

EDINBURGH 2010: LISTENING GROUP REPORT

The Song of Songs ends with the king saying to his beloved:
"Your friends listen to you. Let me hear your voice!" (SS 8,13).

In any encounter and gathering listening as well as speaking are significant. At Edinburgh 2010 a group of twelve persons was given the particular task to listen to what was said and observe what was happening in this worldwide gathering. The purpose was not only to provide a report of its findings, but in listening to detect how the many voices may contribute to and strengthen our common voice and witness to Christ.

The members in the Listening Group met each other for the first time in Edinburgh, and the group mirrored the composite participation in the conference (cf. list of group members at the end of this report). During the conference we shared meals, met for group sessions and compared notes. After the three full days of the conference we gave a preliminary report to the plenary on Saturday evening. Based on the notes of the members and in communication with them after the conference, this more comprehensive report has been compiled and given its final form by the co-chair of the group.

The conference had been well prepared, and we tried to listen with the material of the conference book "Witnessing to Christ Today" at the back of our minds. Edinburgh 1910 lasted for 10 days, our gathering for four days with only three days for deliberations. The limited time available did not allow for in-depth discussions of significant theological and missiological issues related to the nine themes covered by the conference book and the conference programme. It is our hope that this can be done in the follow-up of Edinburgh 2010 in the various regions of the world as well as in the Global Forum, in the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism and by the various stakeholders of the conference.

Paradigm Shift in World Mission

As an event Edinburgh 2010 demonstrated to us the paradigm shift that has taken place in world mission and in the global church since 1910 and particularly in the last decades. Hopefully the conference as such with the study process in advance and the follow-up will foster and further develop this shift in focus for the worldwide church in its missional ministry:

- From mission as the church's mission to God's mission (*missio Dei*), and thus from a church-oriented mission to a mission-centred church.
- From world mission and a global church dominated by Western culture to a worldwide community with a major growth in the global south, with many colours and a multifaceted face.
- From competition among churches and missionary organizations to cooperation and unity.
- From a split between ecumenism and evangelism, dialogue and mission to a more united ministry with the Gospel.

- From a focus on verbal communication to a more holistic understanding of the Gospel and Christian ministry.
- From a power-exercising church to vulnerable communities and a church among and for the poor.
- From male-dominated ministries to full involvement of women, young adults and children in the life and ministry of the church.

In listening to the many voices that spoke and conversations that took place during the conference, we not only sensed an affirmation of this paradigm shift, but we also came to acknowledge that there still are many stumbling blocks on our way to achieve this common witness to Christ in our lives. In this report we highlight how we heard that this paradigm shift was affirmed, but also the challenges in front of us.

Foundations for Mission

The worldwide Church has been on a theological journey since 1910. Ecumenical discussion in the last decades of the twentieth century developed the understanding of mission as God's mission (*missio Dei*), and that the Church is called to participate in the mission of the triune God. This understanding of mission reverberated throughout the conference. Mission is the heartbeat of God, and its foundation is the very nature of God: the relational, self-giving, grace-filled nature of the triune God in which we are invited to participate.

The paper on "Foundations for Missions" in the conference book deals with experiential, biblical and theological foundations. The focus upon experience was appreciated, as a way of dealing honestly with the history of Christian mission in the last century and particularly its dark sides, but also as a significant signal to overcome the tendency to prioritize the so-called theoretical above the empirical approach. At the same time some expressed the desire that the biblical foundations always should have priority, and that both the theological and experiential approach and reflections must be rooted in Scripture.

In the last decades the uniqueness of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit have been key issues in the missiological debate. The previously mentioned paper on "Foundations for Mission" in the conference book states: "Linking Christology and pneumatology avoids exclusive christo-centrism in our understanding of the person and work of Christ, neither neglecting the creativity of the Spirit in creation, mission and redemption, nor emphasizing a false autonomy of the Spirit that displaces Christology and the Trinity" (p.24-25).

In this respect we heard references to the World Council of Churches Conference on Mission and Evangelism in Athens in 2005: "Come, Holy Spirit, Heal and Reconcile", in which Orthodox and Pentecostals discovered common ground in their understanding of the work of the Spirit. At the conference in Edinburgh there was little time for a more in-depth discussion of the uniqueness of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit with its implications for our participation in God's mission. We sense, however, that not only further study and reflection on these issues are needed, particularly

with regard to the next topic – Christian mission among other faiths, - but such reflection is a fertile ground for developing a dynamic and sound spirituality in our missional practice.

A Trinitarian understanding of mission today has several implications, for missiological thinking as well as for our missional practice. It is participation in the incarnational life of Jesus Christ and following him on his way to the cross and the resurrection: walking alongside the poor, the oppressed and the abused. It also implies responsibility and concern for God's creation, particularly in view of the contemporary consumer culture and the current exploitation of earth, water and air. It calls for a more holistic witness to the love of God for the salvation of a fallen world.

Christian Mission among Other Faiths

Also from a missional perspective the world in 2010 is significantly different from 1910. In 1910 80% of Christians were in Europe and North-America, today less than 40% of all Christians are in the same regions. In 1910 there was an urgency in the recognition that only 1/3 of the world population was Christian. Today we rejoice in the growth of churches in the global south, and that with the growth in world population Christians still are 1/3. Today we live in a “global village” with a plurality of cultures, languages and faith-traditions in our societies. It is in this new context Christian mission among other faiths takes place. Mission used to be to “the far”, today it takes place in our local context, in our neighbourhoods. Today mission is about being good neighbours and faithful witnesses at the same time. Yet, as we were told, 86% of all Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims do not personally know a Christian.

With regard to the history of Christian mission in the last century, some asked about the place of the revitalization of Islam in this story. When militant Islam often is focused by the media, and we acknowledge that Christians live under pressure in many Muslim countries, we also note that Muslim scholars today write on the duties of proximity and a theology of neighbourliness. In today's world this seems to us as a key challenge: How to live with Muslims as neighbours and share the Good News of the Gospel with them?

In the conference we realized anew that the discussion about either dialogue or evangelism in the encounter with people of other faiths belongs to the past, although we still need to deepen our understanding of the uniqueness of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit for these encounters. In every encounter with a fellow human being we need to listen intently and respectfully and to speak the truth with humility. In sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ there can be no superiority.

It was challenging to listen to the story told about young adults in Germany as an illustration of the situation in much of Europe. Many young people there know little of the faith and even less about the mission of the Church. They are impressed by an expressive faith, yet are uncertain in matters of ethics and evangelism. Thus the question was asked: Have western

Christians lost confidence in the Gospel? Is it possible to maintain confidence in the Gospel and respect for people of other faith traditions?

Mission and Postmodernities

Postmodernism and postmodernities are complex concepts, debated and criticized as well. We found it helpful to address postmodern culture as a way of analyzing the cultural context of which we ourselves are part, and in which mission takes place. Being a phenomenon significantly marked by western values, we also noted that postmodern culture expresses itself in different ways and poses varying challenges in different regions of the world. Common features that we noted, are possibly: an emphasis upon relations and experience rather than rationality; relativism rather than normativity, with mistrust of authorities; a search for autonomy and authenticity; an emphasis upon aesthetics more than ethics; fragmentation in the life of the individual as well as in society, with plurality and pluralism as a distinct mark of postmodern culture; a consumerist life-style in a society marked by market liberalism.

It is evident that mission in such a postmodern context has to be distinctly critical and countercultural, and we heard this particularly with respect to contemporary relativism, the fragmentation of life and consumerism. But this should not make us blind to sound elements in the reaction of postmodern culture to modernity, both in our own critical assessment of Christian mission and Church life today, as well as in the acknowledgement of the genuine possibilities for Christian ministry in this context. The triune God, Christian faith and the Church's participation in the mission of God are if anything relational, and experience and aesthetics are distinct elements in the life of the believer and in Christian worship. In this regard we noted what was reported from North America that Orthodox and Pentecostal churches are growing with their emphasis upon non-verbal elements in worship and communal life.

In reflecting critically and constructively on postmodern culture as our current context in many parts of the world, we detect some priorities for the life of our churches and ministries: Now is a time for renewed telling of biblical and personal stories and for worship that provides space for the aesthetic and the experiential. Our current context also represents a call to authentic Christian living, to a proper emphasis upon the relational aspect of Christian faith and community, and to strengthen Christian unity and fellowship as a way to overcome fragmentation. Authenticity, however, is not the same as the perfect story. Our brokenness and vulnerability are as much part of authentic Christian living and have to be recognized. Finally, postmodern culture also challenges churches and Christians to uphold a prophetic voice in the encounter with consumerism in our own lives and societies.

Mission and Power

In reviewing the history of Christian mission in the twentieth century, Edinburgh 2010 for many of us became a humble conference, particularly with regard to the dark history with abuse of power by churches, missionary

organisations and workers, sometimes manifest and wilful use of power, other times through abuse of power in the shadows of missionary ministry.

The stories told in the conference book from aboriginal communities and residential schools in Canada were also shared orally and visually at the conference, and we heard similar stories from other continents and countries. These are stories about physical harassment and sexual abuse of children in residential schools, as well as overt and more sophisticated suppression of indigenous cultures by churches and missionary organisations.

We no longer live in the colonial era, but there are still people in our midst living with traumatic memories from such abuse of power in their personal lives and against the indigenous culture in which they grew up. There are still stories to be told, repentance to be made and restorative justice to be exercised. In many places there is still a need for healing.

But past history also challenges us to a fresh and more profound approach to the questions of power in our churches and missionary organisations, a conscious appreciation of indigenous cultures and particularly taking seriously the dignity of children and their rightful place in the Christian community. For a Church that consciously wants to be vulnerable and follow in the footsteps of its crucified Lord, this is also a challenge to lift up the voices of the marginalized and subjugated people of the earth.

But the question of power has also wider implications for the worldwide Church participating in God's mission. These implications concern the use of economic power in the relationship between the poor south and the richer north and between churches and missionary organisations in these regions. These relations and questions we have only begun to address, and we need both humility and creativity in order to develop a stewardship that will mirror the unity we long for in our common ministry and witness.

Forms of Missionary Engagement

We received a lot of input and noted a wealth of issues from the discussions on "Forms of Missionary Engagement". Criticism of insensitive evangelical missionary activities and particularly televangelism was voiced, but unhappiness was also expressed with what some experienced as a caricature of evangelicals.

The paradigm shift from the Church's mission to God's mission, and from a mission to "those far away" to "those who are near", implies a renewed focus upon local context and the primary role of the local church in mission. The local church is always the actual expression of the worldwide church, the people of God in their local context. But this implies that the local church should never be seen and experienced as a static entity. On the contrary, renewal in mission depends on the continuing renewal of church communities, being sent and reaching out in a holistic ministry to their local communities and beyond.

This focus upon the local church is consequential. In most local contexts this calls for constructive and ecumenical cooperation as well as space for new and emerging churches, not overlooking the difficulties that this sometimes involves. Today we sense a new willingness and a common search for cooperation between the “come” and the “go” structures in the history of the church: the local church and the missionary team, or the institutional church and the missionary organization, sometimes called “para-church”. However, we also note a mushrooming of missionary agencies in several countries, presenting us with new challenges towards risky collaboration in humility. We listened to stories of missionary lay movements and communities within both the Roman-Catholic and Protestant churches and recognize their significance in our common missionary endeavour.

At the conference we heard and watched a vivid presentation of the growth of churches in South-Korea. Churches there have a strong missionary identity, and we were told that today there are more than 4000 Korean congregations in Europe and North-America. This demonstrated another difference from one hundred years ago. Today there is mission from the east and the south to the west and the north and between all continents, and migrant communities have become a mark of a globalized society in most countries.

“No church is so rich that it does not need mission. No church is so poor that it cannot provide mission” (Fidon Mwombeki, United Evangelical Mission). Migrants from many nations and cultures today bring with them new and refreshing expressions of the Gospel to the countries where they settle. This has had and continues to have the potential of reviving and creating new Christian communities. With this potential it is not only important that the migrants are given a Christian welcome, which sometime is lacking in the north because of a frequent stigma of foreigners. But there is a need to develop new ways of ecumenical cooperation with migrants and migrant congregations and to provide cross-cultural training so that unnecessary stumbling blocks are overcome for the sake of their integration into a new context and their participation in our common mission.

A new and refreshing concern was voiced in Edinburgh as well as in the preceding study process: the role of children as “a new energy for twenty-first century mission”. Some critical remarks were heard. With past examples of abuse of power in the treatment of children, it is important that powerful and demanding language is avoided, and that there is a deep respect of their dignity – as children. But respecting their dignity and their full participation as members of the Body of Christ makes us realize anew that God has used children as his willing instruments throughout Christian history.

At the conference stories were shared about children from 8 to 15 years in eastern and southern countries involved in discipling, reconciling and environmental ministries. From Rome we heard about the Catholic “Centre for unity” with its interactive program for teaching children reciprocity and mutuality across confessional and religious boundaries. In many Christian communities children are mainly treated as passive recipients of verbal

messages and passive participants in fellowships for grown-ups. It is time that both children and youth are taken seriously as active participants in our communities and in living out their Christian faith.

Today more than half of the world's population lives in urban centres, and poverty is one of the major challenges in our societies. Although the church as such does not have the means to solve the problem of global poverty, it does challenge the identity and the ministry of the church. In many parts of the world and particularly in the global south the Church is a church of the poor. A key element in the ministry of Jesus was "bringing good news to the poor", and in his life this was not only about sharing a verbal message, but life and transforming it. In this we today hear a call to the Church and to Christians on all continents to live with the poor and for the poor.

Living missionally is to be context-oriented, rooted in the reality and experience of actual persons and communities, always marked by reciprocity and mutuality. The same concern was also voiced from people working on the study theme "*Christian Communities in Contemporary contexts*", particularly with respect to migration, the new urban contexts and the mega-cities of today. Mission is never about being powerful, but rather about making oneself vulnerable and hospitable to others, so that we may share the Good News of the Gospel and our lives be transformed.

Theological Education and Formation

In most parts of the world there is today a growing demand for higher education, and there has been a proliferation of theological schools, Bible colleges and training institutions, particularly in the global south. The composition of student bodies has changed, with a richer diversity in gender, age, race and vocational goals. The current context of education is also marked by new forms of accreditation standards and the possibility of the electronic media in providing online models of delivery and resources. But there is also a disparity between the north and the south with regard to financial resources for educational institutions and programs. How does this affect theological education and formation in mission?

At the conference we noted a strong affirmation not only of Christian faith as committed to education, but that mission should be a key, integrating element, and that we need a new vision for theological education within a missional model. This is particularly the case where growing tension is experienced with regard to ministerial and spiritual formation versus academic preparation. Teachers are to be spiritual mentors, and there still are needs to further develop education and training which are rooted in the local and regional context, resisting the impact of western models on a non-western context

In the current landscape of theological education and training we observed a paradox. In the global south and east, where there are less financial resources, Theological Education by Extension has become a major instrument for training, not only as a preparation for pastoral ministry, but for grounding lay people in their faith and equipping them for participation in Christian service. In the global north and west, however, there is in many

countries less focus upon the training of lay people and a lack of recruitment to pastoral ministry. We believe this situation calls for new, cooperative and inventive partnerships between traditions, institutions and geographical regions in theological education.

Concerns that were voiced in other tracks, were also discussed with regard to theological education and formation. The changing financial conditions and difficulties for churches to support their institutions and programs were noted, also causing less support of interdenominational cooperation in education. But churches working together in theological education are a significant contribution to Christian unity and may strengthen our common witness. With the past and present abuse of children in our communities, a sound “theology of children” should be developed, and the concern for children should be moved from the margins into the core of our curricula. Today grounding people in Christian faith and ministry also demands that they are equipped for engaging with persons of other faiths and are properly introduced to their faiths and traditions, and at the same time to share the Gospel as “public truth”.

Mission and Unity

Edinburgh 2010 was in itself a signal of a growing unity among Christians, and we rejoiced in this fellowship with Orthodox and Catholic representatives, with Protestants from all streams, with Evangelicals and Pentecostals, African initiated churches and people from the charismatic movements as well as Adventists. But we still have a way to go, not only with regard to the differences among us, but in the way we express our unity when it comes to the participation of women and young adults. We also heard that today there are 41.000 Christian denominations in the world. Thus the growing unity that we experienced, makes it more urgent to face the parallel development of increasing fragmentation within Christianity.

The study process of the WCC in connection with the document on “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” (BEM) has shown that confessional theology and practice of ecclesiology lie at the heart of our continued disunity, and the challenge of BEM is still relevant: to arrive at an understand and practice of unity-in-diversity based on hospitality and mutuality, love and renewal in the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the time has come to move away from attempts to forge some kind of uniformity which will force faith groups to become defensive, and rather explore new approaches and possibilities such as networking.

The notion of networking was emphasized as a way to seek and develop broader Christian unity. Networking provides a kind of mutuality that takes people beyond the formalities of organizations that tend to descend into misuse of power and domination. It also offers a potential to engage young adults who so far have had no interest in church or mission. There was some disappointment that the conference did not provide more ample space for young adults to be part of the revisioning of what future mission will be like. Any paradigms of unity in diversity will have to take seriously the language and methods of communication which young adults understand, embrace and promote. Young adults are uniting today and use innovative ways to do

so, and we may learn from them and allow them to participate in leading the Church in the quest for unity.

Another recurring thread was the call for a movement toward unity to come from the grassroots rather than to wait for leaders to implement it. The irony was that this call came from leaders themselves, with whom the dismantling of unity seems to be tied up. There are also denominational structures in the west which not only sustain disunity in their countries, but which are imposed on the south. On the other hand, we should not overlook, but highlight advances in dialogues that have taken and are taking place, so that members of churches may be aware of progress toward greater understanding and cooperation between traditionally conflicting communities.

Mission and work toward unity cannot be undertaken without an attitude of humility, but there should be confidence without arrogance. This was emphasized in connection with observations on proselytizing activities from certain Pentecostal and Evangelical groups. It was felt that Christians can be confident in sharing their faith without promoting denominational structures, taking into consideration that we belong to the same Body of Christ.

The nature of Christian unity is and will be God-given. But divisions among us cause damage to the credibility of the Gospel, and inability to work together eclipses our common witness. On the other hand, unity across our confessional and other boundaries enables the beauty of our differences and gifts to impact our societies and communities with the Gospel. Unity is at the heart of Christian mission, as Jesus said when he prayed that “all of them may be one ... so that the world may believe” (John 17).

Mission spirituality

“Mission spirituality is specifically concerned with what is necessary for the Christian to engage in mission” (Conference book, p.223). As in all Christian spirituality, spirituality in mission is intrinsically linked to the work of the Spirit: discerning and discovering the movement of the Spirit of God in the world and joining in with it.

In the conference book we read and at the conference we heard stories and descriptions of spiritual life and formation of Christians and communities in a missional context: from Africa and Asia, from Russia and migrant communities in North America. From South America we heard about the spiritual life of Base Ecclesial Communities and Pentecostal groups working together in mission. We realize that there cannot be one prescribed discipline for a missional spirituality. Our spirituality has also to be context-sensitive. Although critical analysis and reflection are always needed, we still learn and share the riches of our diverse spiritual traditions and practices.

At the conference we heard a call for a return to the classical Christian spiritual disciplines: the practice of daily scripture reading and meditation, prayer and solitude is a fount from which flows spiritual vitality for mission. But neither Christian spirituality in general nor mission spirituality in

particular are solitary enterprises: they have to do with a spiritual life lived in community, rooted in common worship and sustained by the prayer and encouragement from our local Christian communities. Transformations that we are privileged to see in the lives of others, grow out of the same source of sustenance. Today we are discovering anew the significance of spiritual direction or companionship, two persons walking and talking together in the presence of God, seeking his will and direction for their lives.

In the classical tradition meditation and contemplation was combined with action. Today we also sense a renewal of this element in the classical tradition, a renewal rooted and shaped in our contemporary and regional contexts. Rene Padilla is quoted in the conference book: “Contemplation without action is an escape from concrete reality; action without contemplation is activism lacking a transcendent meaning” (p.241). Both contemplation and action take place in our various contexts. In Africa this implies addressing issues like the HIV and Aids and responding to conflict with biblical peacemaking principles, and in many regions it expresses itself in a concern for the environment.

Discipleship and the call to discipleship are the gifts of grace from God, and from God alone, and mission spirituality recognizes that God is already at work, and that we may join in on what he is doing. Mission spirituality has to do with living a life oriented toward the fulfilment of God’s purposes for all creation.

Witnessing to Christ Today

Many voices and narratives from different regional, confessional and other perspectives were heard at Edinburgh 2010. Arguments were articulated in an organic rather than a linear way, and the conference appeared to us more as an event than offering a set of conclusions. Nevertheless, it was a time for thinking together and doing missional theology in a new and different way, expressing itself in the concluding Common Call.

We note with joy that it was possible for participants from all parts of the world and from the various streams of the worldwide Christian Church to unite behind this Common Call, and we sensed throughout the conference not only honesty with regard to the past and to our present differences, but a willingness to let the many voices converge in a symphonic witness to Christ today. Modern symphonies are not without cacophonous elements, and so was the conference, but we definitely experienced it as a symphonic event.

The conference affirmed that we today have endless possibilities for common witness, if we are bold enough to seek God’s truth together and are converted to the One who still call us his friends. “If we become friends ourselves and walk the ecumenical miles of hope together, the Spirit of Christ will bring life to his people and mission will thrive and blossom,” as bishop Brian Farrell from the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity said at the conference. We were delighted by being given the task of listening. Now it is our hope that not only the Common Call from Edinburgh 2010 will be heard, but that our common witness may shape our lives and

lead people to Christ, as we listen to one another and heed the call of our Lord: “Let me hear your voice!”

Listening Group: Rev. Dr. Iain Torrence, President Princeton Theological Seminary, USA (chair); Rt.Revd. Ole Chr.M.Kvarme, Bishop of Oslo, Norway (co-chair); Rev. Dr. Daniel Buda, Rumania and World Council of Churches programme executive for the Coordination of Church and Ecumenical Relations; Rev. Fr. Gosbert Byamungu, Tanzania and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity at the Vatican; Rev. Dr. Gao Ying, Vice-president of the China Christian Council, Beijing; Rev. Dr. Cheryl Bridges Jones, Professor of Discipleship and Christian Formation, Church of God Theological Seminary, USA; Mr. Paul Joshua, Professor of Pastoral Theology and Counselling, South-East Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies, India; Rev. Marvia Lawes, Minister of the Jamaica Baptist Union, serving in Panama; Miss Claire-Lise Lombard, DEFAP Service Protestant de mission, France; Rev. Elizabeth Salazar Sanzana, Pentecostal Evangelical Church, Chile; Ms Antonia van der Meer, Latin American Theological Fraternity, Brazil.