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Missional ecclesiology and integral mission

The theological discourse of the Christian
Community Development Conferences 2010–2018

I Introduction

The 3rd Congress for World Evangelisation in Cape Town in 2010² confirmed an understanding of mission that combines evangelisation and social commitment in this world. In the European context, the Christian-Community-Development (CCD) Conference is a unique opportunity for people working in this field to share experiences and reflect on the Christian understanding of international development and integral mission.

This article attempts to summarise the theological discourse from 2010 to 2018. Prof. Johannes Reimer, who spoke at all of the conferences, was a major contributor to this discourse. Other speakers cited are Sheryl Haw (International Director of Micah Network/Micah Global), Rev. Joel Edwards (International Director of Micah Challenge), Rev. C.B. Samuel (former Director of EFICOR, India), Dr. Rosalee Velloso (Director of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance) and Rev. Dr. Chris Wright (Director of Langham Partnership). While some the content of the talks and seminars have been published as summaries in German, most of them are only available as audio files, seminar presentations or participants' notes.

This article will provide a brief history of the CCD-Conferences with an overview of the conferences and their topics, followed by a summary of the teaching on various theological issues.

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² Lausanne Movement 2011. *The Cape Town Commitment*. URL: <https://www.lausanne.org/content/ctc/ctcommitment#capetown> [accessed 09.04.2020].



2 A brief history of the Christian-Community-Development-Conference

What later became the CCD-Conference was started in 1993 by Klaus Strub as the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Mission und Landwirtschaft³ (AMuL). Klaus Strub, a farmer by profession who was involved in mission, realised that it was necessary to provide missionaries with practical help and contacts to experts, especially in the field of agriculture and appropriate technologies (Kröck & Sayhoun 2007). With seminars at the Academy for World Missions (AWM) in Korntal and a newsletter, AMuL provided practical knowledge and established contacts with scientists and practitioners in tropical and subtropical agriculture.

Klaus Strub's concern received new impetus after the agricultural scientist Karin Sahyoun and other staff of mission and aid organisations joined him in 1999. From 2002 to 2006 seminars and conferences were conducted annually. In addition to agriculture, topics such as project management, participation, HIV/AIDS, children's rights, the promotion of small businesses, etc. were added. English was chosen as the conference language so that international speakers and participants from other than only German-speaking countries could be included. As the number of participants increased, in 2006 the venue was moved to the centre of OM Germany in Mosbach and in 2012 to the Christian conference centre Schönblick in Schwäbisch Gmünd. In 2020 the conference was supposed to be held in Berlin. Conference reports have been published since 2006 in the journal "evangelische missiologie".⁴

Since 2008 the CCD-Conference has been conducted bi-annually as a five-day event with plenary meetings in the mornings and evenings and four to eleven seminar tracks in the afternoon. In 2010, the Association of Evangelical Missions (AEM) in Germany took over the administrative responsibility for the conference. In 2012, Micha Network (later Micah Global) and the European Evangelical Mission Association (EEMA) became partners of the conference.

In addition to practical issues, the conference is concerned with establishing a specific Christian perspective on development work and offers spiritual fellowship. As shown in Table 1 (pages 70–71), plenary sessions and seminars on theological topics are an important part of the conference.

³ Working group for mission and agriculture.

⁴ See <https://missiotop.org/em-zeitschrift/> [accessed 18.06.2020].



3 Topics of the theological discourse

3.1 Mission

Mission, not development, was the centre of the theological discourse at the CCD-Conferences. Many of the speakers emphasised that mission is the mission of God (*missio dei*), not our mission. In his seminar in 2010, Johannes Reimer provided the historical background of this concept (Haw & Reimer 2010). Joel Edwards (Kröck 2012) and C.B. Samuel (Samuel 2014a) contrasted the *missio dei* with the tendency of NGOs to see themselves at the centre of mission, focus on their particular mandate and try to expand their ministry. Instead, they recommended to study what God is doing beyond our ministry and to join in his work.

Starting from the meaning of mission as sending, Chris Wright⁵ focused on Biblical characters and the purpose of their sending: to save lives, to free Israel from slavery, to influence international politics, to preach the word of God, to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim the kingdom of God in word and deed, etc. These biblical examples demonstrate a wide variety of aspects of mission (Kröck 2018:126). Joel Edwards showed that mission also addresses a wide target group, as God is interested in every people group (Kröck 2012:117).

According to Johannes Reimer mission has to focus on peace and reconciliation. A mission of peace is God-centred, motivated by love, grace dominated, marked by righteousness and justice, it will build community and promote joy (Reimer 2018b).

The question on the relationship between proclamation and social action in mission, which has caused intensive debates, in particular among German theologians (see Ott 2007) was not discussed much during the CCD-Conferences. According to Reimer (2014) Christian development workers “may not start with words, but we will come to words”. Sheryl Haw presented the Micah Network Declaration on Integral Mission⁶ as a common basis:

It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life and our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ. (Haw & Reimer 2010; Haw et al. 2012)

⁵ For Wright’s understanding of mission see: Wright, Christopher J. 2010. *The mission of God’s people: A biblical theology of the church’s mission*. Grand Rapids Mich.: Zondervan.

⁶ http://www.micahnetwork.org/sites/default/files/doc/page/mn_integral_mission_declaration_en.pdf [accessed 18.06.2020].



Date + Place	Main Topics	Speaker on theological topics
31.03.– 04.04.2003 ⁷ Korntal	Participatory development and HIV/AIDS	Martin van de Loch, Albrecht Hartmann (both from World Vision Germany): Principles of transformational development.
09.–13.02.2004 Korntal	Participatory approaches, the role of children, sustainability	Dr. Erik Spruyt (Le Rucher Ministries, France): Why the church should be involved in community development.
11.–15.03.2005 Korntal	Participation, holistic mission, phasing out	Dr. Detlef Blöcher (Chair of AEM Germany): The relevance of holistic ministry. Dr. Bryant Myers (Vice president of World Vision International): Towards a Christian understanding of community development. ⁸ Dr. David Evans (Executive Director of Credit Action): Is the church an effective actor in community development? Dr. Bernhard Ott (Director of studies at Theological Seminary Bienenberg, Switzerland): Holistic ministry: retrospect and future prospects in the German context. ⁹
22.–26.09.2006 Mosbach	Community development and disasters, Christians in community development: Agents for reconciliation or divisions?	Paul Bendor-Samuel (Director of Interserve): Christians in community development – agents for reconciliation or divisions? John Wesley Kabango (Regional coordinator of Micah Network for Africa) & Maria Roncesvalles (Dean at ASDECS, Philippines): Workshop on Wholistic Ministry.

⁷ Dates follow the format dd.mm.yyyy.

⁸ Myers' concept of transformational development is elaborated in Myers, Bryant L. 2011. *Walking with the poor: Principles and practices of transformational development*. Rev. and updated ed. Maryknoll N.Y.: Orbis Books.

⁹ Published as Ott, Bernhard 2007. *Das Ringen um ein ganzheitliches Missionsverständnis: Historische Aspekte und biblische Begründung mit besonderer Berücksichtigung des deutschen Kontexts*, in Kusch, Andreas (Hg.): *Transformierender Glaube, erneuerte Kultur, sozioökonomische Entwicklung*. Nürnberg: VTR, 191–207.

Date + Place	Main Topics	Speaker on theological topics
25.–29.04.2008 Mosbach	Dependency or sustainable change?	Bible Studies: The biblical worldview and sustainable development. Seminars: World views and how they affect development work.
13.–18.04.2010 Mosbach	Conflict transformation and reconciliation	Prof. Johannes Reimer: Biblical reflections on aspects of conflicts. Sheryl Haw & Reimer: Missional ecclesiology meets holistic ministry (seminars).
23.–27.04.2012 Schwäbisch Gmünd	Partnering for change	Rev. Joel Edwards: Priesthood in the new covenant. Reimer & Haw: Integral mission conversation (seminars).
19.–23.05.2014 Schwäbisch Gmünd	Community transformation: Hopes and challenges	Rev. C.B. Samuel: Bible Studies on challenges for missionaries and Christian development workers. Reimer: Living in obedience to the call.
30.05.– 03.06.2016 Schwäbisch Gmünd	Doing church God's way – Rethinking faith and development	Dr. Rosalee Velloso: Bible Studies. Reimer: Church & discipling nations; Doing church God's way. Reimer & Velloso: An ecclesiology for the local church (seminars).
18.–22.06.2018 Schwäbisch Gmünd	The mission of God's people – Called out to take responsibility	Rev. Dr. Chris Wright: Bible studies on mission. Reimer: Peace & reconciliation: The heart of God's Mission; Peace building: The Church involved in Mission. Reimer, Rev. Joseph Nyamutera (Founder of Mercy Ministries, Ruanda) & Dr. Rhiannon Lloyd (Founder of Healing the Nations): ¹⁰ Peace building: A ministry of reconciliation (seminar).

Table 1: CCD-Conferences and theological topics

¹⁰ Details of their ministry are found in Lloyd, Rhiannon, Nyamutera, Joseph & Sabamungu, Anastase 2010. *Healing the Wounds of Ethnic Conflict*. URL: <https://www.lausanne.org/content/healing-the-wounds-of-ethnic-conflict> [accessed 09.04.2020].



3.2 The ultimate goal of the mission of God

Various concepts were used to describe the ultimate goal of God's mission. They were to overcome all kinds of pain (physical and psychological, social, economic and in the non-human creation) (Edwards), abolition of sin and injustice (Velloso, Wright), the reign of God (Haw, Reimer), reconciliation and shalom (Reimer, Edwards). These goals have to solve the corruption of relationships as the root cause of problems (Haw & Reimer 2010, Reimer 2010c, Velloso 2016c)

The universal perspective of Ephesians 1:9–10 is a key concept stressed by Wright (Kröck 2018:126). It shows that the target of mission is not just humanity but the whole of creation. On several occasions, Johannes Reimer emphasised reconciliation and peace as the goal of God's mission. The sending of his son to reconcile the world with God and to bring peace in all relations (Col 1:15–20), is the heart of the gospel (Reimer 2018b). This includes the reconciliation with oneself and the restoration of the image of God in humans, reconciliation between (ethnic) groups and with creation (Haw & Reimer 2010; Müller 2016:125; Reimer 2010b). The biblical understanding of peace is captured in the word shalom which stands for the wholeness of life, for harmony between people and between humans and God, for prosperity and fulfilment and for the absence of war (Reimer 2018b).

3.3 The Church as the instrument of God's Mission

Next to mission, the Church was a dominant topic of the theological discourse of the CCD-Conferences. In development circles the focus is often on the NGOs (para-church organisations) and the Church may be understood as a "para-para-church organisation" (Samuel 2014b). Reimer backed this critique, stating that not mission agencies or Christian NGOs are the instruments of God's Mission, but the Church as the body of Christ (Reimer 2014; Müller 2016:125).

The role of the Church was traced back to the Old Testament with the priests as mediators between God and humans and the people of Israel chosen by God to make himself known to the world. The people of God had to be a holy people being distinct from the other nations by their behaviour. Therefore, as Wright put it, "living in obedience to God is not a prerequisite for redemption, but it is a prerequisite for mission" (Kröck 2018:128). This requires a transformation of the character of Christian development workers, an aspect that was emphasised by C.B. Samuel (see below).

The Church was a major topic of many contributions by Johannes Reimer¹¹ who focused on the concept of *ecclesia* (OT: *qahal*) as a place where people gather to make decisions for the wellbeing of the community and accept responsibility

¹¹ For a comprehensive account of Reimer's ecclesiology see: Reimer, Johannes 2013. *Die Welt umarmen: Theologie des gesellschaftsrelevanten Gemeindebaus*. 2. Auflage. Marburg an der Lahn: Francke.

for the world. Its purpose is mission (Reimer 2016). Mission as the *raison d'être*, the organising principle of the Church, was also stressed by Sheryl Haw (Haw et al. 2012).

According to Edwards, the Church operates in a tension between historical continuity and freedom, between the pure Gospel and a diversity of forms. The blood of Christ is shed for the many and everyone is invited into God's kingdom. But we should keep the balance: working with the many without watering down the offensiveness of the cross. What happened at the cross is inclusive for everybody, but it has also an exclusive aspect, which we are tempted to hide when we cooperate with government agencies or UN organisations (Kröck 2012:118).

The richness and diversity of the Church may also be a challenge to cooperation and partnership. The Church should be a community that is not separated (Samuel 2014a) and envy needs to be overcome (Kröck 2012:118). Velloso emphasised that missional equity and equality does not mean that everyone is the same, but that we are together. To serve in kingdom equality, we have to learn the hard lessons of friendship, reconciliation and speaking well about one another. As we get closer to Jesus, we also get closer to one another (Velloso 2016b). As Reimer explained, this is also important on the organisational level. Some NGOs can command vast financial resources and may determine how other members of the body of Christ are to function. All shall submit to Christ, who is the head of the body and need to be aware of the temptation to rely on financial strength rather than on God (Reimer 2014).

3.4 Cultures and transformation

As would be expected, the topic of culture was frequently addressed at the CCD-Conferences. The contributions to this topic came mainly from Johannes Reimer. He adopted the view of Peter Beyerhaus on cultures as combining theological (created by God), anthropological (formed by humans) and demonological (corrupted by evil) factors (Reimer 2010c). The demonic factor in culture is manifested in a misleading concept of satisfaction (Eph 2:1–3), in particular for the individual (Reimer 2010c; Haw & Reimer 2010).

Generally, he, as well as other speakers, regarded the diversity of culture as something valuable. This can be seen in the laws of Israel, which provided foreigners access to Jewish institutions and rights, but did not push them to melt into the nation of Israel. Although Israel played the powerful, putting the nations down, God's goal was to use Israel to bless the nations (Reimer 2010a). In Matthew 28:19 the term *ethnos* is used, a socio-political space. The mission of the Church is not to melt all nations into one, nor to exchange other cultures with a superior one, but to transform them and add value to all cultures (Reimer 2010a). This can also be seen in Acts 2 – where the people are not made all the same, but still retain their own languages (Velloso 2016d) – as well as in Revelation 22 (Haw & Reimer 2010). Edwards, Reimer and Velloso stress the



desire of God to heal the relationships between the poor and the rich, educated and uneducated, and different social and ethnic groups (Kröck 2012:117; Reimer 2010a; Velloso 2016b).

Reimer used a model of G.A. Ferraro with four levels of culture (material, social, cognitive, religious). He proposes that transformation often starts with service on the material level, which builds trust and allows transformation in the social and cognitive culture through discussion, confrontation and healing. The process may end with the witness to Christ and a decision of people to follow him (Müller 2016:127f; Reimer 2018a). These steps relate to the dimensions of Church as *diaconia* (entry point), *koinonia* (fellowship in dialog, alternative community), *martyria* (practical witness) and *leiturgia* (worship). In this process the gospel is understood as bitextual, as we read the culture through the gospel and the gospel through the culture (Haw & Reimer 2010).

3.5 Development

In spite of the title of the conference, the term “development” was not used much in the Bible studies. When it occurred, it often had a critical edge pointing at shortcomings and challenges. Joel Edwards touched the temptation to hide the exclusiveness of the cross when cooperating with government agencies or UN organisations (Kröck 2012:118). Rosalee Velloso questioned the goal of development, asking to what sort of life we intend to lift people up. Is it to a lifestyle of consumption of dependence on petroleum-based cash economy, rather than to a lifestyle of dependency on God, who challenges the powers of consumerism, money and politics? She also criticised labelling people as poor, rich, haves and have-nots and making decisions on their behalf (Velloso 2016a). Although this was not explicitly discussed, the conference speakers may have avoided the term “development” as it can be understood as “progress”, related to technology, modernisation and economic growth.

3.6 Transformation of hearts and structures

Instead of “development”, “transformation” was used frequently. It does not carry the connotations mentioned above, but its meaning needs to be specified. According to Velloso and Wright, the basis of transformation is the good news that Jesus is Lord over all powers and has overcome evil (Velloso 2016a; Kröck 2018:129). As Wright stated, the cross must be at the centre of our mission and development work, because it is the only power with which we can resist evil (Kröck 2018:128).

The conference speakers saw the need for transformation at different levels. Reimer mentioned personal, relational, local and global levels (Haw & Reimer 2010). Edwards talked about the abolition of physical and psychological pain, social alienation, economic dependency and the destruction of creation (Kröck 2012:118).



Many of the speakers focused on transformation of the individual, which starts with the restoration of human beings as the ones bearing God's image and should touch all aspects of life (Haw et al. 2012). Reimer used the term *theosis* – to regain the image of God, which requires to repent and to be born again (Reimer 2010a). Speaking of Jonah, Velloso said that a conversion of the oppressors may be necessary before anything changes for the oppressed (Velloso 2016c). The need for transformation includes the Christian development workers themselves (see next section).

As shown above, transformation was interpreted as going beyond the personal level. Wright showed from Deuteronomy 15:1–18 that God hates all forms of exploitation and slavery. Seeking the shalom of the city (Is 29:7) may include prayer, proclaiming the gospel, creating jobs, providing health services, political activism, etc. (Kröck 2018:131). Acts 16 shows that the proclamation of Jesus and of God's justice may have economic implications, because it threatens the powers and principalities (Velloso 2016c). Reimer interpreted Matthew 16:18 as transformation of the public sphere: "In the gate of the city (i.e. the parliament) hell is not going to prevail" (Reimer 2016).

However, this does not imply a triumphalist theology. Reimer (2014), Samuel (2014c) and Velloso (2016c) stated that the witness (*martyria*) of the Lordship of Christ may be costly and result in suffering.

3.7 Character and spirituality

As shown above, the conference speakers emphasised the transformation of the individual, including the Christian development workers themselves.

This transformation is based on a spiritual journey, which includes a desire to know God and a desire for spiritual discernment and the formation of character (Samuel 2014a). If Jesus being Lord over all powers truly constitutes the essence of the gospel, we can entrust our identity, security and future to God and become vulnerable rather than focusing on tactics and strategies to secure our own identity and future (Velloso 2016d).

According to Sheryl Haw, agents of transformation need to *be* the change they long to see. Their lifestyle should reflect the love and justice of the kingdom of God (Haw et al. 2012).

In his Bible study on Jeremiah 29:1–14 Chris Wright used the exiled Israelites in Babylon as a model for agents of transformation, who need to be transformed themselves. This included the awareness that God was still the sovereign Lord and that they had the calling to be a blessing to the nations, including their enemies (Kröck 2018:131).

C.B. Samuel spoke of the need of a transformational journey to become more like Christ (Samuel 2014a). He stressed that Christian development workers are "called to be holy". Based on Matthew 5–7 and his experience with NGOs in India, he showed that holiness is manifested in reconciliation,



pure thoughts and faithfulness in marriage, in truth-telling and not retaliating (Samuel 2014d).

3.8 Already and not yet

Eschatology was not a major topic in the theological discourse of the CCD-Conferences. All speakers, however, seemed to agree with Chris Wright that “everything we do now is only provisional and God himself must complete his kingdom. But this does not mean that what we are doing is for nothing and that we could not measure what we achieve”(Kröck 2018:127), or in the words of Joel Edwards: “Transformation awaits God’s final renewal and is therefore always incomplete and temporary. But it is the task of the priesthood of the new covenant in the mission of the triune God, who wants to reconcile all things to Himself” (Kröck 2012:118). Working in interdependence with God, bringing together all of God’s creation, may bring a bit of the Kingdom into our own context (Velloso 2016a).

4 Conclusion

This survey does not allow for studying these theological concepts in depth or for discussing their conformance or disagreement with secular development approaches. However, it is clear that the Christian Church has a distinct contribution to make in the fight against hunger, poverty and injustice.

The combination of theology and practice has been an essential aspect of the CCD-Conferences. The participants have been encouraged to reflect on their understanding and practice of community development. This includes its ultimate goals, the interplay of different actors and the spirituality and character of the agents of transformation themselves. It would be great to study the impact of the CCD-Conferences on the ground, but it would be difficult to monitor. However, it is clear that the conferences have been a catalyst of re-thinking and evolving the Christian understanding and practice of community development.

A variety of theologians from all continents contributed to this discourse, with Johannes Reimer being a driving force in this process. His focus on the multifaceted effects of culture, his integral understanding of the *missio dei* and his view of the importance of the Church have been significant contributions to this discourse and enriched the conferences. Although the conference planned for 2020 had to be postponed due to the global Covid-19 pandemic, the CCD conferences may continue to play an important role in stimulating reflections on the theological basis of Christian development work. Hopefully Prof. Reimer will continue to contribute to this discourse.



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