

### **Core Value No. 6**

***The Gospel in every culture: We are committed to the formation of communities of faith that are obedient to the Word and Spirit of Jesus Christ, find expression through local languages and cultures, and are led by national leadership.***

#### **How the Gospel Moves from Culture to Culture**

The little book mentioned earlier, On Someone Else's Terms is concrete, specific, local and very "here and now." Its title was taken from a recurring phrase in the lectures and writing of former missionary and missiologist Andrew F. Walls. He stated it in yet another way in the Introduction to The Missionary Movement in Christian History; Studies in the Transmission of Faith, Orbis Books, 1996 (hereinafter, MM). He wrote, "The fundamental missionary experience, by which the endeavor stands or falls, is to live on terms set by someone else." MM, page xix.

We need to make sense of what it means to cross the borders of geography, language and culture in mission. To do that, we need to take stock of how the Gospel has crossed borders since its inception. Andrew Wall's exposition of this theme is about the best there is, these days. He does this very well in the book mentioned above and a later volume entitled The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History, Orbis Books, 2002. We will be looking at some parts of the first book as we move forward with this theme.

#### **Going Deeper:**

Some of you prefer the really heavy stuff. If so, the next two books are for you – but be warned, they are not light reading. Virtually every serious thought about world mission that can be heard today is indebted to the painstaking efforts that produced these two master works. They are, Christianity; Essence, History and Future by Hans Kung, The Continuum Publishing Company, 1995. 936 pages.

Transforming Mission; Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission by David J. Bosch, Orbis Books, 1991. 587 pages.

We live with an intellectual tension that, in some ways, first emerged at the Tower of Babel. Human beings are simultaneously and immediately recognizable by both their sameness and their fragmentation. Walls adds, "The bewildering paradox at the heart of the Christian confession is not just the obvious one of the

divine humanity; it is the twofold affirmation of the utter Jewishness of Jesus and of the boundless universality of the Divine Son.” MM page xvi. But how does the Christian faith address both our very concrete cultural specificities and our universal sameness? Walls answers this question by referring to what he calls “The Indigenizing Principle” (MM page 7) and “The Pilgrim Principle” (MM page 8).

The indigenizing principle has to do with the Christian belief that people are called to be reconciled to God in Jesus Christ...

### **Just as they are.**

“...It is the essence of the gospel that God accepts us as we are, on the ground of Christ’s work alone, not on the ground of what we have become or are trying to become. But, if he accepts us “as we are” that implies He does not take us as isolated, self-governing units, because we are not. We are conditioned by a particular time and place, by our family and group and society, by “culture” in fact. In Christ, God accepts us together with our group relations, with that cultural conditioning that makes us feel at home in one part of human society and less at home in another.” MM page 7. The genius of the expansion of Christian faith down through the ages can be seen in its “incarnation in specific cultures”; that is, in the way it has been adapted to be “at home” in an almost infinite variety of cultural settings.

This “indigenizing principle” exists in tension with what Walls calls the “Pilgrim Principle.” This has to do with the Christian belief that people are called to be reconciled to God in Jesus Christ so that their...

### **lives will be changed.**

Walls wrote, “Not only does God in Christ take people as they are: He takes them in order to transform them into what He wants them to be.” MM page 8. They will have “...no abiding city...” MM page 8, and will be “out of step with (their) society...Jesus within Jewish culture, Paul within Hellenistic culture, take it for granted that there will be rubs and frictions – not from the adoption of a new culture, (note: as in, say, the home culture of the missionary) but from the transformation of the mind towards that of Christ.” (MM page 8).

#### **Stories and such:**

Two choruses often sung in churches illustrate Wall’s two principles. Their first lines are, “Come, just as you are to worship...” and “Change my heart, O God”.

Walls “unpacks” these ideas in various ways in his books. Our favorite way is found in a story that he made up about an alien spaceman. In this story, the spaceman “drops in” on various Christian communities over time just to see what they are all about.

“Let us assume his first visit to be to a group of the original Jerusalem Christians, about 37 CE. He notes that they are all Jews; indeed, they are meeting in the Temple, where only Jews can enter. They offer animal sacrifices. They keep the seventh day...free from work. They circumcise their male children. They carefully follow a succession of rituals and delight in the reading of old law books. They appear, in fact, to be one of several “denominations” of Judaism. What distinguishes them from the others is simply that they identify the figures of Messiah, son of Man, and suffering Servant (figures all described in those law books) with the recent prophet-teacher Jesus of Nazareth, whom they believe to have inaugurated the last days...

His next visit to Earth is made about 325 CE. He attends a great meeting of church leaders – perhaps even the Council of Nicea. The company come from all over the Mediterranean world and beyond it, but hardly one of them is Jewish; indeed on the whole they are rather hostile to Jews. They are horrified at the thought of animal sacrifices...they do not have children themselves, since Church leaders are not expected to marry, and indeed most of them regard marriage as an inferior, morally compromised state; but they would regard a parent who circumcised his children as having betrayed his faith...

The dominant factors, which the outsider notices as characteristics of these Christians, are the concern with metaphysics and theology, an intense intellectual scrutiny, an attempt to find precise significance for precise terms. He thinks of the Jewish Christians in the Temple nearly three centuries back, and wonders.

The best cure for his wonderment is the still greater wonderment of a journey to Ireland some three centuries later still.

A number of monks are gathered on a rocky coastline. Several are standing in ice-cold water up to their necks, reciting the psalms. Some are standing immobile, praying – with arms outstretched in the form of a cross. One is receiving six strokes of the lash because he did not answer “Amen” when grace was said at the last meal...Others are going off in a small boat in doubtful weather with a box of beautiful manuscripts and not much else to distribute themselves on islands in the Firth of Clyde, calling the astonished inhabitants to give up their worship of nature divinities and seek for joy in a future heavenly kingdom. Others are sitting quite alone in dark caves by the seashore, seeking no intercourse with men...Their beautiful manuscripts include versions of the same holy writings that the Greek fathers used. He notices that the Irish use the same formula that he heard being hammered out in Nicea in 325 CE; somewhat to his surprise, because they do not seem very interested in theology or very

good at metaphysics. They attach great importance to the date on which they celebrate their main festival, Easter...

Our spaceman delays his next visit until the 1840s, when he comes to London and finds in Exeter Hall a large and visibly excited assembly hearing speeches about the desirability of promoting Christianity, commerce and civilization in Africa. They are proposing that missionaries armed with Bibles and cotton seeds be sent a distance of four thousand miles to effect the process. They are also proposing a deputation to the British Government about the necessity of putting down the slave trade, raising a subscription to promote the education of Black mechanics, agreeing that letters be written, pamphlets and articles published. The meeting has begun with a reading from the same book (in English translation) that the other Christians used...most also accept without question the creed of Nicea. Like the Irish, they also use the word "holy" quite a lot; but they are aghast at the suggestion that holiness could be connected with standing in cold water, and utterly opposed to the idea of spending life praying in an isolated cave. Whereas the Irish monks were seeking to live on as little as possible, most of this group look remarkably well fed...

In 1980, he comes to Earth again, this time to Lagos, Nigeria. A white-robed group is dancing and chanting through the streets on their way to their church. They are informing the world at large that they are Cherubim and Seraphim; they are inviting people to come and experience the power of God in their services. They claim that God has messages for particular individuals and that his power can be demonstrated in healing. They carry and quote from the same book as the Exeter Hall gentlemen. They say (on being shown the document in a prayer book) that they accept the creed of Nicea, but they display little interest in it: they appear somewhat vague about the relationship of the divine Son and Holy Spirit. They are not politically active and the way of life of the Exeter Hall gentlemen is quite foreign to them; they fast like the Irish, but only on fixed occasions and for fixed purposes..."

Walls concludes, "Our spacemen may...note that between the five groups he has visited there is a historical connection. It was Christians scattered from Jerusalem who first preached to Greeks and founded that vast Greek edifice he observed in 325; it is in Eastern Christianity that we must seek some of the important features and some of the power of Celtic Christian religion. That Celtic religion played a vital part in the gradual emergence of the religion of Exeter Hall. And the Cherubim and Seraphim now in Lagos are ultimately a result of the very sort of operations which were under discussion at the Exeter Hall meeting...our observer is therefore led to recognize an essential continuity in Christianity: continuity of thought about the final significance of Jesus, continuity of a certain consciousness about history (e.g. ancient Israel), continuity in the use of the Scriptures, of bread and wine and water." MM pages 3-7.

This story, and the reality that it demonstrates, puts a very important framework around our discussion of “where Covenant world mission is going”. If you could interview Covenant missionaries from the past, a good number would likely say that Covenant world mission was about planting Covenant churches around the world. After all, we too were influenced by the colonizing and civilizing aspirations of Exeter Hall, even though, in our time, with its focus on the independence and self-reliance of nations, we have vigorously renounced those goals as part of mission. Still, to a significant degree, the Western goal of establishing sister denominations around the world has been met. Most of our historic relationships are with denominations in other countries that identify themselves as Covenant and whose origins began with the proclamation of the Gospel by Covenant missionaries. Other relationships, mainly in Europe, are at one not very distant remove with members of IFFEC – the International Federation of Free Evangelical Churches. This reality is not at all surprising. Missionaries, like everyone else, are products of their culture. And that culture includes the specific historical and social subculture of the kind of church to which they belong. So, around the world, missionaries over the last 100 years or more have set out to establish replicas of their home church, be it Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, Assemblies of God, Evangelical Covenant or whatever. Yet during the last century, most missionaries saw that there was something decidedly wrong with that picture. They increasingly began to talk about the need to revise their thinking and look to the establishment of “indigenous churches”. The change in their thinking has been gradual. At first, it was about establishing indigenous churches that continued to look exactly like their own home church. Then, they began to note that the “indigenous churches” took on an increasing number of characteristics that were not at all similar to theirs, even when they bore the same name. The tension of ideas continued as mission folk asked, “What will a truly indigenous church look like?” They discovered that the specificities of local language, history, geography and culture were as definitive and tenacious for others as they had been for themselves.

Lamin Sanneh, a native of Gambia and professor of missions, world Christianity and history at Yale University has turned the argument upside down – or perhaps set it right side up. He wrote that we must speak “...of the *indigenous discovery of Christianity* rather than the *Christian discovery of indigenous societies*” in his groundbreaking book, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003, page 10. In Sanneh’s view, missionaries did not transmit the Gospel. They translated the Bible and they proclaimed its message, but the church was born in other lands as indigenous people discovered and appropriated the Gospel for themselves. They were moved to do so by the Word and Spirit of God and by the witness of the missionaries, but they adopted the Gospel in ways that embedded it deeply within their own languages and cultures. Was the witness of the missionaries flawed? Was that witness embedded within the missionary’s home

culture? Most certainly so - yet it was tangible enough to be understandable and persuasive.

**Jargon:**

**Contextualization** is the word missiologists use to describe the way in which the gospel is adapted to different cultural contexts.

So, if we were to continue to define our fundamental task as that of “planting Covenant churches around the world”, we would be at odds with the way God’s mission has moved across time and from culture to culture. This persuades us that we must define Covenant World Mission as “participation in the advance of the multiform expressions of the Kingdom of God” rather than “the advance of the Covenant Church”.

This does not in any way denigrate our love and loyalty to our home church or culture. It does not in any way denigrate the loyalties implicit in our relationship with self-identified Covenant denominations in other lands. It will be messier. It is likely that some of our sister churches in other lands may be troubled as they become aware that while our companionships with them continue, they will not be exclusive. We will have to work hard to define and affirm our ongoing mutual mission with them. And we will have to work hard to differentiate between the universal principles of the Gospel and the particular “cultural clothing” with which we dress it.

We are not espousing some sort of facile cultural relativism. Truth matters. Ideas matter. Convictions arise from the white heat of life and death issues. We are simply arguing that what has been true for us is also true for others. Their concrete life situations have not been the same as ours and they have been given other light that our situation has perhaps not required or, at least, noticed.

So, in the light of all this, “Where is Covenant World Mission going?”

Perhaps the best way to go more deeply into this question is to describe some to the related questions that we are presently facing.

- 1) What role is God calling us to with the new movements of His Spirit around the world?

There is a remarkable movement among Muslims in various parts of the world. It is not being led by Western missionaries or begun by their initiative. Muslims are following Jesus in astounding numbers. Often, they are urged to do so through visions and dreams in which Christ appears to them and calls them to follow him. None of these movements are ever likely to define themselves as “Covenant”. In fact, they do not even use the word “Christian” to describe themselves because

of that word's political association with Western powers that are rather correctly perceived as their traditional enemies. Similar movements are taking place among Hindus and others in other parts of Asia. Covenant missionaries serving in proximity to these movements are wrestling with appropriate ways of participating with them and encouraging them. Covenanter Milton Coke has discovered ways to be effectively linked in service to some of these movements. This concern is at the heart of the Mosaics Project in Europe and is of great interest to our folk serving in Africa and Asia.

**Jargon:**

These new movements in which people retain their cultural identity as they follow Jesus are often referred to as **Insider Movements** in missiological literature.

2) What role is God calling the DWM to take with the emerging initiatives of local denominational initiatives in mission?

Discernment is difficult on this question. Local Covenant congregations are sending ever-increasing numbers of individuals and groups into international and cross-cultural mission. But how are they deciding where to go and what to do? A few seem to be driven by pragmatic self-interest. "We just want to provide an experience of mission for our people. We need someplace easy to get to where there are some poor people that we can help." Others, perhaps influenced by non-denominational mission agencies find questions about the denominational affiliation or genuine religious identity of their hosts to be entirely irrelevant. Maybe this reflects some general trends in the US toward anti-denominationalism. On the other hand, "What is the Spirit saying to and through the local churches?" Many are demonstrating wonderful new ways of engaging in mission that combine various key components of the Gospel; a passion for the New Birth, a passion for humble service to those in need and a passion for justice for the oppressed. We do believe that God speaks "upwards" from the grass roots more frequently (although not exclusively) than the other way around – and we need to listen for his voice.

3) What role is God calling us to with our historic companions?

Certainly empowerment is a vital term. We need to empower Covenant denominations around the world to define themselves within the specificities of their language, geography, history and culture. Then we must have the humility to allow their definitions to transform our understanding of ourselves. This will not be easy to do, but it will ultimately be far more meaningful than simply introducing them to "their Swedish roots". We owe them the dignity of self-definition. At the

same time, we do honor and recognize that some of their desire to identify themselves with us and with our specific heritage derives from gratitude and love. But we must encourage them not to become a foreign subculture within their own country by “cloning” our historically derivative doctrinal affirmations, church political structures, worship forms and the like. In addition, it is imperative that we give priority in our relationship with them to companionship in God’s mission in the world. Our focus on God’s mission tends to get lost in a confusion of over-activity when our relationship is “about everything” that churches do.

4) What role is God calling us to with new churches in other lands that want to establish themselves as Covenant denominations in their countries?

We continue to confront this reality at a steady rate. As in the previous point, we acknowledge the role of relational loyalties that, more often than not, create this desire. Our growing edge, however, lies in developing a certain humility or shyness toward the relative weight of our longer history of self-definition. Our understanding of “what it means to be a Covenant Church” can overwhelm and over-define a newer movement. We must avoid short cuts and allow younger churches to figure out who they are and how they will live within their specific cultures. How all Covenant churches around the world can contribute equally to an ever-deepening understanding of what it means to be an expression of the worldwide Church remains to be seen.