

CHAPTER 11

Holistic Mission: A Thai Church's Ministry to the Whole Person

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[This chapter is a slightly revised form of the article entitled, "The Integration of Development and Evangelism," which was published in *Missiology*, 26.2 (April, 1998): 131-142.]

In June 1983, participants from a broad spectrum of evangelical churches, missions, and aid agencies met at Wheaton College, Illinois, to discuss the issue, "The Church in Response to Human Need." The consensus of those meetings as found in the resulting "Wheaton '83 Statement" was that "we do not emphasize Evangelism as a separate theme, because we see it as an integral part of our total Christian response to human need" (Samuel and Sugden 1987: 254-265). The declaration and the main body of the Wheaton '83 Statement highlight a struggle on the part of evangelicals to move from a separatistic understanding of the relationship of

evangelism and social action to a more holistic or integrated understanding of the relationship between the two.

The beginning of an evangelical consensus is documented as early as 1974 when the Lausanne Covenant proclaimed,

Although reconciliation with man 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 Christian duty (Lausanne Committee 1974: para. 4).

Although this early statement advocated that both evangelism and social action are part of Christian duty, thus implying that the results of evangelism should impact society, the nature of that relationship was not spelled out (Samuel and Sugden 1987: 175).

Almost a decade later, the consensus of the "Consultation on the Relationship Between Evangelism and Social Responsibility" held in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1982, was that social action is an adjunct to the task of evangelism. Development was seen as a "consequence of evangelism," a "bridge to evangelism," and a "partner to evangelism" (Lausanne Committee 1982: para. a).

Commenting on the growing consensus in the evangelical community on the relationship of evangelism to development, Tite Tienou in his paper given at the Wheaton Consultation in 1983 noted,

Social transformation is part of the message of and a natural outgrowth of evangelism... (but) it will likely not take place through a dead evangelism: evangelism will likely not result in social transformation unless the church and Christian community witness by their lifestyles that they have been transformed. If we really mean business let us deflate our empty words and inflate our actions (Samuel and Sugden 1987: 179).

Today, some 20 years after the above statements were made, we are still discussing the relationship between development and

evangelism. It seems that consultation statements and an overall consensus of opinion do not necessarily bring about policy changes or action within the larger evangelical community! The question that springs to mind is *why?* If, in fact, after over two decades of discussion and dialogue on the subject, we have really arrived at a consensus, why then is holistic ministry not being more widely practiced by the evangelical community around the world?

I believe the answer is to be found in a number of obstacles that impede the progress of the implementation of the holistic mission of the church around the world today.

Obstacles to the Practice of Holistic Ministry in the Church

1. A Continuing Separation of Evangelism and Development: A Narrow Understanding of Evangelism

In spite of the rhetoric of the Wheaton '83 Statement, the fact is that the evangelical community at large remains, to this day, committed in largely to a "separatistic" concept of the relationship of development to evangelism. Development and evangelism are still regarded by the majority in evangelicalism as two distinct, if necessary, "duties" of the church. The use of such terms in the above statements on the relationship of evangelism and development as "linking," "bridging," "consequence of," and "partner to" betray a continuing bifurcation of the relationship of these two important entities. They are considered to be different parts of the same being. They are seen as "different" concepts and only related to each other as independent parts of a broader church mission.

This mindset is enhanced by, or perhaps enhances, the structural distinction of two separate organizational components of the broader church movement, the mission agencies, and the aid and development agencies. At the very least, these two entities of the Christian movement are different departments in the same denomination; at the most, they are entirely independent

organizations, the one seen as focused on "spiritual" ministry and the other on "socio-economic" work. They are often linked by the "add-on-an-evangelist" syndrome where development projects are given spiritual credibility by the addition of an evangelist who is related to a separate department or organization.

I believe that this continuing tendency to separate development and evangelism is the result of a "truncated" concept of evangelism. This concept sees evangelism as "spreading the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures" (Lausanne Committee 1974: para. 4). The "verbal" expression of the good news is seen as evangelism. It is proclamation oriented and dedicated to the verbal presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ to all humanity. The myth perpetuated by this understanding of evangelism is that "hearing" the gospel is the equivalent to "being reached" by the gospel.

I would be the last to deny that this is what evangelism is about. It is, however, not the whole picture. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not just a *word*; it is a *living word*. The gospel is *life*, which includes the making of prepositional statements about its nature but at its *best* is the *incarnation* of the Word of God into the cultures and lives of humankind around the world. It is "doing the gospel" which is mandated by Scripture. Jesus himself is our model. As we read in John 1:14, he "became flesh" (all that it meant to be human) and "dwelt among us" (lived with us as one of us) and was "full of grace and truth" (the gospel). As a result, "we beheld his glory" (we saw the truth by his grace). Jesus was the first evangelist and his method of incarnation remains what evangelism is about to this day.

Evangelism is about enabling the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ to be born into our lives, our cultures, our societies, our organizations, and our traditions. It is about enabling that gospel of grace to live in and permeate us and our context in such a way that it "transforms" us and our environment to become what we and our environment are meant to be in Christ. Evangelism *is* transformation,

transformation *is* development, and development *is* evangelism in a very real sense.

There is a need to replace the narrow concepts of evangelism held by many today with a more biblical understanding of the holistic nature of evangelism. Until we do this, we will remain bound in the confines of our separatistic thinking, robbing evangelism of its natural process in all of life and development of its power.

2. *A Secular Definition of Development: A Constrictive Interpretation of Development*

Since development is persistently separated from evangelism in the minds of many Christians, it is easy to see how for them development becomes a concept defined not by the teaching of God's Word, but by the secular mind that coined the term. As long as development is perceived of as separate from evangelism, in whatever way, it will continually fail to be defined in a way consistent with the Word of God. As long as development is defined in a secular manner, there is no possibility of integrating it with the biblical concept of evangelism.

The influence of the secular mindset is strong. It is based on normative value premises about what is or is not desirable that are often in conflict with the teaching of the Word of God. It is geared toward indicators of success that often have little to do with development as understood from a biblical perspective. An example of this can be seen in the economist's approach to secular development that has economic growth as its ultimate goal. Even at the micro level of grassroots development projects, this mindset persists. As its goal is to increase income, its focus is individualistic and often pits individual entrepreneurs against each other in competition. The better-off poor minority is its target since they are more likely to succeed, given the economic definition of success, than are the poorest majority. It is an up-and-out mode of

development based on Adam Smith's famous notion that "if each individual consumer, producer and supplier of resources pursues self-interest, he or she will, as if by an 'invisible hand,' be promoting the overall interests of society" (Todaro 1989: 5).

More important for us than the fact that Adam Smith's principle is not working in Third World settings today is the fact that the whole economic development mindset, with its focus on individualism and self-attainment, is in total contrast to the Word of God. The focus of God's Word is on the good of the group or the "body." It teaches self-denial and service to others as the way life should be lived. Its central theme is to love God above all else and to love others as we love ourselves. A development mindset that is based on individualistic self-attainment is contrary to the basic thrust of God's Word and as such needs to be rejected as a definition of what development is about for the church.

The secular development mindset both repels and appeals. On the one hand, it puts the term "development" into a conflictive position with evangelism and accuses it of being less than spiritual. As a result, development programs connected to the church are often accused of bringing spiritual death or of squelching the growth of the church. On the other hand, the secular mindset often dictates the norms for both policy and procedure, for both programs and standards for evaluating those programs within Christian development organizations.

What is badly needed is a critical evaluation of the secular development mindset that will determine which aspects of the mindset are consistent with and which are opposed to the Word of God. As Christians, our definition of development must stem from principles and values from God's Word and not from the theories of secular development. Biblical theology ought to dictate our development principles and values. The Word of God must be the norm from which all of our development theory is drawn. If the church does not re-interpret the meaning of development in the light

of Scripture, there is no way that development can be integrated with evangelism. However, if development is interpreted by the Word of God, both development and evangelism will be found to merge and mesh until they are firmly integrated.

3. *A Crisis of Faith: Theological Infidelity*

Tite Tienou's statement that social transformation (development) will not occur through "dead evangelism" is an important point (Samuel and Sugden 1987: 179). He defines "dead evangelism" as that done by the Christian community that is not being transformed and is not living out that process of transformation in their lifestyle. The immediate question that springs to mind is, how can there be dead evangelism within the church of Jesus Christ given the nature of the gospel and its power to transform? From my experience of almost three decades in holistic ministry in Thailand, I am convinced that the answer to that question is that there is a crisis of faith in the church today that is sapping it of the transforming power of God.

According to the Word of God in Romans 1:16-17, the gospel is "the power of God for salvation." The power of the gospel lies in the fact that it reveals God's righteousness, which is given freely to all people. The only requirement is that they in faith accept God's righteousness and as a result, experience his transforming power. In short, the gospel is completely and solely a word about what *God* has done for human beings by his *grace*.

Moffatt has noted that "the Bible is a religion of grace or it is nothing at all...no grace, no gospel" (1932: 15). God's purpose is to bring humankind to salvation by the power of his grace and not by the efforts or personal goodness of any human being (Eph. 2:8-9). In the gospel it is only what God has done and will do that counts. The problem is that every fiber of human nature causes us to think that

we can earn God's favor and indeed, that we *must*, if we are to be accepted by God.

I am deeply concerned about what I feel is a departure from the gospel of grace in the church around the world today. The focus of a large segment of the church is on *law* and not *grace*. Even if the rhetoric is *grace*, the practice is *law*. The emphasis of much Christian teaching is on being good enough to please God. Law and obedience to the law are held up as the indicators of a person's salvation, this in spite of the Word of God in Romans 3:20, which tells us that there in no way a person can be saved by obedience to the law. In fact, the basic function of the law, according to God's Word, is to drive humankind to despair of their own ability to save themselves and to cast themselves in total dependence on the grace of God in Jesus Christ. It is *only* by the power of God's grace that we are saved and transformed into all that God desires us to be.

I feel that the church is often "duped" by the "religious" value system of the society it is in, which teaches that humans must work at being morally good in order to please God and find salvation. The overriding concern becomes morality, and the method and message become *law*. The basic problem with this way of thinking is that it is not the teaching of the gospel. The gospel of God teaches that human beings are not and cannot be good enough to please God by obedience to the law. There no one good except God himself (Luke 18:19). This goodness (righteousness) of God is free to all who believe and accept it (Eph. 2:8-9). This goodness of God is the power of God (Rom. 1:16-17) that will utterly transform those who experience it to become what God intends them to be (Rom. 12:2).

This is development in the true sense of the word. It is also evangelism of the best kind. As the church truly understands and believes the gospel of God's grace and not only accepts it personally but lives out the gospel in every aspect of its organizational life and work, the power of God's grace will enable the ongoing transformation of both the church and its society. By God's grace

evangelism and development are bonded to each other. Both are empowered by the grace of God, and both are the expressions of God's grace as it is lived out in the church and its society.

4. A Cultural Insensitivity: Cultural Imperialism

Perhaps one of the greatest obstacles to the church's being the source of social transformation within its own society is the fact that the church today in most settings is culturally a foreigner in its own culture. Especially in Third World countries, this is true. The church has often been established with the motto "the West is best" in mind. As a result, "formal correspondence" becomes the model on which most churches in the Third World are based, and Western Christianity is the model to which they conform. Local culture is seen as "sinful" and not measuring up to God's standard. Little thought is given to the fact that Western culture itself does not measure up to God's standard. The forms and expressions of the church in the West are seen as the real Christian expression of the gospel and are copied religiously. Anything departing from this norm is seen as syncretistic and heretical.

In fact, this very Western, formal correspondence Christianity is the most syncretistic of all. Although the form of the church remains that of the West, more often than not, the content (values) remain that of the local culture. The problem that this creates is twofold. On the one hand, the form of Western Christianity is foreign to most cultures of the world (as well as being extremely foreign to its own diversified culture today). It does not have entry into these cultures and is not easily understood by them. On the other hand, if the Western form of Christianity is always an outsider and is rarely understood in non-Western cultures, then what it houses (its content—belief or values—which is the power of the gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ will never have a chance to impact the hearts and minds of those non-Western cultures. If this, in fact, is the

case, as it certainly is from my study and experience, then it is no wonder that the church is generally unable to impact its culture and society with the power of the gospel. Evangelism and development are dead because Western Christianity blocks the effective communication of the gospel of God's grace, which alone is the dynamo that can empower the church's movement into its society.

The overall problem is a lack of cultural sensitivity on the part of the church today. Cultural sensitivity provides the means for enabling the power of the gospel to address clearly the context of any culture and thereby bring about the necessary transformation of society. There are two basic aspects to cultural sensitivity. First, cultural sensitivity enables us to use local forms and expressions to communicate clearly and effectively the gospel of God's grace and its implications in a way that can be understood easily and simply by people in culture. This is what Jesus did when he "became flesh" and "dwelt among us." Second, cultural sensitivity enables us to pierce to the core of local culture and detect those aspects of the value system that need to be confronted and transformed by the grace of God. As these are detected and the gospel is clearly and simply communicated and lived out in culturally appropriate ways, it will confront the local value system by the power of God resulting in a process of transformation (a change in values and lifestyle).

A Case in Point: Holistic Ministry in Northeast Thailand

For over 30 years, I have worked with my wife and a growing number of Northeastern Thai colleagues, to do holistic ministry in Northeast Thailand. The name for this ministry in Thai is *patina tung krop* or "integrated holistic development." It is *development* in the sense that it seeks to transform people from where they are to what they are meant to be in Christ. It is *holistic* in the sense that it deals with the whole person and all areas of his or her life. It is *integrated*

in that all aspects of the ministry are tied together and could not exist or function independently of each other.

This integrated holistic development was begun with the establishment of the Center for Church Planting and Church Growth in Northeast Thailand (CCPCG) in 1977. Its original purpose was to plant "contextualized dynamic equivalence" churches in Northeast Thailand, the poverty belt of the country. Since its beginnings in 1977, the Center and its ministry have grown. It has given birth to over 40 "mother" churches and over 200 "daughter" churches. In 1983, it started the Issaan Development Foundation (IDF) to deal with the social, economic and physical needs of the people of Northeast Thailand. In 1993, the CCPCG changed its name to The Institute for Sustainable Development (ISD). With the name change came a more holistic focus for the organization. The ISD today does research and curriculum development training in all areas of holistic ministry related to the churches for which it is responsible.

In late 2002, the IDF underwent a series of changes, one of which was the independent formation of the Isan Aquatics Farm (IAF) development organization that has assumed the socio-economic development roles of the IDF. The ISD and the IAF are today working together to facilitate the growth and expansion of contextualized churches in Northeast Thailand.

Both the ISD and the IAF are owned and operated by Northeastern Thai who are committed to the same integrated holistic ministry. They work together to enable the local churches in the area to "do the gospel" in their own communities. The ISD focuses on research and training in all areas of the ministry. This includes those areas related to the churches' faith and practice: church planting, faith (theology) and culture, and musicology (using local instruments, song and dance, as well as the life of the church in society). The IAF is concerned with enabling the local church to impact the socio-economic areas of its context.