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**Global Connections National Conference 4-6 November  
2009**

## **Church as Transformed and Transforming Community**

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### ***Issue Group Objectives***

The objective of the group was to explore and challenge our understanding of church, the mission of churches and issues surrounding churches in mission. Drawing on an appreciation of current examples of churches in mission and historical renewal movements, the group explored the relationships between the mission community and churches, asking how we as a mission community can be a force for renewal in mission among churches.

### ***Historical Context - Church in the modern missionary movement***

The modern Protestant missionary movement that was initially shaped by William Carey was a child of the Great Awakening or evangelical revival of the eighteenth century. The revival was a powerful uniting force among the various denominations that existed at that time. At any rate they could be very united as long as they avoided talking ecclesiology. So, when Evangelicalism was defined at the international conference convened in London to establish the Evangelical Alliance in 1846 the definition explicitly excluded an ecclesiological statement.

The formation of the London Missionary Society [LMS] half a century earlier in 1795 was a good example of this non-ecclesiological unity. Episcopalians, Presbyterians and Independents formed an overseas mission to send out missionaries that would simply preach the gospel, translate the scriptures and allow converts to organise themselves into the sort of churches that suited them. They were not indifferent to church' but their desire to express their unity did mean that they were prepared to bracket a lot of talk about church in order to preach the gospel to the heathens – to use their language.

However, it was not the LMS way of doing mission that prevailed in the first half of the nineteenth century but the denominational model of the BMS that had been established through the efforts of William Carey in 1793. Following the pioneering example of William Carey overseas evangelization within denominational church structures was delegated to volunteer societies that ran the business of overseas mission – raising funds, selecting candidates, transporting missionaries to the field and overseeing their work on the field. The links denominational societies had with their sponsoring churches varied in strength but they all recognized at least some accountability to church.

While the denominational missionary societies followed the path pioneered by Carey on the home front they did not on the whole follow his pioneering example in the field. When he eventually settled in Calcutta, where he was joined by Marshman and Ward and their families, Carey came to the conclusion that to be effective the mission community needed to constitute itself a fully fledged Baptist church. Carey came to the conclusion that making visible the alternative community of the church was vital to the effectiveness of the mission's witness in a context that was almost totally ignorant of Christianity...

With the emergence of the interdenominational faith missions in the second half of the nineteenth century a very significant non-denominational stream became a permanent fixture and eventually the predominant factor in evangelical mission from the West to the majority world. This weakened further the link between mission and the church and since the great expansion in their prevalence happened when premillennialism was sweeping through the evangelical community, particularly in the USA, the focus moved from forming communities of disciples to making converts. By the middle of the twentieth century the US culture of planning, marketing and measuring had come to dominate the scene and mission felt very much like a business enterprise. With this as the dominant model the worldwide evangelical missionary movement had relegated church to the periphery of its concerns.

The Lausanne Movement was born out of this particular manifestation of the primary evangelical imperative to convert individuals everywhere to faith in Jesus Christ. But at the Lausanne Congress in 1974 a significant number of delegates led by majority world leaders managed to persuade the congress to look again at the dominant US model and seek a more adequate and more biblical model of evangelism. The result was that repentance and social action came to be linked with evangelism as an essential component of Christian mission. With the emphasis on the importance for evangelism that people change the way they live and relate to others within and outside the Christian community it became very difficult to ignore church.<sup>1</sup>

The first Lausanne Congress in 1974 is a good place to see the tensions between what had become the dominant mission model that relegated church to the sidelines by the middle of the twentieth century and a different mission model that was coming from the majority world that has church at its heart.

Paragraph 6 of the Lausanne Covenant is headed 'The Church and Evangelism' and the different perspectives are clearly evident in it:

'We affirm that Christ sends his redeemed people into the world as the Father sent him, and that this calls for a similar deep and costly penetration of the world. We need to break out of our ecclesiastical ghettos and permeate non-Christian society. In the Church's mission of sacrificial service evangelism is primary. World evangelization requires the whole Church to take the whole gospel to the whole world. The Church is at the very centre of God's cosmic purpose and is his appointed means of spreading the gospel. But a church which preaches the cross must itself be marked by the cross. It becomes a stumbling block to evangelism when it betrays the gospel or lacks a living faith in God, a genuine love for people, or scrupulous honesty in all things including promotion and finance. The church is the community of God's

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<sup>1</sup> Another way of telling the story would be to tell the story of the Enlightenment, modernism and individualism, which is another way of telling the story of the relegation of community to the periphery of life. This story gets us to a similar place in the end – with people generally feeling that something vital has been lost when community is lost and Christians beginning to talk seriously again about what church is all about.

people rather than an institution, and must not be identified with any particular culture, social or political system, or human ideology.’<sup>2</sup>

The Lausanne Covenant as a whole marked a very important watershed in the history of twentieth century evangelicalism but in this paragraph on the church we see a movement stumbling towards an adequate biblical understanding of the significance of the church in the mission of God. On the one hand there is a deeply biblical appreciation of what the church is as a cross centred community at the centre of God’s cosmic purpose but on the other hand the church is seen as merely a means to an evangelistic end.

A third of the Manila Manifesto that was drafted at the second Lausanne Congress in 1989 is devoted to ‘the whole church’ because by that time ‘the whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world’ had become the movement’s motto. However, the Manila Manifesto is disappointing because the instrumental aspect of the ecclesiology of the Covenant is strengthened with a pervasive emphasis on the evangelistic action of individual members of the churches.

As with the Covenant there are also hints of a non-instrumental ecclesiology here and there:

‘Our message that Christ reconciles alienated people to each other rings true only if we are seen to love and forgive one another, to serve others in humility, and to reach out beyond our own community in compassionate, costly ministry to the needy.’

‘The church is intended by God to be a sign of his kingdom, that is, an indication of what human community looks like when it comes under his rule of righteousness and peace. As with individuals, so with churches, the gospel has to be embodied if it is to be communicated effectively. It is through our love for one another that the invisible God reveals himself today, especially when our fellowship is expressed in small groups, and when it transcends the barriers of race, rank, sex and age which divide other communities.’

In these paragraphs the church is not just a means to an end but the end itself. It does not just exist to fulfil some task or other but its existence is the fulfilment of God’s purpose for humanity. This non instrumental view of church means that it communicates the gospel as much as by what it is and does as by what it says.

The view that the church is a ‘sign of the kingdom’ of God and ‘an indication of what human community looks like when it comes under [God’s] rule of righteousness and peace’ reflects more adequately the sweep of the biblical story. The vision of the end of the in Revelation 21-22 provides many clues to understanding the significance of the church in God’s dealing with humanity in history. The reference to the New Jerusalem as the bride and to the foundations of the city as the apostles of the Lamb suggest strongly that the glorious society that we will be one day is but a greatly intensified version of the society that the church is now and always has been since the Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost. There is plenty of biblical evidence to indicate that the society that has submitted to the rule of Jesus has the characteristics, if only in shadow, of the glorious society that it will be one day. We may bemoan the failings of churches but if the church is church in any meaningful sense it is a foretaste of heaven.

### ***Church as a transformed community***

#### **Characteristics of church as a transformed community**

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<sup>2</sup> The scripture references attached to this paragraph were John 17:18; 20:21; Matt. 28:19,20; Acts 1:8; 20:27; Eph. 1:9,10; 3:9-11; Gal. 6:14,17; II Cor. 6:3,4; II Tim. 2:19-21; Phil. 1:27

In its essence church is the gathering of those that are united with God the Father in their faith in Jesus Christ as their Saviour and in their obedience to him through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The church is present wherever groups of people gather because of their common desire to deepen their knowledge of Jesus Christ and to strengthen their lives of obedience to him in relation to each other and to the world. As the body of Christ the church can only grow in fruitfulness by remaining in constant contact with Jesus who is the source of its life. Like the early church in Jerusalem the church in all ages has done this by devoting 'themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer' [Ac 2:42]. What is important in the New Testament is the relationship to God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the communal implications of that relationship

The church is a community whose hope is centred on Jesus Christ. He is the descendant long promised by God to Abraham and described by the Old Testament prophets as the one who would come to restore truth and justice and establish the universal rule of God that will be a blessing to all nations. The church is the community that believes that the brokenness now so evident in the world because of sin has been dealt with in the death and resurrection of Jesus and will one day be finally banished from the new heaven and earth that will be established when he returns in glory.

In this confidence the local church has nothing to lose in giving itself away in sacrificial service of God and all creation knowing that their service in the Lord will not be in vain. Because the church's hope is not in this world it does not need to grasp at the transient security that is offered by our consumerist society.

The word that is used by Jesus and his apostles to describe the key characteristic of the church is 'love' [Jn 15; Gal 5; Eph 4; Phil 2 etc]. The equation is simple: we as believers 'know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.' Because we owe our life to the sacrificial love of Jesus it follows that 'we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers/sisters' [1 Jn 3:16]. The church is a community in which the members give their 'lives' away – i.e. their time, energy, possessions etc – in service to each other and to those outside their community. This selfless service is offered lovingly because it is offered generously, cheerfully and joyfully within the Christian community.

Hospitality is one of the key practices expressing sacrificial love in the New Testament. Like the disciples in the early church disciples in all ages have taken great pleasure in eating 'together with glad and sincere hearts' [Acts 2:46]. This Christian habit was not just a social convention but a living embodiment of a unity in Christ that transcended all social divisions because rich and poor, the powerful and powerless, male and female, Jew and Gentile etc gathered around the same table.

### **Hindrances to Transformation**

In summing up the deliberations of the Theology Working Group at the Lausanne Leaders gathering in Budapest in June 2006, Chris Wright said that his hope for Cape Town 2010 was that it would 'launch nothing less than a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Reformation among evangelicals...for there are scandals and abuses in the world-wide evangelical community that are reminiscent of the worst features of the pre-reformation medieval church in Europe.' Sheryl Haw pointed out a number of weaknesses in the church that call out for reformation:

1. **Materialism:** especially in the face of the suffering poor (Ez 16: 49) – what are we doing to support the poor?.
2. **A loss of a sense of God’s holiness in the church:** church is conformed to the entertainment model of the world and becomes a place we attend in order to have needs satisfied than a place of worship and service. The prosperity gospel is the most extreme manifestation of this spirit.
3. **Indifference to an increase in the level of violence in society:** violence is a key symptom of a society rejecting God [Gen 6:11]. Ceasing to be shocked by what we hear in the news all the time we end up doing nothing.
4. **Worldly leadership models:** we conform to the ‘celebrity’ leadership culture of the world.
5. **Secret sins of leaders and members:** by not walking in integrity we lose our power and credibility.
6. **Rumours and lies:** the lack of integrity in public communication as exemplified by the press is also a very common practice in the church.
7. **Busyness:** we conform to the frenetic pace of our cultural context that is driven by technological advances in communications. Ironically building real, caring relationships seems in inverse proportion to our ability to communicate.

### ***Church as a transforming community***

#### **Characteristics of church as a transforming community**

A local church is by definition a community that has been brought into being by the power of God for transformation and as the community itself is transformed it is also inevitably a force for transformation beyond itself. Any local church is a community that through the power of God is experiencing the most radical change imaginable, so that it becomes a community that is not of the world; simultaneously by becoming a community that is not of the world it causes the most radical change imaginable in the world. It is the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Therefore, what has been said about the local church as a transformed community is also a part of its transforming influence in the world. It is transforming by being a:

- ❖ beacon of hope for a lost world
- ❖ community that does not exist for itself but for the sake of others
- ❖ community that welcomes all with an offer of grace rather than judgment
- ❖ compassionate community towards those that are rejected and marginalized by the world
- ❖ generous community with all its resources towards those who do not belong
- ❖ community that speaks to God on behalf of those in the world and to those in the world on behalf of God.

As the local church grows in its knowledge of the love of God in Jesus Christ it becomes less fearful and is prepared to expose itself to costly risk for the good of others because there is ‘no fear in love’ [1 Jn 4:18]. Historically this has led the church again and again to do what the world considers to be totally foolish – to be bonkers as one small group said in our discussions. It is this fearless love that also enables church to build relationships with all sorts of people that are rejected as hopeless by the world.

As a loving community the local church relates to those in the world in humility. Living in an atmosphere where others are considered as better than ourselves in the church we also approach those outside with humility. We have nothing to boast of in

ourselves; we are 'all recovering addicts'<sup>3</sup>! We are beggars who in God's amazing grace have a source of sustenance that is inexhaustible but totally independent of our efforts. It is our privilege simply to lead others to a free banquet.

The local church needs good leadership if it is to relate to the world in a transformative way. This means leadership that envisions the church to be outward looking and that empowers all who belong to the church to use the gifts given them by the Holy Spirit – to prepare God's people for works of service' [Eph 4:12]. Being confident in the gospel the church needs to be led to know the society in which it is placed, count the cost of its involvement and then go and be a blessing to it.

'Church' (ekklesia)' is sometimes used in the New Testament to refer to all the disciples everywhere conceived as one congregation focused on Jesus as Lord. This is the one body of the enthroned Messiah Jesus that will be revealed in all its glory at the second coming. [Colossians 1:18,24; Ephesians 1:22; 3:10; Hebrews 12:23]. If this is the case then local congregations are likely to be much more effective if they co-operate in being a blessing to their societies. We deplore the spirit of competitiveness that so often prevails among churches. This also means that we can benefit from the experience of churches outside our context. In an era of global communications we have wonderful opportunities to learn from each other as churches all over the world. We should embrace these opportunities.

#### **Historical context – church dependent on continual renewal**

Richard Tiplady pointed out that we are not the first generation to be concerned about the lack of evidence of transformation in the church or the lack of transforming impact made by the church on the world. He reminded us of the succession of reforming movement in church history – the early monasticism of the desert fathers; medieval monasticism; the Cathar, Lollard and Bohemian [Jan Hus] movements; the magisterial Reformation and Anabaptism; Pietism and Methodism; the Brethren and holiness movements of the nineteenth century; Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Movement.

In contrast to Roman Catholicism with its emphasis on the papacy and church tradition, as the means of providing stability for the church in the midst of change, Protestantism expects the church to go through periods of renewal, decline and renewal again under God's direction. In the Protestant tradition all reformation is provisional because the church will always be in need of further reformation by the God who is constantly renewing his church. If this is the case we should expect to find renewal movements in evidence today. The movement inspired by Guinness and Wells against the church's entrapment in modernity, the purpose driven church and emerging church are examples of contemporary reform movements.

The most relevant question in the context of this issue group is whether the missions community/missiology has something unique to contribute to church renewal at the moment. For example, in the 1990s the work done on contextualization by missiologists had a profound impact upon youth evangelism in the UK and contributed to the renewal of youth work. Richard left us with the challenge to explore whether the missions community/missiologists have a contribution to make to the renewal of the church.

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<sup>3</sup> This is a wonderful phrase that I heard used by David Evans when director of Tearfund's UK Team.

## ***Mission agencies and church as a transformed and transforming community***

The discussion on the relationship between the mission agencies and the church did not focus directly on the challenge given by Richard Tiplady although a substantial proportion of the discussion is relevant – especially when viewed in the context of our discussion on the church as a transformed and transforming community.

Some of the discussion focused on the old chestnut of the relationship between the church and mission agencies in the context of sending and supporting mission partners/missionaries. Here the focus was on the mission partners and the contribution of the church on one hand and the mission agency on the other in commissioning and supporting them. There was a measure of agreement between church leaders and mission agency leaders that the function of the mission agency is to serve the church in the process of sending mission partners. Churches primarily need the HR capacity of the agency. The ideal was considered to be a direct relationship between the church and the agency on all HR and budgetary issues for the sake of the mission partner. This left problematic any interests that the mission agency might have that were broader than servicing the church in supporting a mission partner. This was graphically illustrated in the statement that churches don't want any contact with an agency's PR team, throw their glossy magazines straight in the bin and will not contemplate giving any mission agency a slot in Sunday services.

However, the somewhat limited view of the mission agency contribution expressed in the last paragraph was not the prevailing view. Given the importance of church in the mission of God a strong consensus emerged that the mission agencies have a role to play in realizing the vision of church that emerged in group's discussions. There was clearly a desire to minimize any gap that may have emerged between church and mission agency. Some spoke of the mission agency as a part of the church or members of the body of Christ. Others emphasized the need for the agencies to see themselves as the servants of the churches.

Church leaders in the group emphasized that many churches need both the theological and practical expertise of the agencies. Theologically the churches need the understanding of mission that has developed in the evangelical world since the first Lausanne Congress in 1974. This understanding is expressed by terms like the 'mission of God', 'holistic mission' and 'integral mission'. Practically the churches need help with outworking this theology in their own contexts and beyond. The role of the agency would undoubtedly need to change if this is to be achieved. What is envisaged is long term co-operation between church and agency to reshape the theology and practice of churches so that they become missional churches. What this could mean for the territorial focus and HR function of agencies was not discussed.

The mission agencies have done and continue to do a great deal to educate and inspire the churches but it was felt that more could be done and that the agencies' input would be more effective if there was more co-operation between them. It was suggested that Global Connections could have a key role in this context.

The Issue Group concluded with more questions than answers but the challenge of Richard Tiplady's input remains – will the mission agencies make a significant contribution to the renewal of evangelical churches? They may have the theology and a lot of practical experience but the challenge is transfusion into the lifeblood of the churches.

The major questions that need further airing were:

What should be the role of the mission agencies?

Is there a need of a radical review?

How can the enormous assets of the mission agencies be shared most effectively with the churches?

How can the agencies be accountable to the churches?

The group meetings concluded with a request for Global Connections to facilitate a continuing conversation.

*Compiled by Dewi Hughes, 'Church as Transformed and Transforming Community' Group Coordinator.*