

Monday, November 15, 2010

A publication of the Presbyterian Lay Committee

Mission-minded Christians 1910 World Missionary Conference

By G. Jeffrey MacDonald, Correspondent to The Layman, Posted Wednesday, November 10, 2010

CHESTNUT HILL, Mass. – Christians eager to make disciples and witness to the love of Christ had better be ready to apologize for the church’s sins. Otherwise, they won’t get a hearing from a skeptical and wary world.

That message came through clearly this month (Nov. 4-7) as mission-minded Christians, students and scholars gathered in Boston for the centennial anniversary of the 1910 World Missionary Conference. The 2010 Boston conference, which drew attendees from as far away as Australia, was the fourth international gathering to mark the historic anniversary and to chart a course for missions in the century ahead.

An estimated 300 attendees heard speaker after speaker tell how mission workers of all stripes need to rise to meet this century’s emerging challenges. They’re expected to witness to truth while respecting other religions, which can mean walking a delicate and volatile line. They’re called to speak and act with moral authority, yet they bear the taint of one church scandal after scandal, which have bred deep suspicion of churches and Christians.

How then might mission-focused Christians be effective in the coming century? By taking the costly road of discipleship, participants said during sessions at Boston College, and by humbly confessing how the church has sinned and needs forgiveness.

“The greatest stumbling block to God’s work in God’s world ... is the unfaithfulness of the church,” said Ruth Padilla DeBorst, general secretary of the Latin American Theological Fellowship in San Jose, Costa Rica. “We need to hear the prophetic word: repent and believe ... Before we take the Gospel to the world, we must confess our lack of faithfulness to God.”

But, she added, confessions for specific wrongdoings of the church cannot be done behind closed doors, as if in a confessional booth. They must be lifted up for all the world to hear, such as when the church repents for effectively supporting South African apartheid with a theology that often justified an unjust system.

“What is called for is public confession,” DeBorst said. “Evils, crimes perpetrated and social wounds must be publicly remembered, named, faced, confessed and mourned. Space must be created for all voices and stories to be heard, and for collective repentance

and forgiveness to take place.”

When asked for close-to-home examples, DeBorst urged American Christians to admit their churches have sometimes been wrong in treating immigration as a political issue, rather than showing mercy toward migrant peoples in need. Audience members nodded in agreement. Afterward, some acknowledged it’s risky for churches to confess sins of any sort publicly since Christianity’s critics would have a field day exploiting such confessions. Others might lose faith. But, they added, failing to take such risks would pose an even greater danger – that is, Christians would appear indifferent to the church’s moral failings, or would appear to lack confidence in a God who forgives sins.

“We should confess for the way we’ve approached immigration, for the way we’ve treated those in poverty across the country, and for racism,” said Bradley Johnson, a 23-year-old evangelical and graduate student at Wake Forest University. “To say, ‘we’re aware of these attitudes, we’re wrong for doing this, we’re wrong for thinking this and we’re doing our best to go forward.’ I think that would lead to a slightly better image [for the church and for missions]. A few years ago, the Southern Baptist Convention confessed their role in slavery, and I think that was a really good thing for them to do.”

Other participants said public apologies have strengthened their moral standing among non-Christians. In Australia, no denomination can belong to the Australian National Council of Churches until it has publicly repented for the role that churches played in producing a so-called “stolen generation.” In the 20th century, churches helped remove children from villages where they were feared to be at risk of fraternizing with another race, according to Amelia Koh-Butler, director of the Education for Life and Ministry Center, a Sydney-based organization that trains thousands each year for missionary work.

“Before those confessions, people held it against the church because [the removal of children] was such an obvious sin,” Koh-Butler said. “It’s like opening a door” to have confessed publicly, she said. That’s because Australia’s non-believers and church critics are now more inclined to listen when Christians speak.

For participants in 2010 Boston, the challenge at hand was partially to re-invigorate missions by remembering 1910. Speakers recalled that gathering of some 1,200 American and European Protestants in Edinburgh, Scotland as a capstone on the 19th-century overseas missions movement and as a Protestant precursor to Vatican II.

They also aimed to build upon 2010’s prior international, ecumenical gatherings. They took account of the Tokyo 2010 Declaration, which re-affirms a call for Christians to bring the Gospel “to every creature,” to baptize and encourage lifestyles consistent with “Biblical morals.” They considered what delegates had to say at Edinburgh in June and at the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, held at Cape Town, South Africa in October.

“This [conference] is really trying to synthesize the other three,” said Allen Yeh, an assistant professor of history at Biola University and author of a forthcoming book on the

international missions conferences of 2010. “It’s saying, ‘we have these three: how do we understand them? And where do we go from here?’”

As the caboose of this year’s events, 2010 Boston focused largely on how to keep past mistakes from hampering future mission work. That meant taking aim at systemic problems and proposing ways to redeem them.

Example: sharing faith with members of other religions. Staging conversations between members of other religious groups has for decades been understood in Catholic teaching as a type of preparation for evangelism, according to Peter Phan, a Catholic theologian at Georgetown University. That’s been somewhat problematic, he said, in part because it leads to confusion about how to understand other religions. Are they just means, or warm-up acts, for Christian ends? Or do other religions have value in their own right? Catholic teaching has been ambiguous on these points, he said.

Phan concluded that inter-religious dialogue shouldn’t be seen primarily as a prelude for missions but as a wholly separate and unrelated undertaking.

“Maybe we should re-introduce [missions and inter-religious dialogue] as friends, as collaborators, or as non-identical twins, but not as one subordinate to the other,” Phan said.

Others, however, were not convinced that missions and inter-religious dialogue should be, or even can be, separate enterprises. Catherine Cornille, chair of the Boston College Department of Theology, said Christians should see inter-religious dialogue as part and parcel to missionary activity. That’s because both sides share facts for a higher purpose than just building understanding; each side wants to persuade the other that its beliefs are ultimately true. But many Americans, especially younger ones, don’t dare engage in robust inter-religious dialogue because they worry – unnecessarily, in Cornille’s view – that religious persuasion is an inherently disrespectful pursuit.

“That’s why people in other religions have these dialogues: to convince the other of the truths of what you believe,” Cornille said. “Christianity is the only religion that makes a distinction between mission and dialogue with other religions. [When dialoging across faith lines], you can believe yours is a higher truth and try to persuade others. But you don’t have to say yours has all the truth... It’s important to acknowledge there is truth beyond Christianity.”

Others found patterns where institutions tend to thwart the best intentions of mission-minded churchgoers. That’s been the case for evangelicals in the Church of the Nazarene, the Wesleyan Church and Southern Baptist Convention, according to Derrick Lemons, a United Methodist pastor and anthropologist who studies churches at the University of Georgia.

In one case study, Lemons showed how the Southern Baptist Convention has tried over the past year to capitalize on the idea of missional congregations sending people out to engage neighbors, do good works and share testimonies in their communities. But in

practice, Lemons said, the denomination has instead beefed up funding plans for its North American Mission Board. Local congregations, he said, have been overlooked in a process that turns “missional” on its head. Rather than send SBC members out to engage communities, the denomination has prioritized recruiting new people in to SBC churches. “This is the old church growth project in missional clothing,” Lemons said.

Others questioned whether short-term mission trips are truly faithful and helpful to local communities in need – or if they too often distort the meaning of missions by seeking to transform the lives of missionaries first and foremost. Peter Folan, assistant director of Boston College’s First Year Experience program, said Catholic universities tend to structure outreach projects so that participants might first bond with one another, work together and then reflect intentionally on their experiences. But that approach comes at the expense of meaningful engagement with local communities, he argued, and creates an unfortunate, even unfaithful divide between those serving and those being served.

“The ‘bond, work, reflect’ model ends up isolating [mission trip participants] from the poor and the marginalized,” Folan said.

While 2010 Boston tended to focus on problems yet to be resolved, participants were treated to encouraging signs as well. As in 1910, about one-third of people across the globe today are Christians, according to data presented by Todd Johnson, director of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He said that’s largely because the church has grown rapidly in Asia, Africa and Latin America even as its percentages have declined in North America and Europe over the past century.

Johnson’s data showed room for improvement, too. He said 86 percent of the world’s Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus do not know even one Christian. Since friendship often undergirds the spread of faith, “the friendship gap is significant,” Johnson said. He also noted that 40 percent of the world’s Christians (primarily in the northern hemisphere) receive 83 percent of the world’s income. Awareness of that gap in resources helps account for a growing interest in social justice activism among evangelicals.

“The changing face of mission includes a recovery of social justice,” Yeh said. “18th and 19th century evangelicals – such as John Wesley, William Wilberforce and Charles Grandison Finney – were all into social justice. But that was lost during the 20th century. So this is a recovery of that.”