The Church and Holistic Ministry in Culture

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In June 1983, participants from a broad spectrum of evangelical churches, missions, and aid agencies met at Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois, to discuss the issue "The Church in Response to Human Need." The consensus of those meetings as found in the resulting "Wheaton '83 Statement" was that "we do not emphasize Evangelism as a separate theme, because we see it as an integral part of our total Christian response to human need."[1] The declaration and the main body of the Wheaton '83 Statement highlight a struggle on the part of evangelicals to move from a separatistic understanding of the relationship of evangelism and social action to a more holistic or integrated understanding of the relationship between the two.

The beginning of an evangelical consensus is documented as early as 1974 when the Lausanne Covenant proclaimed, "Although reconciliation with man is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of Christian duty."[2]

Although this early statement advocated that both evangelism and social action are part of Christian duty, thus implying that the results of evangelism

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（1） Vinay Samuel and Christopher Sugden, eds., *The Church in Response to Human Need* (Oxford, UK: Regnum Books, 1987), 254–265.
（2） Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, "Lausanne Covenant", in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice,* J. D. Douglas, ed. (Minneapolis, MN: World Wide Publications, 1982), para 4.

should impact society, the nature of that relationship was not spelled out.[3]

Almost a decade later, the consensus of the "Consultation on the Relationship Between Evangelism and Social Responsibility" held in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1982 was that social action is an adjunct to the task of evangelism. Development was seen as a "consequence of evangelism," a "bridge to evangelism," and a "partner to evangelism"[4]

Commenting on the growing consensus in the evangelical community on the relationship of evangelism to development, Tite Tienou in his paper given at the Wheaton Consultation in 1983 noted,

> Social transformation is part of the message of and a natural outgrowth of evangelism… (but) it will likely not take place through a dead evangelism: evangelism will likely not result in social transformation unless the church and Christian community witness by their lifestyles that they have been transformed. If we really mean business let us deflate our empty words and inflate our actions.[5]

Today, some 20 years after the above statements were made, the church is still discussing the relationship between development and evangelism. It seems that consultation statements and an overall consensus of opinion do not necessarily bring about policy changes or action within the larger evangelical community! The question that springs to mind is why? If, in fact, after over two decades of discussion and dialogue on the subject, we have really arrived at a consensus, why then is holistic ministry not being more widely practiced by the evangelical community around the world?

I believe the answer is to be found in a number of obstacles that impede

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（3）　Samuel and Sugden, *The Church in Response to Human Need,* 175.
（4）　Lausanne Committee, *"Lausanne Covenant",* para a.
（5）　Samuel and Sugden, *The Church in Response to Human Need,* 179.

the progress of the implementation of the holistic mission of the church around the world today.

Obstacles to the Practice of Holistic Ministry in the Church

1. A Continuing separation of evangelism and development (A narrow understanding of evangelism)

In spite of the rhetoric of the Wheaton '83 Statement, the fact is that the evangelical community at large remains, to this day, committed, in a large part, to a "separatistic" concept of the relationship of development to evangelism. Development and evangelism are still regarded by the majority in evangelicalism as two distinct, if necessary, "duties" of the church. The use of such terms in the above statements on the relationship of evangelism and development as "linking," "bridging," "consequence of," and "partner to" betray a continuing bifurcation of the relationship of these two important entities. They are considered to be different parts of the same being. They are seen as "different" concepts and only related to each other as independent parts of a broader church mission.

This mindset is enhanced by, or perhaps enhances, the structural distinction of two separate organizational components of the broader church movement, the mission agencies and the aid and development agencies. At the very least, these two entities of the Christian movement are different departments in the same denomination; at the most they are entirely independent organizations, the one seen as focused on "spiritual" ministry and the other on "socio-economic" work. They are often linked by the "add-on-an-evangelist" syndrome where development projects are given spiritual credibility by the addition of an evangelist who is related to a separate department or organization.

I believe that this continuing tendency to separate development and

evangelism is the result of a "truncated" concept of evangelism. This concept sees evangelism as "spreading the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures." [6] The "verbal" expression of the good news is seen as the unique expression of "evangelism". It is proclamation oriented and dedicated to the verbal presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ to all mankind. The assumption perpetuated by this understanding of evangelism is that "hearing" the gospel is the equivalent to "being reached" by the gospel.

I would be the last to deny that proclamation is what evangelism is about. It is, however, not the whole picture. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not just a word; it is a living word. The gospel is life, which includes the making of prepositional statements about its nature but at its best is the incarnation of the Word of God into the cultures and lives of mankind around the world. It is "doing the gospel" which is mandated by Scripture. Jesus himself is our model. As we read in John 1:14, he "became flesh (all that it meant to be human) and "dwelt among us" (lived with us as one of us) and was "full of grace and truth" (the gospel). As a result, "we beheld his glory" (we saw the truth by his grace). Jesus was the first evangelist and his method of incarnation remains what evangelism is about to this day.

Evangelism is about enabling the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ to be born into our lives, our cultures, our societies, our organizations, and our traditions. It is about enabling that gospel of grace to live in and permeate us and our context in such a way that it "transforms" us and our environment to become what we and our environment are meant to be in Christ. Evangelism is transformation, transformation is development, and development is evangelism in a very real sense.

There is a need to replace the narrow concepts of evangelism held by

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（6） Lausanne Committee, *"Lausanne Covenant",* para. 4.

many today with a more biblical understanding of the holistic nature of evangelism. Until we do this, we will remain bound in the confines of our separatistic thinking, robbing evangelism of its natural process in all of life and robbing development of its power of transformation.

2. A secular definition of development (A constrictive interpretation of development)

Since development is persistently separated from evangelism in the minds of many Christians, it is easy to see how development becomes a concept defined not by the teaching of God's Word, but by the secular mind that coined the term. As long as development is perceived of as separate from evangelism, in whatever way, it will continually fail to be defined in a way consistent with the Word of God. As long as development is defined in a secular manner, there is no possibility of integrating it with the biblical concept of evangelism.

The influence of the secular mindset is strong. It is based on normative value premises about what is or is not desirable that are often in conflict with the teaching of the Word of God. It is geared toward indicators of success that often have little to do with development as understood from a biblical perspective. An example of this can be seen in the economist's approach to secular development that has economic growth as its ultimate goal. Even at the micro level of grassroots development projects, this mindset persists. As its goal is to increase income, its focus is individualistic and often pits individual entrepreneurs against each other in competition. The better-off poor minority are its target since they are more likely to succeed, given the economic definition of success, than are the poorest majority. It is an up-and-out mode of development based on Adam Smith's famous notion that "if each individual consumer, producer and supplier of resources pursues self-interest, he or she will, as if by an 'invisible hand,' be promoting the overall interests of society."[7]

（7）　Michael P. Todaro, *Economic Development in the Third World* (New York: Longman, 1988), 5.

More important for us than the fact that Adam Smith's principle is not working in majority world settings today is the fact that the whole economic development mindset with its focus on individualism and self-attainment is in total contrast to the Word of God. The focus of God's Word is on the good of the group or the "body." It teaches self-denial and service to others as the way life should be lived. Its central theme is to love God above all else and to love others as we love ourselves. A development mindset that is based on individualistic self-attainment is contrary to the basic thrust of God's Word and as such needs to be rejected as a definition of what development is about for the church.

The secular development mindset both repels and appeals. On the one hand, it puts the term "development" into a conflictive position with evangelism and accuses it of being less than spiritual. As a result, development programs connected to the church are often accused of bringing spiritual death or of squelching the growth of the church. On the other hand, the secular mindset often dictates the norms for both policy and procedure, within Church related projects and Christian development organizations. As a result, the Church becomes co-opted by the values and standards of secular development thought rather than guided by the teaching of the Word of God.

What is badly needed is a critical evaluation of the secular development mindset that will determine which aspects of that mindset are consistent with and which are opposed to the Word of God. As Christians, our definition of development must originate from principles and values of God's Word and not from the theories of secular development. The Word of God must be the norm from which all of our development theory is drawn. If the church does not re-interpret the meaning of development in the light of Scripture, there is no way that development can be integrated with evangelism. However, if development is defined by the principles and values of the Word of God, both development and evangelism will be integrated into a single process in which God and his Word are dominant.

3. A crisis of faith (Theological infidelity)

Tite Tienou's statement that social transformation (development) will not occur through "dead evangelism" is an important point.[8] He defines "dead evangelism" as that done by the Christian community that is not being transformed and is not living out the process of transformation in their lifestyle. The immediate question that springs to mind is how can there be dead evangelism within the church of Jesus Christ given the nature of the gospel and its power to transform? From my experience of almost 30 years in holistic ministry in Thailand, I am convinced that the answer to that question is there is a crisis of faith in the church today that is sapping it of the transforming power of God.

According to the Word of God in Romans 1:16–17, the gospel is "the power of God for salvation." The power of the gospel lies in the fact that it reveals God's righteousness, which is given freely to all people. The only requirement is that they, in faith, accept God's righteousness and as a result experience his transforming power. In short, the gospel is completely and solely a word about what *God* has done for human beings by his *grace*.

Moffatt has noted that "the Bible is a religion of grace or it is nothing at all…no grace, no gospel."[9]

God's purpose is to bring humankind to salvation by the power of his grace and not by the efforts or personal goodness of any human being. This is clearly expressed in Ephesians 2:8–9. In the gospel, it is only what God has done and will do that counts. The problem is that every fiber of human nature causes us to think that we can earn God's favor and indeed that we *must* if we

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（8）　Samuel and Sugden, *The Church in Response to Human Need,* 179.
（9）　James Moffatt, *The Grace of God in the New Testament,* (New York: Ray Long and Richard R. Smith, Inc., 1932), 15.

are to be accepted by God.

I am deeply concerned about what I feel is a departure from the gospel of grace in the Church around the world today. The focus of a large segment of the Church is on *law* and not *grace*. Even if the rhetoric is *grace,* the practice is *law.* The emphasis of much Christian teaching is on being good enough to please God. Law and obedience to the law are held up as the indicators of a person's salvation, in spite of the Word of God in Romans 3:21–26 which tells us that there in no way a person can be saved by obedience to the law. In fact, the basic function of the law, according to God's Word, is to drive us to despair of our own ability to save ourselves and to cast ourselves in total dependence on the grace of God in Jesus Christ. It is *only* by the power of God's grace that we are saved and are becoming transformed into all that God desires us to be.

I feel that the church is often "duped" by the "religious" value system of the society it is in which teaches that humans must work at being morally good in order to please God and find salvation. The overriding concern becomes morality, and the method and message become law. The basic problem with this way of thinking is that it is not the teaching of the gospel. The gospel of God teaches that human beings are not and cannot be good enough to please God by obedience to the *law.* As Luke 18:9 says, there no one good except God himself. This goodness (righteousness) of God is free to all who believe and accept it, says Paul in Ephesians 2:8–9. This goodness of God is the power of God we are told in Romans 1:16–17, and it will utterly transform those who experience it wto what God intends them to be, notes Paul in Romans 12:2.

This is development in the true sense of the word. It is also evangelism of the best kind. As the church truly understands and believes the gospel of God's grace and not only accepts it personally but lives out the gospel in every aspect of its organizational life and work, the power of God's grace enables the ongoing transformation of both the church and its society. By God's grace, evangelism and development are bonded to each other. Both are empowered by the grace of

God, both are the expressions of God's grace as it is lived out in the church and its society, and both are responses to the Word of God as it is heard, understood and acted on by the church.

4. A cultural insensitivity (Cultural imperialism)

Perhaps one of the greatest obstacles to the church's being the source of social transformation within its own society is the fact that the church today, in most settings, is culturally foreign to its own culture. This is Especially true in majority world countries. The church has often been established with the motto "the West is best" in mind. As a result, "formal correspondence" becomes the model on which most churches in the majority world are based, and western Christianity is the model to which they conform. Local culture is seen as "sinful" and not measuring up to God's standard. Ethnocentric pride given little thought to the fact that western culture, itself, does not measure up to God's standard. The forms and expressions of the church in the West are seen as the real Christian expression of the gospel and are copied religiously. Anything departing from this norm is seen as syncretistic and heretical.

In fact, this very western, formal correspondence Christianity is the most syncretistic of all. Although the form of the church remains that of the West, more often than not, the content, or values, remain that of the local culture. The problem that this creates is two-fold. On the one hand, the form of western Christianity is foreign to most cultures of the world. It does not have entrée into these cultures and is not easily understood by them. On the other hand, if the western form of Christianity is always an outsider and is rarely understood in non-western cultures, then what it houses (its content – beliefs or values), which is the power of the gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ, never has a chance to impact the hearts and minds of those non-western cultures. If this, in fact, is the case, as it certainly is from my study and experience, then it is no wonder that the church is generally unable to impact its culture and society with the power of the gospel. Evangelism and development are dead because

western Christianity blocks the effective communication of the gospel of God's grace, which alone is the dynamo that can empower the church's movement into its society.

The overall problem is a lack of cultural sensitivity on the part of the church today. Cultural sensitivity provides the means for enabling the power of the gospel to address clearly the context of any culture and thereby bring about the necessary transformation of society. There are two basic impacts of cultural sensitivity. First, cultural sensitivity enables the church to use local forms and expressions to communicate clearly and effectively the gospel of God's grace and its implications in a way that can be understood easily and simply by people in culture. This is what Jesus did when he "became flesh" and "dwelt among us." Second, cultural sensitivity enables us to pierce to the core of local culture and detect those aspects of the value system that need to be confronted and transformed by the grace of God. As these are detected and the gospel is clearly and simply communicated and lived out in culturally appropriate ways, it will confront the local value system with the power of God's values. This confrontation will ultimately result in the transformation of local values and lifestyle.

Core Principles for the Practice of Holistic Ministry in the Church

The following are a number of core principles that are the result of a research project of local churches working in Thailand in holistic ministry in culture. These principles are not exhaustive by any means. They do, however, point out dynamic issues which have been drawn from the study of there local churches as they have sought to practice holistic ministry in their own contexts.

1. *Authority.* Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman Jr. (1982) in their important book on management, *In Search of Excellence,* have quoted Thomas

Watson Jr., president of IBM, concerning the importance of beliefs or values in the success of any organization. He writes,

> I firmly believe that any organization in order to survive and achieve success must have a sound set of beliefs on which it premises all its policies and actions. Next I believe that the most important single factor in corporate success is faithful adherence to those beliefs. And, finally, I believe that if an organization is to meet the challenge of a changing world, it must be prepared to change everything about itself except those beliefs, as it moves through corporate life. [10]

What Watson has said about the management of business organizations applies also to the church. The authority of God's Word needs to be central to the activities of holistic ministry in the Church today. At the heart of Scripture is the gospel of God's grace and power. This gospel of God's grace, with all of its implications, is the core belief on which all policies and practices of the church must be based.

2. *Integration.* Every aspect of the holistic ministry in the church needs to be impacted or "integrated" by the grace of God. God's grace is relevant to every aspect of both personal and organizational life in the church. There can be no spiritual and secular distinctions in holistic ministry in the church. All of life is spiritual and is impacted by God's grace, which integrates the life and actions of the church.

3. *Focused Flexibility.* All aspects of the work of holistic ministry are focused and flexible at the same time. They are focused on God's Word and his powerful grace. They are flexible in seeking to allow his grace to be seen and understood by communities in which the church lives and works. It is only as God's grace is understood and responded to that the work of transformation

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(10)　Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr., *In Search of Excellance* (New York: Warner Books, 1982), 280.

can begin in the lives and community of local believers.

4. *Contextualization.* Knowing that people can communicate clearly with each other only to the extent that they share a common culture, and that effective communication is what is "heard," not necessarily what is "said," the Church must enable Jesus Christ (the Living Word) to be born into the diverse cultures of the world. The worship and life of the church (musicology, language, ceremonies) as well as the structure, management system, and development programs are each part of holistic ministry that enables the gospel of God's grace to be born into and lived out in all cultures.

5. *Power Encounter.* As the gospel of God's grace is incarnated into culture, it is clearly understood and focuses on the cultural value and belief system of the local culture. The result is a "power encounter" of values and belief systems that results in decisions that feel the process of transformation. Holistic or socio-economic development programs run by the Church are key points at which this process can take place.

6. *Local Church Focus.* The local church and its community must be the focus of holistic ministry.. The ultimate goal of holistic ministry is to enable the local church to become a "local development organization" in its own context. As this process takes place, the local church begins to impact its own community with the transforming power of God's grace. This is "doing the gospel" at its best with a group of believers living out the values and beliefs of the gospel in their own communities. A development study done by Esman and Uphoff (1984) of 150 local development organizations has confirmed that the establishment of intermediate local development organizations, such as the Church, is crucial for the facilitation of local development organizations such as local churches at the village level. [11]

（11）　Milton J. Esman and Norman T. Uphoff, *Local Organizations: Intermediaries in Rural Development* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1984)

7. *Process/Broker Approach.* David Gow, in a study of the approaches of 41 local development organizations, found that those organizations with the greatest success in helping the poor help themselves were those that followed a process/broker approach. The "process" part of the approach is highlighted by a "down and in" movement on the part of the local development organization – the starting point of good holistic ministry is with the poor themselves. As the local development organization begins to work in a participatory manner with the local poor, an understanding of the context of those being helped is achieved and the grace of God is able to "empower" the poor leading to an effective transformation. The "broker" function of the local development organization is that of linking the local context to extra-local resources. Through the brokering process, the local poor are linked to markets, knowledge, supplies, funds and other appropriate sources for ongoing development. [12]

Some Conclusions

Given both the concepts of holistic ministry that have been briefly outlined in the first part of this paper, what implications does this have for us as we seek to do holistic ministry in a needy world? The following are a few conclusions that I feel are important as the church seeks to do holistic ministry in culture today.

1. There is a danger in being co-opted by the secular mindset.

There is a real danger in secular donor organizations setting up the basic principles for development programs that do not coincide with either the tenets of God's Word or the development needs at the grassroots level. The basic

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（12）　David D. Gow, *Local Organizations and Rural Development: a Comparative Reappraisal* (Washington D.C.: Development Alternatives, 1979), 89–90.

question is which takes priority, funding sources or local development organizations priorities based on the principles of God's Word?

There is also a danger of funding sources dictating the standards on which success will be evaluated. The danger of quantitative economic indicators of success is all too clear for those who have worked in development at the grassroots level. At the very least, it forces local development organizations to concentrate exclusively on those poor who can help achieve the quantitative goals – the entrepreneurial poor. At the most, it usurps the gospel's emphases on qualitative indicators of development — values and beliefs. What is needed today is the articulation of indicators of success that are drawn from the basic principles of the Word of God they alive will show progress in the direction of holistic transformation.

2. There is a need for us to see our role as holistic and not single faceted.

It is easy, and perhaps natural (given the separation of development and evangelism today), for Christian aid and development organizations to assume that the church that they are seeking to help is mature and capable of implementation the socio-economic programs which the aid organizations bring. This assumption, however, is not true in the majority of cases. In the implementation of any socio-economic development program there must be a concurrent emphasis on the spiritual dimension of development. Values of local church members must be challenged progressively by the transforming power of God's grace. Only as local church members are "being transformed" by the power of the gospel can they in turn become "transformers" of their own communities. It is not enough to add on an evangelist to the local development programs. What is needed is "holistic development" which addresses the social/cultural/spiritual dimension of development as well as the economic dimension. Whole people are in need of "holistic transformation" which is the ultimate goal of holistic ministry.

3. *There is a need to allow the grace of God to permeate our Christian organizations to the extent that it becomes the key in determining their policies and actions.*

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin has noted, "It is a sign of our spiritual weakness that we lust for tight organizations where everything is governed by a set of inflexible rules. The multiplication of rules is a sure sign of spiritual decay."[13]

We need to combat the *law-oriented* organizational mindset of most Christian organizations with a *grace-oriented* mindset. As the grace of God becomes the basis for all of our organizational operations the results will be two-fold: one, the power of God will infuse our organizations, and two, the dichotomy of "spiritual" and "socio-economic" will disappear and be replaced by holistic ministry.

4. *We need to avoid the search for simplistic answers to the needs of the poor.*

I am convinced that we are easily enamored by the sensationalism of *global* thinking and planning. We westerners especially, have a tendency to want to generalize answers to the world's problems. It would be fantastic if we calls develop a global answer to the problems of poverty around the world. In reality, however, given the fact of cultural diversity around the world, this is not a possibility. What is needed is *"area specific"* focuses that result in a variety of holistic ministry programs, each aimed at the needs of specific situations and their needs.

I am also convinced that we need to resist the *"resource development syndrome"* that seeks to simplify and sensationalize the local setting in order to stimulate funding. If development programs that relate to real grassroots situations do not stimulate the Christian community at large to contribute to their success then the education of the larger Christian community to the realities of holistic ministry should be the approach taken, not capitulation to

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（13）　Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God* (New York: Friendship Press, 1954), 106

the skewed values of a Christian community seeking sensationalism.

5. We need to focus on enabling the local church to do holistic development.

Too often, Christian development organizations do development themselves and do not seek to equip the local church to do the work. Enabling local churches to be the resource base for ongoing community development will have a more effective impact on society than encouraging Christian development organizations to do the work of development themselves. It is a fact that the best possible initiators of grassroots development or holistic ministry are local people. The local church is the obvious source of effective Christian holistic ministry at the grassroots level. It is the enablement of local churches to be local development organizations in their own communities that is of crucial importance today. As local churches are enabled and equipped to reach into their own contexts with the power of God's grace, the holistic mission of the church will be realized and the church around the world will be both transformed and become the transformer of society by the power of God's grace in Jesus Christ.