

# **‘To Serve the Present Age’**

## *Pre-Institute Report of the 12<sup>th</sup> Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies*

### **Introduction**

*[Richard Rodgers, India, Convener of Pre-Institute]*

The Pre-Institute of the 12<sup>th</sup> Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies met at Christ Church, Oxford, August 9-12, 2007, to explore the theme – ‘To Serve the Present Age, Our Calling to Fulfill’ – in terms of the particular social, political, economic, and religious contexts that affect and shape our understandings of Ecclesiology, Mission, and Vocation. There were 36 participants: four from *Africa* (Congo, Zimbabwe, Ghana); five from *Asia* (India, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines); three from the *Caribbean*; sixteen from *Latin America* (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Uruguay); two from the *Pacific* (Samoa, Tonga); and six officers and staff. There were four major languages for which translation was available and at least seven other state/regional languages represented in the group. The participants were from a variety of political backgrounds – states governed by the dynastic rule of a royal house (chieftain), states with democratically elected governments, semi-dictatorships, dictatorships and military rulers. The African, Asian and Latin American/Caribbean countries shared a common experience of having been colonies of one of the major European powers of the last 500 years and who have gained their independence through struggle and bloodshed at various times during the last 200 years. The cultural, social and economic backgrounds of the countries represented were equally diverse but with the common colonial experience of having traditional cultural/social patterns disrupted and economic/ecological systems exploited. It is in the context of this diversity and shared experience that the participants of the Pre-Institute met to rejoice in the saving act of God’s grace, growing together through the sharing of many gifts in worship, celebrating our Wesleyan heritage, and affirming our contributions of scholarship and personal experience to the continuing work of God’s Spirit through the people called Methodists.

The Pre-Institute provides a forum for Methodist scholars from countries where there are few, or even no, opportunities for an exchange of scholarship because of language, travel restrictions, financial limitations and vastly different contexts. This has tended to keep scholarship from these parts of the world both isolated and insulated. The Pre-Institute, which has met at each of the Oxford Institutes since 1992, helps scholars from these countries to reflect together on the interaction between their contexts and the tasks of theology in the service of the Church under the theme of the Institute. It provides a place for affirming scholarship and experience within a group that empowers these voices to be heard beyond the limitations of their contexts. As such, the Pre-Institute has become an integral part of, and makes a significant contribution to, the overall work and message of the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies.

We present this report of our work through statements of critical lament, affirmation and hope, through the music of our peoples in worship, through the symbols of life in our cultures, and above all, with great warmth and love that we hope will admonish, encourage and challenge us to discover and affirm what it means to be disciples of Jesus Christ in our day and age.

**Jesus tawa pano**

Patrick Matsikenyiri, Zimbabwe

*Jesu tawa pano; Jesu tawa pano; Jesu tawa pano;  
tawa pano mu zita renyu.  
Jesus, we are here; Jesus we are here; Jesus we are here;  
we are here for you.*

## **Presentation of Symbols from Africa**

### **Looking at the Present Age**

*[Wycherley Gumbs, Caribbean]*

The current world is filled with complex and contrasting realities. It is not possible to understand what is happening to us in all areas of life without considering the growing complexity of our mutual dependences and relationships, which we recognize under the name of ‘globalization.’ The marks of our present age include: the processes of scientific development and global communication; the amplification of aims and perspectives; and a growing awareness of how humanity is a part of the wealth and possibilities within the created order. We are opened up to new dimensions of life and encouraged and challenged to new forms of human communication and to a deepening of the Gospel message.

However, while globalization is viewed as a blessing for some, it is a grave threat for the majority of men and women who inhabit this planet, and for the planet itself. Globalization has put neither God, nor the creation, nor even the human creature, but rather money in the center. Financial accumulation is the driving force of the world system that has developed in the present age.

The global machine, along with the political and economic policies that sustain it, has been organized out of the global capitalist financial system. This system dominates the global market, alternative economies, the communication system controlled by transnational corporations, the technologies and scientific research developed and manipulated by corporate interests, and the processes of production shaped by the demands of global elites rather than the necessities of most of the world’s population.

*[Claudio de Oliveira Ribeiro, Brazil]*

This global capitalist machine does not have answers for unemployment and exclusion, for the ecological crises it causes, or for the hunger and plagues it has sowed. It doesn’t admit – or, if it does, it co-opts – alternative technologies and perspectives, incorporating different approaches under only one totalizing ideology. Moreover, when faced with the limits of its impotence, it increasingly responds with forms of totalizing violence and war.

Globalization, which presents itself as the realization of a utopia, is an ‘anti-theology’ that has its own ‘anti-eschatology,’ a hallucination of the fulfillment and closing of history. It preaches its own sinful dreams as a salvation of prosperity, limitless growth, possession, and consumption. Although it proclaims respect for differences, it subsumes all true uniqueness in its voracity for money, subordinating other cultures under its domain and thereby generating a hybrid culture that threatens the dignity and life of most human beings on the planet. In this way, instead of uniting the human community, it brings fracture – fragmenting the human being in his or her relationship with God, with others, and with the whole of creation.

It must be said, however, that we are not without hope. Despite the over-ruling threat of this form of globalization, we celebrate the presence of the Spirit in our lives, we trust in the love of God, we celebrate the power within the good creation, we recognize the varied manifestations of grace in our lives, and we announce the presence of the Reign of God in this present age.

**Ore-Poriaju**

Latin America

*Ore poriaju, vereko, Nandeyara; Ore poriaju vereko, Nandeyara.  
Senior, ten piedad, Senor, ten piedad;  
Jesucristo ten piedad, ten piedad de nosotros.*

## **Presentation of Symbols from Latin America**

### **Discernment Within the Present Age**

*[Mosese Mailo Fuaivaa, Samoa]*

We who are called to witness to the Reign of God are confronted with a tension between the gospel of this present age and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are given a vision of the coming rule of God, and we want to live according to that vision. And yet, because the whole creation has been groaning under the captivity of futility, we cannot but groan and suffer as part of this subjected world. The tensions between this vision which we receive as a gift of God, the signs of divine activity in this present age, and the realities of our world today lead us into a critical discernment of the times.

Job wrestled with these tensions. How are we to understand suffering within our experience of reality? In battling with his friends, Job refused to be bound by the cultural and religious explanations of suffering; rather, it was the hope of justice that sustained him. As such, he could say, "I know that my redeemer lives." Job's experience is a parable of the suffering and demonizing forces at work within the global machine. Yet, as in the story of Job, the last word is not given to the forces of death, de-humanization, and destruction. The last word is not given over to human designs, but comes from God, the author and creator of life, who brings all things to their fulfillment.

In this process of discernment, we have identified four tensions in which we live.

*[read in Spanish by Raquel Martinez, Chile]*

*The 'materialist' tension:* the material world is not devoid of spiritual reality. The 'resurrection of the body' is an affirmation of the material dimensions of salvation. Here, we affirm Wesley's concern for health, for the welfare of the poor, for the education of children and family life, as an integral part of the Gospel. There is a materiality of the spiritual life that we cannot avoid, and a spirituality of the material reality that is to guide our concern for our neighbors and our quest for God's justice in our lives.

*[read in Tongan by Tevita Sinhengalu, Tonga]*

*The 'eschatological' tension:* the creation is under God's judgment, yet it is also embraced by God's grace and love. So we see the present time not only as a time of sorrow, but also a time in which God's mercy enlivens human history. God's judgment

is part of the liberating love that God grants God's creatures, already manifested in Jesus, the Christ. The story of Jesus, as the presence of messianic times in the midst of human reality and as the vocation of the new creation within the old, has to be told and retold as part of our vision and message.

*[read in Philippino by Luther Oconer, Philippines]*

*The tension in human culture:* Cultures can serve as vehicles of proclamation of this message of salvation. Historically, tensions between the local and the global were not balanced by this recognition, as many missionary enterprises were marked by cultural imperialism, which continues in the globalizing tendency of the present age. We affirm that many aspects of the particular traditions, symbols, and wisdom of our local cultures should be drawn upon as we transmit the Gospel and our Methodist heritage in our varied contexts. As Methodists, we must seek to resurrect some of the values lost in our different cultures and use them in interpreting and embodying the Gospel in our day and age.

*[read in Swahili by Sul-A-Nawej, Congo]*

*The tension of 'grace.'* In the midst of a global market economy, there is no place for that which is gracious. And yet, as Christians, we live only in and through the grace of God. How might we extend the core meaning of this grace to such realms as economics, politics, social welfare, health, and education? In Jesus' parables, there is a justice based in retribution, but there is also a justice affirmed in the gratuitous, in life given and received as a gift. Grace can only be meaningful as a 'spiritual' doctrine of salvation if it is also manifest in a material doctrine of salvation. The whole of creation abides within the grace of God, which means that the privatization of creation – creation submitted to futility – is a sinful attempt to privatize the gifts of God.

*[Mosese Mailo Fuaivaa, Samoa]*

Amidst these tensions we pray for discernment, offering ourselves to the Spirit to be guided in all truth. We are called to celebrate the memory of Jesus, his prophetic force and courageous words of judgment and mercy, which makes present God's liberating judgment. In doing so, we are incorporated into the community of saints who, in different cultures struggling for justice and life, are giving accounts of the hope that is in them – hope against hope, hope of the things we do not yet see, but that we announce in the present age.

## **Psalm 42**

trad. Caribbean melody

*The thirsty deer longs for the streams, my thirsty soul longs for our God.*

*I have been weeping aloud all day and all night,  
as I long for the face of God.*

*Why are you cast down, O my soul? Why are you so troubled inside?*

*O put your hope in our God, yes God is our help,  
O sing praises to our living God.*

## **Presentation of Symbols from the Caribbean**

### **To serve the Present Age**

*[Joan del Sol Meade, Caribbean]*

It is not enough to praise God for God's grace, and it is not enough to recognize these various tensions, because the Christian message must be enfolded in the life of the Christian person and community. As such, there is an ethical dimension, the dimension of action, of acts of mercy, which are concrete expressions and means of God's grace in and for the world. We are called to become real witnesses of salvation through the exercise of responsible grace, attending to the concrete situations around us, while at the same time being aware of the global situation and its impact on global cultures.

As Methodists, we are inheritors of a tradition whose founder, John Wesley, in addition to preaching the Gospel, visited those in prison, cared for the sick, helped the poor, taught, and fed those in need. The Wesleys and the first Methodist communities set out not only to talk about eternal life but to offer wholeness to the 'least of these.' As they realized that acts of charity were not enough, they began to envision a mission that would transform the world, a transformation that would not itself usher in the Reign of God, but that would increasingly manifest signs of the new creation within the present age. As we learn from the Wesleys, the life of holiness involves actively sustaining the sanctity of life.

Methodism upholds an ethic of human and ecological dignity, a dignity established in God's act of creation and eternally preserved in the redemptive presence of the Spirit. We will serve the present age as we continue to preach and embody this dignity of the whole of God's creation.

### **Ye Servants of God**

Lim Swee Hong, Singapore

*Ye servants of God, your Master proclaim,  
and publish abroad his wonderful name.*

*The name all victorious of Jesus extol,  
his kingdom is glorious and rules over all.*

*Halle! Halleluyah! Halle! Halle! Halleluyah!*

*The let us adore and give him his right,  
all glory and power, all wisdom and might.  
All honor and blessing with angels above,  
and thanks never ceasing and infinite love.*

## **Presentation of Symbols from Asia-Pacific**

### **Prayers**

*[Ines Simeone and Gustavo Loza]*

### **Lord's Prayer**

### **Benediction**

*El Señor nos bendiga y nos guarde.  
El Señor haga brillar su rostro sobre nosotros  
y de nosotros tenga misericordia. Amén.*

*May God be gracious to us and bless us.  
And make his face shine upon us  
and have mercy on us. Amen.*