



MKs in Perspective: *Deacons for the 21st Century*¹

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What has really happened during this week at ICMK Nairobi? Have we really been asked to think, or are we stuck with cliché answers?

For some of us, especially those who have attended other ICMKs, it has been a happy reunion, a celebration. For some, it's been a continuation of therapy, a continuation of reconciliation. For others, it has offered the beginning of a long process of searching for self-understanding.

At best, ICMK Nairobi has been a renewal of hope. At worst, it has been one more affirmation of alienation and loneliness. In any conference where we focus on troubles and problems, there is a terrible danger of self-pity. But there is also the danger of denial. I hope that those of us who are still in a mode of denial will open ourselves up to the ministry of God as Holy Spirit in restoration, healing and forgiveness.

For others of us, it has been a professional learning experience. Our jobs relate to human pain, and we learn so we can help others better. But here again, a danger lurks. We may put it all in our heads, while the problems are really in the hearts. We dare not *feel* less simply because we *learn* more. And there is a danger of oversimplification. Important problems deserve careful solutions.

An Ongoing Process

In this conference we've been able to see a process some of us began in Manila, some in Quito, and some this week. It has a similar pattern for almost everyone.

1. *Naming the problems.* Any good counselor knows that when you can name your problems and face up to them, you're halfway home.
2. *Defining the problems.* We have learned more about how things fit together.
3. *Facing our own personal histories,* seeking personal therapy and self-discovery. And watch out, many of the emotional problems and most of the needs that we identify as MK problems are, in fact, not unique to MKs or overseas kids. Many of these problems are exacerbated by the overseas situation, but in fact they are the challenges of growing up in a complex world.
4. *Finding support, building constructive networks.* That's one of the greatest things that happens when we take the time, effort, and money to come together and really share. There are things you can't do on paper or in books.
5. *Realizing that we are not simply the victims of social situations,* but in fact in this whole business of being God's witness in the world, we *confront principalities and powers*, many of which have invaded the mission system.

¹ Ted Ward. MKs in Perspective: Deacons for the 21st Century. In Joyce M. Bowers (ed). *Raising Resilient MKs: Resources for Caregivers Parents, and Teachers*. Colorado Springs, CO: Association of Christian Schools International, 1998, pp. 11-18. Based on the closing address at International Conferences on Missionary Kids (ICMK) Nairobi, Kenya. This book (which includes MK's in Perspective, chapter 2) is available as a full text eBook at http://www.missionarycare.com/ebooks/Raising_Resilient_MKs.pdf

Problems and Possibilities

There are problems which must be solved, and we've begun to open them up. We've begun to see people propose possibilities and commit themselves to action. Let me name just a few:

- Selection, training, and in-service education of dorm parents.
- Selection, training, and in-service education of missionary kid schoolteachers.
- Pre-field preparation of whole families.
- On-field support assistances for whole families.
- (Dare I say it?) Coming to grips with legalistic theology and the social hang-ups it has created for us.
- (If I can get away with that one, the last one on my list is:) Non-Christian management styles within our mission operations.

Never ask a fish to describe how it feels to live in the water. A fish cannot describe that context, because it has no perspective. It's our own culture, the culture of being a missionary, that's the hardest to see. Do we really understand our own peculiar subcultures as foreigners, as missionaries, as returning persons, as helpers?

Needs

A process of increased understanding has unfolded from Manila to Quito to Nairobi. Some needs are becoming very clear:

- To gain perspective.
- To understand ourselves better.
- To learn to forgive, which is a spiritual task.
- To learn to help.

Motives

In addition, there are some *motives* which have emerged through the three ICMK conferences:

- To comprehend sources of problems, not simply identify them.
- To plan strategies of change, not simply to complain about conditions.
- To commit ourselves to positive roles.

In this conference something very important has happened. It has been evident that many of us have been enlisted, and many have accepted the challenge. We expect to hear significant things in the future that have their roots in commitments made this week.

Another *motive* that is emerging is to recognize and emphasize the advantages of being bicultural and multilingual, and ultimately to connect that with the very important Christian task of learning the culture of the Kingdom.

When we use the terms "transculture" and "transcultural" we ought to recognize that this is not simply a nice option if you have time to work on it. Transculturalness is what it is all about to be a Christian in this world. Just ahead, we may anticipate that many of us will be helping the people of God become intercultural, or better yet, become transcultural. The energy from this conference and through the people here, moving into the church of Jesus Christ, is marvelous to contemplate.

One of the things that I find exciting about the ICMK conferences is that they are the most clearly cross-sectional in terms of gender, age, roles, types of mission work, and mission organization, of any gathering that missionaries ever engage in—much more so, for example, than field councils or home conferences, any one church's missionary conferences, or typical meetings of IFMA and EFMA.

There's real promise here for some kind of long-term venture in which we learn to communicate effectively within the community of faith about the overseas mission of the church. Just ahead also may be some inroads into what I believe to be one of the most crucial problems that we deal with in this series of conferences, and that is to loosen the deadly grip of secular culture on our missionary kid schools.

Pitfalls

What do we need next? Some have suggested topical conferences; some have suggested regional conferences. Whatever we do, we must watch out for the pitfalls. I see the major pitfall as the tendency to blame—the tendency to affix the guilt and assume that’s why we’re here. I felt it first in Manila where there was a tendency to blame the *schools*. But it’s too easy to blame the schools, and it’s not going to solve anything just to fix the blame. We came on to Quito, and there we learned to blame the *family*. Many of us engaged in a kind of therapeutic catharsis, and maybe we needed it. We tended to dramatize family relationships as being the crux of the problem. That was a pitfall. I think we’ve come perilously close here in Nairobi to blaming the *missions*—maybe the next step in the blaming process. We seem to want to fix the guilt somewhere.

A Broader Perspective

But let me suggest we get a little broader perspective. All of these things fit within a context which has to be seen as the whole community of mission—a community that exists as culture of its own impinged upon by about five other cultural functions, and producing a kind of lifestyle peculiar to itself that is somewhat asynchronous, not harmonized with virtually any of the rest of those cultures and in some cases asynchronous with the *transcultural perspective of the Kingdom of God*.

I think that would be an interesting theme for a conference. Could you get anybody to come? In every case where we have focused on one aspect or another, the true lurking demon is simplistic cause-and-effect models which cause us to assume that certain kinds of therapies are needed, and once we have them in place, it will all get better. I think we have to get at the whole context, not just treat symptoms.

Nairobi is a milestone. If in the past we pointed to school issues, kids’ issues, adult and MK issues, Nairobi has broadened that to mission family issues and readied us to think in terms of cultural context. I’ve said it before: I don’t think the MK is the right unit of analysis. We need to look at larger contexts through which the mission’s community shapes the mission family and thus shapes MKs.

Who are We?

The first step is to get to know ourselves. We need to see how we have come to be what we are. Our uniqueness in our particular cultural context—the combination of our own culture and the culture of the country to which we have been called—makes us “green” in Ruth Goring Stewart’s metaphor. Uniqueness is the hallmark of being Christian in the next century.

What’s wrong with being green? What’s wrong with being unique? What’s wrong with being Christ’s ones? *Not a thing is wrong with that!* Let’s focus it.

The Mind of Christ

The second step is orienting that uniqueness toward Christ. “Be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” And a crucial passage, Philippians 2:5-11, “Let this mind be in you”—a mind of servant hood, not a mind of claiming rights. Here’s how we sound: “This is my right as an Englishman; this is my right as an American; this is my right as an Australian.” Where is, “Let this mind be in you, the mind of the servant, even the servant who is obedient to death.”?

Take a loose hold on life. It’s not the best we’ve got coming.

Cultural Flexibility

Then step three: Move all of that toward cultural flexibility. Gain some skills. Learn how to be as Christ was—from another place, from another standard of life. And as we all know, he left it behind, as the Philippians’ passage states, and he became an example of a person moving into another culture and coping with it extremely well. We also see in the Apostle Paul evidence of this same kind of capacity to be culturally flexible. Paul was a man of several cultures, but a man called of God to minister in expanding ways in the world because he dedicated that multicultural framework built on his experiences to the service of Jesus Christ. He moved out effectively because he was adaptive and he could be “all things to all people.” What a

marvelous thing to have written on your tombstone! Think about that kind of transcendence—beyond our personal needs and aspirations; beyond our desire to serve each other; beyond missions as outreach.

Christ is glorified in his church. The church must be in a culture, and yet the church must rise above culture. That is the meaning of “transcultural.” It’s bigger than intercultural. I’m not satisfied that an intercultural curriculum, though valid, will answer the whole problem. Virtually all the educational enterprises of the world today are currently looking at such issues as globalization, internationalization, and larger scale world perspective building. Every country in the world has made at least some effort in this regard. We live in a world where in order to be competent; you literally have to be intercultural to some degree. Because of the ethos that we have created around ourselves, we as Americans (and I speak as an American, self-critically) have become complacent, even though our own country is rapidly becoming a combination of three major racial groups.

Multilingualism is common in American cities, but North American churches still remain monolingual. Multilingualism is an absolute necessity to function well in the city of Los Angeles, the city of Miami, and a dozen other places in the United States unless you stay in your ghetto—and we are often content to do just that. God help us!

The MK situation is but one case of the larger task of the church. As Brian Hill says, the MK is a potential resource for the church, and I think we need to keep saying this.

Serving the Church as Deacons

As we leave Nairobi, let us go forth with a new awareness of what it is to serve the church as deacons. That’s a strange twist in the conversation, but follow me closely. The first fulfillment of the meaning of deacon is recorded in Acts 6:1-7. The church, at that point, was a local assembly, or series of assemblies, in one place. They were not yet looking outward. Although they had the Great Commission ringing in their ears—to go first to Jerusalem, then Judea, then outward to Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the world—they were still quite content to stay in Jerusalem.

But, because they were a normal group of human beings, there were cultural problems. There are cultural or subcultural problems in every church of Jesus Christ, and I believe that the intention of God was that his people would know how to cope with cultural problems. Why do I think that? Because the first problem identified as something to be dealt with by the people of God in that first church in Jerusalem was racial prejudice, bias, and neglect. It is a very human tendency that exists everywhere because of the fallenness of humankind. It even infects the church of Jesus Christ—it did in Jerusalem, and it still does today.

The focus was the neglect of the widows of the Greek Christian community; Greeks who probably had been proselyted into Judaism and then on into Christianity. If that’s not third culture, I don’t know what is. And those third-culture people, who were outsiders even though they were Christians, were being neglected by the majority. It was this that provoked the Apostles to call together the whole community and, (to paraphrase Acts 6:2) **“It is not good for these unresolved cultural dissonances to keep us all from effective and worshipful focus on the Word of God.”** Read it closely. The need then and now was to identify special people within that community whose backgrounds prepared them for that moment when the church needed help with cultural bias and ethnocentric selfishness.

So, they identified seven people. Listen closely and see if you notice anything if you know anything about the languages of the Mediterranean. First, Stephen—we know about him. We’ve also heard about Philip. Procorus—now there’s an unlikely Jewish name! Nicanor—hmm, he didn’t run the delicatessen. Timon—he probably wasn’t the son of a Levite. Parmenas—another one of those sneaky Greeks. And Luke says specifically of Nicholas that he was from Antioch, a Gentile. Isn’t that an interesting list! They picked their third-culture kids! Think about it. The original deacons were the ones commissioned to deal with the problem of ethnic dissonance within the body of faith.

May God give us a crop of people who understand, because they've been there; what it is to come to terms with being a transcultural Christian. Do you see why I'm so hopeful about MKs? But where in the world today is a church with a problem like that; a church that would select seven people from the minority to deal with the minority problem?

Things aren't as they should be. Racism still infects the church. Racism still blights missions. It is an evidence of fallenness. Racism and cultural superiority—we politely call it ethnocentrism. But whether it is Americans who do it, or Chinese, or Nigerians, it is evidence of fallenness and sin. Evidence of being *normal* human beings. Evidence of being *natural* human beings. The catch is, we haven't been called to be *natural* anything, folks. We've been called to be *different*!

We do need to take a look at organizational lethargy sometimes too attached to the old ways, or the way we've always done it. But we also need to look at ethnic aloofness, defended in many places by such questionable notions as “the homogeneous unit principle.” Many facets of the missionary community engender aloofness, suspicion, fear, and anger. No wonder we've got problems. We are not always a good reflection of our Lord, the Prince of Peace. For all of us—MKs, parents of MKs, teachers, counselors, researchers, executives—“becoming green” in Ruth Goring Stewart's sense involves pain and risk. And making the most of multicultural background requires effort. It requires assistance; we all need help but more important, it requires Christian grace and humility.