

THE OXFORD INSTITUTE OF METHODIST THEOLOGICAL STUDIES 2007 WORKING GROUP: CHRISTIAN FORMATION

FORMATION FOR MISSION – DO WE REAP WHAT WE SOW?

Introduction

I am writing this introduction on Friday 27th July 2007. 108 years ago to the day, the foundation stone for The Great Central Hall, Bermondsey, was laid. The Wesleyan Methodist Church built Bermondsey Central Hall, situated in South East London, at the end of the 19th century, to accommodate the charitable work of the South London Mission and to offer a substantial worship venue to the deprived masses in this part of London.

The original ‘Great Hall’ was demolished in the mid 1960’s, but the front part of the building (comprising, office accommodation, meeting rooms, and a worship area) remains. Currently, the church has a membership of about 270 and is growing, with between 100 and 120 people regularly meeting for worship each Sunday. The congregation is now overwhelmingly of West African origin, and the preferred worship style seems to be primarily conservative and traditional, bearing a marked resemblance to British Methodism of the 1950’s and 60’s. Being a white, middle-aged woman, I am curious about the similarities between this Methodist church and the Methodist church of my childhood in the East End of London. I am interested partly for personal historical reasons; how is it that a black, West African, immigrant, Methodist community should display such similar attitudes, opinions and behaviours as the white, inner city, indigenous, Methodist community in which I grew up? I am primarily interested, however, because I am currently the Director of the South London Mission and the minister for this church, and I want to understand the theological influences that have led to such diverse peoples being so similarly formed as Christians.

Over the last fifty years, in common with many Western mainstream churches, the British Methodist Church has suffered considerable numerical decline and the recent relative growth in the inner city churches is regarded as a sign of potential renaissance. However, the current ethos of the adult congregation at Bermondsey Central Hall: that traditional worship practices should be maintained, that positions of responsibility should be held by older people, that younger people should conform to conventional church norms, (whilst at the same time expressing bewilderment at the reluctance of younger people to attend worship and bemoaning their lack of commitment to the institution), almost exactly parallels the situation that I experienced as I was growing up in the church. My supposition is that the theology that originally underpinned the work of The South London Mission (and other London Methodist Missions) and led to the building of Bermondsey Central Hall, was the same theology that Wesleyan Methodists exported to West Africa at the turn of the last century, and which has subsequently returned. If this is so, then it is reasonable to assume that the influx of Methodists from Africa is unlikely to bring about a long-term reinvigoration of the British Methodist Church. Is British Methodism merely reaping a transitory harvest from seeds sown at the end of the 19th century, or does West African Methodism hold the germ cell of future growth for the Methodist Church in Britain?

In order to consider this question I will describe some of the features that characterised Wesleyan theology and practice at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, with particular reference to John Scott Lidgett, who was one of the early Superintendents

of The South London Mission. Then, having briefly set the development of West African Christianity in context, I will explore some of the issues arising from the information available on the West African Methodist Church in the late Victorian period. I will then move on to consider some contemporary African theological discourse and its possible implications for serving our present age.

The South London Mission at the end of the Victorian era

The Wesleyan Methodist Church of the 1870's and 80's was characterised by strict conservatism, where the challenging of received doctrine was frowned upon and progressive thinking viewed with suspicion. Wesleyans were slow in absorbing the results of intellectual changes in the latter half of the 19th century and, for the most part, Wesleyan theology remained static¹. According to John Scott Lidgett, it was easy to raise suspicions of unorthodoxy on relatively trivial grounds and face severe discipline in Conference². Nevertheless, the loosely termed 'Forward Movement', a pressure group of young ministers led by Hugh Price Hughes, was determined to make the church relate more positively to contemporary thought and society, and was eager to grapple with the social problems of the day. The group's radical programme included the new 'city mission' concept, which sought to bring the Gospel, in both word and deed, to the great mass of impoverished working class people. The need was not only to save people's souls but also to sanctify their circumstances.

It was in this context that the Wesleyan Methodist Church established the South London Mission in 1889, as an attempt to respond to the agonising poverty found in Bermondsey and the surrounding area at that time. To house The Mission, Bermondsey Central Hall was built, and opened in September 1900. A magnificent edifice, it offered a huge auditorium, a number of substantial meeting rooms for teaching and recreational activities, kitchen and dining facilities, office space, and living accommodation for the team of Wesley Deaconesses (Sisters of the People) who would carry out the work under the instruction of the Superintendent Minister and his assistant. The 'work' included, among other things, providing food in the 'Central Hall Dining Rooms', offering practical support and help to destitute people, and organising a wide range of social activities (The Sisterhood, the Men's Fireside, Young People's Pleasant Sunday Afternoon's) that were both religious and respectable. It presented the poor of Bermondsey and Borough - two of the most deprived areas in London - with comfort for the soul, sustenance for the body, and recreation for the mind. In its day, it was a shining example of Christian social action.

The Reverend Doctor John Scott Lidgett had a long association with Bermondsey, and was deeply committed to effecting social change in the area. He became the Mission's Superintendent minister in 1908 and described the focus of SLM's work as follows:

Firstly, the effective proclamation of the Gospels to the great multitudes who are not reached by the ordinary Church Agencies. Secondly, the application of the spirit and principles of the Gospel to the vast problems of

¹ Rupert Davies et al, [A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain](#), vol. 3

² John Scott Lidgett, writing in [The Methodist Recorder](#), 11th June 1936, p7

poverty, ignorance, and suffering, with which we are confronted. This means a far-reaching programme of social work. Thirdly, the supply and training of an adequate body of workers to carry out these great objects³

His was not a typical view. At that time, the overriding responsibility of the church was thought to be preaching the Gospel, and many of his contemporaries believed that evangelical effort alone would solve the appalling social ills of the day.⁴ Lidgett however, was highly critical of the churches, the missions⁵, and their members. He saw proselytising as merely a patronising attempt to remedy social evils through conversion, and charitable help as palliative, not preventative action.

In 1897, Lidgett had published *The Spiritual Principle of the Atonement*, his first and best-known theological work, in which he set out to challenge current orthodoxies and to:

... disencumber Methodist theology from outworn philosophical and legal conceptions so as to liberate the full significance of our doctrines.⁶

The only Methodist to write systematic theology before the 1870's had been Richard Watson, whose *Institutes*⁷ were required reading at theological college and represented the fundamentalism of evangelical theory. Lidgett's declared intention was to inform Wesleyans about the developments in theological ideas on the Atonement over the last fifty years, but he was immediately suspected of heresy and threatened with a doctrinal charge. This reaction epitomised the static nature of Wesleyan theology in that period. In fact, compared to theological trends at the time, Lidgett was already out of date.

Nevertheless, Lidgett continued to hold that the concept of the Fatherhood of God⁸, properly understood, was the key to all theological understanding. He believed that the Incarnation demonstrated that human life in its entirety - spiritual, social, and material - was sacred, and that this was true for each individual, regardless of status, circumstances or personal belief. His position emphasised the notion of shared responsibility for one's fellows. This stance was in marked contrast to the more established Wesleyan view which held that the relationship of God to the justified and regenerate was indeed that of Father, but his relationship to the rest of mankind was that of holy, awful Sovereign, who was obliged to consign the degenerate to an eternity of conscious suffering.⁹ Accordingly, the contemporary movement for Wesleyan Missions favoured individualism and other worldliness over social responsibility, and Lidgett was accused of setting the secular above the spiritual.

The kind of response that Lidgett received demonstrates the extent to which Methodist thinking had stagnated at the end of the Victorian era. The Forward Movement struggled to revitalise the church and introduce a more progressive outlook. The development of the South London Mission indicates that they had some success at making the church organisation more relevant. Both Hugh Price Hughes and Scott Lidgett in turn became

³ John Scott Lidgett, *Annual Report of the South London Wesleyan Mission and Settlement*, 1909, reported in the South London Messenger

⁴ See W.F. Lofthouse in *John Scott Lidgett, A Symposium*, 1957, Rupert Davies (ed), pp51ff

⁵ During the 1880's there were a number of experiments with colleges and public schools establishing missions in deprived inner city areas

⁶ *Methodist Times* 24th January 1935 quoted by Alan Turberfield, *ibid.* p47

⁷ Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes*, 1829. Watson was one of the founders of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society

⁸ John Scott Lidgett, *The Fatherhood of God in Christian Truth and Life*, T&T Clarke, 1902

⁹ See Alan Turberfield, *John Scott Lidgett Archbishop of British Methodism?* (Part 1)

Presidents of the Methodist Conference, but they were the exceptions rather than the rule. The Wesleyan Church continued to be primarily conservative and traditional in its outlook.

The introduction of Christianity into West Africa

The connections between Britain, West Africa, slavery, and Christianity, are far too complicated to explore in any depth here. However, to understand the nature of West African Methodism at the end of the 19th century, it will be helpful to describe briefly some of the historical background.

The first protestant missionaries to Africa were former slaves who had been freed and were then sent to West Africa by European and American mission societies. Originally, men of African ancestry served as chaplains in the European forts along the West African coastline early in the 18th century. Their efforts met with only marginal success, since they were fully identified with the European community -- all of them had European wives, sometimes at the insistence of the mission agency that sent them.

In 1792 however, 1,200 former African American slaves, who had fought on the British side in the War of Independence, travelled from Nova Scotia to Sierra Leone and established Freetown as a Christian city. The British government paid for the expenses of their voyage. While in North America they had become Christians and carried their "boisterous" (Wesleyan Methodist) Christianity with them back to Africa, These 'Settler Christians' defined their new culture in Christian terms, and began to spread its message: this formed the core of West African Christianity.

In 1806, the year before Britain outlawed the slave trade, Sierra Leone became a British Crown Colony and subsequently became the place where individuals rescued from captured slave ships would be landed. Consequently the colony and the faith flourished, as the Gospel message spread through the 'recaptive' population. Many of these converts were Yoruba, originally from coastal Nigeria, who maintained their Yoruba identity in Sierra Leone, while converting to Christianity and becoming westernised. A significant number of them returned to Yorubaland, converted their neighbours, and created a flourishing church and a westernised Yoruba culture. The Church Missionary Society encouraged these Yoruba missionaries and ordained a number of African pastors, the most important of whom was Samuel Ajayi Crowther who, in 1864, became the first black bishop in Africa.

The British Wesleyan Methodist Church began its work 'among the heathen' in 1811 when Thomas Coke successfully established a mission station in Sierra Leone. The Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS) was established in 1813 to co-ordinate the work. In 1821, a second station was opened on the River Gambia and another on the Gold Coast (Ghana) in 1834, when work began among the Mfantse-speaking peoples of the coast, some of whom were already Christians. Between 1838 and 1857 Thomas Birch Freeman, the son of an African father and an English mother, carried Methodism from the

Mfantse coastland to Badagry and Abeokuta in Nigeria, and to Kumasi in the Asante hinterland¹⁰.

Thus by the 1840's, in common with the other mainstream churches, the Wesleyan missionary enterprise in West Africa was well under way. As Adrian Hastings has put it:

What in 1780 existed in the Protestant world as at most the rather idiosyncratic concern of a handful of Moravians was by 1840 almost the very *raison d'être* of all the mainline churches as understood by their more lively and enthusiastic membership.¹¹

These early missionaries shared a number of common characteristics. Most of them were working class, otherworldly in their social and political orientation, and individualistic in their views of salvation and society. They were also quite idiosyncratic in their approach to the work, readily crossing denominational boundaries to further the cause of evangelism and collaborating willingly with fellow missionaries, whatever denomination or nationality they might be. These were the pioneer missionaries, who came for the duration and usually settled permanently in their compounds and mission villages with little thought of returning "home."

By the 1860's, the Sierra Leonean Christian community had grown to such an extent that they requested the help of full-time missionary clergy from England. The Church in Sierra Leone was lively and vibrant under the leadership of the wealthy and powerful Settler Christians. The missionaries sent out to minister to them were frequently their inferiors in knowledge of the Bible and Christian doctrine but they resented the control of the African church. Henry Venn, the Superintendent of the CMS, pursued a policy that sought to establish self-sufficient, self-reliant, autonomous, native churches: the irony was that these attributes already typified the church in Sierra Leone.¹²

The second wave of protestant missionaries coincided with the colonial scramble for Africa that took place between 1880 and 1914. The greatly enhanced transportation networks, which went along with colonization, meant that this new generation of missionaries were far more mobile. They could reach their mission stations quickly, easily and comfortably by train and road. What had been a yearlong trek on foot to reach Uganda in 1880, for example, became a two-day train trip in 1902. Furthermore, most of these missionaries were far more westernised than their predecessors had been, since they went home on furlough far more often. This had a major impact on their practice. For example, while a significant number of 19th century missionaries baptized polygamous converts, very few 20th century ones were willing to accept polygamy in their flock. The evidence suggests that wherever the European missionaries went they opposed, often successfully, many aspects of African custom and religion, which were regarded as heathen or pagan.

¹⁰ F.L. Bartels, *The Roots of Ghana Methodism*, Cambridge University Press, 1965

¹¹ Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa: 1450-1950*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994. p 245

¹² See Hastings, *op. cit.* 1994, Ch 5, 7, 8, & 9

Methodism in West Africa at the beginning of the 20th century

By the start of the 20th century, the WMMS, which had begun in the 19th century with an expectation of its work being passed on fairly rapidly to African churchmen, had become very reluctant to hand over control to native hands. Together with the rest of the ‘foreign mission field’, the Methodist Church in West Africa was unquestionably seen as an extension of (and subordinate to) the British Conference,¹³ and subject to the greater need of the home church. In 1899, for example, there is a complaint that the Sierra Leone Mission has been drained of European workers,

For ten years past the Chairman has been the only English leader supplied to the District.¹⁴

and this, not because Sierra Leone was adequately supplied with native clergy, but because the policy of the church was to invest resources in the home stations. In 1900, following an official visit to West Africa, the Chairman of the WMMS, William H. Findlay, relented and, in the face of Islamic encroachment, suggests that the Missionary Society should send,

... young Missionaries, fresh from England, to win the heathen tribes and Moslem perverts.¹⁵

At that time, The Methodist Church was strong in Freetown, but the remainder of the country was relatively untouched by Christianity and the ground breaking tasks of outreach and evangelism to the main populations in the country, were seen as unsuitable for native ministers.

The reluctance of the home church to permit native African evangelists freedom in their evangelical initiatives caused a growing tension between the two groups, and there was a movement, especially in Nigeria, to break away from white control and establish purely African churches. Some of these churches adopted exactly the same pattern of liturgy, doctrine and ministry as the Wesleyans; some accepted aspects of traditional life, such as polygamy, which were strongly condemned by the missionaries; and others rejected anything associated with paganism or African religious culture, even more forcefully than the missionaries had done¹⁶. It is interesting to observe that, at the beginning of the 20th century, it was the refusal of the church authorities to find room for what it saw as unregulated evangelical preaching, which drove these new groups into ecclesiastical independence – much as it had driven the followers of Wesley out of the Church of England at the beginning of the 19th.

However, the Christian faith (and hence Methodism) did spread across West Africa, not so much because outsiders imposed it, but because Africans vigorously adopted it. In fact, the pace set was so rapid that the WMMS found itself struggling to keep up, and the call in the British Church for personnel to serve overseas was to satisfy demand rather than to create it. It is worth noting that this achievement was not due to the effectiveness of the European missionaries, on the contrary it was really an indirect by-product of colonial expansion combined with African enthusiasm. As Hastings explains,

¹³ The Methodist Church in The Gambia still operates as a District of the British Methodist Conference.

¹⁴ G.G. Findlay and W.W.Holdsworth, The History of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society 1849-1919, Vol IV Epworth Press 1921-1924 p111

¹⁵ Ibid. p114

¹⁶ Often this was in opposition to Islam, which was seen as more accommodating to traditional religious practices.

What was happening in place after place was a spiritual revolution sparked off by native evangelists in conditions created by the unsettlement of colonial rule.¹⁷

At this point, it is important to emphasize how difficult it is to get a view of Methodism in West Africa at the turn of the 19th century from any perspective other than that of the 'home' church. Not surprisingly, most of the information and records kept in Britain reflect the preoccupations of the British Methodist Church at the time, rather than the concerns and interests of those in the developing West African field. The archive of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society is kept in the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies. It includes minutes, correspondence, personal papers and photographs which detail the history of the organisation, its work and employees, as well as the regions and peoples with whom the missionaries interacted. However, the material is written for the British constituency: for example, to report to the British Conference the state of the work of God on the foreign field, to encourage the church to support missionary endeavour across the world¹⁸, or to offer a detailed account of the financial arrangements necessary to support the work.¹⁹ In fact, it appears that part of the reason the Wesleyan Church originally established the WMMS was essentially to regulate missionary receipts and expenditure.

Towards the end of the Victorian era, authority in the Missionary Society resided in The Executive Committee, which supervised the collection and disbursement of funds from subscribing members, and managed the foreign missions in the intervals between the annual Conference. On the foreign mission field, the Conference and Executive Committee exercised control through the District Synod, which, by 1903, had its role limited to the supervision of ministers and Circuits in the District. The Executive Committee established 'Local Committees', consisting of the missionaries of the District and local 'gentlemen', as their agents in the administration of funds. They met annually, received official letters of instruction from 'home', and made appropriate reports.

Information that reflects the perceptions and insight of the missionaries themselves, especially native ministers, is hard to find. For example, the 1900 WMMS Annual Report indicates that ministers serving in the Gold Coast and Sierra Leone Districts during 1899 were almost entirely African, and yet there is no material at all in the archive on native African candidates for the Wesleyan Methodist ministry after 1860. Consequently, it is impossible to discover what principles were used to select people for the ministry, or to ascertain how an individual's character and suitability were assessed. Staff posted by the WMMS, not the native ministers, conducted the correspondence between the mission field and the 'home' church. There is much communication about the 'state of the work' and about personal matters such as health: there are also many anecdotal accounts of trips and visits in and around the circuits, but there is no obviously discernable theological discourse which gives an account of the principles underpinning the work. The notion of reflective practice is as absent as the voice of the African Christian.

¹⁷ Hastings op. cit. p453

¹⁸ See for example Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, The Helpers' Union of the Wesleyan Missionary Society members' manual. (London), Wesleyan Centenary Hall, [1896?]

¹⁹ For example, a paper entitled W.M.M.S. centenary. The needs of the field 1911, is not a missiological but a financial document.

Missionaries and Theology

If there is no easily identifiable evidence of theological discourse occurring in communications from the field, perhaps then it is to be found among those teaching in the colleges, or with those who have withdrawn from the field and are reflecting on their experience. Regrettably, it appears not. The retiring missionary contemporaries of John Scott Lidgett are not writing academic works equivalent to *The Spiritual Principal of the Atonement* or *The Fatherhood of God*. Once again, there is a dearth of available material to enable any meaningful analysis of theological trends or views.

On consideration, this lack of any obvious theological discourse is not necessarily surprising. In his book, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*,²⁰ Andrew Walls explains that, although missionary work has produced some major scholars, theology was not supposed to be their area of expertise. As already stated, the first generation of missionaries were not well educated and the second generation hardly any better qualified. Not until the latter part of the 19th century did recruits begin to come from the universities. Even then, when the other denominations began to take the need for formal theological education of its missionaries seriously, the Wesleyans, with their tradition of ‘on the job’ training for preachers, lagged behind.

One particularly interesting observation that Walls makes from his study is that overall the brighter and better-educated missionaries were not sent to Africa. China and India appear to have received the most capable candidates intellectually. Furthermore, his analysis of statistics from a number of mission agencies suggests that such scholarly missionaries as there were, tended to excel in subjects such as languages (notably Chinese), medicine, anthropology, and comparative religion, but not theology *per se*. Of the small number that did write in Biblical studies, dogmatics or the philosophy of religion, hardly any drew, in any significant sense, on their missionary experience.

Given the context in which these people worked, perhaps this is understandable. The pressing task for most missionaries was evangelism; their primary concern was communicating the Gospel message in a foreign land. They understood theology as information and knowledge that had to be passed on entire, it was not something to be questioned or subjected to investigation. It was a given. As Walls puts it:

Theology was a *datum* to be explained and demonstrated in the new cultural setting, not something which would develop in it.²¹

Consequently, little theological reflection took place either on the mission field, or on return from it. Eventually the Continental missionaries, who seemed to take the business of education for mission work much more seriously, reflected on that work and produced a completely new branch of theological scholarship, missiology. Their British counterparts did generate some equivalent thinking, but it was never integrated into theological study²².

²⁰ Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 1996, T&T Clark

²¹ Walls, *ibid.* p197

²² Walls suggests J.G.N. Farquar’s view of Christianity as ‘The Crown of Hinduism’ had profound theological implications, but Farquar pursued them from the Hindu rather than the Christian side.

The missionaries replicate the lack of theological analysis of their ‘stay at home’ counterparts. Apart from Lidgett (who we have already established was an exception), none of the late Victorian ministers who served at the South London Mission wrote accounts to explain the theological thinking behind their practice. Like those in the foreign mission field, the relationship of God to all this activity is taken as understood. For example, John Hopkin wrote the following for the London Wesleyan Methodist Mission Report in 1901.

The (Great Central) Hall is capable of seating over 2,000 people, and from the first, it has been mainly filled by people not accustomed to attend ordinary churches and chapels. The most sanguine of us did not anticipate such a swift success. My colleague, who originated this great scheme [has] gathered one of the largest working class and poor congregations in Methodism. [...] but with the crowds we have had conversions. In all the skilful organising of the work the salvation of the people is ever the chief object in view.²³

The report then goes on to describe the many activities of the Mission, most of which are designed either to offer healthier alternatives to the conditions in which people lived or to alleviate social need, and to state the numbers in membership. The style of the report is upbeat and encouraging, but at no point is there any sense of a need to provide a theological rationale for all this activity, or to explain specifically what it is that has led to this upsurge in renewal.

In 1910, at the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference, the Reformed churches of Europe and America and their Missionary Societies met to consider the reports of a number of international commissions.²⁴ Commission V dealt with the preparation and training of missionaries and, among other things, considered what were appropriate subjects for formal study. The Bible, natural science, philosophy, and elementary medicine and hygiene were all considered important. It was argued that philosophy was more valuable to a missionary than theology, as it reduced the tendency of missionaries toward dogmatism.²⁵ Theology was an occupation for theologians and not considered much use at the front line. Thus, we have a situation both at home and abroad, where missionary endeavour does not appear to feel any need to justify itself theologically.

Contemporary African Theology

For the reasons outlined above, it can be seen that the (West) African Church was seriously disadvantaged in its attempts to develop a theological voice of its own. Not only did Western Missionaries fail to address the unique theological concerns of their situation, but also it appears they ignored any attempts by the indigenous population to embark on such explorations for themselves. Consequently, one of the features of early theological endeavour in Africa was the ‘deconstruction’ of Western theology, which led to discussions on the nature, problems and methods of theology itself. Valetin Dedji²⁶ suggests that the development of African theology can be separated into four main stages.

²³ The London Wesleyan Methodist Mission Report March 31st 1900 to March 31st 1901. SLM Archive. Bermondsey Central Hall

²⁴ Interestingly Lidgett was a Wesleyan representative to the conference

²⁵ World Missionary Conference, Commission V, p111f, quoted by Walls op.cit., p 209

²⁶ Dedji, Valentin, Reconstruction and Renewal in African Theology, Acton Publishers, 2003, p2-3

Firstly he identifies, the *introductory stirrings*, which involved the beginnings of discussion about the need for and possibility of an African theology; secondly, the *theology of adaptation*, which attempted to Africanise Christianity by adopting African elements into Christian theology; thirdly, the *theology of incarnation*, which had either a cultural emphasis (inculturation) or a political one (liberation); and fourthly, the *theology of reconstruction*, which attempts to find creative, inclusive ways in which Africans can become subjects rather than objects of their lives.

It is to the theology of reconstruction that we now turn.

In 1991 the AACC convened a symposium in Mombasa, Kenya on the 'Problems and Promises of the Church in Africa in the 1990's and Beyond.' J.N.K. Mugambi delivered a paper in which he considered the theological imagery that would be suitable for Africa after the political liberation of most African countries had been attained. Mugambi suggested that the African Church needed,

... to shift paradigms from the Post-Exodus to Post-Exilic imagery, with reconstruction as the resultant theological axiom.²⁷

Thus, the crucial notions in African Christian theology for the twenty-first century should be reconstruction and social transformation.

According to Dedji, the launching of the *Theology of Reconstruction* at the Mombasa Symposium was a landmark event in theological discourse in Africa. Up until this point the church, although vocal on issues of liberation, had been comparatively quiet on the need for social transformation and reconstruction. Furthermore, as Dedji explains,

Reconstruction was now applied not only to African countries and cultures ravished by colonisation, but also to churches embedded in 'inappropriate' socio-ecclesial structures and 'inadequate' theological thinking. 'Reconstruction' was therefore seen as a necessity for all African societies and churches.²⁸

Another participant at the 1991 Symposium was the francophone theologian Kä Mana, who agreed that there was a vital need for African theologians to rise above their long-standing concerns about 'African identity' and 'liberation'. However unlike Mugambi, who saw the reconstruction paradigm as replacing the old concerns and thus overcoming the past, Kä Mana understood it as a larger idea with the capacity to incorporate the earlier notions (of liberation and identity). According to Kä Mana, there is:

...a deep antagonism that exists between the cultural spiritual values of Africa, and the materialist and mercantile spirit that the West brought to Africa. [...] Such an antagonism is the main reason for the African crisis: a lack of an adequate articulation between African identity and Western modernity.²⁹

It was this antagonism that led to the failure of the theologies of identity and liberation to achieve their goals. The theology of reconstruction however, offers a means to escape the prevailing, comprehensive crisis in Africa and reconstruct African societies on new foundations.

²⁷ Mugambi, *The Future of the Church and the Church of the Future*, in *The Church of Africa: Towards a Theology of Reconstruction*, AACC, Nairobi 1991; quoted by Dedji p37

²⁸ Dedji, *op.cit.* p38

²⁹ quoted by Dedji *op.cit.* pp110-111

It is not possible to do justice to Kā Mana's complex and sophisticated theological arguments here. However, some of his insights have been very helpful in clarifying issues that are encountered on a daily basis by the African members of Bermondsey Central Hall. For example, the suggestion of an inherent antagonism between African and Western cultural values, illuminates the experience that many members at Central Hall attempt to articulate. African people speak of a demanding attitude toward work that they find incomprehensible, and a disregard for the respect of elders that they find insulting. If Kā Mana is correct then such discontinuity with the British way of life is to be expected.

The use of Scripture

The Bible has a widespread influence among Africans, but in Africa, popular approaches to Scripture, both inside and outside the Bible colleges, have fossilized in biblical literalism. Mugambi recognises the dangers of using Scripture in an alien cultural setting and argues that many biblical texts can be very misleading if they are taken as directions. However, there are many African Christians who insist on using the Bible more as an instruction manual, than a book requiring interpretation and understanding. Mugambi characterises such attitudes to Scripture as 'enslaving' and comments that most African Christians have been raised on a literalist approach to the Bible, encouraged by imported devotional and liturgical material. Mugambi argues that church leaders and theologians must adopt a critical and contextual approach to the Scripture, so that the implications of the Gospel can be worked out in the realities of African life.

It is certainly the case that some members at Bermondsey Central Hall find a less than literal interpretation of the Bible difficult to accept, and there have been challenges in training African local preachers to adopt a more imaginative approach to reading Scripture. However, if Mugambi's thinking is correct, then such attitudes are products of poor Biblical study rather than cultural mindsets, and can be challenged.

The African sense of community

It is almost impossible to overstate the importance of community for African people. A young South African theological student once pointed out to me that in the West we have the expression, 'I think, therefore I am,' whereas in Africa it is 'I belong, therefore I am.' The Ghanaian, John Pobee, takes it a stage further, noting the importance of community for African identity in the maxim: 'I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am.'³⁰ Dedji argues that this is a fundamental African concept, expressed in the term *ubuntu*: 'a person is persons'.³¹

At Bermondsey Central Hall, this facet of African culture is most evident when members of the community meet in National Fellowship Groups. Part of the purpose of church attendance is to maintain and develop those community links and relationships: to be Ghanaian or Nigerian, or Sierra Leonean. For an expatriate community, the fostering of cultural heritage is of supreme importance, but at times this can create tension within the overall church community.

³⁰ John Pobee, Toward an African Theology, Abingdon Press, 1979

³¹ Dedji, op.cit. p6

What does all this say about a missiology to serve the present age?

Dedji suggests that the launching of the *Theology of Reconstruction* at the Mombasa Symposium in 1991 was a turning point in African theological discourse, because the breadth of its thinking allowed it to be incorporate African churches embedded in inappropriate socio-ecclesial structures and inadequate theological thinking. The Methodist Church in Britain (similar to other denominations) is struggling to change inappropriate socio-ecclesial structures and to develop a theology that better meets the missiological demands of contemporary British culture. Perhaps there are things to be learnt from engaging in the conversation with our African sisters and brothers, not least those who strive to live with Christian integrity in, and make sense of, bewildering and contradictory cultures. Many of the congregants at Bermondsey Central Hall left Africa twenty or more years ago, and no longer recognise the African church they attend when they visit 'back home.' Nevertheless, some of them and some their children, born and raised in this country, have developed high levels of sophisticated understanding, which enable them to hold in creative tension an appreciation of their African Christian roots and their British Christian experience, and to understand them both as authentic. The need to balance a cherished heritage with a contemporary faith does not come as anything unusual for this group. The question is how willing is British Methodism to learn these lessons?

According to Kä Mana part of the purpose of the theology of reconstruction is to understand the Church's mission as a permanent process of reconstructing human communities from chaos to abundant life. On this view, one of the most significant implications of Christ's incarnation is the establishment of a new and all-inclusive human race that transcends ethnicity. If we are to develop a new and relevant Christianity for a multi-cultural, global twenty-first century, one that both convinces and convicts, then surely the seeds of encouragement are to be found here, and in the churches of the other major world cities. The task seems to be threefold: to build on an impressive heritage, to develop high levels of mutual understanding and respect, to celebrate together the love of God through Christ, which transcends and transforms us.

Conclusion

The congregation at Bermondsey Central Hall has inherited a theological disposition characterised by a European missionary need to pass on the Gospel message entire, without examination or question. This has led to the development of a somewhat traditional, unquestioning attitude toward Christianity. As a group of West African Christians, seeking to live out their faith in twenty-first century London, contemporary British culture can appear bewildering and very challenging to a more conservative worldview. Developing an effective approach to mission in this situation is enhanced by an understanding of why supporting the status quo is so prevalent, and how contemporary African theology is developing. The theology of reconstruction is a helpful paradigm in seeking to find models and metaphors to meet the need of an expatriate community struggling to construct new lives and meanings in an alien land.

For a white, Western woman, the perceptions of Jesse Mugambi and Kä Mana into the theologies of adaptation, inculturation, liberation, and reconstruction, and their

application in modern Africa, provide useful insights into mindsets of the congregation. They also offer encouragement to tackle such issues as the literal view of Scripture, inter-community conflict, and cultural antagonism. However, the theology of reconstruction is a paradigm not just for Africans in Africa, or even for Africans in Britain. It may, in fact begin to provide the basis for new theological insights that can inform the re-formation of Methodists and Methodism in Britain, as part of a truly world church.

The Rev'd Sheryl Anderson
July 2007

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