Edinburgh 2010: How Far Have We Come?
Andrew R. H. Thompson

The Edinburgh 2010 World Mission Conference is a powerful example of how much mission has changed in the hundred years since the 1910 conference. It is also a clear reminder of how little progress we've made.

The changes were clear; a cursory glance around the conference revealed a far different group from the one assembled a hundred years ago. Organizers made a sincere effort to include delegates from groups that had been included only marginally, or not at all, in the first conference: Roman Catholics and Orthodox, indigenous groups, participants from the global south, women, and young people. Worship was designed to be as inclusive and creative as possible (and indeed, under the leadership of the Iona Community's John Bell, worship was one of the highlights of the experience). Imbalances and abuses of power that have too often characterized missionary activities were acknowledged and lamented. These advances all call for celebration.

Many important ideas, both new and well-established (but nonetheless urgent for that), were raised. Among the latter, one of the most significant was the recognition that mission can no longer be viewed as unidirectional, principally from countries in what may be called the "global North" to those in the "global South." Dr. Fidon Mwombeki reminded delegates, first, that much of the impact of mission in history was due to the local communities' graceful reception of missionaries, and, second, that, in spite of the general failure to acknowledge it, a great deal of contemporary mission is from, within, and among former mission fields. The distinction between "sending" and "receiving" countries can no longer stand. One of the most urgent issues for contemporary mission is therefore for communities in Europe and North America to recognize their own need and the very real contributions offered by Christians from other continents. Related, and equally significant, discussions emphasized the need for mutuality in mission, for careful attention to context and experience, and for social and environmental justice as central concerns for mission efforts.

Some ideas were perhaps more unconventional. In his concluding reflections on the conference, Dr. Vinoth Ramachandra delivered an impassioned call to reconceive mission not solely as the responsibility of appointed missionaries (and much less that of academics and religious professionals), but rather fundamentally as the work of believers everywhere whose lives testify to Christ in the public sphere. This view of mission is multidirectional, in all times and places, and emphasizes the role of laypeople. Thus while the intercultural encounter of international mission remains an invaluable aspect of that engagement, we ought no longer see it as the only, or even the paradigmatic, form of mission. The challenge of mission in the twenty-first century is the challenge of God's people everywhere witnessing to the world around them.

All of these developments notwithstanding, the conference was also a clear reminder that we still have far to go if we are to overcome traditional shortcomings and prejudices. Despite the commendable inclusion of typically marginalized perspectives, the intellectual and institutional character of the conference meant that these voices – young people, non-whites, non-professionals and non-academics, women, and those for whom English was not a first language – often went unheard. Dominant voices sadly remained dominant. Attention to past – and in some cases, painfully present – abuses

was, in general, not frank enough. Early in the conference Bishop Geevarghese Mor Coorilos urged us to be straightforward about issues of power, race, gender, injustice, and exploitation – to "name the demons" that continue to possess our approaches to mission. Perhaps because of the desire for unity, these demons, though not ignored, were not named clearly enough. If they are ever to be exorcised, we must first address them honestly, however threatening it may be.

The 2010 World Mission Conference is a momentous achievement. There is much here for Episcopalians and Anglicans to celebrate and embrace. As an opportunity to meet and engage in serious (and even joyful) sharing with diverse Christians participating in God's mission all over the world, it was an incredibly enriching experience. At times, the well-worn notion of Christian unity in diversity was indeed tangible. Yet for the conference to have real impact, and, more importantly, to be faithful to the divine mission, it must broaden and deepen its scope. For Edinburgh 2010 truly to be counted as a success, its insights will need to be entrusted to, challenged by, and (we may pray) accepted by God's people everywhere in the world.

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The Common Call for mission from the conference is available here:
http://www.edinburgh2010.org/fileadmin/files/edinburgh2010/files/conference_docs/Common_Call_final.pdf