

Presentation of the Listening Committee for the IAMS Seoul Conference 2016

Context

- Context cannot be separated from the content/theme of the conference—we reflect on the *content* and *theme* of the conference *in context* as a multi-cultural academic community. Reflected upon experience, otherwise known as experiential learning, is an important part of knowledge. We believe it is very important that we recognize this as a unique and important part of the IAMS conference, and we cannot undervalue the reflections that can emerge from this intertwining of context and content.
- This has been a fascinating context for multi-dimensional learning: Korea has been a thriving center of Christianity and mission sending force, but we have also heard another side—is Korean Christianity in crisis? We have also see the socio-political side in viewing the economic wealth of South Korea and seeing the role of the military in its position with North Korea, and the struggles of North Korean defectors. And we have also been privileged to see some of the artistic culture of Korea through song.
- In response to the plenary speaker of the ‘crisis of Christianity’ in South Korea, how can one consider the implications of a ‘fast bloom’ and ‘withering’ of Christianity in terms of conversion and transformation? Is the parable of the sower relevant as a Biblical reflection of this? What makes for a vital Christianity?
- This context allows us insights and also helps us reflects on our own research and contexts—much of this reflecting I think has been in the ‘gaps’ as people are processing their exposure trip experience. I think we began to see that a little more last night, as people were using the Korean context to reflect on their own history and current situation. I was doing that in the modern history museum in Korea...to think about how Koreans remember and speak about their war in comparison to the countries of former Yugoslavia where I work.
- We observed that there is a hope for reunification set against the reality of the armed border and the prejudice against North Korean defectors. Can this be seen as a metaphor for our church’s vision of the Kingdom of God but our often unbridgeable borders and disdain for the ‘other?’

Consensus

- This conference seems to emphasize the *conversion of the church* over the *conversion of the ‘other.’* Although this is an interesting observation, perhaps even more intriguing is the question raised in the final plenary. Why? What does this emphasis tell us? Certainly, if this conference had happened 100 years ago with this very same theme, the approaches and focus would certainly have been very different. So is this a shift in missiological focus? Something specific from this context? Is it the result

of questions churches are asking in various contexts? Or is a reflection of certain contexts' hesitation to speak about conversion of the 'other?'

- Related to the conversion of the church was the theme of the multi-directional flow of conversion through ongoing encounters—this theme appeared in the plenary Biblical studies, theological, and sociological papers presented
- Spirituality is essential and foundational to missiology—without it becomes a dried husk really, lacking in power.
- Relationship of disciplines to conversion or missiology themes---the structure of the conference highlighted this, but how do we bring them together?

Creative Tensions

In many presentations and conversations we heard expressed some anomalies, paradoxes or creative tensions that seem to be integral to theology – and in particular to the practice of Christian mission.

- Christine Lienemann-Perrin showed us how historically processes of conversion have taken Christianity in different directions, over numerous frontiers, to produce an almost bewildering variety of cultural, theological and political expressions. So what connects these 'Christianities' or holds them together? We experienced in this conference that most of us see this reality not as a threat but as a tension inherent to the Christian movement, which (as Joel Robbins reminded us) is a religion of "secondarity", which never tries to create a "total society but keeps on producing "duplex" cultural formations where traditional elements are "troped" into the Christian life and where there is an on-going tension around values and practices, a built-in cultural criticism. We sensed that the participants in the conference saw this not as a danger but as a challenge we need to face together – as an opportunity for mutual growth and learning and for ongoing 'conversion.'
- In many presentations we heard and felt the ongoing interaction between theory and practice, the need to move back and forth between the Bible, Christian doctrine, notions of mission Dei and concrete expressions, embodiments in specific contexts. We heard missiology being practiced as critical and creative reflection on practices and projects of mission – aimed at the transformation and renewal of the church, for the sake of more credible and authentic mission. We were happy to be part of a conference in which a high academic standard *in reflecting on* experiences and practices of mission did not detract from a clear commitment to make a difference to a divided, broken and suffering world, even though there were different emphases – and sometimes tensions – between these two dimensions. We agreed, though, that the quantity of papers does not guarantee academic excellence, nor does it guarantee transformative learning that pushes and challenges us into creative new ways of thinking.

- In our exposure to South Korean mega-churches and numerically smaller churches, we encountered that other inherent Christian paradox, between strength and weakness. We sensed the impressive power of the mega-churches, harboring some inherent weaknesses – and the vulnerable weakness of some small Christian communities, radiating amazing strength and courage. And we wondered whether it was possible for us to affirm both these manifestations of God’s mission, holding these two ‘ways’ together in creative tension?
- Do we reflect our emerging missiologies in the structure and format of our conferences and presentations? How is content, form, and experience related? How can the tensions propel us into deeper learning? People coming to IAMS to see current themes in missiology, but also the experience of IAMS-in-context coming to fresh reflections upon those themes.
- In exploring transformation in individuals, churches, cultures and societies, we heard participants employ different tools and perspectives, and we sensed the tension (mostly creative) between these different ways of perceiving or constructing reality, acknowledging the various factors at work in conversion and the need to use different disciplines to understand if and how people and communities are transformed. But we did occasionally hear participants wonder whether rigidly methodological and systematic ways of discussing conversion could keep conversion ‘too distant’ or make our study of it too cognitive?

Contestations

During the course of the conference we not only sensed some of the tensions inherent to Christian mission and missiology; we also experienced some contestations and differences of opinion between colleagues, as is to be expected in an academic conference.

- We heard colleagues correcting each other, giving additional information on historical events or personalities;
- We heard colleagues complementing each other, pointing out other dimensions of an issue, which make it more complex, more interesting;
- We heard colleagues questioning each other’s presentations, probing to get deeper into an issue;
- We heard and saw different theological traditions affirmed side by side, not contested or opposed, but respected, while experiencing (and sometimes suffering) the confessional diversity and even division of the Christian movement. In this regard we experienced the truth of what Joel Robbins said: “Other ways of life can serve as a mirror into our being.”
- We also heard some participants ask: Are we giving sufficient attention to the question how Christianity is changed as it interacts with culture, not just the way cultures change in contact with the Christian message?
- In the conference we also experienced the painful reality of social, economic, gender, racial and political contestations in society around us and even amongst us. One participant expressed this painful reality by saying: “One person’s liberator is another’s oppressor.”

Gaps and Silences

As a group, the Listeners spent a considerable amount of time talking about gaps. Gaps can prove to be fertile spaces: throughout the past week, we have been connecting with one another in breaks, over meals, over cups of coffee in town, and in our dormitory hallways. These times of discussion and relationship building are often at least as important for our learning as the formal sessions.

But other gaps are less productive: the elements that were missing. As listeners, we tried to identify some of these less life-giving gaps. It's quite a challenge: listening for silences. Silences in terms of methodological perspectives neglected, topics omitted from consideration, questions left unasked, and voices that could not contribute to our conversations. No gathering can include everything, and the past several days have included a wonderful variety of perspectives. But still, a few significant absences emerged.

Topics: One category of silences we identified relates to *topics*. We want to highlight some questions left unasked, or at least insufficiently considered.

- First, did we speak enough about the conversion of structures and society in addition to the conversion of cultures and individuals? How do these structures facilitate or prevent transformation?
- Second, in our opening session Thursday evening, Mika helpfully signaled the diverse ways we use terms like conversion, transformation, religion, and missiology. Have we grappled sufficiently with the implications of the different ways we understand conversions and transformations?
- Third, in which ways have we been constrained or held captive by the conventions of academia, our conference schedule, or the geography of our conference venue? And how might this be symbolic of the ways in which the church becomes entangled in social structures?
- Fourth, what missiological issues on the margins have not been discussed here? To name just a few that have popped up in our conversations: What of migration, ecology, or the patronage systems that marginalize too many people in our academic systems and the broader world. These and other issues have been dancing around the edges of a number of our talks...but have we unpacked them enough with honesty and clarity?

Voices: Alongside these underrepresented topics, there have been underrepresented *voices*—voices who might have helped us to air these and other unasked questions.

- First, we asked who has been *absent*? This has been a rich gathering, drawing together voices from around the world, and numerous Christian traditions. But some areas, especially Latin America, are underrepresented here. And other regions, like Asia, are unevenly represented. Similarly, we have been privileged to have a number of our Korean sisters and brothers join us as the past week as conversation

partners. Still, a number of people to whom we spoke communicated that our conversations would have benefitted had other portions of the church in Korea been more robustly present here: such as Minjung voices, Korean Catholics, or the voices of the newly converted. Our representation has shaped the character of our conversations.

- We also reflected on what voices have been *inaudible*. We talk about things like “mission from the margins,” yet it is difficult to practice this within our conference structures. Plenary speakers tend to be well-respected church leaders and academics—and for good reasons. And in similar ways, study group paper presentations seek to bring together high-quality, engaging papers to be delivered. As Listeners, we found ourselves asking, though: what might less polished—or *differently* polished—voices from the margins have contributed? And have we done enough to cultivate an environment in our study groups that encourages all voices with valuable insights to be heard? We want to invite everyone to reflect: where are the still, small voices in our midst?

Community

- First of all, many of you have expressed your deep appreciation for the Korean welcome, hospitality and service to the IAMS. Along with the hosting committee, many volunteers who made themselves available at every corner of the conference certainly created and built up the conference dynamic.
- Second of all, although many parts of the world are still missing and we do pray to be connected with them in the next assembly, there is still a wide diversity represented here whose voices have been carefully heard and responded to. Also, with the amount of the interest groups suggestions as well as an increasing number of participants from the younger generation in comparison with the previous assembly, IAMS seems to be a community growing in vitality.
- Finally, participants have expressed their need for more space and time for communal learning encounters through which they can come to “new horizons’ of missiology. Though learning does take place in isolation as well and some of us may prefer such a learning mode, more intentionally designed communal and reflective learning opportunities may help IAMS grow as a learning community. Having small learning groups that “travel” the conference together for mutual interaction and engagement, for example, will certainly build up a multi-cultural community such as IAMS.

Conversions

- We have discussed how conversions and transformations are mutually interdependent and that it was an ongoing process — we reflected upon this within Biblical, theological, and historical realms in our various study groups.
- The first idea I want to our recollection is the Nature of Conversion itself:
 - In the way we can conceive of conversion, we were able to appreciate the *multiplicity and diverse natures of conversions*. Several polarities were identified: the individual and the community, Church and society, polarities even within the range of denominational diversities and diversities of sizes: mega-church and small church.
 - The polarities that were discussed brought to the center, “**me**” as an individual (I am a sinner, but with a greater savior!) but at the same time, brought **systems and the structures** we have built into focus as also being sinful.
 - We are often tempted to see the need for conversion of those out there! But a theme that repeatedly returned more than once in this conference has been how we are in need of transformation.
- What are we converting from? and what we are converting to? . . . as we continue to move along life’s path in relationship with others
 - In short, what marks it as Christian conversion? . . . is there a convergence of a location towards which we move both as individuals and also in terms of cultural change?
- We also addressed the question of “How?” of conversion and transformation:
 - We talked about pre-evangelistic efforts by working on improving the “happiness-index” of people, to themes to align our methodologies in the image of God’s economic activity through the guidance of the Holy Spirit . . .
 - We talked about entering into and moving deep into someone else’s space . . . converting to the other in order to see the other convert. First conversion is you resonating Paul’s “becoming all things to all men so that by all means we might save some.”
 - One prophetic voice said: and I quote, “If the defectors do not see self-emptying love in the church, they will abandon the church just as they had to abandon the doctrine of North Korea.” That's powerful!
 - We had opportunities to notice those deep incarnational model instanced: when a pastor leaves the mega-church and its comforts and privileges to go and start a small community church, which is nearer to the needy.

- Finally, for us as IAMS members, it is great to recall *where* these transformations and life-changing events happened:
 - It was fascinating to learn that these transformations are tied into community we find ourselves in: how we experience each other, and even in this conference through our interactions.
 - We are transformed through the one-on-one conversations we had with each other and also through our group conversations.
 - Conversion and transformation during the exposure trips (Think of the Pakistani and the Indian – hanging out together during the exposure trip! It would never happen otherwise.)
 - But more transformations happened while we exposed ourselves to stories-in-context within Korean church community. This perhaps has something to say about the importance of experiential learning and reflection and for our pedagogy, even as we carry it back with us to our schools or institutions.
 - Another theme that stood out was that — God works through outsiders for the conversion of the church . . . and this is always humbling wherever we can recognize it. It’s like handing a Bible back to us.
 - But really this is the heart of the matter: that while we seek transformation of cultures and societies, God is at work in us for a conversion *ad intra*: calling us to a genuine faith, to practice integrity, to practice justice in societies, to observe solidarity with the marginalized, show mercy toward the weak, and to always practice humility.
 - How can we as IAMS be transformed? We were repeatedly called to be aware of how easily we’re prone to self-deception– yes, including the smartest of us, perhaps, especially the smartest among us, when we think about mission and conversion, and who needs it . . . the last words as prof. Prof. Elsa Thomas was that, we have to pray!

Conclusion

In the last seven days we gathered here at the hilltop of the campus of the Presbyterian University in Seoul South Korea. We were engaged in critical and creative reflection on Conversion and Transformation in Christian mission. From all continents and various countries of the North, South, West and East we were deeply involved in listening and engaging one another on what Conversion and Transformation mean today in our various contexts.

Today after visiting here for the past seven days as we descend this hill going into different directions we are preoccupied by new missiological insights, understandings, challenges, ideas and concerns that came from various plenary and group presentations. We have been more challenged to relook our context and interrogate our previous assumptions of conversion and transformation in Christian mission. Some of crucial questions we are taking home are:

- How far have we been challenged to convert and transform by being at this 14th IAMS conference?

- How far are we open as academic and mission practitioners to listen and learn from the other in our search for authentic encounter with God as he reveals and appears to us from various cultures and contexts?
- Have we been enabled to integrate rigorous academic engagement while empowering reflective lived experience that transforms the world?
- Are we able to discern God-in-others in poverty, in the margins and in squalor conditions and yet continue with our excellent academic engagement without paralyzing recapitulation and compromise?
- How are we discovering and appreciating Christ among us, appearing in different forms as he calls us to conversion and transformation?
- Who, after these seven days do we say is Christ is?

No single culture can 'contain' the fullness of God and have its monopoly. Opening up for further learning and discovering Christ in others is the only way we can enrich our conversion experience.

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