

“Witnessing to Christ Today”: A Perspective

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I greet you all in the name of the Holy Trinity

It's indeed a great honour for me and for the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) of the World Council of Churches that I represent here, to be part of this historic moment when we together celebrate 100 years of our ecumenical missionary journey which started right here in 1910. The leaders of the 1910 conference would not have anticipated the kind of sea changes in the global Christian landscape that we have witnessed over the years. Crisis in Western civilization, disintegration and collapse of colonial imperialism, emergence of new forms of colonialism (economic and cultural globalization) and war ('war on terror'), growing secularization, and challenges of post-modernity are just a few aspects of the ever changing global landscape. On the ecclesial front, the phenomenal growth of Charismatic and Pentecostal churches today is a major development. All of these, as Dana Robert has articulated in her key-note presentation, pose new challenges for conventional understandings of Christian unity and Mission and Evangelism.

For want of time, I should like to lift up only a couple of concerns here:

Firstly: Mission as “Liturgy before Liturgy”

Dana Robert, in her presentation, has likened the process of mission in unity to the act of breathing. According to her, “mission is the church breathing: we inhale in worship, exhale in witness”. She has also made reference to the classic Orthodox notion of mission as ‘liturgy after liturgy’, popularised by Ion Bria . Standing in today's context, marked by division amongst churches, lack of inter-communion even among members of same ecclesial family, exclusion of various sections of people within and without churches, brokenness of relationship between humanity and nature; my own sense is that it's time we also started talking about “liturgy before liturgy” if we as churches have to be credible in our being and becoming. Perhaps, it's also time we practised inhaling in witness and exhaling worship. How can we possibly claim to be a credible worshipping community if we are still far from being able to practise equality, sharing, justice and mutuality in our ecclesial and social engineering? How can we possibly call ourselves a liturgical community if churches continue to discriminate people on the bases of caste, race, gender and so on even within their worship life? What is Holy Communion without social communion? To me, the challenge seems to lie in taking up ‘liturgy after liturgy’ (the ministry of healing and reconciliation) before liturgy. The actual practice of healing and reconciliation needs to reflect in the liturgical life of the church. In fact, the Biblical tradition does take us in that direction.

Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift before that altar and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. (Mtt. 5: 23,24)

As the Athens Mission Conference reminded us, we, as churches, are essentially called to be healing and reconciling communities. Our worship and liturgy would stand discredited, as Is. 1: 10-15 suggests, if we do not embody the values of equality, peace, justice and integrity of creation. Liturgy before liturgy, therefore, is just as important as liturgy after liturgy.

Secondly and finally: Mission as Contestation

Dana Robert has pointed out an important aspect in her key-note presentation; that is that the 1910 macro context of colonialism has now been supplanted with the current macro context of (economic) globalization. The question whether churches and mission agencies, in particular, are also being negatively influenced by the logic of globalization and market imperialism needs to be addressed seriously, especially in a context where there is a growing concern that the prophetic voice has been gradually diminishing in the ecumenical circles including the WCC. While it is true that a false dichotomy between evangelical and ecumenical strands is irrelevant, our attempts in widening the ecumenical umbrella should not result in diluting the prophetic dimensions of mission. Passion for evangelism and quest for social justice should be held together.

As David Bosh and Schmidt have articulated, our response to *Missio Dei* should be to turn to God. And to turn to God is to turn to the world. Differently stated, mission is church's engagement with the world in a prophetic manner. In today's context of neo-colonialism, of systemic injustice and violence, manifested in increasing globalization of poverty, economic and social marginalization of people and exploitation of mother earth, mission as quest for justice is not simply an option, but a mandate. 100 years since 1910, we need to underscore this affirmation in no uncertain terms. We must also recognise that the church is not the sole agent of *Missio Dei*, God's transformation of the world. She must witness to God in Christ alongside all God's people including people of other faiths and civil society initiatives. When the church engages the world, she is called to act like salt and get dissolved in it. Even after 100 years of missionary movement, I sense an obvious lack of courage and commitment on the part of the global church to address issues of global justice (social, economic and ecological justice) and religious pluralism and its specific challenges as fundamental mission concerns. While 1910 mission conference was marked predominantly by a Western colonial missionary ethos, what seems to influence the global ecclesial and missionary context of today is a neo-colonial project of sidelining issues of global justice. The representation of global south in this conference may have significantly increased from that of 1910, but the question is whether the pressing concerns of the global south such as poverty, economic and social injustice, ecological violence and marginalization of indigenous peoples actually form the main mission agenda. For instance, it was quite appropriate that we decided to meet here in Edinburgh where the modern ecumenical movement was born 100 years ago. But do we all share the same strong feelings about the place where the very ground of our faith and of the ecumenical movement, Jesus Christ himself was born? If we do not address the issues of the unjust and illegal occupation of Palestine and the continuing aggression of the State of Israel on the people and land of Palestine, which world are we turning to in *Missio Dei*? If this conference does not have anything to say in missiological terms about the islands and its people that are going to simply disappear

due to climate change, which world are we turning to in God's mission? It is here that we need to highlight the importance of mission as contestation.

The miracle account in Mk. 5:1-20 offers us some insights as to how mission can be perceived vis-à-vis contestation. Mission, here, can be understood in terms of exorcism, as 'casting out demons', confronting satanic forces. The most striking thing about the Markan story is that Jesus confronts the satanic forces by naming it. The name 'legion' (meaning 'a battalion of soldiers') also is suggestive of the context of Roman military imperialism. The word 'legion' also is indicative of the fact that satan here is not an individual, but an army, a system, a structure of evil. In today's context of neo-colonialism, we are challenged by Jesus Christ to confront systemic demons and satanic forces that express themselves in the guise of economic globalization, casteism, racism, patriarchy, ecocide and so on. Mission in this context is about calling them by name and casting them out. It is important that Dana Robert has lifted up the Revelation vision in her presentation. However, it is even more important to remind ourselves of the fact that this was a church daring to envision in a context of Empire. The early church's model of confronting the Roman empire, as recorded in the Book of Revelation, is a classic example of how mission of contestation is carried out in specific contexts. Rev.18 is truly a prophetic passage on the doom of the then empire. This is how it is announced, proleptically:

He cried with a loud voice saying: Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great. She has become a dwelling place of demons, and a stronghold of every unclean spirit...with the wealth of her wantonness.¹

John here speaks of the fall of the empire as if it had happened. This is the missionary spirit in which we need to contest the demonic forces of our times.

In sum

All mission conferences are meant to, as Wolfgang Gunther would put it:

Make new discoveries of the grace and power of God for ourselves, for the Church, and for the world, to face the new age and the new task with a new consecration².

Edinburgh 2010 is yet another opportunity to discover anew the grace and power of God for us, the Church, and for the whole created order. May the triune God help us discover that divine grace and power.

¹ . Rev. 18:2)

² . Wolfgang Gunther, "History and Significance of World Mission Conferences in the 20th Century", in *International Review of Mission*, Vol.XCII, No.367, October 2003, p.521.