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The Whole Church as a Transformed and Transforming Society

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WHEN EVANGELICALISM was defined at the international conference convened in London in 1846 to establish the Evangelical Alliance the definition explicitly excluded an ecclesiological statement. The reason for this was that the great evangelical revival of the eighteenth century had created a situation where members from most of the Protestant denominations that existed at that time could be one in heart and mind as long as they ignored their differing ecclesiology. A good example of this non-ecclesiological unity was the formation of the London Missionary Society [LMS] in 1795. Episcopalians, Presbyterians and Independents formed an overseas mission to send out missionaries that would simply preach the gospel, translate the scriptures and allow converts to organise themselves into the sort of churches that suited them. However, for most evangelicals

this proved to be a step too far and most mission work was carried out on denominational lines for the first half of the nineteenth century.

Following the pioneering example of William Carey, overseas evangelization within denominational church structures was delegated to volunteer societies that ran the business of overseas mission—raising funds, selecting candidates, transporting missionaries to the field and overseeing their work on the field. The links denominational societies had with their sponsoring churches varied in strength but they all recognized at least some accountability to church.

With the emergence of the interdenominational faith missions in the second half of the nineteenth century a very significant non-denominational stream became a permanent fixture and eventually the predominant factor in evangelical mission from the West to the majority world. This weakened further the link between mission and the church and since the great expansion in their prevalence happened when

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premillennialism was sweeping through the evangelical community, particularly in the USA, the focus moved from forming communities of disciples to making converts. By the middle of the twentieth century the US culture of planning, marketing and measuring had come to dominate the scene and evangelism felt very much like a business enterprise. With this as the dominant model the worldwide evangelical movement was poised to relegate ecclesiology even further to the periphery of its concerns.

The Lausanne Movement was born out of this manifestation of the primary evangelical imperative to convert people everywhere to faith in Jesus Christ. But at the Lausanne Congress in 1974 a significant number of delegates led by majority world leaders managed to persuade the congress to look again at the dominant US model and seek a more adequate and more biblical model of evangelism. The result was that repentance and social action came to be linked with evangelism as an essential component of Christian mission.

The Church as a transformed society

With the emphasis on the importance for evangelism that people change the way they live and relate to others within and outside the Christian community, it became very difficult to ignore the church. So, it is not surprising that the Lausanne Covenant has a paragraph focusing on the church:

6. The Church and Evangelism

We affirm that Christ sends his redeemed people into the world as

the Father sent him, and that this calls for a similar deep and costly penetration of the world. We need to break out of our ecclesiastical ghettos and permeate non-Christian society. In the Church's mission of sacrificial service evangelism is primary. World evangelization requires the whole Church to take the whole gospel to the whole world. The Church is at the very centre of God's cosmic purpose and is his appointed means of spreading the gospel. But a church which preaches the cross must itself be marked by the cross. It becomes a stumbling block to evangelism when it betrays the gospel or lacks a living faith in God, a genuine love for people, or scrupulous honesty in all things including promotion and finance. The church is the community of God's people rather than an institution, and must not be identified with any particular culture, social or political system, or human ideology.¹

The Lausanne Covenant as a whole marked a very important watershed in the history of twentieth century evangelicalism but in this paragraph on the church we see a movement stumbling towards an adequate biblical understanding of the significance of the church in the mission of God. On the one hand there is a deeply biblical appreciation of what the church is as a

¹ The scripture references attached to this paragraph were John 17:18; 20:21; Matt. 28:19,20; Acts 1:8; 20:27; Eph. 1:9,10; 3:9-11; Gal. 6:14,17; 2 Cor. 6:3,4; 2 Tim. 2:19-21; Phil. 1:27.

cross-centred community at the centre of God's cosmic purpose but on the other hand the church is seen as merely a means to an evangelistic end. This paragraph may have provided what has become the Lausanne Movement's strap line—'the whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world'²—but it left the movement without an adequate ecclesiology.

A third of the Manila Manifesto that was drafted at the second Lausanne Congress in 1989 is devoted to 'the whole church' because by that time 'the whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world' had become the movement's motto. However, the Manila Manifesto is disappointing because the instrumental aspect of the ecclesiology of the Covenant is strengthened with a pervasive emphasis on the evangelistic action of individual members of the churches. Many good things are said in the Manifesto that still need to be said—that if every member of the church is to fulfil their calling the distinction between clergy and laity has to be undermined; that there is a crying need to encourage women to exercise their gifts; that homes and places of work should be seen as places of witness; that the strength of the church's witness is

linked to the quality of the individual and corporate lives of the members; that 'the local church bears a primary responsibility for the spread of the gospel'; that churches and denominations, evangelicals in the West and the majority world and, where possible, evangelicals and non-evangelicals should cooperate in evangelism.

As with the Covenant there are also hints of a non-instrumental ecclesiology here and there:

Our message that Christ reconciles alienated people to each other rings true only if we are seen to love and forgive one another, to serve others in humility, and to reach out beyond our own community in compassionate, costly ministry to the needy.

The church is intended by God to be a sign of his kingdom, that is, an indication of what human community looks like when it comes under his rule of righteousness and peace. As with individuals, so with churches, the gospel has to be embodied if it is to be communicated effectively. It is through our love for one another that the invisible God reveals himself today, especially when our fellowship is expressed in small groups, and when it transcends the barriers of race, rank, sex and age which divide other communities.

In these paragraphs the church is not just a means to an end but the end itself. The church does not just exist to fulfil some task or other but its existence is the fulfilment of God's purpose for humanity. This non-instrumental view of church means that it communicates the gospel as much as by what it

² Charles van Engen pointed out at our Panama consultation that much of this strap line was not original to Lausanne but had been circulating in World Council of Churches circles since as early as 1951. For a discussion of the meaning of this strap line in the WCC and evangelical context see Charles Van Engen, *The Growth of the True Church: An Analysis of the Ecclesiology of Church Growth Theory* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1981), pp 379-385.

is and does as by what it says.

The view that the church is a 'sign of the kingdom' of God and 'an indication of what human community looks like when it comes under [God's] rule of righteousness and peace' reflects more adequately the sweep of the biblical story. The vision of the end of the story of God's dealings with the earth and its peoples in Revelation 21-22 provides many clues to understanding the significance of the church in God's dealing with humanity in history. John saw a vision of a new heaven and a new earth devoid of disorder. Into this renewed creation he saw the New Jerusalem descending from heaven like a bride in all her splendour ready to meet the bridegroom. This holy city or bride is actually renewed human society living fully in the presence of God as a result of which everything that has ever made human life sorrowful—including death—has been banished for ever. In his dealing with recalcitrant Israel God often declared that a time would come when they would obey him and then they really would be his people and he would really be their God. This is the reality John sees as prevailing in the end not only with Israel but with all nations, who will gladly bring of their best into this holy city. The crucial legacy of Israel and the Old Covenant was marked by the fact that the names of the 12 tribes were over the 12 gates into the city but its foundations were the 12 apostles of the Lamb and the Lamb, the Lord Jesus Christ, was its glory and light. This glorious scene is a picture of a human society living in complete peace and security under the authority of the servant king, the Lamb.

The reference to the New Jerusalem

as the bride and to the foundations of the city as the apostles of the Lamb suggest strongly that the glorious society that we will be one day is but a greatly intensified version of the society that the church is now and always has been since the Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost. There is plenty of biblical evidence to indicate that the society that has submitted to the rule of Jesus has the characteristics, if only in shadow, of the glorious society that it will be one day. We may bemoan the failings of churches but if the church is church in any meaningful sense it is a foretaste of heaven. Jesus did not say to his company of disciples that they ought to be the light of the world or a city on a hill that cannot be hidden. The simple fact that they had gathered around Jesus and recognized him as the Messiah, the anointed Ruler sent by God, meant that they would reflect something of his effulgence as *the* light of the world. The fact that they were listening to his radical moral teaching and that in due course they would seek to live in obedience to him in the power of the Spirit meant that people outside their society would see the light of God's glory in them and come to praise their Father in heaven.

As someone that has spent a substantial proportion of his life trying to convince churches and individual Christians that they should share their possessions with the poor through Tearfund, which is a Christian relief and development agency, I have been asked on a number of occasions why it is that in the New Testament the emphasis is almost always on Christians looking after their own poor. The answer is that Jesus is establishing a specific type of society on earth that

prefigures the glorious society that will be fully revealed at his second coming. What happened in Jerusalem after Pentecost clearly points to this. If we bracket all the caveats raised by wise and materialistic western theologians what we see happening in Jerusalem after Pentecost is the formation of a wonderfully new way of being a society.³ Here were people from different nations and classes delighting in each other as they joined the society of Jesus the Messiah. They loved to be together, to eat together and to share their material possessions with one another. We know that problems were around the corner and that the realism of being imperfect would soon hit them but it would be folly to lose the sense of wonder, security, mutual respect and community that characterised this first Christian society blessed by the powerful infusion of the Holy Spirit of God as a result of Messiah Jesus' exaltation.⁴

What is also very significant about this description is the powerful evangelistic impact of this community that should satisfy the most ardent advocate of evangelisation in the Lausanne Movement. It was the quality of the communal life of the church that caused the church to enjoy 'the favour of all the people', which in turn provided the platform for sharing the good news of Jesus Messiah.

There is so much that could be said

about the renewal of human society in the mission and purpose of God. Beginning with the declaration on the eve of the giving of the law at Sinai that Israel was to be a holy nation and ending with Peter's reminder that the Christian community he addressed in his first letter was called to be a holy nation the Bible is full of God's heart for the corporate renewal of humankind. Peter's encouragement will suffice as concluding evidence that the good news that we call the gospel is not just about the salvation of individuals but the creation of an alternative community now in the midst of this sinful world that points to the eternal community that is to come:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. [1 Pet. 2:9-12].

The impression has often been created within the Lausanne Movement that the task of evangelization has not been completed because of a lack of evangelizing zeal coupled with a lack of planning, strategy and finance but in light of the biblical picture of the sig-

³ For a discussion of the Jerusalem church that takes note of the western caveats see Dewi Hughes, *Power and Poverty, Divine and Human Rule in a World of Need* (Nottingham: IVP, 2008/Grand Rapids: IVP, 2009), pp. 210 ff.

⁴ Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-35.

nificance of the church the cause of failure is just as likely to be a lack of holiness among the people of God.

As the Lausanne Movement prepares for its third congress in Cape Town in 2010 it is an opportune time for us to draw attention to our defective ecclesiology and for evangelicals to grasp that there are certain biblical truths about the church that they must share and celebrate. Our evangelical forefathers were wrong to exclude church from their minimum definition of evangelicalism because it is possible to include some fundamental truths about church without betraying our denominational allegiance. Without this the task of evangelization will be profoundly hindered.

In summing up the deliberations of the Theology Working Group at the Lausanne Leaders gathering in Budapest in June 2006, Chris Wright said that his hope for Cape Town 2010 was that it would 'launch nothing less than a 21st Century Reformation among evangelicals...for there are scandals and abuses in the world-wide evangelical community that are reminiscent of the worst features of the pre-reformation medieval church in Europe.'

One of the worst scandals is *the consumerist captivity of the western and westernized church*. It is now over two centuries since European intellectuals began declaring independence from the traditional political and religious structures of Christendom that made 'freedom' one of the key concepts of our modern era. There has been much discussion about the precise nature of this freedom and the best political structures that need to be put in place in order to secure it but at the heart of

all this discussion has been the assumption of the autonomy of the individual self—to be truly free is to be able to make what *I* want of *my* self. For a considerable proportion of the last 200 years the capitalist-libertarian and the socialist-Marxist ideologies competed for ascendancy as the means to deliver self-centred freedom. It now seems that the capitalist-libertarian ideology has won the day. Under the banner of post-modernity it is now busily persuading the whole world that the essence of human freedom and self-fulfilment is found in the ability to consume. Kant's noble call to reject traditional authority in the interest of individual autonomy and 'Dare to know' has ended up as a price tag in the quintessentially post-modern western shopping mall! The tragedy is that all too often western and westernized evangelicals in the majority world are deeply compromised with this self-centred consumerism, which in New Testament language is nothing more or less than the idolatrous worship of mammon/money—and all that money can buy.

The irrefutable evidence that this is so is the growing meanness of western evangelical Christians as they have become immensely richer in the last 25 years. Ron Sider draws attention to this fact in his *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* Sider's thesis has been amply confirmed by an academic sociological study entitled *Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don't Give Away More Money*. In his review of this book in Christianity Today Sider says that 'the level of self-centered materialism systematically described here is truly

staggering. The publisher should have used an earlier title that was considered: *Stingy Believers*. The book should drive us to our knees.' The primary cause of this stinginess is conformity to consumerism because 'the widespread consumerism and materialism of the culture—expressed above all in our incessant advertising—seduces many people into making extravagant decisions about major purchases like houses and cars and smaller things like recreation, eating out, vacations, etc.; and the result is that most families are financially pressed in spite of enormous wealth.' The authors 'think there are five primary reasons for the fact that "the wealthiest national body of Christian believers at any time in all of church history end up spending most of their money on themselves"'. The most important is our society's 'institutionalized mass consumerism'.⁵ It just happens that the evidence is available for US evangelicals but anecdotal evidence leads me to think that the same principle applies in the UK—the richer evangelicals become the more consumerist and mean they become. Even in the majority world those who work among the poor testify to the meanness of the rich middle class evangelical churches towards their charitable work. The pressures of consumerism can be subtle and Jesus himself warned us against the danger of the cares of this world but conformity to the consumerist world would be far less likely if evangelization was seen as a process of incorporating people

into a new type of society under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

A very pernicious manifestation of the consumerist spirit within evangelicalism is the so-called prosperity gospel. In this sacralisation of the American dream devotion to God is seen as a deal—we risk our little on God and he pays back with abundance for us to enjoy on ourselves. Even when our giving to God is presented as giving to our poor brother or sister the approach is destructive of true human community because the needy are reduced to just a means to an end. But the most destructive manifestation of this teaching is the way church leaders in situations of great poverty use it to exploit the poor for their own comfort. Prosperity preachers by definition have to be prosperous in order to have credibility. So, their technique is to put pressure on the poor to risk the little that they have on their ministries with the promise that since they would be giving to God by giving to them God will bless them with abundance—and if the poor lose out they do so because of their lack of faith in giving.

Another scandal is *the ideological captivity of significant sections of the western evangelical church*. The war on terror—which for some mysterious reason to objective observers is said to include the Iraq war—prosecuted under the leadership of the evangelical George W. Bush, who was voted into office with the support of the overwhelming majority of US evangelicals, has done, and is doing, unimaginable damage to the evangelization of the most unevangelized populations in the world.

At the Lausanne Forum in Pattaya in October 2004 a group of the dele-

⁵ Quotations taken from the review in www.christianitytoday.com/2008/006/5.11.html

gates led by Rene Padilla approached the leadership of the forum to discuss the possibility that the Lausanne Movement could publicly distance itself from the military policy of the Bush administration. The leadership of Lausanne, which was dominated by US citizens at the time, was resolute in its opposition to the suggestion.

The consultation that launched the Micah Network met in Oxford, England two weeks after 9/11. In the Micah Declaration on Integral Mission we expressed 'our abhorrence at this atrocity' but we also recognized 'the symbolic meaning of this act of terrorism. In his day Jesus interpreted the butchery of Pilate against the Galileans as an opportunity to repent. Could it be that this act against the symbols of Western economic and military power is a call to repentance?'⁶ This suggestion caused deep offence to many in the US in particular.

In his book, *Myths America Lives By*, Richard T. Hughes has made a strong case that at different periods in their history Americans have adopted stories that have no foundation in truth to justify actions that are very obviously unjust. The myth of 'manifest destiny' that justified the extermination of Native Americans is an obvious case in point. At the moment it is the myth of the Christian or Millennial Nation that is causing even evangelicals in America to believe that the use of the most terribly destructive weapons can be justified as a Christian activity. The evangelical church in America and in

the West generally must distance itself from this destructive ideology so that the kingdom of the Prince of Peace can grow in the most unevangelized places in our world.

In 1846 evangelical Christians from many parts of the world gathered in London in order to form a global evangelical alliance. The attempt failed because some of the delegates from the US insisted that slavery was consistent with their evangelical faith despite the overwhelming international evangelical consensus at that time that it was not. It would be a tragedy if the US and other evangelical churches stood to one side once again because of their perceived commitment to western imperialism at this critical point in the history of evangelicalism.

The church as a transforming society

As Jesus prayed for his community of disciples in the prayer recorded in John 17 he affirmed that because they were identified with him they were not of the world. What they needed above all else was to be sanctified by the word of truth from the Father revealed through Jesus. Just as Jesus had resolutely determined to sanctify himself by doing his Father's will, which ultimately took him to the cross to die for sinners, so he prayed that his followers would sanctify themselves so that they too, as a community of grace, would be able to resolutely dedicate themselves to serve God and their neighbours. But then he prays to the Father: 'As you sent me into the world I have sent them into the world' (Jn. 17:18, cf. 20:21). The church is both called out of the

⁶ Tim Chester [ed.], *Justice, Mercy and Humility: Integral Mission and the Poor* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), pp. 17, 18.

world to be an alternative society under the rule of Jesus but also, empowered by the Spirit, sent into the world to be a blessing to those who do not belong. In the Lausanne movement this mission of the church has been defined as mission in word and deed—‘holistic mission’ or what is now often called ‘integral mission’. This is how the Lausanne Covenant describes the social aspect of this mission:

5. Christian Social Responsibility

We affirm that God is both the Creator and the Judge of all men. We therefore should share his concern for justice and reconciliation throughout human society and for the liberation of men and women from every kind of oppression. Because men and women are made in the image of God, every person, regardless of race, religion, colour, culture, class, sex or age, has an intrinsic dignity because of which he or she should be respected and served, not exploited. Here too we express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive. Although reconciliation with other people is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbour and our obedience to Jesus Christ. The message of salvation implies also a message of judg-

ment upon every form of alienation, oppression and discrimination, and we should not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist. When people receive Christ they are born again into his kingdom and must seek not only to exhibit but also to spread its righteousness in the midst of an unrighteous world. The salvation we claim should be transforming us in the totality of our personal and social responsibilities. Faith without works is dead.

There is little in this paragraph to suggest that social action is a *church* responsibility. There is some advance on the Covenant in the Manila Manifesto but again in the context of a strong commitment to an instrumental ecclesiology. Affirmation 16 states ‘that every Christian congregation must turn itself outward to its local community in evangelistic witness and compassionate service’. Paragraph 7, which is in the section on the whole church, says that ‘our message that Christ reconciles alienated people to each other rings true only if we are seen to love and forgive one another, to serve others in humility, and to reach out beyond our own community in compassionate, costly ministry to the needy’. Again paragraph 6, which is also in the section on the whole church, states that a local congregation/ church ‘might decide to organize a visitation of their whole area, to penetrate for Christ a particular place where people assemble, to arrange a series of evangelistic meetings, lectures or concerts, to work with the poor to transform a local slum, or plant a new church in a neighbouring district or village’.

Churches need integrity and they need to transform slums but the motivation for either activity is not some overriding evangelistic strategy. Churches are not a means to evangelism but communities under the benign rule of Jesus the Messiah learning what it means to love God with all their heart and their neighbour as themselves. It is not some programme or strategy for evangelization that determines the shape of the church but the shape of the church that determines the programme or strategy for evangelization. Neither must social action be seen as a means to evangelization. The church should not 'work with the poor to transform a local slum' as a means/method of evangelizing the local slum. The church works to transform the local slum because of love—born of their experience of the love of God in Jesus—for the people in the slum that births practical action to bless them.

Those of us that have been advocating the vital importance of deeds in the mission of the church—especially social action with and on behalf of the poor—also need to remember that an instrumental ecclesiology is defective. Tearfund, the evangelical Christian relief and development agency that I serve as Theological Advisor, has a ten year vision of seeing '50 million people released from material and spiritual poverty through a worldwide network of 100,000 churches'. I rejoice that Tearfund has become convinced that churches are vital to transforming the lives of the poor in their societies but we must also avoid thinking of the church as a means to an end. The church does not exist to deliver our relief and development agenda any more than it exists to serve an evange-

lization agenda. The true church is a transforming society and it is our privilege as an agency to serve its agenda. The most we can and ought to do is to encourage the church to be what it is.

It is a cliché but with a strong element of truth that the church is the only society that exists for the benefit of non-members. Churches do need to attend to the serious and challenging task of growing as the peace [shalom] communities that they are but they are probably more successful in becoming peace communities when they seek the peace of the societies in which they are located. We know as the society of Jesus that our citizenship is in heaven and that we are strangers and aliens in this world that is organized in opposition to God. We also know that this world will be subject to God's judgment. Jeremiah knew that Babylon, which had been the rod in God's hand to punish the Jews for their sin, would one day itself be brought low in the purpose of God. Even so in his divinely inspired letter to the exiled Jews in Babylon he told them to 'seek the peace and prosperity of the city' and to 'pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers you too will prosper' (Jer 29:7). It is in the spirit of Jeremiah that Jesus commands his disciples many years later to love their enemies and that Paul commanded the church in Rome to love their enemies before going on immediately to exhort them to pray for the imperial administration that despite all its failings was put in place in order to make sure that what is good for all citizens was protected. And, of course, they were to continue loving their neighbour rulers and seeking their blessing even when they soon started persecuting them.

Rwanda and other examples

I could tell many stories that have convinced me that evangelicalism developed what can only be described as tragic defects in its theology in the twentieth century and I believe that many of those defects are concentrated in the area of ecclesiology. The most glaring example is the terrible tragedy that engulfed Rwanda. There are heroic tales of evangelical individuals risking their lives—and sometimes losing them—because of their refusal to join in the genocide. I am yet to hear a story of a church that stood for justice. Then there are many other stories that are not dramatic but witness to the same problem. I was told about a city centre Baptist church in Latin America that refused to let an evangelical agency that was working with vulnerable girls abandoned to the streets to use their excellent buildings because they were not meant for such work but as a place to worship God. Friends working in the slums of India testify that it is very difficult to get support from middle class evangelical churches that must be doing very well financially as a result of the current economic boom in their country. I have myself visited evangelical churches in India that are located very close to slum colonies where there was no sense of responsibility at all for the needy people on their doorstep. I have walked through a slum in an African city with a senior evangelical pastor born and bred in that city to be told by him that he never knew that people lived in such appalling conditions in his city. I have stood in the compound of a large evangelical Baptist church in an African city, which was in the process

of spending an enormous sum of money on its buildings, from where I could look down into a most appalling slum and learnt that the church had done nothing to reach out to the suffering people on their doorstep—who also happened to be Muslim.

Such anecdotes could easily be multiplied by many others from all over the world to highlight the evangelical ecclesiological malaise that the third Lausanne Congress must address as a major priority. Successful world evangelisation depends upon it. The picture is not totally bleak by any means because there are an increasing number of stories of evangelical churches being the transforming societies that they were meant to be. It is the voices of these churches that need to be heard loudly in Cape Town. These are the churches that have become convinced that their calling is to be communities of blessing to the societies in which they are placed. In these churches transforming society is not seen as the task of individuals in the church or of para-church agencies but of the church as a whole. In many cases they are churches of the poor who choose to stand in solidarity with their fellow poor so that they may all be lifted up in the name and power of Jesus. Together they dedicate themselves to God, to each other and to the needy outside their community. The best way to catch something of their vision is through case studies. Here are just 2:⁷

⁷ These case studies have been researched and written up by Tulo Raistrick, Tearfund's Church and Development Advisor. These and many others can be found at <http://tilz.tearfund.org>—see the box headed 'Welcome to

1. The Church that Mobilised— Trapeang Keh, Cambodia

Trapeang Keh is a very poor village in rural Cambodia. Up to three years ago it appeared a very unpromising environment for church-led community transformation. The land was dry and hard, and the water wells were dry most of the year round. Men had to go off to the cities for months at a time to earn money, but often came back broken and sick. Many in the village were in debt to powerful money-lenders. Like most Cambodian villages, there was little trust or co-operation between people, the legacy of the horrendous Pol Pot and Khmer Rouge regime during the 1970s. And the church itself consisted of only four members, and they were persecuted and marginalised by the rest of the community.

However, things began to change three years ago. Two Christian community facilitators from FAITH project began to visit the village and spent time with the local Christians. They visited for two days every fortnight, and would stay overnight in the village. This surprised most of the villagers—visitors who ever came to their village seemed only too quick to leave and escape the primitive living conditions that were there. Each visit, the two Christian facilitators would spend time doing bible studies, helping the Christians to see how God wanted them to be agents of transformation in their community and building their confidence in

the fact that *they* could be used by God in this way.

The local Christians began to realise that if they helped the village to begin to work together things could change. They invited the community to join them for a meeting, but the villagers were very sceptical. They were not sure they could trust these Christians. So the Christians then went and visited every person in their home, one by one. Gradually they began to win people's trust, and then one day, when they called a community meeting, almost everyone came. Helped by the two Christian facilitators, the community began to discuss their problems. Over the next few meetings they began to realise *why* they were poor, and then they began to realise that *they* could do something about it!

The community began to work together to address some of the problems. They helped dig more and better wells and they improved the irrigation to people's fields. No longer is the village reliant on one unhealthy pond during the dry season. With better irrigation, they were able to start vegetable gardens, and now grow crops all year round. The men no longer need to leave for the cities. And they have formed a development committee to help manage all the changes taking place in the village.

But the village has experienced not just physical changes. Attitudes and relationships have changed too. There is less social disruption, as men stay with their families all year round. The community discussions had encouraged men to listen to women, often for the first time, and the result is that men's respect for women has increased. There is less wife-beating,

tilz' and [Click here](#) to go to the new section of this site about mobilising churches' for many more case studies and guidance on how to go about mobilizing churches.

and more sharing of the tasks that had always previously been left up to the women—gardening, water collection, and cooking. There is less quarrelling and fighting in the village, and less alcoholism. The village is more united, and decision-making within the village is fairer and more inclusive.

And, significantly, attitudes to the church have changed too. The Christians themselves have grown in confidence to care for their neighbours and to share their faith. There is less persecution. In fact now people respect the Christians as they have shown themselves willing to help others. And the church has grown. All but two of the households in the village now attend the church! It is a story of remarkable, holistic transformation.⁸

2. The Church that Rediscovered its Confidence— An Anglican Church in East London

The church of this case study is in an area of East London in one of the poorest parts of the UK. There is high unemployment, poor health, low levels of literacy, and large numbers of single parents. The specific church reflects this situation: it is a church made up of people with low incomes and little confidence.

The minister of the church is a visionary and activist, and was keen for the church to have a big impact in

its community. He had long negotiations over a four year period with a big donor who finally agreed that they would provide over a million pounds to help the church build a community centre. However, throughout these negotiations, the minister had not involved the church members. He had assumed that they would be in favour. At the final meeting before the funding was to arrive, the church was asked to sign the contract. However, the church members were somewhat unsure, and when they were told that *they* would be responsible for running the centre they got scared, and said 'no'. It was devastating for the minister—years of hard work had gone down the drain and what he saw as a great opportunity had been lost. The church too was very upset—they liked their minister and felt that they had let him down.

However, the church members were right to say 'no'. The community centre project was far too big for them. The problem had been that the minister hadn't spent enough time listening to their views or thinking through their skills to realise it would not work.

A Tearfund facilitator was invited into this situation to help the minister and the church think through what should happen next. Their starting point was the failed community centre project, helping all sides to be heard and understood, and to enable healing of people's hurts to take place. They then began to help the church to see themselves as God saw them. The church members, low in confidence and self-esteem, began to discover that they did have many gifts and skills for community work—not for running a big community centre, but for doing many other useful things instead.

⁸ For another a striking case study from Cambodia see David Evans with Kathryn Scherer, *Creating Space for Strangers: Thinking Afresh about Mission and the Church* (Leicester: IVP, 2004), pp. 84-89.

Gradually, the church members began to want to get more involved in their community again, but this time in a more realistic way.

The church began a process of listening to their community. Through house-to-house visits they discovered that a big worry for people was that a large building renovation scheme was about to take place that would leave people without electricity for two weeks. As most people cooked and heated their homes with electricity this was quite a concern. The church realised they could help. They realised that there were people in their church who could cook meals, others who could open up the church building so that people could stay in there to keep warm, others who could drop round leaflets to people's homes to let them know that the church was offering help, others who could chat with people and make them feel welcome, and others who could pray. Suddenly the church felt they were able to make a difference.

As a result of this practical initiative, the church grew in confidence. When it became apparent that the local government was corrupt and misusing public money, it seemed a natural action for the church to decide to take a stand. They headed up a coalition of community groups calling for greater accountability in the local government, and for the return of squandered money.

The church has changed hugely since the day they said 'no' to the community centre project. They have grown in confidence and discovered their gifts. As a whole church they now get involved in serving the community, not just a few isolated individuals. The

church has become more relevant to the community. People are now more ready to listen to their message. And the church has discovered that 'small can be beautiful'—that it is not always necessary to do big projects but that small projects with love and compassion can make just as big a difference.

Conclusion

Part 3 of Chris Wright's *Mission of God* provides a compelling biblical and theological foundation for what has been argued in this paper. It is fitting to conclude with just one quotation from this magnificent volume:

The question is, Is the *church as a whole* reflecting the wholeness of God's redemption? Is the church (thinking here of the local church as the organism effectively and strategically placed for God's mission in any given community) aware of all that God's mission summons them to participate in? Is the church through the combined engagement of *all* its members, applying the redemptive power of the cross of Christ to *all* the effects of sin and evil in the surrounding lives, society and environment?

The ringing slogan of the Lausanne movement is: 'The whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world.' Holistic mission cannot be the responsibility of any one individual. But it is certainly the responsibility of the whole church.⁹

⁹ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Nottingham/Grand Rapids: IVP, 2006), p. 322. See Part 3 'The People of Mission', pp. 189-392.