



Connecting people to change lives

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Albert was minister at St Andrew's Church of Scotland, Bo'ness for over 30 years. Much of Albert's ministry has been developing and exploring mission in response to a changing culture. He has been a member of various General Assembly Boards and Committees and acted as Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland for 2012/13. He is chairman and founder of the Vine Trust and recently served on the Church's Mutual Credit Union Board. In April 2016 Albert was appointed by the Presbytery of Falkirk as minister of Sanctuary First, the Church of Scotland's first aspiring online congregation.

In this session we will explore the opportunities, challenges and dilemmas that arise when the church is willing to enter into partnership with a variety of institutions and agencies, including working with governments and corporate organisations to help fulfil her mission. Can we be faithful to the gospel and work alongside partners who don't share our faith? Will secular money and values not simply dilute the gospel message? What is more important – living out the gospel or speaking out the gospel?



Introduction

I am not a theologian, but I have been a reflective practitioner of mission for many years. I am a parish minister who has tried to engage with mission through the arts and humanitarian aid. The purpose

of this introduction is not to speak particularly about the various projects with which I have been involved but to seek to reflect on the principles behind those that have involved partnerships with secular organisations. In this session we will explore the opportunities, challenges and dilemmas that arise when Christians are willing to enter into partnership with a variety of institutions and agencies. The list includes work with governments and corporate organisations to help fulfil their mission. Connecting people to change lives is more than a strap-line to me. It is what mission is all about. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not just about the transformation of an individual, it is about the transformation of the whole of creation and that includes a transformation of the social order of things in the world. God's mission in the world is about bringing his kingdom to fruition. The resurrection of Jesus is the first fruits of this new order.

My aim in this seminar is to encourage you to consider again the names of people and politicians, companies and institutions with which you have a relationship or contact. To encourage you to ask, like the prophet Nehemiah, for help – no doubt asking it in fear and trembling, but in a prayerful way. Most of us are afraid to use the network of people we know to solve problems and bring about the kingdom vision that God has placed in our hearts.

If God has called you, or his church to do a specific piece of work, then he is also the God who is willing to supply all your needs. Paul writes about this in his letter to the church at Philippi: 'And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus' (4:19). Understanding the significance of this text means that we should be looking and waiting, ready to meet the people and resources that are required. When we have this mood of expectancy we will undoubtedly discover the people God has already prepared to help us fulfil his calling. As yet, many of these people may not be self-confessing Christians. But their hearts have already been prepared by God to receive and answer your prayer.

There will, of course, be dilemmas. Do you accept the offer of a shipbuilder who builds nuclear submarines to build medical ships and help maintain them? Do you accept the proceeds of gambling and apply to the Lottery Fund for social outreach programmes to benefit the community and support vulnerable families?



Mission: an inclusive theology

What I am pleading for here is a theological understanding of mission that is inclusive. A theology that is set out in the Hebrew scriptures, where there is an understanding that God can and does use all of his creation to bring about his purposes for the world. It is as non-believers are invited to share in the mission of God that they themselves can and often do discover God has been working in their lives. The stories of Daniel and Nehemiah, and even Joseph, all illustrate the idea that God can and does use unbelievers to fulfil his plans.

A few years ago, I recall speaking to an entrepreneur who had been very generous towards a project I had been working on. I asked him how he felt knowing that God had moved him to share his wealth in this particular way. He looked at me, smiled and said, ‘I’d like to think that was true!’

The second thing is that we need to have an open and generous spirit towards all the people in our communities and spheres of influence even when we do not agree with their beliefs or lifestyles or activities. When we talk about mission in today’s world there are literally no walls. Living in a pluralist society means we share the gospel of Christ by our actions long before we are invited to explain it using words. This is an important insight we can learn from the Incarnation: ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us’ (John 1:14). John also points out that Christ is already ‘the true light that gives light to every man’ (John 1:9). In other words, there is an ability within every person to recognise the light of Christ.

This, in turn, raises a number of questions. Do we accept doctors and nurses who have a different moral lifestyle from what is perceived as orthodox Christian living? Do you accept a Muslim to come and work as part of a medical team? We are, however, being called to be a church without walls. This means that we have an internationalist agenda when we talk about mission. The first disciples were told to go into all the world and preach the gospel, beginning at home and reaching to the uttermost parts of the earth. For most Christians today, we haven’t ventured further than our own communities in Scotland. I want to suggest that we need to ensure when we talk of mission that we do so from a global perspective. To solely concentrate on Scottish

trends without taking into account the influence and contribution that the world church can make to the lives of our communities, and the contributions our communities can make to the world church, is to miss out on an important strand of biblical mission strategy. Each Christian community should be partnering and twinning themselves with another community – especially one in a developing country. By doing so we become both the agents and the receivers of truth and light. We begin to learn the meaning of interdependency.



Mission: adventurers

When we begin to think this way we become what I call mission adventurers. By creating partnerships with local and international institutions, governments, charities and foundations, we learn how to be the salt and the light. This is our indispensable gift to those others who share our common goals reflected in the Jesus Manifesto in Luke 4 and Isaiah 61. In this way we begin to create relationships around the principles of the gospel, and it is the work of God to fulfil his purposes in these relationships. This idea of the mission adventurer has its roots in the *missio Dei*, a term which is first accredited to Karl Barth in a paper he gave to the Brandenburg missionary conference of 1932. These ideas were later picked up by Jürgen Moltmann when he wrote: ‘It is **not** the Church that has a mission of salvation to fulfil to the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church, creating a church as it goes on its way.’¹

This idea was further developed by David Bosch, in *Transforming Mission*, when he writes, ‘Mission is [...] seen as a movement from God to the world: the church is viewed as an instrument of that mission’.² The only reason that we have a church is because mission is the DNA of God. Mission begins within the heart of God. All who begin to participate in mission, end up engaging with the very heart of the creator. God doesn’t always call fully signed up Christians when he begins his mission. If we define mission as God’s love and compassion moving towards a broken world, bringing healing and reconciliation, then it should be no surprise that often those involved in the process of mission are changed by the process of love and healing. Mission itself is a converting tool. Under this definition everyone who begins to work

for peace and reconciliation is in some small way participating in the mission of God. Winning hearts and minds in secular institutions can be difficult, but it starts by being faithful and true to this definition of mission. Perfect love casts out fear.

I have been trying, then, to show that the task of serving the needs of those at home in the name of Christ, and inviting others to join in, is based on a sound biblical principle. To talk only of the future of mission in Scotland today without reference to the world church, however, would be a serious omission. To limit the discussion to Scotland and to a Scottish context is to my mind too parochial. We now live in a local and *glocal* world. What happens in China will eventually have a knock-on effect on what happens in South Africa or even South America. We are living in a world of globalisation and technology is driving the agenda. While politicians may try to roll back the effects of a global economy, it is not simply politics or world trade that has brought this situation into being. Science and technology have brought us together to live in a global village. I believe people all over the world are asking the same basic question: *What is the meaning of all this?* It is here that the church confronts some bewildering issues, but it must try to understand them if the gospel of Jesus Christ is to be received as relevant.



Mission: the issues that face us

In his book of essays entitled *God in Public*,³ Tom Wright poses the following questions: What does the Bible say about war, including nuclear war; global warming and the care of the environment; poverty and hunger; natural disasters; economic crisis? What has the church got to say about strategies to end child poverty; international debt; the failure of secularisation to understand the increasingly highly complicated world of religious faith, including the increased rise of fundamentalism within both Islam and Christianity. Then there is the Middle East and the refugee crisis which is causing havoc in Western nations. Following on from all this are the moral issues surrounding gender roles and ethnic diversity; we also have medical ethics relating to end of life issues.²

The list continues if we consider the role that media plays in our lives and the influence technology is having on our understanding of what truth is, and what is fake news. It is easy to see how Western democracies are in turmoil. We no longer believe in the mega-narrative of an overarching meaning to life. We are now in search of our own meaning. This search for meaning, however, is itself a connecting point for mission and faith. I want to suggest that at the heart of mission is the very nature of God himself. God is the mission adventurer. Believing this to be true I'm happy to talk about some engaging examples of mission I have been involved in while seeking to share the Christian gospel in a pluralist society. These include: Bounce Higher; the Avenue Project; the Tuesday Club; St Andrew's Multimedia Youth Project (SAMYP); Sanctus Media; the Vine Trust; Church Without Walls; the Churches Mutual Credit Union (CMCU).

Can we be faithful to the gospel and work alongside partners who don't share our faith? Will secular money and values simply dilute the gospel message? What is more important – living out the gospel or speaking out the gospel? Should Christian organisations only employ professing Christians?



Conclusion

Here is an amazing fact about Scotland and its place in world mission history. In the introduction to *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Then and Now*, edited by Ken Ross and David Kerr,⁴ the editors ask: Why was Edinburgh chosen as the conference venue for the very first missionary conference relating to the evangelisation of the world? The answer is that Scotland had an importance in worldwide mission far beyond her size or population.

The introduction continues: 'It had produced some of the most celebrated figures in the modern missionary movement: Robert Moffat, Alexander Duff, John Philip, David Livingstone, James Legge, Mary Slessor, to name but a few.'⁵ In addition, Scotland had established some of the most highly regarded centres of mission work, such as Lovedale in South Africa, Livingstonia in Malawi, and the Scottish educational institutions in India. This work was supported from within

the Scottish churches, and they were sure of the success of the first missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910. Jack McConnell, the former First Minister of Scotland, talked about the significance of the Scottish contribution to the present regeneration of Malawi, likening it to the ‘Scots Second Coming’. It was through the churches in Malawi that aid was distributed to the poor. The Scottish government are aware of the importance of these links.

To be contemporary is to try and bring together that which is fleeting and temporary and give it meaning for the present time, the present moment. This is what Paul speaks of in Ephesians when he writes of the cosmic Christ bringing all things together in the unity of the Spirit. How then does the church engage with what we describe as contemporary Western culture? What are the things that are happening in your moments, in your lives, in your worlds? What is it that is happening in the worlds of so many all around us? We are living through an age of unprecedented change – how we deal with this will determine our future.

After 34 years of work in the parish I have been trying to understand what has been achieved over these years of ministry and how we can move further ahead with certain projects and programmes. I am especially interested in the influence of the world church on the local church. Where is Scotland’s place in world mission today? It has been this vision that has inspired me to continue as the chairman of the Vine Trust and that leads me to try and find a way to keep the World Without Walls project alive. I think there is an undercurrent just below the surface in the Scottish psyche that still retains a sincere belief in truth and justice and displays a great sympathy for the underdog. The question to which I’m seeking an answer is: Can Scotland once again become a dynamo from which world mission can be activated and empowered?

In recent times the growth of the Vine Trust, an organisation which emerged out of a local congregation, has been quite remarkable. The fact that, annually, over 400 people volunteer to build homes for street children in Peru and Tanzania, that doctors and dentist and nurses from the NHS give up their time to work on medical ships funded by corporate companies, governments, high net-worth individuals

and ordinary members of the public, all goes to show that deep within many Scots there is a desire to stand with the poor and make a difference in their lives.

It is worth remembering that for everyone who volunteers there are ten times as many people helping in a practical way to help raise money for the projects. As I write, I'm encouraged knowing that the Vine Trust is refurbishing its fourth ship on the river Forth and getting ready for yet another impossible voyage. Once again adventurers have appeared to bring about the vision. Perhaps we should pray that the church will find creative ways to help this new wave of humanitarian support, and make the vital connections between Christian faith and service to the poor. In doing so we are fulfilling the Jesus Manifesto.

Let me conclude with one last, open question. Revelation 3:8 declares: 'See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.'

What does this verse mean? – an open door into the world or into the church?

Notes

- ¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (translated by Margaret Kohl; London: SCM Press, 1977), 64.
- ² David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 390 [quoting from Johannes Aagaard, "Trends in Missiological Thinking During the Sixties", *International Review of Mission* 62 (1973): 13].
- ³ Tom Wright, *God in Public: How the Bible Speaks Truth to Power Today* (London: SPCK, 2016), 45.
- ⁴ David A. Kerr and Kenneth R. Ross eds., *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Then and Now* (Oxford: Regnum, 2009).
- ⁵ *Ibid*, 5.