

Mission from the Perspective of a Pakistani Christian

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My involvement in Mission

Before being called to ordained ministry in the late 1970s, I was involved in mission practice in a remote area of Multan Diocese of the Church of Pakistan, working with villagers for their socio-economic development, and leading an agricultural extension service.

During my first international exposure at Westhill College, Birmingham in 1985, I was exposed to modern theologies including Liberation Theology, which gave me insights into human suffering, e.g. poverty. I felt committed to the poor and to poverty eradication in Pakistan. My thesis for the certificate was on the topic, "Poverty in Pakistan: A Challenge to Christian Ministry."

My involvement in holistic mission reached its peak during my Ph.D studies at Oxford Centre for Mission Studies (OCMS) during 1990-1997. The overall focus of OCMS on holistic mission raised my commitment for Pakistan. My Ph.D thesis was on the topic, "The Role of the Church of Pakistan in Development".

I have worked in different parts of Pakistan and overseas, promoting holistic mission and integral theology in my teaching, preaching and practice. The Church in Pakistan has also manifested a mission practice by way of focusing on distinct mission concerns according to their local contexts.

My Understanding of Mission

Mission to me is the whole understanding of God's intentions for humanity and Christ's service to them and the Church's volunteer commitment to preach the Gospel message of salvation and demonstrate practically all that Christ did and asked the disciples to do.

'Holistic mission' is an ongoing commitment of the Church to the Gospel of Christ to show practical solidarity with the people in physical needs of resources and support in the midst of oppression and affliction, and also to share the saving message of salvation in Christ who died for the sins of the world to provide eternal atonement. These two aspects of mission are inter-related and none is superior to the other or holds primacy over and against the other.

Holistic mission is described in two expressions. Holistic refers to the soundness, correctness, healing of body and soul, restoration, etc. and wholistic, gives the sense of a total, greater, fuller and more significant reality. These two expressions can be used interchangeably.

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Willem A. Visser't Hooft, the first World Council of Churches (WCC) General Secretary addressed the fourth General Assembly of the WCC in 1968 at Uppsala:

I believe that, with regard to the great tension between the vertical interpretation of the Gospel as essentially concerned with God's saving action in the life of individuals, and the horizontal interpretation of it as mainly concerned with human relationships in the world, we must get out of that rather primitive oscillating movement of going from one extreme to the other, which is not worthy of a movement which by its nature seeks to embrace the truth of the Gospel in its fullness. A Christianity which has lost its vertical dimension has lost its salt and is not only insipid in itself, but useless for the world. Christians have more reason than anyone else to be advocates of humanity... They are on the side of all humanity because God is on that side and his Son died for it.²

The WCC General Secretary's concern to keep a balance between the vertical (proclamation) and horizontal (service) is clear from this speech. This Eecumenical view is generally supported by Jesus' declaration of his mission in the synagogue of Nazareth when he read from Isaiah 61:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4: 18-19)

Purpose and Strategy of Mission

i. Good News for the Poor

Christ brings Good News to the needy, including those who need healing and the good news that their sickness is not from God and that God loves them equally as God loves the rich and healthy. This was distinctive and of stark importance in the ministry of Christ as compared to the leaders of the Jews whom Jesus tried to transform. (Matthew 4:23)

ii. Church - the herald of the Good News

John's version of the great commission reads, "Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' And with that he breathed on them and said, 'receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'" (20:21-23)

Although the passage can be taken as supportive of an understanding and doctrine of the Apostolic succession in the Church, there is also an understanding that the church has a distinctive authority to preach the gospel and share peace (Shalom) of God with the world.

² Quoted by Norman Thomas in *Readings in World Mission* (London: SPCK, 1995), 139-140.

Pope Benedict, addressing groups of people at Castel Gadalfo on 28 August 2005, said, "Where God does not have pride of place, where he is not recognised and worshipped as supreme good, human dignity is at risk... it is urgent to rediscover the authentic face of God."

Challenges and Opportunities

The biggest challenge in a situation like Pakistan is the conservatism in theology and mission which is not bad altogether but rigidness and tight atmosphere leading to a traditional approach to theology and mission does not appreciate broad-based theology and mission practice. The opportunities I got include my role as a teacher, leader and preacher. Also there is a level of acceptance of innovative concepts in Pakistan among many young people.

I have new learning and discovery on mission because of my work with people from the grassroots level and those coming from sophisticated backgrounds. These encounters helped me to understand issues of life at different levels, e.g. poverty and riches and how people behave in different situations.

Also my role as Principal of a theological college provided me with opportunities of working with the Church leadership and overseas mission partners which helped me to keep reviewing my commitment and practice and to learn and develop as a mission theologian.

Holistic Mission in Pakistan

The context of Pakistani Christians is that of Islam and poverty. Islam has a clear concept of mission known as *Da'awa*. This is defined as follows in a textbook of Islamiyat for students:³

Da'wa means inviting ourselves and all others to obey Allah and His laws which were given to the mankind through a long chain of messengers and prophets. For this is the Holy Quran enjoins upon us:

'Let there arise out of you, a band of people, inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong: They are the ones to attain felicity.' (3: 104)

At the heart of the Islamic mission is submission to One God and social justice, says Anwar Ali in "Islam - Ideology and Leading Issues"⁴. Highlighting the essence of Islamic teaching of inculcating belief in the Unity of God and to ensure the ends of social justice, Anwar Ali links human beings' natural yearning to pour forth gratitude towards their Creator. He says, "It is the Islamic mission to convince by rationalistic thought combined with moral consciousness"⁵.

³ Farkhanda Noor Muhamm: *Islamiyat for Students* (Lahore:Ferozsons, 2000)- 193

⁴ Ali, Anwar, *Islam: Ideology and leading Issues* (Lahore:Publishers United Limited, 1978)-34

⁵ *Ibid.*

Regarding poverty and the scarcity of social development in Pakistan, the UNDP human development index report has placed Pakistan in the 135th position among 177 countries, which is not encouraging at all. Pakistan is still among the 10 most backward countries in the world. Pakistan to date is under an external debt of 2,000 billion plus an internal debt of 35 billion US dollars. Economists and social scientists concerned that Pakistan falls behind Nepal and Bhutan in some spheres of social development and that Pakistani society is divided between the privileged, *ashraafia* and labouring poor.⁶

The daily newspaper, *Dawn*, on 6 September 2005 highlighted the Asian Development Bank's dissatisfaction over the governance, power sector reforms and poverty situation in Pakistan and warned that rising oil prices will affect the growth rate during the current year. These alarming facts about Pakistani situation should touch our theology of mission and evangelism. Since social development has to do with the values a society believes and upholds, the Church as a spiritual organization has a role to raise its voice on social issues. This is one way of combating poverty which will be a good news for the poor in the end.

The after-effects of Globalization on the South Asian countries are immense, deep and long lasting. The great economist, Mahbub ul Haq, said about Globalization: "Globalization is no longer an option; it is a fact. Developing countries have either to learn to manage it far more skillfully, or simply drown in the global cross currents."⁷ I would like to conclude this section by quoting from the same report:

Globalization affects developed and developing countries differently. While the developed countries focus on the protection of their domestic industries and agriculture, particularly if it involves the cost-reducing measures by shifting production process abroad, the developing countries contend with increased poverty, vulnerability, inequality and inequities generated by the globalisation process on the poorer sections of their population.⁸

Many Christians in Pakistan are among the poorest of the poor. This raises the challenge for the Church in general to commit to holistic mission, to commit to the development of the 'people of the household' as well as highlight the case development of communities in general. Well-off Christians at their individual level need to commit to the wider mission

⁶ Kaiser Bengali, article in Daily Dawn (Karachi: Pakistan Herald Publications, Oct 5, 2005)

⁷ Human Development in South Asia 2001, Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre, Oxford University Press Karachi, p.46.

⁸ *Ibid.*

of the Church.

Case Study of the Centre for Mission and Development

This author, along with his wife Ophelia⁹, had a privilege of pioneering a Centre of Holistic Mission in Karachi in 1999. The Centre focused on mission education along holistic line and worked with hundreds of Christians, clergy and laity, men and women, young and old, Christians and Muslims. The aim was to raise consciousness of holistic mission among clergy and lay people and demonstrate it. A prescribed course was followed to teach and

⁹ Mrs. Ophelia Sultan evaluated the work of the Centre for Mission Study for her MA in Mission from the University of Wales through Birmingham Christian College.