

Commission VI: The Home Base of Missions: Edinburgh 1910 and Missional Church 2010

Introduction

The World Missionary Conference of 1910 (Edinburgh) convened to advance the cause of the western missionary movement. Consultation and cooperation among mission boards and societies were basic principles motivating the vision for that event.

Much has changed since 1910 but we also continue to revisit many of the concerns of Edinburgh. I would suggest that consultation and cooperation lead us to questions of “agency.” Who “does” mission? Who are the “agents” for mission...humanly speaking (understanding, of course, our theological commitment to *missio Dei*).

In 1910 mission boards, denominational and inter-denominational, were the agents of world mission. Edinburgh could not have imagined that in the early 21st century more than 1.5 million North Americans would participate in short term international mission trips each year.¹ How does this enormous change affect consultation and cooperation? The question of “agency” is surely present today.

I propose to consider these questions rooted in Edinburgh and relate them to the context of the “missional church” conversations presently being engaged in Europe, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and North America. Missional Church, as explored by Lesslie Newbigin and many others², tends to focus on the congregation’s missionary vocation with respect to “near neighbors.” What is its meaning when expanded by Acts 1:8 (Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth)? How do we deal with consultation, cooperation and agency in the missionary movement today?

I use the word “agency” here because it underlies a discussion of consultation and cooperation. Commission VI (The Home Base of Missions) at Edinburgh focused on the issue of the how the denominational and interdenominational mission boards motivated the “Home Base” (European and North American churches) for missions. It desired to encourage the mission boards, local churches and individual members to support world missions with prayer, people and money.

It was assumed that mission was “from the west to the rest.” This was, after all, the World Missionary Conference “To consider Missionary Problems in relation to the Non-Christian World.” One “missionary problem” was the lack of candidates, money and prayer for missions to evangelize the non-Christian world. Today we prefer to talk of mission as “from everywhere to everywhere.” But the question of human agency still remains, no matter where we find the locus of initiative. Furthermore, not all assumptions of western superiority are a thing of the past.

¹ Preliminary surveys and research for the Edinburgh conference determined that 3,000 persons had visited 900 mission stations, presumably over a period of several years preceding the event. *Report of Commission VI: The Home Base of Missions*, Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1910, p. 96.

² David Bosch, Wilbert Shenk, Darrell Guder, George Hunsberger, Lois Barrett, Inagrace Dietterich, Craig Van Gelder, Alan Roxburgh, Patrick Keifert, Alan Hirsch, Michael Frost, John Flett, Jannie Swart, et al

Important contributions of Commission VI

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 has said 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.”³ 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.⁴

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, missionary in Egypt and chronicler of the event, said that the topic was of first importance.⁵

The definition of “home base” is found in this quote from 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.⁶

What exactly was meant by the “home base” is not always clear, but the following three are elements of the definition:

1. On one hand, “home base” in 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.”⁷

³ Andrew 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.

⁴ Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids/Cambridge, 2009, p. 16.

⁵ W. H. T. Gairdner, “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. 238.

⁶ *Report of Commission VI.*, 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.

⁷ Pierson, Arthur T., editor, *The Missionary Review of the World*, April, 1910, pp. 288 – 289.

2. Sometimes the “home base” refers to ecclesiastical structures, whether a diocese, presbytery, 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.⁸
3. There is also a third understanding of the “home base,” namely 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.”⁹

W. Ritchie Hogg noted that the Edinburgh Conference was essentially church-based in its orientation. He said, “Basically, Edinburgh was a conference on the home base of missions... Missionary periodicals of the time indicate that Edinburgh was valued almost wholly in terms of its direct stimulus upon missionary endeavour and interest.”¹⁰ 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.

John R. Mott, whose masterful chairmanship of the Edinburgh Conference was acknowledged by all, affirms this commonly-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?¹¹

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

⁸ *Life & Work: The Church of Scotland Magazine and Mission Record*, Vol. XXXII (January, 1910), p. 30. The Laymen’s Missionary Movement was particularly attentive to these denominational structures.

⁹ *Ibid.*, December, 1910, p. 94.

¹⁰ W. Ritchie Hogg, “Edinburgh 1910 – Perspective 1980,” *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research*,” October, 1980, pp. 134, 138 and 147.

¹¹ *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.

deeper insight into the character, and purposes, and resources of our God...Now blessed be the Lord our God, the God of Israel, For He alone doth wondrous works, in glory that excel.¹²

A 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.”¹³ In the Commission VI report the topic of “missionary intelligence” accounted for chapters two through eight (36% of narrative) as it addressed several ways to accomplish this activity on behalf of foreign missions.¹⁴

The Edinburgh reports spoke often of advancing the “science” of missions.¹⁵ 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 sensitivities) 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. Quoting the report:

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.¹⁶

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

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.¹⁷

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

¹² “The World Missionary Conference,” *The Missionary Record of the United Free Church of Scotland*, Vol. X, 1910, p. 355.

¹³ A hundred years earlier William Carey would have referred to this as the “use of means.”

¹⁴ *Report of Commission VI: The Home Base of Missions*, pp. 17 – 119.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ *Report of Commission VI: The Home Base of Missions*, p. 249; The Laymen’s Missionary Movement was considered to be the most significant effort in advancing this science. See David Dawson, “Funding Mission in the Early Twentieth Century” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, October, 2000, Vol. 24, No. 4, pp. 155 – 158.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17. The concept of the church as missionary society was first articulated in American Presbyterian circles by John Holt Rice in 1831; see David Dawson, “A Recurring Issue of Mission Administration,” *Missiology*, October, 1997, pp. 457 – 465.

becoming more respectable.¹⁸ Mission study classes for church members and courses in schools, both church-related and public were documented through 550 surveys to these institutions. 3,000 visits were made to more than 900 mission stations for the purpose of expanding missionary intelligence.¹⁹ Missionary conferences, conventions, summer schools, institutes, exhibitions, slide presentations and mission dinners were advanced as means for education in the churches.²⁰ Attention to telling the missions story and asking for support was far more common and intentional in 1910 than it is today.

The report said, “The success of foreign missions largely depends upon the financial support it receives and upon the candidates available for appointment.”²¹ Humanly speaking, this assertion from Commission VI had 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. Western mission societies saw themselves as the principle agents of mission to the non-Christian world, but in fact, “indigenous agency” proved to be the norm for the explosive growth in the twentieth century.²²

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.²³ 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 own congregation and the work of starting new churches, but only 72¢ on foreign missions (approximately 6%). This ratio was actually much higher than is found in the North American churches today.²⁴

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.

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ *Report of Commission VI: The Home Base of Missions*, pp. 96 – 103 (chapter VII). Visitors included board secretaries, board members, pastors, laymen and women and even young college graduates. These visits were entirely different than the short term mission trips of today. They were designed to learn, not to do mission work.

²⁰ *Report of Commission VI: The Home Base of Missions*, pp. 43 – 119.

²¹ *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 Divine Spirit that missions will and must succeed.”

²² See Dana Robert, ed., *Converting Colonialism*, William B. Eerdmans, 2008, p. 17ff; Sebastian Kim and Kirsteen Kim, *Christianity as a World Religion*, Continuum Books: London, 2008, pp. 2, 11.

²³ *Report of Commission VI*, 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.”

²⁴ *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 is used internationally. Presbyterian News Service, January 9, 2007, #07019.

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.²⁵

It would not be accurate to say that Commission VI concluded that advances in the "science of missions" would assure success. The writers of the report are clear that any "success" goes far beyond human effort. In the final chapter of conclusions and recommendations, the first item noted was "dependence on prayer and the Holy Spirit."

...[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.²⁶

Commission VI noted in chapter thirteen the role of women's boards and their significance in funding and promoting missions. During 1909 sixty women's boards had raised \$4 million and produced 500,000 books for study groups. A further implication from the report was that women's boards should move toward assimilation into the 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."²⁷ Within a decade of Edinburgh all of the American denominations would be moving toward organizational centralization.

This was a huge emerging change in the constitution of mission societies and boards. In retrospect it is clear that this co-opting of women's boards and other organizational centralization actually had a long term negative effect on the advancement of mission.²⁸ The operative assumption of this era was that efficiency was the highest good and that this would be accomplished by centralization. Such thinking plagued denominational mission throughout the rest of the century.

These are just a few of the highlights of the Commission VI report. We turn now to some echoes of Edinburgh that reflect on our present struggles with consultation, cooperation and agency.

The Short-Term Mission Phenomena

²⁵ Commission VI. The Home Base. Burke Library, Series 1, Box 18, File 8, pp. 29 – 32.

²⁶ *Report of Commission VI*, p. 270.

²⁷ *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.

²⁸ Dana Robert, *Gospel Bearers, Gender Barriers: Missionary Women in the Twentieth Century*, Orbis, 2002; see also Stanley, p. 316.

Christendom in 1910 perceived missions in terms of expansion from a fixed geographical point.²⁹ Many churches in the West today approach mission with the assumption that it is still a western prerogative. This is seen most dramatically in the short term mission movement. Research shows that more than 1.5 million North Americans go internationally on short term mission trips of two weeks or more each year.³⁰

This dramatic shift from long-term to short-term agency has brought with it dramatic changes. Robert Priest says, “they see everything and understand nothing.”³¹ Ralph Winter, bemoaned what he called the “amateurization” of mission, saying “never in American history have more local churches been more interested in having a hand in the mission cause!”³² Jehu Hanciles goes further in his critique saying that short-term mission amounts to “...little more than Christian tourism with a touch of scheduled humanitarianism.”³³

But the trend continues because of the economic power of western churches. Priest notes that research finds, especially in the megachurches (those averaging 2,000 or more in weekend worship), that “...the large increase in expenditures for ministry abroad was not channeled into a corresponding increase in support of career missionaries.”³⁴

Much more could be said about these developments, but there is clearly a significant shift in “agency.” Whereas mission societies were the means (William Carey) for mission in 1910, today congregations are seen as the primary means/agents for mission. Western congregations (especially American) are engaged in international mission because they can...financially and logistically. They are increasingly ignoring mission boards and getting involved directly on their own. However, the evidence suggests a number of problems.

The growth in short-term mission comes with a woefully inadequate missiological preparation for those who lead this effort, not to mention those who participate. Mission pastors in these churches are not well-trained missiologically. Contextual wisdom is lacking. Dependency and a myriad of other unfortunate consequences follow.³⁵ It seems that the Eurocentric thinking of 1910 may not have progressed very far as evidenced in the North American short-term mission movement.

However, there are some interesting developments as noted by Hanciles. “America may be the foremost missionary-*sending* nation in the world, but patterns within contemporary global migrations have arguably transformed it into the foremost missionary-*receiving* country in the

²⁹ Jehu J. Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*, Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY, 2008, p. 379

³⁰ Robert J. Priest, “Researching the Short-Term Mission Movement,” *Missiology*, October, 2006, pp. 431 – 450.

³¹ Robert J. Priest and Joseph Paul Priest, “They See Everything and Understand Nothing: Short-Term Mission and Service Learning,” *Missiology*, January, 2008, pp. 53 – 73; see also Mark 4:12

³² Ralph Winter, “Editorial Comment,” *Mission Frontiers*, May – June, 2005, p. 4

³³ Hanciles, “Researching...,” p. 382; see also Karla Ann Koll, “Taking Wolves Among Lambs: Some thoughts on Training for Short-Term Mission Facilitation,” *IBMR*, April, 2010, pp. 93 – 96.

³⁴ Robert J. Priest, Douglas Wilson, and Adelle Johnson, “U.S. Megachurches and New Patterns of Global Mission,” *IBMR*, April, 2010, pp. 97 – 104.

³⁵ Glenn Schwartz, “Large Churches and Short-Term Teams,” *Mission Frontiers*, May-June, 2010, p. 31.

West.”³⁶ In spite of western power and money, there may be surprises in store, just as there were in the decades after the Edinburgh conference.

Andrew Walls says of world Christianity 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.³⁷

The present state of the western missionary movement, especially in North America, has missed some significant insights from the Edinburgh experience and the perspectives of a century of retrospect. The “home base” in Edinburgh was Europe and North America. The non-Christian world was the object of the missionary movement which was hopeful of a great harvest if the home base would simply provide support. There was, of course, a great harvest but the cause of Christianity’s growth in the Global South had little to do with the hoped-for response from the “home base.”

Edinburgh was not entirely ignorant of the western-centric fallacy. 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.”³⁸ Hutchison notes that the “older/younger” distinction was even challenged by Mott by the time of the International Missionary Council conference in Jerusalem in 1928.³⁹ Also referring to Jerusalem, Basil Matthews, in the 1920’s, 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.”⁴⁰

Developments of the past century have helped missiologists to see that mission is “from everywhere to everywhere.”⁴¹ Every congregation is a home base. Every church is a missionary community sent into the world as a witness to the coming Kingdom of the risen Lord (Luke 10).

³⁶ Hanciles, p. 379.

³⁷ 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.

³⁸ William 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.

³⁹ Hutchison, p. 180.

⁴⁰ Basil Matthews, *Road to the City of God*, New York, Double Day, Doran & Company, 1929, p. 20; Heather J. Sharkey, *American Evangelicals in Egypt: Missionary Encounters in an Age of Empire*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2008, p. 97.

⁴¹ Michael 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.edinburgh2010.org/> see papers on Study Theme #5 “Forms of Missionary Engagement”; David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991, p. 260; Samuel Escobar,

At Edinburgh 1910 the mission societies and boards came together to consult and cooperate with each other for the advancement of the evangelization of the world. These boards and agencies understood themselves to be the agents for the missions to evangelize the non-Christian world. They consulted and cooperated among themselves. Today congregations see themselves as the agents of mission, not only in their local communities, but beyond. How can they be agents for mission “to the ends of the earth?” The short term mission phenomenon is an indication of their answer and through this “means” they are the “agents” for a significant amount of world mission. Their mobility and money generally works against consultation and cooperation among those with whom they are working, but this is the reality in which we live.

Some Developments since Edinburgh

Edinburgh led to greater consultation and cooperation through the International Missionary Council formed in 1921. Subsequent conferences such as Whitby (1947) emphasizing partnership and Willingen (1952) out of which the *missio Dei* understanding emerged, raised further questions about the church and agency.

Lesslie Newbigin was, as is well known here, the preeminent voice in these conversations. In *The Household of God*, he called the church to its missionary purpose and he challenged any ecclesiology that would separate church and mission. His famous quote brings it home,

It is surely a fact of inexhaustible significance that what our Lord left behind Him was not a book, nor a creed, nor a system of thought, nor a rule of life, but a visible community. He committed the entire work of salvation to that community. It was not that a community gathered round an idea, so that the idea was primary and the community secondary. It was that a community called together by the deliberate choice of the Lord Himself, and re-created in Him, gradually sought - and is seeking - to make explicit who He is and what He has done. The actual community is primary; the understanding of what it is comes second. (p.20)

Newbigin had a profoundly local understanding of the church. In *The Gospel in a Pluralist Culture* (1989) he devoted chapter 18 to a discussion of “the congregation as hermeneutic of the Gospel.”⁴² The Gospel is not exhibited primarily in denominations or ecumenical expressions, but rather in the local gathering of the people of God around Word and sacrament. Dana Robert reminds us that the ultimate world religion is essentially local. The meaning of the faith must be lived in the local congregation. Even though it presents challenges that so many North Americans participate in short term mission trips each year, it is also appropriate that the missionary nature of the local church is affirmed.

Newbigin reminded the local church that mission is fundamentally God’s work (*missio Dei*) not a human enterprise. As David Bosch described it,

The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003.

⁴² Wilbert R. Shenk, “Lesslie Newbigin’s Contribution to the Theology of Mission”, *TransMission*, Special Edition, 1998, pp. 3 – 6.

Mission was understood as being derived from the very nature of God. It was thus put in the context of the doctrine on the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another “movement”: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world.⁴³

The church becomes a sign, symbol and foretaste of the coming reign of God. However, the danger always lurks that the local church will fixate on itself as the center of the missionary enterprise. It then makes mission one of the programs of the congregation. The congregation can begin to believe that it is “the agent” for mission. It begins to see itself as indispensable to the coming reign of God. A fixation on short term mission trips is a logical result.

Inagrace Dietterich notes that Newbigin helps us by challenging our assumptions about the church as an “agent” for God’s mission.

Newbigin suggests that the church begin to think of itself not as the *agent* of mission but as the *locus* of mission...the church becomes the place where the Spirit speaks and acts.”⁴⁴

The congregation is sent by God but it is God who is the missionary. The church may, and often does, fail, but the missionary-God does not, for even the stones will cry out (Matthew 3:9; Luke 3:8; 19:40). The world is not saved by the local congregation engaged in short term mission trips.

Newbigin’s return to England in 1974 put in motion a critique of the church in western culture through his writing and the formation of the Gospel and Culture Programme of the British Council of Churches in the 1980’s. This carried across the Atlantic to become the Gospel and Our Culture Network of North America which emerged in the early 1990’s. In the past twenty years it has taken on institutional forms designed to introduce Newbigin’s concerns into the life of local congregations.⁴⁵ These “missional church conversations” are beginning to have an impact on leaders in middle judicatories and congregations in North America, the United Kingdom, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

Missional Church

The meaning of “missional church” and the abundant literature on the subject are far more than can be addressed here. A precise definition of “missional church” is impractical and generally resisted among its advocates. However, the etymology of “missional church” listed above would be acknowledged by most participants as their heritage. The *missio Dei* understanding

⁴³ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991), p. 390; David Bosch, “Vision for Mission,” *International Review of Mission*, January, 1987, pp. 8 – 15.

⁴⁴ Inagrace Dietterich, “A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America,” *Missiology*, January, 2010, pp. 29 – 30.

⁴⁵ Church Innovations www.churchinnovations.org ; Center for Parish Development www.missionalchurch.org ; Roxburgh Missional Network www.roxburghmissionalnet.com ; Allelon www.allelon.org ; Vital Churches Institute www.vitalchurchesinstitute.com ; Institute of Urban Initiatives www.urban-initiatives.org

acknowledges the missionary nature of God and sees the church as the gather community of those becoming disciples of Jesus, sent into the world by the power of the Holy Spirit.

There would be a strong affirmation of the failures of the western church based on its Christendom and Enlightenment assumptions. Proponents would note that the church in the west has become a vendor of religious goods and services in support of the dominant culture. A contextualized witness by the church is essential, thus exhibiting a profound grounding in its local nature. The mission of God is seen as the central organizing principle of the church.

Therefore, the term “missional church” is a redundancy since a church that is not “missional” is not, by definition, a church. Therefore, as Jehu Hanciles observes, “One central reason for this failure [of the Christendom project] is a diminished sense of mission to its own society and culture; and this loss of missionary function is rooted in the entrenched association between Christianity and Western culture or national identity.”⁴⁶ The western church cannot be considered the normative expression of Christianity.

Significant efforts are presently being made to bring this missional church conversation into the life and consciousness of local congregations. The one with which I am most familiar is the process called “Partnership for the Missional Church” (PMC) developed by Church Innovations of St. Paul, MN. Through extensive scriptural engagement, nurturing spiritual disciplines, deep listening (in the congregation and local community), attention to the sociology of change, initiating missional experiments, and other strategies, congregations are encouraged to engage in action/reflection designed to open them to the *missio Dei*. Those who participate are constantly reminded that there is no human strategy that will effect transformation and renewal. The Spirit always moves in unexpected and often disturbing ways.

Connecting Edinburgh with the Missional Church Conversations

There were some at Edinburgh who recognized that human endeavors would not accomplish the “evangelization of the world in this generation.” Hanciles, commenting on the optimism of the Edinburgh conference, observes that, “...this optimism was only slightly tempered by a muted recognition that the spiritual state of the ‘Home Church’ was not fully in keeping with its missionary obligation.”⁴⁷ Yet the operative assumption of Edinburgh divided the world into Christian and non-Christian. 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.⁴⁸

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

⁴⁶ Jehu J. Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West*, Orbis Books, 2008, p. 110.

⁴⁷ Hanciles, p. 123.

⁴⁸ Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids/Cambridge, 2009, p. 16.

financial support? Will the home church lose its zeal because of rising materialism?”⁴⁹ The meeting was convened not to assess mission to the world but “to consider missionary problems in relation to the non-Christian world.”

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.⁵⁰

It was customary (and still is in some places, even at the turn of the twenty-first century) for denominations to think of their national agencies as the only appropriate “agents” of world mission. One hundred years earlier Tucker challenged this thinking, but developments actually moved in the opposite direction from his admonitions for most of the twentieth century.

During the past one hundred years congregations were seen simply as the source of funding for the world mission of denominational leaders. Those assumptions about agency have imploded during the past decade. Virtually no denominational leaders would dare to pretend that such understandings would be taken seriously today. Just one example will suffice. Linda Valentine, director of the Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly Mission Council recently said (in the context of the sixth cutback in national staff in the past eight years):

Our [national church agency] role is changing from doing mission on behalf of the church to inspiring, equipping and connecting the church for mission and ministry...⁵¹

Rev. J. Henzel (Utrecht Missionary Society) was another who was given the privilege of commenting on the Commission VI report. (Less than half of those who asked to speak were able to be accommodated because of the seven-minute time limit for each speaker.) He also spoke regarding pastors and how their leadership for mission might be enriched. He felt that the

⁴⁹Lectures 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.

⁵⁰ *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.

⁵¹ Presbyterian News Service, May 14, 2010, GAMC10027
<http://www.pcusa.org/pcnews/pressreleases/gamc10027.htm>

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.⁵²

The missional church conversation understands the Bible as a missionary document (David Bosch, Christopher J. H. Wright, etc.). Therefore mission is not a program like the music program or the youth program of a church. While avoiding the warning of Stephen Neill that, “if everything is mission, nothing is mission,” the missional church understanding insists that the overarching missional identity of the congregation animates everything that a church does.

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 formed itself with *the firm intention* to do mission, but a human community *called* to the act of mission.”⁵³

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.⁵⁴

⁵² *Report of Commission VI*, pp. 313 – 314; see also Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic), 2006.

⁵³ Darrell L. Guder, “From Mission and Theology to Missional Theology,” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, Vol. XXIV, No. 1, 2003, p. 42.

⁵⁴ Van Gelder, p. 13.

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 place 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.⁵⁵ 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.”⁵⁶ 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, i.e. indigenous agency. Virtually all direct evangelism among people groups which do not have an indigenous church is being done by non-western Christians. The Christians of Asia, Africa and all of the Global South were the principle evangelists of the past century and they continue to be so today. 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 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 are beginning to engage these issues in their local manifestations, but they have not usually addressed the world mission concerns of Edinburgh. “Jerusalem” is beginning to return to the attention of local congregations, but “Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth” are still on the back burner for the missional church conversations.

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 the significant decline among mainline churches during the last century 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. However, this has mostly been motivated by a precipitous fall in financial resources.

⁵⁵ www.edinburgh2010.org

⁵⁶ <http://www.ad2000.org/ad2kbroc.htm>

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.”⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸

This warning is still needed today. The present missional church conversations constantly struggle with the hunger for some method or program or blueprint that will make the congregational “missional,” which is usually understood as some form of “successful.” It should be apparent from the “scientific approach” of one hundred years ago that formulaic answers do not assure missional behavior and practice. There is no formula to renew the western church. In fact, as Andrew Walls suggests, we may be beyond renewal and into a place of reconversion in the west.⁵⁹ But renewal and transformation that embraces the “missional church” tradition may be significant for the declining churches today.⁶⁰

This missional church conversation may also be helpful to 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 any serious understanding of their missionary vocation. Institutional changes will be a necessary part of this process. 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 through 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

⁵⁷ *Report of Commission VI*, pp. 40 and 146.

⁵⁸ “The World Missionary Conference,” *The Missionary Record of the United Free Church of Scotland*, Vol. XI, no. 125 (May, 1911), pp. 198 - 199.

⁵⁹ Andrew Walls, Overseas Ministries Study Center Lectures, November 9 – 13, 2009.

⁶⁰ Wilbert R. Shenk, “Contextual Theology: the Last Frontier,” in *The Changing Face of Christianity*, edited by Lamin Sanneh and Joel A. Carpenter, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2005, p. 194.

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

Missional Church and Partnership with Sudanese Christians

In the typical North American congregation we still find the operative missiology as one designed “to consider missionary problems in relation to the non-Christian world.” Most of our churches still operate on a “from the west to the rest” mentality. This missiology is even evident when an affluent congregation ventures into the inner city to “do good for some poor unfortunate group.” It is also seen in the dramatic growth of short term mission trips.

All efforts to imagine a “from everywhere to everywhere” approach out of a North American context are humble at best. Furthermore, any “success” that they have is mostly thrust upon them by the Holy Spirit rather than something that emerged from self-initiated reflection. This has been true for a Presbyterian Church (USA) presbytery of sixty-eight churches in western Pennsylvania. I tell this story briefly as the executive staff for this presbytery.

Shenango Presbytery stumbled into a partnership c. 1994 with the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church (SPEC).⁶³ The natural tendency from the beginning of this relationship was to ask “what can we do to help them?” Even though that presumptive question is consciously critiqued on a regular basis, it still persists. This is particularly challenging given that these sixty-eight churches provide annually approximately \$150,000 in resources to the Sudanese church.

However, some significant missiological learning has certainly occurred during this experience. The natural tendency in such relationships to develop short term mission trips is one obvious example. The predisposition to travel to the Sudan to do some good for suffering people has been stifled by the political and religious circumstances of the Sudanese church as it functions mostly in the north Sudan in the context of a dominant Islamic hegemony. Typical short term mission trips in which most North American Christians engage are not possible in the Sudan. Visits are complicated but feasible. However, work projects are very limited.

More than fifty persons from the churches of the Presbytery have visited the Sudan, but with only one exception they were not able to do any “mission work” as it would normally be understood. The visitors could “only” say that they were going to see what the Holy Spirit was doing in the Sudan and talk about it among themselves and in their home churches. A “listening” model for these visits was enforced by the context.

Sudanese have also visited in the Presbytery in the United States, although obtaining visas is always problematic and limiting. The conversations engaged have developed within the American church an emerging appreciation for mission “from everywhere to everywhere.”

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 The World Mission office of the Presbyterian Church (USA) has intentionally nurtured this kind of partnership. “New Strategic Direction for World Mission” (February 24, 2010), “Global Discipleship” May 10, 2010; “Communities of Mission Practice Characteristics” n.d. – all unpublished papers

Since this presbytery is not the only one engaged in partnerships in the Sudan, its people have had the benefit of pursuing this learning in an extended community. PC(USA) missionaries working in the Sudan with SPEC have also been significant voices in reflecting on the partnership. The whole situation has forced a different “short term mission” experience that has shaped our missiology and brought a measure of humility.

Given our context in the west one hundred years after Edinburgh, such international partnerships are not optional for the church in North America. This kind of partnership and mutuality can take different forms but we cannot afford the luxury of neglecting it. The present status of short-term mission trips make it clear that there is much that needs to be learned through relationships so that we can move beyond a western-centric view of world mission.⁶⁴ In spite of one hundred years of perspective the western church is still beholden to a self-definition based on power.

Much more could be said about this example. The outcomes are truly humble and modest, but the relationship is significantly different than if we were left to our own unimpeded initiatives. The short term mission phenomenon drives much of our action today, but the experience of Shenango Presbytery in the Sudan has been shaped in ways that would not have been chosen.

Conclusion

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...”⁶⁵ Whatever lies ahead after observing the centenary of Edinburgh will also likely be other than our plans intend.

This essay has attempted to propose further reflection on the questions of “consultation and cooperation” found in the report of Commission VI (The Home Base of Missions). This centenary occasion can be instructive for our situation today. It may enhance our efforts at consultation and cooperation between Christians around the world. We in the west will be reminded of the importance of humility, expecting that God will surprise us.

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⁶⁴ Kim, p. 226.

⁶⁵ Stanley, p. 16; see also Stanley’s concluding chapter, pp. 303ff.