears in the audience and we think calls theologians and missiologists to deeper and more careful reflection on what continues to be a scandalous, radical divine act. Mary's pregnancy was an illegal act within the context of her Jewish culture. Could God's becoming human be an illegal crossing of a human border? Does incarnation make all border crossings legal? As Dan said so clearly, and as Danny Carroll said earlier in the day, we need laws. They shape or moral imagination. But they are not God.

A third idea that one of our listening group heard in one of the study groups, but which was accented clearly in Dr. Okombe's presentation, was the ambiguous understanding of "home." For migrants, what is home? Is it where they came from? Is it where they are going—to make a new home? Is it the journey itself? Migration and migrants shake up our comfortable categories. We need to think about this more.

Our listening group heard other intriguing terms and phrases in the study groups. Should we speak not only of Pentecostal Christianity but also of *Pneumatic Christianity*? Would *extensio Dei* be a way better to speak of *Missio Dei*? Do we need to probe more deeply terms like “interculturality,” “over-indigenization,” and “catholicity”? These are all terms and ideas that definitely need further reflection and discussion in missiological circles.

WHAT ARE THE TERMS, THEMES, AND ISSUES ON WHICH WE HAVE NOT REACHED CONSENSUS?

Our listening group heard two items on which we thought missiology needs still to form a consensus. The first is something that was mentioned under the question of emerging themes and issues above, but still might deserve mention here. That is the question, heard by one of our listening groups, of whether the place of migration in mission is simply a fad, one that will occupy us for a while, but then one from which we will move away in subsequent years. Or is it really as central and formative of missiological thinking as some speakers during the Conference have claimed? Will it make its impact on missiology, like issues of social justice and inculturation, and then take its place within a number of standard themes in missiology? Or will it continue to hold a central place in theology’s and missiology’s thinking? The jury is still out.

Secondly, in the World Christianity study group there was quite a discussion about the concept of World Christianity itself. Should we rather speak of Global Christianity? Or is this term too tainted with colonial overtones and colonial discourse? Should we instead speak of “intercultural theology” and scrap both World Christianity and Global Christianity as viable terms? Again, it seems the jury is still out.

WHAT WERE THEMES, ISSUES AND REALITIES THAT WERE NOT ADEQUATELY DEALT WITH IN THE CONFERENCE?

Finally, our group thought it might be appropriate to mention several themes, issues and realities that they did not hear. Naturally, no one conference can do justice to all the complexities involved in the topic of migration, human displacement, and the Good News, especially one of only four days. Still, the group thought it would be useful to mention some things in particular that should have been discussed or recognized that were not. We do this not in a condemnatory or “gotcha” way, but as a constructive critique and as a guide for further reflection. This has been a very fine Conference, with very fine papers and discussions. But some topics and realities would have made it even more comprehensive.

We have heard from Sierra Leonian migrant Jeho Hanciles, and Nigerian migrant Dr. Okome, but we have not heard the voices of poorer migrants and refugees from various parts of the world. Some of us did encounter migrants, refugees, or displaced persons on our exposure trips, but perhaps the plenaries

would have been more enriched had we heard the voices of the poor that we have talked so much about.

At least one person mentioned that he was saddened by the lack of Latin American presence at the Conference. Could anything be done to ensure a greater presence at our next Assembly in 2016?

While there were a good number of Asian participants, it is regrettable that there was no presenter in a plenary session that dealt with Asian migration, in particular issues around migrant workers from the Philippines and Indonesia in so many parts of the world.

The group noted that very little has been said about what is called the “feminization of migration” in so many parts of the world. This topic leads to a number of related topics like the oppression of women domestic workers or the rampant human trafficking that is going on all over the world.

Also missing, except in one of the Study Groups, was a sense of the ecological issues attending migration on so many fronts.

One of our group members also wondered if issues regarding the pastoral care of migrants was adequately covered. Another wondered whether issues around the questions of assimilation or integration of migrants were adequately discussed.

One person mentioned in the discussion following this report when it was read to the assembly that, while we had done a fairly good job in attending to two of the terms in the Conference’s title—migration and human displacement—we did not focus all that much on the “Good News.”

CONCLUSION

On the balance, however, our listening group unanimously concluded that this fifteenth IAMS General Assembly was an extremely successful event. Our sense, as we have kept our ears to the ground, is that most participants have come away both inspired and refreshed. There have been so many opportunities for reflection, for sharing, for conversation that this Assembly will indeed be a memorable event. Once more, our thanks go to all those who have made this Assembly possible, especially our president Jonathan Bonk and the 2008-2012 Executive. Our sense is that the future is bright for IAMS, and we look forward to meeting again in 2016.

Stephen Bevans, Chair
Pavol Bargar
Jacob Kavunkal
Valentin Kozuharov
Susan Nganga
Atola Lungkumer