

A Praxis Approach to Evangelism: Reflections on the Realities of Contemporary Evangelical Outreach

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It was an important and welcome decision to have a working group on evangelism at the Seventh Oxford Institute, and for two reasons. If theology is to avoid the abstraction of critical reflection for its own sake, the theologian is well advised, not only to practice Christian living, but to take the gospel as a message into the rough and tumble of ordinary human existence. Proclaiming the truth on which one reflects is a searching exercise. It is at once the test and the purpose of a Christian's engagement with theology as a discipline of the faith, and it is precisely this dimension of Christian *praxis* which the evangelist brings to theological discourse. By the same token, it is salutary for the evangelist to be exposed to the critical enquiry of the theologian. The theme of this Institute, with its emphasis on theological traditioning in the quest for God's future, was particularly pertinent to such an exposure. Without a faithful appropriation of the Christ event and the scriptural witness of the church across the centuries, evangelists are all too susceptible to the pressures of contextual exigencies, allowing their own priorities to subsume God's gracious initiatives.

Far from being separate functions of the church's ministry and mission to the world, therefore, evangelism and theological reflection are quite interdependent. They are of course distinct, since evangelism is the pointed and relevant presentation of the gospel in its essentials. Theological reflection is out of place in the immediacy of such a communication, just as critical commentary by a musicologist

is anomalous during the playing of a piece of music. Criticism and reflective response are necessary for authentic interpretation, but they should not interrupt the immediacy of a happening. At the same time, evangelism is always the tip of a theological iceberg, to use Wesley Ariarajah's vivid metaphor.¹ A wide range of ecclesiology, soteriology, eschatology, and pneumatology will inevitably extend deep below the surface of the communicated message, rendering theology *de facto* a substantial component of evangelistic outreach, and dialogue between the evangelist and the theologian of paramount importance.

The lack of such dialogue in the church invariably leads to a weighty missional error: engagement in theological controversy to the neglect and even the exclusion of authentic evangelistic outreach. This is not to deny the place of dispute in theological enquiry, something quite pivotal to the critical reflection it affords. But if it is not tempered by the realities of defining the gospel as a communicable message—the task which more than any other Christian activity provides the church with its distinctive identity in the world—then theology, lacking a proper accountability, becomes ecclesially introspective and intellectually self-indulgent. This in turn, with a harsh irony, permits the practice of an evangelism which, insensitive to the *missio Dei*, is theologically brittle rather than tensile. Strategy and method are substituted for the faithful traditioning of the *evangel*, and theologies which ought to be seriously questioned are adopted as little more than motivational techniques. The result is that whenever evangelism does become the subject of serious theological reflection, issues are all too often prejudged and attitudes entrenched.

The working group on evangelism sought to avoid this error by adopting praxis as the theological method of its deliberations. Because this required the discussions to be grounded in the realities of historical context, the subject matter could not be evangelism as a concept, nor yet as an ideal. It had to be *the evangelism that is currently being practiced in the church*. This perforce locked the group into an agenda which was not only comprehensive but polemical, and it was hardly surprising that the working papers evoked a number

of candid and forthright disagreements. Yet the discussions took place in an atmosphere of trust and collegiality, and always with a sure sense of evangelistic priorities in appropriate tension with the criteria of theological reflection.

This was due in no small part to the overall focus of the Institute on the Methodist theological traditions, which time and again took us back to Wesley himself—perhaps the exemplar for thoughtful and accountable evangelism. Even a cursory study of his ministry reveals that, while the touchstone of the Methodist contribution to the eighteenth-century revival was Wesley's driving concern to take the gospel the length and breadth of the land, this was never to the detriment of his concern for right doctrine. On the contrary, he honed his theological positions in the exigencies of the revival: in preaching the evangel to audiences which were hostile as often as they were receptive; in the plotting of a tortuous course through minefields of clerical opposition; and in the pastoral anguish of very mixed fortunes with his assistants and society leadership. Most remarkable about this doctrinal pilgrimage is that he did not markedly change his stance on what he regarded as the essentials of the faith. The passing years tempered his language and gave added depth to his perspective, but the gospel which he preached remained essentially the same—the offer of salvation through the merits of Christ's atonement and a summons to the obligations of a changed life-style in the power and grace of the Holy Spirit as a necessary consequence of accepting God's forgiveness and reconciliation.²

To insist on the necessity of obedient discipleship as an integral part of the evangel was the distinctive dimension of Wesley's evangelistic outreach and the principal reason for the efficacy of early Methodism as a spiritually reforming movement. The polity of societies, classes, and bands was the embodiment of this message no less than the expression of its founder's organizing genius, and could not have been forged as a disciplined structure had he and his preachers not proclaimed Christ in law as well as gospel:

It is our part thus to preach Christ, by preaching all things whatsoever He hath revealed. We may indeed, without blame, yea,

and with a peculiar blessing from God, declare the love of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . but still we should not preach Christ according to His word, if we were wholly to confine ourselves to this; we are not ourselves clear before God, unless we proclaim Him in all His offices . . . not only as our great High Priest . . . but likewise as the Prophet of the Lord . . . who, by His Word and His Spirit, is with us always, 'guiding us into all truth'; yea, and as remaining a King for ever; as giving laws to all whom He has bought with His blood . . . until He hath utterly cast out all sin, and brought in everlasting righteousness.³

The implications of this are profound, for evangelism and theological reflection alike. As he took the gospel "into the highways and byways," Wesley found that the theological question with which Protestantism had wrestled since the Reformation—the question of faith and works—was altogether moot in the practical realities of discipleship.⁴ The truth of the matter is that the great majority of Christians, whose chief occupation in life is not theological reflection, find faith and works quite indistinguishable. They perforce must live out their faith or lose it, and their instinctive understanding of this was the underlying strength of the weekly class meetings which, far from being intensive group experiences per se, were times of mutual accountability for faithful discipleship—the "sinews" of the societies.⁵

Yet Wesley remains largely unheard in this regard, and the issue continues to occasion divisions in the Western Protestant church, which Christians elsewhere in the world find difficult to understand and are increasingly unwilling to accept. The problem is the conceptual distinction between the inward faith of commitment to Christ and the outward works of discipleship. Because each is viewed as having its own integrity, albeit contingent upon the other, missional outreach becomes a two-fold activity: the proclamation of an evangel that offers salvation through faith in Christ and the working out of that salvation through social and personal obligations to the global community. Every attempt is made to stress that faith must result in costly discipleship, and that authentic discipleship must be rooted in grace. But as long as the one is viewed as the occasion or corollary of the other, there is a tendency for the distinction to become a

polarization, and even a dichotomy. Personal faith and accountable discipleship are stretched to the limits of their semantic connotations, and dedicated Christians are imperturbed by the perceived need to make one or the other an evangelistic priority.

The pressing issue for evangelism is not the bridging of this dichotomy when it occurs, but the prior question of whether the conceptual distinction from which it proceeds is appropriate. Clearly the proclamation of the gospel is not all that the church does as it engages in God's mission to the world. Good works are as much a part of that mission as the announcement of God's salvation—indeed, as is everything else that the church is sent into the world to be and to do as a sign of Christ's new age. But to define evangelism as the proclamation of God's grace in Christ, and the works of discipleship as the corollary of that proclamation, albeit a necessary corollary, is to draw a false and unscriptural distinction. The call to an accountable discipleship of good works is as much a part of the evangel as the offer of forgiveness and reconciliation through faith in Christ, and acceptance of the atoning work of Christ is as necessary for true discipleship as the works of obedience for which grace empowers.⁶

The first priority of the evangelist, therefore, is to get the gospel message clear in its essentials in order to proclaim it in its fullness. Failure to do this in the contemporary church merely results in attempts to correct defective evangelism with more intensive discipleship—a perpetuation of the false dichotomy between word and deed. If, on the other hand, the properly scriptural distinction is made between evangelism and the task to which it calls, the gospel and Christian discipleship both retain their proper integrity: evangelism as the announcement of God's salvation in Christ and the call to an accountable discipleship in the world; discipleship as joyful obedience to the continuing gracious initiatives of the Holy Spirit and an acceptance of God's saving righteousness in Christ.

This was well argued in Plutarco Bonilla's working paper for the group, "The Content of the Evangelistic Message." Bonilla suggested that the Latin American Protestant

evangelical churches, including those of Methodism, have been more concerned about winning people away from Roman Catholicism than converting them to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Their preaching of the gospel has thus centered on personal salvation, drawing on the Pauline epistles for a doctrine of the death and resurrection of Jesus in isolation from his life and teaching. Social concern has been confined to areas such as education and health, with little weight given to the scope of the kingdom announced by Jesus. When Paul is viewed in the light of the gospels, however, there is no dichotomy between the personal and social dimensions of the gospel. Faith in Christ means obedience to the One who is ultimately to reign over history, and discipleship consists of the exercise of love, justice, and peace which brings us into the reality of that new age. Just as sin is not an abstraction, but a concrete reality in history, so must the gospel be proclaimed as historical hope.⁷

Once it is perceived that the gospel proclaimed in its fullness calls to a discipleship that actively anticipates the true scope of God's new age, many of the theological concepts which govern the evangelistic outreach of the church emerge in a very different light. A good example of this was the discussion stimulated by Robert G. Tuttle's working paper on prevenient grace. Wesley emphasized prevenient grace, Tuttle argued, "so as to portray God as the principal character in the drama of rescue, while preserving the freedom of human response." It was the universal efficacy of grace that made valid the evangelistic ministry of early Methodism. And since people today, no less than in Wesley's time, are being drawn by the Spirit of God at work throughout the world, those of us in the church should evangelize not only with energy, but with expectancy.⁸

This proves to have significant social as well as individual implications. If the promise of the *evangel* is the new age of Jesus Christ—the fullness of *shalom*—then the Holy Spirit is at work, not only in personal lives, but in human communities, societies, nations, and international systems, drawing by prevenient grace to that *novum* which is promised for the world as well as for each human being. The evangelist must look for God's grace in the entire panorama of human

history, discerning those evidences of God's love, power, and justice in historical moments that a sinful world cannot recognize. And once discerned, these workings of prevenient grace must be interpreted, announced, and affirmed. For they are not random manifestations of God's gracious activity. They are nothing less than the breaking in of Christ's new age, the signs of that which *is* to come, on earth as in heaven.

An equally stimulating session was initiated by Ronald Crandall's paper on the centrality of Christian experience in the Methodist tradition. Advocating a restoration of this emphasis to contemporary evangelism, Crandall argued that the "inward witness" of Wesley was the distinctive core of the evangelical tradition. Whatever its manifestations throughout the history of the church, the essential evangelistic message has always been the offer of a salvation which can be experienced—a knowledge of God in the power of the Holy Spirit, at once liberating, transforming, and empowering. The present pluralism of religious expressions notwithstanding, evangelists should continue to affirm this experience as the center of Christian faith, and the source of authentic discipleship.

The ensuing discussion made clear the extent to which the Christian tradition must now be viewed in a global context of interreligious dialogue.⁹ While it was agreed that Christian experience is a necessary component of the evangelistic message, serious questions emerged about its holding a central emphasis in what is proclaimed. This was not to deny the significance of religious experience. On the contrary, the issue for evangelism proved to be the very commonality of such experience throughout the human family. Studies in comparative religion, as well as in adjunct disciplines such as social psychology and anthropology, have fostered a new openness among Christians to the spiritual reality behind all world religions, constituting a whole new area of evangelistic research.¹⁰

This presents the contemporary church with a task very similar to that of the early church as it sought to establish the particularity of its spiritual gifts in the midst of first-century religions. Then and now, the criteria for true Christian

experience are two-fold: the fruits of God's righteousness in the life of the believer and the honoring of Christ as the end of true faith. Christian experience must evince faithfulness to the imperatives of Jesus' own life and work, and the gospel which offers the assurance of salvation in Christ must also issue a clear call to discipleship. Put differently, Christian experience as the inward witness of God's saving righteousness is authentic only to the extent that it is grounded in the historical reality of the prophet from Nazareth. The invitation to be a disciple of the risen Christ is a call to work for the new age to which the ministry of the Jewish carpenter has already given definitive shape.

This is not to imply that contextual reality displaces experience at the center of the evangel, for involvement in human history lacks the authenticity of Christian discipleship if it is divorced from the experiential power of the Holy Spirit. It is rather to affirm that the central core of the gospel is a dialectic: of inward assurance and outward commitment, of spiritual experience and worldly involvement, of self-awareness and historical vision. Grace and accountability alike must be proclaimed in their personal, social, and cosmic dimensions. It is a dialectic which Wesley came to understand at an early stage of his evangelistic ministry, and which he maintained by giving his message only one center—Jesus Christ: "In strictness, therefore, neither our faith nor works justify us; that is, deserve the remission of our sins. But God himself justifies us, of his own mercy, through the merits of his Son only . . . therefore in that respect we renounce, as it were, again, faith, works, and all other virtues."¹¹

To make Christ "the flaming center" of the evangelistic message provides at once a freedom from contextual limitations, and freedom for authentic Christian experience.¹² This emerged with some cogency from three contextual studies presented to the group. The first, by Zablon Nthamburi, stressed the need in the African context for a gospel which speaks to the strong community consciousness of the continent. A message that propagates the individualism of Western Christianity, Nthamburi explained, renders the gospel incongruous to African

Christians. Indeed, the more the Christian faith is traditioned in the African context, the more it becomes clear that Western individualism is both cause and effect of an undue reliance on the printed word for the propagation of the gospel. In Africa, where there is a vital sense of human community, the oral tradition plays a much more significant role and to great evangelistic effect. Not only does Jesus Christ occupy center stage quite effortlessly when the story is told by word of mouth, but neglected dimensions of the tradition emerge with new force and clarity. The saints of the church, for example, assume their proper place in the faith of a people whose sense of ancestry is foundational to their culture.

The most important praxis question of Nthamburi's paper, however, was missional moratorium—an issue which the group found to be very much alive.¹³ There was a strong feeling on the part of African participants that the mission and the health of their church had been threatened by too much receiving, and that only a self-propagating, self-governing, self-reliant church could become incarnate in its own culture. Emerging leadership and initiative had to come from the indigenous church and could not depend on a limitless supply of missionaries from other countries—not all of whom were willing to step aside when there was a clear opportunity to do so.¹⁴ Non-Western members of the group were at pains to stress that this was not a rejection of Western cooperation in the task of reaching people with the gospel. But they insisted that the whole concept of "unreached peoples" required careful attitudinal examination.

It was at this point that the dialectic of contemporary world evangelism, so clearly articulated in plenary session by Wesley Ariarajah and Alan Walker, came most pointedly to the fore in the group's deliberations.¹⁵ On the one hand, as Ariarajah eloquently demonstrated, the Christian must expect to meet the risen Lord already at work in the mission field. This is to do no more than affirm prevenient grace as the theological undergirding of evangelism, accepting that the human contribution to the task is not so much initiative as facilitation, for which the requisite gifts are sensitivity and empathy as well as enthusiasm. There will always be a degree of mutuality in the proclamation of the gospel, the evangelist

receiving new dimensions of Christian insight from those with whom the gospel is shared quite simply because Christ is already in their midst. Evangelism cannot therefore be a church-centered activity—only Christ-centered. For the Christian is called "outside the gate" to engage in the *missio Dei*.¹⁶

On the other hand, as Alan Walker convincingly argued, if the gospel is indeed the good news of Jesus Christ, then evangelists are needed urgently, whatever contextual adjustments might be required to render their work effective. The missionary work of Paul is a constant reminder that the gospel carries its own authority, provided the messenger is sent in the power of the Holy Spirit. The proclamation by the early church of God's salvation in Christ was by definition a cross-cultural if not supra-cultural message, and the point of the Apostolic Conference between Paul and the Jerusalem leaders was not so much the issue of Jewish legal observances, but the fact that Paul, in taking the gospel to the gentiles, had found it received by faith *before* its implications were contextualized.¹⁷ The evangelist who, like Paul, travels to foreign parts, must observe the particulars of contextualization. But in the final analysis, he or she will be heard, not through the technics of cultural communication, but as one whose message has the authority of divine revelation and eternal truth.

The commitment of the group to a praxis method of theological reflection brought this issue to a very particular imperative. The challenge of missional moratorium emerged, not as a suspension of evangelistic activity by Western churches—which must surely be censured as altogether contrary to the impulse of Christian tradition—but as a question of basic Christian collegiality. Of course there must be a deference to indigenous workers, where indeed they are at work. But the real test for evangelists throughout the world is whether they are willing, as a global task force, to *respect each other's work for what it is*.

The history of Christianity over the past three hundred years lays the onus for developing such a collegiality squarely on the evangelists of Western countries. As they evangelize at home, they must be willing to receive help from colleagues

in the other parts of the world with the same graciousness they wish to be accorded when they go abroad. Alan Walker's words are prophetic: the Western world is now the most difficult mission field of all. Yet Western churches continue to view their mission through traditionalisms which blind them to the neopaganisms of their contexts, whether it be North American folk religion or European secularism. As the Holy Spirit moves throughout the world church, imparting new vision, power, and hope, Western Christians must learn to welcome the collegiality of their global sisters and brothers, who can assure them of the reality of God's coming new age and strengthen their resolve to witness to their faith. North American churches, for example, must increasingly receive missionaries from Latin America, whose biblical message will perhaps be disturbing, challenging their ecclesiocentricity and their culture-bound theology.¹⁸ Christians in Europe must invite African and Indian colleagues, not merely to minister to immigrant peoples or gratuitously to confirm well-diagnosed racisms, but to preach in their churches and cathedrals, giving new expression to the tradition which for centuries was the lifeblood of their culture.

A pointed reminder of this need for renewal in Western Christianity was brought to the group by the second contextual case study, in which Kenneth Thompson compared John Wesley's mission in Ireland with the traditioning of the gospel by Irish Methodism. His conclusions were sobering. While Wesley ministered in Ireland as a strategist for church renewal, Irish Methodists over the years have allowed theological and political considerations to distort their witness into a narrow denominationalism. A very special type of evangelism is now required, which, avoiding triumphalism and defeatism alike, will liberate people from their tribal and political idolatries.

Thompson suggested that the answer lies in a secularization of the gospel, thereby providing a ferment of creative action that can lead to renewal and reform. The enculturation of the church in Ireland, as in much of the Western world, has led to an unacceptable measure of religious and ideological confusion. The essentials of the apostolic tradition have been

subverted by racial fraction and cultural conflict, with the result that pastoral obligations have been consumed by the more immediate demands of ministering to people whose faith owes more to three hundred years of history than the living word of the gospel.¹⁹ In such a context, nothing less will suffice than a radical quest for the gospel regardless of, or even in spite of, the church.

It is important in the light of this discussion to clarify a semantic confusion which, in the absence of serious dialogue between evangelists and theologians, causes much mischief. Secularization is not *secularism*, the rejection of traditional religious values altogether, but rather a critical examination in the light of the gospel of those values which the church has assimilated from its surrounding culture.²⁰ Just as an evangelist to another culture must be sensitive to the need for indigenous expressions of the gospel, so an evangelist in a Christianized culture must be sensitive to the need for a faithful expression of the gospel, especially if this requires a reorientation of ecclesial attitudes and structures. In short, the evangelist must be constantly discerning and defining the gospel for the church as well as the world—a task well modelled by Wesley.

The third case study by Norman Thomas returned the discussion to the African context. Drawing on Max Weber's concept of "elective affinity,"²¹ Thomas examined Wesley's synthesis of personal piety and social witness in relation to the values of African culture as found in Zimbabwe. Citing political leaders such as Canaan Banana, Kenneth Kaunda, and Abel Muzorewa, he showed how any dualism between the spiritual and the physical was foreign to African culture which, like Hebrew thought, emphasized the unity of human personality and existence. In the words of Canaan Banana:

The need of facing this issue in dualistic terms is typically western. . . . If western theologians are unable to see that the spiritual message of the Gospel is contained in the historical temporal realities by which Jesus was surrounded, that is their problem, not ours. The poor of the world know very well what Jesus is saying. That is why they find in him the plenitude they are looking for. They will never accept any longer the disincarnate "spirituality"

of western Christianity, "scornfully superior to all earthly realities."²²

It was the embodiment of this unity in the early Methodist class meeting, Thomas suggested, which provided the affinity for its ready adoption in Zimbabwe, both in its original form, and through the women's societies known as *Manyanos* in South Africa, and *Ruwadzanos* or *Rukwadzanos* in Zimbabwe—"the fellowship." These groups now cut through traditional tribal patterns, and provide sociability, status, security, and approval, especially for migrant peoples. Their rules of practical piety, the role of their leaders, and their impact on society as a whole, are highly evocative of the eighteenth-century model. During the liberation struggles in Zimbabwe, for example, they formed an important link for churches wherever worship services had been banned or suspended due to the conflict, adopting as their symbol of unity the ritual of foot washing.

There were two responses to the paper which served to focus the work of the group in the closing days of the Institute. The first was to note the role of women in these African *ecclesiolae*. Evangelism, with very few exceptions, has been projected in the contemporary church as a predominantly male-oriented ministry, with strategies and concepts couched for the most part in language of initiative and even aggression. This was questioned by the two women in the group and brought to the fore in a short but pointed presentation by Lois Miller. If indeed the Spirit of God is the power of the evangel, should there not be a passive as well as an active mode of evangelism? Should there not be a more rigorous evaluation of evangelistic outreach, in which the gracious initiatives of the Holy Spirit are sought rather than assumed? Without discounting the urgency of taking the gospel to the world, should there not be a waiting for God as well as a seeking of lost souls? The caring, receiving, and mothering of the *Ruwadzanos* seemed to have as powerful an evangelistic outreach as any other model considered by the group, and it could well be that the next major contribution to the field of evangelism will be from women, providing not only a nurturing complement to the cutting edge of

the message, but a complementary form of outreach and ingathering with its own evangelistic integrity.

The second response was a growing awareness of the significance for evangelism of the whole phenomenon of the *ecclesiolae*, rightly given a major emphasis in Alan Walker's plenary report. They were the subject of three working papers, each of which drew distinctive inferences from the early Wesleyan model of class meetings. The first, by George Hunter, was an innovative and detailed survey of early Methodist polity, correlated with contemporary strategies of church growth. Wesley's methods and models of evangelism, suggested Hunter, were selected on the basis of pragmatic discoveries, which were tested and verified according to three principles: (1) The choice of method is primarily pragmatic, but is guided by the Christian ethic; (2) If a method ought to work, but doesn't, reject it—even if you like it; (3) If a method is effective, use it to the maximum—even if you don't like it. Accordingly, Wesley adopted two principal strategies: an intentional and even disproportionate move towards receptive areas and peoples, and the multiplication of "cells" as a means of recruiting people through "ports of entry."

In discussion of the paper, it was questioned whether pragmatism, albeit ethically guided, is an appropriate principle for evangelistic outreach. Things can succeed for the wrong reason, and even though the *ecclesiolae* are once again to be found in the church worldwide, the fact of the matter is that they died out in American and British Methodism during the nineteenth century, when the denomination in its various branches experienced its most substantial growth. Yet Hunter's question was wholly apposite to the method of the group's deliberations: What *in practice* is being done in evangelism today, and how should we reflect on it? His argument was convincing—that Wesley acted as he reflected, and so must we. Most assuredly this is preferable to constant deliberation about what ought to be done in evangelism, with implementation a wholly optional exercise. More than once the metaphor was used of the ship at sea. Course corrections are possible if the vessel is under

way. If it is becalmed, the matter of direction is always subject to hypothesis.

Stein Skjorshammer presented a working model of the class meeting in the United Methodist Church of Norway, a project funded directly by their Board of Global Ministries and implemented by First UMC, Bergen. The purpose is directly evangelistic, since only 14 percent of the Norwegian people consider themselves intentionally Christian and a mere 8 percent attend church. The plan has been to find leaders who after training will recruit from local neighborhoods for membership in house churches, and to date, more than forty persons have joined such groupings. The challenge of the work is proving a stimulation for further outreach, though the problems that emerge for church renewal in a neopagan society point chasteningly to the importance of always keeping the church in the larger view of God's eschatological horizon.

Howard Snyder brought some final reflections on *ecclesiolae* structures by drawing attention to their social function, both for their members and for society at large.²³ Their evangelistic dynamic, he suggested, was five-fold: the stabilizing of new converts; instruction and discipline; the imparting of a sense of mission; their openness and accessibility to the poor; and their vitality over a long period of time. In society at large, they provided the poor with an identity and a training in leadership for social change, affirming personal dignity, and often providing the education necessary to play such a role. If the contemporary church will look to the poor today, it will find that this is where God is still at work. It is not that the *ecclesiolae* provide the possibility of new structures for the church as *ecclesia*. They offer rather a whole new way of understanding its life and work in the world. And the touchstone for this is the faith of the poor. They are the ones who receive the gospel most readily, who respond most faithfully in committed discipleship, and to whom above all others belongs the new age.²⁴ Among them, therefore, is to be found the surest sign of that which is to come—the little church.

The authoritative word on this came from two members of the group whose direct participation was impeded by

differences of language, but who, in the closing sessions, bore witness to *ecclesiolae* in their own countries. Rosangela Soares de Oliveira from Brazil shared her experience of the *comunidades de base*, and Harry Windisch from the German Democratic Republic described the development of house churches in areas where there are no church buildings or established parishes. The pattern was similar to the other forms of *ecclesiolae* studied by the group, but in these two instances the witness was poignant and powerful: a grass-roots working of the Holy Spirit with the presence and the promise of the new age. In this outworking of the evangel, the Methodist theological tradition was found to be alive and well—a sign that the church in our day is being called to discipleship, perhaps as never before, with the commission to announce the coming on earth as in heaven of that for which the followers of Messiah Jesus have prayed ever since he taught them the words.

Notes

1. See above, p. 138. The assignments for the evangelism group, as with all of the working groups at the Institute, were three-fold: a plenary thematic statement, presented by the co-convenor of the group; a plenary report, based on the deliberations of the group; and a series of working papers, which provided the subject matter for group discussions. The plenary statement by S. Wesley Ariarajah and the plenary report drafted and delivered by Alan Walker comprise the two preceding papers. Working papers were presented as follows: Plutarco Bonilla A., "The Content of the Gospel as found in Wesley's Sermons, viewed from a Latin American Perspective"; Robert G. Tuttle, Jr., "Prevenient Grace: The Divine Initiative in the Drama of Rescue"; David Lowes Watson, "Christ Our Righteousness: Grace and Accountability in Wesley's Message"; Ronald King Crandall, "The Centrality of Christian Experience in the Methodist Heritage"; Zablon John Nthamburi, "Crisis in Mission: Contextualization and Enculturation of the Gospel"; Norman E. Thomas, "Personal Piety and Social Witness: A Case Study in Zimbabwe"; Kenneth H. Thompson, "Wesley's Mission in Ireland"; George G. Hunter III, "Wesley's Strategies for Christian Expansion"; Stein Skjorshammer, "The Wesleyan Class System in Parish Development Today"; Howard A. Snyder, "The Evangelistic Relevance of *Ecclesiola* Structures in Early Methodism and Moravianism"; and Alan Walker, "Wesleyan Evangelism Today."

2. See, for example, "The Principles of a Methodist" (1740), in *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols. (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Book-Room, 1872; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 8:359-74. This short polemical essay has all of the essential components of Wesley's mature work of the 1760s and 1770s.

3. John Wesley, *The Standard Sermons*, ed. Edward H. Sugden, 2 vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1921), 2:76-7. Cf. *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences, from The First Held in London by the Late Reverend John Wesley, A.M., in the Year 1744*. Volume 1 (London: Conference Office, 1812), p. 20.
4. *Minutes*, p. 10; Wesley, *Works*, 8:300.
5. *The Letters of the Reverend John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. John Telford. Standard ed., 8 vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 4:194.
6. There is no better exposition of the scriptural texts in this regard than the third chapter, "The Evangel," in Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 48-77.
7. Bonilla emphasized this point with regard to Wesley in particular: "It is necessary to make a re-elaboration of Wesley's thinking about sanctification and its historical implications. But this re-elaboration should take as its starting-point not mainly Wesley's sermons and theological writings, but his pastoral and caring ministry, his actions as an actual missionary to the poor and disinherited of his times. This is to say that we should read Wesley 'backwards' from his praxis."
8. Tuttle's paper was notable for some striking metaphors: "People want faith. They want to belong to something that is important, even costly! Believe it or not, they want to become disciples. God's preventive grace is at work everywhere and in everyone. Let's get our shirts off and start flagging down traffic because the bridges are out all over the world."
9. A theme well explored in Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky, ed., *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1981). Cf. Richard W. Rousseau, ed., *Interreligious Dialogue* (Scranton, Pa.: Ridge Row Press, 1981).
10. See, for example, Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky, ed., *Mission Trends No. 5: Faith Meets Faith* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans; New York: Paulist Press, 1981).
11. Wesley, *Works*, 8:362.
12. So K. E. Skydsgaard, "The Flaming Center, or The Core of Tradition," in *Our Common History as Christians: Essays in Honor of Albert C. Outler*, ed. John Deschner, Leroy T. Howe, and Klaus Penzel (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 3-22. Cf. Carl E. Braaten, *The Flaming Center: A Theology of the Christian Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).
13. For an informative account and stimulating discussion of the "moratorium" proposal, see P. A. Kalilombe, "Self-Reliance of the African Church: A Catholic Perspective," in *African Theology En Route*, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), pp. 36-58.
14. The graduate research of one of the group members, Leslie Shyllon of Sierra Leone, has revealed a number of instances where indigent African churches have not been permitted to fulfil their potential for precisely this reason.
15. In addition to providing a rich dialectic for discussion, it can be noted that the two papers afford the necessary tension of praxis—the reflection of Ariarajah's thoughtful argument and the direct evangelism of Walker's statement. The one explores several facets of the theme in depth; the other takes a wealth of data and hones it into a forthright challenge.
16. So Orlando E. Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1982).
17. Acts 15:1-35; Galatians 2:1-21.

18. Costas, *Outside the Gate*, pp. 174ff.
19. Thompson gave a simple example to illustrate his point: "Recently a group of Protestant churchmen, convinced that what Northern Ireland needs is spiritual revival, have been pressing the American evangelist, Dr. Billy Graham, to conduct a campaign in the province. Dr. Graham, who has become more ecumenical in recent years, has stated that one of his conditions for coming would be that both Catholic and Protestant churches should work together in preparation. It has been found impossible to agree to this, either out of conviction or for fear of the kind of backlash from the reactionary sections of the churches noted above; so there the matter rests."
20. A good discussion of these semantic and conceptual factors remains the fourth volume of the Geneva Documents, *Man in Community*, ed. Egbert de Vries (New York: Association Press, 1966). See especially pp. 293-382.
21. Whereby ideas, including religious ideas, enter into the processes of social action and change by gaining affinity with the interests of certain social groups. See *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 62-63.
22. *Your Kingdom Come: Mission Perspectives*. Report on the World Conference on Mission and Evangelism, Melbourne, Australia, May 12-25, 1980 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1980), pp. 109-10.
23. Snyder's argument is given full treatment in his book, *The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church Renewal* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1980), which received many appreciative comments during the Institute.
24. See Elsa Tamez, *Bible of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1982), p. 74.