

## CHURCH AND COMMUNITY

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A preacher once asked a Christian audience  
Do you want to go to heaven when you die?  
Most people raised their hand  
The preacher then said-would you like to go to heaven tonight?  
A few people raised their hand  
The preacher then asked the audience  
Would you like to see a world where there is no disease no crime no war?  
Would you like to see a world where poverty has been eliminated?  
Would you like to see a world of justice and peace?  
Would you like to see a world where everyone has the opportunity to hear the good news  
of Jesus Christ?  
Immediately everyone in the room raised their hand

When I walk into a village community and see child soldiers carrying guns  
I want to see the world changed

When I witness the suffering of innocent people in Lebanon Israel Palestine and Iraq  
I want to see the world changed

When I know there are 1.5 million women and children forced into prostitution and  
trafficked globally  
I want to see the world changed

When I visit countries where there is no liberty to worship God freely  
I want to see the world changed

All of us want to see the world changed  
That is why we are here this week at the Micah Network Conference  
We are followers of Jesus Christ  
We believe the Church of Jesus is called to make a difference in his world  
So where do we begin?

You have asked me to address the subject of Church and Community  
And I suggest that we begin by admitting that humanly speaking  
The task of changing anything in the world is beyond us  
This is not the same as the defeatist manner which is overwhelmed by the enormity of the  
challenges  
There are Christians who see the devastating effects of war and poverty and disease  
And think the Church is powerless to do anything  
I am not recommending a helpless defeatism which walks away from a wounded world

I am suggesting that a position of vulnerability is a good place for the church to begin  
We can't be partners in God's work and then insist on doing it our way  
Each generation needs to ask the question  
Is it our desire to see the Kingdom of God advance?  
Or  
Is it our besetting temptation that *we* should advance the Kingdom of God?  
It's God's Kingdom and we are the servants of the Master  
So let the Master direct the mission enterprise  
This is why I suggest that a church stripped naked of its power  
A Church humanly overwhelmed by the needs and demands of the world  
*That* kind of Church might begin to understand more fully the nature of the Gospel and  
the call of Jesus  
A vulnerable church might open itself to the unplumbed depths of intercessory prayer  
with global partners I affirm what Ann Morisy says:  
'It is only when churches are stripped of their power that they begin to get a gist of the  
gospel. The vulnerability that we experience today presents us with glorious new  
possibilities'<sup>1</sup>

If my world travels have taught me anything-it is the strength of vulnerability  
A few weeks after NATO planes ceased bombing the Serbian city of Novi Sad  
I travelled to the city with Hungarian Baptist Aid and visited a Christian family whose  
house had been almost destroyed by three NATO bombs The residents of the home,  
Milanko and Suzana shared with me: 'we survived the bombs but what is the Lord trying  
to teach us through this experience? They shared that in the days following the bombing  
the Lord gave us two passages of scripture. Psalm 91 which reminded us of the protection  
of God and Hebrews 12 told us that our miraculous escape was a teaching moment in our  
lives. We now have a new vision for our lives.

During May this year I led a Baptist World Alliance (BWA) Human Rights delegation to  
Vietnam. I was wending my way through a crowded street in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon)  
Vietnam when someone nudged my arm. It was a mother with a young child and they  
were pointing to my can of coke. I finished the drink and handed it to them. They walked  
away and after a few yards the mother put the can on the street, crushed and flattened it  
with her heel and then placed it in a canvas bag held by the child. This is the face of  
poverty in Vietnam where the poorest survive on less than 50 cents a day.

Another face of Vietnam is one of economic prosperity with a growth rate of over 7% per  
year and a burgeoning tourist industry lured by the sugar white beaches and the  
overwhelming beauty of locations such as Phu Quoc Island. During recent years Vietnam  
has moved from being a rice importer to the world's third largest exporter of rice after  
India and Thailand and as a further sign of its prosperity, check the label on the garment  
you are wearing and see if it says- 'Made in Vietnam'

The BWA Human Rights delegation was in Vietnam to review the face of religious  
liberty in 21<sup>st</sup> century. Five East Asian nations have been named in the 2006 list of

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<sup>1</sup> *Journeying Out* Ann Morisy p ix (Morehouse 2004)

‘countries of particular concern’ (CPCs) for their violations of the universal right to freedom of religion or belief. Burma, North Korea, China, Indonesia and Vietnam are all named as CPCs because their governments have engaged in or tolerated systematic violations of religious liberty.

Whilst respect for religious freedom has improved in Vietnam since the new law, *Ordinance on Religion and Belief*, went into effect in November 2004 and the Prime Minister issued his *Instruction on Protestantism* in February 2005, there are concerns that the authorities need to clarify the ambiguities and loopholes of the new laws and offer the guarantee that local party and security officials are educated and held accountable to the new legislation on religious activity.

During one of the meetings with government officials I sat under a huge portrait of the communist founder of Vietnam-Ho Chi Minh on the day the country was celebrating his birthday. We appealed to the government for the right of Vietnamese Christians to worship freely –to share their faith openly and to organise mercy ministries for the benefit of the community. The Vietnamese pastors who accompanied us spoke boldly and eloquently. After the meeting one of these pastors told me of his time in prison in Vietnam. He had been sentenced to six years in jail and after three years said to the Lord are you hearing my prayers? He felt led to the words in John 13 where Jesus washed the feet of his disciples and said to them: ‘You will not understand what I am doing at present but afterwards you will understand.’ When he was eventually released from prison he wrote a book and titled it ‘Afterwards you will understand’

Only vulnerability enables the church to enter into the mystery of the words of Jesus  
‘Afterwards you will understand’

The vulnerable Church is more open to receive God’s vision for the future  
The vulnerable church will go deeper in understanding the true nature of dissent  
And this world needs Christian dissenters  
Christian dissent is dissenting from a way that is not the way of God for his world  
This form of dissent calls the world to conform to Gods’ ways for running his world

I agree with Walter Brueggemann when he suggests how such dissent is brought to birth  
‘People are not changed by moral exhortations but by transformed imaginations’<sup>2</sup>  
If the Church is to be a dissenting church it needs a new way of seeing things.  
If we want a Church that dissents from the dominant culture, which constructs a world  
where poverty is *never* consigned to history  
Then we need to ask the Lord for a constant supply of the water of life  
This gift of living water will simultaneously cleanse our thinking  
And open the floodgates of renewed imaginations

*The challenge for the Micah Network is the constant renewal of the imagination*

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<sup>2</sup> *Hopeful Imagination* Walter Brueggemann p25 (Fortress Press 1986)

Consider this challenge with respect to the global campaign sponsored jointly by the Micah network and WEA – the Micah Challenge campaign.

Micah Challenge has many partners in the world  
There are those who share our vision who do not share our faith  
These co belligerents have an infectious passion for justice and peace and the elimination of poverty. We welcome warmly their partnership  
But we must guard our distinctive values as followers of Jesus  
The wellsprings of our passion and motivation are unique  
Re-imagining our calling comes when we re-visit the ancient words of Jesus  
When Jesus urges his followers to be *salt and light*  
He is making a bold claim for his church  
At all times and in all places  
The church *is* salt and light

How can God keep the world going from bad to worse?  
Through his salty church  
How can God shine his light into the dark places of evil and injustice?  
Through his light bearing church

The main use of salt is to prevent decay  
Jesus is suggesting clearly that the world left alone has a tendency to sin and evil  
Morally people descend from bad to worse unless salt intervenes  
But the life of a nation can be morally transformed when believers act as salt

The salt of the gospel can be rubbed into the life of the world as a preservative  
This action may not be seen or acknowledged  
It is the invisible work of Christian discipleship

I like the way Mike Frost puts it:  
‘We must remain mindful that for every ongoing war  
For every environmental disaster  
There are thousands of counterbalancing acts of staggering generosity and humanity  
happening all over the world on a breathtaking scale  
Many of these are being perpetrated by local churches  
Every day meat-and-potatoes followers of Jesus’<sup>3</sup>

These invisible disciples of Jesus are rubbing salt daily into the life of their communities  
Through homeless centres-justice action groups-prayer cells-HIV/Aids support networks

I think of Project Ruth started by a Baptist church  
Located in a poor suburb of Bucharest  
The Ruth School currently educates 200 children from mainly Gypsy background  
Every child receives a primary education and medical support services

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<sup>3</sup> *What can one church do?* Mike Frost (Micah Challenge Australia)

Salt not only preserves  
Salt gives flavour-it adds something  
We should be adding the flavour of Christ likeness to communities  
A distinctive lifestyle makes Christian discipleship tasty and attractive

Alan Kreider has studied the life of the Early Church and posed the question  
What made the early church grow at such a rate?  
He concludes it was neither their evangelism or their worship that were the critical factors  
The main evidence was 'the fascination factor'<sup>4</sup>  
People were intrigued by a loving serving community  
They were fascinated by the inclusive community life which was boundary breaking  
They were drawn by the alternative lifestyle of the community

Jesus also called his church to be the light of the world  
The church is like a lighthouse-it warns  
The church is like a flashlight-it guides  
The church is like a welcoming house with burning lights-it attracts  
There is no such thing as a hidden disciple  
When Jesus lights our lives we are expected to shine for him

The NightLight organisation works in the red light districts of Bangkok  
They reach out to the estimated 20,000 women and children who work in the sex industry  
Their mission is to carry God's light into the darkness and demonstrate his amazing love and grace  
As relationships are formed women are offered alternative employment with NightLight Design Company jewellery business. As of June this year 30 women were employed by the company  
Once employed the women are offered life skills training physical and spiritual assistance  
Here is a group of disciples shining as stars in the darkest places  
Holding forth the word of life

This is the primary role of the Church as salt and light  
Serving as the counter culture  
Preserving what is best  
Exposing what is wrong  
We are the ones concerned for the well being of every human being made in the image of God  
We are called to create salt and light communities

So what does this mean in the context international conflict and violence?  
How can the church proclaim and demonstrate hope?  
How can the church be involved in practical justice and peacemaking?

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<sup>4</sup> *Worship and Evangelism in Pre Christendom* Alan Kreider (Grove Books 1995)

## 1. Presence

First the church is a presence. It is simply being there as a salt and light community where necessary re-neighbouring the community, bringing a Christian presence in areas where the church has disappeared.

I am always challenged when I read the story that Jim Wallis tells of the tough Dorchester neighbourhood of Boston. He speaks of the valuable advice of a heroin dealer with a group of young black pastors who were desperate to do something to stop the violence on the streets of their community and were willing to listen to anyone who might give them some ideas

The drug dealer said:

‘When the kids get out of school-we’re there and you are not  
When they are out on the streets-we’re there and you are not  
When Mum sends Johnny out for a loaf of bread-we’re there and you are not  
All night long-we’re there and you are not-so we win and you lose  
It’s as simple as that’

The pastors knew that the bars and drug houses were open 24 hours a day while their churches were closed and locked most of the day<sup>5</sup>

When the Archbishop of Canterbury visited Sudan earlier this year he saw the work of the Sudan Council of Churches which is providing shelter and health care to those forced from their homes by the 21 year conflict which ended with a peace agreement in January 2005.

Rowan Williams expressed his concern that the dividends of the peace accord are not much in evidence; there was a disparity between the promise of \$5 billion dollars in aid and development and the delivery of this promise from the international community; the painfully slow emergence of a government in southern Sudan; the posturing and preoccupation in Khartoum while Darfur literally burns; the bureaucratic administration of the World Bank multidonor trust fund, all play their part in slowing progress on the ground.

But in the face of all this, what encouraged him he said was ‘the miraculously enduring delivery mechanisms of the churches. Time and again the places I visited where hope was most in evidence were those with strong links to the church’. It was NGO’s collaborating with local churches in delivering the kind of development that enables children to eat to learn and to discover freedom to shape the world around them<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Faith Works* Jim Wallis p73 (Hodder)

<sup>6</sup> article in *Christian Aid News* Spring 2006

Christian Presence has a transforming influence in the life of a community. But this presence is not to be dominated by the meeting of human need. Where there is openness of heart and mind Christian presence in community gives birth to a transforming theology. A theology which deals with the root causes of poverty and deprivation rather than always being shaped by the delivery of welfare and aid.

The Micah Network should be fostering a theology from the streets.

A theology *from* communities not just *for* communities

Christian presence makes space for the theological voice of the people<sup>7</sup>

This theology of the streets is a profoundly important part of our advocacy to those in high places

## 2. Perseverance

The second feature of salt and light church is the Christian value of perseverance. What has been termed the enduring principle of 'keep on keeping on'!

I read in a newspaper recently the story of a Mr Joachim, a Sri Lankan living in Canada. He has an odd passion for accumulating world records based on endurance. He has smashed the record for watching television non-stop (69 hours and 48 minutes); he has set the standard for the time balanced on one foot (76 hours 40 minutes); and for travelling up and down an escalator (7 days) When asked why he engages in frantic but seemingly futile activities, he replies 'that it is to raise awareness of suffering children' Tim Hames who writes the story comments: 'The suspicion remains that it has become an end in itself'<sup>8</sup>

This could be our danger- persevering without a purpose. You cannot be intimately involved with the pain and struggle of the poor without experiencing bouts of compassion fatigue, cynicism at the broken promises of government leaders, and disappointment with the Church. There needs to be a spiritual perseverance with a cutting edge purpose to bring us through the inevitable setbacks. The scriptural word is 'do not lose heart. By God's mercy we (still) have this ministry' (2 Corinthians 4:1)

I think of Sister Mathilde Casula, a 67 year old Italian missionary working in a sweltering outpatients' clinic near the mosquito infested town of Isiolo in northern Kenya. Forty years ago she founded children's hospital and maternity clinic. More recently she set up a residential home and school for Aids orphans. She is now caring for 166 of them, a small proportion of the estimated 900,000 Aids orphans in Kenya today. 'Things have never been so bad' she said in a recent report describing the third year of drought in the region. "TB and malaria are endemic and every month we are seeing more than 70 cases of child malnutrition in the clinic". While this missionary exhibits staying power here on the ground- aid comes through the churches. The churches support those who persevere so

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<sup>7</sup> see Church of England report *Faithful Cities* (2006)

<sup>8</sup> Article by Tim Hames in *The Times* 26 September 2005

the travelling teacher obtains her motorbike; the seamstress gets her sewing machine; and Sister Mathilde receives the retroviral drugs for her vital work.<sup>9</sup>

I remember visiting the village of Namaroi in Northern Mozambique in the early 1990's soon after the end of ten years of drought and the fifteen years of civil war. We were shown round the war ravaged village by the local pastor. We said to him what did you do during the long years of drought and war. He replied, the first year we prayed. The second year we prayed and cried. The third year we prayed and cried and waited in hope.

Martin Luther King used to encourage his hard pressed co-workers in the dark days of the Civil Rights Protest with the words of Isaiah 40 verse 31: 'Those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength. They will rise up with wings like eagles. They will run and not be weary. They will walk and not faint'

Luther King would say: 'If God gives you the wings to fly-then fly  
If he gives you strength to run -then run  
If he gives you strength to walk for him-then walk for him  
If you only have the strength to crawl for the Lord-then by all means crawl  
But by all means keep moving'

It is the principle of 'keep on keeping on' and I see it at work through the persevering ministries of local churches in the tough places of the world. Micah Challenge should recognise and applaud the virtue of enduring fruitful ministries.

### **3. Prophetic Pioneering**

We are living through an intriguing and revolutionary period of world history  
It has been observed that in such times as these the Church divides itself into at least three camps

There are pioneers travellers and settlers

There are *the pioneers* who blaze a trail where there are no existing paths. They are gifted to go on a visionary expedition and tell us what a wonderful land awaits us if only we have the faith and courage to make the journey beyond the high mountains.

There are *the travellers* who catch the vision of the pioneers and are trusted by the settlers. They do not have the gifting to blaze a trail like the pioneers, but they are prepared to among the first to travel a new road to a new destination

Finally there are *the settlers*, usually the largest number, who are comfortable living in the camp. They love the routine and the familiarity of the camp and will not exchange the familiar territory of their camp for some uncertain promised land; until they are sure it is safe to make the journey.

The truth is we need to honour and listen to all three groups in order to be the people of God in such times as we are living

But I plead that we hear the voices of the pioneers

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<sup>9</sup> Article by John Cornwall in *The Tablet* 6 May 2006

They are God's gift to the church for such a time as this  
I meet them everywhere I travel  
They have discovered that the church can have a prophetic agenda as well as a pastoral agenda

I met prophetic pioneers in South Africa in the Wolanani organisation set up to support people with HIV/Aids. Courageous people who make it a priority to put an end to HIV related stigma ignorance and isolation. My heart was touched and my conscience stirred when I saw the practical love of Jesus being shared with the stigmatised.

I met a prophetic pioneering congregation when I worshipped with a congregation in Buenos Aires. The week before I visited the church a young man had died of HIV/Aids and his family (who were not regular churchgoers) were in the congregation on the Sunday morning. They felt the stigma shame and isolation which is often carried by the families of those with HIV/ Aids. The first act of the pastor was to personally welcome them. He asked them to stand. He then invited as many as possible to lay hands of welcome on them and offer a prayer of blessing over their lives. It was a powerful witness of grace in a culture of gracelessness towards families with HIV/Aids.

I met an inspirational prophetic pioneer when I visited Mozambique. One of my heroes is Bishop Denis Sengulane. I have personally heard his first hand accounts of how he travelled between the armies of the two warring sides seeking peace. As he stood outside each Headquarters with his heart beating faster than usual, he would recite the words 'Blessed are the peacemakers-for they will be called children of God'

At the end of the murderous civil war in Mozambique, huge numbers of guns were still in circulation, a constant threat to the rebuilding of peaceful communities. With other Christian leaders and in partnership with Christian Aid, Bishop Denis launched a programme to encourage decommissioning. A tool in exchange for arms was the transforming of military weapons into agricultural tools.

Those who handed in arms to be destroyed would receive in exchange tools which would allow them to work and to earn-they received a sewing machine, a hoe, or a plough. But Bishop Denis felt this was not enough that the weapons were out of commission. They had to be shown to be part of a new order-like the communities' from where they had come.

He invited a group of Mozambican artists to make the weapons speak, to tell the story of their past use and their present purpose. To tell the story that life can come from death if we allow it to do so. Last year in the Great Court of the British Museum in London their work went on display for three months.

*The Tree of Life* is the sculptures of a tree made of rusted metal-sheltering in its branches are the birds and animals of Southern Africa. Neil MacGregor, who tells the story of *The Tree of Life*, says:

Every element in the sculpture was designed to bring death

Hundreds of lives were ended or mutilated by these weapons  
But the metal also speaks of a new beginning  
Of individuals and communities refashioned, like the weapons, to a higher purpose  
The Tree of Life is a supreme Image of hope<sup>10</sup>

Pioneers are sometimes angry prophets. Go on line to the web site of Christianity Today and read the scathing words of Martin Acad, the academic dean of the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut Lebanon In his recent article he explains why he is angry at evangelical Christians, Israel, Hezbollah, The United States and the international community. Anger at the evangelicals who believe that apocalyptic destruction is a precursor to global salvation; anger that Hezbollah takes a unilateral decision to go to war without consulting the Lebanese government; anger at Israel for an out of proportion reaction; anger at the US for only using its veto at the UN to prevent resolutions that would be helpful to the Lebanese people; anger-and a loss of hope- in the international community for keeping silent and not even budging with an official condemnation of the senseless instinct of extermination. Pioneers can burn with prophetic anger and overturn our tables of silent complicity and passive indifference.<sup>11</sup>

I have come to a deeper appreciation in recent years of that pioneer prophet Martin Luther King. Ched Myers is right when he suggests: 'If you want to understand Martin Luther King you must look at Jesus'.<sup>12</sup> In other words, Luther King understood the gospel as a vocation of advocacy for the oppressed, of love for adversaries and non violent resistant to injustice. He understood fully the meaning of Ghandi's words 'the philosophy of an eye for an eye makes a nation of blind people'

Non violent resistant sometimes involves the shedding of blood. The true spirit of the prophetic pioneer is they do not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. 73 years old Dorothy Slang was shot dead in Brazil on 12 February 2005. She had worked among the poor and landless for years, speaking out against death threats from those who logging and ranching interests. When they finally came for her she read passages from the bible to her killers. They listened for a moment, and then fired. Her body was found face down in the mud, blood staining the back of her white blouse.<sup>13</sup>

As I was reading the story of Dorothy, I came across this quote from my friend Anne Wilkinson Hayes. She is writing about the need for Christian communities to model an alternative society. To show it is possible to live in Christ simply joyfully freely 'No amount of shouting about increasing overseas aid is going to make a real difference until a significant proportion of the voting population is prepared to live in a way that enables it to happen',<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *A painful resurrection* Neil MacGregor *The Tablet* 2 July 2005

<sup>11</sup> *Christianity Today* 17 July 2006

<sup>12</sup> *The Bible in Transmission* Ched Myers (Bible Society UK 2006)

<sup>13</sup> [www.catholic.org/cathcom/national\\_story](http://www.catholic.org/cathcom/national_story)

<sup>14</sup> *Notes in the Margin-new ways of being the gathered church* lecture by Anne Wilkinson Hayes

One of the most urgent questions for the church worldwide is  
How do we produce these kind disciples of Jesus?

William Abraham says the ministry of making disciples is not just a moral imperative it's a *missionary* imperative. Hosts of people struggle with the life of discipleship because of the incompetence of the church in the art of making disciples. He talks about the intrinsic grammar of initiation and the richness and many-sidedness of initiating disciples into the faith.<sup>15</sup>

We need followers of Jesus trained in the principles of discipleship  
Who will work as counter cultural agents for the Gospel.

So that when the world says -We do it our way  
The disciple says I submit myself to a project greater than my own life

When the world says –We are answerable to no one  
The disciple says I lose in order to gain

When the world says –We are seeking self-fulfilment  
The disciple says I die in order to live

Disciples of Jesus will always be faced with hard choices and all of us need to heed the warnings about gaining a world and losing a soul. As Thomas Merton observes:  
The real tragedy (for the disciple) is in the cold waters of moral death. These waters climb imperceptibly within us blinding conscience drowning compassion suffocating faith and extinguishing the spirit<sup>16</sup>

God is writing his book of history  
The hard work being done by members of Micah Network and Micah Challenge are chapters in that book  
Each day we will contribute pages to that chapter  
So write carefully  
But take risks

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<sup>15</sup> *On making disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ* William J Abraham p165-66 in Marks of the Body of Christ edited by Braaten and Jenson (Eerdmans 1999)

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Merton *A passion for peace* 197