MISSION IN THE 21ST CENTURY 3: DISCIPLESHIP

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Categories: Africa, Mission, Reviews

This is the third in my series looking at the five marks of mission as discussed in Mission in the 21st Century by Cathy Ross and Andrew Walls. The second mark of mission is teaching, baptising and nurturing new believers, or making disciples.

People respond to the Christian message for all sorts of reasons, but none are converted with a fully formed Biblical faith, and everyone needs to be encouraged to grow in both their understanding and the expression of their new found convictions if the Church is to grow and flourish. Emmanuel Egbunu puts this very clearly:

> *When young converts are not steadily nurtured, (sometimes exclusively), they become like abandoned babies. The neglect of thorough follow-up to conserve the fruits of evangelism has been the major factor for the prevalence of untaught Christians whose ideas of Christianity are a travesty of Biblical discipleship. (p. 25)*

This sort of nurturing of new believers can only happen within a community and the first sign of the acceptance of the Christian message is the development of a community of people committed to the message. The individualism of much of Western society can be inimical to the development of the sort of community which will take seriously the nurture and encouragement of new believers. The individualised message of Jesus as *my personal* Saviour may not help the new believer to understand the fundamental communal nature of the Christian faith. We need to be careful that our proclamation of the Gospel leads on to an expectation that new converts will become part of a community committed to active discipleship.

Of course, community *per se* is not sufficient, the discipling community needs to be rooted the person and work of Jesus Christ and in the revelation of Scripture:

> *An accurate understanding of the person and mission of Christ as revealed in the Holy Bible is the bedrock of Christian discipleship. (p. 32)*
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> *At the centre of Christian discipleship is the need to relate to the Bible as the authoritative revelation of God in all matters of life, salvation and godliness. The new convert must be taught to know that, over and above the wisest opinions and traditions of men, the Holy Bible is the unshakeable foundation of faith.*

The diocese ofÂ Aru in the Democratic Republic of Congo is an example of a community which is consciously trying to put these principles into practice. They aim to have:

Scripture Formed Christians: even in this impoverished part of the world, there is a network of workshops and seminars to ensure that clergy and catechists are continually being exposed to and challenged by God's word so that they can more effectively teach and train those under their

charge. Small Bible study groups encourage people to examine their daily life and challenges in the light of Scripture.

Theologically empowered Christians: believers are not simply taught to parrot Christian teaching, but to continually reflect on their situation. "We have also made continuing theological education a high priority for our clergy and lay leaders, so they teach and empower the baptised to read the signs of the times and become interpreters and prophets for a bewildered people." (p. 43)

A Community of Knowledge: the laity, as well as the clergy, are encouraged to continue learning and growing in their understanding.

Inclulturation: "The Aru diocese recognises that the local context is very important if the Gospel is to be inculturated in the heart of God's people. Jesus must speak to people in their current context so that they can *feel at home*. (p. 44). It is only as the Gospel is accurately incultured in a society that it is able to truly confront and challenge the norms of that society with the truth of the Gospel. A western understanding of theology and the Scriptures cannot accurately challenge the realities of African life (p. 32). Equally, I would add, that theology that is shaped by the enlightenment and the values of modernism will struggle when it comes to address the challenges of post-modernism. We must be continually asking, what do the Scriptures say to us here and now and not simply accepting the answers that worked in a different time and place.

Political Awareness: "Christians in Congo were taught to be apolitical, based on a spiritual separation, not transformation. It is very individualistic in its concentration on personal sin and the spiritual journey to heaven, rather than communal in concern for righteousness and social and political justice. It's not just in Congo where this is the case. Too often in the West, Christian political engagement revolves purely around issues of sexual morality (Gay marriage, abortion etc.) without taking the larger picture of justice into account. This issue is raised in later chapters, so more then.