

Emerging Themes in Mission

A survey and summary



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As those of you who have read the Editorial will have gathered, this paper is based on the contributions of mission leaders and thinkers who were asked to comment on the first twenty-five editions of *Encounters* and to suggest future possible themes to be treated by the journal. Out of these contributions I have selected a number of key ideas which I judge reflect the main concerns of those who responded. Minor themes are also listed. Of course the list of current interests and concerns is made up of items that are uniquely the choice of the twenty three respondents. Also it is a list compiled in the Summer of 2008. The same exercise undertaken by a historian of mission trying to take a longer view might come up with very different results. Equally, in five years time other pressing issues will almost certainly have forced their way onto the mission agenda.

Nevertheless I commend this exercise to you. I am convinced that we are not doing enough mission reflection, that we are not listening enough to each other, and that we are often woefully ignorant of issues that we need to grasp simply because they are affecting world mission in significant ways sometimes without our even noticing it.

Here then are my main themes, with some comment under each heading largely drawn from the emails and letters sent by the respondents themselves. The list is in no particular order. I have put in some cross references to the individual contributions listed as Notes from... but ideally these should be read as they stand to get the full flavour of the responses.

MAJOR THEMES

Violence and mission, persecution etc.

Though the Western church has long experienced freedom from persecution, it remains a serious issue in many parts of the global South, indeed it is often on the increase. Actual physical violence against Christians is becoming common in parts of India and is not absent from China or the Islamic world. It would be good to address this in the light of an emerging 'Christian rights' approach. Does the Bible give us any guidelines here? Stories of converts from hostile contexts - showing the complexities of their situation and the price they pay would make the discussion more real.

Prosperity gospel

'The prosperity gossellers' falsehoods' says one respondent. This may be true but it is not a simple issue. There appears to be a symbiotic relationship between prosperity theology and spiritual warfare in the thinking of Southern Christianity, and, at the very least, this raises challenges for partnerships between Western Churches and Missionary Agencies and Southern Christians. Also, the sheer 'success' of the movement needs to be taken into account. Often we hear of 'massive growth and revival' and large percentage figures of the overall number of Christians in a given country are claimed as adherents. At the same time Evangelical church leaders in these countries frequently do not wish to be associated with churches that practice and preach prosperity theology as they see the theology as heretical.

Business and mission

We may need to take a fresh look at this topic in the light of the emerging economies. In the political sphere, there is a lot of discussion on the role that private enterprise can play in providing public goods such as education and healthcare. More explicitly looking at mission, do we have anything to say on what the aims of business should be? Is there an alternative model of business that goes beyond profit maximisation, or is the key question what 'Christian' businesses do with their maximised profits i.e. support more traditional mission activities or engage in Corporate Social Responsibility? Certainly some are worried that the capitalist ethos (and political ideology?) behind Business as Mission may not be entirely aligned with 'kingdom business'. See further Notes from Paul Thaxter.

Islam

Islam is always in the news as far as Christians are concerned! There are many possible topics. Women in Islam is one that has been mentioned. Islamic commitment to coercion and how to respond, is another. See further Notes from Ida Glaser.

Money and mission

The theme of 'money and mission' is linked to wider issues to do with power, control and leadership. See further Notes from Rose Dowsett where the issue of control of money is linked to training institutions.

Education and training

This topic was placed in a wide framework. There was a request for a review of the curricula of mission training colleges around the world. One respondent was interested in discussion on the 'fundamental biblical mission principles for local churches and mission organizations'. She felt that discerning these principles 'will help them [the churches and agencies] to understand the reasons for their existence' and 'will also guide them to provide adequate mission training for mission practitioners.' At another level there was concern about Christian schools, Christian universities etc. and whether these should really be the models we are pursuing?

Current political and economic issues

Obviously this could be broken down further. Migration was one popular sub-heading, as was the apparent increasing divide between rich and poor even in countries where the economy seems to be growing rapidly. Another respondent mentioned the shift to the 'left' in Latin American politics. Yet another raised the whole question of post-imperialism, suggesting that the consequences of a not-too-distant colonialism is still impacting mission today. Globalisation – what it means and what it means for mission – comes up again and again. In this connection see the questions raised about cross-cultural living in the global church in Notes from Jonathan Rowe.

Urbanisation and informal settlements (slums)

Urbanisation could obviously be included as a 'political and economic issue', but it deserves to stand alone because mentioned by so many. Asian respondents were particularly concerned – migration from rural areas is massively on the increase in a place like India, for example – but other continents are clearly not exempt from the challenge. One respondent wanted practical suggestions as to how church planting is to happen in the informal settlements (slums) of our big cities, especially in the two-thirds world. There is a need, he felt, for mission agencies to think of how sustainable mission can take place among the

illiterate, insecure, deprived and destitute people of some of the large slums. Also how do we challenge the church to get engaged? See further Notes from Martin Lee.

Technology, especially the media

People were concerned to discuss not only the use of 'technology' for better mission communications but also the subtle effect of the twenty-first century electronic media mission, meaning things like the God channel which not only work as evangelistic tools but are also often as promoters of specific lines of theology without offering the opportunity for 'reader response' or academic debate. See further Notes from Martin Lee and especially Paul Thaxter.

Contextualisation

A respondent with a Latin American inclination felt that the role of Liberation Theology in the development of both contextual theology and missiological method has not really been recognised and it would be nice to see some further discussion. This would be in the context of a more general discussion on the development of contextual theology, something which was called for by a number of people. See further Notes from Rose Dowsett.

Listening to the global South

It is not just Liberation Theology! There are many indigenous theologies and many other ways of 'listening'. For example, what has been the contribution of the African church to mission? What are the untold stories of African missionary heroes? Not enough attention has been paid to this so far, it was felt. We desperately need to raise up and hear alternative mission voices, those from the underside with non-Western perspectives. From a Western point of view this may mean more learning of languages so that non-Western languages can be 'heard'.

Learning from other traditions

There are many mission traditions: Orthodox, Catholic, Pentecostal etc. Are we learning from them? Beyond that there is the vexed issue of inter-religious dialogue. See further Notes from Paul Thaxter.

Accepting vulnerability

This included avoiding neo-colonialism, the endurance of pre-modern societies, the failure of 'progress' and 'order', and the jettisoning the modernist baggage.

Re-appropriating the Bible for mission

People seem to feel that this is important but are not sure what to recommend. See further, however, Notes from Ida Glaser and from Jonathan Rowe.

Leadership

This links (in some people's minds at least) with the topic of inter-cultural teams. A clear concern, I would judge, not always clearly expressed, is that Westerners always seem to think that they should be the leaders! There is also concern that leadership models are being borrowed from 'the world', and this applies to those both from the West and the global South.

Church and mission

The church is changing e.g. it is more than ever multicultural. What does it mean for mission? Can church and mission share new ideas and new models (e.g. 'emerging church' and 'emerging mission')? Somebody asks provocatively: 'Can a catholic ecclesiology confront globalised fragmentation?' meaning, essentially, can we in mission recover ecclesiology as a proper theological and biblical first order matter?

Short-term mission

Mostly discontent expressed here. Described by one respondent as a 'boom industry' he added the some are claiming that more resources are now being expended on short-term mission than on long-term. Some link the topic with what they call 'the Americanisation' of mission. See a searching critique of short-term mission in Notes from Rose Dowsett.

Legislation

This is the new 'nightmare factor' for mission executives. See further Notes from Martin Lee and Rose Dowsett.

MINOR THEMES

Just to complete the picture I list below the topics which were mentioned by the respondents but which might be considered minor topics, not in the sense that they were judged to be less important but that, as a matter of fact, they were mentioned less frequently. I have not included headings you can find in the Notes in the rest of this edition of *Encounters*. Again, the topics come in no particular order.

Theology in an era of world Christianity; gender and mission; hospitality and mission; reconciliation and mission; south to south mission e.g. the 'back to Jerusalem' movement; mission, evangelism and polemical approaches; new mission thinking emerging from the margins of Christianity such as: the Dalits, Women, children; families in mission; sports and mission; pastoral care in mission (both care of mission/church workers and issues of different understandings of what pastoral care entails); the relationship between the global and local church; preparing churches in the global South for mission; Latin America; the danger of downplaying proclamation; the church's responsibility in areas of high unemployment; building inter-cultural and inter-generational churches in European cities; art and mission; 'secular' vocation as a mission call; people groups revisited; America versus the rest; damaged people on offer for mission service – what might be the cultural knock-on?; measuring our effectiveness; mission opportunities associated with the growing concern regarding matters environmental and economic; positive engagement with integrated development/sustainability initiatives that involve cross community organisations; African mission initiatives, including the emergence of the National Initiative for Reformation of South Africa; mission in relation to disasters/traumas; industrial chaplaincies; livelihood groups - especially Farmers' groups; the message of reconciliation; Edinburgh 2010; changing roles of western mission societies – evaluation of different sending structures; frontier mission; insider movements; attrition and burnout in mission; gender issues; children at risk; conflict-resolution; ethics and missiology; new models of mission in the light of globalisation.

This should give us something to talk about!

CONTRIBUTORS

Finally, I offer a list of respondents (in alphabetical order!) with my sincere thanks.

Daniel Clark, Paul Davies, Rose Dowsett, Chris Ducker, Rosemary Foster, Ida Glaser, Jim Harries, Manoj Jacob, Andy Kingston-Smith, Carol Kingston-Smith, Martin Lee, Terry Lockyer, Julie Ma, Peter Oyugi, Rogelio Prieto, Tim Raby, Cathy Ross, Jonathan Rowe, David Singh, Kang-san Tan, Loun Ling Tan, Paul Thaxter, John Wibberley.

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