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Conference Report: 'Reflecting Jesus Christ: crucified and living in a broken world'

A report of the Tenth Conference of the International Association of Mission Studies (IAMS)

In a previous issue of *Anvil* we reported on the ninth IAMS conference in Buenos Aires in 1996.¹ In January 2000 the next conference in this series met near Pretoria in South Africa, at a campus belonging to the University of Pretoria at Hammanskraal. It was there that in the days of apartheid the 'Kairos Document' of the 1980s had been born, in a township which had been something of a dumping-ground for black South Africans but also the site of a major Roman Catholic seminary.

A total of 222 participants from every continent gathered under the presidency of Chun Chae Ok, a Korean woman professor of theology from Seoul. The conference owed much to the department of theology of UNISA, the other university of Pretoria, where David Bosch had been head of a department which, in his day, numbered thirteen missiologists.

Each continent was given a plenary session. These began with Asia, in a presentation which emphasized the Sri Lankan experience of 'brokenness' of the conference theme, in which some 60,000 Tamils had lost their lives. The Latin Americans, who still experience the oppressive effects of the market and its impact on the poor and excluded of their societies, were represented by Paulo Seuss, incoming president of IAMS, and a widely-respected Roman Catholic missiologist from São Paulo, Brazil. Africans who had participated in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), in reference to Pilate's question 'What is truth?' were inclined to ask the further question: 'Can there be anything but the truth of power which is male and white?'. The conference sensed depths of continuing pain from those who felt that the proceedings of the TRC had been too lenient to white perpetrators of injustice and oppression and too reluctant to compensate the black South Africans who were their victims. African Independent Churches (AICs, or as some preferred, Initiated or Indigenous Churches) were viewed by many as the main-line church tradition, on the cutting edge of society, dynamic and expansive. There was, however, a down-side to the contemporary South African experience: widespread criminality and, in particular, victimization of women, whose place in

1 'God and Mammon: Economies in Conflict', *Anvil* 14.1, pp 49-52.

traditional African society was one of inferiority. According to a conference exposure group, South African women now faced rape every 17 seconds and a level of violence which had caused a new word to be coined: 'femicide', denoting the killing of a spouse.

In addition to exposure groups, one of which, a large group, visited Soweto and heard more first-hand experience of the TRC, there were also workshops on such subjects as healing, ethnic and racial conflicts, church and state, other faiths, AIC's and the Bible in mission. A special open session was organized to hear the Revd Michael Lapsley, an Anglican priest from New Zealand who had worked in South Africa until expelled in 1976. He became a chaplain to the ANC, returned to South Africa and, as the new South Africa was emerging, was sent a letter bomb on 18 April 1990, wrapped in an English/Afrikaans theological journal. The bomb blew off both his hands. He is a powerful example of the evil and violence of a broken world. Yet in the restraint, authority and understatedness of his presentation he is also an example of resurrection life and hope. Unlike his bishop, he saw no need for his maimed condition to hamper his ministry, in which he remained fully committed and active. His was a most moving and inspiring session, which deserved the respect and warmth of reception that it received.

The substantial number of European participants, including a number from the UK, met under the chairmanship of Graham Kings, *Anvil* trustee and member of the IAMS executive, to discuss plans for a meeting of European missiologists in 2002, to be based, at the suggestion of Professor Sundermeier of Heidelberg, in Leipzig. This location should help the Russian Orthodox, who were represented at Pretoria, and other eastern Europeans, to attend. A session organized by Dr Gerald Anderson, veteran of IAMS meetings and himself editor of the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, enabled editors of some twelve journals of mission to speak briefly and was a valuable addition to the programme.

Information collected from outside the conference indicated how strong church-going remains among those of Afrikaans extraction. The main Dutch Reformed churches in Stellenbosch and Swellendam each have congregations of 800, and the latter has a daughter church with two congregations every Sunday morning of 1000 each. In Pretoria it was difficult to get a seat in a fully-integrated Methodist church. In one 'coloured' congregation, shaped by apartheid social policy and vocabulary, evidence was given of the acceptance of women priests not only by this warm body of people, but in the church more widely. The woman president at the eucharist told a familiar story of hostility she had experienced. However, the position of women priests had been helped by the personal qualities and leadership of Archbishop Tutu, and by a general recognition (even by opponents) that women's ordination was now a fact to be accommodated. This was despite a context of a predominantly catholic tradition, with a strong Anglo-Catholic input, of which Archbishop Tutu himself had been a product. It sounded an enviable position to English Anglican ears.

The conference posed at least two pressing issues to missiology and one to IAMS itself. First, the AIC's demanded recognition as the real 'main-line' tradition in South Africa today, with their rapid growth, depth of fellowship and vigorous

life expressed in celebration and hope, allied to an understanding of the 'spirit world' of Africa and to a belief in supernatural healing absent from the traditional Christian churches. Second, issues relating to women were posed sharply, not only in the realm of violence already mentioned, but in their exclusion from leadership in church and society, the additional burden which the AIDS epidemic had placed upon them and the effects of an unhealthy theology of self-sacrifice, which could be de-humanizing. Positive gender perspectives were needed in the churches' thinking. As Chun Chae Ok emphasized in her presidential address, more efforts needed to be made to include women in missiological faculties and in general missiological debate. Finally, IAMS as a missiological forum was challenged by Professor Mortensen of Aarhus to lay more emphasis in any forthcoming conferences on research and the reporting of research projects. This had been done, but in too limited a fashion for an association committed to mission studies. No doubt, the incoming executive will reflect on this in preparing for the next meeting in 2004. Meanwhile, the outgoing executive deserve great appreciation for a well-devised and impressive international gathering, set in a well-chosen local and national context, which enriched those who participated.

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