

# Mission today and the uninvited guest

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*Mission today must be seen in the context of the relationship between church and society and include the church's response to global and local crises that impact the lives of people worldwide. Mission must be viewed against the background of an ideology which argues that the global market will save the world through unlimited growth. This is a pernicious myth that threatens not only social but spiritual life, and not only humanity but also the whole of creation.*

There is a distinction between communication as a “tool”, as a means of conveying information and a means of pursuing change, and communication as an essence of being, as a way of changing the world. The phrase, “Be the change you wish to see in the world,” is attributed by some to Mahatma Gandhi. I would like to formulate a different version and say, “Be the communication you wish to see in the world.” What do I mean?

If the medium is the message, as the Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan argued, then as a person I am my own message. Whatever values I hold, I convey them through word, gesture, and deed. My communication has a purpose: it reflects the world I would like to live in. If I am not personally engaged in creating that world, using communication as a mere tool will not bring it about. To illustrate this idea, I shall pursue the theme of hospitality and its opposite, inhospitality, that pervade the world's cultures.

## From Ancient Greece to present-day Afghanistan

To the ancient Greeks, hospitality was a right. Hosts were expected to meet the needs of their

guests. *Xenia* is the ancient Greek concept of hospitality, the generosity and courtesy shown to those who are far from home. The rituals of hospitality created a reciprocal relationship between guest and host expressed in material benefits (such as the giving of gifts) as well as non-material ones (such as shelter and protection). In Greek society, a person's ability to abide by the laws of hospitality indicated nobility and social standing.

Consequently, in Homer's *Iliad*, when King Priam slips by night into the tent of his enemy Achilles to beg for the return of his dead son's body, Achilles offers him food, drink and rest before assuring his safe passage back to the city of Troy. And in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is given hospitality wherever he lands during his long voyage and, on returning to Ithaca, punishes the abuse of hospitality in his own home.

In medieval literature, the concept of knightly chivalry – which is not so far removed from hospitality – can be found in songs and ballads as well as tales such as the 8th century *Chanson de Rolland* and the 15th century *Le Morte d'Arthur* by Thomas Mallory. Given this context, it is no surprise that William Shakespeare often treats both the social and political dimensions of hospitality. In *Macbeth*, the inhospitable murder of King Duncan, a guest in Macbeth's castle, corrupts every relationship and leads to tragedy. And in *King Lear*, the “foolish fond old” king is forced to become a homeless beggar dependent on the charity of his merciless daughters.

In India, hospitality is based on the principle of *atithi satkara*, a Sanskrit expression meaning “doing something good for a guest”. This notion is reflected in several stories in which a guest is revealed to be a god who rewards the provider of hospitality. Today it has become a social awareness campaign aimed at providing tourists with a greater sense of being made welcome to the country!

In Afghanistan, Pashtunwali is an ancient code of ethics that includes offering hospitality and profound respect to all visitors regardless of race, religion, nationality or economic status. It is reciprocal, which goes some way towards explaining Afghani bewilderment and outrage when

American soldiers violated their homes during the recent war in that country.

### **Recognizing “otherness”**

In current political and social debate, hospitality is a “hot potato” because it invokes the question of human rights: the rights of migrant workers and those of local residents; benefits and entitlements; duties and responsibilities. This raises controversial and ambivalent notions such as identity, homeland, security, and surveillance. Public debate around these issues often reflects real or imagined fears exacerbated by political and social realities such as the so-called war on terror, food security, climate change, economic migration, and disputes over land ownership and resources. At their heart lie fear, racism, and a refusal to recognize what has come to be termed “otherness” or alterity.

Alterity refers to the process by which people are treated as “other” or alien by being understood or represented as different from the dominant view, due to race, class, gender, religion, ethnicity or other defining traits. Apartheid in South Africa, Aboriginal Australians, the Tutsi in Rwanda, and the Roma people of Eastern Europe are just a few who have suffered in this way.

And we cannot speak of alterity without referring to the long history of political and social domination that accompanies empire-building – both in its colonial sense and in its modern counterpart: globalization. Nor can we ignore the long history of mission and evangelization that often went hand in hand with the colonial enterprise and, today, with the expansion of the ideology of neoliberalism and so-called prosperity theology.

The politically, socially, and culturally constructed notion of the “uninvited guest”, the asylum seeker, the migrant, the “other” challenges our willingness to see differently, to hear differently, to read differently the images foisted on us by global mass media. The word itself is the language of empire and it seems to deny the right of an “other” to be treated equally, to be accorded full human dignity.

And this “otherness” begs the question of

the human right that demands that people accept the reality of human differences, that they show hospitality to others. I shall return to this concept later, but for now I shall quote Professor Cees Hamelink, one of the pioneers of communication rights:

“A right to communicate proposes that societies learn to live with the ‘permanent provocation’ of living with ‘others’ that exist in widely differing universes. Mature societies are ‘agonistic’ arrangements, which means that people are forever in dispute about the quality, the purpose, and the direction of their co-existence. Only the full acceptance of this reality creates the social environment in which a right to communicate is a sensible proposition.”<sup>1</sup>

As we consider mission in an age of new empires, I shall offer some reflections from a communications perspective. But first, the Bible.

### **A biblical view**

There are numerous references in the Bible to the treatment of the “stranger”. Judaism has always extolled the principle of *hachnasat orchim*, or “welcoming guests”, based largely on the example of Abraham and Sarah in the Book of Genesis. Hosts provide nourishment, comfort, and entertainment for their guests. At the end of the visit, hosts customarily escort their guests out of their home, wishing them a safe journey. One of the best known biblical exhortations is, “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Hebrews, 13:2).

Others include Exodus 22:20-23, “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan.” Exodus 23:9: “You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.” Deuteronomy 10:19: “So you are to love the sojourner, for sojourners were you in the land of Egypt.”

There is also clear evidence of hospitality in the New Testament, where the Greek word used





*Abraham entertains unknown guests (Genesis 18: 1-16) in this painting by Chagall.*

is *philoxenia*, which literally means “love for strangers”. In this sense, the story of the Good Samaritan can be read as hospitality:

“There was a man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho and was waylaid by robbers, who stripped him and beat him and made off, leaving him half dead. Now a priest happened to be taking that road, and seeing him there gave him a wide berth. It was the same with a Levite who came to the place, and seeing him gave him a wide berth. But a travelling Samaritan came upon him, and moved to pity at seeing him, approached him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then laying him across his own beast he conveyed him to a hostelry and took care of him. When departing on the morrow he gave two dinars to the host with the injunction, ‘Take care of him well, and I will reimburse you for any additional expense on my return journey.’ Which of these three, do you think, acted as neighbour to the man waylaid by robbers?” (Luke’s Version of the Good News

of Jesus Christ, 10: 25-29. *The Original New Testament*, 1985: 159-60).

Much can be (and has been) said about this parable of Jesus. To begin with the man waylaid by robbers is anonymous. We do not know his name, or his appearance, or his class. He has no clothes that might help identify him and he is “half dead”, presumably unconscious. The man cannot speak: he is voiceless. He is a stranger both to the Samaritan and to us.

The parable deals with a first-hand experience that was common then and is still experienced today. Who has not seen someone lying in the street, possibly in need of help? The priest actually sees the man lying by the side of the road and crosses over to avoid him. He does not attempt to ascertain if he is alive or if he is a Jew or not. The priest risks ritual defilement if he approaches closer than four cubits since restoring ritual purity was time consuming and costly. He chooses, therefore, to ignore the victim of violence. The Levite also chooses to pass by on the other side of the road. Levites assisted priests in the temple and who knows but that this Levite was hurrying to



catch up with the priest? Perhaps he saw the priest avoid the man and thought, “If the priest can do that, so can I.”

The person who stops and displays genuine concern and a sense of hospitality is the outsider, a descendant of that mixed race of the Jews of captivity and the Samaritan people of the land in which they were once captive. At the time, the relationship between Jews and Samaritans was one of hostility because of past conflict. Yet, the Samaritan, who is clearly well off, is “moved to pity” and takes it upon himself to assist the man. He pours oil and wine on his wounds – an act customarily done by the priest before the high altar in the temple. The Samaritan takes him to a place where he will be cared for and pays all the expenses. He is going to return that way a few days later, so he tells the man running the hostelry not to spare any expense. The Samaritan does not know whom he has helped; nor does he have any expectation of being rewarded.

And in Luke 24:13-35 we learn more about hospitality. Cleopas and another disciple are walking to the village of Emmaus after Jesus’ crucifixion. A “stranger” joins them on their journey, who is the resurrected Jesus unrecognized. As the disciples reach their home in Emmaus, the stranger makes to continue onward, but the disciples insist that he accept their hospitality. Once inside, the hosts prepare a meal for the traveller, and when he breaks the bread, the disciples recognize Jesus.

In these two examples we see that genuine hospitality has no limits. As the French philosopher Jacques Derrida argues, true hospitality poses no conditions, seeks no reward, and distinguishes itself dramatically from codified law and the concept of justice. It is not contingent upon situation, event, history, or consequence; neither does it seek to establish a logic. It is merely a gift, in the purest sense.<sup>2</sup>

### **Mission today**

In September 2012 The Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) of the World Council of Churches (WCC) published a document called *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*. It noted that:

“Mission has been understood as a movement taking place from the centre to the periphery, and from the privileged to the marginalized of society. Now people at the margins are claiming their key role as agents of mission and affirming mission as transformation. This reversal of roles in the envisioning of mission has strong biblical foundations because God chose the poor, the foolish, and the powerless (1 Cor. 1:18-31) to further God’s mission of justice and peace so that life may flourish. *If there is a shift of the mission concept from ‘mission to the margins’ to ‘mission from the margins’, what then is the distinctive contribution of the people from the margins? And why are their experiences and visions crucial for re-imagining mission and evangelism today?*”(6) [emphasis added].

The WCC Report goes on to suggest that new information and communication technologies have an important role to play in bridging gaps in knowledge and understanding. It affirms that:

“The church lives in multi-religious and multi-cultural contexts and new communication technology is also bringing the people of the world into a greater awareness of one another’s identities and pursuits. Locally and globally, Christians are engaged with people of other religions and cultures in building societies of love, peace, and justice. *Plurality is a challenge to the churches and serious commitment to interfaith dialogue and cross-cultural communication is therefore indispensable.*”(9) [emphasis added].

If this is the case, we might ask how that cross-cultural dialogue is to begin. Do we sit back and wait for a knock at the door? Do we make visits bearing gifts and offering to show the way? Or do we ask humbly to get to know the other, to begin to see the world from his or her perspective, and to exchange experiences? In short, are we prepared to listen?

As the WCC Report makes clear:

“In order to commit ourselves to God’s life-

giving mission, we have to listen to the voices from the margins to hear what is life-affirming and what is life-destroying. We must turn our direction of mission to the actions that the marginalized are taking. Justice, solidarity, and inclusivity are key expressions of mission from the margins.” (107)

It is my contention that none of this can happen – not genuine hospitality, not genuine dialogue, not genuine understanding, not solidarity, not inclusivity, not justice – without the implementation of what WACC recognizes as communication rights. The implication being that the churches need to move beyond narrow understandings of mission to embrace the unknown and to recognize and restore the rights of the marginalized. What do I mean?

- Not “granting” recognition, but living in genuine acceptance.
- Not paying lip service to inclusion, but dismantling the barriers that prevent it.
- Not conferring equality, but struggling against inequality.

### **Communicating human dignity**

Both in its revised Principles and in its *Strategic Plan 2012-2016*, WACC has underlined its belief that a rights-based approach to communication provides a framework for everyone to be able to engage on an equal footing in transparent and informed debate. *Communication for All: Sharing WACC's Principles* affirms the centrality of communication – including mass, community and social media – to strengthening human dignity and to promoting democratic values. In particular, the principle of “communication for all” restores voice and visibility to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in a spirit of solidarity and in the knowledge that structural transformation is a prerequisite of social justice.

Communication rights have a crucial role to play in recognising and accepting those who have been politically, socially and culturally marginalized, in abandoning notions of empire in order to

create a new world in which all are equal. Implicit in communication rights is a process of reconciliation with those whose freedom has been denied – a process based on truth-telling, commitment to justice, freedom in solidarity, and respect for human dignity. Such reconciliation can only take place in a context of mutual trust in a shared reality.

And, as the Buddhist social activist Sulak Sivaraksa has written, “Reconciliation requires seeing the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. We cannot make compassion dependent on a transformation to the ideal; we must begin with reality if we want to have any hope of influencing reality.”<sup>3</sup>

If we are going to see the world as it really is, we must include the reality of the marginalized. The view from the margins must find a transformative place at the centre, or the centre must move to the margins, so that the whole is in communication with itself: “Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body” (1Cor. 12:12).

In other words, be the communication you wish to see in the world! ■

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### **Notes**

1. Hamelink C.J and Hoffmann J. (2009). “Communication as a Human Right: Picking Up the Challenge?”. In *The Right to Communicate: Historical Hopes, Global Debates, and Future Premises*, edited by Aliaa Dakroury, Mahmoud Eid, and Yahya R. Kamalipour. Dubuque IA: Kendall Hunt.
2. Derrida, J. (2000). *Of Hospitality*. Two lectures derived from a series of seminars in Paris in 1996. Stanford University Press.
3. Sivaraksa, S. (2001). “Culture and reconciliation.” *Media Development* 4/2001. London: WACC.

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