



Global Connections National Conference 4-6 November 2009

Mission and Risk Feedback

Introduction

An encouragingly large number of people made 'Mission and Risk' their first choice igroup (interest group) at the Global Connections Conference. The group of about forty people consisted of mission CEOs, mission board members, team organisers, health and member care specialists, mission trainers and teachers, and people who had themselves recently been serving in high-risk situations.

Presentations on the selected topics (see below) were brief, and the five sessions mainly consisted of personal testimonies, case studies, role playing, small group discussions and question raising. There was a long and very valuable space initially for people to introduce themselves and to voice their interests and concerns, and a time at the end to identify outcomes and to suggest topics that needed fuller discussion.

1. Violence, terror, trauma, persecution

Responding appropriately, as servants of Christ, to dangerous and risky situations, potential and actual, became the main, though not the only, focus of the igroup. The following issues were raised and discussed, often initially in the form of questions.

- In general is Christian mission being restrained and constrained by a risk averse society, where, for example, a 'health and safety' mentality dominates? If it is a true assumption that we live in a culture where safety is an idol, how can we retain or regain our risk taking identity? Discussion revealed this to be a complex issue. Some were daunted by the demands of 'risk assessment', others felt that risk assessments could and should be done, though the conclusions drawn about the appropriate response to that risk might well vary considerably from organisation to organisation. All agreed that it was difficult to tie down definitions. What did the word 'reasonable' mean in the phrase 'reasonable risk'? Did it vary for short-termers and long-termers, for children and adults, for expatriates and nationals? One person commented that sending out young people in teams was a 'minefield' (from the perspective of risk management, i.e.). Particular concerns in this respect were expressed about parental expectations and also about naive youngsters who were impatient of the briefing they received and were often infected by a degree of romanticism. Others commented on the different approaches to risk that might be found within the same team, even when it was made up of experienced mission partners. Those who had already experienced danger and persecution often had a different theology of risk. (A leader reported that one of the members of his team declared that he had 'the gift of martyrdom'!) Behind a good deal of the discussion lay the question: 'Who gets the blame if it all goes wrong?'
- There was a good deal of discussion about the ethics of putting other people for whom we are responsible into risky situations which they have not chosen – children being the

obvious example. No simple solution emerged to this dilemma (it came up in another context: see 'Incarnational Ministry' below) and most of the discussion centred on how to care for children after a traumatic incident. It was recognised that even when people have chosen to take risks, this might not be the only consideration: their behaviour might have difficult consequences for others and those others might be less well positioned to cope with difficulty than they were. National Christians were mentioned at this point.

- Another debate centred on disagreement over decision making about withdrawal in the face of risk. Who, for example was responsible for evaluating the risk? Where does God's verdict come in?
- Appropriate patterns of post-traumatic assistance, counselling and pastoral care were discussed, with some detailed illustrative input by means of one case study/role play.
- A 'theology of suffering'. This phrase came up a good deal (often in contrast to 'prosperity gospel') though there was little attempt at definition in this session. There was, however, an emphasis on the inevitability of suffering as part of Christian discipleship. Further, it was agreed that 'the church is built on crisis'.
- It was noticed that there was a 'violence' that was not necessarily attached to dramatic events. Being under constant surveillance, for example, carried an emotional risk.
- The need for preparation before going into risky situations naturally came up. Everybody agreed on its importance and that both individuals and the organisation needed to be prepared. This should include a 'reaction plan'(with some sort of 'priority list') as traumatic events inevitably created a chaotic situation. If something of the sort was not premeditated, important aspects of the response – such as handling the media – could easily be forgotten.
- There was a reminder that the sending church could have a significant role in preparing, monitoring and responding to situations of high risk?
- It was felt it would be worth checking whether our guidelines for good practice in member care had a section on the value of risk and sacrificial suffering.

The following refers more specifically to a case study/role play in which a mission partner working for an NGO in South Asia was shot:

- The case study/role play brought out four dimensions of this traumatic crisis event: (1) the need for responsible leadership 'on the ground' (2) the need for pastoral care (3) the need for Biblical and theological reflection (4)the need to respond adequately to the reactions and concerns of those from outside the Christian and mission communities.
- It was pointed out that in these circumstances, handling the media would always be a challenge. There was often immediate distortion. Accurate information to those concerned, especially families, was very important.
- After such an incident, security came first or in general there was a pre-eminent duty of care for those who were *in situ*. This included: counselling for grief and shock, quick accurate information to families, and appropriate care for national believers. For nationals due consideration would have to be given to cultural issues.
- In due course some evaluation needed to take place as to why the incident took place, including consideration of culture, politics, conflicting religious ideals and possible satanic influences.
- At some stage it would be important that there was careful Biblical reflection on the whole incident and that it should be linked to our understanding of the purposes and power of God (theology).

2. Globalisation, neo-colonialism, environmental crisis, economic insecurity

This session consisted of brief presentations on the topics above as they related to mission and risk, followed by small group and then plenary discussion based on a number of questions which arose naturally from the presentations. The purpose was to put the idea of risk into the wider framework of world affairs. What do we mean by globalisation? Is greater inter-connectedness and inter-dependence a curse or a blessing? Are we still 'colonial' in some of our attitudes? Do we

think it too risky to give up our power to others? Is environmental breakdown the ultimate danger and what risks do we have to take to prevent it happening? Does economic uncertainty matter – how, for example, will it affect our Christian and mission organisations?

Globalisation

Globalisation affects every aspect of our lives, but its most dramatic effect is the creation of greater interconnectedness and interdependence ('the compression of time and space', particularly by means of the communications revolution, is key). Paradoxically, this greater sense of 'one world' also causes fragmentation as people are 'pushed and pulled' in different directions. The close links between consumerism and globalisation also create a challenge for mission. The fact that risk is increasing in the wake of climate change, global insecurity, and gross worldwide inequality, cannot be ignored by mission leaders.

Neo-colonialism

A particular feature of globalisation is what we call 'neo-colonialism', the continuation of colonial policies by means, other than direct settlement of conquered and occupied lands. The mission question is to what extent we have continued to be 'colonial' in our mission structures and mission praxis. The biggest risk we need to take is to detach ourselves from the colonial structures of wealth and power. While this is a question particularly for Western mission agencies, it may also be true that emerging missions from the Global South are equally in danger of colonial attitudes. At base, colonialism is a matter of *control*. Letting go of that control is a risky business. Much has been invested. Handing it over to others is not only risky but painful.

The idea of progress is being replaced, certainly in the West, by the idea of risk. Are we Westerners hypocritically abandoning progress after we have long benefited from it, while at the same time exporting the risks to the poor? Global warming may mean something different for South Sea islanders than it does for, say, Londoners hiding behind the Thames barrage.

Environmental crisis

The environmental crisis has been called 'the most critical issue facing humanity in the twenty-first century'. It has multiple facets but can be illustrated by material on such matters as carbon emissions and forest depletion and more generally by data on climate change, with a reminder that where there are crisis situations arising they affect the poor most seriously. Christianity is widely thought to be responsible for a worldview that is contributing to the ecological crisis, and Christians need to respond to this with better theology, an appropriate life-style and active intervention in the crisis.

Economic uncertainty

Our society has become increasingly a risk-producing, risk monitoring and risk managing society. Risk is the mobilising dynamic of a society that is bent on change, that wants to determine its own future. Modern capitalism embeds itself into the future by calculating profit and loss, and therefore risk.

If it is true that we live in a risky world, it is not true to say that this is an altogether novel situation. The disciples asked Jesus a 'social security' question (Mark 10:28-31) in the light of the fact that they had given up all the normal security arrangements – family, property and livelihoods. The consequences of this were worked out in practice in the early Jerusalem church (Acts 4:34,5). People who sold ancestral lands and who committed themselves to the fellowship were doing so at considerable risk. On a wider scale the people of Israel had been taught from the start to live a risky life economically. The Sabbath regulation and later on the laws to do with gleaning and Jubilee, were all to do with taking a risk on Yahweh who was more reliable than the market. The risky question is: are we prepared to live in this way?

We may well ask whether the current risk-takers in our world economy – bankers etc. – are really taking risks, if it is other people's money that will be lost if things go wrong? Are we Western Christian mission agencies the 'bankers' of the world church, managing risk at a safe distance?

Questions

A number of questions were raised for discussion after the presentations:

1. How will mission thinking and practice change through the continuing impact of globalisation and what might God have to say about this? For example, what about our Western lifestyle (compared to that of the Global South) or the political stance of mission agencies in the resource wars which seem sure to be a feature of the future?
2. What are the risks associated with 'handing over', perhaps to people we feel are less well qualified than ourselves? What are the risks in *not* handing over?
3. What is our responsibility to future generations in terms of environmental risk, and, in the light of this, what action needs to be taken *now* by all Christians, but particularly by those in leadership?
4. Does the Bible teach us anything about taking economic risks? What about 'social security' for Christians?

Discussion

Little time was left for discussion after the presentations; also the response was rather muted compared to other sessions. The following points emerged.

- Globalisation is a symptom of a rapidly changing world. We are inclined to apply old missiology to new situations and the results are messy.
- There is little to be gained by indulging in 'postcolonial guilt'.
- Leaders can only respond to the situation as it is, not as they would like it to be.
- Accountability remains a necessary concept though it is difficult to get a balance between 'strings attached' giving and legitimate concern for the correct use of donated resources. Donors expect, rightly, that there should be accountability.
- It is not responsible behaviour (i.e. not a risk that should be taken) to 'hand over' before there are competent leaders to take up the work.
- Can our mission agencies continue to promote worldwide travel when flying has such a bad impact on the environment?

3. The challenge of incarnational ministry. Mission from weakness

This was a 'lighter' version of the session on 'violence, terrorism, trauma, persecution'. The issues were similar, however, in that the key questions centred on a case study in which a young couple doing community development in Nairobi and with two year old twins were challenged to take the risk of moving from their (relatively) comfortable and safe accommodation to take up residence near or in a slum district. In other words, they were challenged to take on additional risk by making a move in a more 'incarnational' direction.

This issue created some vigorous discussion, initially in small groups, but also in a final plenary session. The following points were raised:

- How were the young couple to discern God's will? There was much discussion about 'hearing God speak' and, in particular, the use of the Bible in this process. A strong case was made using Biblical material for staying *and* going!
- It was felt that moving into the slum was not necessarily the most risky option. More 'fashionable' parts of the city could be more dangerous.
- The group needed to know what the mission's leaders have to say about all this? Was there an already formulated mission policy? Was the decision a simple matter of obedience?
- Another question: 'Was it possible, in any case, to shield children from risk? It is a worldwide phenomenon.'
- It was further felt that questions of contextualisation were not just a matter of geography. Where (and how) should the couple live in terms of the effectiveness of their ministry?

There was some further input on related topics:

God and risk

- Our theology may affect our attitude to risk. Christians disagree, for example, about whether God takes risks or not.
- Whatever we think about God taking risks, we are certainly called upon to do so. This is particularly true when there is a call for change.
- The Bible is clear that we struggle to make decisions; it is equally clear that we should not worry unduly about the future.

Risks in ministry

- There are inherent risks whenever we handle the gospel (for example in Bible translation). We all operate under the 'pilgrim principle' that we are on a journey, not yet at our destination.
- God takes the risk of accepting our sin and failure, that is, our imperfect service.
- What does the above say about our understanding of the 'insider movements' including taking on people with an immature understanding of the faith?

Ministry in weakness and power

- Apostolic ministry seems to be both powerful and weak. How do we reconcile authority with service?
- Paul viewed his ministry as cruciform. He believed that the means of salvation are weak means, the people saved are weak, and the preacher of salvation is weak. He also said that God's power is made perfect in weakness.

4. Left undone

There were a number of matters, usually expressed as questions, which could have been taken further had time permitted.

1. Are we creating uncertain institutions in which the (sense of) risk increases? Consider the institutional uncertainty that accompanies many modern day mission partners, particularly those who go out independently or from small churches.
2. In a time of economic insecurity how much do we risk the future existence of our organisations, perhaps in response to current need? How much do we set aside against 'a rainy day'?
3. Global South missionaries manage with a lot less than Westerners. This makes them more flexible, more able to improvise (compare the way Jesus sent out the Twelve and the Seventy). Is this good or bad? What are the potential risks for everyone concerned? What impact may all this have on multicultural teams?
4. Are the mission groups emerging from the Global South responding more appropriately to the nature of risk than the older missions in the West?
5. What is an appropriate mode of training and education, including an appropriate theology, in today's risky world? Are we preparing commandos or rank and file?
6. Is long-term planning becoming more difficult? Is flexibility an appropriate mode in risky situations? Is setting only short-term goals therefore a rational approach?
7. Have we thought sufficiently about redistributing risk, that is, making sure that the risks in any particular venture are evenly or at least fairly apportioned?
8. Is law breaking (e.g. distributing Bibles illegally) sometimes a reasonable risk?
9. Have we sufficiently considered what might be called 'everyday' risks? For example, the biggest risk to family life is often overwork!
10. Deaf teams and disabled teams (in Latin America) create their own risks because they challenge the authorities about their lack of provision in this area.

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