

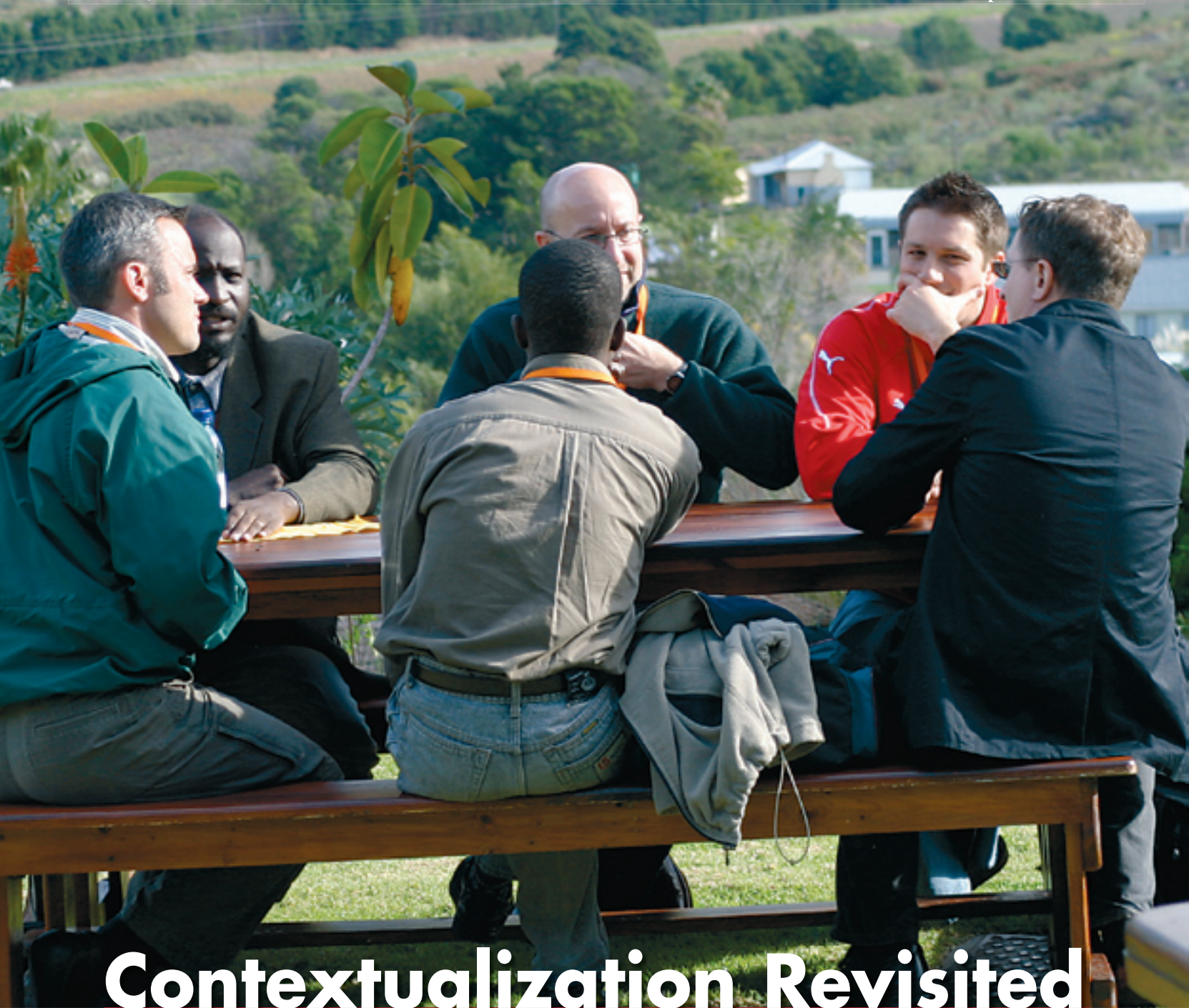
Connections

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A GLOBAL WRITERS' ROUNDTABLE SPEAKING INTO
THE CHALLENGES OF WORLD MISSION TODAY

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Contextualization Revisited


A Global and Missional Perspective

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From the heart and mind of the editor



William D. Taylor, Editor

Welcome to the thoughtful journal, grappling with the ongoing challenge of contextualization. Let's try to define this complex term, contextualization. But to do it justice, I offer four as broad brush-strokes on a challenging canvas.

Mark Young, co-convener of the MC task force on contextualization, says it's "The process of reformulating and communicating (behaviorally, verbally, institutionally, etc.) the truths of Scripture according to the cultural patterns of a given context."

Latin American theologian, Emilio Antonio Núñez, writes: "Contextualization is, generally speaking, the effort to make relevant the meaning of the biblical text to our contemporary social context. It is in a sense the transculturalization of the text from the times of the biblical writers to our own times. The word *contextualization* can suggest to us the content, context, and communication of our message to contemporary people.

Veteran Latin American theologian, René Padilla, defines it as "Transposing the Message from its original historical context into the context of present day readers so as to produce the same kind of impact on their lives as it did on the original hearers or readers."

Another veteran, New Zealander, Bruce Nicholls says it's "The translation of the unchanging Gospel of the Kingdom into verbal forms meaningful to the peoples in their separate culture and within their particular existential situations."

Perhaps the best way for the term to take root is simply to release the writers of this issue to develop the theme: missiological and contemporary; practical and relevant from colleagues who lead key missional networks or agencies around the world.

But here's a different humorous perspective, given to me by an Aussie friend, a crazy attempt to contextualize the story of God

as it confuses the stories. Preach it, as I have!

"My favorite parable is about the good Samaritan. You see, there was this dude who had to go from Jerusalem down to Jericho, and on the way he fell among thieves, and the thorns grew up around him and choked the poor man, who didn't have any money. But lo and behold, along came the Queen of Sheba, who gave him, that's right, gave him, a 1000 talents of gold and a hundred changes of raiment. And he got a chariot and drove furiously. As he

was speeding along under a big sycamore tree, his hair got caught on a branch and left him hanging from it. And he hung there many days and many nights, and ravens brought him food to eat and water to drink. Then one night, while he was hanging there asleep, his wife Delilah came along and cut off his hair and the poor man fell on stony ground. And it began to rain, and it rained for 40 days and 40 nights, and he hid himself in a cave until the rain stopped. But

when he left the cave he met a wife who said, "Come and have tea with me." But he said, "No, I can't. I have married a wife and cannot come." So the man went out into the highways and byways and compelled the passers-by to come into tea. He went on until he came to Jerusalem. When he got there, he saw Queen Jezebel sitting high up in the window, and he cried out, "Throw her down" and they threw her down. Again he cried, "Throw her down some more". And they threw her down 70 times 70 and of the remains they picked up twelve baskets. Not then I ask you all this: Whose wife do you think she'll be in the resurrection?"

Profitable and provocative reading for you.

William Taylor is Ambassador at large of the WEA and editor of *Connections*. Born in Latin America, he and his wife, Yvonne, served for 17 years before a move to the USA. He is the father of three adult GenXers born in Guatemala.



Living

From my corner...



Bertil Ekström
Executive Director

“Did you bring the ties?” was the first question the Tikuna leader asked me as soon as he saw me in the boat entering the small harbour in the Santo Antonio village. Renamed Filadelfia due to a majority of believers in Jesus, the village is located on the shore of the upper part of the Amazon River, the Solimões. The Tikuna is one of the largest indigenous tribes in the Amazon region living alongside the rivers in the borderlands of Brazil and Peru.

The Tikuna were contacted for the first time by missionaries in the 1930's and several mission organisations have been working among them since then. Our denomination got involved in 1980 when they already had their own churches and autochthonous leadership. My visit in 1986 was to evaluate a school project and discuss the start of theological training for the leaders.

According to the Tikuna pastors, the ties had been promised by a colleague from my own church, and were, as they saw it, a necessary accessory for church ministers. Wearing shorts, t-shirts and being barefoot, the

ties on their necks were a sad remembrance of ecclesiastical rules in the West and a screaming testimony to the lack of contextualization by the missions.

No, I did not bring new ties. I did not even have my own with me. It was over 40 degrees Celsius and the less you wear the better. It took a couple of hours to explain my failure in fulfilling the promises made, but it also brought opportunity for an interesting discussion about spiritual authority and ways of showing their position of responsibility for the churches.

Later the same day, one of the elders asked me about dancing and the use of their traditional instruments. It was a releasing and wonderful service that evening when they used their drums and danced, worshipping the Lord.

Contextualisation has been one of the main challenges in missionary work. Not just to adapt to local and national customs and religious expressions, but to do it knowing the beliefs and the worldview behind them and, at the same time, respecting biblical principles. Hrangkhuma, an Indian missiologist, gives, in the case of India, five negative results of what he calls “the missionaries’ failure to incarnate.”

- A failure to communicate the gospel at the deepest level through not knowing the worldview of the Indians;
- The changes imposed on the

receiving people, rejecting the indigenous culture;

- Missionaries not contextualising their theological teaching and not understanding that their own theology was conditioned by their culture of origin;
- The formation of “exotic” churches as almost exact copies of denominational churches in their homelands; and,
- The formation of a top-down leadership according to the model practised by the missionaries.¹

Paul Hiebert’s “critical contextualization”² is certainly helpful here, searching for a full respect for the receiving culture without neglecting the principles in the Word of God and letting these principles critically evaluate cultural expressions, both in the sending and in the receiving contexts.

This issue of *Connections* is a contribution to the relevant discussion on mission and contextualization. Looking to the

different aspects that involve this theme and the way we have acted many times in our mission history, there are reasons for us to be both humble and courageous. Issues go much deeper than wearing ties. On the other hand, they are, in the case of the Tikuna, flagrant examples of our need for God’s grace. <<

Endnotes

- 1 F. Hrangkhuma, *Christianity in India: Search for Liberation and Identity*, (Pune, India: ISPCK 1998), 318-322
- 2 P. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1995), 171-192

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Mozambique

In my attic, there is a pigtail: a long black plait of hair, attached to a Chinese skull cap, such as scholars and many others wore in late 19th century China. I do not know the name of the person who wore it, though I do know he was a missionary with the China Inland Mission.

Rainbow faith

authentic discipleship in global perspective

Every now and then I hold the cap and pigtail in my hands, and remember my forebears who carried the gospel with such passion (literal suffering as well as commitment) to the interior of a vast, and even then vastly populated, land. And, as I remember, I also remember *why* that anonymous man chose to wear Chinese dress, despite being despised and taunted for it by most of his own countrymen. He did it to identify with the people he longed to reach with the gospel, and to show respect for their culture. I honour him, this man unknown to me, but known to God and a brother in Christ.

As I write, I have beside me a reproduction of an etching – a detailed line drawing from before the days of photography – originally printed in a missionary magazine in the late 1860s. In the picture, the King of Yoruba in Nigeria, surrounded by hundreds of his subjects, welcomes three missionaries recently arrived from Scotland. The foreigners, two men and a woman, are dressed in full western attire: long frock-coats, trousers and hats for the men, and floor-length heavy dress, shawl and bonnet for the woman.

It's hard not to smile: it looks so exasperatingly silly. More seriously, it perhaps suggests a complete lack of adaptation to another culture, with all the likely failure in gospel contextualization that goes with it. And yet, these, too, I honour. They were part of a brave procession of men and women who knew full well as they left their homes that they were not likely to survive more than a year or two at most in 'the white man's graveyard', yet even so believed the cause of the

gospel more urgent and more precious than their own lives.

The history of the church in its mission is full of the good and the bad, the absurd and the tragic, the awful and the inspiring. As fallen human beings, our motives are rarely pure, and, whoever we are and of whichever generation or culture, our ministry will bear all the ambiguities of our humanity. Even though redeemed, we are still not perfected!

Because it is very fashionable to dismiss much of the modern Protestant mission movement, since the early 19th century, as cultural and/or political imperialism, and therefore harmful, we can easily lose sight of God's amazing grace in choosing to use and work through flawed human beings and all the peculiarities of history. Yes, it is easy to spot many things which should have been done differently. But we need also to honour those who gave themselves in the cause of bringing the gospel to unreached and unevangelised people, often at tremendous cost. We need also to recognise that it is always easier to see the splinter in another's eye than the log in our own, as our Lord so graphically put it. How discerning are we about how we are doing today? Nor is this a western problem, though it is that. I also observe that many in the exciting, God-birthing new mission movements from Africa, Asia and Latin America, equally do not find it easy to contextualize, but assume that what they have been familiar with is equally transferable to their new setting.

In other words, contextualization is a challenge to us all.

As old as the human race

Although the word 'contextualization' is modern, the practice is as old as the human race. In the Old Testament, over the centuries God's people had to work out what authentic discipleship looked like in pilgrimage or settledness, in servitude or freedom, in exile or in homeland. In the midst of many contexts and cultures, what did faith and obedience consist in? How could they display the distinctiveness of their calling and of their message, and the uniqueness of the God whose they were? Of course, over and over again they failed, or wrongly slipped into cultural legalisms. But on the other hand over and over again they were renewed through the grace of God, and, as Hebrews 11 celebrates, there are many shining examples of men and women of faith.



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The New Testament illustrates the same journey of faith, though now wonderfully in the transforming light of the life, death and resurrection, and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. Repeatedly, the challenge is the same as it always was: how to live in faith, obedience and authentic discipleship, in which ever setting the sovereign Lord has given us. Character, word and deed, personally and in community, must all bear witness to the one and only living God, so that the community of believers becomes a visual aid and shining beacon of light, communicating God's truth to the world and living a life of worship to God himself. You could be Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, young or old, and live in Jerusalem or Corinth or anywhere else, but you would have a visible, audible DNA in common, alongside all the enriching, complementary particularities.

It was the particularities that were to cause so much trouble down through the centuries. We all have an inbuilt tendency to reject or be suspicious of those who are different from ourselves. Difference can be unsettling and threatening. It challenges our security in our own identity. And, since Genesis 3, the consequence of fallenness is the constant pattern of the more powerful

imposing their will upon the weaker. At the same time, we are not very skilled at being able to critique our own cultures, and it's easy to have blind spots about values, beliefs and behaviour with which we are familiar and comfortable but which in some way or another are not compatible with biblical norms.

Painfully, as we study church and mission history, we see repeatedly the distortion that comes when the gospel is compromised by being linked to political, economic, military or cultural power. Sadly, the same is true of ecclesiastical power, especially where that power is bound up with all the others. Further, conquering powers rarely show respect for, or real understanding of, the cultures to which they come. Even within the church, from early centuries, bitter splits occurred between those streams of the Christian community whose expression and understanding of their faith differed largely because of different cultures: hence, for example, the violent rupture between the Greek and Latin parts of the church, which was quite as much to do with culture and struggling for power as it was to do with theology.

At the same time, church and mission history is also mercifully lit up with examples

of fine pioneers and groups who contextualized their precious message with sensitivity and creativity. The Nestorians and later the Jesuits in China; the Celtic missions in north western Europe; the Moravians; William Carey and his friends in Bengal: these and many more exemplify great respect for the cultures to which they came, a desire to share the gospel in terms that made sense to their particular audience, a willingness to learn the language and live long-term alongside and among the people they wished to reach, and flexibility in thinking what the church might need to look like in this particular setting. This is all the more remarkable in that these people would rarely if ever have encountered people much different from themselves before setting out on their missionary journeys..

By the time we come to the past two centuries, alongside so much that was flawed, we also find ample evidence of careful study of particular cultures, and much thoughtfulness about appropriate contextualization to meet the challenge of an alien religion, different thought forms, different customs and values and social organisation. Yes, there are plenty of infuriating examples of totally inappropriate western church buildings replicated in some tropical setting, or of pipe organs

exported to Africa, or of hymns extolling the beauties of the snow in a place where the temperature rarely drops below 90 degrees Fahrenheit. But equally there are plenty of examples of early converts being encouraged to develop their own authentic patterns of worship in their own language and cultural idioms, and being helped to face up to the particular issues in their context which would be incompatible with following Christ.

The contemporary challenge

Why has contextualization become such a pressing – and contentious – issue at the present time, both in the west/north and in the global south? The reasons may be different in different places and among different communities, but there seem to be some widespread issues.



Asian lady

...in the west and north

In the west/north, in most places (though not all) the church is declining, and there is a widespread loss of confidence in the gospel and in the uniqueness of Christ in the face of other world religions. Even evangelicals are caught up in this. We have lost our Reformation understanding of truth, and with it the authority of Scripture is undermined. With the collapse of Christendom, not only has the church largely lost its credibility as a voice in public affairs, in Europe especially now dominated by secularism, but also it faces an internal crisis of how to reach a generation increasingly totally alienated from traditional forms of church life and values. At the same time, mass immigration to the west/north means that we simultaneously find ourselves living face to face with people who are Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist, and at the same time with Christians from other parts of the world who live out their Christian faith differently. All these factors disturb old ways and assumptions, challenge our identity, and raise profound questions (sometimes healthily as well as painfully) about what authentic discipleship, personal and communal, should look like in the twenty first century. Change is hard but essential. But how can we ensure that change is not shaped by an increasingly pagan culture but rather by a faith-full re-reading of and re-living of God's Word?

To complicate matters, among evangelicals there are at least two polar opposite reactions, with many others uneasily somewhere in between. On the one hand, conservatives have often reacted with rigidity, believing their traditional theological formulations, and in some cases a very literal reading of Scripture, and particular forms of church life and worship, are essential for true orthodoxy. Any kind of change or adaptation is perceived as unfaithfulness. At the opposite end of the spectrum, perhaps most strongly among those who embrace post-modernism with the greatest enthusiasm, are those who see truth as in some sense evolving, with the Bible as a strong story written for particular contexts, and therefore offering guidelines rather than unchanging absolutes; this means that in a vastly different cultural climate one can be as flexible as one wishes about most things, provided people hear 'the story of Jesus'.

...in the global south and non-western churches

Here the issues are usually different, though not all global south churches are growing vigorously – some of them, too, are declining, especially where they are unable to pass on the baton of faith to an upcoming generation. Also, among global south churches there is not one uniform attitude to the Bible, so that some of the tensions seen among northern churches are reflected in the south, too.

Many (but by no means all!) global south churches are comparatively young, having come into being sometime during the past two centuries. There are, of course, some ancient churches of various streams in Asia, Africa and Latin America. But Protestantism, and Charismatic and Pentecostal churches, are rarely older than a century. Many trace their roots to western missionary work. They are no longer, quite rightly, willing to accept without question forms and formulations of Christian faith and behaviour handed down to them by foreigners. There are inherent questions especially where evangelisation was compromised by travelling alongside imperialism and colonialism; the form of Christian faith may be alien and alienating, impose cultural patterns which are unhelpful, and exclude cultural forms which would be very positive.

If the church was shaped by poorly contextualized missionary activity, there may be too little engagement with real questions in societies which did not have a long Christianised history, there will be specific questions (e.g. relating to pre-Christian ancestors, what can be salvaged from pre-Christian religion, etc) which are not adequately addressed, and a high likelihood of too little transformation at a deep level – the deep level conversion to which the Lord calls us all. Where the latter does not take place, syncretism follows. Western theology was shaped by long centuries of Greek and Latin logic and propositional thinking; this is not often the way that those in the global south think, but those who have struggled to recast theology in more acceptable forms may have been misunderstood and criticised by northerners. Most people in the global south are much more naturally holistic, and much less individualistic,

than northerners, who have been impacted by centuries of Enlightenment thinking.

Particularity, diversity, and contextualization

So how do we move forward from here? How can we help one another, wherever we may be in the world, to live out the gospel more faithfully and to pursue the radical transformation which glorifies the Lord while also respecting and celebrating our differences?

One of the exciting privileges we have today is the opportunity for genuine encounter with brothers and sisters from around the world in order to help us identify our own cultural blind spots on the one hand, and on the other positively to recognise our commonalities. For this we need honesty, humility and integrity, a learning spirit, trust, a seeking of the other's highest good. We have the opportunity to listen to those of other cultures open the Scriptures, so that we see things freshly. We can pray and worship together, opening ourselves to a variety of styles and traditions, and experiencing the dynamic touch of the Spirit in new ways. We can weep together as we struggle with failures and sin and painful history. We can rejoice that the Lord who delighted in creating tens of thousands of species of trees and butterflies and flowers, does not ask us all to be the same either.

We will celebrate cultural diversity, but we will not let our cultures have the last word. In recent decades, it has been fashionable for cultural anthropologists to assert that culture is neutral and we should not challenge or confront anything, simply accept and affirm the validity of whatever we observe. However, as Christians we need to affirm both grace and sin, so that we will recognise in every culture many traces of human beings made in the image of God, and of God's merciful and gracious dealings with his creatures, but we will also sorrowfully but firmly recognise that our fallenness means that we are by nature pulled to subvert what is good and to reinforce rebellion. Thus the cultures we develop will be marked by both beauty and ugliness, by both goodness and wickedness. In our diversity, different cultures will demonstrate sinfulness in different areas, and goodness in different areas. Part of our task as we interact with one another will be to

help identify that which glorifies God and reflects his beauty, encouraging its reinforcement; and to help identify that which is the outworking of fallenness, finding ways to replace it with values, beliefs and behaviour which are in keeping with God's nature and Word.

We will be more discerning about programmes, methodologies, and training, developed in one place and transferred somewhere else. Although these have often been transported with good intentions, they rarely fit well in another context without considerable adaptation. Indeed, in cross-cultural situations, it is far more effective for an outsider to be a catalyst enabling local believers to develop their own. What 'works' in Kenya may not work in France; what works in Korea may not work in Peru. Similarly, we will expect to see a growing resource of Christian literature and hymnody bubbling up freshly and with variety, all over the world. That does not mean that we will all worship in separate ethnic groups, except in contexts where there is genuinely only one ethnic group in a given location (increasingly rare in today's mobile world). The coming together in reconciled fellowship of people of different ethnic backgrounds is one of the most powerful gospel signs in today's fragmented world, and we should work hard at multi-cultural as well as mono-cultural worship and visibly shared life. But, within that multi-culturalism, there needs to be space for diversity of expression, so that we celebrate our diversity as well as our unity in Christ. Because of recent patterns of rapid migration, this will be one of the most exciting – and demanding – challenges in the near future.

Because contextualization often involves experimentation and dealing with the unfamiliar, it can be rather messy and unnerving. At present one area where this is clearly seen is in the debate about insider movements. These are not an entirely new phenomenon, but are being analysed and discussed in a different way in some quarters today. Similarly, the now well-known C1-C6 scale is a particular way of assessing something that has been going on for centuries. It is important that these do not become 'the latest fashion' but that we learn from past history the strengths



Lome

and weaknesses of discipleship expressed and outworked in a variety of ways. As we look with heartache at the huge swathes of the world where there are few believers, and acknowledge how few inroads the gospel seems to have made in the Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu worlds, we will humbly and prayerfully support those who work in such contexts while also wanting to be watchful to live and work in ways that honour the Lord. That doesn't rule out new and unexpected things! Our God is not to be chained by our traditions and comfort zones.

Ironically, there has been a great deal of discussion and writing about contextualization in the past thirty years, but not necessarily any more informed practice of it. This is particularly true of the mission community, perhaps especially because of the huge increase in short-term mission as opposed to long-term mission. While there are many great values in short-term mission trips, especially for those who go on them, and sometimes through them for their home churches and friends, short-termers by definition are not likely to be able to engage in sensitive, profound contextualization. They simply do not have the time to learn, and observe, and understand beyond the superficial. This is the case even where there is a common language, and it's true of short-termers from anywhere in the world, not just from the west. It is sobering to remember that the Lord Jesus

spent thirty years learning and listening and watching before embarking on his three years of public ministry in his own home country. In an impatient age, we need to reaffirm the non-negotiability of 'a long obedience in the same direction', and of being willing to invest a lifetime in the cause of the gospel.

Conclusion

The Scripture teaches us that we are to stand on tiptoe, in daily expectant readiness for the Lord's return. At the same time, and paradoxically, we are also to show the patience and long-term vision of the farmer, who knows there will be a long wait between the sowing of the seed and the harvest in due season. As we think about contextualization, we do not know where in the Lord's timetable we are: many have tried to guess, but the Lord himself tells us not to. We only know that we are somewhere between the now and the not yet; that is our context in history and eternity. In the here and now, we will have limited understanding, flawed ministry, lives shaped more than we realise by our own culture and heritage. Yet, despite all that, we have a priceless treasure, the treasure of the gospel. Paul tells us that we have that treasure in old clay pots, so that all the glory may be seen to be the Lord's. Let it be our prayer, and our life's work, to display the beauty of Jesus in whichever culture the Lord has set us, and by all means to make the gospel plain. <<

Picking up a porcupine is a necessarily wary enterprise. No matter how desirable or important it may seem to pick up a porcupine, our instincts warn us that those razor sharp quills warrant caution.

A Necessarily Wary Enterprise?

North American Evangelicals and Contextualization

In many ways evangelicals have viewed contextualization as a necessarily wary enterprise, a desirable and important task, but one that demands caution. This caution has created tension in our conversation about contextualization both in the movement's academic institutions and on the front lines of mission. One wonders if this tension hasn't contributed to the noted lack of implementation of contextualization theory by North American mission agencies and missionaries now some thirty years after we began to discuss the concept.¹

Conservative evangelicals in North America reacted cautiously to contextualization when it was first discussed by mission scholars and practitioners in the 1970's.² In part their concern was due to the term's formal introduction in the context of the World Council of Churches (WCC), an organization that many evangelicals had grown to distrust. Furthermore, since some of the most persistent voices for contextualization in those early days were associated with liberation theology in the Latin American context, some evangelicals in North America became even more concerned that it did not reflect the values of the conservative wing of the movement. Viewing liberation theology through the lens of the Cold War, many North American evangelicals saw it as a threat to evangelical theological beliefs and an assault on the American values of democracy and capitalism. Guilt-by-association sullied the image of contextualization among conservative evangelicals. In some cases the concept was rejected outright; others saw the benefit of it and simply chose

different language to describe the same process and goal.³ In my own theological training in the late 70's contextualization was considered suspect, at best.

Even though we can identify socio-cultural and geopolitical realities in the 1970's as reasons for caution on the part of evangelicals in North America, we should not dismiss evangelical wariness toward contextualization as solely based on issues of that context historically and culturally. Caution has framed evangelical consideration of contextualization throughout the four decades that we've used the term in mission circles because it seems to challenge deeply held theological values and commitments that have shaped the movement's existence and identity in North America. In particular conservative evangelicals view contextualization cautiously when we feel it threatens our belief in absolute, transcultural truth as revealed in the Bible. Thus, B.J. Nicholls defined contextualization as "the translation of the *unchanging content of the Gospel* of the Kingdom into verbal form meaningful to the peoples in their separate cultures and within their particular existential situation."⁴

Because evangelicalism does not have an historic ecclesial identity, but exists transdenominationally, consistency and continuity in the movement's identity are based on common creedal commitments. Nicholl's language, "the unchanging content of the Gospel," is bedrock dogma for conservative evangelicals.⁵ However, this theological commitment is not all that creates wariness

toward contextualization. Conservative evangelicals believe that the "unchanging content of the Gospel" is propositional. We seek not just common belief in the truth of Scripture but also common language to confess the truth of Scripture. This commitment is seen as a highly valued legacy reaching back to early Christian creedal formulations.

If a commitment to unchanging truth in Scripture and common confessional language grounds the wariness of conservative evangelicals in contextualization theory and practice, an ongoing conversation about the nature of theology and the nature of Scripture is necessary for conservative evangelicals to embrace contextualization with fewer fears and limitations. Are there ways to discuss these fundamental theological commitments that may energize evangelicals to embrace contextualization more eagerly?

Unfortunately conservative evangelicals do not discuss these issues as freely and vigorously as they ought because the risk is too great. In many ecclesiastical and mission relationships, common confession acts as social power. When membership in a faith community is dependent upon the assessment of any member's adherence to common confessional language (e.g., signing an organization's doctrinal statement to join or remain in it), vigorous theological conversation is muted because members fear expulsion. Yet, it is exactly this kind of theological conversation that contextualization demands. Contextualization requires the freedom to

Mark Young



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explore and risk intellectually without the fear of dire social and financial consequences.⁶

Contextualization and the nature of theology

How shall we reconsider the nature of theology in order to stimulate more meaningful contextualization? Perhaps Paul Hiebert's application of set theory to a theological discussion of conversion provides a starting point.⁷ In his work Hiebert discussed how four different concepts of a set affect the way we define a Christian. Of those four concepts, three seem most helpful for a consideration of the nature of theology and doctrinal formulations—bounded, fuzzy, and centered. According to Hiebert bounded sets have fixed shapes and boundaries that clearly define what's inside and what's outside the set. Fuzzy sets, on the other hand, have no fixed shape or clear delineation for inclusion and exclusion. Fuzzy sets are built around the idea of degrees of inclusion. Centered sets, according to Hiebert, are defined by a member's relationship to the center point of the set. No matter where that member may be spatially in relation to the center of the set, as long as there is a relationship to the center, it is a member.⁸

Using Hiebert's categories, one could

argue that conservative evangelicals tend to view theology as a bounded set of propositions. When viewed as such, the confessional community (church, mission, denomination, etc.) possesses the set and focuses primarily on its boundaries in order to determine whether any given proposition is inside or outside the set. Boundary maintenance is considered essential to maintaining the integrity of the set and the identity of the confessional community that possesses the set. In this approach to theology, theological understanding must remain within the bounded set formed by the propositions of a community's doctrinal statement. Theological discourse, therefore, only serves to reinforce the boundaries. Because the truth of Scripture is seen as unchanging, many conservative evangelicals view theological formulations as immutable also. The boundaries of the set, they believe, have been fixed historically and must remain as they are. The language of belief is, therefore, static and must be fiercely defended. Unfortunately, a bounded-set view of theology does not invigorate contextualization.

For conservative evangelicals to more freely embrace theological contextualization they must view theology as *partial, overlapping centered sets of beliefs*. This perspective on theology may allow evangelicals to retain the security found in the belief in unchanging truth as expressed in a set of theological propositions while, at the same time, admitting to the limitations of all theological reckoning and language. All theologies are *partial*; none encompasses all that can be known from what has been revealed in Scripture.⁹ Each community's theological formulation will include beliefs not necessarily contained in other sets and each set may ignore some of the beliefs that are contained in other sets.

Viewing theology as *partial, overlapping centered sets* allows evangelicals to retain common beliefs that define them as Christian and evangelical. These common beliefs form the center of each contextually formulated set of propositions and create the possibility of global evangelical identity. The contextualization of theology, therefore, becomes the formulation of beliefs grounded in the revelation of truth in Scripture for the prosecution of the redemptive purpose of God. Common belief is not necessarily expressed in common propositions. The articulation of common beliefs

will involve the development of contextually appropriate theological propositions for each confessional community.¹⁰ In order to pursue theological contextualization evangelicals will have to admit that common beliefs may not share common theological language. Common beliefs center evangelical theologies but the trajectories of development in both content and language for each theological set are limited and shaped by context.

Contextualization and bibliography

Bibliology is the watershed issue for conservative evangelicals in North America, many of whom value agreement on matters of inspiration and inerrancy as highly as the common belief in the deity of Christ and the efficacy of the gospel. Evangelicals began to consider contextualization during the same decade that they were publicly fighting the "battle for the Bible" in North America.¹¹ That battle hasn't stopped and issues of bibliology continue to play a major role in evangelical wariness toward contextualization.

It may be tempting to see contextualization as primarily an issue of hermeneutics. But that view may be too limited. It seems to me that evangelical caution toward contextualization is first a question of how we view the Bible, then a question of how we read it. In order to facilitate more meaningful contextualization, evangelicals may need to reexamine their understanding of the nature and purpose of the Bible.

When the term "evangelical" is used in a global sense, it almost always connotes those who make the Scripture their "the final rule for faith and practice."¹² Evangelicals affirm this identity through the practice of distilling propositions of truth and principles for life from Scripture just about every time we read it. Thus, evangelicals want to see the Bible as a source of universally true propositions about God and universally valid principles for godly living.

This view of Scripture spurs evangelicals to identify some propositions and principles as "biblical" and, of course, therefore, others as "not biblical." When propositions and principles are deemed biblical in a particular evangelical confessional community, it is often assumed that these are universally bind-

ing for all who view Scripture as the final rule for faith and practice. This assumption mirrors and expands our dearly valued belief in the “unchanging content of the gospel.”

Unfortunately evangelicals frequently do not clearly articulate what it means when we say that a proposition or a principle is biblical and, thus, universally binding. In many cases “biblical” simply means that a statement, value, or behavior in a given contemporary context resembles selected statements, values, and behaviors found in a text of Scripture. For example, Moses delegated judicial authority to selected leaders in Exodus 18:17-23; therefore, delegation of authority is a biblical principle for leadership that is a “rule for practice” in all contexts. Similar kinds of principles for marriage, child-rearing, business, counseling, and practically every other area of life, are designated “biblical” by particular evangelical communities around the world and considered, therefore, to be the universally valid in all contexts. Contextualization is often stifled in an intercultural mission setting when this use of the term “biblical” characterizes the relationships between believers.

Unfortunately this understanding and use of “biblical” rarely engages the whole of Scripture. The Bible is more than a book of propositions about God and principles for godly living. It is, first and foremost, a story, coherent and meaningful when read as a whole. The Bible is not just a story, however. Evangelicals believe that it is *the* story of human history and existence in a world of competing stories.

*“The Bible is universal history: it sets forth a story of the whole world from its beginning to its end. It is the true story of the world, and all other stories are at best partial narratives, which must be understood within the context of the biblical story.”*¹³

Chaturvedi Badrinath, a Hindu scholar of world religions, challenged the church in India to go beyond a view of Scripture that limits it to a book of religious propositions and principles.

“I can’t understand why you missionaries present the Bible to us in India as a book of religion. It is not a book of religion—and anyway we have plenty of books of religion

*in India. We don’t need any more! I find in your Bible a unique interpretation of universal history, the history of the whole of creation and the history of the human race. And therefore a unique interpretation of the human person as a responsible actor in history. That is unique. There is nothing else in the whole religious literature of the world to put alongside it.”*¹⁴

When viewing the Bible as the only true story of human history and existence evangelicals can see the true character of God in the context of his purpose for humanity.

On the basis of that vision evangelicals in every context have the privilege and responsibility to develop beliefs about God and principles for godly living that contribute to the prosecution of his universal redemptive purpose in their own context. In this regard evangelicals must face the possibility that a proposition or principle regarded as biblical in one setting may not be so in another setting.

When read this way the Bible becomes intensely missional and the faith community’s motivation for creating a true vision of God for their own culture through their beliefs, values, and practices drives the hermeneutical task. “Biblical” then takes on a more expansive meaning that gives each faith community a sense of their privileged role in the grand purpose of God. That realization gives urgency and rationale to the task of contextualization.

Wary but Not Fearful

Embracing contextualization with restraint will likely continue as the *modus operandi* for evangelicals from North America. And that’s okay. Contextualization should be a necessarily wary enterprise for evangelicals. Our fundamental understanding of the nature of theology and the Bible demands caution when formulating beliefs, values, and behaviors for the purpose of prosecuting God’s universal, redemptive purpose. Christian identity in any cultural setting must mean embrace of common beliefs, values, and purposes that have been expressed in a variety of propositions, institutions, and behaviors through two millennia of Christian presence.

But we need not be fearful of contextualization; it is our privilege and responsibility

to create a testimony of the gospel in every context that shouts the truth about God and his purpose to a lost world. For us contextualization is not the end, but a means to the end that all evangelicals share—the worship of the One True God by all peoples. <<

Endnotes

- 1 Charles H. Kraft, *Ed. Appropriate Christianity*. (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2005), page 32.
- 2 Ibid. pages 22-26.
- 3 Bruce Fleming’s proposed phrase “context-indigenization” is representative of evangelical reluctance to use the term contextualization. Bruce Fleming, 1980. *Contextualization of Theology: An Evangelical Assessment*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library.
- 4 B. J. Nicholls, 1975. “Theological Education and Evangelization” in J. D. Douglas (ed.) *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*. Minneapolis, World Wide Publications, page 675. Italics mine.
- 5 In the early years of the debate conservative evangelicals preferred the term “indigenization” to “contextualization” because of this commitment. See Charles R. Taber, 1991, *The World is Too Much with Us – ‘Culture’ in Modern Protestant Missions*. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press.
- 6 The psychological and social dimensions of this problem need to be explored in greater depth. Their influence in evangelicals’ attitude and approach to contextualization cannot be underestimated.
- 7 Paul Hiebert. (1994). “The Category Christian in the Mission Task” in *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- 8 The center point of a centered set is typically seen as a bounded set itself. Furthermore, the centered-set model can be used to illustrate the affective dimension of belief through the designation of members either moving toward the center (positive affect) or away from it (negative affect).
- 9 In my classes I draw a large circle on the marker board and ask students, “If this circle represents all that can be known about Christ as revealed in Scripture, how much of this circle does your theological tradition encompass?” Most have never considered that their theological system does not contain all that can be known about God as revealed in Scripture.
- 10 Steve Strauss. (2006). “The Role of Context in Shaping Theology” in *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, page 118.
- 11 Harold Lindsell. (1976). *The Battle for the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- 12 “An Evangelical Manifesto.” (2008). Downloaded from www.anevangelicalmanifesto.com, May 10, 2008, page 6.
- 13 Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen. (2004). “Story and Biblical Theology” in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. page 151.
- 14 Ibid.

Church planting theology and contextualization

Ronaldo Lidório

Foundations for church planting begin from the conviction that missiology and theology are not isolated fields of study but rather two sides of the same coin. Hesselgrave, confirming the absence of theological foundation in church planting studies, asks, "Of what lasting significance is the evangelical commitment to the authority of the Bible if biblical teachings do not explicitly shape our missiology?" Van Engen stresses that the theology of mission needs to be a multi-disciplinary field that reads the Bible with missiological eyes and "based on that reading, continually reexamines, reevaluates and redirects the church's involvement in God's mission in God's world."

In church planting, we face three dangers if theology and missiology are not perceived as partners:

- a) To use God as an instrument to fulfill our purposes, instead of serving Him by pursuing His plan on earth;
- b) To offer simplistic solutions for complex and ambiguous problems related to gospel communication, contextualization and church planting;
- c) To defend the view that there is only one biblical way to accomplish Jesus' commandment to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

This article describes some theological criteria for church planting (CP) and contextualization. CP is normally associated with evangelism, but carries a variety of meanings and concepts. According to Van Rheeën, it is "initiating reproductive fellowships that reflect the kingdom of God in the world," but it is also linked with church nurturing, maturation and growth. Malphurs defines CP as a planned process of beginning and growing new local churches, which implies that it is a) a proc-

ess that involves planning; b) an intentional activity; c) it has to do with church multiplication and growth. Donald MacGavran developed the study of church growth, and later David Garrison presented the concept of CP movements as a rapid, and even exponential, increase of indigenous churches, planted within a given people group or population segment. Patrick Johnstone, Luis Bush and others wanted to mobilize the world Church to focus on CP amongst people groups in less evangelized areas.

According to David Bosch, theology in the early days of the New Testament was practiced in the context of mission in response to missiological questions, as church planters were spreading the Gospel and nurturing the existing church. The Apostle Paul is a classic example of that as he was, at the same time, "the most impressive theologian of Christianity and its greatest missionary," - to quote Augustus Nicodemus Lopes. St Paul's theology arose out of his mission and ministry, and his mission activity inspires us to reflect on God and His action in the world (Rom 15). We begin, therefore, with the affirmation that CP must have sound theological and ecclesiological foundations.

Three theological values for CP

CP is done in faithfulness to Scripture

The foundation of gospel communication should never be defined by what works, but rather by what is biblical (1 Thess 1:5). In CP, following what is biblical does not necessarily mean there will be greater results in terms of time-saving and numbers. Undergirding mission and CP with sound biblical theology may require investment of time, patience and theological reflection,

alongside national Christians. Murray explains that "All church planters operate within theological frameworks, but often these are assumed rather than articulated and adopted uncritically rather than as the result of reflection."

Amongst progressive church planting movements today, non-biblical movements appear among the top ten in terms of numbers and influence. The Church of the Holy Spirit in Ghana, for example, is a CP movement which is growing rapidly in the Southern part of the country. A few years ago, the founder declared himself to be the incarnation of the Holy Spirit on earth. But today this is a fast growing movement, planting churches and spreading its influence throughout different parts of the country and beyond. In contrast, evangelicals are committed to God's mind and vision as revealed in Scripture, and not to human strategies of growth.

CP is done in dependence on God's power and desire to save

Although there is a great need for training, we should not expect to fulfill our mission merely through carefully elaborated strategies and well trained human resources. Nothing but God's power and activity can enable the Church spiritually to accomplish His plan in a relevant way in today's world. CP is not merely a matter of marketing, methodology and strategy. It is first a spiritual matter, characterized by the power of God released through the unique and historical sacrifice of Christ and undertaken through the enabling of the Holy Spirit, who guides the church to pray, believe and work (John 14:15-18).

CP requires a clear understanding of the nature of the Church and God's purposes for it (ecclesiology), so that the long-term objec-

tives guide the short-term strategy and vision. In particular we hope to plant churches as communities:

... of redeemed people, birthed by God, and belonging to God (1 Co. 1:1-2);

... of human, vulnerable people: men and women, parents, children, farmers and fishermen who live and breathe the Gospel wherever they may be (Matt.10);

... in the world, holy but not apart from it, not isolated or alienated (1 Co. 6:12-20);

... without borders, and it is therefore missionary by its very nature (Rom 15:18-19);

... with a witness and a gospel that makes sense both in and out of the church building (Jo 14:26; 16: 13-15);

... with the primary mission to glorify God (1 Co. 6:20; Rom 16:25-27);

CP is done through proclaiming the Gospel

The “*praxis*” of CP begins by proclaiming the Gospel, because the church is born where the word of God is powerfully at work. So proclamation is the non-negotiable foundation of CP. For many in mission today, CP itself has become the overriding focus of mission. But for Van Engen and Van Gelder, the primary aim is making the Gospel known and experienced for people in their own context, thereby creating disciples of Christ; rather than building a physical, ecclesiastical structure, which, although important, is for them a secondary matter. In any case, in some contexts a visible church may not be possible or permissible, but that does not limit the growth of the Kingdom.

Missionaries may have good leadership, satellite communication, three monthly reports and good pastoral care structures, but they may not be simply proclaiming the fullness of the Gospel as the living Word of God. Although proclamation involves both word and deed, social involvement, holistic ministry and cultural understanding can never substitute for clear verbal teaching, nor in themselves justify the presence of the Church. Church planting envisages the creation of a

viable, living and growing community, which can itself be a powerful witness as a sign and instrument of the Kingdom. A living Church with a fresh experience of the Lord will be able in its turn to share the dynamic and powerful Word of God through its life, words and witness (Jo 16:13-15).

CP and contextualization

Among the Gonja of Ghana we have a saying: *The dogs of yesterday cannot catch the rabbits of today.* Culturally, this means that new problems in the tribal society cannot be resolved with old solutions. From the missiological perspective, it may help us to remember that in our fast, changing, globalized and post-modern world we need to pray for discernment in trying to catch new rabbits. This will require proclaiming a contextualized gospel and planting a contextualized church.

David Bosch states that “*The gospel always comes to people in cultural robes. There is no such thing as a ‘pure’ gospel, isolated from culture.*” George Hunsburger observes: “*No culture-free expression of the gospel exists, nor could it.*” Anthropology thus becomes a powerful tool for gospel communication, and cultural anthropology and phenomenology help the Church to understand people and their culture with a view to proclaiming the Gospel more effectively.

The aim of cultural understanding and theological contextualization is to plant indigenous churches whose members engage

with the human and cultural questions of their own context and how these might be answered by a biblical theology. It is tempting to plant churches before doing this groundwork of cultural understanding, but this can result in churches that are poor at relating to their own contexts.

The churches that we plant need to be equipped to teach theology in a relevant, understandable and clear way to the people of their own culture. If we look at the African context, for example, we see that the de-Westernization that leads to true indigeneity of Christianity among some tribes can never be accomplished without a de-westernised, but deeply biblical, theology that communicates God’s mind and makes sense to Africans in their own land.

Although the Gospel speaks supra-culturally to everyone in every culture in every age, the way to formulate the questions to which the gospel is the answer varies from culture to culture. For example, in the West, sickness is treated according to the presenting symptoms, which fit into a formalised understanding of illness and medicine. In the animistic worldview, no action will be taken before they get an answer to “why” the person is facing the problem; because knowing the source of the problem is the most important factor for dealing with it.

Alan Tippett stressed that “*when the indigenous people of a community think of the Lord as their own, not a foreign Christ; when they do things as unto the Lord meeting the cultural needs around them, worshipping in patterns they understand; when their congregations function in participation in a body, which is structurally indigenous; then you have an indigenous Church.*”

A historical perspective

When we consider the most common approaches to CP in history, we may notice that after the Reformation in the 16th century, Gisbertus Voetius, in his *Politica Ecclesiastica*, described a



Coptic Bishop - Egypt

seven-fold purpose of the church's mission with a remarkable emphasis on personal evangelism and the training of leaders.

Later, Pietism emphasized individual salvation rather than CP, although churches were planted with clear planning and intention by early Protestant missionaries such as William Carey, William Ward and others. In the mid 19th century, the three-self formula of Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson guided the Church towards self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating churches. By the second half of the 19th century, denominational mission was well under way in terms of CP and social action, combining evangelism with the building of hospitals and schools, and generating growth in all main denominational organizations. In the 1960's, evangelicals began to recover this integrated approach to mission.

Hibbert notes that by the early 1980's there were three main streams with different emphases within CP: McGravan and Winter emphasized evangelism and church multiplication; John Stott and others emphasised a holistic approach to mission; and Samuel Escobar, Rene Padilla and others adopted a more radical focus on social justice.

Today, there is a proliferation of CP models: the Garrison CP Movement model, Spiritual Warfare model, Meta model, Vineyard model, Willow Creek Seeker model, Ralph Neighbor cell model, the Purpose Driven Church model, the Charles Brock itinerant church planter, the Five-model approach to church planting and evaluation of Brian Woodford, and others. Although they have very different emphases most of them are defined by three main values: a) intentional and planned church multiplication; b) quick incorporation of new believers into the church and CP process; c) emphasis on leadership training and self-governing communities.

Main problems of CP strategies

Anderson, explaining the three-self formula, shows that the aim of evangelism with a view to CP involves four stages: a) conversion of individuals b) organizing converts into communities of local churches or cells; c) providing an able church leader for each community; and d) guiding the community to independence.

This makes CP an ongoing dynamic process that brings with it a number of challenges. These challenges highlight the need for strategies which create mature and healthy churches with long-term viability.

a) The problem of the "Mother church" model. A mother church tends to reproduce itself in its own image, without contextualization. Historical denominations have very often planted churches as exact replicas of their home church, reproducing a model that very often does not make sense for the people in a different place or culture. The danger is to spread an uncontextualized church model around the world.

b) The problem of dependency. After a century discussing this issue, dependency remains one of the great issues in CP. Resulting from the mother church model, many churches become dysfunctional. If the building maintenance, pastor's salary, instruments for worship, leadership courses, etc. are built on mother church templates, great conflict can result when local churches face the challenge to become self-supporting and self-governing. The question we should ask is not how many churches were planted in the past fifteen years, but how many of them remain and became independent communities.

There is also a tendency to create dependency on the charity of the mother church or church planters in meeting local social needs. A church planter should ask how the values of the gospel empower people to work for socially positive changes in the daily life of their own community. This draws education, health, dignity, clean water, rescue of relationships and sustainability into the mission responsibility of the newly planted church. But we should not wait to get a church building before helping local people to start a school if education is the main social need in their community. The gospel

should focus people on their real life, dreams and struggles, so that they in turn will create churches that take responsibility for their mission in their own contexts.

c) The problem of leadership training. Church growth is very often disassociated from leadership growth. The effects of dysfunctional leadership are immature churches and an open door for syncretism. Often, church planters do not plan how to leave, but stay for too long; they do not invest a proportional time between evangelism and leadership training; and they do not address the main cultural problems in the context, leaving new believers to work this out as they go along, poorly prepared to face the issues.

Leadership training, therefore, begins as soon as the first believers appear. We should avoid making a difference between basic discipleship and training leaders, as discipleship should be the first step to identifying those who are natural leaders. To have a self-supporting and self-governing church we need to reproduce a structure compatible to its reality in terms of human and financial resources. The only input from outside should be the Gospel. Leaders, finance, buildings and ongoing strategies should be generated from the inside by the efforts and initiative of the indigenous people themselves.

Conclusions

CP is often associated with pragmatic methodology and field processes, leading to understanding and evaluating CP on the basis of results rather than its theological foundation. Missiological decisions must be rooted in biblical theology, but unfortunately biblical theology can become less important than what works well and is pragmatically effective.

Some attempt to make CP nothing more than a network of solutions to people's needs.



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This is a growing concern in our post-modern hedonistic world. It happens when church planters make decisions based purely on an anthropological understanding of needs rather than on theological criteria. In this case, the culture and culturally related issues become determining factors. Vicedom affirms that only a deep biblical understanding of the nature of the church (Eph. 1:23) will enable church planters to make decisions and take action that is rooted in the "Missio Dei" rather than the demands of culture. <<

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Reading, or how to get the seven blind men see the elephant

Melba Padilla Maggay

Let us imagine a death bed scene.

A great man is dying, his wife clutches his hand and leans over him, a doctor is by his side taking his pulse. Standing in solemn silence are a reporter and an artist. The former is there to report the event, the latter happened to be visiting.

Now let us imagine what each would see.

The wife, because she is so much a part of him, would perhaps see very little. Very likely her whole being would be intent on watching breathlessly every spasm, every twitch of pain. Her frantic anxiety would allow her to see nothing else.

The doctor would have an eye for more clinical details. He would carefully keep an eye on the heartbeat, take the temperature and go through the futile motions of fighting to the teeth the sure lot of the dying.

The reporter would perhaps take a wider sweep, a more panoramic glance at the scene; It is most likely he would pay attention to the wildness of the woman's grief, the blank, bewildered helplessness in the doctor's eyes. He would size up the room, compare its lofty vastness and decadent richness with the shrunken old man huddled under the sheets. He may even notice the fly on the medicine

bottle, all the details that make up the tragic inner meaning of the event.

The artist, on the other hand, may be looking at something else: the shadows underneath the bushy eyebrows, the pale, bluish twilight behind the shimmering curtains, the deep purple and fine texture of the heavy chairs. The lines in the woman's suffering face, the disorder of her hair, may interest him more than the slow tally of the grand seigneur's dying to gasps.

Now it is obvious from this exercise that we may be looking at the same thing and yet see it in many different ways. What we see depends largely on what we are disposed to see; and what is seen is but a corner of the reality that is there. In communication we call this selective perception, meaning not so much the wicked propensity of some of us to edit anything unpleasant or threatening from view as the natural phenomenon of missing out on that which does not interest us.

The implications to our reading of the Scriptures are clear. None of us see the Absolute Reality that is recorded in it in all its pregnant fullness. What we see is but a small part, and even that is seen darkly, wrested from the multitude of competing images that press upon us every day. None of us see it unengaged, on top of a hill as it were, looking down the dust and rattle of passing caravans.

We are all on the journey, all blind men fumbling for the right steps to take as we participate in the life of the world. What we see is a reflection of what we are, and where we are in the struggle to make sense of the hope that is in us in a world of want and despair and fear.

It is not an accident that one hits upon the awful glory of the gift of choice, and yet another gets struck by the sovereign power of God to choose His little ones and make them bow the knee. “Sola fide, sola gratia” becomes someone’s war cry, the deadly assurances of faith without works incites someone else into fear and trembling. Each cuts a corner of the Truth for himself, and well it serves him.

It is also not surprising that liberation theology should dominate much of the Third-World thinking, or that the complex of ideas surrounding sin and guilt should appeal so much to the conscience of the West. In poorer countries, the need for concrete engagement in the face of the intense questioning brought about by the situation of the poor has made the cosmic dimensions of the Gospel stand out far more sharply, almost leaping out of every page of Scriptures. In affluent countries, more subtle oppressions like angst and guilt neuroses have brought about an emphasis on the inward certainties ringingly proclaimed by the Word.

These examples are highly generalized, but they do demonstrate how the specifics of a culture, e.g., whether rich or poor, preindustrial or technologically sophisticated, animist or theologically elaborate, determine people’s sensitivities and leanings.

Literature has an ancient word for it: “point of view,” the vantage point from which we dare to read and tell His story. There are as many ways of reading Scriptures as there are points of view. This is what we mean when we say that there are many theologies. There is of course one Theology, the knowledge of God as originally recorded. There is

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a common text by which theological systems are to be measured and judged. But we must also say that none of us can claim for our statements about it a final and exhaustive character. To do so would be to fall into the error of the seven blind men who tried to guess the elephant.

What is happening in theology is a bit like the seven blind men who generalized out of their limited experience what the whole elephant must be. One took hold of the body and thought it was a wall, another got hold of the massive leg and thought it was a tree trunk, another happened to feel the length and pointed sharpness of the tusk and thought it was a sword. Each was right in his perception of what each part was like. But all were wrong in supposing that the part they chanced upon was all there was to the elephant.

And so with our theologies. How many dishonoring divisions could have been avoided if people had enough humility to see that theirs was but one reading of a very rich and very vast literature? Would missionaries be so eager to dump on us their systematics and pet formulations if they realize that what they have is but a dim version of a part of the Word, or worse, that it is not the part the Spirit can best use in speaking to this culture.

This is not to say that the insights of one culture are of no value whatever to another. Certainly, we must listen to each other and profit richly from the truths each culture discovers. But we must remember that God draws people to Himself through the things that are most natural and familiar to them. The Magi came to the Christ child by the Star of Bethlehem. To David He was a shepherd, to the hungry crowds He was the bread of life, to the Samaritan woman’s searching thirst He was the water that flows forever and always.

This is the reason behind the plea to take cultures a little bit more into account in our reading of the Scriptures. God’s revelation has a cultural specificity that we shall do well to imitate.

He did not simply say to the Jews that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. He instituted the Passover feast and an elaborate sacrificial system so as to make it

possible for them to find within their culture the meaning of the Lamb’s dying. These of us who are threatened by recent talks about the cultural conditionedness of the Scriptures should remember that if we take away the Jewish cultural baggage behind the events at Golgotha we are left with nothing but the ignominious hanging of an obscure rabble-rouser who pretended to lay claims on the ruined throne of an ancient Jewish king.

Events themselves do not mean much. A lot of fuss is made about the historicity of the events surrounding Jesus. Oh sure it did happen, but so did the latest newspaper item. To say that it occurred in history is about as significant as saying that the murder of a pop singer really did happen recently. To establish it as a fact is one thing, to make it known as a truth that truly sets free is another. For this we have to go back to the tradition in which it took place.

It seems to us that when we speak of a Gospel “core,” we really mean the Christ events. These are of course universally shareable, for the plot of Scriptures is simple enough: man fell and so God took a people to Himself, out of whom came the promised Saviour who died and rose again and is to return in glory at the end of time. Anybody who knows how to read will see this. In fact all of Christendom already knows this. We have Christmas and Holy Week and Easter to prove it. Yet we know very well that people really do not know the meaning of these events. It is this problem of meaning which makes cross-cultural communication intensely difficult.

The situation is a bit like reading a novel. It is easy to the bare bones of a plot. I suppose Tolstoy would not get offended if someone ventures to say that “War and Peace” is the story of how Natasha finally married Pierre interspersed with a blow-by-blow account of the Napoleonic wars. It is also fair enough to say that Crime and Punishment is about a gifted but impoverished student who kills a miserly old hag to give himself a chance to cultivate his immense gifts. The question, “What happens next?” is easy enough to outline. But when the hardnosed “So?” is thrown at us, we get stumped and we hie off to our study comers to clarify to ourselves what it is really that makes Tolstoy’s book larger than



Means of transport

a love story, or Dostoyevsky's more than a detective story. Once we get to this point, it is every man's guess from then on.

It is characteristic of all great literature that while it is possible to have some agreement as to the outline of the plot, there is always a variety of interpretations fiercely fought for. Each reading is usually organized around some insight that has especially gripped the reader.

So with the Scriptures. While it would be possible to make a summary that everyone with a relatively developed sense of fact could agree upon, the themes are so densely rich that it would be violence to presume that one man or one culture or one age can colonize the wild vastness of its meanings.

Now much of our difficulty in communicating the Gospel today has to do with being able to put across some relevant content to the Gospel events that already saturate the

imagination of many cultures. In this culture at least, the task of communicating is way past the stage of making known the Gospel plot. The last thing we need is another outline that conceivably can be passed on from culture to culture but by its very level of generality does not interact with this culture at the point where it hurts. It is a principle in communication that the higher the level of generalization, the more abstract and the less usable a statement is for a specific situation. This is perhaps the reason why the eternal Word was not afraid to become a Jew. In belonging to a specific ethnic grouping, He was not being less than a man for all races and all seasons. He was simply seeing to it that the fact of God should be something that people can touch and see and handle.

The concern that God should not simply be a name, a dream or a faraway longing is behind the insistence that all cultures be allowed to read with their own eyes the specific meaning of the cross for themselves. This

is something a missionary will find hard to do, or at least will take time to be able to do. Listening to the culture is essential, and this takes time, and necessarily means that for a while the missionary is hardly functional, a fact that is perhaps hard to take for those who come from cultures that are impatient and aggressively efficient. But it must be remembered that one does not come here as a multinational does, with loads of money and resources and promising to effect technology transfer (notice all the recent talks about nationalization and training leaders). One comes here as a servant. And servanthood means that one must be prepared to wait. Jesus was willingly enough to start as a helpless child, spending thirty years of His life just growing up and taking root among His people. He wasn't overeager to get out there and preach.

The reality of the body of Christ and the ability of the Spirit to speak through each one should humble those of us who belong to established theological traditions. The Word is so untidily deep that it defies our itch to colonize it into some neat formulation. There is still so much to be mined, and the Spirit is still speaking to the rest of the churches.

We often forget that Revelation itself was an unfolding. It took centuries before we could get an adequate picture of who God is and what, darkly, He could be up to in human history. We now have the complete text, but we still do not have a full view of the drama. That will have to wait until all of the Church gets to recite its lines and the curtain falls and the houselights come up. Then we shall see the elephant, and, hopefully, understand, even as all of us have been fully understood. <<

What is the purpose of church meetings? Why do we gather together? To sing hymns and songs of worship? To hear the word of God preached? To meet in fellowship with other Christians? At the church which I attended after first becoming a Christian, the minister had a favourite saying; "What does the story of doubting Thomas tell us? Never miss a meeting, you don't know what might happen!"

The pilgrim church needs a new home

Contextualizing the church in Europe

Evangelical Christians are fond of their statements of faith, yet we frequently work to a far more visible method of calculating orthodoxy, that is, consistent and frequent attendance at church on Sundays, and mid-week as well if possible. Catholic professor and Dominican Edward Cleary comments on this; "Latin American Pentecostalism shares characteristics of religion in the United States. Specifically, it places exceptional emphasis on congregational participation and worship attendance as a measure of religious involvement" (IBMR 28/2, Apr 2004, p51). But have we ever in fact stopped to consider why evangelical Christianity functions in this way?

"I have sometimes felt that the real purpose of church services is to enable clergy to count the congregation. This is probably a little cynical, but churches often find their main sense of success in the number of people who attend on a Sunday. Regular church attendance is seen as being a significant test of spiritual health, and church growth is measured in the size of congregations. The importance of Sunday attendance and congregational size can never be underestimated for solid church" (Pete Ward, *Liquid Church*).

Mission strategy in recent decades has focussed on the importance of church planting rather than just doing evangelism, that is,

combining Christians in new communities for worship, teaching, fellowship and mission. But church attendance in Europe is in freefall. Year by year, across Europe, congregations are shrinking or closing. Most of those congregations that seem to be holding their own, and the few that are growing, tend to do so because of transfer growth, that is, new members from other churches.

And yet across Europe we find a massive interest in spirituality. In a continent that is generally prosperous, and where even its poor can generally be said not to be starving, there is a desire for something beyond material possessions. People are searching for meaning, for transcendence (something beyond themselves), for identity. But they are generally not looking at churches for this. It is not uncommon to hear people say of themselves that they are "spiritual but not religious", with the church being included in the latter category. All too often, we have created communities where spiritual experience is tied to meetings and membership, as well as participation in a whole host of other institutional activities. The spiritual seeker looks at the social price tag, and looks elsewhere. And this isn't a problem only for those currently outside the church.

"Problems arise when younger missionaries are expected to plant churches according

to a model that they themselves find boring and irrelevant. It is not uncommon to find young missionaries whose only motive for attending church is a latent sense of Christian duty, and who come away each week wondering why they bothered to go. Such a situation cause problems at three levels : the personal spirituality of the younger missionary whose faith is weakened, not strengthened, by church attendance; the ineffectiveness of the missionary as evangelist and church-planter (after all, why draw people into a church where you rarely meet God?); and tension and division in the missionary team itself" (Peter Stephenson, I still haven't found what I'm looking for, in Postmission).

So what is going on, and how might we respond to this?

Community and church in pre-modern, modern and postmodern Europe

In pre-modern societies, communities were based around land and a sense of place. The parish system served well across Europe as a way for the church to reach all those, rich and poor alike, who owned, lived or worked on the land in a given place.

The modern era was characterised by a significant change, which affected the way that churches were organised. Emigration,

Richard Tiplady

urbanisation and industrialization meant that the land and the parish became less important. Community was reconstituted in the expanding industrial cities on the basis of shared culture and shared experience. Class, not place, became the most important signifier of identity. Churches emerged with an emphasis on congregation and club, where people gathered to worship with those who were like them, rather than those who lived in the same village. Working-class and middle-class denominations arose.

The postmodern era changes our ideas of identity and community again. Identity is not based on a common sense of place, since we are all more able to be highly mobile now. Nor is it based on common experience or social class. In his book, "Bowling Alone", Harvard professor Robert Putnam argues that America's 'social capital', a term which refers to "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit", is being reduced. He quotes a staggering array of statistics showing that across all types of social association, such as religious affiliation (church attendance), union membership, participation in parent-teacher associations and the number of volunteers for civic organizations such as the Boy Scouts and the Red Cross, involvement has declined in the last fifty years. The title of his article came from his discovery that, while more Americans go tenpin bowling than ever, participation in organized bowling leagues fell 40 per cent between 1980 and 1993. This is not a trend that affects America alone. Putnam shows that a decline in the level of social engagement is also evident in Europe. People are meeting together less frequently in organised groups. The cultures of the West are changing dramatically.

Living in exile?

In the West, until recent decades, Christians have held a privileged position in relation to European / Western life, thought and society. But things have changed. The social and religious changes described above have, along with the growth and spread of secularisation since the 1960's, pushed Christianity to margins of public life, which is a big change for European Christians after 1700 years of Christendom.

It is not difficult to find examples of the marginalisation of the Christian faith in Europe. The draft European Union constitution, which was rejected in 2005 by the voters of France and the Netherlands, was notable for its excision of any mention of Christianity from the history of Europe. The furore over the appointment of Rocco Buttiglione as EU Equality Commissioner is equally noteworthy. A committed Roman Catholic, who had previously made known his views on homosexuality, was not accepted to a post which would include gay rights issues. In England, the BBC broadcast on mainstream TV the show "Jerry Springer : The Opera", despite vocal (and sometimes counterproductive) protests against its portrayal of Jesus as gay.

European Christians might want to return to what the Bible has to say about living on the margins, rather than at the centre of society. One option is to draw on the Old Testament experience of Israel, specifically the period of exile during the 6th century BC, when Israel experienced a catastrophic loss of security and status.

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them," declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 29:4-9)



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The first group was exiled from Judah to Babylon in 597BC. The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple – the symbol of God's presence among his people – and the second, bigger, exile happened in 587BC. In the passage quoted above, Jeremiah is writing between these two dates to the first group, now exiled in Babylon. (False) prophets like Hananiah were saying that their exile would only be for a short time, and that they would soon return (cf Jer 28:2-4, 15-17). Yahweh would not abandon his people, they said, for he had promised them a land of their own. Jeremiah advised the exiles not to listen to this advice, and to get used to living in a new situation.

There is some fear and pessimism about the survival of the church and the crisis of faith in Europe. I wonder if we sometimes get similar messages of (false) hope? I have heard, on many occasions, quotes of "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail." In other words, God won't let the church disappear in Europe. But Islam obliterated the church in Turkey and North Africa, so there are no guarantees. Jeremiah's message to the exiles in Babylon is equally relevant to us today : stop looking back at the (mythical) lost past, *accept the new reality, settle in it and serve God there.*

But what might this mean? After all, there were significant changes in post-exilic Jewish religion, compared to pre-exilic Israel. Before, the faith of Israel was centred on the Jerusalem Temple, regular sacrifice, and festivals at which people gathered, such as Tabernacles, harvest, and so on. After the exile, the Jewish faith was centred on the synagogue, Sabbath, and Torah (and the Deuteronomistic History - otherwise known as the history books of the Old Testament - was compiled to explain why the exile happened). We face similar major readjustments on how we live as Christians and do church in the 21st century. How then should we live?

Emerging Church?

A movement of new thinking and practices that seeks to respond to the above questions has well and truly 'emerged'. It is a diverse and fluid movement, still taking and changing shape, one which has been given a variety of names – "missional church" and "mission-shaped church" are but two,

although the above phrase, “emerging church”, is the one most widely in use.

Why “emerging”? Because the ideas and practices are nowhere near fully-formed, it is imprecise (allowing room for experimentation and avoiding the restrictions of tight definitions), and because “emerging church” ideas and experiments have sprung up or ‘emerged’ in a variety of different contexts, more-or-less spontaneously and simultaneously.

As a movement, it has its roots in the northern/western European cultural sphere, but not just the Anglo-Saxon one. While “emerging church” ideas and practices are present in the UK and USA, they also do in the Netherlands and Scandinavia, and significant early practitioners and thinkers ‘emerged’ in Australia and spread elsewhere. In fact, it’s probably wrong to describe it as a movement; it’s not that coherent. “Emerging church” has ‘emerged’ through the confluence of different social, missiological, theological and ecclesiological currents, which are outlined below in turn.

Currents that combine in ‘emerging church’

1. Changing cultural, religious and social realities in Europe

“Emerging churches are communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures” (Gibbs and Bolger, p44). This is a key assumption behind “emerging church”. Just as the ‘gathered congregation’ form of the church emerged most definitively in the C18-C19, when the parish system proved inadequate to service the spiritual needs of urban industrial Europe, so new forms of the church will be needed to reach post-industrial, post-modern European people. “Emerging church” tries to avoid the secular/spiritual divide imposed on the Christian faith by the Enlightenment, emphasising church as the people of God, not a place to meet. If there is no secular/spiritual divide, then there can be no ‘holy’ or ‘profane’ places. Churches are being intentionally planted in cafés, pubs and in houses, not just in special buildings.

“In Christendom, the Sunday meeting was the centre of corporate spiritual expression for the community. In a post-Christendom context, a church-meeting focus is no longer indigenous to the culture or necessary to be

faithful to the gospel. Instead, the practice of community foundation itself is more central than the church meeting” (Gibbs and Bolger, p44).

2. New approaches to missionary outreach in Europe

Michael Moynagh describes “emerging church” as a mindset rather than a model, a way of thinking about church, rather than simply a way of doing church. This mindset is “we’ll come to you”, not “you come to us”. This has also been contrasted as “incarnational” vs. “attractorial”, the latter being the more familiar mode of church (i.e., bringing people along to the church building or meeting place). In the “incarnational” approach, we model ourselves on the example of Jesus by going among people and embodying the life of the Spirit in their midst. This is central to “emerging church” ideas about evangelism – existing forms of Christian worship and community do not attract outsiders (and may even repel them). There should be no offence except the cross of Christ.

3. A renewed emphasis on the kingdom of God (the in-breaking reign of God)

A “kingdom of God” emphasis is central for many emerging church writers. Mark Scandrette of ReIMAGINE in San Francisco said about his attempts to set up a Gen-X church, “We got the questions wrong. We started out thinking about what form the church should take, as opposed to what the life of Jesus means in this time and place. Now, instead of being preoccupied with new forms of church, we focus on seeking the kingdom as the people of God.” The in-breaking kingdom of God scandalizes the wealthy, the comfortable and the religious, and lifts up in the outcast, the immoral and the rejected. At least, it did in Jesus’ day, so why should we expect it to be any different now?

4. Not “what is the church?”, but “what is the church for?”

The quote from Scandrette above shows that “emerging church” is therefore as much about the purpose of the church as it is about the shape of the church. Form should follow function. Emerging church challenges us to rethink our fundamental assumptions about what it means to “be the church” as well as how we “do church”. Only thereafter should we create new wineskins, doing things in an

entirely new way, for the sake of the spread of the good news of Jesus Christ in Europe. For example, Latin American missiologist Orlando Costas described church-planting as “penultimate”, i.e., it is not the goal and purpose of mission. The purpose of church-planting is to create living communities of Christians that will work for personal and social transformation in their locality. If this is true, then how does this affect the way we plant churches?

Examples to illustrate

The above elements may describe the ethos and driving forces behind “emerging church”, but missionaries, church leaders and others rightly ask, “OK, so what does it look like?”. Two examples, with their websites for further information, are given below:

Urban Expression

www.urbanexpression.org.uk

Urban Expression is a church-planting enterprise that began in the East End of London (which is urban, deprived, socially and ethnically very mixed, multicultural and multi-religious) and is now also active in Glasgow, Scotland. They don’t always look like church, and their involvement with their local communities’ needs is very deep. Most or all members of Urban Expression are evangelical, but they don’t have a statement of faith – they are united by what they call their “Core Convictions” which incorporates:

- their Mission Statement (“Urban Expression is an urban mission agency that recruits, equips, deploys and networks self-financing teams pioneering creative and relevant expressions of the Christian church in under-churched areas of the inner city”)
- their Values (relationship, creativity and humility)
- their Commitments (e.g., “We are committed to following God on the margins and in the gaps, expecting to discover God at work among powerless people and in places of weakness” and “We are committed to being Jesus-centred in our view of the Bible, our understanding of mission and all aspects of discipleship”)

The Crowded House

www.thecrowdedhouse.org

The Crowded House is a network of missional communities in the cities of Sheffield

and Loughborough in England, with a strong commitment to church planting. Their website states that “most of our churches meet in homes. We want to offer a place of belonging. We are committed to *mission through community* (we believe that the life of the Christian family is a powerful apologetic for the gospel) and *communities in mission* (we want to be congregations focused on the gospel and church planting)”. The following excerpt from their website illustrates their approach:

At university someone had tried to get Patrick along to church. What a joke! But was he at church now? He wasn't sure. It had started when a colleague asked him round for a meal. He was impressed by how Simon and the other people in his house all got on with one another. They'd got talking about life and stuff and they'd invited him to come round again on Sunday. Simon had suggested he come round in time to watch the football. When others arrived later in

the afternoon they had all eaten together. They were a real hotch-potch of people, but Patrick enjoyed the banter. After the meal they had read from the Bible and discussed what it meant. No-one seemed to mind his questions. Now some were playing a board game. A family with young children had just left. A couple seemed to be praying in the kitchen. Maybe this was church. Maybe it wasn't. Whatever it was, Patrick felt strangely at home.

Wittevrouwenveld, Maastricht, the Netherlands

A young Dutch couple, Tjerk and Anneke van Dijk, have moved into the inner-city district of Wittevrouwenveld in Maastricht. Modelling themselves consciously on the Crowded House model above, they have opened their home as a meeting place for a new church-plant. In this broken and neglected community, they ‘do church’ around the dinner table, welcoming the outcast into table

fellowship, just as Jesus did. This is not a prelude to becoming a proper church, with a meeting room, chairs and the rest. It is already church, and they hope to multiply this model of inclusive community across the district.

A few questions

“Emerging church” is not a panacea for the challenges facing the church in Europe today. But as an ethos, an idea and a movement, it offers us much to consider.

How then should we learn from “emerging church”? How can we participate in the discussions, understand the experiments, learn from the mistakes and success of others, and incorporate them into our own mission strategies and practices? In addition, can we encourage and resource our missionaries with these ideas and practices, and can we contribute to and support the work of others without trying to make it our own? <<



To Catch the Wind:

A New Metaphor for Cross-Cultural Mission Partnerships

When Alex was a boy, cattle were herded through the unpaved street where he lived, three blocks from Main Street, on the way to the slaughterhouse two blocks away. He and his friends would note the number of cars that drove by each day: usually one or two. The rural community in Brazil where Alex was born seems as far away in history as the Middle Ages. Yet, today it is a booming center of industrial activity. Many are now flying on aircraft made in his home town by Embraer, the fourth largest aircraft maker in the world. There has never been another period in human history in which such radical and rapid transformation has occurred. It seems that Alex's grandfather in Brazil had more in common with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob than he would with this generation today.

Because of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, the West has experienced unprecedented development and economic growth. We have been blessed in many ways. Diseases have been eradicated, people are living much longer, technology has made daily life so much easier, reliable infrastructure has been created, and many more people have discretionary income to give for

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the kingdom of God. We define our objectives, gather resources, organize tasks, assemble necessary components—all with great accuracy and precision. In the material realm, we seem to accomplish virtually anything we set our minds to. By gaining control over our material environment, we have removed many of the uncertainties of life.

Amidst these changes in the West, a mindset of high-control became further entrenched in many areas of life. Whether consciously or unconsciously, most of us at some level believe we are “in control.” Except for extraordinary events like Hurricane Katrina or 9/11, we feel we can control outcomes. But here's the problem: Often without realizing it, many Westerners have transferred this mindset or paradigm of high control (which has often worked well in our Western material realm) and have assumed it will also work in the spiritual realm and in global missions.

Because the nature of a paradigm constrains how we see and interact with the world, we (the authors) wanted to bring this “high-control paradigm” to the surface and examine whether there might be a more effective mindset to shape our global mission efforts.

Two Paradigms of Control

We in the West have been so successful in taming the material world to serve our needs and aspirations that we have assumed a paradigm in which control of resources and processes is also the default mode for ministry. Consider...

- We often express our obedience to God in terms of methods and management—assuming a high level of control, taking charge of tasks, and measuring outcomes.
- We set dates, create timetables, and identify numeric results by which to evaluate how well we serve the Lord and his church.

This approach to ministry assumes that the principles of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution are transferable to the affairs of God's kingdom around the world. But could it be that much of this high-control paradigm is *not transferable*? That cross-cultural partnership with the majority world church requires a different way of thinking?

Suppose instead we began with a paradigm in which God is in full control and man has considerably less control? What if we truly viewed the material world as being subordinate to the spiritual world?

This issue of control is critical; it impacts everything. Although most Western believers espouse that God is in control, our high-control paradigm has a built-in aversion to living with high trust in God, i.e., a low-control paradigm. Could this help explain why relying upon one's own strength is, for many Christian leaders, the default mode for day-to-day life and ministry?

This article proposes two metaphors to clarify the contrast between high-control and low-control paradigms, and to guide us into more effective, perhaps more biblical, cross-cultural partnerships.

*Alex Araujo, Mary Lederleitner,
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The Powerboat and the Sailboat

To illustrate the different paradigms of control, compare a powerboat to a sailboat.

A powerboat captures the essence of the Western paradigm. Power is inside the boat, in the hands of the human operator. The powerboat metaphor represents “taking control.” It is confident, modern, powerful, noisy, expensive. The destination—and getting there fast—is often most important. Unless there is a calamity on the sea such as a catastrophic storm, it will go wherever the captain directs, as long as he or she planned well and has enough fuel. The powerboat epitomizes high control.

Contrast the sailboat, representing the paradigm of less control. While the people in a sailboat have some control and power, their power is much more subordinate to the wind. Success depends completely on their cooperation with the wind. Some days the vessel will travel great distances. Other days the Wind will be calm—time to rest and build deeper relationships. The slower days are not deemed inferior to the days when greater distance is traveled—for the journey itself is as important as the destination. Sailors know that a strategy that worked yesterday could get them killed tomorrow. They respect and carefully assess the context, and realize that flexibility is one of their greatest resources.

The sailboat epitomizes high trust, and less control. The external circumstances are the same in both paradigms. The seas are what they are and the weather will be what it will be. The difference lies in the vessel: the design is different, the training is different, the journey is different. Perhaps most important is the mindset of those who choose a powerboat versus a sailboat.

Implications for Cross-Cultural Partnerships

If we function from a paradigm of less control as illustrated by the sailboat metaphor, how might that change how we partner with majority world leaders and churches?

1. Greater mutuality: If we function from a base of material power, there is no way our partners will be able to work alongside us in mutuality and equality. The material power

will likely create resentment, suspicion and confusion. However, if we truly depend primarily on God, we can function with greater mutuality and respect as our eyes will be focused on the same Source.

2. Relationship is primary, accomplishment secondary: The high-trust paradigm helps us to step back and see the big picture. If we accomplish outcomes, yet we fracture relationships and alienate people, we have not succeeded. If we accomplish outcomes yet our prayer life has decreased and our trust in God has lessened, we have not succeeded.

3. The standard is faithfulness: The phenomenal capacity of Westerners to control their material destinies has influenced how we see our service to God. We have optimistically assumed that we can approach world missions in the same way: We define the goals, determine the resources needed, procure the right staff, implement the plan, and expect results. In non-Western contexts where infrastructure and processes are often less stable, partners find it more helpful to measure success by examining “faithfulness.” (Even with stable environments, some partners may define success this way.) We see in Scripture that in the end, faithfulness is also the standard by which God will measure us (Matthew 25:14-30).

4. Embracing vulnerability: Starting from a point of vulnerability and high trust creates in us a willingness to listen more carefully to others, which is critical for working effectively together in cross-cultural ministry. It is also frequently the starting place for deep personal growth and transformation.

5. Sensitivity to context: The sailing metaphor also provides a greater respect for context and a willingness to consider it carefully. Often in the West we are quick to export ways of doing ministry with the belief that what works here will always work elsewhere; however, doing this might actually quench an indigenous model for ministry that would be far more effective.

6. God’s Word alive: The sailboat metaphor, or the high-trust paradigm, has implications for the value of Scripture in how we “do” missions. In the powerboat paradigm, modern business practices are dominant. Could it be, however, that if the sailboat

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paradigm is chosen, Scripture becomes even more vital, more indispensable for how we fulfill the Great Commission? From the beginning, God knows and controls everything; at the same time He has ordained for Himself a people on mission who must depend wholly on Him for security, wisdom, happiness and success. In this paradigm, the operative word is trust, not control.

Conclusion

A paradigm does not determine how much we love God, the level of our commitment to Him, or our personal holiness and devotion. Many who have developed “powerboat structures” have been men and women of great faith. We recognize their contribution and their accomplishments by God’s grace. “Powerboat structures” have often been effective for a given time, in a given context, or a given era.

The goal of this article is to help the church further examine its presuppositions about control, and explore whether a low-control paradigm is needed in this current era of global missions. In a world ripe with injustice, instability and oppression—and where the center of gravity of the global church has seen a massive shift from the West to the Global South—could it be that high-control “powerboat thinking” is far less effective than “sailboat thinking” in cross-cultural partnerships? <<

Reflections on Contextualization

My Personal Journey

Missionaries from the United States brought the Gospel to my grandparents. My father's mother came to Christ in Malacca, Malaya through Methodist missionaries. These missionaries majored on education and started schools. My grandmother's father was keen not only to have his daughters educated in English, but to have a school started in his home. My grandmother was the first convert to be baptized and was also the first local teacher of the Methodist Girls School.¹ Both my paternal and maternal grandparents were "Straits-born Chinese" (or "Peranakan") as they had mingled with Malays and spoke Malay. As I reflect, I am thankful my background has helped me value other cultures.

With exposure to Western education, those converted to Christianity were more than happy to adopt Western patterns while holding to some of their own customs. These would sometimes cause tensions. For example, the selection of a husband for my grandmother would normally be done by her parents. But because my grandmother insisted on having a Christian as her husband, the choice became difficult because there were no eligible Christian men in Malacca. Her father had to journey to Singapore, and with the help of missionaries, he met five fine Christian men for his daughters. My grandmother, the eldest daughter, was matched with the one who was to become her husband. The Methodist archives describe some of these customs, which to us today would be quite hilarious!² The Methodist mission, through schools, bore much fruit. My father,

Benjamin Chew, trusted Christ as a teenager through the Anglo-Chinese School when the evangelist E Stanley Jones spoke.

My mother's side of the family was influenced by Presbyterian missionaries and prominent lay leaders. My parents were also ministered to by Brethren missionaries. When my parents married in Singapore, they were already members of the Brethren Assembly. The churches that were founded followed the patterns of church governance and liturgical practices of the Methodist, Anglican, Presbyterian or Brethren from England or America.

At an early age, I responded to the Gospel through New Zealander J. Oswald Sanders who spoke at my church. I loved my Bible, which was the Authorized King James Version, the Bible used by all congregations at that time. The many Scripture verses I memorized were in the King James. Our leaders prayed using "Thee, Thou and Thy" and we were taught that this was the reverential way to address God. The hymns and choruses we sang were also in "Old English." They remain meaningful to me – to this day.

Many Singaporeans, former "Buddhists" (though more accurately, practicing a mixture of Chinese religions) and "freethinkers" (a favorite expression of those who considered themselves broadminded) turned to Christianity as their new "religion." Conversion was commonly viewed as changing religions – often through the rite of baptism when one would sometimes be given

a Christian name. Some Christian leaders would scarcely know the nature of true conversion, or the difference between converting to Christianity as a religion and entering the kingdom of God. Christianity in Asia, then and now, is generally viewed as a Western religion. Paul Johnson made the piercing statement that "though Christianity was born in Asia, when it was re-exported there from the sixteenth century onwards it failed to acquire an Asian face."³ He explained, "It was the inability of Christianity to ... de-

Europeanise itself which caused it to miss its opportunities." Christianity came to Singapore with British colonization. Colonialism, however, was a political issue and not a religious one. I don't ever remember Christians speaking of "cultural imperialism."

The People's Republic of China was proclaimed on October 1, 1949. China began to expel missionaries and in the early 1950's, the China Inland Mission, later renamed Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF) set up its headquarters in Singapore. Churches were to benefit from the presence of many OMF missionaries. "Para-church" organizations, such as Scripture Union, Youth for Christ and The Navigators, also came to Singapore. These groups influenced our churches in Bible reading, in teaching, in evangelism and discipleship. Theological seminaries were founded which also had evangelical teachers.

Being English-speaking, I had limited contact with Chinese-speaking congregations. In some Chinese services I attended, the worship patterns and hymn tunes were (except for language) similar to English-speaking churches. Dr. Bobby Sng's book, *In His Good Time*, tells the story of the church in Singapore.⁴ Today, there are English-speaking and Chinese-speaking (some in dialects) churches, and also Tamil-speaking and other language groups. However, to this day, to my knowledge, there

Jim Chew



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is no official Malay-Muslim congregation, though there have been some Muslims who have become followers of Christ and are part of a Christian congregation. Would contextualization be an issue? I believe so.

During my student days, a university-mate from a staunch Hindu background received Christ. He did not change his name to a “Thomas” or a “John,” as was common in India. If he did, it would have made it more difficult to influence his family for Christ.

I first encountered the concept of contextualization when working with university students in Malaysia. (According to David Bosch, the term “contextualization” was first coined in the early 1970’s).⁵ For example, I found some Malay Muslims open to talking about religious things. I knew that it was against the law to “convert” Muslims to any other faith. I thought about the relevance of the Gospel to Muslims. I had a conviction that getting them to change their religion to “Christianity,” join a “church,” and adopting a Christian culture was not the mandate of Christ. However, these seed thoughts were dormant.

In Malaysia, my wife and I learned the importance of applying the principle of “incarnation” by opening our home, sharing our lives, and having students and young graduates live with us. They came from non-Christian backgrounds. Some students we disciplined later ministered cross-culturally.⁶

In the early 1970’s, we were sent by The Navigators to New Zealand where we served for four years. At first, it seemed strange to us as Asians to go to what we thought was a “Christian” country. Our “mission field” was primarily the university, where we disciplined New Zealanders (and not Asian or international students). In order to identify with these students, I enrolled for a course on campus. Our New Zealand friends helped us learn the culture. Since we spoke English, there was no need for language learning. As in Malaysia, our home became the centre for ministry with many coming to Christ. There wasn’t a big need to work at “contextualizing” the message. We studied the Scriptures, developed a sense of community among the students and gave them a vision for their lives, seeking God’s kingdom above all. From New Zealand, young missionary trainees were



Discussion in Ouagadougou

sent for exposure to cross-cultural mission, mainly in Asia. Some continued in long-term mission. As missionary sending increased, I realized that missionary preparation and orientation was absolutely vital. On the mission field, missionaries were starting to pioneer ministries among Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Chinese in East Asia.

My wife and I returned to Asia in the mid-1970’s. Seeing the need to prepare mission candidates (both from the West and from Asia) for their work, my colleagues and I had long discussions on culture and contextualization. We studied the Scriptures and read books, papers and articles on culture and cultural anthropology. One text-book was “*The Church and Cultures*,” by Louis Luzbetak.⁷ I also read books by Christian anthropologists Eugene Nida,⁸ Paul Hiebert⁹ and others, and articles in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*. David Hesselgrave’s book, “*Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*,” was helpful.¹⁰ I recognized the importance of understanding worldviews. The concept can be complex, as a worldview is a composite of beliefs from one’s culture, family and religion and determines how one views and interprets reality. From this worldview will flow a person’s values, which in turn will influence behaviour. There can be no behavioural change without transformation within the heart of a person. I observed why missionaries like E. Stanley Jones made an impact because of their understanding of their

host culture’s worldview. I remember hearing Stanley Jones preach on conversion, defining it as a “change gradual or sudden when one passes from the kingdom of self to the Kingdom of God.” He was certainly passionate about the Kingdom of God. He wrote, “Jesus was obsessed with the Kingdom of God ... The Kingdom of God was the only thing he called good news.”¹¹ Surely, that’s what we are called to advance among the nations – the Gospel of Jesus and His Kingdom.

I strengthened my convictions about contextualization, rooting these in the Scriptures. Jesus Christ, of course is our prime example. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). All New Testament authors wrote “in context.” Paul was constantly ministering contextually and his messages were relevant to his different audiences. For example, his sermon to the Jews in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:14-41) was very different from his message at the meeting of the Areopagus (Acts 17:22-31). Contextualization will affect not only our message but our lifestyles and the ways we minister.

In 1978, at a Congress on Evangelism, I presented a paper and spoke on “Culture and Religious Background in Relation to Conversion.”¹² By then, contextualization was becoming a much-discussed concept. The *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, January 1978 had an issue on contextualization. In

January 1978, there was also a landmark Consultation on “The Gospel and Culture.” The Willowbank Report on the Consultation is a must-read.¹³ One section of the Report worth re-reading is on missionary humility.” Ethnocentrism is an obstacle we face in crossing cultures. None of us can claim to be exceptions! Peter (in Acts 10) is a classic example. Dean Flemming writes about Peter’s conversion from his Jewish ethnocentrism: “The ‘conversion’ of the messenger must come before the conversion of those who need the message.”¹⁴ Humility means taking the trouble to understand and really appreciate the culture of those to whom we go.

In the 1980’s, I continued studying the Scriptures with my colleagues on issues of contextualization. We held consultations with mission practitioners ministering among Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Secularists. Paul’s letter to Galatians was one of the key epistles for our study and discussion, together with the history of the early church in Acts and subsequent church history. A project on “The Scriptural Roots of Ministry” was launched. We were concerned about the *purity* of the Gospel and with it, the *mobility* of the Gospel to spread in context. Studying the Scriptures was both mind-stretching and also

liberating. Two key questions were: “What is the Gospel?” and “What is ‘church’?” On the latter question, Western ecclesiology has highly influenced concepts and strategies of so-called “church planting.” Such ecclesiology can be extremely disadvantageous among hostile religious contexts – and this could affect the mobility of the Gospel. How does the Bible view the whole matter of “church” and “doing church”?

I took a sabbatical in New Zealand where I had discussions with missionary statesman, J. Oswald Sanders, one of my mentors. As we talked about contextualization and mission issues, he encouraged me to write a book. I wrote *When You Cross Cultures*.¹⁵ I was particularly impressed by the example of Paul and his team in 1 Thessalonians 1:5-9 and 2:1-12. It was not just their message, but their lives and lifestyle – all part of contextualization. In my book, I mentioned the five stages of cultural communication (owing much to Jim Petersen, who had led a seminar on contextualization).¹⁶ The communicator must firstly:

1. *Gain rapport*. He needs to be aware of his own cultural background and free himself from traditions that will inhibit him from relating to the new culture. The continuous learning of the host cul-

ture’s background is essential. Rapport takes place when the people in the receiving culture say, “I now want to hear what you have to say.”

2. The second stage is *Comprehension*, which occurs when the receiver says, “I now understand what you have to say.”
3. The third stage is for an *Equivalent Response* on the part of the receiver – “It means the same to me as it does to you.” What the messenger has communicated makes sense and brings about a positive response.
4. The fourth is *Relevance to Life*. The message transforms the receiver’s life and there is true conversion.
5. Finally, we see *Mature Co-labourship* in the advance of the Gospel. The apostolic team has assumed its role and the receivers spread the Gospel in context undistorted by cultural traditions. As Jim Petersen states: “The issue in contextualization is the truth and mobility of the Gospel...It means taking care that it remains undistorted by the culture of the hearer as it is being received. The Gospel plus anything ... becomes a non-Gospel.”¹⁷

In practice, this process can be complex and even messy. One obvious problem comes from one’s own traditions. The Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15) had to convene to deal with this problem and Galatians was written because the truth of the Gospel was being threatened. We see Paul in heated battle with Peter on this issue. James’ words in Acts 15:19 are a reminder “that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.”

I was helped reading Paul Hiebert’s book, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, where he writes about bounded sets and centered sets.¹⁸ Western culture and churches often think and operate as bounded sets with a Greek worldview of reality. Hiebert examines Hebrew culture as a “centered set.” This helped me to see the dangers of “Churchianity” (promoting the traditions and forms of church),



Waitress in Norway

of promoting Christianity (as a religion) and not focusing on the Person of Christ.

In the 1980's, more Asians were responding to the challenge of cross-cultural missions, many going as bi-vocational tent-makers to restricted access countries. The lack of missionary preparation and pre-field orientation became evident. In Singapore, mission leaders from eight mission societies met, and under the leadership of Dr. James Taylor of Overseas Missionary Fellowship, formed the Asia Cross-Cultural Training Institute (ACTI). We developed a curriculum which included Cross-Cultural Living and Ministry, Contextualization, and Cultural Anthropology. ACTI continues to function well. Its September 2007 publication, *Asian Mission*, has its focus on "Contextualization and the Church."¹⁹

Churches are growing in Africa, Asia and in Latin America. When evangelical statesman John Stott was asked about this enormous growth, his response was that the growth was a fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. When asked how he evaluated this growth, he said, "The answer is, 'growth without depth'."²⁰ This speaks again of the importance of laying the foundations of the Gospel well. It also emphasizes the importance of establishing our churches, ensuring that true spiritual transformation is taking place. In doing so, I have learned the importance of concepts such as function, form and meaning. Are the functions and forms relevant as we see the work of God in the growth of faith communities?

Finally, in the past decade, the issue of "C5/Insider Movements" has come to the fore. The concept began with John Travis (a pseudonym) in 1998, who proposed a scale (or continuum), C1-C6, describing six types of "Christ-centered communities" (that's what the "C" stands for) found in Muslim contexts.²¹ "C5" refers to Muslim believers who identify themselves as "Muslim followers of Jesus." I don't intend to enter this debate, as many papers have been written on this subject. (See a sampling in the endnotes).²² This issue has generated much discussion, sometimes with more heat than light. Do keep in mind that C1-C6 began as an analytical (and not a prescriptive) tool. It was devised by an American ministering

in a Muslim country. My American friends think in terms of matrices and spectra (as an Asian co-worker reminded me). These are helpful. However, Asians, and certainly most Muslims, don't have discussions using such a paradigm. We usually communicate through stories (as Jesus did).

Having met some believers in these "insider movements" whose lives have been transformed, each community would have their stories. They worship God deeply and are seeing the movement of the Gospel among their own relational networks. I visualize the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. I can't help thinking of the years the Apostle Paul took to see the growth of the church at Corinth.²³ Similarly, the apostolic ministries among these believers have seen fruit. In one Asian country where race, religion, language and politics all reinforce each other, C5 seems to work best. My plea is for critics to pray more for these "insider movements" and affirm the work of God. The discussions continue and so must our attitude of being learners.

Some years ago, I was told that these growing believers from a particular people group did a prolonged Bible study on "Worship". It would have been a grand study! I often try to visualize the scene in Revelation 5 and look forward to worshipping with these believers in heaven! John Piper's words are a powerful reminder – "Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate...because God is ultimate. When this age is over and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more...Worship abides forever."²⁴ That's ultimate reality! <<

Endnotes

- 1 *My Times are in His Hands, a Biography of Dr Benjamin Chew*, (Singapore Youth for Christ, 1991), pages 23-25.
- 2 Earnest Lau, "Malacca's first Chinese Methodist wedding," Methodist Message (June 2003). (The Methodist Church, Singapore) describing my grandparents wedding.
- 3 Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, (New York: Atheneum, 1976), page 410.
- 4 Bobby E K Sng, *In His Good Time*, The Story of the Church in Singapore, 1819-2002 (3rd Edition,

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- 5 David J Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), page 240.
- 6 See David Bok, *The Navigators in Malaysia*, The First Twenty Five Years (Navigators Malaysia, Second Edition, 2001). Also Waldron Scott, "Training Malaysian Leaders," Evangelical Missions Quarterly, Volume 6, No 4, Summer 1970, pages 203-208.
- 7 Louis J Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures*, (Techny, Illinois: Divine Word Publications, 1970).
- 8 Eugene A Nida, *Customs, Culture and Christianity*, (Tyndale Press, 1963).
- 9 Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1978).
- 10 David J Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) The 2nd Edition was published in 1991.
- 11 E Stanley Jones, *A Song of Ascents*, (Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press, 1968), page 153.
- 12 Jim Chew, *Culture and Religious Background in Relation to Conversion*, paper presented at Congress on Evangelism for Malaysia and Singapore, 1978.
- 13 <http://www.lausanne.org/willowbank-1978/lop-2.html>
- 14 Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament* (Leicester, UK: Apollos, IVP, 2005), pages 36-37.
- 15 Jim Chew, *When You Cross Cultures: Vital Issues Facing Christian Missions* (The Navigators Singapore, 1990).
- 16 Illustrated in pages 8-10 in my book above.
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- 19 Website www.acti-singapore.org (look under "PRESS").
- 20 John Stott, "Evangelism Plus," Christianity Today, October 2006.
- 21 John Travis, *The C1-C6 Spectrum*, Evangelical Missions Quarterly, October 1998, pages 407-408.
- 22 1) *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, October 1998, articles by Phil Parshall and John Travis, pages 404-415
2) Joshua Massey, *His Ways are Not our Ways*, EMQ April 1999 www.EMQonline.com
3) *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, Spring 2000, Volume 17, articles by John Travis, Joshua Massey, Bernard Dutch.
4) John & Anna Travis, "Appropriate approaches in Muslim contexts," in *Appropriate Christianity*, ed. Charles Kraft (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2005), pages 397-414.
5) Bill Nikides, "Evaluating 'Insider Movements': C5 (Messianic Muslims)," St Francis Magazine, (Interserve and Arab Vision, No.4, March 2006).
6) *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, January-March 2007 Volume 24:1, www.ijfm.org/archives.htm, articles by Gary Corwin, Herbert Hoefler, J Dudley Woodberry, Kevin Higgins.
7) Articles in IJFM Volume 24:2 in www.ijfm.org/archives.htm.
- 23 See my article, "Mission and Spirituality: Lessons from 1 Corinthians" in *The Soul of Mission*, ed. Tan Kang San, (Pustaka Sufes Sdn Bhd, Selangor, Malaysia, 2007), pages 50-63.
- 24 John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), page 11.

Jesus was a master at integrating local context and imagination. He adopted his cultural backdrop, with its symbols and everyday artifacts, to point to earthly truth and transcendent meaning. He engaged heart and mind and consistently called upon the ability to imagine.

The arts, the imagination and contextualization

Lovingly, God brought all things into being in moments of hovering holy imagination. Man and woman were formed as those who would bear the image and the imagination of their Creator. We are by our very nature created to be cultural beings that are actively involved in the constant re-creation of our world. Our cultural work will include the cultivation of the arts, which in turn will be indispensable in the task of contextualization—offering us a language that penetrates deeply into the heart and soul.

The inaugural gathering of indigenous Christians from around the world was a colorful time of celebration. It demonstrated the rich diversity of the nations worshipping God through their own cultural forms. When a video of the event was later viewed by a group of Inuit people in Alaska, they wept uncontrollably. For them, the good news of the Gospel had been accompanied by bad news for their cultural expressions. Their weeping was a mixture of sorrow and joy—sorrow for what they had lost and joy at the thought of regaining their own artistic and cultural expressions in worship and celebration of God.

Worldview embodiment

The Great Commission, by integrating the use of story (teaching), symbol and ritual (baptism) and cross-cultural communication (all nations), draws attention to the strategic role that the visual and symbolic must play in the evangelism and discipleship process.

Understanding the arts is vital for evangelism and missions because of the central role they play in every culture. Every people group is informed by a meta-narrative that contains its beliefs and values. This Grand Story is affirmed in the present and passed on to the next generation, through the arts—storytelling, drama, music, dance and visual arts. The artistic expressions of a given people group encode their worldview. One of the urgent tasks facing the church in the outworking of this commission is to find new and creative ways to embody the gospel narrative in indigenous forms.

Heart language

Indigenous arts are expressive, intrinsic communication forms that are integrated within and across the structures of a given society; they define and sustain cultural norms and values. Becoming acquainted with the artistic expressions of diverse cultures is as important as attending language school in preparation for mission work. The arts provide a window to the language of the heart, and the worldview of any people group.

Reclaiming indigenous art forms

Mission organizations need to champion the value of arts done by the local people in their own style, rhythm and language, allowing them to express their praise to God. Though the approach is changing, there are still groups of missionaries insisting on Western art forms for indigenous churches. Because of teaching they have received, many non-Western churches have adopted this practice, making it a challenging task for local leadership to reclaim their traditional music and art forms within a Christian framework.

Every people group has its own unique cultural traditions, artistic expressions and festivals that are woven into their daily life. Contextualization must involve indigenous Christian leaders of the culture in the restoration and sanctification of these symbols, ceremonies and art forms where possible—redirecting them towards Christ. The fear of syncretism, justified as it is, should not immobilize this process from moving forward, depriving people of the opportunity to worship and celebrate in their own heart language.

Dr. Colin Harbinson



Dr. Colin Harbinson was born in London, England, and has been involved in many varied aspects of the arts and missions for 30 years.

As a leader in Youth With a Mission for over two decades, Colin became the International Dean of the College of the Arts, was a member of the international leadership team of the University of the Nations, and pioneered the arts in YWAM. Colin is the founder of the International Festival of the Arts that pioneered Sacred Fire—the first East-West arts festival in St. Petersburg, Russia—and the Love Without Borders festival in Sofia, Bulgaria. The Ode to Joy festival in Kunming China involved over 700 artists from 21 countries and was the largest international arts festival of its kind in the history of that nation.

We must reject any mono-cultural perspective of mission that would deny indigenous people the right to celebrate faith in Christ with their own creative forms and within their own cultural framework, and encourage the renewal and redirection of cultural practices towards Christ that are free from Western Christian forms that hinder the celebration of indigenous creativity.

Imagine a future

The Inuit continue to explore and express their faith within their own cultural context. One example is their discovery of an analogy to Christ in the ancient story of an “eagle-man,” who gave up his wings and his high loft in the cliff and became an Eskimo, so he could teach a lost family how to survive on the cold tundra. He saved their lives in order to “begin a new kind of people” on the earth. During a cold winter, seven Eskimo (Inupiat) Christian young people performed this story in several of their villages—accompanied by original songs. As they did, God touched people through one of their own stories, its analogy to Christ and what he had done to save mankind.

As we engage these and the many other important issues surrounding the arts and contextualization, can we imagine a future in which the church in all people groups will reinforce the biblical narrative, pass it on to next generation, and celebrate the goodness of God within their own cultural framework with their own indigenous instruments and art forms? Can we imagine a future in which mission organizations will value the partnership of artists and the arts in fulfilling the Great Commission as consultants in indigenous hymnody and contextualization? <<

This article has been adapted from the Lausanne Occasional Paper, “Redeeming the Arts,” edited by Dr. Colin Harbinson.

Article for WEA MC Connections Magazine reporting on the second stage of the Wycliffe International Missiological Consultative Process

The journey of reflection moves forward

Wycliffe leaders from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas gathered in August 2006 to begin a missiological journey. Our conversations became a means of empowerment as together we sought to find our leadership voice and presence with the church worldwide. Each of us had experienced firsthand the pressure of spending most of our energies on plans, strategies, budgets... and, of course, intended outcomes. But we knew we were missing something—we needed to dig deeper to discover what our work and world looked like through missiological lenses. Facilitated by Bill Taylor, our three days together became a historic turning point for each of us and the organizations we lead. The August 2007 issue of Connections has a report on that consultation held in Orlando.

Our experience at that first consultation inspired us to plan a second gathering. Eighteen leaders met for three days in Singapore in August 2007. There was intentional consideration of diversity in the selection of participants. Seven represented Wycliffe International (a Guatemalan, Australian, American and Korean) and eight represented Wycliffe organizations (South Africa, US, Papua New Guinea, Cameroon, South Korea, Singapore and Germany). All of the participants held executive-level leadership roles in their respective organizations. We also included a Wycliffe International

Board member from Argentina and a representative from SIL International, a major partner organization. Bill Taylor wasn't available to be our facilitator, but recommended Kang San Tan, now at Redcliffe College, who graciously agreed to fit us into his schedule.

Selecting Singapore as host nation for this consultation was a significant choice. Wycliffe Singapore was the host organization and Grace Chinese Church (a supporting church of Wycliffe Singapore) was selected as the meeting place.

We invited several Singaporean church and mission leaders for our first day. Meeting in an Asian city-nation represented a more-than-symbolic shift in our understanding and intention to the majority world church. We were able to reflect and discuss in the midst of different worldview perspectives. Through this, our desire for our missiological foundation and expression to be better represented by the worldwide church became more apparent.

Preparing through reading and reflection

As a part of the consultative process, we sought a reflective methodology to stimulate the participants as they considered missiological issues affecting the organizations they lead. Therefore, each participant was asked to read articles and books before they arrived in Singapore. Kang-San and I selected these

By Kirk Franklin



Kids in South Africa

readings. They were:

- An abstract of *The World is Flat*, by Thomas Friedman
- *The Future of Globalizing Mission: What the Literature Suggests*, by Marty Shaw and Enoch Wan
- *Globalization and the Gospel: Rethinking Mission in the Contemporary World*, from the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization
- *Demographics, Power and the Gospel*, by Andrew Walls
- *A Body of Christ Missiology*, by Kent Parks
- *Celebrating and Shaping Our Work with Churches*, by Cheryl Catford
- *Truth with a Mission*, by Chris Wright with Steven Coertze's introductory comments
- *Christology and Culture*, by Kang-San Tan
- *Liberating Word: The Power of the Bible in the Global South*, by Philip Jenkins
- *The Failure of the West and Can the South Save the West?* by Jonathan Ingleby
- *Reclaiming the M-Word: The Legacy of Missions in Nonwestern Societies*, by Robert D Woodberry
- *The Big 3 Missiological Issues*, (from the August 2006 WBTI Missiological Consultation) edited by Kirk Franklin

I asked the participants to come with summaries of their reflections from the readings. In Singapore, each person was given fifteen minutes to share what they had learned. Even though some participants had not had the benefit of the first consultative experience, all gave excellent contributions from their reflective readings. There is a noticeable depth in the reflective process which highlights the benefit of what we are doing. The reflective thinking was somewhat dictated by

the reading list but this was to be expected. Being purposefully reflective practitioners* is a new experience for many of the participants. As leaders, our initial response is to immediately attempt to “solve” problems, systems, structures and processes. In-depth reflection requires learning and reorientation. The structured reading and reflection process helps us begin to act differently.

**Reflective practitioners are people “of both action and reflection, committed to God’s truth; obedient in the power of God’s Spirit to the Great Commission in all its fullness” (Global Missiology for the 21st Century, pg. 5).*

Plenary presentations

Kang-San Tan started each day of the consultation with a thought-provoking presentation. His first presentation, “Key Issues in Missiology,” outlined sixteen issues arising from his missiological reflections on the current status of the mission enterprise and its global impact, including Bible translation. His second, “Building Mission Reflection,” outlined the value of reflection within a mission endeavour. Kang-San’s third presentation was entitled “Transforming Conversion: From conversion to the transformation of culture.” This presentation developed the observation that globalization and multicultural realities have resulted in a new generation of Christians who are shaped by more than one religious tradition. These new contexts impact our understanding of transformation.

Stephen Coertze, Wycliffe missiologist and director of Wycliffe South Africa, presented a paper titled “Missiology in Wycliffe International: Possibilities for the future.” It explored the concept that a contribution of missiology should be to equip *all* levels of the organisation to think, strategize and function according to sound missiological understanding.

Participants met in break-out groups to process the salient points from each presentation, then brought their summaries and thoughts back into the wider missiological conversations that took place during the three days together.

Reviewing the three “Big Missiological Issues”

At the Orlando consultation, three “Big Missiological Issues” had been identified as the issues on which Wycliffe International should be focussing. One of the goals of the Singapore consultation was to further process these to create meaningful articles, message outlines and other resources for Wycliffe leaders to use. The three issues we had identified were:

- a) The church – its missiological significance to us
- b) Bible translation – its missiological basis and context
- c) *Vision 2025 – its missiological importance

**Vision 2025 is a vision adopted by Wycliffe and numerous partner organizations—“By 2025, to see, through partnership, Bible translation in progress for every language group that needs it.”*

It was obvious that there was not going to be enough time to give adequate attention to the three “Big Issues.” Furthermore, our group was too large to effectively explore the issues in detail. We did, however, clarify that we would need multiple statements to speak to a variety of audiences on these issues. The issues are of paramount importance in urgent need of development because they are critical to Wycliffe and its ministry.

Other themes

During the course of the consultation, a number of other noteworthy topics emerged. We would benefit from further exploration, reflection and research on these now and in the future. These topics arose either from the plenary sessions or from the reflections on the reading. Some overlap with the three “Big Issues” or further expand them:

- Bible translation as mission: The theology of Bible translation as mission, including research into all factors of Bible translation as mission; Bible translation as a kingdom activity rather than a traditional missions activity; an apologia for Bible translation as mission that can be used with the church; mobilization issues arising from this research; the impact of Bible translation on cultures; Bible translation’s connection with theology; the face of a Bible translation movement; ownership of the Bible.

- Translation issues affecting the Wycliffe Member Organizations (WMOs) with Language Programs (such as transformation and holistic transformational development).
- Whole church responsibility: The Global South's responsibility for mission, including Bible translation; evaluation of the readiness of the church of the Global South for increased responsibility and ownership; is the Western model of mission the right one for the future, especially for the Global South?; how do we move beyond West/East/South classification to a decentralized interconnectedness?; how to help the African church make Bible translation a priority and increase understanding that it is not a "Western work"; the features of a mission agency that is no longer identified by Western 'clothing'.
- The Newer Sending Countries: Development of mission reflection for the newer sending countries (including learning from history and grappling with different questions such as HIV-AIDS, poverty, the plight of refugees, etc.).
- Missional ecclesiology in terms of how WBTI views the church and vice versa, involving the Non-Western church to teach the Western church how to do mission.
- Empire building: affects and implications on mission and Bible translation.
- Globalization: an elusive factor worthy of further consideration.
- Serving with bold humility.
- Understanding and relating to our partner SIL's articulation of its mission.

What did we achieve?

- Our missiological foundation and expression is now being represented from a worldwide church perspective.
- We are now positioned as intentional international missiological participants.
- Multiple Wycliffe leaders are now active participants in the missiological discussion.
- We recognise that external facilitators help us move beyond our own constraints.
- We recognise that a concerted effort will need to be made to create a culture of reflective practitioners.
- There is a general consensus that the missiological process in Wycliffe is moving in the right direction.
- There is high anticipation among Wycliffe

leaders concerning what missiological reflection can offer.

Recommendations

The second consultation made a number of recommendations to the Wycliffe International leadership, including:

1) Develop missiological "reflectors":

We should develop a core group of reflective practitioners who keenly apply their minds to specific issues. They will help Wycliffe Bible Translators, Inc. (WBTI) engage at the global level to influence missiological dialogue and strategy as it relates to Bible translation.

2) Intentionally develop reflective thinkers:

There is a definite need to develop a pool of general reflective practitioners within WBTI—in fact we want to encourage all our Wycliffe leaders to make time to read and think reflectively. Building on what was covered at the consultation, it is essential that our leaders understand and articulate the theological and missiological underpinnings of Bible translation.

3) Wycliffe International Convention

2008: A full day is being set aside at our global conference to intentionally grapple with questions surrounding the church in the context of Wycliffe's work.

4) Formal training:

Appropriate missiological training would be helpful to various levels of organizational functions. There was a call for curriculum development in the African Francophone context to provide a Bible translation curriculum from a missiological perspective into Bible schools.

5) Financing missiological development:

WBTI should consider providing scholarship funds and other financial assistance for WBTI and Wycliffe Member Organisations (WMO) leaders to develop themselves as missional

leaders through study programs, attending workshops, courses and personal reflection.

6) Culture shift through reflection and research in WBTI:

WBTI is going through numerous changes. Bringing missiology into focus at this stage will effectively help the organization work through the changes. However, missiology must not become the hanger "on which the changes hang," because if some changes are not popular, missiology as a culture could be rejected as well. The WBTI administration will benefit from incorporating missiological research and reflection into its decision-making processes. Therefore, WBTI can utilize the help of Stephen Coertze to begin this process. His South African Board has agreed to release him for 30% of his time during 2008 to be the missiological advisor to WBTI and its Global Leadership Team.

7) Research: Writings in theology, ecclesiology and apologetics from an Asian, African, or Latin American perspective in the context of their own situations are few and far between or are not widely known or accessible. WBTI may have a role to play in stimulating missiological research. These missiological discussions and results should be shared with the local church as Wycliffe engages with them.

Conclusion

Our missiological foundation and expression is well on the way to becoming a significant development for Wycliffe. Many of our leaders are developing as reflective practitioners. Others at least have a better understanding of the value of this approach. There is active buy-in from key Wycliffe leadership in this entire process. Therefore, there is scope to continue the consultative process with a core group of reflective practitioners, using internal and external resource personnel, to guide Wycliffe in developing its missional thinking in all of its ministries. <<



Kirk Franklin grew up in the mountains of Papua New Guinea, the son of American Wycliffe linguist-Bible translators. He became involved with Wycliffe in 1980 and has served in media-communications and leadership roles in Papua New Guinea and Australia. On January 1, 2008 Kirk became the Executive Director/CEO of Wycliffe International, which is an association of 48 member organizations worldwide that have agreed to work with each other and with partners around the world, promoting and participating in local and international Bible translation movements. Kirk is based in Melbourne, Australia.

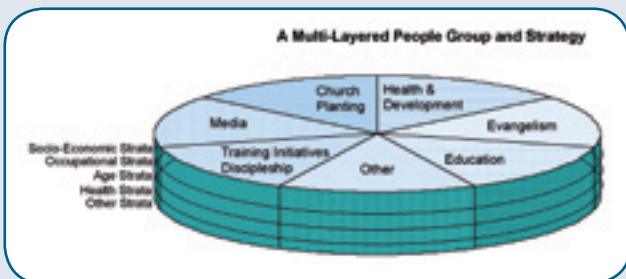
A “peoples” approach:

Mission apartheid or practical universality?

Particular Gospel contextualization is necessary so the result can be universal. Jesus’ universal claims require development of transformation strategies for each population segment.

The Ethnê Initiative’s vision - “Peoples joining together to glorify God among all peoples” - is an attempt to “trans-culturalize” Jesus’ command to *make disciples* of all ethnê. The context: fragmented, segmented, Babel-cursed population segments cut off from humanity and God. The message: God will reunify peoples with him and the rest of humanity. Contextualized communications: send the Gospel along culturally-defined paths into the hearts, minds and spirits of each person and “people.”

A vision which only seeks a transforming movement to Christ among a people group is *too small*. Contextualization is a “missions apartheid” approach if it is only about reaching “those like me.”



Historical context: In the 1963 Mexico City World Council of Churches meeting, some announced the death of missions. The Church existed in most countries. Colonialism was dying. Nationalism had emerged. Some deemed culture-crossing mission efforts no longer necessary.

In the 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelism, Ralph Winter emphasized that the Church’s existence in a country did not mean all the people groups had contextualized Gospel access. Nationalism inherited colonialism’s inadequate geographical definition of “nation” rather than a more accurate definition as a mosaic of ethnicities.

Historians showed how cross-cultural witnesses entered a nation and naturally focused

on “more responsive, fulfilling” segments, and often ignored “more difficult to reach” peoples. In India, lack of focused efforts left some castes “under-served.” In Burma, some peoples responded in large numbers, while the majority ethnic group received little specific focus. The Thai church is mainly made up of non-Thai ethnic groups. Some Indonesian ethnic groups are considered “Christian,” but over 2/3 of Indonesia’s peoples are considered “Ignored.” The Malaysia church chose in the early 1900’s not to evangelize the majority Malays (for political, economic and harmony reasons).

S. Kent Parks, Ph. D.

Definitions: Researchers exposed the ethno-linguistic or socio-ethnic fracture lines in each nation through various terms. “Unreached People Groups” differed slightly from the more technical “Least Evangelized Peoples.” India’s context required more socio-ethnic and geographic categories. Indonesia’s Peoples Network accepted their responsibility by choosing the term “Ignored” peoples.

A “people group” is an interwoven whole consisting of several strata. Specific strata may benefit from similar strategies used with like-strata in other people groups (e.g., youth, disabled, women) – but a specific global stratus is *not* a “people group.” A family or a clan will have members of several strata but are from a common ethno-linguistic or socio-ethnic background.

Universality: The “impossibility” of the task stimulated multi-cultural collaboration and new depths of global family bonding. The global AD2000 Movement sought focus for each people group. A move toward a “Body of Christ” missiology began to emerge.

Yet, just as Christ-followers around the world were joining in reaching unreached ethnê, some leaders began to call for a de-emphasis of the people group focus. The global South leaders, whose countries are more typically multi-cultural and may have more intuitively gravitated to this idea, were surprised. One global South

leader said: “About the time we joined them (the global North) in this vision, they began telling us that they were off to some new idea.”

As AD2000 phased out, mainly global South mission leaders called for a global continuation of this emphasis. The Ethnê Initiative was born.

Strategic particularity: Demassified, focused strategies have emerged - and colonial strategies and nationalistic /industrial wave mass strategies diminished. A monolithic nation-state focus reverted to a more biblical understanding of each “nation” as a collection of languages, peoples, tribes, cities, etc.

This people group emphasis is a wonderful transculturalization of Jesus’ command to disciple all ethnê (population segments). Specialized strategies for each strata are needed – but within the context of a comprehensive strategy for the whole people group. If legitimate, these particular strategies must result in universal reintegration. Humanity will be built up *and* enriched by each people group’s cultural strengths.

The vision must include a mission sending movement from that people group to other peoples. Mission “sending” is a required proof and privilege of transforming discipleship. When formerly unreached people join in completing the Commission, they experience amazing reunification with God’s global family. Jesus accomplished this with his ethno-centric Jewish followers – new believers transformed into disciple-makers of all ethnê – including whichever “Samaritan” group they hate.

A people group approach is a practical universality which segments the task in order to unify humanity ultimately. *Ethnê to Ethnê: This Generation.* <<



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Member Care and Contextualization

It takes time, not appointments; it takes food not famine

“As a Brit, I feel cared for and supported when someone offers me tea, a copy of the ‘Times’, puts on some classical music and leaves me alone!”

“In my city, Latinos don't come for counselling or any kind of structured form of 1-1 help. Instead we have coffee at home, we eat, we talk, with kids around us, and after a couple of hours, it might happen that we talk deep, very informal.”

Member care, like much of missions, has three contexts:

- Cultural
- Theological
- Organisational

Cultural context:

The two comments above are typical responses from low- and high-context cultures. High-context care needs to be relationally based, based on a we/us dimension not an I/me, as in the second comment. High-context care takes time not appointments, it takes food not famine: “North East Indians are the same. Islanders are the same and the Chinese are the same, just with tea instead of coffee, with BBQ or hot pot.”

In addition to the relational aspect of our cultural context, our perceptions of ourselves are culturally-based and can generate a need to look again at how we see ourselves. For example, French people describe their own culture as “a culture of criticism,” which can have a negative affect on a missionary’s self-esteem.

Delivery of member care must acknowledge the missionary’s cultural context and the world as he/she sees it. It may mean

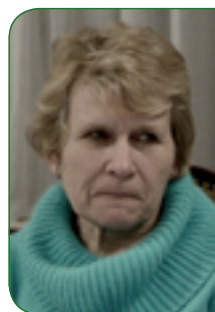
revising some of our accepted counselling procedures and the training given to member care providers and mission leaders. For example, one member care professional noted, “All of these people might come to a seminar, but not for one-to-one coaching or counselling, unless they hit a rock-bottom crisis.”

Theological context:

In many parts of the world, missions equal self-sacrifice: “Why care for yourself when God calls you to die or at least to burn out for Him?”

Elsewhere, a triumphalist theology means not acknowledging pain or weakness because this could indicate you are questioning God’s calling, enabling, and ultimate victory: A Latin American couple is physically assaulted and robbed while working in a large European city; they feel guilt and shame at not being able to “shake off” the assault experience and get on with their work and “walk in victory.”

We need to develop a theology of member care which is biblically, based but takes into account the different emphasis in different theologies. Where does God strike the balance between self-care and member care?



Marion Knell is fully involved in Member Care and is part of the European Member Care Consultation as well as a ExCo member of the Global Member Care Network, a network of the WEA MC.

Marion Knell, UK

The Bible says both, “Carry each other’s burdens” (Galatians 5:2), and “Each should carry his own burden (Galatians 6:5). Is there a contradiction within these verses? No, the personal burden is a light shoulder-pack; the shared burden is a heavy rucksack.

Organisational context:

Member care in the organisational context is often related to the lack of clarity concerning what the missionary is expected to do and how he is expected to do it. For example, “US Americans appreciate member care services that give practical information, and allow for confidential expression of feelings.” By contrast, “In South Africa, they appreciate the understanding and caring of their supporting churches back home.”

In many organisations, a culture of member care does not exist. The organisation is fixated on the task. One missionary said, “It is accepted that everyone who does my job burns out in seven years.”

Agencies and churches need encouragement and information to develop their own procedures and structures that enhance the well-being of their members long term, and most importantly, to have a sound policy on work/life balance and the consequent expectations.

Jesus said: “Love your neighbour as yourself,” presupposing that we know how to love ourselves. We need to pose the question: What do I/we understand by that verse, culturally, theologically and organisationally? We might uncover some interesting answers (“interesting” being a typical British understatement!). <<

Contextualizing mission information management in the 21st century

The Joint Information Management Initiative (JIMI) is the taskforce of the WEA MC charged with enhancing and enabling information management within the context of world mission. This is being done within the framework of the global proliferation of information and communication technologies that characterizes the information age. The challenge to JIMI is to assist mission organizations, partnerships, networks and movements in utilizing those technologies best in advancing the Kingdom of God within and from their own contexts.

As a global mission community, we need to realise that the Internet and other information and communication technologies influence many aspects of 21st century life. Personal communication, media, entertainment, education, governance, military, science, research, management and marketing are all areas of life where new technologies have a great impact. The following chart on Internet usage statistics (see www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm) on 31 May 2008 shows the extensive use of the Internet in different regions of the world. The growth in Internet usage, especially in the developing world, is a clear indication that information communication technologies such as Internet based technologies will increase in importance in the next decades. The global mission community needs to take note of that!

Global mobile phone use is increasing even more rapidly than Internet use—about 3.25 billion people will have used mobile phones by the end of 2007. More than 1,000 new people are effectively signing up for mobile phones every minute around the world.

From a mission perspective, the question is how could this expansion in technologies be used in God’s mission in the world of the 21st century within the framework of different mission contexts?

Dr. Sas Conradie

ICT is an important tool to make life easier or to spread a message quicker. It is not the message itself but could be used in transmitting the message. Within a missional context there are a number of ways this tool could be used and contextualized:

a) Connecting people: Most cross-cultural missionaries and Christian workers depend on ICT to communicate with their home churches, prayer supporters, people they are evangelising, leaders, etc.. It does not matter from where they are or where they are working, to communicate and connect these workers will use e-mail, mobile or satellite phones, Skype or the kind of communication tool that is most appropriate to them. Contextualization means using the appropriate communication tool in the appropriate context. That could be a satellite phone for a local church leader in Sudan or blogs for mission leaders in Europe.

b) Spreading the message: What is generally known as Cybermissions or using ICT in evangelism and Christian training is becoming one of the most important tools in spreading the Gospel in the 21st century. Web evangelism, Internet Bible teaching, Scripture downloads on mobile phones, online seminaries, Christian websites and discipleship discussion forums are just a few ways of spreading the Gospel message. However, much is still to be done in terms of encouraging

c) Information management: ICT enhances the gathering, verification, analysis, storing, communication and dissemination of information. Improved information and information management through the use of electronic technologies enables improved strategy development and improved outcomes. This is also the case with missional communities. Conditions have to emerge in which Christians are enthused to contribute towards the development of mission information databases and systems that are disseminated through local networks, in local and national languages and through context appropriate technological infrastructure. Various modes of ICT would need to be integrated with one another so that a meaningful volume of information can be generated in the minimum possible time to have the greatest possible impact in sharing Jesus and transforming lives. In an increasingly interconnected and interdependent global mission community, a further challenge is to network “contextualized” local, national and regional mission information systems in such a way that a platform could be created for mission strategy development and mission resources sharing based on sufficiently accurate mission information.

Mission information needs to guide the global mission community to become more effective in outreach and use of available resources. JIMI wants to work with Christian communities in using context appropriate technologies to connect with one, to spread the Gospel and to develop information systems that can enhance mission strategy. <<

ing Christians to develop context and language appropriate ICT content that takes into account the needs of specific target groups.

Sas Conradie works for CMS-UK and is especially involved as co-ordinator of the Global Mission Fund, a joint initiative of CMS and WEA MC. Sas also is the taskforceleader for the Joint Information Management Initiative (JIMI), one of the taskforces of the WEA MC.

| World Regions | Internet Usage, Latest Data | % Population (Penetration) | Usage Growth 2000-2008 |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|
| Africa | 51,022,400 | 5.3 % | 1,030.2 % |
| Asia | 530,153,451 | 14.0 % | 363.4 % |
| Europe | 384,332,394 | 48.0 % | 265.7 % |
| Middle East | 41,939,200 | 21.3 % | 1,176.8 % |
| North America | 247,637,606 | 73.4 % | 129.1 % |
| Latin America / Caribbean | 137,200,309 | 23.8 % | 659.3 % |
| Oceania / Australia | 20,204,292 | 59.5 % | 165.1 % |
| World Total | 1,412,489,652 | 21.2 % | 291.3 % |

Jesus and his parents slipped into Egypt to escape Herod's infanticide. Moses and the Israelites were delivered from Egyptian tyranny into the Promised Land. Early church believers poured out of Jerusalem to save their lives and consequently the gospel reached new corners of the world. The Apostle John was exiled on Patmos and wrote the book of Revelation. All fled their homelands because they were singled out by leaders within their own country as targets for persecution. In other words, they were refugees.

Contextualization for aliens and sojourners

then and today



Worship Team Paraguay

The Old and New Testament are filled with stories of those forced to leave their homes and set out for places unknown. Time after time, the Bible shows how God can take the tragedy of forced migration and use it to work out His purposes. He took extraordinary interest in refugees. He still does today.

The aliens and sojourners of today flee the brutal military dictatorship in Burma, the post-war chaos in Iraq, the genocidal violence in Sudan, or other forms of terror. They wait long years in remote refugee camps in Africa, huddle in city parks in Greece, or struggle to assimilate in New Zealand. But although the names, locations, languages and cultures differ, today's refugees share much in common with their biblical counterparts.

Refugees have their lives and their sense of security shaken to the core. They confront their own powerlessness in response to violence and evil. They experience profound loneliness and mourn the loss of family, friends and the familiar places of home.

Effective contextualization for this population involves highlighting the refugee stories woven throughout Scripture. It is easy for those of us with deep roots in our homeland to miss this recurring theme. We overlook the multiple references. But refugees recognize people who are very much like themselves.

Refugees understand the groans and laments of the Israelites when they remember their homeland. They recognize the fear Joseph must have felt when God told him to flee. They find comfort in these words of David from Psalm 107 (verses 4-7), written when he himself was a refugee,

*Some wandered in desert wastelands,
finding no way to a city where they could settle.
They were hungry and thirsty,
and their lives ebbed away.
Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress.
He led them by a straight way
to a city where they could settle.*

Through the words and experiences of refugees in the Bible, we assure contemporary refugees that God sees them in their

isolation and loneliness. God understands their suffering. And He will meet them in the midst of their exile. His love knows no geographic boundaries. It is a rock on which to build their lives, even when everything familiar has been torn away.

The Bible also reassures refugees that they have value. Too often, their self-worth is stripped away along with their home and possessions. Language barriers limit their ability to communicate and be understood. Educational qualifications and professional certifications are no longer recognized. Countries and individuals tell them they are a burden and not wanted.

In contrast, the Old and New Testament are filled with reminders to love and care for those far from their homelands. These strangers are close to God's heart and are to be welcomed and embraced. They are a blessing to their new communities. We never know when they might be angels in disguise. <<

Heidi Moll Schoedel



Heidi Moll Schoedel is cofounder and executive director of Exodus World Service, a ministry that mobilizes the local church to welcome and serve refugees. She also serves as chairperson of the Refugee Highway Partnership, a global network of Christian leaders working to increase the involvement of the church in worldwide refugee ministry.

The Contextualization of Missionary Training

Contextualized missionary training tends to happen when people develop their own curriculum and programs from “scratch,” and use local resources to create ongoing viability in meeting the training needs of their own people. We cannot assume, however, that because a program is contextually derived, that it produces effective people for mission ministry.

Since the Canada 2003 Mission Commission Consultation, the vision of the IMTN has been to push towards the adoption of an integral (whole person) philosophy of training, strongly entrenched in the ideal that each missionary training (MT) program should be defined and developed within its own context to meet specific and objectified training outcomes in ways that effectively address the many contextual challenges faced. We recognize that there are a number of reasons programs don't conform to this ideal. A program's viability may depend on international relationships that dictate training content and methods. Or adoption of programs may simply be a temporary solution in light of lack of “know how.” Sometimes it's a matter of offering a “plug and play” program or no program at all.

Rob Brynjolfsen's first term of service was in South America where he was involved in church planting with International Teams. Married to Silvia from Argentina they served together with WEC International in South America, Europe and Equatorial Guinea and were involved primarily in leadership development. Rob was the founding director of Gateway Missionary Training Centre, Langley, BC and presently is the pastor of Esperanza Multicultural Church, Burnaby, BC and the program director for Gateway Missionary Training Centre.



Jonathan Lewis has been on staff of the Mission Commission since 1991. As from 2005 he has a consultant /advisory role to the MC staff. He also is leads the International Missionary Training Network.

The question of contextually appropriate training

There is a general perception that the West has imposed its educational systems on non-Western societies and that this is not a good practice. This is a very complex issue which we won't attempt to resolve at this time. However, from our IMTN perspective, lack of contextualization is primarily a problem when a missionary training program fails to produce intentional, desired outcomes that equip the missionary trainee for effective service. Whether or not a missionary training program or curriculum is adopted from the outside, or even “imposed” by international agencies or denominations, is less of an issue than whether or not the program is effective in generating specified outcomes that lead to effectiveness. If the program is measured by the generation of effective people for mission, then where or how the process was originally designed seems like a non-issue. Nevertheless, we strongly endorse the need for local institutions to determine their training outcomes and to utilize programs and methods that address contextual variables and generate effectiveness.

Here are some points to ponder in our concern for the contextualization of MT.

Accessibility

What do we mean by accessibility? Perhaps we can define this by briefly mentioning the interrelated hurdles and challenges that missionary candidates are faced with when considering training options. First on the list is the geographic and linguistic availability of training. Secondly is the cost of training, which is typically the responsibility of the candidate. Thirdly, the value placed on the training by society, churches, and agencies (which is more an issue of accreditation and licensing than effectiveness). A distant fourth is the suitability of training (in terms of educational competence, ministry focus, intended field of service, etc.). These barriers must all be overcome in order for the training to be “accessible”

to the candidate. And in our way of thinking, for missionary training to be accessible and sustainable, all of these issues must be faced locally in contextually appropriate ways.

Yearning for foreign training

Each year the small missionary training centre in Canada, with which one of the authors is associated, receives a multitude of inquiries from all over the globe. Many of these letters introduce what would appear to be exceptional candidates. Yet, each year, the reply goes back to these inquirers with the same suggestion: *find a missionary training program in your country or region that will provide you with the tools that you need to become an effective servant of our Lord.* Our response is based on the conviction that, for most of these candidates, their best option is contextualized training that is based on a profound understanding of the training needs of the missionary candidate and which caters to the circumstances which typically characterizes the candidate. Yet, we are fairly certain that these concerns are not uppermost in most of these applicants minds.

The value of knowing your people

David Tai-Woong Lee, argues strongly for the need to train Koreans in a Korean context to address their particular cultural and worldview concerns. David Lee points out that the current generation of Koreans has been raised in a social context that has developed unique personality disorders. When they work with candidates, they are able to address these deep seated issues in constructive ways. They have a remarkable record of field retention from their candidates and much of this can be attributed to the rigorous contextual training their candidates undergo in Korea.¹

¹ David Tai-Woong Lee, “Training Cross-Cultural Missionaries from the Asian Context,” *Missiology: An International Review*, (Vol. XXXVI, no. 1, January 2008, pp. 111-130).

The global missionary movement has expanded to the point where we recognize the need to ensure that missionary training is accessible. It is imperative that every national missionary movement strengthen, encourage and develop missionary training opportunities within their contexts.

Transplanting programs

The transplanting of missionary training is a bilateral problem. The two camps involved are either importing (receiving) or exporting (producing) non-contextualized models of training.

Importing (receiving) Missionary Training.

Imported models of training are those that develop through local initiative, but are sourced from outside of the context. Sometimes whole curriculums are taken from one continent to another and puppet schools are set up. Frequently, course content is imported and used without modification.

The online Internet delivery of courseware is now a direct challenge to the contextualization of missionary training. Likewise is the development and use of video lessons or curriculum on DVD.

We need to ask, why are programs and courseware imported indiscriminately? In some cases, there may be a legitimate need based on lack of trained instructors. Yet, we suspect that many training institutions value efficiency and some administrators may all too easily accept mediocre educational results in lieu of a cost-effective delivery. Furthermore, some institutions may value the conformity in content that these homogeneous processes produce for whatever reason. Academic snobbery plays a role in this process as well. Sometimes foreign courseware is imported because of the impression that it is preferred, superior or of greater status. The bottom line is that importing courseware is easy, appears to be efficient, and may provide greater status, but users beware!

Exporting (Producing) Missionary Training.

Exported models of training are those that are produced in a foreign context and delivered locally through extension offices or partnerships with existing educational institutions. This is not always bad. The particular challenge to contextualization of exported models can be significantly mitigated by adequate participation from a national stakeholder group or body that

defines its own set of outcomes and can adapt the curriculum or system to its own needs. The problem of little or no local stakeholder involvement raises questions of legitimacy, long term viability, dependency and/or unfair competition with local training programs. The lack of know-ledge or “how to” obviously plays a role in adopting unexamined training as well. The IMTN has attempted to address this issue through the development and dissemination of a course on creating and evaluating training in contextually appropriate ways.²

Contextual appropriateness is of ultimate importance because cultural differences play a significant role in the formation of missionaries, as do learning styles and preferences, socio-economic conditions, ethnic diversity, etc.. We all need to stop from time to time and examine the underlying educational assumptions upon which our training programs are built. Does our educational philosophy grow out of our Christian worldview, or is it heavily influenced by the non-Christian assumptions that drive secular educational institutions? Is it possible that training-as-business is a stronger motivation that drives our importing/exporting of training models? What operational values would cause us to set up a training program that competes with and threatens a national initiative?

The need for multi-cultural contexts

Missionary training must be multi-cultural in order to effectively acquire needed skills and attitudes. A properly contextualized training program will intentionally take advantage of more than one context to ensure that candidates are exposed to the kinds of experiences they will need to provide real-world tools and needed intercultural skills (e.g., cross-cultural adaptation skills, language learning skills, etc.), and to acquire needed attitudes (e.g., flexible, teachable, culturally sensitive, etc.). This is what makes missionary training different from ministry training: the cross-cultural outcomes will not be achieved without a cross-cultural context in which experiential learning can take place. This point does not contradict previous statements that training must be culturally sensitive, related to the needs of the candidate, etc.. Both contexts are essential.

2 R. Brynjolfsson and J. Lewis, eds., *Integral Ministry Training Design and Evaluation*, (William Carey Library, Pasadena, 2007).

The way forward

I would suggest we can strengthen our missionary training by ensuring we address the training needs in each context. To do this we will need:

- 1) Strong local leadership: A group of local stakeholders must stand behind the curriculum process to address the immediate training needs of their candidates. They need to start by asking questions like: Who is to be trained? Why are they to be trained? What will they be doing when on the field? What does a trained person look like? How will they be trained?
- 2) Integral (whole person) and outcomes-based training: An express and intentional effort to make MT integral (whole person) will force us to multi-contextualize the training. We will recognize that certain training goals will not be achieved without multiple contexts. Outcomes-based MT focuses on producing the desired results and will steer the curriculum towards the methods and practices that will ensure these results are achieved.
- 3) Local resources: Wherever possible, we need to strive to ensure that training resources are developed within or adapted to suit the local situation. By training resources we should consider texts, course content, presentations, facilities, and human resources.
- 4) Authentic Christian worldview and values: Because our cultures are all impacted by non-Christian assumptions and values, in our effort to contextualize missionary training we should contemplate and examine our own assumptions and values, and ask God to give us the courage to eliminate those that do not serve our purposes. Just as faulty methods will produce faulty products, an errant philosophy of education or incorrect values will produce poorly trained missionaries.

In conclusion, and with great caution, I think of Jesus' own words when he said, “Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit” (NIV Matthew 7:16b-17). It should be out of a commitment to the continual improvement and perfection of our training that we strive to contextualize our models and methodologies to achieve the end to which God calls us. <<

A Review of Contextualization Resources

Reviewed by Warren R. Beattie

Introduction

“Although there are ambiguities in culture, this does not justify a Christian abdicating participation in his own culture with Christian insights and input.”¹ Bishop John Chew’s challenge to Christians in Singapore is a reminder that we must strive to make our theology contextual, despite the challenges and uncertainties. The following offers a sample of recent books that will encourage readers to develop a deeper understanding of the needs and scope of contextual theology.²

Orientation

Contextualization is not a new phenomenon. Its historical roots are illustrated by Andrew Walls’ imaginary “scholarly space visitor” who views six phases of the church from Jerusalem in 37C.E. through Celtic ascetics to the Victorian missionaries and modern day Nigerian churches (Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, Ch 1 and 4, 1996). The necessity of contextualization is highlighted in his analogy of a “human theatre,” where views and perspectives are limited. This mirrors the limited and partial participation of Christians in the great drama of faith. This necessity is underlined by René Padilla, who, writing in the 1980’s, provocatively describes Latin American Protestant world as “a church with no theological reflection of its own” (Padilla, *Mission Between the Times*, 1985). There are clear limitations when church life and theological education are dominated by external thinking and translated literature. Padilla’s cautions are still relevant for the church, especially in the majority world.

Significant books

I recommend four books which give an overview of issues in contextualization. The first two offer practical approaches to contextualization based on theory. Firstly, Charles Kraft’s approach focuses on contextualization as translation and uses the linguistic model of “dynamic equivalence” as a methodology to move from the context of the New Testament to contemporary contexts (Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, 1992). He explores the relevance of this model for the Christian message, for the church, for theologizing and in relation to conversion. Secondly, Robert Schreiter draws on “cultural semiotics” to help isolate important symbols and activities within a culture and stresses the importance of “meaning” over and against “function.” In the context of identifying “fruitful themes” for local theologizing, he develops a methodology that takes into account existing local theologies and the interplay between the community and theologians. Although the section on

semiotic analysis is complex, Schreiter offers a robust “dynamic” that helps apply findings to the local church setting (Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 1999 [Cath.]).

The third book, written very recently by Dean Flemming, has developed a method derived from the way in which New Testament genres and their themes exemplify the task of contextualization—“the activity of expressing and embodying the gospel in context-sensitive ways [that] has characterized the Christian mission from the very beginning”³ (Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament*, 2006). The fourth book, by Stephen Bevans, has developed a framework to critique different models of contextual theology. He explores a spectrum of five approaches, each giving differing emphases to text and context, which he labels as “translation,” “synthetic,” “praxis,” “anthropological” and “transcendental” models (Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 2001 [Cath.]). Bevans’ framework allows for a comparative critique of contextual models.

Religions

The contextualization of Christianity in relation to particular religions has produced some practically oriented approaches to contextualization. Gailyn van Rheenen looks at how an understanding of animism involves charting the issues of spiritual realities, practitioners, and worldview (van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts*, 1991). Contextualization in animist contexts needs to affirm the Christian world-view, especially its perspective on spiritual realities and its understanding of God. Van Rheenen sees the theology of the kingdom of God, with its eschatological perspective of God’s reign in the world, as an effective backdrop against which the Christian gospel and its relevance for salvation can be proclaimed to animists.

A series of conference proceedings have engaged with contextualization in the Buddhist world. Whilst focussing on the content of Christian engagement with Buddhism, they also consider aspects of how the gospel must be contextualized. One volume discusses a holistic approach to contextualization: dialogue in terms of Christian and Buddhist experiences of faith is balanced by discussion of intellectual dimensions of faith. The need for cultural sensitivity is also stressed in terms of reshaping Buddhist ideas to a Christian perspective (Lim and Spaulding (eds.), *Sharing Jesus Holistically with the Buddhist World*, 2005). Another volume considers how to respond to Buddhist faith in largely oral cultures. How do song and story, memorization and recitation relate to Buddhists who come from oral traditions? How do Christian themes, narratives and messages need

to be repackaged in ways appropriate for such Buddhist cultures? These questions are addressed with examples from countries as diverse as Tibet and Cambodia (De Neui (ed.), *Communicating Christ through Story and Song*, 2008).

In a similarly practical vein, a reader on Christianity and Islam looks essentially at methodological topics. It covers issues facing cross-cultural workers, such as lifestyle, spirituality, the use of sacred texts, apologetics and the spectrum of approaches to contextual churches and worship. It offers a good summary of the practical issues facing those doing ministry in Islamic contexts (Parshall (ed.), *The Last Great Frontier*, 2000).

A more reflective text that seeks to look at the relationship between the life of Christian discipleship and the world of the imagination considers the way “religions use symbols and ceremonies to initiate believers and to teach them the faith.” Zahniser notes Protestant hesitation when it comes to religious symbols and rituals, but suggests that careful appropriation of symbols and adaptation of ceremonies can be a valid approach to contextualization in other cultures and can help to develop a more culturally rooted form of discipleship (Zahniser, *Symbol and Ceremony*, 1997).

For a much more personal account of contextualization, we turn to a North American Catholic priest. Vincent Donovan found himself in a situation that caused him to re-assess his own call as a missionary, the biblical testimony and the need to start afresh in the contextualization of faith to the nomadic and “pagan” Masai tribe. Finding inspiration in the writings of Roland Allen, he looks afresh at the New Testament and culture and offers a radical perspective on the limits of mission and contextualization. He stresses the need for missionaries to recognize their limits and to give adequate space for a local church to thrive. His approach is one that many in cross-cultural ministry have found inspirational (Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, 25th Anniversary Ed., *Orbis*, 2003 [Cath.]).

Methodology for local contexts

Contextualization can be undertaken by both those working cross-culturally and those living in their own cultures. As Wilbur Shenk points out, ultimately the process of contextualization will reside with the local church: “[contextualization]... a process whereby the gospel message encounters a particular culture, calling forth faith and leading to the formulation of a faith community, which is culturally authentic and authentically Christian. Control of the process resides within the context rather than with an external agent or agency” (Shenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission*, 56).

Two contrasting approaches from the Philippines offer models for contextual theology

from an entirely local perspective. Maggay emphasizes the need to distinguish between core values and surface values. “Core values are those that belong to deep structures—root metaphors that define a people—... in sum, core values and traits frame our meaning system. ... Contextual communication is the process of developing and communicating a message that works with the deep structures of a culture” (Maggay, in *ATS Forum Doing Theology in the Philippines*, 2005). Maggay looks at examples of this thinking in terms of deep structures in Filipino thinking such as “the mediator” and “relationships” that cross the boundary between earthly life and eternity.

Jose De Mesa, a Catholic theologian in the Philippines, envisages two poles of activity—the Judaean-Christian cultural tradition and the local culture—with contextual theologizing being the bridge for “mutually respectful and critical interaction” between the two. He sees three stages to the process: 1) the generation of ideas from culture, 2) the “critical correlating” of the two poles and then 3) the endeavour to unpack the theological relevance of the ideas in relation to culture and tradition. De Mesa concludes with examples of how this would apply to selected concepts such as “well-being,” “inner reality” and “the world outside” in relation to theological themes such as resurrection and the will of God. His deeper aim is to foster an appropriate “cultural identity” for Christianity in Asian contexts De Mesa in Scherer and Bevans, *Faith and Culture New Directions in Evangelization 3*, 1999 [Ecum.].

Contextualization across the globe

Given our modern global context, there are many opportunities to read perspectives on contextualization from different parts of the world. Within Asia, Hwa Yung’s “quest for an Asian theology” explores and defines contextualization in relation

to Asian contexts. He addresses 1) socio-political backgrounds, 2) evangelistic and pastoral issues, 3) “inculturation” as the locally determined process of bringing the gospel to bear on culture and 4) faithfulness to the Christian tradition. He concludes by questioning to what extent themes as diverse as apologetics, church leadership, church structures, ethics, social engagement ancestral practices and “power encounters” have been addressed by contextual theology in Asia (Hwa, *Mangoes or Bananas*, 1997). The Asian Theological Association has also re-issued a set of conference proceedings that deals with contextualization in terms of Asian religious contexts and theological methodology in relation to Asia noting the particular relevance of a contextual theology of the doctrine of God (Gnanakan (ed.), *Biblical Theology in Asia*, 1995).

Contrasting approaches to these evangelical protestant works can be found in two other Asian books. Gerrit Singgih has offered a personal perspective on many of the core issues that affect the debate on contextualization in Indonesia. His collection of essays and papers cover key themes in Asian mission and theology: they include subjects as diverse as identity; religious pluralism and the church’s role in modelling hope and reconciliation; approaches to the Bible, including hermeneutics, exegesis and story-telling; and the implications of the global on local theology and church (Singgih, *Doing Theology in Indonesia*, 2003 [Conc.]). A wide-ranging survey of topics, the product of an Association rather than an individual, comes from the Indian sub-continent in the form of a collection of theological statements on specific themes. It opens with three essays that set the framework for doing contextual theology in India in terms of methodology by seeking a paradigm shift to a method that is “experience-based, praxis-oriented, dialogical and interdisciplinary.” In the remaining sections, the Indian Theological Association addresses issues of poverty, religion and caste

and considers the theological responses to these overwhelming contextual realities and considers the pressing need to reconstruct Christian identity in India. The statements weave around these themes and address additional issues such as the nature of ecclesiology, theological education, the ecological crisis and “Hindutva” (Parappally (ed.), *Theologizing in Context*, 2002 [Ecum./Cath.]).

Books that are of interest to an international audience, addressing the history, development and legitimacy of contextual theology in other continents, include writings by Kwame Bediako and Justo Gonzalez. The former looks at “African Christian theology as a new Christian idiom.” Bediako is concerned to show

that the African imagination has already helped to shape a new idiom of Christianity as a non-Western religion. This process shows the “translatability” of Christian faith and indicates how contextual theology needs to continue beyond the missionary era (Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, 1995.) In a similar way, addressing the interface between the Latin American Christian community in the USA and the wider world, Gonzalez pursues issues of identity and history. In the light of the Hispanic experience of history, he considers themes such as reading the Bible, visions of God and idols, the implications of the doctrine of the Trinity for social life, creation, the incarnation, and life in the Spirit. He brings to each of these theological discussions unique perspectives derived from the experiences of Hispanic communities (Gonzalez, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*, 1990).

Finally, contextual theology in the West has been provided with a new guide in relation to popular culture. Kevin Vanhoozer and colleagues suggest that contemporary Christians need to analyze and respond to cultural activities around us, and not just be moulded by culture. In short, how we do “everyday theology” is a challenging but essential and necessary task for Christians who want to understand their world and relate the gospel to it. Themes included take the reader from supermarket check-out counter to the cinema via the blog right to the grave—and beyond it since it deals with the Christian perspective on life. This is everyday contextualization for everyone! (Vanhoozer, Anderson and Sleasman (eds.), *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*, 2006).

Further reading...

For those who would like to read further, the Dictionary of Mission Theology has excellent summary articles on theology in Africa, Asia, India and Latin America (and on Culture, Contextualization and Inculturation from Asian, African and Indian perspectives respectively) (Corrie, *Dictionary of Mission Theology*, 2007). Such an approach would seem to offer confirm that the Christian church is beginning to move beyond reading the Scriptures with “cultural blinkers” to “read them together.”⁴ <<

Endnotes

- 1 Chew in Sng (ed.) *“Church and the Inculturation of Gospel.”* Church and Culture Singapore Context, 1991, 85-111.
- 2 The list extends to the early 1990’s where there are fewer recent equivalents. Though largely Protestant, the books draw from writers across the Christian spectrum including Conciliar Protestant (Conc.), Catholic (Cath.) and inter-denominational perspectives (Ecum.)
- 3 This is reviewed at greater length in this edition of Connections.
- 4 A.Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996, 15.



To the market in Ouagadougou

Contextualization in the New Testament

Reviewed by Barbara Helen Burns

After years of studying, teaching and writing about biblical contextualization, I felt that Dean Flemming's latest book was a most special gift. *Contextualization in the New Testament* mines treasures of Biblical directives and models based on broad research and personal experience. Flemming shows not only how the gospel was contextualized as the church spread to other cultures, but that it is in itself an example of contextualization as the Biblical authors explain the faith to different audiences. Each one is relevant, at the same time being confrontational and transformational.

Behind everything is Flemming's commitment to biblical authenticity and divine inspiration. He rejects the notion that the Bible is a "case-book" of examples of how God reveals Himself, but instead rests firmly on the proposition that it is normative, revelational and relevant in every context. Jesus is the prime example of biblically contextualized mission and theology. Christian contextualization cannot be done without taking seriously His life, teaching, death and resurrection, meant for people groups everywhere (Mt 28:18-20; Phil 2:1-11). Unfortunately, Flemming missed a few good resources for his study in not including in his bibliography Harvie Conn's book *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds*, 1984 or Kenneth Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*, Eerdmans, 1976 and 1980).

Contextualization in Acts: bridging cultural barriers

In his first chapter, Flemming looks at Acts from two perspectives: a register of the church's contextualization in Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts and as an example of contextualization itself as Luke translates the gospel to his audience in written form. Flemming compares Luke's literary styles, content and method to norms at the time in situations such as Stephen's discourse, the scattering and witness after the persecution begins, Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch, Peter's experience with Cornelius and his subsequent defense before the church in Jerusalem, the "Jerusalem Council" in Acts 15, and then the following expansion to the Gentile world. These are not just reheated superficial discussions of contextual principles, but in-depth analyses bringing to light new insights important for reflection and action.

Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission. By Dean Flemming. InterVarsity Press: 2005. 344ps.

(Dean Flemming, Ph.D., Aberdeen, New Testament professor at European Nazarene College in Büsingen, Germany, previously at the Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary in the Republic of the Philippines)

Comprehending the *process* of contextualization is as important as its results. In both Acts 11 and 15, God acts miraculously, revealing and breaking deep traditions and previous understanding. The church listens to the testimony of these miracles and the fact that Gentiles have indeed become believers in Jesus. They also base their final decision on biblical truth, showing that "the words of the prophets agreed" with the testimonies and miracles (Amos 9:11-12). The new developments help the church (the whole church, not just the leadership) actually better understand and apply the Scriptures in a new way to the Gentiles.

In all, Luke interacts with culture, making the message understood and dynamic in a transformational way while at the same time maintaining the unity of the one church and people of God. Flemming soundly disagrees with the dividing of the church along cultural or ethnic lines. "We must learn, however painfully, to sing the gospel in all the rich harmonies that enhance the beauty of the song" (p. 53).

Contextualization in Acts: the preaching of Paul

Flemming examines Paul's three major messages and includes a very helpful comparative chart at the end of the chapter. In it, he shows the similarities and differences in audience, setting, sermon preparation, occasion for the sermon, address used, initial point of contact, rhetorical style, preparation for the gospel, description of God, God's dealings with people in the past, themes tailored to the audience, cultural resources used, the kerygma, challenge to the audience's worldview, evangelistic appeal and response of the audience. Once again the "identificational" approach, that proclaims the gospel in ways the audience can understand," is artfully balanced with the "transformational" approach that resists compromising the gospel's integrity in a pluralistic world" (p. 86).

Inserted, in Flemming's defense of this balance is his treatment of some current and controversial issues. For example, he shows that Paul respected the people at Lystra and Athens and their worldviews and used them as steppingstones to the true gospel, but he did not think they were "anonymous Christians," worshipping the true God with another name such as Zeus or "the

Unknown God." Paul is keenly aware that their present state of ignorance must be corrected by a *true* knowledge of God through the proclamation of the gospel (p. 76, emphasis by the author).

Flemming also refutes the idea that Paul overcontextualized his Athenian address, something some allege that he admitted when he wrote 1 Corinthians (2:1-2). The author proves at length that

this is not so, but to "confront and correct their understanding of God at a fundamental level" (p. 78) and to lead them to repentance. He says there is simply nothing in the text to support the view that Paul erred at the Areopagus and that most modern commentators have rejected this view.

Paul's letters: doing theology in context

Paul's contextualized letters to diverse Christian communities (Chapter 3) demonstrates that, in spite of diversity, Paul had a focus, Jesus Christ, His incarnation, death and resurrection. This narrative provides continuity of Paul's Gospel with God's past dealings, as he repeatedly cites the Scriptures to show that the gospel is not *new*, although in Jesus things are not to continue as they were. God did not start all over again, but He came as a fulfillment of what was promised all along. A major formative element in all of Paul's thought are the Jewish Scriptures and God's overarching "metanarrative" of His dealings with mankind.

With solid convictions based on his own encounter with Christ and the Scriptures, Paul freely used all kinds of images, sometimes in multiple ways or with different emphases, to explain and interpret the gospel for his readers. This explains why some language forms are present in some letters and not in others, excluding the necessity to "invent" other authors for some letters.

Paul's letters show coherent unity within a flexible diversity. "Paul walks the via media, which avoids abstract formulas and generic theological solutions on the one hand and fickle pragmatism on the other. . . . His writings bear witness to a process of creative and flexible theologizing that enables the abiding message of God's redeeming work in Christ to be contextualized in a variety of ways for ever-new settings" (p. 116). We must have a clear vision of normative truth or we face the danger of leaving the true gospel behind.

Paul and culture: engaging the Greco-Roman world

As to Paul's own cultural background (chapter 4), Flemming effectively demonstrates that he was influenced mainly by his Jewish heritage, which was entwined with a very large dose of Greek and Roman culture. Greek was his "first language", pointing to the fact that he spent sufficient time for this as a child in Tarsus before going to Jerusalem, allowing him to communicate effectively inside the cultures he visited. "Paul demonstrates enormous flexibility in making use of the cultural materials that were available to him – whether from language, religion, philosophy, ethics, rhetoric, literature, politics, social institutions, family and community life – as long as they did not conflict with

the gospel” (p. 134). Paul approached culture by affirming, relativizing, confronting and transforming it. A look at the images, language, styles of rhetoric, cultural institutions and conventions Paul utilized is a treasure for any missiologist, missions teacher, student or New Testament scholar.

Confronting human sinfulness within culture (including that of the missionary) is clearly seen throughout Paul’s speaking and writing. He identifies with culture so as to bring forth transformation. Paul makes no doubt about the fact that all are sinful and need God’s grace and forgiveness. Sin is expressed in culture, “enemy-occupied territory” (p. 139). In the midst of the culture, the church becomes an expression of adoption into God’s family and of heavenly citizenship, sometimes leading to persecution and suffering (Phil 1:29-30). Christians “function within their society as a prophetic subculture, whose cross-shaped living offers a visible alternative to the ethos of the dominant culture” (p. 144).

Paul as interpreter: contextualizing Scripture and tradition

Chapter 5 speaks to Paul as interpreter, contextualizing Scripture and tradition. Flemming explains at length Paul’s different hermeneutical methods in relation to the Old Testament, all flowing from his own background and relevant for different purposes and audiences. The question is, can interpreters in each culture adapt their hermeneutic according to culture? Flemming cautions against what Larry Caldwell calls *ethnohermeneutics*, an extreme application of cultural control over hermeneutics. Flemming skillfully demonstrates that “...relevance must submit to truth in the hermeneutical process” (p. 170).

Case studies from Corinth: the gospel, food and the future

Chapter 6 is the first of two examples of Paul’s contextualization in specific contexts. The issues examined in Corinth are of eating meat offered to idols and confusion about future life. Flemming effectively shows how Paul instructs the church about how to contextualize in their specific context based on Christian principles. Some things were optional, depending on meaning and others’ reactions. Meat that has gone through temple rites has no power over the Christian. Other things are absolutely forbidden, such as participating in the temple feasts, thinking there is no danger or that demons do not really exist. “What [these people] had not considered, however, is that behind the worship of idols is the very real activity of hostile spiritual forces, which may gain power through pagan cultic practice” (p. 189). In 1 Corinthians 10:14-22, Paul radically forbids such participation, a “contra-cultural stance to the core” (p. 189).

For Flemming, idolatry in all its forms is still off-limits to Christians of all cultures today, whether it be traditional rites or nationalism, materialism or self-gratification. In matters when the integrity of the gospel is not jeopardized, he encourages “principled flexibility, not restrictive legalism, must still govern our approach to nonessential matters” (p. 200).

This is such a controversial issue in missions today, I cannot resist quoting Flemming’s conclusion to this extensive and important section.

...Paul responds to the problem of idol food with theological imagination and communicative skill. He draws upon a quiver full of persuasive strategies in order to call the Corinthians to reenvision their world in light of the gospel: quoting his opponents’ terms and slogans; appealing to Scripture (1 Cor 9:9; 10:1-12, 22,26); illustrations from common life (1 Cor 9:7-11, 24-27); concrete case studies (1 Cor 8:10; 10:27-29); rhetorical questions (1 Cor 1, 4-12) and direct commands (1 Cor 10:14), just to name some. What is more, Paul refuses to offer a single-note solution to the idol meat problem. He speaks of its effect on the weak and its danger for the strong, its connection to idolatry in some settings and its lack of idol involvement in others, and the need for both responsible freedom and self-renouncing servanthood. This ought to caution us against simplistic answers to contemporary cultural questions, especially those gray areas over which sincere Christians disagree. At the same time, it should challenge us to exercise theological imagination under the leadership of the Spirit, so that the story of God in Christ might engage the complex “idol meat” issues of our own world (p. 201).

Colossians: the gospel and syncretism

After outlining several possibilities of the religious beliefs and practices carried out in the Lycus Valley and influencing the church, Flemming shows that “Not only does Paul need to counteract the syncretistic tendencies of the false teaching, but he also wants to empower the community to change elements of their basic worldviews, beliefs and behavior patterns. How does he accomplish this?” (p. 217, emphasis mine).

One of Paul’s methods is direct assault (2:8-23) where he “apparently takes up a series of catchwords from the lips of his opponents, which he then turns against them like verbal boomerangs” (p. 218). “Mystery” is one example where Paul takes a religious word from the context and redefines it. Christ is the mystery and they need look no further. Christ is truth; He is supreme, not thrones, dominions, rulers or powers (1:16); He is head of the church (1:18); and He is exalted in dozens of ways throughout the letter. Colossians 2:8-15 uses audacious images to illustrate who Christ is: He “disarmed” rulers, stripping them of their power, He “publicly exposed” them as worthless, and He led them in triumphal procession as the Roman generals would have done after victory at war. Flemming points out that it had appeared that Jesus was the one stripped, exposed and defeated. “...Colossians flips every human expectation on its head.”

Flemming continues, “Remarkably, Paul does not respond to the threat of syncretism by imposing upon the Colossians a pre-packaged, “one-size-fits-all” theology, as sometimes happens in missions settings today. Instead, he allows the gospel to speak directly to their fears and felt needs, and to address



their particular worldviews and behaviors” (p. 232). They need no longer seek help in amulets and rituals, they have Christ, “the all-encompassing and all-sufficient Savior, in comparison to whom every human and cosmic alternative pales. He is the sun that trivializes the output of every tiny candle. Such a positive reformulation of the gospel, then and now, leaves no valid reason to syncretize the faith” (p. 233).

The Gospels: contextualizing the Story for a target audience

Flemming begins this chapter by putting into perspective the recent and widely dispensed notion of “mirror readings” of the Gospels – an exaggerated attempt to interpret and delimit the target communities based on the text, although each Gospel author does have a specific audience and objectives in mind. The convincing material Flemming produces shows once again the adaptability, relevance and transforming power of the Scriptures. The Gospel writers shattered boundaries, broke pre-conceived ideas and showed the way for the new Church and its universal mission.

One of the major themes Flemming approaches in John is being “of the world” and “not of the world.” This tension is most important for issues of contextualization. The “world is a dangerous place and Satan is its ruler (Jn 12:31), but it is also the object of God’s redemptive love (Jn 3:16)” (p. 262). “John’s persecuted readers must take a countercultural stance. Accommodation with the unbelieving world isn’t an option” (p. 263).

Revelation: the gospel and the Empire

In Revelation, we see once again the need to take care in not allowing the dominant culture to dilute true Christian discipleship. Most of the messages to the churches are stern warnings and a call to repent, either because of syncretism or the lack of love in resisting syncretism. The terms used are familiar to the readers: “Satan’s throne,” referring to emperor worship; “lukewarm,” referring to the terrible tepid mineral waters close to Laodicea; “shamed and naked,” referring to the same city’s pride in its wool and clothing production.

In spite of being similar to the apocalyptic writing common at the time, John presents several important differences. His is a letter, open for all to read, written under his own name and given as a divinely inspired prophecy, not just a story with hidden allusions to reality. “...the mysterious images of

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Revelation cannot be viewed as a secret code that was unintelligible to John's contemporaries but waits to be 'cracked' by Christian readers at some later point" (p. 273). Revelation instead gives the readers a new vantage point from which to comprehend their situations and the future. John creates "a new symbolic world for his readers, one that opposes the Roman imperial worldview that dominated their horizon" (p. 274). These symbols were taken from the Old Testament and Judaism as well as the Greco-Roman world and were as familiar to the readers as are present-day political cartoons fully understood by the people whose history and experience they reflect. John's objective is to help the sometimes suffering and often compromising Christians remain faithful in resisting noxious cultural traits in their contexts and in worshipping an almighty, all-knowing and glorious God.

Jesus, the sacrificial Lamb, His death, resurrection and exaltation, is the focus of Revelation, just as it was in Acts, Paul's letters and the Gospels. Through this Lamb, people from all nations are redeemed. Flemming explains the counter cultural nature of this message:

With this penetrating symbol of the slain Lamb, Revelation completely transforms the Jewish notion of what the Messiah of David would be like... This Lamb also turns Rome's notions of power and militaristic conquest on their head. The very One who was crucified at the hands of brute Roman might vanquishes all of God's enemies by submitting to death. A more countercultural perspective within the world of John's readers could hardly be imagined (pp. 280-81).

Along with this, Revelation does not promise safety or prosperity to the Christians. As Jesus suffered, so will they, many unto death. They are not to try to escape death, but remain faithful in spite of consequences. For John, this is "conquering" – "they have conquered him [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death" (Rev 12:11). John leaves no room for using cultural accommodation in order to escape suffering. Instead Flemming says, "But Revelation also gives its readers the confidence that the saints' faithful testimony even to the point of death will have the magnetic effect of drawing people from the world's nations to worship the one true God (Rev 11:3-13; 15:1-4; cf. 5:9; 7:9; 14:6; 21:3, 24, 26).

Revelation calls for "radical contextualization," but not the kind that stretches cultural acceptance beyond biblical limits. It "gives us the most consistently countercultural theological perspective of any of the New Testament writings we have examined in this study" (p. 288). It "magnifies the boundaries between the church and the world to the tenth power" (p. 288).

But even so, the church is not to "retreat into a cocoon of pious irrelevance, but to resist Rome's dominant ideology through its prophetic and costly witness" (p. 290). There is still hope for the nations and the church will be an agent for their healing (Rev 22:2). "Within the cities of Roman Asia, Christian communities resist the empire of Caesar by being outposts of another kingdom, the empire of God and the slain Lamb" (p. 291).

Romans and Revelation are complementary, showing that at times Christians need to live within their culture as yeast, salt and light, and at "other times they must take a costly prophetic stand over against the dominant order" (p. 291). This variety of perspectives means that the church must always "discern and reassess its relationship to the power structures of its world" (p. 291).

Contextualizing the gospel today

In his concluding chapter Flemming reiterates and reinforces the need to be relevant in each context and at the same time faithful to the unity of the gospel and the church. As he has emphasized all along, the gospel is a narrative – a story which is Christ-centered and historically true. It is *the* defining story of God's gracious and loving act of salvation in Christ. In this there are certain non-negotiables which exclude any possibility of idolatry. It is a living story, not a "cluster of abstract theological ideas" (p. 301), and as such must be passed on as story in which the teller and the listeners are a part. It leads to unity in diversity because it is a single overarching story. It makes exclusion impossible.

As a correction to Charles Kraft's widely influential "translation" model, Flemming proposes that the gospel's encounter with first-century culture was that of *transforming engagement* (pp. 306-308). "Jesus and the New Testament writers model a delicate dance between formulating the gospel in terms that make sense in their cultural worlds and at the same time calling those worlds into question in order to re-form them" (p. 308).

Another correction to many trends in current missiology is Flemming's insistence that churches be heterogeneous communities. "... the gospel relativizes all cultures and demolishes the old cultural lines of division and ethnocentrism in favor of a common identity 'in Christ'" (p. 309). At the same time, the gospel affirms the necessity of doing theology in a particular, local context so it can be heard and understood, without the danger of "contextualism" (borrowed from Max L. Stackhouse, referring to a belief that no theological reflection is able to supersede a particular context), leading to relativism and theological dissonance. "In contrast to either a homogenizing globalization on the one hand or an atomizing relativism on the other, Scripture models a dynamic interaction between the local and the global which has important implications for our time" (p. 311). Most helpful is Flemming's idea that we need to think not only in contextual, but *transcontextual* categories, meaning that each part contributes toward the growth and enrichment of the whole – local theologizing done in the context of the global church.

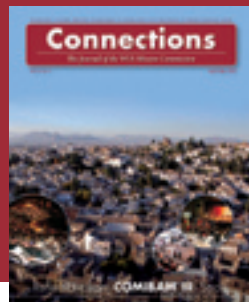
The last few pages of the book are directed toward possible contextualizing methods in our own post-modern world. He draws from his research to suggest community, story and imagination as necessary to reach this present generation. It is the task of the church, not just the cross-cultural missionary. The church together must grow in understanding and application of the gospel, in outreach to others and in embodying the kingdom of God. Without being prisoners of post-modern cultural norms, as some market-driven churches have experienced, they need to be mission-directed.

Finally contextualization is on-going. Cultures and societies change and new questions arise. "Like the book of Acts, contextualizing the gospel is an open-ended story" (p. 322). In spite of the immense difficulty of this task, we are most encouraged by the fact that God is at work. The same Holy Spirit that led the New Testament writers is present in the church and in our lives today. We need humble, learning, and prayerful minds and spirits. "May faithful communities of disciples in a multitude of local settings purpose to truly listen to Scripture, to the Spirit, to Christians through the ages, and to one another, as they learn to sing the old, old story in new keys" (p. 322). <<

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