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Mission Leadership and Church Growth

Chris Sugden

Introduction

Dr. Yonggi-Cho's experience in growing the Yoido Full Gospel Church has been described and reviewed in many articles, reviews and discussions. I do not intend to repeat the issues that have been raised in them. They and the life of his community are testimony to God's blessing on his preaching and teaching of the scriptures. In the Korean context that growth has taken place in a situation of war and deprivation. Dr. Cho's approach has not necessarily been, as everyone everywhere else would have undertaken the work. But then Dr. Cho and his community and not everyone else were the instruments that God chose to use.

What can we learn from Dr. Cho's experience?

My question is what we can learn from Dr. Cho's experience and writings about the role of leadership of Christian communities in Church growth. It is quite legitimate to do this as there are precedents in Christian history to characterize a movement of God by the writings and activities of a leader – there are Lutheran churches and Wesleyan churches. We are meeting to reflect on what characterizes a Choian church.

What we learn about leadership.

Leaders lead. They take initiatives and risks. They pioneer new territory and methods. They are the first to do things, and they determine what must be done first. They appoint others whom they deem fit to carry out the similar vision. They provide a narrative, the story, and the framework for understanding the history and experience of the group over time.

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Dr. Cho has clearly done this in his writings. He narrates his own experiences of starting with nothing; of undergoing great anxiety and suffering, and sometimes rejection. This narrative both repeats the experience of Jesus in his ministry of death and resurrection, and illuminates the experience of many of his church members as they go through suffering.

His experiences provide examples of how to respond to suffering and risk in prayer and faith. He builds a theology of faith and prayer based on the bible and his experiences in interaction.

He draws on the bible as the appropriate justification for his teaching and his action, thus illuminating the meaning of God's word for people in the Korean situation.

Studies on Christian leaders at OCMS.

In our research at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, our research colleagues are studying the leadership roles of a number of contemporary church leaders. A recent doctoral study focused on Archbishop David Gitari, former Archbishop of the Anglican Church of Kenya and his role in giving leadership for justice and truth in a society of declining standards in political life.¹ A current doctoral study is focusing on the role of bishops in Kenya in giving leadership in the transition from colonial to independent rule and the factors that shaped the emerging new leadership of the church. These studies found that the leaders of the church have had such a profound influence in Kenyan national life because they provided the role of the old tribal religious leaders – they were the defense of vulnerable people in the community against the extremes of their political leaders. Thus church leaders had a major role in national life when people saw them fulfilling the expectations they had of religion in their society – to protect the vulnerable.

These leaders provided a narrative for their leadership. In the case of Archbishop Gitari it was the sacrifice he endured in his opposition to President Moi, in which at least two attempts were made on his life. He provided an example of standing up against injustice in his own culture. He constantly provided biblical justification for his actions in preaching from biblical texts with consistent relevance to his experiences.²

Taking these initiatives and taking these risks with justification delivered from the Bible means seeing beyond the horizon and pointing out the direction to others.

Leadership in Mission

Dr. Pervaiz Sultan from Pakistan undertook a study on the development ministry of two dioceses in the Church of Pakistan,

published subsequently as *The Church and Development*.³ He examined the approaches to development of two dioceses, one that followed an evangelical ministry in development and one that concentrated on social changes. He discovered that what determined the approach of each diocese was the approach of the leader – one was evangelical and one was ecumenical. But both leaders were similar in exercising an authoritarian approach in giving leadership in the diocese. Essentially both regarded the people in their dioceses more as objects of their leadership, to carry out their agenda.

My own doctoral research in India and Bali focused on the evangelistic and social ministries of churches in South India and Bali among poor people.⁴ I studied two leaders, Dr. Vinay Samuel in India and Dr. Wayan Mastra in Bali. I discovered that what motivated them both was an understanding that central to the development and growth of poor people was for them to recover and discover their own identity and dignity. The heart of this process was the preaching and teaching of the gospel, which told poor people who had been treated as nobodies, that through the grace of Jesus Christ they could be sons and daughters of God. Though society around treated them as expendable and marginal, they were of inestimable value to God.

It was not enough to leave this new value at an abstract, conceptual or even religious level though it had vital and irreplaceable religious foundations. Both leaders realized that this new identity and dignity had to be expressed and supported in a number of ways. These ways were also informed by their theological understanding of who people are.

Wayan Mastra particularly focused on expressing people's identity in their community culture. He built churches in the local Balinese style. He recovered the use of Balinese music in church. He promoted cultural dance in worship. He clearly understood that people need to express their new identity in cultural forms that connect them with their surroundings, their fellows, their past and their community. He found a church that was cut off from its culture as Dutch culture had replaced all local Balinese culture for the Christians. Thus Balinese were known as Black Dutch. He built a theology seeing continuity between what God wrought in nature and what he brought about through grace. As a result he gave Balinese Christians a new confidence to play a role in their communities, and to provide a lead in some of the important national initiatives such as emigration to less overpopulated parts of Indonesia.

Both Mastra and Samuel saw the need to express people's identity and dignity in their calling to be stewards of creation.

This was rooted in the Genesis narrative to be fruitful and multiply; to exercise dominion over the creation as the images and representatives of God the absentee landlord to whom all people must give account. Mastra saw this calling in the promise to Abraham to be a blessing to the nations. To be a blessing one needs the strength to hold one's hand out palm down, not palm up to receive a handout. They both saw a particular calling through the gospel to enable poor people to play their role as stewards. Both the Old and New Testament witness to God's special concern for the poor: in liberating the Hebrew slaves from Egypt and in defining the gospel of the kingdom as good news to the poor. Both Mastra and Samuel developed important ministries of Micro-enterprise development among poor people to express the calling to be stewards.

Both Mastra and Samuel saw the need to model in their leadership the cross-cultural partnership that expressed the gospel breaking down barriers between races and cultures. Both were very aware of their own strong identity and worth as national leaders, yet provided space to Christians from other races and cultures to work closely in partnership with them, a partnership which would be mutually enriching to both parties. This follows the pattern in the New Testament where Paul the Jew had a close partnership with for example Luke the Gentile doctor.

In these two leaders we see biblical understandings of human personhood determining their involvement and the sort of leadership they gave in building Christian community: it embraced and expressed the new identity and dignity that people receive through the gospel as sons and daughters of God; the role that expressing people's personhood in their community and cultural context played in affirming their growth and gifts in their culture; the need to enable people to express God's calling to be stewards of creation and provide for their families through enterprise development; and the importance of expressing life and leadership in Christian communities in cross-cultural and international partnership.

We see here how theological and biblical understanding of the nature of human personhood, human flourishing and human community formed the sort of leadership and priorities that both these Asian Christian leaders expressed in their ministries and sought to build into their communities.

Studies on Pentecostal Churches in Contexts of Poverty

A recently completed doctorate on Pentecostals in the Philippines by Dr. Joseph Suico of the Asian Pacific Theological

Seminary addressed the picture given of Philippine Pentecostals that they were otherworldly and not concerned with or involved in social change. His study finds that their focus on evangelism, prayer and deliverance gives them a tremendous sense of confidence and ability in what can be done in their lives, and families and communities to bring change. They are tremendously empowered to believe change is possible. This is a great resource for poor people.

Dr. Suico draws parallels with studies done among Pentecostals in Latin America by Dr. Doug Petersen who addressed the same perception.⁵ Dr. Petersen showed that Pentecostals there did not have a social theology, but their very nature as a community believing in the power of the spirit (not the government nor the church) but the power of the spirit in them to bring change was itself a social theology. I noted that Dr. Suico though himself an East Asian did not draw on any examples or writings of Korean Pentecostals which might show the same reflection. I ask whether Dr. Cho might give leadership by encouraging similar studies on how it is that Pentecostal faith and practice gives dignity and confidence and hope for change to the poor.

Mission as Transformation

These components of mission focusing on human personhood, human flourishing and human community have been brought into a coherent understanding of Christian mission, which has been styled "Mission as Transformation". Transformation has been defined by Vinay Samuel as enabling God's vision of society, to be actualized in all relationships, social, economic and spiritual, so that God's will may be reflected in human society and his love be experienced by all communities, especially the poor."⁶

Transformation is about a vision of society where God's will is done and his love experienced. Thus "mission is individuals coming to Christ, challenging corrupt and sinful systems, structures and cultures and enabling individuals and communities to experience God's transforming power".⁷ How do we see God's transforming power acting in communities today?

1. Transformation is focused on persons
2. Transformation is about the development of personhood in community and thus the building of communities.
3. Transformation is through the action of communities and community institutions. Through communities we create the public good and attack evil systems.

1. Transformation is focused on persons: on reorienting their relationships and empowering their choices to develop their character.

Transformation is

- *about bodies in time and space and therefore in relation to others.* Personhood is both ourselves and ourselves in relationships.
- *about the development of the self:* the substance of the person expressed in the choices we make in relating, receiving and understanding people and situations.
- *about understanding the role we have been entrusted with.*
- *about the ability to make moral choices living up to convictions, codes of conduct, standards and guidelines.*
- *the integrity of a person's belief and actions:* that which holds one together and expresses truth, faithfulness and dependability.
- *the ability to be other-regarding:* showing love in sacrifice, compassion, acceptance of difference and inclusion.
- *the ability to resist wrong-doing:* with strong ethical resistance but also are able to forgive, heal and rebuild.
- *reconciling and renewing:* recognizing that you yourself also have to be cleansed, renewed and reconciled.
- *the development of creativity and stewardship:* seizing the opportunity, building and taking responsibility.
- *the reality of worship:* in worshipping and turning to God in prayer we are really fulfilled and flourish.

As we grow in personhood we become the home where Christ dwells through his spirit. And as we relate to people so that Christ may be formed in them, through our intervention in people's lives be it in medical treatment, teaching, adult literacy, project planning, visiting and having fellowship the Holy Spirit works through us for them.⁸

2. Such personhood takes shape in community, between people in a covenant relationship. Such communities are moral communities and are marked by freedom, justice, righteousness, order, law, truthfulness, love and grace.

These are

- *creative communities:* encouraging stewardship, truthfulness and hope;
- *nurturing communities,* nurturing people with mercy, forgiveness, patience and long-suffering and building them up.

- *communities that provide security and a sense of belonging.* These are communities of belonging - where orphaned children and battered women can find themselves in a community that cares as personhood is restored.
- *communities that worship* - that are open to the action of God's kingdom and overcome divisions among themselves, unite us and give us energy.
- *communities with character* - being faithful and honest, compassionate and caring, concerned for justice. The community character reinforces the character of persons.
- *communities that reflect the kingdom of God* - living in anticipation of its reality, especially in worship.⁹

Here is the model and criteria for our churches, and our churches as examples to the surrounding community of what they can be and become.

3. Through communities we create public good and attack evil systems. We build people's personhood as they engage in public action.

Poverty is virtually eradicated and people are lifted out of poverty

- *not through conversion* - Conversion produces freedom from the misery and violence of poverty as in particular men desist work and are committed to their families
- *not through ethical change.* Ethical change produces a lift out of poverty to a level of sustainable growth.
- *through the development of a strong law-governed state* with individual freedoms, property rights and civil society institutions.

Communities are focused on institutions. We cannot access the community as a whole without mediating entities and institutions. These institutions are rooted in the culture. They belong. The church is a mediating institution, part of the community landscape, committed to the community, rooted in the culture. The church is called to be a good civil society institution, a good voluntary organization existing for the public good. The church should be wholistic.

Transformational development is rooted in communities. Mediating institutions are rooted in the culture of a community. These communities are shaped by their culture. Cultural change is community focused. So transformation must address culture.

Culture

- is the ideas that people have about people, community, individuals, sin, love, what is or is not important.

- perpetuates these ideas through institutions and practices.
- is constructed by people. They live with it, seek their profit in it, want to feel good about it.
- change in culture will not come unless people see the advantage in it.

In each culture we have to ask what are the norms that Christian transformation seeks to promote within a culture? Is it possible for culture to be resource for change rather than a barrier to change.

So we see that there is a large horizon for the mission of the church and thus for the leaders who are called to lead God's church. There is a role for individuals, families, movements and institutions in cultural transformation.

Leadership and the Mission of the World Church.

I am therefore minded to ask of David Yonggi-Cho at this point in his leadership and in the mission of the world church a number of questions with relation to these themes.

1. The gospel in a context of poverty and suffering:

We are set in a context where Christianity is moving south. Churches in Africa, Latin America and Asia are growing. Churches in Europe are declining. In Korea the church has been through poverty and suffering and now has many resources. But the current generation of young people in Korea have not known the struggles that shaped Dr. Cho. How will he ensure that his successors in leadership understand the same profound realities of the gospel amidst suffering and trial? What part will the experience of and relationships with the two-thirds world church play in this?

2. Partnership in the Gospel:

- 1) Does the Korean church believe it is qualified to be a leader in the world church through its numerical success? What identity does he see the Korean Church having in the world church? What gifts does it bring? To what model of participation in the world Church does he see the Korean Church aspiring?
 - a. Is it the model of being part of the western hegemony through financial resources?
 - b. Is it a model of being part of the two-thirds world focus on the resources of its people and their eagerness for evangelism?
 - c. Is it a model of being part of the suffering

church because of its recent experience of suffering and trial and the Korean cultural theme of "grudge".

- d. In the photograph of the world church, who does he want to be seen standing next to and why?

2. Would the opportunity to relate as partners with the Two-Thirds World Church enable a clear witness to be drawn between the very fruitful alliance of Christianity and Korean Nationalism? Studies show that the success of Christianity in Korea related to resistance against the Japanese Invasion identified Christianity with Korean national identity.¹⁰ Studies also show that the massification policy of the Korean government, kick starting the Korean economic miracle by encouraging people off the land into the new industries in the city has set a cultural pattern making gigantism part of Korean culture and church life. How will he lead the Korean Churches to face the challenge of being Christians in partnership with those who are Christians in small scattered communities and what enrichment will they bring to the life of the Korean Church?

2. How does he relate the financial resources of the Korean Church to the financial needs of the church in other parts of the world? What responsibility does he regard the Korean church as having for those churches and for the global witness of the church in those contexts? Churches in Africa and Asia are faced with the challenges: disease, poverty, AIDS. They have wonderful resources in their people and their faith. They are thirsty for knowledge to address their problems. For example we at OCMS are working with a small college in Kenya to train 25 church leaders over two years to give care and counsel for those infected with and affected by HIV/AIDS. These 25 people will as part of their post-graduate course each train 20 people in an area base group. Each of these 500 people will be in touch with 20 people living with or affected by HIV/AIDS. Thus 10,000 people will be impacted by gospel-based care for AIDS. They need \$1500 dollars a year each to supplement what they are providing for the costs of this course. For the lack of this their studies may not go ahead. Given the considerable investment of churches in the United States in the early development of Korean

churches, what view does he have of a similar investment in churches in the Two-Thirds World? Why is it that Korean churches are not currently seen as sources of potential financial support by churches in the Two-Thirds world when seeking for resources? What might be the cultural issues and perspectives that need to be addressed?

3. Many churches in the US and the UK are encouraging their members to make exposure visits to the Two Thirds World to build relationships and gain a world perspective on world Christianity. It is now well recognized that Christianity is moving south. Korea is no longer economically in the Two-Thirds World. Are Koreans making exposure trips to the Two-Thirds World not only to build relationships and gain a perspective on world Christianity but also most importantly to share their narrative of surviving and growing churches in the midst of poverty with churches in Africa and India?
4. What is the relationship of Korean personnel to local Christian leadership?

Conclusion

I ask these questions in friendship and respect. An international mission symposium and seminar at this important level requires that the respect we give each other include the respect to ask the most important questions. I suggest that the current research being done on leaders who have promoted the growth of the church in other parts of the world prompt these questions of the leadership of the growing church in Korea. I have every expectation of stimulating and exciting answers.

Writer

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NOTES

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8. Summarizing "Mission as Transformation" op.cit p 245-246

9. From "Mission as Transformation" op.cit. p.246-247

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