



Everyone, Everywhere mission conference concludes with call for continued, deeper engagement

By Mary Frances Schjonberg June 09, 2008

[Episcopal News Service] During the second half of the June 5-8 [Everyone, Everywhere World Mission Conference](#) participants heard calls for deeper engagement with the gospel, people of other faiths and issues beyond the hoped-for achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

The conference, which was held at the [Conference Center at the Maritime Institute](#) near Baltimore, Maryland, was also a joint meeting of the [Global Episcopal Mission Network](#) (GEM) and the [Episcopal Partnership for Global Mission](#) (EPGM).

Some 300 people from more than 60 dioceses of the Episcopal Church and six provinces of the Anglican Communion gathered to worship together, tell their mission stories, learn effective ways to build relationships throughout the world, and share mission interests and experiences. The church-wide conference included participants from across the theological spectrum. Conference organizers say they hope to run a similar gathering every three years.

Conference ends with Eucharist

"During this conference we've struggled with the perennial questions and arguments about how to carry out Jesus' commission to make disciples of all nations," the Rev. Dr. Titus Presler, of [General Theological Seminary](#) (GTS), said during his sermon June 8 at the conference's closing Eucharist at which Dominican Republic Bishop Julio Holguin presided.

Seventeen missionaries were commissioned during the service.

Presler, who is GTS' sub-dean and vice president for academic affairs and professor of mission and world Christianity, described those questions and arguments as "the tension between word and deed, between evangelization and development, the tension between being and doing, between cultural expression and cultural imposition, between gospel freedom and the prerogatives of empire, [and] the tension between sending and hosting, giving and receiving."

He described "a mystic intuition that we are drawn by God into a wonderful and sacred mystery" that he sensed he and other participants had felt "amid the questions and the dilemmas."

"A mystery in which the working of God in Christ Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit is a patient, humble working that never forces its way but honors the peoples to whom it comes," Presler said. "Yet it comes with a confidence that it must touch every human difference with love and loveliness, conferring liberation from the blight of every human sin, oppression and degradation."

Noting the variety of people and organizations that participated in the conference, Presler said "difference is the distinctive mark, for mission has to do with reaching out across boundaries."

"If there's a difference, we know that the gospel must somehow reach it because the gospel has something to say to and in every difference," he continued. "Mission is, in fact, ministry in the dimension of difference."

Presler described "an aspiration" he senses in the Episcopal Church for connections and relationships with people in other parts of the world.

"Today, as never before, congregations are engaging the task of mission discernment," he said. "They

hear God calling them to mission, and they understand intuitively that mission involves an encounter with the other, the different, and that they are embracing the fullness of God's call only if they are reaching out to the other and the different, whether in their own neighborhoods or across the world.

"As a result, today as never before, world mission is pursued through local initiatives in parishes and dioceses of our church. In 1930 or even in 1960 it was rare for an Episcopal parish to have a direct link with fellow Anglicans in a parish in what we now know as the Two-Thirds World, but today it's not uncommon for a parish to have two or three such links, many of them with multiple personal relationships that are the heart of mission companionship."

"World mission is no longer a distant activity mediated only by church headquarters but genuinely an activity of the whole people of God."

Presler cited the Episcopal Church's Companion Diocese Network and its emphasis on the [United Nations Millennium Development Goals](#) (MDGs) for nurturing what he called that "local engagement."

Now, he said, Episcopalians must become more deeply engaged with people of other faiths as a crucial next step to "intensify" the vision of "Everyone, Everywhere." They must also nurture the awareness that "the gospel is a story and stories are meant to be told."

"Telling the story [about] what God has done in Christ through your own story implies no particular stance toward any other story, any other news, any other religion -- and it certainly does not mean anyone is trying to convert anyone -- that is the work of the Holy Spirit, not the work of persons," Presler said.

"Simply telling the story equally brings us into conversation with other stories and opens our ears to how God may be at work in other stories, and there we see the paradox of how freedom in proclamation nurtures friendship, not rivalry, between evangelism and inter-religious understanding."

Going beyond the MDGs

Hellen Wangusa, Anglican Observer at the [United Nations](#) and the conference's June 7 keynote speaker, told participants that the church must be prepared for the days after the year 2015, by which time the MDGs are targeted to be achieved.

Wangusa said she was glad to be talking to a "group of very strong believers in the MDGs." While the Episcopal Church and its main offices in New York City might be "MDG-ized," she said, many other parts of the Anglican Communion are not as convinced, convicted or passionate about the eight goals aimed at making measurable progress combating poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation and discrimination against women.

Some institutions, she said, are skeptical of anything that comes out of the UN, and other groups and individuals call the MDGs "simplistic" or "too narrow in scope."

Some governments are already claiming achievement of some of the MDGs, but Wangusa said people must look at the quality of that achievement. For instance, she said, if universal primary education is achieved, questions must also be asked about the quality of the education and the retention of students in the higher grade.

She also warned against movements that become "fashionable and trendy to work with," only to have people and organizations grow tired of the cause.

"As my friend Marge Christie would say," Wangusa urged, referring to the long-time activist from the Diocese of Newark, "let us not get tired of doing good."

Wangusa said that people dedicated to achieving the MDGs must also remember that the world has changed since the goals were named in September 2000. Increasing globalization impacts the work of achieving the MDGs both negatively and positively, she said. Climate change affects the hunger-related issues named in the goals, as does the rising cost of fuel. Perceived solutions that work in the developed

world, such as solar and wind power, may be of no use in places where people's homes cannot be wired for electricity, she added.

The church has been about the work of the MDGs since long before they were named as such, she said.

Wangusa, a lay woman from Uganda who worked as the national women's coordinator for the Anglican Church of Uganda, recalled how she was part of an experience many children in the developing world have had of receiving basic education in Sunday schools.

Before there were the Millennium Development Goals, there were the church's "mission-driven goals," she said.

"The one institution that was there and will be there in the church," she said, adding that governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) come and go, and that governmental promises are different from those made by the church, which believes in what she called "a promise-keeping God."

Predicting that poverty and hunger will persist in 2015, Wangusa said the church must train itself in the tools it will need to convince governments, NGOs and corporations to continue MDG work past 2015. Those tools include documenting the church's "best practices" for doing MDG work so as to be able to both present models and to show that the church is indeed doing the work it is asking other institutions to do.

She told participants that they must be savvy about the use of statistics as a way of proving the need for a program or the success of a program. What she called "excited numbers" don't always tell the whole story, but perhaps only the story that the broker of the statistics wants to tell.

In answer to a question about aid and development money that may not reach those who most need it, Wangusa noted that in some parts of the world only 30 cents of every aid dollar "hits the ground." It may be easy to claim that the system is "riddled with corruption," she said, but she cautioned that stereotypes are created when people assume it is only the governments of those being aided that are corrupt.

"Even the North is corrupt," she said. "Even the [International Monetary Fund] is corrupt."

Wangusa, responding to a question about how to develop "mutually transforming relationships" between those in need and those who want to help, suggested that people follow the model of Jesus encountering the Samaritan woman at the well. They were, she said, "at par with each other and, I tell you, Jesus couldn't outdo her."

Everyone should approach those relationships assuming that "we have something to give and something to take." A goal should be to meet without the intent to condemn or patronize, but to empower.

Coverage of the first half of the conference is available [here](#).

The conference also included on-going small-group discussions of the plenary speakers' presentations and a series of workshops. Participants could attend more than 40 different workshops ranging from regionally specific workshops concentrating on the Dominican Republic, Pakistan, Philippines and Sudan (among other areas) to panels, discussion groups, and classes on mission theology, Islam, sustainability, and the nuts-and-bolts of mission work. The conference also featured workshops presented by [GEM's Certificate Program](#), a training ground for diocesan mission agents.

Conference sponsors included Episcopal Relief and Development, EPGM, Church Pension Fund, Episcopalians for Global Reconciliation, CM Almy, Cross International, GEM, the mission centers of the Episcopal Church, and the dioceses of Milwaukee, North Carolina, Northern California, Vermont and Virginia.

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