

The Church and the Edinburgh Missionary Conference

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The Edinburgh Missionary Conference¹ of 1910 was the defining meeting of the modern Protestant missionary era.² This essay will consider the contribution of Edinburgh's Commission VI (The Home Base of Missions) and its insights into the importance of the local congregation in mission. We will observe how the concerns of Commission VI relate to the "missional church" conversations which are under consideration today.³ "Missional church" normally refers to Christian witness to near-neighbors (to whom is God sending us?). However, considering Commission VI may serve to remind us of the comprehensiveness of Jesus' command to "...be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8) A close reading of Edinburgh 1910 shows that the importance of mobilizing congregations toward a comprehensive missional identity is as important today (albeit in a vastly different context) then it was a century ago.

We might be tempted to consider Edinburgh 1910 as anachronistic. It could be seen as triumphalistic, embracing the Student Volunteer watchword of "the evangelization of the world in this generation." However, Andrew Walls contends that, "It was no triumphalist celebration, but a serious attempt at a systematic and business-like analysis of what Protestant missions had already achieved, and remained to be done."⁴ Brian Stanley acknowledges that there was a "boundless optimism" evident, but he highlights "a more muted and discerning voice" that comes through in the extensive missionary responses to questionnaires that form the basis for the conference reports.⁵

¹The full title was "World Missionary Conference to Consider Missionary Problems in Relation to the non-Christian World." It was held June 14 – 23, 1910 with more than 1,200 delegates at the United Free Church of Scotland Assembly Hall.

²Temple Gairdner, Islamist from Egypt who wrote the summary volume said that it was, "...the most notable gathering in the interest of the world-wide expansion of Christianity ever held." Gairdner, W. H. T., "Edinburgh 1910," An Account and Interpretation of the World Missionary Conference, Published for the Committee of the World Missionary Conference by Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier; Edinburgh and London, 1910, p. 5. (published in the United States as *Echoes from Edinburgh, 1910*); Kenneth Scott Latourette called it, "a major landmark in world Christianity." "Edinburgh 1910," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, May 30, 1960, Vol. 142, No. 22, p. 8; David Bosch said, "Edinburgh represented the all-time highwater mark in Western missionary enthusiasm, the zenith of the optimistic and pragmatist approach to missions." David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991, p. 338.

³The term "missional church" is broadly and often carelessly used today. I am referring to the missional theology that can be traced to Karl Barth, the World Council of Churches (Willingen) and principally defined by Lesslie Newbigin. The present conversation has been brought into focus by Darrell Guder in *The Missional Church and The Continuing Conversion of the Church*.

⁴Andrew F. Walls, "The Great Commission 1910 – 2010," <http://www.towards2010.org.uk/downloads/t2010paper01walls.pdf>, p. 1.; see also Bosch, David, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991, pp. 336ff.

⁵Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids/Cambridge, 2009, p. 16.

The Commission VI report (567 pages) was based on hundreds of responses to questionnaires and was compiled by a committee of twenty-two. Discussion was scheduled on June 23, the last day of the Conference. Temple Gairdner said that the topic was of first importance.⁶

What was meant by “Home Base?”

We begin by describing what was meant by the term “home base?” Quoting from the first page of the report,

...there must be an organization at home which will secure the formation of a constituency upon which dependence for support can be placed...The Home Base is the widely extending organisation in Christendom through which foreign missions are supported and directed, and this statement must stand as true until the *foreign missions* of the Church in Christian lands are absorbed into the *home missions* in the countries at present non-Christian.⁷

What exactly was meant by the “home base” is not always clear, but each of the following is part of the definition. On one hand, the report is referring to the efforts of the mission board (whether independent or denominational) to recruit new missionaries and raise funds for the work. In this case, the home base is the sending board. A. T. Pierson, editor of the most prominent American missionary magazine of the day, assumed this definition with the title of his article, “Home Problems of Foreign Missionary Societies: Work of the Sixth Commission – World’s Missionary Conference.”⁸

Sometimes the term refers to ecclesiastical structures, whether a diocese or presbytery or conference or association. The challenge advanced was, “What are your denominational structures doing to provide the resources (people and money) to complete the task of world evangelization?” National and regional bodies of denominations employed structures and processes to advance the cause and elicit support from congregations.⁹

This indicates a third understanding of the home base. It was a direct reference to congregations.

*“The Home Base for Missions is the Home Church prayerful and purposeful, alive in every member to the great privilege and the unequalled opportunity of the present hour in the kingdom of Christ.”*¹⁰

W. Ritchie Hogg noted that the Edinburgh Conference was essentially church-based in its orientation. He says, “Basically, Edinburgh was a conference on the home base of

⁶ Gairdner, p. 238.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1; for an earlier draft, see Commission VI. The Home Base. Burke Library, Series 1, Box 18, File 1; also File 2, The home base was considered the foundation. It is more critical than the superstructure in that mistakes made there could more easily be corrected. Selecting the missionaries and collecting the funds are essential. Those who did not do this often failed.

⁸ Pierson, Arthur T., editor, *The Missionary Review of the World*, April, 1910, pp. 288 – 289.

⁹ *Life & Work: The Church of Scotland Magazine and Mission Record*, Vol. XXXII (January, 1910), p. 30.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, December, 1910, p. 94.

missions...Missionary periodicals of the time indicate that Edinburgh was valued almost wholly in terms of its direct stimulus upon missionary endeavour and interest.”¹¹ Of course, only one of the eight commissions had this as its topic. The other seven addressed issues on the foreign field.

What was the message of Commission VI?

Edinburgh assumed that there was a fully-evangelized world that must supply money and missionaries responding to this great opportunity to finish evangelizing the remainder of the world. The pressing questions that animated Commission VI were, “Will the home base pray and commit itself? Will the youth come forward as missionaries and will the churches give financial support? Will the home church lose its zeal because of rising materialism?”¹²

The optimism of the early 20th century was evident. Inevitable progress was assumed. “The white man’s burden” – an obligation of all civilized peoples to contribute to the welfare of the poor and suffering of the world – was assumed. There was confidence because the nineteenth century had known less war than any since the fourth. Mission historian Kenneth Scott Latourette called it “the Great Century.” Little did the participants know that just over the horizon awaited the most devastating wars ever known to humanity.¹³

John R. Mott, whose masterful chairmanship of the Edinburgh Conference was acknowledged by all, expressed this accepted worldview in a 1908 editorial anticipating the Conference,

The Church to-day stands in great need of the work of this commission [VI]. On the one hand, it stands before the greatest missionary opportunities which it has ever confronted. On the other hand, it has in its possession latent resources more than adequate to supply its every need. The problem is this, How to engage the energies and resources of the whole Church in the missionary enterprise?¹⁴

Mott’s closing words to the delegates at Edinburgh reinforced these assumptions,

The end of the Conference is the beginning of the conquest. The end of the planning is the beginning of the doing...Our best days are ahead of us, because we have now a deeper insight into the character, and purposes, and resources of our God...Now blessed

¹¹ W. Ritchie Hogg, “Edinburgh 1910 – Perspective 1980,” *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research*, October, 1980, pp. 134, 138 and 147.

¹²Lectures by Andrew Walls, “Understanding the Western Missionary Movement III: Western Missions Move into the Twentieth Century,” November 3 – 9, 2007, Overseas Ministries Study Center, New Haven, CT; see also A. T. Pierson, *The Crisis of Missions*, (New York: R. Carter), 1886.

¹³ W. Richey Hogg, *Ecumenical Foundations, A History of the International Missionary Council and its Nineteenth Century Background*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1952, p. 99; Hogg also called the Conference “Kiplingesque.” in W. Richey Hogg, “The World Mission Conference, Edinburgh, 1910” *Ecumenical Foundations, A History of the International Missionary Council and its Nineteenth Century Background*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1952, p. 49.

¹⁴ *The East and The West: a Quarterly Review for the Study of Missions*, published by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, London, 1908, p. 374. YDS Microfilm SD2361, reel 2.

be the Lord our God, the God of Israel, For He alone doth wondrous works, in glory that excel.¹⁵

The focus of Commission VI was the “promotion of missionary intelligence.” This phrase, unfamiliar to us, might be translated today as “education and mobilization for mission.”¹⁶ In the Commission VI report it accounted for chapters two through eight as it addressed several ways to accomplish this activity on behalf of foreign mission.¹⁷

The Edinburgh reports spoke often of advancing the “science” of missions.¹⁸ The early twentieth century was much interested in what we would call “management science.” The attention to “efficiency” shows it to be very much an American report (especially to German eyes) reflecting the interests of its chairman, James Levi Barton of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. The Home Base was considered an area where this science was underdeveloped.

The science of missions is much more advanced in its bearings upon the work abroad than it is in relations to the operations of the Societies at home...disseminating information at home, creating and holding the constituency, securing missionaries needed for the work, and raising funds for its support. These commonplace matters have been too close at hand to command much general and systematic attention.¹⁹

The work of the home base involved attention to advancing the science of promoting missions in the local church, where the responsibility resided and where the potential was profoundly untapped.

The Church itself as an organisation is fundamentally a Missionary Society. While the formation of organised societies is essential to the proper conduct of the business of missions, the Church itself in all its branches is by right and commission responsible for the dissemination of a true missionary spirit among its members.²⁰

Missionary intelligence was also to be developed through newspapers, magazines, and books, both for consumption in the church as well as for the general public where missions were becoming more respected.²¹ Mission study classes for church members and courses in schools,

¹⁵ “The World Missionary Conference,” *The Missionary Record of the United Free Church of Scotland*, Vol. X, 1910, p. 355.

¹⁶ A hundred years earlier William Carey would have referred to this as the “use of means.”

¹⁷ *Report of Commission VI: The Home Base of Missions*, pp. 17 – 119.

¹⁸ This “science” (introduced by German missiologist Gustav Warneck) involved more systematic study of mission (missiology) and greater efficiency with resulting bureaucracy and management by specialists. There emerged in this era a search for the “formula” that would assure results.

¹⁹ *Report of Commission VI: The Home Base of Missions*, p. 249.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²¹ Letters from the King George of England, Theodore Roosevelt and William H. Taft to the Conference organizers indicate growing public acceptance of mission; John R. Mott Papers, Yale Divinity School, R.G. 45, Box 214, Folder 3372; see *Report of Commission VI: The Home Base of Missions*, p. 45; see *Life & Work: The Church of Scotland Magazine and Mission Record*, Vol. XXXII (January, 1910), p. 255; see Stanley, p. 4; However, this trend would soon be reversed as evident in the Hocking Report (1932). See Craig Van Gelder, ed., *The Missional Church in Context*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2007, p. 18ff.

both church-related and public were documented through 550 surveys to these institutions. 9,000 visits were made to more than 900 mission stations for the purpose of expanding missionary intelligence. Missionary conferences, conventions, summer schools, institutes, exhibitions, slide presentations and mission dinners were advanced as means for education in the churches.²² Attention to telling the missions story and asking for support was far more common and intentional than is found in North America today.

“The success of foreign missions largely depends upon the financial support it receives and upon the candidates available for appointment.”²³ Humanly speaking, this assertion from Commission VI has a kernel of truth for the church in the West, although the dramatic growth of the church in the Global South would prove to be stimulated much more by local factors.

The perennial concern over the lack of funds was clearly addressed as the Commission noted that it had always been a minority in the church who were strongly committed to missions.²⁴ Note was taken of the recent advances in giving especially in America which came through the work of the Laymen’s Missionary Movement. However, in some denominations less than half of the congregations gave any financial support for missions. That percentage was much higher in Europe, but the report noted that the US church was engaged in a great deal of church extension (new church development), spending \$11.40 per member on their congregation and new churches, but only 72¢ on foreign missions (which is actually much higher than found in the American church today).²⁵

The discussion of the home base also raised the question of leadership. It was acknowledged in the preliminary papers (but not included in the final report, probably because it would be too personal and sensitive) that the home base fails if the leadership is insufficient.

The problem of the home base is after all a problem of leadership... the Boards and the Board Secretaries are not without fault for some of the present conditions prevailing in the home church.... The result of the Laymen’s Movement so far is a signal demonstration of what can be accomplished by the statesmanlike leadership of a comparatively few men and shows what can be accomplished by the Board Secretaries if they only lead. The churches are looking to them for leadership and to such leadership the churches will undoubtedly respond.²⁶

It would not be accurate to say that Commission VI concluded that advances in the “science of missions” would advance the churches’ meager efforts. In the final chapter of conclusions and recommendations, the first item was “dependence on prayer and the Holy Spirit.”

²² *Report of Commission VI: The Home Base of Missions*, pp. 43 – 119.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 146; The report also stated, “...there is no Missionary Society which believes that success depends wholly upon financial support...it is through the Diving Spirit that missions will and must succeed.”

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 146 – 147. “Even where foreign missionary work has been conducted by a Committee appointed by the recognized ecclesiastical authorities, as in Scotland, interest in the work has been confined to a comparatively limited circle of people and has not characterized the Church as a whole.”

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 153; see also David Dawson, “Mission and Money in the Early Twentieth Century,” *The Journal of Presbyterian History*, Spring, 2002, p. 38. It is estimated that today less than 1% of church giving in the US goes overseas. Presbyterian News Service, January 9, 2007, #07019.

²⁶ Commission VI. The Home Base. Burke Library, Series 1, Box 18, File 8, pp. 29 – 32.

...[all recommendations] must fail unless they represent first and always the Divine spirit working through human instruments. There can be no forward movement in missions, no revival of interest, no new era of giving, no great offering of life, except as these are attained through deepening and broadening of the spiritual life of the leaders of the church, and a real spiritual revival among the members.²⁷

Commission VI noted in chapter thirteen the role of women's boards and their significance in funding missions. During 1909 sixty women's boards had raised \$4 million and produced 500,000 volumes for study groups. The implication from the report was that women should move toward assimilation into church boards, for the sake of efficiency. "With the increasing recognition by the Church of its corporate responsibility, there comes a tendency to discourage the multiplicity of organisations and to unite the forces of the Church in a more concentrated effort."²⁸

This was a huge emerging change in the constitution of mission societies and boards. It actually had a negative effect on the advancement of mission.²⁹ The operative assumption of this era that efficiency was the highest good and would be accomplished by centralization plagued denominational mission throughout the century.

How was the Home Base report received?

Temple Gairdner was assigned the task of writing a book summarizing the Edinburgh Missionary Conference. He described it as "a volume written for the people of the Church," meant to be "a narrative, an interpretation, and a summons."³⁰

When it came to his evaluation of Commission VI, he said that even though the report was presented on the last day of the conference, "...the subject which was logically not last but first." He found Commission VI to be the most important because, "Christendom is not yet missionary...*they do not love the work*...the Church of the living God must arise as a great Missionary Society."³¹

The concluding chapter of Gairdner's book was, "God is the ultimate Home Base of Missions." His final appeal was to the churches...the home base,

Yet the Edinburgh Conference, if it had done anything, had shown that the whole crisis of missions just turns upon whether the Church of Christ can get behind these words, discover there a palpable reality, and then demonstrate her discovery to the world...the

²⁷ *Report of Commission VI: The Home Base of Missions.*, p. 270.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 222 Dana Robert, *Gospel Bearers, Gender Barriers: Missionary Women in the Twentieth Century*, Orbis, 2002; Brian Stanley (. p. 316) notes how this direction had a negative effect on the advance of mission.

²⁹ Dana Robert, *Gospel Bearers, Gender Barriers: Missionary Women in the Twentieth Century*, Orbis, 2002; see also Stanley, p. 316.

³⁰ Gairdner, p. 5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 238 – 240.

problem of missions is the problem of the Church's faith in God: that the only solution of the problem of missions is the Sufficiency of God.³²

The Missionary Record of the United Free Church of Scotland agreed with the preeminence of Commission VI.

The closing day of the Conference has come, but no one is wearied. Only a very few delegates have left, and the last Report [Commission VI] to be presented is of quite remarkable interest. Dr. James Barton's introduction was one of the raciest speeches yet given, full of American shrewdness and pith. Who could forget the scorn which he poured on congregations whose chief aim was self-support? 'It is as if a man who kept a poultry-farm rejoiced in its being self-supporting when the fowls were eating their one egg.'³³

The *Missionary Record* ran a monthly series of reports. The report on Commission VI came in May, 1911. It noted that the report on the Home Base identified two issues: education – missionary intelligence leading to more life in Christ; and administration – growth in finance and leadership.³⁴ Reports were found in subsequent issues on the efforts in the United Free Church of Scotland to address these concerns, but by August, 1912, the reports were discouraging, "...we fear we must sorrowfully admit that NOTHING HAS HAPPENED! We are just where we would have been had there never been a Conference."³⁵ Decline in the US came much later.

Financial support was a key element in measuring how the Home Base was responding. One of many examples of this is found in the action of The Foreign Mission Committee of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland (1909) which had devised a "Scheme of Home Organization,"

Its fundamental plan was to bring the individual members of the Church into closer personal relation with the missionary enterprise. It proceeds upon a system of decentralisation starting from headquarters, and working through the Presbyteries, and ultimately into the Parishes. As a first step, Presbyteries are asked to appoint a Committee or a Correspondent, whose function it will be to bring the definite proposals of the Scheme before the members of the Presbytery, and ultimately before the Parishes and Congregations...each Presbytery and Parish is left entirely free to adapt the Scheme to suit local conditions.³⁶

The Layman's Missionary Movement (LMM) stimulated much of this focus on funding through congregations and Commission VI highly praised it. However, the direct, personalized and designated approach fostered here became more centralized in many churches within a decade. The LMM's approach was essentially to mobilize individuals and congregations for financial

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 258, 263 – 264; see also Stanley, pp. 228f.

³³ "The World Missionary Conference," *The Missionary Record of the United Free Church of Scotland*, Vol. X, (1910), No. 116, p. 354.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. XI, (1911), No. 125 (May), pp. 198 – 201.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, August, 1912, p. 349.

³⁶ *Life & Work: The Church of Scotland Magazine and Mission Record*, Vol. XXXII (1910), p. 30.

support of missionaries. Business models of the day were embraced, but these included centralization and efficiency (as in the assembly line) which ultimately undermined congregational “ownership” of their missionary obligations. In the process congregations were marginalized into the role of simply providing funds for distant institutions. They soon ceased to be taken seriously as the essential agents of missional practice.

The message of Commission VI on the Home Base was deceptively simple, “Do it.”³⁷ As the Archbishop of Canterbury Randall Davidson said in his opening address, “...everything depended on the willingness and ability of the Church to grasp the providential moment.”³⁸ But unknown to the participants, war was coming, followed by economic depression and another war greater than the first. Christendom would be in shock. All the while Edinburgh’s greatest dreams and more were taking shape, but not in the way that they had expected.

How did the Home Base fare after Edinburgh?

Possibly the most important action taken by Edinburgh 1910 (whose participants had actually agreed not to take any official actions as a body)³⁹ was the formation of the Continuation Committee. It would have no power.

What happened to the Home Base under the Continuation Committee? Actually, very little. The minutes of the Continuation Committee through November, 1913 make no mention of the Home Base.⁴⁰ Ten special committees were formed, but none of them addressed the Home Base issue.⁴¹ The Committee began publication of *The International Review of Missions* in 1912 under the editorship of J. H. Oldham. Each issue contained a bibliography with one sub-section entitled “The Home Base.” It was usually very modest with only a few items.⁴² The weight of the entire *IRM* project was the advancement of the science of missions and greater cooperation on the field.

At one level this complete lack of follow-up attention to the Home Base is shocking and neglectful given that many had affirmed its significance. A. T. Pierson, editor of *The Missionary Review of the World* said, “The greatest problem of the day is not faced on the foreign field, but at home. The greatest difficulty is to arouse the Christians who have bread enough and to spare...”⁴³

Commission VI at Edinburgh raised the call for missionaries and money to send them, but the Continuation Committee showed little interest in the subject. However, the Home Base was probably an agenda that could only be addressed by the denominations and other agencies like

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

³⁸ Stanley, p. 215; Davidson, like many at Edinburgh, assumed that the church of Christendom had the resources to complete the task of evangelization, if it simply seized the moment.

³⁹ See Stanley for this story, pp. 290ff.

⁴⁰ Edinburgh 1910 Preparatory and Continuation Committee Minutes, 1907 – 1913.

⁴¹ *The Missionary Review of the World*, December, 1912, pp. 901 – 906.

⁴² Stanley Skreslet (“Configuring Missiology: Reading Classified Bibliographies as Disciplinary Maps,” *Mission Studies: Journal of the International Association for Mission Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 2006, pp. 171 – 201 (quote from p. 187) notes that *Missionalia* differed from *IRM* in that it gave more attention to the local Church.

⁴³ Pierson, Arthur T., editor, *The Missionary Review of the World*, June, 1910, p. 411.

the Layman's Missionary Movement and the Conference of the Foreign Missions Boards of North America (FMB-NA). The FMB-NA met in January, 1911 and had a "Committee on the Home Base."⁴⁴ Organizations like the LMM and the FMB-NA did raise among congregations the level of "missionary intelligence" (mission education) and "administration" (fund raising) to their high water marks in North America during the years following Edinburgh.⁴⁵ This was consistent with the vision of Commission VI. However, the Continuation Committee did not address this area. The LMM and FMB-NA made significant strides but when war came much began to change and by the mid-1920's the decline was evident.

John R. Mott was asked by the Continuation Committee to make a tour of Asia from October, 1912 – May, 1913. The purpose was to conduct conferences that would be a follow-up to Edinburgh. Harlan P. Beach wrote an account of these conferences, but the Home Base was never mentioned and was not included in any of the questions discussed, probably because the conferences took place in Asia, which was not considered a home base. Beach wrote, "The home base would eventually be omitted..." but he gave no explanation.⁴⁶

What might we say in retrospect about the Home Base?

A major hurdle had to be overcome for the Edinburgh Conference to even happen. The Anglo-Catholics within the Church of England were hesitant to attend, so their decision to attend such a gathering was unprecedented. They insisted that only mission societies involved in non-Christian lands could participate. This eliminated all of South America (which was considered completely occupied by Roman Catholics) and the Middle East (because of the Orthodox presence). This, by implication, raised the question of the meaning of Christendom and the operative understanding of the meaning of the "home base." On one hand there is no home base, but on the other, every congregation is a home base. Numerous speakers at Edinburgh commented critically on the threat of western materialism and thereby questioned some of the most basic assumptions of "Christian nations."

Andrew Walls says it this way today,

Lands that were once at its heart are now on the margins, others that were on the margins are now at its heart. It has no single centre; above all, the idea of 'home base' in Europe and North America, such as the Edinburgh fathers took for granted in 1910, is long past. The church now has not one but many centres; new Christian impulses and initiatives may now be expected from any quarter of the globe. Christian mission may be started from any point, and be directed to any point... With its return to a non-Western religion, Christianity has reverted to type.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ "A Missionary Survey of the Year 1912," *The International Review of Missions*, Vol. 2, 1913, pp. 65 – 76.

⁴⁵ See David Dawson, "Mission Philanthropy, Selected Giving and Presbyterians," *American Presbyterians (Journal of Presbyterian History)*, Part 1 (Summer, 1990) Vol. 68, No. 2, pp. 121 – 132; Part 2 (Fall, 1991) Vol. 69, No. 3, pp. 203 – 224; "Mission and Money in the Early Twentieth Century," *The Journal of Presbyterian History*, Spring, 2002, pp. 29 – 42.

⁴⁶ *The Continuation Committee Conferences in Asia 1912 – 1913, Arranged by Topics*, with general and chapter introductions by Harlan P. Beach, Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, New York: 1913, p. 11.

⁴⁷ Andrew Walls and Cathy Ross, eds., *Mission in the 21st Century: Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 2008, p. 202.

The assumption of the early twentieth century was that mission was “from the west to the rest.” In retrospect that is presumptuous, but we must remember that at that moment a large portion of the Christian population (c. 80%)⁴⁸ was in Europe and North America. Christendom still reigned. Today we have been helped to see that mission is “from everywhere to everywhere.”⁴⁹ The western spiritual crisis related to the Enlightenment, war, and political strife of the years following Edinburgh combined with the dramatic emergence of the church of the Global South to create a new experience for the church. A confident church in the west has lost its confidence since 1910. The Home Base has moved to every church in every place. For that reason congregations are profoundly important to Christian mission.

William Hutchinson notes that there were some at Edinburgh who saw beyond “from the west to the rest.” Commission II (The Church in the Mission Field) questioned the title given to their work saying, “The whole world is the mission field, and there is no Church that is not a Church in the mission field. Some Christian communities are younger and some are older, but that is all the difference.”⁵⁰ Even the “older/younger” distinction was challenged by Mott by the time of the next conference (Jerusalem, 1928).⁵¹ Also referring to Jerusalem, Basil Matthews said, “...the Western world is itself a mission field. The home base of missions is not a geographical entity at all, but is simply Christ wherever He lives in human life.”⁵²

It should also be acknowledged that many western Christians today embrace their own version of “from the west to the rest.” This operative missiological heresy is found across the theological spectrum. It is found in the underlying assumption of what we can do for the poor suffering underprivileged of the world (including some near neighbors). Here we find an emphasis on the *missio ecclesia* over the *missio Dei*. It takes shape in mission as expressed in efforts for political empowerment and economic self-sufficiency. It can be found in the expression of salvation through education or conversion and baptism into a culturally appropriate church. All of these are, of course, important elements of mission, but often they are not far removed from the assumptions underlying “from the west to the rest.” Our critique of Edinburgh’s assumptions needs to be humbly made.

Parallels for our consideration after 100 years

As we celebrate and reflect on the Edinburgh Missionary Conference Centenary, what might we learn that could help us with our missiological questions today? Our situation is significantly

⁴⁸David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Trends AD 30 – AD 2200*, William Carey Library, Pasadena, 2001; Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, Orbis, Maryknoll, 2004, p. 242.

⁴⁹Michael Nazir-Ali, *From Everywhere to Everywhere: A World View of Christian Witness*, Collins, London, 1991; Samuel Escobar, “Mission from Everywhere to Everyone: The Home Base in a New Century,” http://www.towards2010.org.uk/papers.htm_Toward_Edinburgh_2010, October, 2006; David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991, p. 260; Samuel Escobar, *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003.

⁵⁰William R. Hutchison, *Errand to the World: American Protestant Thought and Foreign Missions*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1987, p. 179; *Report of Commission II*, p. 4.

⁵¹Hutchison, p. 180.

⁵²Heather J. Sharkey, *American Evangelicals in Egypt: Missionary Encounters in an Age of Empire*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2008, p. 97.

different, but there are parallel questions that continue to challenge us. For example, the missional church conversations now popular in the churches of Europe, North America Australia, etc. can be informed by a careful study of Edinburgh, 1910.

The Rev. Canon L. Norman Tucker (Toronto, Canada) was one of those who commented on the Commission VI report on June 23. His concerns would be found in missional church conversations today.

This idea, the Church itself a missionary society, -- not Missionary Societies within the Church, -- I take for granted. Now see how that idea will pervade all life and operations on the Church. The Church a missionary society, all members of the Church called to be missionaries and to help in missionary work, and if all members, then first and foremost the clergy. It becomes their duty to preach missionary sermons, give missionary information to their people, not as something extra and optional, but as part and parcel of their daily administration. The time is past when clergymen may write to the secretaries of their Societies and say, 'Send me your deputation to make an appeal for *your* Society to *my* people, and I will give *you* the collection,' as though the people and the money belonged to the clergymen and the need and appeal belonged to the Society.⁵³

Rev. J. Henzel (Utrecht Missionary Society) was another who was given the privilege of commenting on the report. (Less than half of those who asked to speak were able to be accommodated because of time constraints.) He also spoke regarding pastors and how their leadership for mission might be enriched. He felt that the rare missionary sermon can do more harm than good. His understanding of the Bible as a missionary document would be understood in missional church discussions today.

We too often forget that the Bible is a real, a great missionary book. As soon as we become convinced that the Bible is a missionary book we will see that every text is a missionary text, and we will be surprised at the richness of the Bible in this respect....When the minister is always pointing out the missionary character of Christianity, then shall the congregation begin to feel that they were wrong in thinking missionary work something peculiar.⁵⁴

Darrell Guder observes the historic connection between Edinburgh, 1910 and the missional church conversations, tracing its roots through Karl Barth's use of *missio Dei* in his 1932 address to the Brandenburg Mission Conference in Berlin. Guder quotes Barth,

The congregation, the so-called homeland church, the community of heathen Christians should recognize themselves and actively engage themselves as what they essentially are: a missionary community! They are not a mission association or society, not a group that

⁵³ *Report of Commission VI*, p. 297; re: the church as a missionary society as advocated by J. H. Rice in the 1830's, see David Dawson, "A Recurring Issue of Mission Administration," *Missiology*, October, 1997, Vol. XXV, No. 4, pp. 457 – 465.

⁵⁴ *Report of Commission VI*, pp. 313 – 314; see also Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic), 2006.

formed itself with *the firm intention* to do mission, but a human community *called* to the act of mission.”⁵⁵

Here we see the emphasis on the missionary vocation of the church. It is particularly important to observe that this reference is to the “local church.” Guder notes that by the time of the Willingen Conference (the third following Edinburgh – 1952) there was a consensus that the church must be understood as essentially missionary.

Craig Van Gelder also makes the connection between Edinburgh, 1910 and local congregations in the present missional church conversation. He suggests that we,

...bring resources from the discipline of missiology into conversation with this emerging focus on congregations. I wish to do so by using the recent emergence of the missional church conversation within missiological circles to reframe the relationship of congregations to their contexts. It is interesting that the discipline of missiology, as it emerged in Western theological education, did not tend to focus its attention on congregations – at least not those at home. The missional church conversation offers a corrective to that focus.⁵⁶

The centrality of the local congregation for mission advancement is certainly apparent at Edinburgh. That makes the centenary especially relevant to the missional church conversation of our day as we consider the centrality of the local congregation. In this sense “home base” is always an appropriate designation. Most in Edinburgh would have thought of the “home base” as western Christendom. However, as we have seen, there were voices which acknowledged the “home base” as ever congregation, no matter where it is located.

This focus on the local congregation was neglected by the Continuation Committee but there is some indication that it will be addressed in the Edinburgh 2010 Witnessing to Christ Today centenary events.⁵⁷ The study process includes nine themes, the fifth of which is “forms of missionary engagement.” The principle question proposed is “the primary role of the local church in mission.”

The final years of the twentieth century found many Christians once again interested in “the evangelization of the world in this generation.”⁵⁸ Focus on the “unreached” is still significant today. One hundred years of perspective helps us to see that much has been accomplished to that end, but mostly through means beyond western initiatives. Future developments might be expected to be equally surprising and different than our schemes intend.

Commission VI was concerned to marshal more money and more missionaries. While some mission agencies in the west continue strong in these measurements, others (especially the so-called mainline churches which were most prominent at Edinburgh) have been profoundly

⁵⁵ Darrell L. Guder, “From Mission and Theology to Missional Theology,” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, Vol. XXIV, No. 1, 2003, p. 42.

⁵⁶ Van Gelder, p. 13.

⁵⁷ www.edinburgh2010.org

⁵⁸ <http://www.ad2000.org/ad2kbroc.htm>

embarrassed by the decline in money and missionaries for world mission. This decline has been related to multiple factors including theological confusion and anxiety about membership losses. The missional church conversations in the west have engaged these issues in their local manifestations, but they have not usually addressed the world mission concerns of Edinburgh.

The number of cross-cultural missionaries sent (both near and far) is not in and of itself an ultimate measurement of missionary zeal, but it would be hard to explain such decline if one was trying to demonstrate a church's deepening commitment to the *missio Dei*. The seeds for this decline were already sown at the time of Edinburgh, even though their yield was most apparent after mid-century. However, efforts to address this demise in the mainline churches only began to emerge in recent decades and it is only just now that the institutional structures of the mainline denominations have begun to consider the meaning of their decline.

Edinburgh was deeply committed to a "scientific approach" to missionary problems, both "on the field" and at the "home base." The assumption was that good "missionary intelligence" (mission education and information) and "administration" (a plan for raising up missionaries and money) would solve the problem. Pragmatism reigned and everyone was interested in "what worked best."⁵⁹ But as was clearly reported in subsequent issues of *The Missionary Record of the United Free Church of Scotland*, no mechanical solutions would propel the church into a glorious future. It is, after all, the *missio Dei*.

There must be a new birth of faith, hope, and love throughout the Church, a new coming of God through His Spirit to men. But that does not mean that the Home Church is to do nothing until the Revival comes. Revival does not come to Churches any more than to men who neglect their duty.⁶⁰

This affirmation is very much needed in the western church today as it seeks its appropriate role in the missionary vocation of the world Christian community. Denominations where congregations are engaging the missional church conversations will need to consider their sentness in all its dimensions (Acts 1:8). Many elements of the western church have neglected their missionary vocation. Institutional changes must be implemented to reclaim an appropriate role. But only the Holy Spirit will effect deep change. The Commission VI conclusion begins with this affirmation.⁶¹

As Andrew Walls has often reminded us, Christian expansion is not progressive, expanding outward as does Islam, holding the lands that it takes. There is no way to guarantee sustainability from Christian mission. There is no permanently Christian culture or nation, no birthright claim. The Gospel does not "belong" to us. Its growth is serial, not progressive. Islam is a prophetic faith which comes from obedience to Allah. Christianity is an incarnational faith. The model that we know in Christ is to be reproduced in every time and place. It has to be translated into each culture, as Lamin Sanneh has affirmed. Therefore, when we are engaged in the plans that absorb us, we should remember Edinburgh. There are now many "centers" of

⁵⁹ *Report of Commission VI*, pp. 40 and 146.

⁶⁰ "The World Missionary Conference," *The Missionary Record of the United Free Church of Scotland*, Vol. XI, no. 125 (May, 1911), pp. 198 - 199.

⁶¹ *Report of Commission VI*, p. 270; see also Brian Stanley's concluding comments, pp. 323 - 324.

Christianity and not one “home base.” The missionary task is from everywhere to everywhere and we cannot expect any one church to emerge as the world leader.⁶²

The vision and passion of Edinburgh to invigorate the “home base” was appropriate but these efforts proved less than determinative to the outcomes of the next century. As Brian Stanley put it, “The face of the world church has indeed been transfigured within the last 100 years, but not according to the pattern which was generally predicted at Edinburgh...”⁶³ Whatever lies ahead after observing the centenary of Edinburgh will also likely be other than our plans intend.

⁶² Andrew Walls, *Understanding the Western Missionary Movement III: Western Missions Move into the Twentieth Century*, November 3 – 9, 2007, lectures at the Overseas Ministries Study Center, New Haven, CT

⁶³ Stanley, p. 16; see also Stanley’s concluding chapter, pp. 303ff.