

Report of the Christian Communities and Mission Study Group

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LYNNE TAYLOR

lynne.taylor@otago.ac.nz

Jack Somerville Lecturer in Pastoral Theology, Theology Programme, University of Otago, Aotearoa New Zealand

NIGEL ROOMS

nigel.rooms@churchmissionsociety.org

Church Mission Society, Oxford UK and The Queen's Foundation, Birmingham, UK

The Christian Communities and Mission Study Group (CC&M) was conceived at the 2016 International Association of Mission Studies (IAMS) Assembly in Seoul and later accepted as a study group by the IAMS Executive Committee. The meeting in Sydney was our first gathering to share papers. As conveners of the Group and knowing its connection to *Ecclesial Futures* we share this brief report with readers of the journal.

The *Christian Communities and Mission Study Group* understands local Christian communities as (a) the hermeneutic of the gospel and (b) meeting God's future as it comes towards us in the shape of the reign of God within the particular time and place that we find ourselves. This requires these communities

to be constantly adapting and changing as they orient themselves towards God's preferred and promised future in a rapidly changing world. We believe study and research in how local churches change to be increasingly faithful in their everyday apostolicity is urgently needed.

SCHEDULE AND PROCESS

CC&M received 40 paper proposals for the (postponed) 2020 Sydney assembly, 33 of which were accepted for this Study Group. Of those 2020 papers, 12 were reconfirmed for 2022 and we had 17 more proposals for 2022 of which 13 were accepted. In the end, due to the usual last-minute changes, there were 21 presentations scheduled and 20 delivered.

IAMS was run as a hybrid conference, both online and onsite at Morling College. The CC&M conveners put a lot of thought into how the benefits of being hybrid could be maximized for our study group, and potential disadvantages minimized. We decided early in 2022 to use a "flipped classroom" approach to sharing the papers and asked each presenter to record a 20-minute video of their material which could be watched beforehand. As conveners we encouraged participants to view, make comments, and provide questions on the videos, and did so ourselves for each presentation. Written papers were also available beforehand.

Interactive learning was an important priority for us, modelling something foundational to this group – the formation of Christian community around God's mission. Thus, we organized the papers into seven different themes and in each session the two or three presenters (from the same theme) offered a short five-minute summary of their paper. Then, rather than discussing each individual paper one by one, we encouraged a community of learning to form, inviting "generous, appreciative, inquiring and probing" comments and questions from those in the room and online on all of the presentations. This enabled commonalities and differences to be explored alongside the learnings from each individual paper. Appreciative feedback overwhelmingly affirmed this approach, and some commented on the different "feel" and culture it gave to our study group.

PARTICIPANTS

Ten countries were represented by those who presented: Australia, Germany, Pakistan, New Zealand, Myanmar, Philippines, South Africa, South Korea, USA and the UK. Of the 21 presenters, five were women: less than one quarter. Nine of the presenters were online and eleven onsite. We deliberately mixed online and onsite presentations in each session to help ensure that the onsite group did not dominate.

THEMES

As noted above, we pre-organized the papers into seven themes: chaplaincy; missional/attractational church models (especially in South Korea); responses to Covid-19; community and belonging; war, crisis and justice; indigeneity and decolonization; and partnerships and power.

LEARNINGS

Each paper and collection of papers generated creative and critical discussion and a good deal of learning. Our final session was a debrief, where we considered the common learnings and insights from the papers. These are outlined next.

We recognized that different approaches can be taken to the “other”. Some presentations described churches and mission initiatives that had tended to take a deficit approach, identifying problems and seeking to resolve them. Other activities and initiatives described were more appreciative in style, beginning with recognizing the good and working to enhance that. The starting point makes a difference to the overall stance and approach taken.

We noted the importance of deep listening for the church in mission. Such listening is attentive to the complexities of language, including the need to hear people in their own language. While this certainly relates to syntax, it is much deeper than that. Listening also needs to be attentive to cultural difference, because listening is itself culturally bound.

We affirmed the importance of healthy partnerships and interactions between and beyond churches. Mutuality was key here: both mutual partnerships, characterized by humility; and mutual understandings, characterized by respect. The significance and potential of resource sharing was noted, again

with an emphasis on mutuality, rather than a presumption of a “stronger” group giving one-way support to a “weaker” one. While this was noted in relation to interaction between churches, it can also be extended to the sharing of insights and perspectives between the West and the global South. In relation to this, we noted the need for Western Christians to give up or let go of their ethnocentrism, taking a decolonizing stance. We also recognized the importance of “bridge people” who have an ability to cross over from one culture or group to the other and connect the two together. Stories of intentionally working together ought to be shared and celebrated.

We affirmed the learnings from other cultures. Two were particularly noted. First, the contribution that Māori scholar Mason Durie’s Te Whare Tapa Whā model can make to our understandings of the interrelatedness of wellbeing (Durie 1985). Secondly, *ganjang gejang* and the osmotic pressure between crab meat and soy sauce as an evocative image of kingdom renewal.

We were aware that deep theology lay behind our discussions, and perhaps the limitations of missional ecclesiology in relation to systematic theology. We were aware that not all theological terms were used in the same way by all participants. This invites careful definitions, while recognizing that consensus is not necessarily possible or required. That said, some foundational things remain: for instance recognizing Christ as unifier between us all.

We recognized that effective mission, ministry, and change takes time. We affirmed the power and activity of God in our world and in our lives and wondered how to live with that power, and how might we use it for good. We affirmed the invitation to move to the margins and our expectancy to meet God there.

REFERENCE

Durie, M. H. 1985. “A Maori Perspective on Health.” *Social Science and Medicine* 20.5: 483-6.