

EDUCATING FOR CONTEXTUAL MISSION

“IN LIGHT OF RECENT EVENTS...”

1. INTRODUCTION

“In light of recent events... in the UK, this is a phrase that one hears repeated many times each day. “In light of recent events please make sure that you take all your baggage with you and if you see any items of left luggage, please report them immediately.” Since the London bombings of July 2005, the backpack is no longer innocent, the police are highly visible in all places of public transport and the number of racially motivated crimes has spiralled. All this to say that context is everything and a harmless phrase like “in light of recent events” takes on sinister connotations when heard in light of its history and context.

In a recent article on theological education, Andrew Wingate was reflecting on similar issues of context when he posed the following questions, “How far is theological [we could understand ‘missiological’] education an enterprise that is essentially the same, wherever it is being conducted in the world, or in whatever decade? Alternatively, how far are the content and methodology of theological education determined, or at least highly influenced, by place and historical setting?”¹ We know, and have known for some time now, that missiologically, we live in a new world from previous generations. Andrew Walls,² Dana Robert,³ Philip Jenkins,⁴ Lamin Sanneh⁵ and others have long alerted us to the fact that religious changes in the twentieth century have produced a post-Christian West and a post-Western Christianity. Jenkins comments wryly that “the

¹ Andrew Wingate, “Review of the History of The Debate about Theological Education”, *International Review of Mission*, Vol 94, No 373, Ap 2005, 239.

² See, for example, “The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture” in A Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History, Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, (Maryknoll:Orbis,1996), 3-15.

³ D Robert, “Shifting Southward: Global Christianity Since 1945”, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Ap 2000 50-58.

⁴ P Jenkins, *The Next Christendom, The Coming of Global Christianity*, (Oxford:OUP, 2002)

⁵ L Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West*, (Grand Rapids:Eerdmans, 2003)

phrase ‘a White Christian’ may sound like a curious oxymoron as mildly surprising as ‘a Swedish Buddhist.’ Such people can exist, but a slight eccentricity is implied.”⁶ Sanneh reminds us of the incredible expansion of Christianity in Africa *after* colonialism, of the importance of Bible translation into the vernacular languages and of the crucial factor of African agency – especially among young people and women who were given a role in the post-colonial African church.⁷

So how do we, in the West deal with this reality when educating for contextual mission? To be honest and blunt, how do we face and deal with the reality, when educating for contextual mission, that most of the mission educators, church leaders with influence, books and articles published and resources made available – hence power and control - are still held by predominantly Western males when the worldwide church is predominantly non-Western, female and poor – in fact, very poor?⁸ Of course, it is easy to pose these difficult questions, especially if one is a woman – at least one is theoretically not guilty on all three counts! – it is harder, if not impossible, to offer authentic answers. Again, context is everything. Our different contexts shape us inexorably whether they are geographical, social, economic, temperamental, or cultural. And our engagement in educating for contextual mission takes place in very different contexts. Some of us are involved in educating for contextual mission in formal contexts, some in informal contexts – all of us are part of communities where we long for others and the world to experience the grace and reality of Christ amidst the suffering, the pain and the brokenness of our world.

So I would like to offer a few general reflections on what education for contextual mission might mean. These generalities will have to be applied to your particular situations whether it is a formal educational institution, an informal setting, a church, an

⁶ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 3.

⁷ Sanneh, *Whose Religion*, 18.

⁸ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, “Contrary to myth, the typical Christian is not a White fat cat in the United States or Western Europe, but rather a poor person, often unimaginably poor by Western standards.” 216. See also, Bryant L. Myers, “The Southern Church of 2025” in *Exploring World Mission, Context and Challenges*, (Monrovia: World Vision International, 2003), 57.

alternative church/post-church/fresh expression of church or no church – it would be presumptuous of me to apply them to your particular locale and context.

FOUR APPROACHES

I would like to offer four ideas - the first three from an excellent article by Sherron Kay George and the fourth is my own, born out of my own instincts and reinforced by our recent experience of moving countries from Aotearoa/NZ to the UK. Sherron George wrote an excellent article entitled, “From Missionary to Missiologist at the Margins, Three Decades of Transforming Mission” as her contribution to the book *Teaching Mission in a Global Context*, a project of professors teaching mission in ten Presbyterian seminaries in USA, published in 2001.⁹ I had previously read another extremely helpful article by her on the quest for new images and metaphors for missionaries¹⁰ so was looking forward to this article and I was not disappointed. George spent 23 transformative years in Brazil as a Presbyterian mission worker before returning to USA in 1995. She offers the following lessons as to how mission, and educating for mission, is being transformed.

I am becoming increasingly convinced that it is important to know something of the authors we read. The days are long gone (if indeed they were ever there) where we read and learn in a vacuum. It is critical to know the influences and life experiences of the authors we read and study. In this way we can see how their life experiences have shaped their theology so that we can honestly affirm that theology is indeed biography. For George, her years in Brazil challenged her identity as a North American so she began to see and experience the world through different lenses. This shift in perspective allows us to adjust and reframe previously held views so that our theology and our missiology are enlarged and enriched.

⁹ Patricia Lloyd-Sidle and Bonnie Sue Lewis (eds); S K George, “From Missionary to Missiologist at the Margins, Three Decades of Transforming Mission” in *Teaching Mission in a Global Context*, (Geneva Press:Louisville, 2001), 40-53.

¹⁰ S K George, “Th Quest for Images of Missionaries in a ‘Post-Missionary Era’”, *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol XXX, No 1, Jan 2002,51-65.

1. Mutuality: A New Paradigm

Mutuality – a bit of a buzz word these days – we all know about mutuality in relationships and we know that mission is not just from the West to the rest but it is a two way street, that mission is about giving and receiving, that we learn more than we ever offer or give. We know this – the rhetoric comes easily, especially to those of us schooled in the new era of mission. We know about partnership in mission, mission in reverse and the experience of mutuality, as also experienced by Paul in Rom 1:11-12, “that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith.” We know this but do we do it? As George pertinently comments,

Any mission practice that starts from assumptions of superiority of *doers* and inferiority of *receivers* is not really mission, but imperialistic aid. While the theory of partnership, equality and mutuality between older and younger churches goes back to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the gap or transition between vision and practice has often been discouraging.¹¹

So how do we make this transition and how far along the journey are we? In our educating for contextual mission, how do we model and communicate this mutuality? Are our training colleges and our mission societies really wrestling with this issue – where is the hard thinking being done to encourage the practice of genuine mutuality?

2. Solidarity: A New Perspective

Solidarity – another buzz word. George learnt about solidarity as she started to read the educationalist Paulo Freire and learnt about the concept of conscientization and then began reading Latin American evangelical theologians such as Rene Padilla and Orlando Costas as well as Roman Catholics such as Gustavo Gutierrez and Leonardo Boff, all of whom turned her theology upside down. They insisted that theology was best done from below just as mission was best done out of poverty and weakness. Her students and colleagues challenged her as a citizen and missionary from the richest country in the world. In Brazil she saw that it was the poor who stood in solidarity with one another.

¹¹ George, “From Missionary”, 44.

She tried to stand in solidarity with her students and to reflect critically on North American mission and church. She stood in special solidarity with her female students, insisting on gender-inclusive language, stretching the boundaries for women.

In the first decade of this new millennium are we any further along this road? Solidarity requires taking the ideas and experience of others on their own terms and “suspending one’s personal, cultural and religious ideas and practices to listen for the experience and meanings of others.”¹² Jesus is the perfect example of solidarity, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself.” (Phil 2:6-8, NRSV) This has particular implications for incarnational learning in context as well as for adopting a role of follower, disciple, observer rather than leader, innovator and harbinger of big ideas. Roger Bowen, in his “CMS Education Review” from 2002 makes this point powerfully,

It is often supposed that leaders should be proactive; but the New Testament pattern is predominantly reactive, whether through the constant modification of apostolic plans, or the Twelve’s experiences of being continually corrected, or the passivity of Jesus in the passion narrative.¹³

Are we able to suspend our own ideas and practices, are we able to incarnate ourselves in other people’s worlds, are we able to suppress our endless activism to simply stand alongside quietly, in solidarity, for a while? The key to solidarity is compassion and empathy – walking the road in someone else’s shoes.

3. Marginality: A New Identity

Again, a perspective from the margins or listening to voices from the edges is not a new idea. This is part of the process of what a former colleague of mine calls

¹² *ibid.*, 48.

¹³ Roger Bowen, “CMS Education Review”, Ap 2002, 14.

“defamiliarization.”¹⁴ This will lead us into different dimensions of knowing. For learning to be truly transformative, we must be destabilised so that we may come back to the same place but with a fresh perspective. In this way voices from the margins can help us. As we read the text with foreigners and strangers our eyes are opened to new ways of seeing and understanding. We rediscover how the Bible speaks in community, how Scripture really does comfort those who mourn, how Jesus restores dignity to the unloved and unwanted, and the immediacy and consolation of verses such as, “The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid? When evil men advance against me to devour my flesh... even then will I be confident” (Ps 27:1-3 NIV); words pathetically scrawled in lipstick on the wall of a little girl’s lonely cell in the brothel where she had been sold as a sex slave.

We, in the West, the rich and the strong, the powerful and the well-resourced, the sleek and the well-fed, the self-confident, the ‘good and the great’ must be willing to listen to and to learn from the voices from the margins. We must be able to listen to the little ones, the unnoticed and the insignificant, the refugees and strangers, the aliens and asylum seekers, the unwanted and the ignored. Who are they in our situation and how will they educate us in contextual mission?

Henri Nouwen’s little book on Christian leadership, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*, offers some insights in this area. It is not a best-seller nor highly profiled on Christian publishers’ websites. He writes of his journey to l’Arche Community in Canada to work and live among the mentally disabled – perhaps the group who are the most obviously on the margins in any society. He reflects on how he was teaching at Yale and Harvard preparing “the brightest and the best” among this world’s students and yet here he was, close to burn-out, mentally exhausted and far from an intimate relationship with God. He was also well-known, lauded as a superb lecturer and writer, acclaimed among the highest and wealthiest academic institutions in the land. He left it. He left it all to live and work among the most marginalised in our world. And he

¹⁴ Nicola Hoggard-Creegan, “Teaching Theology – Notes from an Evangelical Classroom”, *Vashti’s Voices: A Journal for exploring theologies for a just future*. No 2/13, Spring 2004; 7-10

claims that through living among the mentally disabled, as part of that community, they nurtured him to regain emotional integration and health, they treated and accepted him as one of them – unaware as they were of his former status and writings - they restored him to healing, wholeness and newness of life. He writes,

This experience was and, in many ways, is still the most important experience of my new life, because it forced me to rediscover my true identity. These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self – the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things, -and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of my accomplishments.¹⁵

This is educating for contextual mission – and who is educating whom?

This paper might be more usefully entitled, “*Learning for Contextual Mission*” because it is really only as we make ourselves vulnerable that learning and education can begin. Dr Mike Higton, the author of a helpful Grove booklet called *Vulnerable Learning, Thinking Theologically about Higher Education* comments that we “only truly learn to the extent that we allow ourselves to run the risk of discovering that we are deluded.”¹⁶ Learning involves transformation and opens us up so we can see there is still more we need to learn. We cannot prejudge our learning or even specify where we are going – which is why learning outcomes are always problematic. Higton claims real learning is “system-shaking” and “vertiginous.”¹⁷ Voices and experience from the margins can destabilise us so that we realise that we are indeed “deluded”, so that the encounter may in fact break us or at least shake us beyond our own existing resources so that learning and education do become transformational.

4. Hospitality and the Stranger: A New Relationship

¹⁵ H Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*, (New York:Crossroad, 1993), 16.

¹⁶ M Higton, *Vulnerable Learning, Thinking Theologically about Higher Education*, (Cambridge:Grove Books, 2006), 10.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 16.

Since moving to the UK, my family and I have been reflecting on the preciousness of hospitality and on what it means to be a stranger. I believe that it is only in becoming a stranger that true education for contextual mission can begin. A dictionary definition of stranger is: “a person not easily explained, an unfamiliar person, and any person one does not know.” Of course, a stranger does not exist in isolation. Anthony Gittins, in his superb book, *Ministry at the Margins*, explains that “A stranger exists as such by virtue of the host: to be a stranger is, curiously perhaps, to be in relationship to another.” He also points out the ambiguity in the Latin root *host* which can mean “stranger, enemy” and “receiver of strangers.”¹⁸ To be a stranger is to feel out of place, to be unsure, to experience dislocation. To be a stranger is to feel vulnerable, to make mistakes, to be dependent, to have needs. To be a stranger is to lose control. To be a stranger is to be ‘other.’ To be a stranger is to need a host – but on whose terms? There have been many times when I have wanted the English to host me as I would host – to offer that invitation, to open up their private spaces, to be honest rather than polite – in other words to host me on my terms. But I am creating a host in my own image. Gittins reminds me that

being a stranger is not easy; but it is *necessary* if people are to succeed in crossing boundaries and discovering new relationships. To be strangers willingly is to respect the cultural rules, to defer to our hosts, and to allow them the common courtesy of moving us between categories. It is impossible for us to move *ourselves* across the threshold of another culture, except by aggression.¹⁹

So it is necessary to be a stranger; to experience the pain of strangeness, the sense of disorientation and dislocation, the emotions of deep frustration and confusion, the feelings of disempowerment so that one can begin to listen and learn, so that one can enter the new culture as a learner, so that one can begin to appreciate the richness of diversity, so that one can begin to engage in new relationships and to humbly receive hospitality.

¹⁸ A Gittins, *Ministry at the Margins*, (Maryknoll:Orbis, 2003), 123-4.

¹⁹ *ibid.*,125-6.

It is also necessary to be a stranger to be reminded of the responsibilities of the host and of the importance of compassion. These days hospitality is often seen as an optional extra if we have the time or the energy to engage in it. Christine Pohl, in her comprehensive study on recovering hospitality as a Christian tradition reminds us that for most of the history of the church, it “was understood to encompass physical, social and spiritual dimensions of human existence and relationships.”²⁰ She tells the story of a friend of hers who runs a home for homeless people, who, every year, spends a few days living on the street, to remind himself of what it means to be marginal, to be invisible, - in effect to be less even than a stranger. He describes the impact of his voluntary homelessness, “What I experience in these journeys is replenishing the reservoir of compassion. I tend not to realise how hardened I’ve become until I get out there...It’s the most effective teaching method for me.”²¹

Hospitality can be subversive because it is inclusive. It can begin a journey towards visibility, dignity and respect. Hospitality suggests face to face encounters and burgeoning relationship. It presupposes servanthood and service. Because God is the original host, inviting us into a relationship with Christ, when we practise hospitality we are nurtured, challenged and strengthened in our relationships – both with God and with others.

CONCLUSION

Educating for contextual mission? Well, those are a few general reflections that may begin our journey. Let me conclude with one brief example which may flesh out some of these ideas. CMS (Britain) closed their training college, Crowther Hall, at the end of 2004 with the intention of offering more flexibility in training for those who wish to serve in cross-cultural mission. The intention now is that, as far as possible, people are prepared *in situ* so that, if done well, they may experience: mutuality among those with whom they live; solidarity as they begin to understand and empathise with the issues in

²⁰ C Pohl, *Making Room, Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, (Grand Rapids:Eerdmans, 1999), 6.

²¹ *ibid.*, 123.

that context; marginality as they are inevitably on the margins of a new culture; transformation as they become vulnerable in new environments; being a stranger with needs as they enter the new context as outsiders and finally the joy of hospitality offered and received.

We live in a world where the strength of the church is in the Majority World. Our sisters and brothers in that part of the world know what it means to live in relationship in mutuality, they know how to practise solidarity, and thanks to current global practices they live in marginality. They know what it is to be gracious host; they know what it is to be vulnerable stranger. If we too can genuinely live some of these experiences, then we will begin our education and our learning in contextual mission.

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