

The Antioch Agenda*

By Daniel Jeyaraj and Rodney Petersen

Christian mission is deeply concerned with establishing new relationships that transcend cultural, social, economic, political and other boundaries. Its cross-cultural communication enables people to overcome deep-rooted prejudices by providing an alternate lifestyle that bridges the gap between outsiders and insiders. It brings together people with differing worldviews, and helps them to learn from one another.

Antiochian Agenda

The ancient Roman city of Antioch, now situated on the eastern side of the Orontes River in southern Turkey, played an important role in the formation of the first multicultural and multiethnic Christian congregation outside of Jerusalem. In all probability, early Jewish Christian converts from Palestine founded a congregation there. They seem to have invited both Jewish and non-Jewish peoples to accept Jesus Christ as their savior and lord. This meant a complete orientation of life around the ministry and person of Jesus, understood to be the messiah or anointed one (Christ) of God. They encouraged them to become full-fledged members of the newly established congregation. It is truly astonishing that the first Jewish Christian converts in Antioch did not require the non-Jewish Christian converts to first follow the characteristic ethos of Judaism (e.g., adherence to the Mosaic Law, circumcision, Jewish dietary habits, and the like), and then to become Christians. Instead they encouraged them to be what they were before with the exception of consciously developing Christian worldviews and evaluating their cherished socio-cultural values from the perspective of Jewish monotheism, the one God whom Jesus Christ had further revealed and whom His apostles proclaimed.

As a result, the followers of Jesus Christ in Antioch were known as Christians (“Christ-bearers,” Acts 11:26).¹ They placed their commitment to Jesus Christ in the center of their belief and life. Their devotion to Jesus Christ did not eradicate their previous socio-cultural identities, but they did not become the constitutive factor of their new identity as Christians. Their new identity drastically changed their former concepts about ritual purity and pollution, interpersonal relationships, religious communion and

¹ Not all followers of Jesus Christ were/are known as Christians. The *Nazarenes* in some parts Iran and India and the *Malankara Nazranikal* in southwestern India are different from traditional understanding of being Christians. In addition, numerous “unbaptized Christians” live in many parts of India. Due to certain social, cultural, political and communal reasons they do not want to be baptized, and formally join a church. Similarly, the “anonymous Christians” claim that they live in God’s grace and that they will attain “salvation” in their own religious traditions because they believe that the Holy Spirit is present and active in these traditions. It is evident that these and many other similar faith communities live somewhere in the *in betweenness* of cultures and human systems.

table fellowship between Jewish and non-Jewish Christians. This change of worldviews and lifestyle enabled them to effectively communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ with people belonging to diverse cultures, religions and other ideologies. As a result, they established intercultural and multiethnic relationships and formed an alternate community that welcomed inquirers, converts, and trainees for cross-cultural ministry.

The Antioch Agenda Today

The *Antioch Agenda* today is an agenda that involves all peoples in the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. It finds specific focus in the pressing issues of our day, but stands as a trajectory with mission from the earliest days of Jesus' mission and proclamation of Good News (Luke 4: 18 – 21). These issues can be said to be the need for human flourishing, the demands of reconciliation in specific settings, an affirmation of religious freedom in the context of a dialogue among religions, and the necessity of freedom from fear.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) offer a vision of human flourishing. Defined by the United Nations, they form a template for action. The lens of Christian reflection offers missional perspective: the goal of eliminating extreme poverty and hunger draws us to consider how all are made in the image of God; that of reducing child mortality calls us to reflect on the incarnation, that the embodiment of Christian hope came into the world as a child; promoting gender equality draws us to reflect on the mystery of unity and diversity; that of gender, ethnicity and race; the goal of achieving universal primary education reminds us that education, schools and universities, have been the gift of the Church to global cultures; improving maternal health reminds us that the health of the mother is key to the health of the community; the work of combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other Diseases drives us to ask whether calamity/suffering is payback for sin; the task of ensuring environmental sustainability calls us to stewardship; and developing networks for development raises the question of those with whom we are willing to associate, to issues of “exclusion and embrace.”² Mission in the twenty-first century fosters human flourishing.

Mission in the twenty-first century is also about reconciliation. Reconciliation, accompanied by forgiveness, grounded in justice. These all are central to Christian spirituality and open the gates forward to the repair of the world (*tikkun olam*). Robert Schreiter calls attention to the vertical, horizontal and cosmic aspects of reconciliation.³ In work for the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches (Athens 2005), he outlines six aspects of reconciliation and healing: truth,

² Sabina Alkire, *What Can One Person Do? Faith to Heal a Broken World* (Church Publishing, 2005). Economist and Anglican priest, Sabina Alkire calls us to craft mission goals that begin with prayer and then move through stages of study, financial giving, connecting with the impoverished, ritual, advocacy, and politics so as to be the *Ambassadors of Hope* (Robert Seiple) that we are called to be. The term “exclusion and embrace” is from the book of that title by Miroslav Volf (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

³ Robert Schreiter, *Reconciliation. Mission & Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (New York and Cambridge: BTI/Orbis, 1992). Schreiter has gone on to develop his ideas in different settings and articles.

memory, repentance, justice, forgiveness and love.⁴ Reconciliation begins in particular settings and reaches out to cosmic dimensions. If there is a role for reconciliation in the political realm, as seen in Helmick's chapter, it finds its deepest grounding in theological reflection on God's work in Christ.⁵ This is where cycles of revenge and release are first encountered within a movement toward health and wholeness.⁶ Reconciliation involves, to use the words of Samuel Escobar, "Transforming Service."⁷ It is the "liturgy after the liturgy," to adopt the expression of Orthodox theologian Ion Bria.⁸

Third, Christian mission assumes and promotes religious freedom. There is a growing sense across the globe that rights and obligations arise from the people as embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights set forth by the United Nations (1948). This was given further significance for religious consciousness and liberties in the U.N.'s Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (25 November 1981). The social reality of people migrating around the world, contemporary technology and media – as well as an increasing tendency to standardize national citizenship – have all promoted a sense of global citizenship. With this has come an increasing understanding of the necessity for a dialogue among religions⁹ in the context of the freedom of religion.¹⁰ Religious citizenship takes shape around issues of identity, lifestyle, specific needs and networks.¹¹ Just as Christianity played a role in globalization through the democracy of salvation,

⁴ Jacques Matthey and the Ecumenical Formation Team, "Mission as Ministry of Reconciliation," Preparatory Paper No. 1. Conference on World Mission and Evangelism, Athens, May, 2005; cf. John Paul Lederach, *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* (Scottsdale, PA: Harold Press, 1999).

⁵ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 2000); and with attention to the overtly political, see: Martha Minow, *Breaking Cycles of Hatred. Memory, Law, and Repair* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2002); also: Olga Botcharova, "Implementation of Track Two Diplomacy: Developing a Model of Forgiveness," in Raymond Helmick and Rodney Petersen, eds., *Forgiveness and Reconciliation. Religion, Public Policy and Conflict Transformation* (Philadelphia: Templeton Press, 2002): pp. 279-304; Christopher D. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution. A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001): 251-280.

⁶ Literature on forgiveness is now legion. One might begin with Robert D. Enright and Joanna North, eds., *Exploring Forgiveness* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998); Michael Henderson, *Forgiveness. Breaking the Chain of Hate* (Wilsonville, OR: Book Partners, 1999). A theology of forgiveness has been written by L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995); cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); and Vladimir Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁷ Samuel Escobar, *The New Global Mission. The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003): 142-154.

⁸ Ion Bria, *The Liturgy After the Liturgy: Mission and Witness from an Orthodox Perspective* (Geneva: WCC, 1996).

⁹ Hans Küng has long argued for the importance of a dialogue of respect among the religions, see the Parliament of the World's Religions, *Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions* (New York: Continuum, 1994).

¹⁰ On religious citizenship, see Bart van Steenberg, "The Condition of Citizenship," in Bart van Steenberg, ed., *The Condition of Citizenship* (London: Sage Publications, 1994), 1-9, esp. 2.

¹¹ On "lifestyle politics," see Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991). On the "politics of identity" and related matters, see Jonathan Sacks, "Judaism and Politics in the Modern World," in Peter Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 51-63.

fostering global religious freedom in the context of a dialogue among religions must also be affirmed as a mission goal so as to promote the authenticity of religious choice and commitment.

A fourth goal for mission in the twenty-first century is to promote freedom from fear. At another time and place Franklin Delano Roosevelt offered a vision of a world founded upon four essential freedoms: the freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and the freedom from fear.¹² This must also be a dimension of mission in the twenty-first century. .Do not fear. is the charge given to Abraham, alike to Joshua, then with resonances through Jesus to John.s vision, the Apocalypse: .Be strong and courageous. I will be with you. (Deuteronomy 31-23). The monotheistic faiths tell us that we live in a world of the one God, upon whose goodness we can totally rely.¹³ The victory cry of the Lamb who was slain is that, .He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed Strategies for Holistic Mission away. (Revelation 21:4).

* This material is taken from: *The Antioch Agenda: Essays on the Restorative Church in Honor of Orlando E. Costas*. Edited by Daniel Jeyaraj, Robert W. Pazmiño and Rodney L. Petersen. Printed by the Indian Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, New Delhi, 2007).

¹² Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Four Freedoms"; Address to Congress January 6, 1941 (Congressional Record, 1941, Vol. 87, Pt. I.).

¹³ I owe this reflection to Raymond Helmick, S.J. The paper in which he develops these ideas is entitled, "'Do not Fear', Because I am with You." (December 2004).