

THE WORLD MISSIONARY CONFERENCE

EDINBURGH 1910-2010

A Time for Reflection

GIDEON GOOSEN

IN THIS ARTICLE I would like to recall some of the salient features of the World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910, and then ask some questions in this, the centenary year of the conference. A centenary seems an ideal time for reflection, review and planning. This article is not a detailed critique or presentation of Edinburgh 1910, but rather a recalling of some salient points which can serve as a basis for reflection today on mission in the local church.

Background to Edinburgh 1910

By way of some background information it is helpful to recall that, prior to Edinburgh 1910, there were previous missionary conferences which can be traced back as far as 1854, but these were on a smaller scale and regional as opposed to global. In 1910 the major Protestant denominations and missionary societies, predominantly from North America and Northern Europe, sent 1,215 representatives to Edinburgh, Scotland. They were mainly from Europe and North America with a few token representations from the global south. No Eastern Orthodox or Roman Catholics¹ were invited. According to some commentators it was both the culmination of nineteenth-century Protestant Christian Missions and the formal beginning of the modern Protestant Christian ecumenical movement. It was unprecedented in scope, preparations and consequences.

It is interesting to note that in retrospect some commentators have called Edinburgh the beginning of the modern Protestant ecumeni-

cal movement. Fifty years after the conference, and twelve years after the foundation of the WCC, J.H. Oldham, looking back, interpreted the significance of the conference in terms of the history of ecumenism rather than the history of missions.² True, it was one (significant) event in a chain of conferences that did lead to the 1948 establishment of the World Council of Churches, but it was planned as a missionary conference albeit with ecumenical overtones. The word 'ecumenical' was in fact part of the official title in the planning stages, but then discarded because of the limited composition of Christians at the conference,

We can recall that the general situation in Europe and North America was distinctive at that time. It was full of hope and pride in what humankind (North America and Europe) had achieved particularly since the Industrial Revolution. There were a number of World Fairs where great technological inventions and achievements were proudly on display. The first World Fair (or 'Expo'), during this the Period of Industrialization, was in London in 1851 and then, leading up to the 1910 Conference, other cities followed: Paris (1889), Chicago (1893), Paris (1900) and St Louis (1906). There was much global confidence in technology and humanity. The future looked very bright. In art there was post-modernism where new ways of expressing oneself artistically were tried. Colonialism (Spanish, British, German, Dutch, Portuguese, Belgium, and French) was still very much alive guided by a nineteenth century anthropology. Unfortu-

nately, it has to be admitted that mission was intertwined with colonialism, acquisitiveness, expansion, aggrandizement and feelings of superiority and racism.

The Colonial Context

There were a number of assumptions behind the Edinburgh conference which need to be mentioned. Let me select a few key ones. Mission was not so much about *mission to the world as mission from Christendom to 'heathendom'*. Use of words like 'conquest', 'soldiers for Christ', and '*Vexilla Regis prodeunt!*' ('may the troops of the King prevail!') were common enough. This underscores the combative ambient and language in which missionaries saw mission to non-Christians. It was said at the conference that the statement that 'the only faith which will conquer Europe and America is the faith heroic and vigorous enough to subdue the peoples of the non-Christian world!' Note the language of 'subduing'. The tone and language used was often reminiscent of the crusades. The historical context of the conference was still very much colonial and imperial. After a message from the King read out in Edinburgh at the conference, we read that with a single accord and impulse the whole Conference, monarchists and republicans alike, sang 'God save the king'. The conference had restricted the mission of the church to certain geographically demarcated portions of humanity. It was further assumed that European Christendom was the norm for expressing Christianity.

Not only were there colonial overtones but some racial ones as well. Azariah, an Anglican indigenous Indian participant, spoke out and offended some. He remarked on the way the white missionaries did not befriend the locals. He commented: 'Too often you promise us thrones in heaven, but will not offer us chairs in your drawing rooms.'³ Azariah's speech had much to say. It was perhaps the first shot in the campaign against missionary imperialism.⁴

Ideas Regarding Non-Christians

As regards the participants, we may ask, what



Gideon Goosen is a Sydney-based theologian and author of 'Bringing Churches Together: A Popular Introduction to Ecumenism, (Geneva: WCC, 2001). His latest book is Spacetime and Theology in Dialogue (Marquette University Press, 2008).

was their theology of religions other than Christian? From what we know they were well aware of a variety of opinions regarding the non-Christian religions adopted by Christian men. Overall their attitudes were very enlightened for that time although some (as one would expect) were not able to see any good in other faiths.

It is encouraging to read that the missionaries insisted that non-Christians must be approached *with real sympathy and respect*. Their insights were profound. It was said that their [non-Christians'] confused cloud-world will be found to be 'shot through and through with broken lights of a hidden sun' (reminiscent of rays of truth in the much later document, *Nostra Aetate*, Vat II). 'Christianity, the religion of the Light of the World, can ignore no lights however 'broken'. Christianity, it was said, must absorb all the broken lights into its central glow. This may shed light on her own truths, forgotten or neglected. By going into the world the Church may recover all the light that is in Christ and become, like its founder, a real *Lux Mundi*. Naturally not all accepted the idea of some light in other religions. And the assumption was still that Christianity would eventually replace all other religions.'⁵

If we think of the three categories sometimes used to describe approaches to other faiths, exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist, the above approach is far from the exclusivist approach of one end of the spectrum. Their thinking was progressive for their time but, we need to remind ourselves, they were often missionaries rather than theologians. However there

was a curious historical turn to the right with Hendrik Kraemer and the 1938 Tambaram Missionary Conference when a more negative approach to non-Christian religions won the day due to the influence of his book, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*.⁶ The nub of the problem was the denial of general revelation and the salvific presence of God in other faiths. The role of other faiths in God's plan still seems to be a point of disagreement among WCC member churches.

Vision on Unity

Science was held in great awe at the time with all the inventions and new knowledge that research and technology had produced. The missionaries were likewise influenced by all these great achievement and saw the big picture of the universe and planet earth as a single unit within it. Within this context Gairdner was able to see the work of preaching the gospel on a grand scale as follows:

If we now can see it as one unit among others, it is this that enables us to see it also as a unit in itself, a single whole. And it is because the world has at last come to be realized as a single whole that the enterprise of carrying the Gospel to all the world is gradually being invested with a new realisableness in the minds of men. And it is because that enterprise is being thus invested with a new realisableness that a World Missionary Conference met in Edinburgh in the year 1910 with a new sense of its own world character, a new vision of the goal, and a new desire to be born again into a knowledge of God commensurate with the superhuman task.⁷

This grand way of seeing the planet and the work of preaching the gospel also influenced their vision of Christian unity. As with other aspects of the missionaries' attitudes, their attitude towards unity was overall surprisingly progressive for that time. What we are seeing is the Protestant arm of Christianity beginning to move towards the desire for a World Council of Churches in at least an embryonic way.⁸ According to Gairdiner, their vision of unity was this:

...one world waiting, surely, for who shall carry

to it and place in its empty hands one Faith – the only thing that can ever truly and fundamentally unite it or deeply and truly satisfy it, bringing its one human race into one Catholic Church, through the message of the: *One Body and one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all*.⁹

Such was the vision which called together the conference

...and such is the vision which any narrative or account of the Conference must seek to convey to the whole Church of Jesus Christ, since on the whole Church's welcome and obedience to the heavenly vision depends its revelation. Thus, only thus, may be fulfilled that prayer of all the ages as in heaven, so on earth thy kingdom come.¹⁰

The focus on unity was reflected in the prayer-life of the participants as well. In the time of worship at the Conference, we read that in their prayers of intercession as in the debates themselves, the theme of the unity of the Church in mission continually surfaced. As one participant remarked: The ever-recurring refrain was 'that they may be one, that the world may believe.'¹¹

Basically two models of unity were talked about at Edinburgh, a minority minimalist approach and a majority maximalist view.

(1) *Minimalist*. This approach took the line that we are united in our common baptism and hence need do nothing further: there is a Federation of Christian communions and the practice of free intercommunion. An Australian delegate at the Conference supported this approach and denied that 'any outward organic unity was necessary or practicable or even desirable—it would be material, mechanical, unwieldy, dangerous, inorganic, non-spiritual, external ...!' (It is still possible to hear this view in some quarters in 2010, in Australia!)

(2) *Maximalist*. This approach acknowledged that Christians are imperfect and that the unity we have is minimal. It stressed that a communion must include 'essential parts of divine revelation or essential means of grace, and that to surrender these, or to do

anything from which that surrender could be inferred, would be a culpable neglect of trust.¹² It was felt that these all have some fragment of vital truth—and all these fragments must be included in a higher unity.

Goals

The slogan ‘The Evangelization of the World in This Generation’ was often quoted as the aim of the conference, or to put it another way: to offer the Saving Gospel to all the world. Expectations were very high as can be seen in that the chairman, John R. Mott, thought that this conference was a truly *kairos* moment with a number of factors coming together to make a huge leap forward in missionary work, especially in East Asia.¹³ Together with this was the aim to get greater collaboration between churches in their missionary work and to achieve greater unity among churches.

The work of the Conference was in receiving and discussing the reports of eight commissions which had been set up beforehand. The reports had been made available before meeting. Because the titles of the commissions give a fair indication of the contents of the Conference, I will mention them and their date of presentation:

1. Carrying the Gospel to all the Non-Christian World (June 15, 1910).
2. The Church in the Mission Field (June 16, 1910).
3. Education in Relation to the Christianization of National Life (Jun 17, 1910).
4. Missionary Message in Relation to the Non-Christian World (June 18, 1910).
5. The Preparation of Missionaries (June 22, 1910).
6. The Home Base of Missions (June 23, 1910).
7. Missions and Governments (June 20, 1910).
8. Co-Operation and the Promotion of Unity (June 21, 1910).

Changes Over One Hundred Years

Now let me fast forward to 2010, the year of the centenary of the Conference. Firstly you could ask how the missionary situation has changed over the one hundred years since

Edinburgh 1910. The answer can be provided by enumerating a few very significant points:

- by the end of the 20th century most people throughout the world had been reached by the gospel;
- the percentage of Christians in the world is roughly the same as in 1910;
- most Christians are now from the southern hemisphere;
- whereas in 1910 it was countries other than Europe and North America that needed evangelization, now the old Christian countries in Europe need it;
- today the secularization of western culture is a threat to Christianity;
- in 1910 it was said that the para-churches, Evangelicals and Pentecostals work without ‘ecumenical discipline’; today there have been significant merges of churches and ecumenical sensitivity in missionary work;
- in 1910 there was no global forum for Christian churches, no World Council of Churches as yet; now we have the WCC and Global Christian Forum which together embrace all denominations;
- the original mother church/daughter church (superiority/inferiority) relationship has changed into a partnership of equals; there has been a movement from accommodation to inculturation;
- mission has moved from being *church-centred* to *God-centred* (*missio Dei*).

The centenary: A Time for Reflection, Planning and Review

From the above it is clear that the mission world has changed profoundly over the hundred years. Christian churches have to rethink what mission is and how best to carry it out. This is part of the reflecting, reviewing and planning part of any thinking Christian church and particularly appropriate in this centenary year. Here are some headings and topics which could form part of that process of review. I am thinking of the local church, that is the local parish, the parish pastoral council, the di-

ocesan pastoral council and the diocesan synod.

What is mission?

We noted above the move from church-centred mission to God-centred. What does this mean? It indicates a whole new understanding of mission as David Bosch has explored within the context of globalization.¹⁴ Any consideration of mission must include an ecclesiology of church-with-others, a broad understanding of salvation which takes cognizance of justice, liberation, contextualization and inculturation. It must include the idea that God's grace is operative throughout the world and is not restricted to Christians. It must include the role of witness as a form of evangelization. It also means a transformation from a theology of mission to a missionary theology. Mission is thus still necessary, but it has changed. In 2004 when Samuel Kobia took up his post as general Secretary of the WCC he soon called on the churches to confess and repent and invited them to a conversion in thinking and attitudes in missionary vision.¹⁵ Given the list above of changes from 1910 to 2010, it is clear that a re-thinking is necessary.

How does all this translate to the local church? For the local church it might mean more effort at trying to discern God's will for the local church. It is less a question of what the local minister or local parish council wants and more a question of what God wants for this local church, in this place, and at this time. That requires a lot of discernment. How many are prepared to do this? How often do parish councils pray and discern before taking decisions? This is light years away from the maintenance model of parish life where business is as usual because 'that is what we have done for the last fifty years'.

Research in Australia has found that many mainline churches have settled in to a maintenance pattern and all but lost a sense of mission. Parish and diocesan pastoral councils could look at their agendas and see what it is

that they discuss at their meetings. Is it the annual fete, parish parking places and fund raising or is it how to reach out to those who have abandoned their Christianity, those who have no convictions, or the impact of secularization on parishioners?

What model of mission?

At a basic level is the question of what model of mission lies behind our activities. Should mission be based scripturally on the relatively modern (Colonial expansionism period) conversion model of Matthew 28: 19-20, or on the newer reconciliation model¹⁶ of 2 Cor 5:17-20 or indeed the coercive model of Luke 14:23 ('make them come in') which was certainly alive during the Crusades and in Medieval Europe.

Schreiter rightly points out that whatever model we chose, we should tease out the distinctive set of practices and conceptions for the conduct of mission according to that model.¹⁷ Should Christians be handing out copies of St. Luke's gospel at train stations, distributing DVDs on Jesus and his teachings, or walking with the homeless and wounded? Do we aim at 5% increase in members of *our* Christian church, or 5% more people improving their relationship with *their* God? Do we see mission as aimed at increasing our church membership or aiding others to become more fully aware of what they already are – children of God? As we asked above, is our missionary work church-centred or God-centred? How much time, effort and prayer is put into discernment, or does the priest/minister know best?

Church–Mission connection

At Edinburgh the fact that some evangelicals and Pentecostals were working in the mission fields as more or less independent missionaries raised the question of the connection between church and mission. Can an individual do missionary work without a church? Beginning with the notion of church this is impossible. Kobia insisted that reflection on mission

cannot and must not be de-linked from basic questions related to what the church is, how it is constituted and what its mandate and organizational forms are. Unlike Edinburgh 1910, today the WCC includes Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches as well as having a working relationship with the (post-Vatican II) Roman Catholic Church.¹⁸ In addition to this we have the Global Christian Forum which includes all those not members of the WCC.

An examination of ecclesiology is all important here. What Christ realized in his life, ministry, death and resurrection is carried on in the church as Karl Rahner points out. The church is a continuation of the mystery of Christ. It is his continuing historical and permanent presence in our history. The church is Christ's body. Christ came to preach the Good News to all and so this Body the church is missionary by nature. Therefore missionary work is intimately tied up with church. It comes down that through baptism a person becomes part of the body of Christ, the church. Baptism is not a private affair with the individuals committing themselves to Jesus.

The church is also human as evidenced by all the sexual abuse scandals by clergy, but there are also other failures by all Christians on occasions. However this should not deflect Christians from what should be the main mission of the local church.

Ecumenical commitment

Edinburgh mentioned the lack of 'ecumenical discipline' among some Pentecostal and evangelical churches in the mission field. How much ecumenical commitment is their in our parish and diocesan councils and how is it manifest? The NCCA Multi-dimensional Covenant among Australian Churches signed in Adelaide in 1994, was a great step forward but has it been implemented at local level? This covenant not only proposed that members pray together but included exploring with one another 'issues and strategies for mission' and the 'shared use of physical resources'. How much of this has been done? Where is it writ-

ten down?

Another dimension is that of planning together. Firstly within the church do lay people and their ministers plan their approach to mission together? The Catholic Church has been slow to use synods in spite of the ARCIC Document, *Authority in the Church (1977)* which encourages it. When will Catholics, for example, see 'Church' not as hierarchy only, but as hierarchy and laity together? Secondly the planning regarding mission, or some aspects of it, could be planned with other local Christian churches. This is sometimes done but more could be done.

Other Faiths

The question of other faiths did come up in 1910 at Edinburgh in the context of preaching the gospel to 'heathendom'. The world was very different then since it had not experienced the devastation of two World Wars and the huge migration of peoples that subsequently occurred. Today's world is characterized by multicultural societies and questions relating to other faiths arise spontaneously. This is another obvious outreach for all Christian churches. What do we think of other faiths? Are parishioners at least generally aware of the contents of documents like *Nostra Aetate* and *Lumen Gentium* (Catholic documents) and World Council of Churches documents, *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies (1979)* and *Ecumenical considerations for dialogue and relations with people of other religions: Taking stock of 30 years of dialogue and revisiting the 1979 Guidelines (2004)*.

Do we in our parish discussions address how we might progress our commitment to dialogue with other faiths? There are many ways of dialoguing: life, action, discourse and religious experience. Which of these are part of the local mission plan? How are they implemented?

Reflection

All these considerations give us plenty of food for thought, review, discernment and planning

today. We can simply note the centenary of Edinburgh 1910 and continue the maintenance business as usual or we could use it as a point of review and renewal. There is more than enough for any parish or diocesan council to use in reviewing and planning missionary strategies for today. For that to occur acknowledgment that the context of mission over the last one hundred years has changed and vision and effort are required to meet the challenges. We cannot resolve the challenges of today with the mindset of the past.

A useful strategy would be for local churches to re-visit the 1994 Covenant. In the light of this document, local Christian churches need not only pray together, but sit down and explore 'issues and strategies' and work out how they can have 'shared use of physical resources'. Sixteen years after the signing of this covenant we still have churches spending millions on new church buildings on housing estates for the exclusive use of their own denomination. This is not good enough and looks too

much like 'business as usual'.

There is also the need to be convinced we can learn from one another. No one has all the answers. This was mentioned back in 1910 and today we see a revival of this idea in the term 'receptive ecumenism'.¹⁹ Azariah, the same Indian participant mentioned above at the 1910 conference, said that all Christians, American, Continentals and Japanese, Indian and Chinese, need to work together: 'We ought to be willing to learn from one another, and to help one another.'²⁰

As we know, Centenary Conference was called from 2nd to 6th June 2010, in and around the historic sites of the 1910 Conference. The Edinburgh 2010 General Council invited 250 church and mission leaders to come to Edinburgh and also welcomed many visitors for the Sunday Celebrations. It remains to be seen in the following months whether this centenary celebration can provide new perspectives on mission and renewed action for the 21st century.

NOTES

1. Bishop Geremia Borromelli of Cremona in Italy, regarded by some as a member of liberal movement in Italian Catholicism, sent warm greetings to the Conference. The elderly Borromelli had a friend, a young priest, Angelo Roncalli (later Pope John XXIII). In June 1908 Borromelli suggested to Roncalli that the time might be ripe to summon a 'great ecumenical council'. Stanley Brian Stanley, (2009), *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, Grand Rapids & Cambridge U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 11,12.
2. Ibid..
3. Stanley, *The World...*124.
4. Stanley, *The World...*124,128.
5. Stanley, *The World...*246.
6. Hendrik Kraemer, (1938), *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, London: the Edinburgh House Press.
7. Gairdiner, W.H.T. (1910). 'Edinburgh 1910': An Account and Interpretation of the World Missionary Conference. Edinburgh : Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 5,6.
8. The Continuation Committee which followed after the Edinburgh 1910 Conference, led to the formation of the International Missionary Council

- (IMC) which in turn joined the WCC in 1961.
9. Gairdner, *Edinburgh...*6,7.
10. Ibid.,7.
11. Stanley, *The World...* 90.
12. Gairdner, *Edinburgh...*205.
13. Stanley, *The World...*3.
14. David Bosch, (1991) *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books), 368-520; and also Neil Ormerod and Shane Clifton, (2010), *Globalization and the Mission of the Church*, T & T Clark International: Edinburgh.
15. Scherer, James, A. (2007). 'Edinburgh II – a New Springtime for Ecumenical Mission?' International Bulletin of Missionary Research, Vol.31, No.4, (October 2007), 197.
16. Brian Stanley, (2009). 'Mission and Human Identity in the Light of Edinburgh 1910.' *Mission Studies* 26 (2009) 80-97.
17. Schreiter Robert. (2009). 'Mission and Identity in the Light of Edinburgh 2010: A Response to Brian Stanley'. *Mission Studies* 26 (2009),99.
18. Scherer, *Edinburgh...*197.
19. Stanley, *The World...* 125.
20. Ibid.