



THE CHANGING CONTOURS OF
WORLD MISSION & CHRISTIANITY

The Changing Contours of World Mission and Christianity: Celebrating the Centenary of Edinburgh 1910¹

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In 2010 the theological and ecclesial communities gathered to discern the missional challenges of our times with at least a dozen conferences worldwide celebrating the centenary anniversary of Edinburgh 1910. Acknowledgements and celebration were in order as the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 had led to multiple mission movements, the development of ecumenical agencies, the growth of world Christianity, and engagement with peoples of other living faiths. The amazing diversity and vitality that has emerged over the past one hundred years is documented in *The Atlas of Global Christianity*, edited by Todd Johnson of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and Kenneth Ross of the University of Edinburgh (University of Edinburgh, 2009).

Prior to his passing, Missiologist Ralph Winter had singled out four of these many conferences as particularly important: **Tokyo** (May), **Edinburgh** (June), **Cape Town** (October), and **Boston** (November). Of these four conferences Tokyo and Cape Town were the most clearly Evangelical while Edinburgh and Boston most clearly Ecumenical. Yet if mission is the mother of ecumenism, then even the Evangelical conferences were Ecumenical and the Ecumenical ones were Evangelical to some degree.

Nevertheless, this division of conferences is understandable. In this context, each had its own clear emphasis. The closing **Tokyo** Declaration signaled that conference's clear affirmation of evangelism and sponsorship by the U.S. Center for World Mission, the Global Network of Mission Structures, and churches in Korea and Japan. Its planning group consisted of persons representing the global church. Tokyo was unapologetic about "Finishing the Task" of worldwide evangelism, yet with an accent on discipleship which added depth to its breadth. **Cape Town** was a champion of holistic mission, bringing evangelism and social justice together. By far the largest conference, it was organized by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization in partnership with the World Evangelical Alliance.

Edinburgh 2010 was run by a Council representative of all strands of the world Church, and was hosted by the University of Edinburgh, with endorsement by the World

Council of Churches. Its Common Call reflects the conference's amazing diversity and supplemented its emphasis on the *missio dei*. The conference in **Boston** drew together students, faculty, clergy and lay persons from over twenty different countries, and from more than a dozen states under the auspices of the Boston Theological Institute, the ecumenical (and now inter-faith) consortium of theological schools in the Greater Boston Area. As at Edinburgh, the conference at Boston was clear in its concern for unity amongst Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox, and other segments of the global churches. The Boston conference was of an academic nature, calling professors and research students to study the phenomenon that is missionary history, the expansion of the Church, and the rise of World Christianity. Students helped to shape the mission movement in 1910. They are central to it in 2010. This was clear in the Boston conference.

Each of these four conferences tried to address the latest issues facing mission in the 21st century, and what has changed in the last 100 years since 1910.

I would like now to highlight what was distinctive about the Boston 2010 conference (www.2010boston.org), a conference supported by the Mass. Council of Churches, the Overseas Ministries Study Center, the American Society of Missiology – Eastern Fellowship and the New England and Maritimes American Academy of Religion. In keeping with the academic character of the conference, it opened with an address by Boston University historian of mission, Professor Dana Robert (also the opening speaker in Edinburgh) at Boston's historic Park Street Church on, "*Boston, Students, and Missions from 1810 to 2010.*" She documented the incredible legacy of piety and learning that led to what can only be called in retrospect a global NGO movement, the founding of churches, schools, hospitals and social service agencies – laying the foundation for a legacy of social capital. Her remarks were matched by those of Angelyn Dries of St. Louis University respecting a parallel history in American Roman Catholicism. Both speakers drew this down to the present with renewed mission interest evident in the newly-founded Institute for Orthodox Mission at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology.

The conference closed with three lectures for students by Anglican Archbishop of York. John Sentamu (also closing speaker at Edinburgh). The Archbishop, originally of Uganda, spoke on "*Who is Jesus and What Does He Mean to Those Who Put Their Trust in Him?*" In between were analyses of the history of Edinburgh by Brian Stanley (University of Edinburgh), remarks on the relation between Edinburgh and Vatican II by Peter Phan (Georgetown University), social and cultural analyses by Ruth Padilla DeBorst (Latin American Theological Fraternity) and Daniel Jeyaraj (of Liverpool Hope University and Andover Newton), and challenging talks about contemporary mission by Brian McLaren, Athanasios Papathanasiou and others – in addition to a wide array of student papers on eight "Edinburgh" themes modeled on those of the original Edinburgh Conference and its Study Commissions.

A Closing General Assembly was held in Harvard University's Memorial Church at which Professor Susan Abraham of Harvard Divinity School posed a question of mission drawing upon post-colonial and post-modern interests. In response, and drawing

upon the eight thematic workshops that ran through the duration of the conference, faculty-led small groups developed the following eight areas of further study as the Boston Conference's contribution to the centenary history of Edinburgh 1910.

1. **Changing Contours of Christian Unity**

Professor Raymond Helmick, SJ (Boston College, Department of Theology), Chair

An assumption that God has made himself and his saving work available only to us is a corruption of the Gospel in the direction of a theology of domination and exclusion, and has historically made the practice of Christian mission vulnerable to exploitation by Western colonialism.

2. **Mission in Context**

Professor Margaret Guider, OSF (Boston College, School of Theology and Ministry), Chair

All mission is contextual. Attention needs to be given to the social, cultural and a historical context in which mission happens.

3. **Disciples in Mission**

Fr. Luke Veronis (Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology), Chair

Missionaries are disciples. They are never "above" the other to whom they seek to proclaim the good news. We need strategies of listening and learning that affirm a common journey and respected spiritual ends helping each other progress towards our Lord.

4. **Education for Mission**

Dr. Elizabeth Parsons (Boston University School of Theology), Chair

We affirm an emphasis on Biblical and theological literacy and on addressing the concrete, daily life issues of communities. Yet there seems to be a lack of connection between what takes in theological education and discussion about "mission," and what is actually going on in the churches. There is a need for intellectual and practical training of the laity and of pastors that should concern both new images for mission and be open to new structures (e.g. NGO/FBO work). We should be open both to God's mission as taking place through "non-Christian" means such as "secular" NGOs and to experiencing God's movement in material, non-verbally dependent ways.

5. **Mission Post-Colonialism**

Professor MT Davila (Andover Newton Theological School), Chair

How do we acknowledge the positive elements of the diverse relationships that stem out of the missionary movements of the 19th and 20th century while at the same time taking seriously the picture of relationships marked by domination and violence brought to light by the descriptive tools of post-colonial thought? For many, suffering was a common element shared by a variety of populations and to which missionaries must attend.

6. **Mission Pluralist World**

Professor Catherine Cornille (Boston College, Department of Theology), Chair

Among the several challenges posed by non-Christian religions is this: to maintain a proper balance between the saving work of Christ and of the Spirit. In this, interreligious dialogue may remind missionaries that proclamation is not a one-way exercise, and that Christian mission may have much to learn from other religions. It also points to the importance in mission of placing one's trust ultimately in the Holy Spirit, rather than in human effort and ingenuity.

7. **Mission Post-Modernity**

Dr. Todd Johnson (Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary), Chair

The dominance theme often fostered by Christians in the Global North makes Christians in the Global South suspicious of motives in mission from the North. The Northern Church needs to become a listener rather than an instructor. In order for this reality to change, a broad and comprehensive rediscovery of the Christological roots of the mission is needed. At the same time, the Northern Church needs to be reintroduced to Christ.

8. **“Salvation Today”**

Professor Peter Kuzmic (Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary), Chair

*Christians differ in the way they conceptualize salvation. Differences of understanding shape views and practices of mission. For those to whom salvation is primarily understood to be the restoration of an individual's relationship with God, verbal proclamation of the gospel as evangelism is primary for “faith comes by hearing” and “salvation is by faith alone.” Others understand salvation as mediated through the church by the means of sacraments. Still, most find salvation to be a comprehensive term expressing God's loving concern for the well-being of all humanity and that the aim of mission should therefore be the recovery of the *imago Dei* in every person. Support for the United Nations' Millennial Development Goals (MDG) was seen to be an appropriate means toward this end. One paper by a theologizing physician interpreted the MDG in the “spirit of Edinburgh 1910” by stating: “If accomplished, these goals could provide unprecedented opportunity for all nations to have better access to the message of hope found in the gospel of Jesus Christ by removing barriers to receptivity such as early death, illiteracy, hunger, religious oppression and cultural isolation.” The conclusion reached was that salvation today should be interpreted as humanization and transformation and that its goal is optimally expressed in the theological metaphor of 'new creation' whose ultimate completion, however, remains in the *eschaton*.*

It would be useful to take these eight themes and to work with them in light of the 5 “Corinthian Café” topics laid out by the National Council of Churches and with respect to the four trajectories for social action laid out by the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation to meet in Jamaica in May, 2011.

In conclusion, permit me to close with this: ecumenism without mission becomes bureaucracy and mission without ecumenism undermines the *missio dei*.

¹ Preliminary Draft: These concluding statements are summaries of notes that need to be affirmed by the BTI International Mission and Ecumenism Committee. Elements of this paper draw upon the work of Allen Yeh.