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INTERSECTION

(The integration of theological studies with ethics, academic disciplines, and ecclesiastical institutions)

URBANA '81: SEARCHING FOR A TRUE PICTURE OF MISSIONS

By Harvie M. Conn, Professor of Missions, Westminster Theological Seminary.

How does one evaluate a five-day Missions Convention that draws 14,066 people from at least twenty-two countries, puts seventeen key church leaders on the speaking platform, and arranges for seventy elective workshops on everything from "What is Missions?" to "Man and Woman as Servants"?

The stated purpose of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship's Urbana '81 was "to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ by helping students in seeking God's place for them in world missions and thus to serve the church in strengthening her ministry in world missions." From hundreds of small group Bible studies in the morning to prayer groups at the end of each day, built on the experience of twelve previous gatherings and a program fine-tuned with business-like efficiency, Urbana '81 sought to serve that purpose. Why then do I rate it a C+ as an information event?

There was too much for students to filter through their preconceptions and myths about missions. As one platform speaker noted, it was for many much like trying to get a drink of water from a firehose. Still too many workshops (in spite of what I figured as a good drop from Urbana '79), still too little free time to rest and gossip through the experiences, still not enough personalized direction for students with questions. Opportunities for feedback within the Convention were minimal. Workshops which filled three of the afternoons were apparently almost always lecture format. One Inter-Varsity staff member commented to me that, of the several he had attended during the week, mine was the only one built around significant student input and discussion. When you've got a product to sell, feedback discussion can slow things down.

And there were not enough jarring notes of dissonance in the process to make people pause long enough to question, to look again at their own mythologies of missions.

I found myself asking why there were standing ovations for Eva den Hartog, the Salvation Army Major from Thailand, for Marilyn Laszlo, the Bible translator in Papua, New Guinea, and for Helen Roseveare of Zaire. Their presentations were powerful effectors, to be sure. Courage, I know many were thinking with me, can hardly be classified as "manly" after hearing these three women. But was it just that? Was it sensitivity to Roseveare's personal sufferings? Compassion for den Hartog's presentation of the refugee camps and their pain? Assuredly, that too. But beyond that, was it the romance of three white women serving Christ "in remote, back-country outposts" (to quote the press release)? Was it the subterranean call of Missions as the task of "the great white father" — and now mother — in the "uncivilized" world? Was the response a response to the old ideology of missions for the "primitive tribal savage"? Was this why so little was said of the call of the world's cities? No one on the platform, I really believe, was trying consciously to dredge up from our unholy history that colonial spectre. But no one spoke strongly enough against it to raise questions.

Laszlo's presentation was a masterpiece of humor and emotional appeal. Twice in her talk she described herself and others as "the first white persons" in an area. It was incidental to the talk. Or was it? She was followed by Dr. George McKinney, black pastor of an inner city church in San Diego. He spoke with great

power of Christ's call to the cities of the United States (though he said nothing of world urbanization and its unique demands). No standing ovation for McKinney. He did not eat grubs or translate the Bible for naked men clothed with one vine around the waist. Laszlo appealed on the deep-structure level of the white psyche to join in jungle gentrification. McKinney warned against that same process in the American city by whites.

How far is racism from the old mentality? Laszlo's comments are indicative. Similarly, in promoting one of the "books of the day," a speaker told of meeting in the hinterlands of South America a missionary who was there because of the book's impact. Once again it was not simply that he was the only missionary in the area. He was the "only white" missionary in the area. I have no desire to select these random comments and make accusations of rampant racism. But I do feel they exhibit a mentality towards missions that retards the world progress of the gospel and drags us back to the colonialist romanticism of the past.

I kept asking myself, "What vision of Missions do these color adjectives give to the 226 blacks present? To the 165 Hispanics? What of the 436 delegates from the third world? We talk so glowingly about the participation of the international church in world missions. What message do these adjectives convey to them about how some of us really see their participation?" No wonder there are so few American blacks on the mission field. And so few blacks in IVCF.

As in previous Urbanas, I fully expected to hear some powerful cautions from the platform on this confusion of world missions

No standing ovation for McKinney. He did not eat grubs or translate the Bible for naked men clothed with one vine around the waist.

with white do-it-now-ism. I was disappointed. Urbana '79 spoke much louder and clearer on these issues through Pius Wakatama, an African theologian and churchman, and Isabelo Megalit, a member of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES) staff in Malaysia. Megalit returned to this gathering, but his warnings were not as loud. His presentation began with a powerful comment to which I said as noisy an "Amen" as I could muster. "Last night," he began, "we heard about the sending church from a North American pastor. Tonight a pastor from Asia has been asked to speak about the receiving church. The implication is obvious. The North American church is the sending church, and the church in Asia is the receiving church. That conclusion is false, and I will attempt to show why."

But this high point was not fully reached again; and I wonder if Megalit's call for "partnership" was really strong enough to shake our ethnocentric past. So too with Samuel Escobar, Associate General Secretary for Latin America of the IFES. His topic, "Characteristic of the Witness," opened the way for some demythologizing. And his sub-headings had great potential — the humility of the witness, the witness as a servant and a prophet. Once the sparks did begin to fly. Escobar spoke of Jesus, "not an unoffensive and unobtrusive guru teaching transcendental meditation, surrounded by flowers and incense and soft cushions. Because he served people, especially the poor, he entered in constant conflict with the governing elites." I waited to hear Escobar flesh this out. At the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in 1974, with Rene Padilla and Orlanda Costas, he had

helped lead a "palace revolt" against the "culture Christianity" of the northern hemisphere and aided us in seeing the need for other components in our homogenized cartons of Missions. But the call was much more "laid back" at Urbana '81.

Perhaps what I'm saying is that the pitfalls of the mission enterprise were less evident from the platform than they were in Urbana '79. One commentator on Urbana '79 was struck by Megalit's courage at that time in delivering some strong words about Western missions. He was given a standing ovation. "The honesty and reality of his words touched the audience" (Dorothy Friesen, "Urbana and the Amazing Missionary Enterprise," *The Other Side*, March, 1980, p. 34).

There was nothing of this sort to stand in ovation for in '81. The agonizing question of the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility, the continuing reality of national church/expatriate mission tensions, the place of the poor in the purposes of God, the call of biblical justice to be reflected in missionary lifestyles, all these components were not loudly heard from the platform. Surely no one at a Missions Convention wants to spend all his or her time on these topics. But surely no one can any longer minimize them to the periphery and hope to give students an honest picture of the realities they will face "out there."

An Inter-Varsity press release dated December 31 carried the headline, "Urbana '81 Stresses Word and Deed." Missions as service and witness, it argued, "was the consistent theme underscored by speakers at Urbana '81." In support of that statement, it quoted Billy Graham's December 30th presentation and his call "to break out of our false distinctions between secular and sacred." It reminded us of McKinney's presentation, of den Hartog's challenge, "We are living in heaven compared with the millions of people living in inhuman conditions, what I call hell." It pointed to the student fast on Tuesday noon, which helped raise \$15,000 for three evangelical relief organizations.

That headline to me was not at all accurate. The message did not come through loud and clear from the platform about word and deed together being vital in communicating the Christian gospel. The Missions we saw from that vantage point was generally a-political and de-historicized. It was a kind of Gnostic Missions operating out of an evangelical *Urgeschichte* — world awareness given a one-column "news brief" in the daily Urbana news sheet we received each morning.

But there was another Urbana. And here Missions seemed closer to 1981. It was the Urbana exposed through Twentyone-Hundred Production's multi-media presentations and some of the workshops. There was the closed-door press conference on "the effect of culture upon missionaries." Here Escobar warned, "the North American culture has become so expansive that its missionaries no longer realize the extent of its power and influence." Here David Howard, the closing speaker of the Convention, spoke of North Americans as largely "monocultural." Here they struggled with how to deal with the social and political ills of the nations in which the missionary served. One panelist urged "prayerful discernment"; another reminded the missionary to be a guest and "slow to speak." And then Escobar responded, "missionaries must eventually come to terms with the questions of injustice and oppression in the countries they serve. Too many missionaries remain silent in the face of obvious crimes against the people."

There were the workshops for the students, sessions which often did address the important issues — "the gospel and culture," "evangelism and social concern," "community development: a Christian response to poverty," "international economic and political influences on North American missions," "western missions and anti-American sentiment," "ministry to the world's hungry and homeless," "urbanization and missions."

And how do you describe the innovative, forward look of the titles available from InterVarsity Press in the armory? Stott's *Culture and the Bible*, Sider on *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, Sally and Behm asking *What Color is Your God?*, Thom

Hopler's exhortation to move beyond your cultural walls in *A World of Difference*, Richard Lovelace's *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*. The list could become endless. One tribute after another to a publisher's willingness to take risks and push us into re-thinking.

All of this was almost a second Urbana.

Then, there is the third Urbana. It is found on the Armory floor and in Huff Gym. It is the Urbana of the Missions boards, built to handle "candidates" for "The Work," too often nineteenth-century processors of vital twentieth-century concern for the world. Here I continue to fear is where student enthusiasm begins to dim, where Assembly Hall and workshop information can shift quickly into P.R. promotion. Granting the obvious way God has used the Mission board in the past, granting the way He will no doubt continue to use it in the future, can we also grant the tendency of any institution towards self-preservation and conservation of the status quo? Can we ask if the Armory is not also part of the siphoning-off process that not only screens out the romantic inquiry but also the "Unstoppable" etceteras of the Lord's student army as well? Does the Armory give any evidence of serious wrestling with the reality of the short-termer (5764 on the field in 1976 and approximately 8581 in 1980)? What accounts for this unusual surge of short-termers? More specifically, could these figures possibly be saying to us that the traditional boards need new ways of transposing this enthusiasm into lifetime commitments? Ten years from now, how many of those will be found overseas who made up the massive response to the call for foreign service at Urbana '79? What part will the Armory Urbana have played as those 1800 young people came down through the funnel to the world's airports?

Ultimately, is the Convention's purpose really achieved in the information flow from these three sources, these "three Urbanas"? Or rather by its unstated achievement as a festival of faith, a celebration of the gospel? Has its growth from a 1946 convention of 575 to 1981 and 14,066 moved it to where the medium has become the message? Is this why one young woman said to me her first Urbana (in 1979) gave her inspiration, but this one gave her information? Why was I left with the unsettling feeling that the powerful morning Bible studies by Eric Alexander had less to say about Missions and more about Christian commitment?

There is no doubt that Urbana's planners are concerned in all these areas. An anticipated 5000 to 10,000 students will attend Urbana Onward mini follow-ups in February. Here the personal contact with missionaries, the time for personal interaction will be scheduled. But will even these be enough to tap the surge? Do we need such programs annually, with one scheduled just *before* the next Urbana? Forewarned can be forearmed.

In a local church, one missionary conference "special" a year opens new doors and excites new hopes. But there must be channels to keep that spectacular interest going and growing. And they must be channels that convey not only an "accurate" picture, but a "true" picture. "Three" Urbanas cannot create a world Christian mentality that is more than simply "accurate." Urbana as a celebration can awaken the hopes and stir the imagination. But until the real Urbana stands up more straight and tall, celebration can lead to triumphalism.

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