



Conference on World Mission and Evangelism

Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship

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Panel Interviews

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1) Tell us a little about yourself and what brings you to a plenary on missional formation at Arusha?

KAG – First, My interest in the study of mission began when I served as resident minister of a small town in the central region of Ghana. The town had known Christianity since the arrival of Basel Missionaries during the early decades of the 19th century. Within the 200-year history of Christianity in the town, other churches had also become established there. In terms of the presence of the church in the town, the place was a Christian one in every sense, but I had real concerns with the lack of continuing witness to the gospel by the various denominations and independent churches. Second, my training continued with graduate studies in challenges that New Religious Movements (NRMs) of both Christian and Non-Christian persuasions posed to the mission of the church in Africa. One of the worrying findings I made in teaching this as a course to seminary students was the extent to which church members, including many in pastoral leadership, patronized the activities of these NRMs because they were either hungry for truth or thirsty for a deeper spiritual experience. Any conversation dealing missional formation that translates biblical truths into everyday spirituality is therefore of interest to me.

KK – I have been involved in mission formation since I was myself trained as a missionary – twice over. My first training was at All Nations Christian College in the 1980s and the second was at the Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary in Seoul in the early 1990s. These were two quite different experiences and revealed rather different ideas about what was required in missionary formation: for example, the extent to which missionaries should inculturate; whether training should be mainly educational or motivational; whether missionaries should look after themselves or sacrifice themselves. Nevertheless, both were valuable and inform my understanding of mission to this day. They also helped me shape my own practice in mission education and formation. I have recently left a university setting for a seminary one because I am convinced of the importance of education and formation that is both theological and missional. At the same time, I have moved into an area that is in a state of flux both because of changes in theological education and also because of changes in the mission agents and contexts.

2) What do you think is really the core issue when it comes to being formed as disciples of Christ?

KAG – First is missional structures we have inherited and built and how we deploy them to serve the purposes of Christ. My study of NRMs and almost three decades as a theological educator has taught and revealed to me the extent to which people yearn for encounters with Christ that is life transforming.

Second, my personal call to discipleship then would be for the church to re-prioritize and to ask herself how any particular move contributes to our common calling in Christ. The church has been doing many things, but the core business of mission lies unattended to as we pursue vain and self-serving interests. In Africa, the numbers are on our side, as far as professing Christians are concerned but the extent of influence remains very much in doubt.

YMD - Proceeding to some substantial issues, the focus on preaching, and the Christocentric focus of much of the evangelisation of the churches, require change in light of the concerns raised both in theological and secular circles. There has to be a Trinitarian emphasis, because evangelism does not begin with Jesus. Rather it must be seen as being initiated by the Father, mediated through the Son and perfected through the Holy Spirit. In this sense the work of evangelisation commences with the call of Abraham, reaches its summit in the incarnational work of Jesus and is now advanced through the economy of the Holy Spirit. And this will pave the way for a broader appreciation of the methods of evangelisation, which have been limited by underscoring the economy of Jesus Christ alone.

KK – The key issue is to convey the comprehensive scope of the Gospel and the global nature of Christianity. The last thing Jesus commanded his disciples to do was to “make disciples” of “all nations,” and go into “the whole creation,” to be witnesses “to the ends of the earth.” Discipleship is more than individual formation; it is joining in with the Holy Spirit, is doing in the lives of others. This “Great Commission” is not only a command to which we must conform ourselves; it is an invitation to explore our world with Christ. Making disciples is in the plan of the Trinity for the whole creation.

3) What do you see as priorities for seminaries as they seek to meet these challenges?

KAG - I am a Langham Scholar. At the beginning of my doctoral studies in the mid 1990s, we attended a research seminar at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies in the UK. John Stott was present to address the sessions and one of the statements he made was this: “If you want to know the spiritual ‘temperature’ of a church, first measure the spiritual ‘temperature’ of the seminary where its pastors are trained/formed.” As seminaries our mission would remain ineffective until those who help to form our leaders themselves learn to be disciples of Christ. The church talks about discipleship all the time and seminary curricula need some attention in terms discipleship training.

KK – Traditionally, seminary education stands between church and academy. On the one hand, seminary education is distinguished from university education by the Christian formation it is able to offer. On the other hand, it is distinguished from religious reflection and ideology by academic rigor, critical thinking, and engagement with international scholarship.

The Christian formation aspect of seminary education is safeguarded in the seminary setting in two main ways: first, learning happens within the context of worship and service so that academic achievement is not idolized but rightly celebrated and missionally applied. This facilitates the empowerment of students to be what Together Towards Life (TTL) calls “authentic disciples,” to develop a spirituality for mission, and to be theologically reflective in their practice. Second, learning takes place in a community that is not just of minds but also of hearts and bodies. As we discovered while developing the Spirit of Life as the theme of TTL, the Spirit is not antithetical to the flesh but is the very ground of our bodily being.

However, seminaries must also attend to the educational side of their mandate. The educational opportunities of many Christians have been limited – by poverty, fundamentalism, or persecution. Seminary education should introduce them to academic excellence, be up-to-date with current scholarship, and in dialogue with academics in universities. For this purpose, it is imperative that seminary professors are as highly trained as possible; that they are informed by many disciplines; and they are up-to-date with the latest knowledge in their fields. Ongoing academic research by seminary professors should not be regarded as self-indulgence; it is vital for the spiritual health and academic standards of the whole seminary.

4) What do you see as obstacles on the path? What is blocking effective formation?

KAG – (i) churches are much more concerned with denominational identity preservation than effective formation: issues relating to hierarchy, new ecclesial robes, inductions of bishops and lay leaders, episcopal colours appropriate for various occasions, and things like that. (ii) We seem to be busier building denominational structures and getting our liturgical identities right, rather than to disciple nations. That brings me back to seminary training. In most of Africa, a number of those who have provided leadership for their churches are not only theologically educated but have themselves taught theological education. There are more than enough examples to indicate that what has been taught, in terms of discipleship, never gets translated into practical reality. (iii) We are at a point in the history of the church in Africa in which power, money, and ecclesial festivities and activities are dominating our lives to the neglect of the pursuit of spirituality at the deeper levels. I have taken time to study the attitudes of theological students preparing for ordination. The issue that I find is that the achievement of academic heights through the acquisition of degrees is what dominates their thinking these days. Thus, although these degrees were designed as a means to the end of making disciples, they have become ends in themselves because for many, it provides an easier route for the occupation of church office.

KK – It is wonderful in a seminary setting to be teaching students who have a clear sense of Christ's call on their lives and a vision for their work. However, seminary education must deal with realities. Theological education that is missional will also connect them with the real world.

One of the realities that must be introduced is the diversity of God's world and especially the plurality of world Christianity. There is a danger in a seminary setting that education may be focused mainly on the church and *its* mission rather than open to the world and *God's* mission.

Second, seminary education must engage with the evidence provided by science, sociology, and rigorous disciplines other than theology. All too often seminary instruction may draw on a narrow band of Christian scholarship and not be up-to-date with current scholarship or in dialogue with academics in universities.

Third, in this post-truth age, we are in need of fact-checking and critical thinking. Particularly in the age of Facebook and Twitter, the teaching of information literacy is essential. It is an academic form of discerning spirits that will help students to separate truth from falsehood on the internet and in social media and choose credible sources, with evidence, over rumours, scare-mongering, and conjectures.

5) How big a canvas do we need for this? How broadly do we need to think when we are thinking of being disciples?

KAG: We ought to appreciate the fact that "disciple of Christ" is the only title that Christians carry throughout their lives. We may be reverends, bishops, even archbishops or cardinals, but no Christian ever ceases to be a disciple. What this means is that the leadership of the church ought to portray themselves as disciples and lead members along the same thinking. What has made us vulnerable in the world as Christians is lack of depth in terms of the fundamentals of faith.

YMD - If the Trinitarian basis for evangelism is accepted, then there must be a re-orientation towards a sense that the redemption of creation becomes the major concern. God's objective in initiating the preaching of the good news is not focussed on humankind alone, but to directing the transformation of all creation so that ultimately there is a new heaven and a new earth. Our efforts must not be at the level of personal salvation alone, but to appreciate the fact that God has called families to experience new life and to understand how humankind becomes involved in the redemption of all creation (Rom 8:19ff). This is a critical need as we are increasingly made aware of the depredation of nature that has happened in the past decades and the urgency to arrive at a sustainable interaction with our environment.

KK – Too much theological education is limited to serving a particular denomination or is narrowly focused on the needs of a local church. Christ holds the universe together and his Spirit is what connects

us one to another, to the eco-system, and to our Creator. Christian disciples need an enlarged vision, a sense of being global citizens, and freedom to explore the breadth of God's mission. If our goals are Christ-like, our motivation will be love for the world, our gifts will be employed for the up-building of communities far away as well as near at hand, and our vision will be for the healing of the whole creation. Christian formation should be an opening to the world, and this involves the academic world, the wisdom of many traditions, and the fellowship of world Christianity.

6) Given our discussions this week, we need to think not only of forming disciples but of *transforming* disciples. What do you think takes us into the realm of the transformational?

KAG: One of the critical catalysts of Christian transformation is the ability to bridge the gap between Word and Spirit. If I take Africa, for example, a number of the churches experiencing growth are within the Pentecostal/charismatic streams of the faith. It has led to a situation in which the historic mission churches now virtually mimic certain Pentecostal practices simply to hold on to their own if not to attract others. As with the church in Corinth, the display of supernatural power for its sake has become a problem for the church in Africa. We are celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation and a return to the Word so it will guide our experiences and expressions of the Spirit would lead us into the realm of transformation discipleship.

YMD - Proceeding from this basis, then we need to broaden our understanding of how evangelism is conducted. We need to re-direct our approach from one which emphasises preaching (verbal) to a method that uses worship or liturgy. "Come and see" should become the approach whereby participation in the worship of a community should become an added channel to draw others towards an experience of the Christian faith. What should be the objective is that evangelism should have as its basis the offer of an authentic life in all its fullness. The corollary to this is that evangelisation must be church-based, not leading to the mushrooming of independent churches, which detracts from the work of Christ to integrate all of creation. The Church must be seen as the sure sign of how God aims to transform all creation to a new existence. And when there is participation of all the faithful in the sacramental life of the Church, then there follows the synergistic working of humankind towards the deification of all creation –the ultimate design of God.

KK – Theological education that is educational and missional not only forms disciples locally, it transforms us by connecting us with the worldwide body of Christ today and through the ages. It gives us a sense of being part of something much greater than our own calling, our particular church community, and our own nation. We are enabled to empathize with people from many different backgrounds, we become sensitized to issues of justice, and we are introduced to global affairs. Through it, we become connected with the furtherance of humanity and with the redemption of creation. We are transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we are no longer conformed to this world, but able to discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom 12:2).