

Global Mission and Local Church

1. Introductory stories

In his latest book, Martin Goldsmith writes of his experiences in the 1960s when he began work with the Karo Batak Church in North Sumatra, Indonesia¹. The church had had unhappy experiences with Dutch missionaries who represented the rejected colonial power². The church decided that any future missionaries should serve under three conditions.

1. They should give no money to the church other than the weekly offering that a local school teacher might offer. The church did not want financial strings again.
2. They should live where the church decided. No more large ex-pat housing to cut people off from the church.
3. They should not speak or do anything in the church unless invited.

The Goldsmiths accepted these conditions. One day out cycling they came to a village where the Gospel had not been preached. The local people asked questions about the strange foreigners. The leaders offered to gather people every week to be taught and promised that at least 300 people would become Christians! This was the answer to any missionary's prayer, but the church told the Goldsmiths that they should not respond to this invitation. It was several months before a local Elder decided to organise a church planting team to the village. There is now a congregation of over 1000. The church leaders' comment to the Goldsmiths was, "If we had let you go, we would still have thought that only Westerners can plant new churches. Now we know that we can do it."

At a recent conference in Hong Kong a Chinese church leader³ made a plea for overseas Christians to

"Stand with us, don't patronise us" (with reference to simplistic programmes "shoving instant solutions down our throats")

"Help strengthen us in God's word, not in your favourite interpretation" (with particular reference to extreme Calvinists from Singapore).

"Help us where we are. Don't try and rescue us" (with reference to church leaders lured to escape to the West).

"Support us, but don't corrupt us" (with reference to a Western missionary who tried to buy an entire Bible training school run by an unregistered church leader)

These remarks would be in tune with the Karo church leaders' attitude forty years earlier. The expectation that those coming from overseas would work to the benefit of local believers and through them evangelise other people, but not be pursuing an agenda of their own. The need to make these comments in modern China shows that this is not always true.

The pattern of working illustrated by the Goldsmiths was not universal for evangelical missions even in the 1960s⁴. More characteristic was an independent American Baptist missionary who informed me in the late seventies in Bandung, Indonesia that there was no one "*born again*" in that city of 1 million people. As one of the Pastors of a congregation of 7000, I suggested that whilst I could not guarantee all the church members were "*born again*", many of these people had come to know God in Jesus Christ, but they used a different

¹ Martin Goldsmith, *Get a Grip on Mission The Challenge of a Changing World* (Leicester: IVP, 2006) p. 83ff

² This church, *Gereja Batak Karo Protestan (GBKP)*, was one of the worst examples of a link between mission and colonialism. Evangelistic work amongst the Karo Bataks began at the request of Dutch plantation owners who hoped that conversion would "make them docile under exploitation." (Frank Cooley, *Indonesia: church and society* (New York: Friendship Press, 1968) p. 71). The missionary work was carried out by the Netherlands Missionary Society. The only positive aspect to this was that the first missionary, Dr H C Kruyt, came to the area with four Minahasa evangelists (from North Sulawesi, another Indonesian island). Church growth was slow until after the ending of Dutch colonialism.

³ Recorded in *Asia Report Issue 276 July 2006* the journal of Asia Outreach International and available on their website at http://www.asianoutreach.org/file/AR_06_JulAug.pdf. The church leader referred to works across both Three-self and unregistered churches, but primarily represents the new churches composed of urban young educated professionals

⁴ In Indonesia the Overseas Missionary Fellowship to which the Goldsmiths belonged was criticised by other mission groups for working with denominations, which were part of the ecumenical movement. Australian CMS was one of the few other "evangelical" missions that adopted a similar policy.

Biblical term to express their experience. He later brought his Mission leaders to visit one of his prize converts and discovered that I was leading a house meeting in that long established Christian family!⁵ He represented a pattern of mission that bypassed the local church, except to try to poach her members, because he did not believe that there was any other church that was preaching the true Gospel.

Let us look at a more recent example:

In one country, which we will call Archenland, missionaries knew that there were many unreached Muslim people groups. They decided that existing churches, of which there were many both in variety and number, were not reaching out to these Muslim groups. The Mission Agency had a history of working with national churches, although in recent years visa restrictions had meant that direct sponsorship by churches was no longer possible, and the “missionaries” then worked mainly in educational establishments including theological colleges. Many of those who had worked with churches had been able to have a part in the churches’ outreach to Muslims and twenty years later there was an on-going ministry to them from these churches. The Agency had already established a way for national Christians to serve cross-culturally within their own country with the deliberate intention of reaching into these Muslim groups. Websites of churches in the country showed that despite persecution they were not afraid to reach out to their Muslim neighbours. There were reports of conversions. More than that, missionaries have been sent out by national churches to other countries where they have been able to identify culturally with local Muslim people and lead them to Christ. In such a situation the Agency decided that there was a need to establish a new work whereby Westerners would find ways to live in Muslim communities, adopt Islamic dress and present themselves as believers in Allah who follow Isa Al Masih⁶. By this means they hoped to establish a contextualised group of believers who would be acceptable within the Islamic community.

In this case a mission agency has changed its policy of working alongside local churches because it believes that the demands of bringing the Gospel to unreached communities is so overwhelming that they can no longer work with the local believers, but must pursue their mission without them. One briefing document stated that the task is so urgent that there is no time to spend on working with the local church.

2. How have we moved to this present situation?

The experience of the Goldsmiths came at an important stage in world church development. The 1960s saw a great advance in understanding about the relationship between Mission and national churches. As the Western powers were rolled back from controlling much of the world, the missionary community realised that Christian churches had been established that would survive the departure of the foreigners. Not only that, but the work had been done so well that these churches were prepared to face the changed circumstances. In some countries missionaries were forced out by governments. In others the churches asked them to leave usually because of the impediment foreigners presented to the perception of the church as a true part of a developing independent country⁷.

Theologically this was reflected in World Council of Churches New Delhi Congress of 1961 when the International Missionary Council was absorbed into the World Council of Churches.⁸ Mission and church were therefore united. The church is mission. Mission was interpreted quite broadly. With an understanding that the church is to work with God in his mission (*missio dei*), mission was defined as working for the establishment of justice on the earth. However many of the evangelical missions who were part of the IMC did not join with the WCC. In 1973 at the WCC Conference in Bangkok there was a call for a moratorium⁹ on the sending of money and personnel to “third world” churches. The All Africa Conference of Churches made

⁵ I have been told, but have not been able to verify, that the current Anglican Church planting in the same city is more the drawing of existing Christians into Anglicanism than the evangelisation of non-Christians. This is from the Singapore diocese and contrasts with the earlier work of CMS Australia.

⁶ The commonly used Arabic equivalent for Jesus the Messiah.

⁷ The church in China is one example of this. See Phyllis Thompson, *China: The Reluctant Exodus* (Littleton Colorado: OMF International, 2000 reprint Edited by M E Tewksbury)

⁸ “The integration of the IMC and the WCC brings into being a new instrument of common consultation and action to serve the Churches in their missionary task under the new conditions of the second half of the twentieth century. In it we see the good hand of God leading us into the next phase of the Church’s mission... The calling of God to his Church today is for a new offering of life. For some, especially the youth of the churches, it is a call for life-long missionary service abroad. For all of every age, and out of every nation, it is a call to total and unconditional commitment to the mission of God *The New Delhi Report*, p249

⁹ The term “moratorium” was not widely used officially in Bangkok where the emphasis was more on the need for “mature relationships”. See J Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978 Translated from *Inleiding in de nieuwere Zendingswetenschap* Kampen: J H Kok, 1975) Chapter XII for a balanced view.

a similar call in 1974, although many African churches sought to distance themselves from the resolution, because of their dependency on foreign funding¹⁰.

Most denominational missions have moved from a “*West to the Rest*” approach to one that is “*From everywhere to everywhere*” Those who serve in overseas churches are regarded as partners. They expect to put themselves under the control of the local church leadership. They will look to overseas churches to come to the West to share their experiences and understanding of God. Sadly in some cases this means that there is no outreach beyond the established churches either to the unevangelised in the local culture or to unreached groups within the country.

Non-denominational missions do not have the same structure of relationships and to work with overseas churches is a more difficult task. Since Chicago in 1960 there has been a series of congresses of evangelicals to address the task of world evangelism. Lausanne in 1974 is most remembered as the time when evangelicals affirmed that they were not only concerned with preaching and winning “souls”, but also with the social and economic needs. In the report there were references to mission/church relationships, but it was not actively pursued.

Both the Lausanne Covenant and the Manila Manifesto, which was agreed at the Congress of 1989¹¹, included references to working with national churches and affirms, “The Church is at the very centre of God’s cosmic purpose”¹². However there does not seem to be any indication that the document has a clear theology of the church in its local manifestation that is more than a “means of spreading the Gospel”. The remarks that follow in the document about the possibility of a church becoming “a stumbling block to evangelism” would seem to indicate at least a hesitation about the local church having a leading role in evangelism¹³. There had been an earlier meeting in Greenlake, Wisconsin in 1971 which was specifically to address issues of mission/church relationships. But it had little impact and, in some ways, confused the issue by also discussing mission agency/church relationships in the sending context.

The Manila Manifesto was very conscious of the urgency of the task of evangelism as the century and millennium neared their end. The AD2000 movement had begun and came to the fore at this conference as the catalyst for the completion of the evangelisation of the world. There was a renewed emphasis on unreached people groups. The Joshua Project identified the 1739 people groups most needing a church planting effort. There was the promulgation of the 10/40 window as the area of the world where most of the unreached people groups were to be found and many of them were Muslim. There was the hope in many hearts that by 2000 all people groups would be evangelised and then Christ would come again. Revelation 5:9 with its picture of those standing before the throne of God representing “every tribe and language and people and nation” was a great inspiration to the movement. The translated words were generally accepted with their modern meanings¹⁴ and it was coupled with a belief that until each entity had been evangelised Christ could not come again.¹⁵ AD2000 and the Joshua project were only two of the initiatives to evangelise unreached people groups. Many mission agencies planned the role they would play in fulfilling their mandate. The need to have a fully contextualised form of Christianity established has also caused some mission agencies to distance themselves from the local church. Some workers among Muslim groups do not attend church at all, lest it should hinder their attempt to identify themselves as “Messianic Muslims”.

Alongside this renewed emphasis on the necessity of the evangelisation of every people group before the end of the millennium, the decisions of the first Lausanne Congress in 1974 had begun to change the nature

¹⁰ It was this resolution that really set the debate in terms of “moratorium”. See Eugenia Ombwayo Adoyo’s 1990 OCMS/ANCC MPhil entitled *Mission and Moratorium in Africa* for an African view of the need to address the unbalanced relationships between Western and African churches.

¹¹ All Lausanne statements are found on the website: www.lausanne.org

¹² *Lausanne Covenant* Point 6

¹³ An article in *Mission Frontiers* September-October 2006 by Bob Goldman entitled *Are We Accelerating or Inhibiting Movements to Christ?* seems to argue that point

¹⁴ The selection of “people” out of the list in Revelation 5: “*pasēs phulēs kai glōssēs kai laou kai ethnous*” (which is repeated with variations in Rev. 7:9, 10:11, 11:9, 13:7, 17:15) would seem not to have the precise definition that is given by those who promote the need to evangelise every people group and who intend to emphasise that the evangelisation of a political nation does not necessarily imply that all the ethno-linguistic groups within the nation have been evangelised. Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich *Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957) in fact defines *laos* in Revelation as meaning “people as nation” (p. 468) The list in Revelation probably derives from Daniel 3:4 LXX which includes four divisions of mankind and may ultimately have its source in the Genesis 10:5. “People groups” is a useful marketing tool, but cannot claim to have the necessary Biblical warrant that is sometimes asserted.

¹⁵ This belief draws on Matthew 24:14 and the interpretation that posits Jesus referring to the end of the time/space universe rather than the fall of Jerusalem.

of evangelical missionary activity¹⁶. With the renewed understanding that social action and humanitarian relief should go along with the verbal proclamation of the Gospel more missionary activity became project orientated. Projects often had a shorter time span and therefore the earlier pattern of a missionary going to a country for an expected lifetime of service became rarer¹⁷.

In the post-colonial period the number of countries that are officially open to missionaries are fewer. Many countries are opposed to the Christian message and do all that they can to stop the growth of the Christian community. In some of these countries Christian development and relief agencies have been able to operate. Their members may have a purpose of evangelism, but their open task is a professional one and they know that too prominent evangelism is likely to result in the ending of their work. Association with the local church may be difficult or undesirable¹⁸. Because development organisations relate directly to government departments, there is no necessity of relating to local churches even when that is possible. There are some situations in which expatriate Christians have chosen not to relate to the open local church because their focus is on an unreached people group that does not share the same culture or ethnic background as the local church.

In other cases there would seem to be more personal issues that cause foreign Christians not to enter into fellowship with local believers. There may be the presence of an international Christian fellowship or an expatriate church. Because there has been little investment in learning the local language or the perceived prioritisation of the needs of children in the family, there is no attempt to join in fellowship with local believers. Local Christians may not even know that there are foreign Christians living in their area¹⁹. An increased emphasis on teams of missionaries working together has also contributed to a bonding within a team rather than with local believers.

So what do we do about the church?

The church has not been absent from mission agency discussions in the UK over the last forty years. But as at Greenlake in 1961, the focus has been upon the sending churches rather than the receiving. The theology of some churches has led them to turn away from the mission agencies believing that parachurch agencies are unbiblical. It is the church which is at the centre of God's purposes they argue and therefore it is the local church that must send missionaries. Sometimes this has led to helpful relationships with existing churches, but too often even that has resulted in the sending church gaining control over the receiving church. Chinese church leaders have at times rejoiced that geography and government restrictions have not made them as accessible as Eastern Europe! Few churches with a strong doctrine of their own local church have also developed a strong doctrine of the local church in another country and culture that is relating to the missionaries they send.

So what of the church at the receiving end of mission? How should mission agencies, with their burning desire to bring the Gospel to all the unreached people of the world, relate to existing churches in the countries and cultures where they are working? Here are a few ideas. First they should want to relate to them as brothers and sisters in Christ. How this might happen will differ from place to place. In countries like China it may mean little more than finding a way to be personally known to church leaders and letting them determine how much more association there can be and in what ways the "missionaries" can become a blessing to the church.

¹⁶ This does not mean that there was no humanitarian relief work before that date. In the UK Tearfund had begun to operate in 1968.

¹⁷ There are many other factors that have led to an increase in short term missionary work over the last twenty years. These are not to be regarded as negative. The ease and relative cheapness of travel has meant that people can now go for shorter periods to remote locations. Most people who eventually become long-term missionaries have had a short-term experience. Because of the concentration on development projects which need professional skills, a person is unlikely to be able to remain in the same place or even the same country for an extended period.

¹⁸ This is particularly true in a country like China where local churches do not want to appear to be dependent on foreign Christians. The church in China, with at least 70 million believers, is an indication that churches can grow without the presence of foreign missionaries and in the face of government opposition. For details of this growth see Tony Lambert, *China's Christian Millions* (Oxford::Monarch 2006 New and Revised Edition)

¹⁹ Goldsmith op.cit. p. 87f tells the story of a relative who had worked in the Karo area and been regarded as the purveyor of a sect because he made no attempt, for theological reasons, to identify with local believers.

In other countries there may be the opportunity for each new missionary to be placed under the authority of the local church so that they learn what it means to live as a Christian in that culture. Such a move might engender a true humility as they both accept pastoring from a member of the host culture and realise what God has already been doing within that country. Fellowship will be established with national believers so that trust develops and the new missionary is invited to minister in an appropriate way. From this fellowship and trust the missionary may be able to plan, together with the church, how to reach out to unevangelised segments of the same society and cross borders into other ethnic groups. For the church this may involve the uncomfortable task of facing ancient divisions and hostility with neighbouring cultures. It is always exciting when people go to their local Samaritans and Gentiles. Koreans and Western POWs going to work in Japan has been a testimony to the forgiving love of Christ. This involvement of national Christians, in reaching out to unevangelised people groups within their own country, also establishes the unity of the people of God²⁰.

For the missionary there may be the restriction of moving at the pace of the church. And it is here that the issue is joined. Mission leaders are concerned with urgency to complete the task. "To win the world in this generation" has been a constant part of missionary thinking since Edinburgh Congress 1910. It is the challenge to complacency and a stimulation to activity. But what if Koyama²¹ was right and the one who said he would build his church is in fact a "three mile an hour God". A God who is "patient and not willing that any should perish" (2 Peter 3.9) may not interpret urgency in the same way as us! To work with the national church in a way like the Goldsmiths forty years ago may mean that the task is done more slowly, but in the process we are seeing the reality of establishing churches which are realising the meaning of the new humanity created in Christ Jesus that encompasses people from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue now and not only in eternity.

© Ray Porter Director of World Mission Studies Oak Hill Theological College

(This article was published in *Evangel*, The British Evangelical Review 25:1 Spring 2007)

²⁰ There is a total lack of any consciousness of the unity and catholicity of the body of Christ in the article in *Mission Frontiers* September-October 2006 by Bob Goldman entitled *Are We Accelerating or Inhibiting Movements to Christ?* He envisages "Christians" who form fellowships of believers within major world faiths with no relationship with the rest of the world church.

²¹ K Koyama; *Three Mile an Hour God* (London: SCM Press 1979)