

# A Review of The Statement of International Conference on Mission

Hyderabad, India: 19-22 September, 1994

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**T**his clearly worded Mission statement that prominently focussed on the marginalised sections of the society, the ecological concern and the implications for our mission is to be acclaimed for its timely appearance. However, there are several serious weaknesses. It claims to go further than the missiological paradigm inherited from the ecumenical movement, but the statement has not added anything new, and has not gone further than the ecumenical paradigm of mission. It is wrong to say that the ecumenical movement had failed to take account of the ecological and the concern for the marginalised sections of the people. One just have to study, for example, the San Antonio Report and section on Canberra report, and several issues of the International Review of mission where these concerns have been discussed. The purpose of this review is not to point out its strengths since the statement speaks for itself, but to point out its deficiency, faulty statements and to propose a more holistic mission paradigm.

First let me point out the deficiency of the statement. The section, 'The Context of Mission' is good as far as it goes. But there are several important omissions. It is surprising that the statement is silent about the religious and ideological contexts. In section IV, the religious context is assumed advocating the process of dialogue with the people of other faiths. It will be more complete if the fact of religious plurality, the rise of militant as well as religious fundamentalism, and the proliferation of ideologies are clearly analysed.

Secondly, in describing the contexts, it is important to include ecclesiastical context. This is debatable since it is the church that is participating in God's mission, and seems to be not in the right order to be a part of the context. But since the church has never, in its totality even in a local situation, involved in mission, and the Indian churches are plagued with nominalism, corruption in high places, social evils such as casteism, dowry and the like, and since only a small part of the church is actively involved in God's mission,

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a careful analysis of the ecclesiastical context as accurately as possible is vital. Moreover, the fact that thousands of Indian Christians, supported by over a hundred indigenous mission agencies, are at the moment, involved with the Dalits, the Adivasis and the Handicaps, should not be ignored or dismissed as following outdated mission paradigm. This is the context in which we are seeking to participate more meaningfully in God's mission, and to neglect or dismiss them as irrelevant in modern times is not the answer. We should analyse this context critically if we are to offer a more holistic and realistic mission paradigm.

Thirdly, completely absent in the statement is what I might tentatively call the timeless context in which humanity exists. If our mission paradigm is to be holistic, this context should not be omitted. This is the spiritual context of humanity's relationship with God. It is not enough to take seriously the contexts of human's relationships with one another and the environment important as they are, and relegate human's relationship to God as traditional or outmoded, or human's relationship with one another replacing it.

According to this timeless context, "there is no difference, for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:22,23). All of us are like sheep that have gone astray, each of us going her/his own way (Is. 53:6). Rich and poor, oppressor and oppressed, exploiter and exploited, everyone has broken relationship with God, alienated and lost. This is not to deny the dignity of human beings incapable of noble motives and achievements. But however noble and good a person may be, all are equally falling short of God's standard, living in broken relationships, and equally in need of the eternal gospel, and the eternal salvation that it provides.

Since the modern missiologists, by and large, neglected the timeless context, the gospel they project normally falls short of the biblical gospel, that is of God, centered in the Jesus' event, and applied dynamically by the Holy Spirit. The statement in review is no exception. The result is the superficial Jesus; the extremely earth-centred liberation without the eternal life; that is one of the major focus of the Johannine literatures, and the better country, etc., one of the major focus of the letter to the Hebrews, and the atonementless gospel. Without this timeless context, our mission paradigm can never be holistic in its understanding, dimension and practice.

The conference was organised in connection with the bicentennial celebrations of the arrival of William Carey in India. Accordingly, I believe, the statement follows his legacy of social reforms and ecological concerns. But the statement is completely silent about the Carey's vision of "the conversion of the heathen." Even though we will use different terms today, his evangelistic vision, the preaching

of the gospel of Jesus Christ by every possible means, so that people may enter into the eternal salvation in Christ and the subsequent establishment of churches with indigenous leadership was his dominant vision and the driving force of his mission activities from the beginning to the end. To appreciate this, we only have to read his *Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to use means for the Conversion of the Heather*, and his memoirs, sermons and letters. Carey was holistic in his missionary vision that includes individual conversion to Christ, social reforms and environmental concerns.

2. Some of the inadequate as well as the faulty ideas in the statement are mostly the result of the incomplete description of the mission context. First is the way the new communities are attained. The statement says, "The vision of new communities can only be attained by establishing solidarity with fellow human beings and new relationships throughout all creation." (III, first sentence). Good as establishing solidarity with others and creation is, it is not the *only* means of attaining new communities. More basic, but not in isolation from the human to human and human to creation relationship, is reconciliation with God in Jesus Christ. Without this there cannot be the kingdom of God.

Secondly, the statement seeks "an earth-centred spirituality that is upheld by women, and indigenous people" (III). What is that spirituality? I would rather vouch for Christ centered spirituality that is down to earth reality — our identification with the oppressed and the exploited women and the indigenous people.

Thirdly, the statement says, "It is only in the process of dialogue with people of other faiths that our faith is clarified and enriched." (IV). This *onlyness* seems the favourite of the framer of the statement. It is incorrect to claim that *only* through dialogue, our faith is clarified and enriched. Yes, definitely dialogue helps in this area. But to claim as the only means is far from true. The repentance and faith encounter with God resulting in the mystical union with God in Christ, the clarity and refreshing experiences we gain as the Holy Spirit unfolds the Word to us, the thrilling experiences we have as a result of stepping out in faith on the promises of God, the enriching experiences gained through suffering for Christ with his people, the deepening understanding of the incarnation and the cross through our identification with the downtrodden, the experiences of new life in Christ through the invigorating work of the Holy Spirit, *inter alia*, are too important to exclude as the legitimate means by which our faith is clarified and enriched.

3. What we want to avoid is the two extremes, namely, the exclusive spiritual and other worldly emphasis, the exclusive emphasis on the transcendent dimension of salvation along with the exclusive

concentration on individual salvation on the one hand, and the exclusively secular and this worldly, the exclusive emphasis on the immanent dimension of salvation with the exclusive emphasis on society, on the other. The statement represents the latter and therefore, although it uses the term 'holistic' several times, it is far from holistic. It has no right to claims being holistic mission paradigm. It is at best incomplete, and narrow, and at some points, erroneous.

The tensions between the individuals and the corporate, the transcendental and immanent, the here and now and the hereafter should be explored creatively rather avoiding it by stressing one at the expense of the other. Let me propose a more holistic mission paradigm from the perspective of the three-dimensional relationships in which humanity exists, namely, the relationship with God, with one another and with the nature. According to this, the central focus is correct relationship by means of the reconciling work of the Lord Jesus Christ. All the problems in the world may be traced to come out of the broken relationship, beginning with our broken relationship with God, ramifying to broken relationships in other dimensions. The healing of these broken relationships is God's mission in which we are called to participate. Salvation is not complete until there is correct relationships in all the three dimensions. None of them must be severed from the other because they comprised one whole reality in symbiotic relationships, although each of them have its own limited reality and identity, none of them alone, nor even two combined is complete.

This holistic mission paradigm needs much more probing and explanation than can be done in this review. Nothing in this paradigm of course is really new, but the concept of its creative, dynamic and unilateral nature may be called new. This paradigm, since it embraces the concept of the here and now, the eternal and the temporal, the individual's salvation - justification, regeneration, sanctification and glorification, to borrow the classical terms, the corporal and social dimensions of liberation and justice and the love for one another issuing in costly and sacrificial service, and the ecological dimension, all centered in the Saviour, Jesus Christ our Lord, is inclusive and broadening of mission paradigm rather than incomplete and narrow paradigm by rejecting some part of it. This is the *missio dei*, in which we participate in two dimensions namely the ministry that concentrates on the people of God in Jesus Christ called the church, on the one hand, and on the other, missions that focusses on non-church members.

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This International Conference on Mission was organised in connection with the bicentennial celebrations of the arrival of William Carey in India, by the Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College in association with the World Council of Churches, Geneva. The historic city of Hyderabad welcomed the delegates from England, Germany, Australia, Holland, Chile, United States, Korea, India and officials from the World Council of Churches, and the Christian Conference of Asia. The Honourable Deputy Chief Minister, Shri. Ranga Rao, Government of Andhra Pradesh, India, felicitated the delegates.

Though the conference was international in nature, the Third World, particularly the Indian issues were taken as the focus. We focused upon the following issues as imperative for mission today.

### I. The Context of Mission

The conference theme GOD'S MISSION NOW, IN EACH PLACE was proposed for exploration in the midst of a move towards globalisation and unification all over the world. India's people have for centuries experienced various forms of domination leading to social separatism and fragmentation among our human communities. In the modern world these pressures are increasing and indigenous people — Dalits, tribals, besides women and other minorities are forced to affirm their identities in the context of the fragmenting processes of a single world market, global media, modernisation, ecological imbalances, and so on. Many people in India, particularly those who live close to the soil, experience these forces as highly oppressive, dominating and dehumanising.

India's rapid population growth is accompanied by a decline in the female population in proportion to the males. We are experiencing a super-imposed feudal democratic system, illiteracy disadvantaging the majority of the masses, violation of human rights, particularly minority rights, child labour, etc. which draw our attention. Moreover there is a new economic policy undertaken by the government of India since July 1991, brought about by the pressure from the World Bank, IMF and the internal lobbies. This economic policy has benefitted and continues to benefit only a small privileged minority, leaving more than 600 million poor people experiencing a survival crisis. The apparent success of this new economic ideology gives a sense of superiority complex to the middle class while India's urban poor, tribal, Dalit and the minority communities are looked down upon as inferior culturally, socially and even spiritually.

These are the challenges of our context which demand that Indian Christians revise their missiological task. The dominant missiological paradigm we have inherited within the ecumenical movement has made

significant contributions to liberation struggles in our land, but had failed to take account of the dimension of our growing ecological problems and has not dealt adequately with the needs of our women, Dalit people, tribal and indigenous minorities, our children and minorities who struggle for identity.

## II. Revisioning Mission

“Mission” is understood by this conference as ‘God’s mission’ (missio dei) which recreates new communities within the human communities in each place. Our participation in this mission is through following Jesus Christ, who through his life and teachings demonstrated love, peace and justice. In these new communities, the aspirations and hopes of people who are marginalised and oppressed may be realised as people are liberated for a fuller life in Christ. In other words, the poor and the oppressed will be restored and affirmed in their culture, land and spirituality. These new communities will embrace a vision which includes the whole of God’s creation. There is to be no discrimination on the basis of gender, race, colour, caste, class and tribe. Communities are envisioned which approach those described in the book of Revelation 21:3 which incorporates the healing of all the nations, the overcoming of death, fear and an end to the groaning of creation. The Cross is the symbol that calls for integration in the midst of the fragmentation, separatism and exploitation in today’s world.

## III. The Mission Imperative

This vision of new communities can only be attained by establishing solidarity with fellow human beings and new relationships throughout all of creation. We have heard a call to self denial, to simplicity, sharing with caring and for the empowering of the powerless and oppressed. This demands a preferential option for the poor in our understanding of mission which is inclusive of women, children, indigenous people and the whole of creation. We have been unavoidably challenged to a holistic approach in response to the needs and sufferings of the people of India along with a rediscovery of what it means to proclaim the Gospel in India today. This kind of rethinking demands rewriting of liturgies, songs, stories, theological curriculum and so on. We reject ideologies and anthropo-progressive interpretations of history which undermine God’s Mission. We are seeking an earth-centered spirituality that is upheld by women, and indigenous people which might be appropriate to Mission in India.

## IV. The Issues

The God of Creation has blessed humanity with many religions, ideologies, languages and cultures. God’s Mission thus is not carried out in isolation without entering into dialogue with the people of other cultures, faiths and

ideologies. Therefore Churches who participate in God's Mission are enriched by entering into dialogue with other living faiths and ideologies. Moreover dialogue should not be understood as mere intellectual experience. Real dialogue takes place in community life. It promotes understanding and inter-religious cooperation in solving common problems that confront us today. It is only in the process of dialogue with people of other faiths that our faith is clarified and enriched. By seeking where God is working and participating in that work in community, we come to know how others look at Christianity and find opportunities to understand holistic evangelism. In these processes we recognise the acts of the Holy Spirit leading the partners to deeper dimensions of truth and service.

There are also other social action groups who are seeking justice, peace and harmony in our society. Christians who struggle alone cannot achieve fuller community. In our search to be faithful in participating in God's mission, Christians are encouraged to cooperate with these action groups and where appropriate share Christian values and visions.

Another aspect of Christian Mission that needs serious attention is to discover ways to listen to the testimonies of women, Dalit and tribal people. The churches are encouraged to give special attention to the most vulnerable ones among our various communities. Mission is bearing the cross and risking walking in the ways of Jesus. This implies learning from the testimonies of the suffering and oppressed people so that their spirituality characterises new styles of Christian Mission. To follow Jesus in this way demands that there be a reordering of the church's priorities. People who hold privileged positions and those who exercise power even in Christian ministry are challenged to rethink and to participate in God's Mission in the Galilees of India.

The growing religious fundamentalism across the world, particularly Christian fundamentalism, needs our serious attention. In order to have a deeper understanding and critical reflection on fundamentalism in each place, we need to look at each of the religious communities who engage in these practices and examine holistically the political, economic, social and psychological dynamics at work in these faith communities characterised as fundamentalist, in order to provide a relevant Christian message in these contexts. This challenge needs to be taken to the point of self-evaluation of the role of the Church in the proclamation of a Gospel which truly ministers to the emotional and spiritual needs of the people.

#### V. Implications for our Mission

1. In our deliberations we began to see the need for reinterpreting the Bible to contribute to a new understanding of Christian identity, for developing a counter-culture in societies in which one culture or economic growth dominates and rethink Christian attitudes to people of other faiths.

Rediscovering prophetic thought will provide much needed motivation for the revisioning of mission. Congregations need educated and new insightful Bible studies to be prepared.

2. The mission of the Church involves the equipping of the individuals as well as the community where God is working. In announcing to each individual the love of God and the gift of abundant life, churches are encouraged to testify to the real joy of experiencing this gift which comes only through identifying with and sharing the pains and joys of others.

3. The theological colleges and seminaries are encouraged to take Christian Education seriously so that the students are fully equipped to meet the multifaceted challenges of Christian ministry.

4. The theological colleges and seminaries are urged to make the course they offer more relevant to Third World Contexts. Special focus should be given to implication of missions in the context of poverty, marginalised people, exploitation, homeless and ecological issues.

5. God's mission actively recreates communities moving us all towards the realisation of God's Kingdom. This Conference affirms that God is at work in this world to bring about a just social order in which people will experience justice, peace and love. Theological colleges/seminaries and churches are encouraged to explore the fact that whilst the marginalised, the indigenous people, the tribals, the dalits and the women have had their identity and dignity disfigured through injustice by the dominant societies, they nevertheless have much to contribute and they are the ones Jesus calls his brothers and sisters. Especially the community of children should be given adequate attention. They are the most vulnerable in all our communities. Jesus pointed to the children and asked the adults to follow their life style. These little ones signify the powerless who have such potential. It is in their empowerment of these needy communities that the Church in India may be reborn, by rediscovering its integrity and by beginning to realise what it means to be the servant communities participating in God's authentic mission.