

“Ruthless Realism And The Situation In Which The Church Actually Finds Itself”: Notes Towards a Mission Focus for the 21st Century

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The Need For A New Mission Focus:

Stephen Neill in the closing pages of Christian Missions, say this:

“The cool and rational eighteenth century was hardly a promising seed-bed for Christian growth; but out of it came a greater outburst of Christian missionary enterprise than had been seen in all the centuries before. There is no reason to suppose that it can not be so today. But such renewals do not come automatically; they come only as the fruit of deliberate penitence, self-dedication, and hope. And the starting-point of all these is ruthless realism as to the situation in which the Church actually finds itself.” (p.572, Penguin Books, 1964)

Bishop Neill, echoing the understanding of the Whitby (Canada) 1947 Mission Conference, also said something in that book that has been quoted widely in mission minded circles since the day it was written. It is this:

“The age of missions is at an end. The age of mission has begun.” (p.571)

He meant of course that Christianity was now a world wide religion in an increasingly world wide context and we Christians, as a community of churches, had better take this global context seriously.

These words were written in 1964, when the United States was fast becoming enmeshed in a new sort of virtueless war, Europe was losing its last holdings in the colonial world and in some denial of its moral devastation following a half century of fratricide and genocide, and the West and East were at each others throats. Things appeared bad and getting worse. Mission engagement by first world churches was being completely rethought, at least in part as a result of its own members understanding the cultural and social limitations and baggage they brought to missionary activity.

In that same year R. Pierce Beaver wrote a small book for the Association Press (The press of the YMCA) called From Missions to Mission. In what must have been the last gasp of critical work by the YMCA before it backed off such matters, Beaver signaled the profound change from mission as a “Western church operation, reaching out from a geographically defined Christendom to ‘heathendom,’ into a mission aimed at all the world from a base in a ‘diffused Christendom’ in a community of churches all around the world.” (p. 7) He spoke of the “hunger for liberation from fear and lost-ness and for reconciliation.” (p. 126) He assumed that addressing this hunger would be the work of mission in the future.

The Difficulty In Attending To This Task:

Well, they wrote such things in 1964 and it certainly seemed then that the future of mission lay with the liberation movement, reconciliation and the ecumenism that was evoked by the metropolis, in which multicultural and multiracial concerns for both liberation and reconciliation thrived.

But that was almost forty years ago. What happened to that sense that “the age of mission had begun?” Where are we now? To be frank, the global situation in which we find our selves is one where Churches whose theologies are informed by and reflect first world middle class values are not easily willing to engage. That is certainly true of the Episcopal Church. Despite the work of some small groups and networks within the Church we are not a church committed in any way to addressing locally and on every occasion possible the implications of the globalization and urbanization of the world. And we certainly do not think of “mission” as being focused on the local expression of the concern for the global.

In the middle class oriented churches of the West we still mostly think of mission as something done by Christians to or for others, and our engagement is primarily to bring them into the meeting tent where they can become believers like us. In the Episcopal Church there is much talk these days of mission as a means to church growth. We also talk about finding new and younger clergy who can help us make the church relevant for, and bring in people from, groups labeled as part of this or that “generation.” But that has moved the focus of mission from “foreign lands” to local evangelization and to the new territory of “generations.” But in neither case does this address the catholicity of the charge from Bishop Neill – to think of mission as singular and the whole world as singular.

Regrettably, the churches to which these newly recruited young persons will be trained to go for the most part lack any ruthless realism, courage or sense of context for mission that is both global and local. They will reflect the mostly what they reflect now, the deliberately limited contextual world of personal spirituality and the morals of our cultural neighborhood. We neither demand the education this sort of global perspective would require nor expect to place clergy in the experimental ministries that such mission appears to entail.

There is the danger that the management of mission focus by marketing methods will mark us finally as a church that has capitulated to the consumerism of our culture. The future of the church in which we provide consumer determined goods and services, modeled on focus groups, is a continuation of the fragmenting brokenness of the body of Christ.

This is not to say that questions of individual or group needs are not relevant, indeed they are, but they are not relevant as separate calls on the missionary energy of the Church. I am increasingly convinced that the future of mission in the Church lies with the catholic (or universal) and uniting and not the individualized and tribally dividing, because an urbanized and globalized context requires our attention with single-minded clarity. Others have gotten to this realization earlier, but perhaps late is not too late.

Now To The Question: How Shall We Focus Mission In The 21st Century?

At the beginning of the twenty-first century we might well ask again where the ruthless realism is being articulated that informs us of the situation in which the Church actually finds itself? What, we must ask, is the form and focus of this age of mission?

I believe there is no more important question facing the churches as they continue their work and witness in the twenty-first century than the question of the focus of mission. If that focus draws the several churches throughout the world together, the promise and prayer of a church universal will come closer to being realized, if not we will perpetuate the smorgasbord of churches marketed for their niche. And for Anglicans the effort to strive for a common mission will be central to our unity and community.

In the Episcopal Church and in the Anglican Communion there is varying opinion as to what constitutes mission action and to what end such actions are taken. The word 'mission' has been sometimes co-opted in the U.S. by those who are talking church growth and numbers in a local situation or numbers (again) and global growth of communities of believing Christians worldwide. And of course there are those, both in the developing and developed world, who think western initiated mission, and western culture that it carries with it, has such a corrupt history as to make traditional mission action whatever its theological motivation a scandal to God.

What is lacking in the numbers games and in the culture centric games is any well defined sense of mission determined by our understanding of the Holy One (and the word 'one' is the operant word here) and how that Presence works its way in the world. That is, we hear precious little in either camp of the possibility that the focus of mission is not ours to determine, but God's. We hear little outside mission theology circles, of the *Missio Dei*.

The Resources Are There:

Resources on the "ruthless realism as to the current situation in which the Church actually finds itself" are not hard to come by. There are wonderfully creative thinkers hacking away at the matter, trying to position the Church to take seriously its location, which location is no longer defined by place names (Bangkok, Rome, Kigali, New York, or Omaha) but by contexts of profound disturbance and trauma, specifically concerning globalization and urbanization. But the problem is to actually read, learn, mark and inwardly digest what this realism brings us.

Laurie Green, Bishop of Bradwell, (lauriegr@globalnet.co.uk) has written a short book, The Impact of the Global: an urban theology (published by the Anglican Urban Network: Church House, London, 2000). It is an important resource in any effort to look realistically at the missionary tasks confronting the Churches in the 21st Century. Its content ought to scare the hell out of the Church where it is complacent and lacking in resolve. But first it needs to be read. It proposes that "the Anglican Communion is being challenged to make a decisive shift towards enabling and supporting urban mission and ministry in this new globalizing world. If it does not rise to this challenge the Communion will have misjudged the global challenges facing the Church..." (p. 59)

Reading this short book has convinced me that mission in the 21st Century will have to be focused not on this or that "people group" or on attracting this or that "generation" but on the

complex human organism made up of individuals, groups, tribes and nations, that constitute the global and urbanized culture. The work will be hard, for mission will increasingly require “thinking globally and acting locally” in ways that the “age of missions” can hardly have prepared us for.

The first point to be made about the “age of mission” is that it will require of us a renewed sense that the Holy One is the source of prayer and action, justice and mercy. Bishop Green says that,

“before rushing into ‘mission mode’ we must therefore learn the discipline of the attentive analysis of our arena of mission with all its globalization and urbanization, researching prayerfully and reflecting theologically before making any assumptions about meaning or what might be God’s Good News to the situation...Urban mission must be underpinned by a multi-disciplinary and prayerful analysis. We must listen, watch and act in solidarity.” (p. 25)

I commend an essay titled “A Long Walk to Freedom,” in Africa Today (July 2001), by Mr. Adebayo Williams, Editor at Large. Here is an example of the sort of insight we need, insight which is not easy to take in. Mr. Williams gives no one an easy out. The cost of urbanization and globalization for the world’s poor, and particularly the poor of Africa, is simply put before us. He says of globalization and its attending trauma, “If one cannot argue with an earthquake, one can at least study its momentum and master its inner logic. Rather than being demonized and diabolized, globalization ought to be rigorously encountered.” The ‘rigorous encounter’ is precisely what I believe Bishop Neill called us to almost forty years ago. That same rigor is what Bishop Green calls us to in considering globalization and urbanization as the complex context of mission in the 21st Century.

I am struck by two articles under the WITNESS banner: One by Bishop Peter Selby, titled Church and culture which appears in The Witness July/August 2001 (<http://www.thewitness.org/archive/julyaug2001/selby.html>) and the other by Professor Ian T. Douglas, ‘Through prayer and action’: the seeds of a new Anglicanism? In the online A Global Witness (<http://thewitness.org/agw/douglas.html>) These bear on the focus of mission in the 21st Century in quite interesting ways.

Bishop Selby cautions against simplistic analysis of the issues facing the Anglican Communion, particularly as we try to work out an ecclesiology for our time. His warning is a vital one for those thinking about mission as we look ahead. Too easily mission and every church’s own cultural norms and ideologies become mixed. Mission that is greater than the limits of our particular horizons must begin with self awareness.

Bishop Selby is particularly cautionary in his remarks concerning culture, power and colonialism,

“What looks like the radical demands of the Gospel to us becomes, as it crosses cultural barriers, simply another form of colonialism. God’s project, a global and local community called after Christ and sharing Christ’s mind, turns out to be mixed up with handling the movements of culture and power in our time.”

(What ever else comes out of these mutterings, I hope to use the “God’s project” quote again and again.) I see in Bishop Selby’s remarks about being aware of the complexities of our efforts an echo of Bishop Green’s concern for our attentiveness to “researching prayerfully and reflecting theologically.”

Professor Douglas in his very interesting essay analyzed together a variety of recent “events” in the Anglican Communion. Running through these events has been a new appreciation of what the Pastoral Letter of the Primates termed “a call for unity through prayer and action.” The fact that that call for prayer and action was also a specific call for prayers between Ascension and Pentecost and was not widely taken up this year is beside the point. There will be other years, and more need for prayer and action. Douglas’ point is that this call “actually challenged the church to a new level of pertinence and accountability beyond our inner-ecclesial squabbles.” The “new level of pertinence and accountability” is precisely the point, for the complex impact of global and urban forces will push the church where it does not wish to go. And we will be accountable for our mission there.

Staying On Focus:

It is important that we gear up for the time ahead, helping the Church to come to grips with the ‘age of mission,’ which mission is defined by the oneness of the Missio Dei as and by global urbanization as the defining characteristic of this new century.

The concern of this essay is one shared by Bishop Green:

“What we have now to reckon with is that by the year 2010 it is estimated that no less than seventy five per cent of the world’s population will be urban. The next Lambeth Conference will have to attend to this profound change if the Anglican Communion is not to miss the real challenge of the new millennium.”

Concerning our engagement with this reality, Bishop Green asks, “But is the Church anywhere up to speed?” (p.1) I think the honest answer is, “No.”

My sense is that, as we in the Episcopal Church talk about mission and lift up and train a new crop of mission minded church leaders, we will have to take very seriously the need “to get up to speed.”

The missionary focus of this century ought not, I believe, be guided by the numerical successes of this or that Church, but by engagement and identification with those who are cast off as ‘collateral damage’ in the rapid movement to global and urban life. Mr. William’s bleak future may be the proximate word for the future of the poor, but if it becomes the permanent future for anyone then we are all reduced to the potential of being disposable. If that becomes the future then Christ died for nothing, and our faith is in vain. We must pray and work to see that this not be so.