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Editorial

There are approximately 5,000 slum colonies in Bombay. More than half of Bombay's 10 million plus inhabitants live in dehumanizing conditions of poverty, inadequate housing, sanitation and water. They are the unevangelized of this city. Less than 10% of Bombay's 600 churches work among them. They leave it to the para-church agencies who are able to reach only a fraction of the people in need.

Calcutta is the same stow, only worse. Half a million children from 3 years upward toil on an average 14 hours a day in factories and in cottage industries in shameful conditions earning less than 5 dollars a month. There are at least 20,000 child prostitutes in Calcutta. Jesus cares; do we his disciples?

At the beginning of his ministry Jesus announced his manifesto in the synagogue at Nazareth, ending with 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing' ([Luke 4:21](#)).

In him the Kingdom had come. Empowered by the Spirit he preached good news to the poor and through them to the whole community. The response of the poor was a sign to the rich, perhaps the only sign they would respond to. Ministry to the poor authenticates the good news for all people.

The dichotomy between evangelism, church growth, compassionate service and social justice is a judgement on both the theology and practice of the Church. Liberals give priority to justice, evangelicals to evangelism or to compassionate service—with the result that we all fail in church planting. The poor neither hear nor see the gospel. They remain unevangelized. Commando raids from the outside are no answer. Only incarnational servant-hood will be able to train the poor to reach their own people. But the cost is more than most of us are willing to bear. The love of Christ and the empowering of the Holy Spirit alone can enable the Church to fulfil this ever-widening task.

This issue of ERT is dedicated to the Consultation 'The Evangelization of the Poor' sponsored by the Ethics and Society Study Unit of the Theological Commission of WEF and held October 17–23 1993 in New Delhi. Seven women and fifteen men participated drawing together theologians and practitioners [p. 100](#) from ten countries. The hermeneutical process involved a serious dialogue between the Scriptures and a wide range of case studies and theological reflection. The result is a creative and living theology. A selection of papers and case studies is included in this issue. A larger book and study guides for churches and missions will follow. [p. 101](#)

Priorities in Our Common Task: Ministry to and with the Poor

Bruce Nicholls

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The consultation, The Evangelization of the Poor was held in New Delhi, India, 17–23 October and was sponsored by the Ethics in Society Study Unit of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship. Twenty-two theologians and practitioners participated

and gave papers or case studies. As Coordinator of the Consultation, I was privileged to give the opening address. In it I attempted to review our failures, the ever-increasing dilemmas of the Church's ministry with the poor and to call for a fresh vision and commitment to identify with the poor in our common task.

Editor

I. A CONFESSION OF FAILURE

We must begin this consultation by confessing to Almighty God that as local churches we have failed in our ministry to the poor. There are exceptions of course, but in the majority of churches that we represent, we have not been faithful to our Lord's call or followed his own example to reach the poor for Christ. We have neither served them nor evangelized them. We confess there are very few churches among the urban poor and slums of our cities. We thank God for the example of the para-church agencies—the relief and development agencies and the missionary societies—that have identified with the poor in sacrificial service and witness as they are able. We will hear some good case studies in this consultation.

Some denominational bodies have ambitious schemes to serve the poor but few have been able to implement them. We also thank God for the many institutions— p. 102 hospitals, schools, orphanages, and agricultural institutes—that are ministering to the poor but this does not relieve local churches of their responsibility to reach out to these who are deprived and oppressed. With the exception of the Pentecostals and some Catholic churches or base communities as in Latin America, we are a middle class community, establishing middle class churches in middle class suburbs. Our attempts at evangelism have been hit and run and not incarnational. Alas our churches are inward-looking, preserving their gains against a hostile world. In many countries we are a ghetto Church. We are fragmented often through no fault of our own. Our churches are absorbed in managing the institutions inherited from the overseas missionary agents. This has led to multi-litigation and further fragmentation of the Church. As we come together let us confess our sin and ask the Lord for forgiveness.

II. THE POOR ARE THE UNEVANGELIZED

The AD 2,000 and Beyond Movement has identified the 10/40 latitude window around the globe as the belt of unevangelized people. It is significant that the majority of the poor live in the same region. Despite advances in technology and communications the number of the poor in the world is rapidly expanding. Fifty percent of Bombay's 10 million people live in slums. By 2020 it will be 75%. Five percent of the people of India are very rich and own more than 50% of the land while more than 50% of the population live below the poverty line. Among this 50%, at least in the cities, there are very few churches.

We live in an age of escalating violence—abortion, female infanticide, rape, murder, arson, terrorism, civil war. Violence brings rich countries to poverty, and poverty intensifies violence. Uganda, Ethiopia, Burma, Cambodia, to name a few, were once rich countries, but now they are desperately poor.

Violence and poverty increase the incidence of disease. The threatening scourge of AIDs, especially in the poor countries, further adds to suffering, death and poverty.

The women of the poor suffer greater oppression than men. Their educational levels are lower; they work longer hours, they are harassed and abused by the male members of society. Children are being sexually abused and forced to work long hours in factories. The village poor become bonded labourers.

III. A CALL TO THINK MORE DEEPLY ABOUT THE GOSPEL

At the heart of the gospel is good news about relationships. Humankind—male and female—are relational beings. Each has a personal relationship to other personal beings. Our self-understanding as persons is in relationship to others. A person in isolation is a non-person. Our primal relationship as human beings is in relation to God our Creator. Being created in the image of God all people have a deep hunger for God. In the Fall we are sinners and in our rebellion against God this relationship with the Divine is fragmented and broken. We are self-centred not **P. 103** God-centred. We recreate God in our image and we worship the gods we have created.

The Gospel is good news that in the Cross Christ has atoned for our sin and in our repentance and faith the relationship is restored. We become new men and women in Christ.

The gospel is good news about Jesus Christ who at great cost emptied himself and became one with us, dying in our place and rising again for our justification. In the resurrection of Christ we are given hope of the transformation of the whole person, spirit and body, as one integrated person. Therefore, the gospel is both spiritual and material in its relationship. Evangelism is the verbal proclamation of the gospel to the whole person in relation to God and one's neighbour. Social justice is the gospel of transformed social relationships in the light of our relationship to God in his attributes of love and justice. While evangelism and social justice are distinct in their focus, they both address issues of broken relationships with God and with human society. There can be no dichotomy between loving God and loving one's neighbour. Together they are the sum total of the commandments of God.

The gospel is addressed to all people but in particular to the poor, for the poor are those who suffer more than others from spiritual despair, material deprivation and social ostracism as Jesus outlined in his Nazareth 'Manifesto' ([Luke 4:14-22](#)). Those who are poor in spirit are those who in their powerlessness cry out to God for mercy. To them belongs the Kingdom of God.

In giving priority to the salvation and liberation of the poor Jesus gives a model for the redemption of the rich and powerful. They must humble themselves, acknowledge their helplessness and look to Christ for salvation.

The liberation of the poor demands the liberation of person—individual and communal—from the bondage of religious fatalism, idolatrous and cultic practices and from a state of guilt and shame. This liberation also demands a recovery of human dignity through meeting the personal needs of food, clothing and housing and establishing mutual respect with others. The miracle of the gospel is the transformation of individuals, families and communities, and also of the structures of society, economic and political. At its very heart this requires a transformed human nature. Chou en Lai of China was right when he saw that unless human nature were changed, Marxism would not succeed in transforming society. The message of the gospel is that God in Christ alone can change human nature and create the new society.

IV. THE CENTRALITY OF THE CHURCH IN MISSION AND EVANGELISM

In the words of the Lausanne Covenant, 'The Church is at the very centre of God's cosmic purpose and is his appointed means of spreading the Gospel.' The Church is both the believing community of the people of God, and the necessary structure of order to enable the Church to fulfil its mission in the world. **P. 104**

In the Old Testament the institutionalizing of Israel in monarchy, priesthood and prophethood was designed by God for the salvation of the people and the elimination of poverty ([Lev. 25](#)). But unfortunately institutionalized Israel became the agent of poverty and oppression. We see this clearly in our Lord's rebuke of the Pharisees and the Scribes of the law.

Tragically, the same has happened in the Church. A classic example is the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America where the people have been oppressed and reduced to poverty. Thus one of the central concerns of this consultation must be the renewal of the Church in all the dimensions of its life. In the midst of the celebration of the building of Solomon's temple, God called the people to return to the Lord and receive forgiveness and the healing of the land ([2 Chron. 7:14](#)). The renewal of the Church for mission includes renewal in the power of the Holy Spirit, reformation in theological understanding, ethical cleansing in the purity and honesty of the Church's administration. It also demands a renewed missiological vision for the whole world beginning with a new vision for the poor. For where there is no vision the poor perish.

Above all else our mission to and with the poor calls for a deeper commitment to Christ and his Church. We love him because he first loved us. Such discipleship is costly, for following him means taking up our cross daily.

May this consultation be a catalyst for a new vision, and a new commitment to Christ and to the poor.

Dr. Nicholls relocated from New Delhi to Auckland, New Zealand from where he will continue his several Asian and international ministries. p. 105

Evangelism and the Poor

Bong-Ho Son

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In this carefully reasoned article the author analyzes the different types of human suffering and the relationship of poverty to sinful lifestyle, to structural evil and to being poor in spirit. He raises issues in the relationship of salvation to liberation from poverty. In evangelizing the poor, he argues, distinctions need to be made between the absolute poor, the relatively poor and the voluntarily poor. He calls on evangelists to accept voluntary poverty in order to witness to the poor.

Editor

More than half of the world's population live in 24 poor nations. Of the ten countries with the largest number of non-Christians, eight have serious problems with poverty.¹ Bringing a witness of Christ to the poor has become one of the heaviest burdens of Christians today. We have a large obligation to motivate ourselves for the task, to be equipped with effective strategies, and to go into action.

¹ Tom Houston, 'Good News for the Poor' in *Transformation*, Vol 7, No. 1 (Jan./ March 1990), p. 6.