

From The United Church of Canada's "Beyond Survival to God's Mission" consultation, held in February 2009 in Mississauga, Ontario

MUSINGS TOWARD A POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST INTERCULTURAL ECCLESIOLOGY FOR THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

by Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng, February 2009, Toronto

Being a response to the question "What would the United Church of Canada look like if the box, book, and preacher were opened?" after a communal viewing of "Beyond The Box, the Book, and the Preacher Ecclesiology," an interview with Bishop Mark MacDonald, Anglican Church of Canada, by the Rev. Robert Dalgleish, Program Coordinator for Congregational Renewal and Community Development, of the Congregational, Educational, and Community Ministries Unit (CECM), at the "Beyond Survival to God's Mission" consultation at Queen of Apostles' Renewal Centre, Mississauga, Ontario, February 16-18, 2009.

On the receiving end of mission

You see before you someone who has been on the receiving end of [traditional overseas] mission, one of the "missioned to," specifically, via mission schools. It was at a Baptist elementary mission school, during a Christmas pageant, that I first heard the Christmas/Christian story and sang my first Christmas carol. It was in an Italian Catholic convent school that I studied the life of Jesus and learned how to observe Lent. It is because of those earlier missionaries that I can now boast of being one of the few real live Congregationalists who is now a member of The United Church of Canada, my home church being the China Congregational Church of my birthplace, Hong Kong.

But I learned more than this, consciously and unconsciously, in those mission schools. What did I learn about the world, when my first history lesson in English was the story of Romulus and Remus and the founding of Rome? Or about myself, when only the English/Western part of my name was used at school? Some of you knew me as "Anne" or "Greer Anne," and some now know me as "Wenh-In." This is because it took decades, until 1994 in fact, for me to become conscientious enough about my own colonization and, with the example of Asian feminist theologians such as Kwok Pui Lan and Chung Hyun Kyung, to "come out" with the name in Chinese characters I was given at birth. And I am ashamed to confess that, so colonized was I by high school, I began to think of England as my literary if not my actual "homeland." After all, the curriculum I encountered over the years had taught me all about November 5 being Guy Fawkes Day and the Lake District being synonymous with Wordsworth; I wanted to be there to experience all of this "authentically."

I have taken the risk to share these parts of my personal identity and social location because I take seriously the feminist conviction that "the personal is political" and, in the present case, theological and ecclesiastical as well. Many have been my companions along the way in this decolonizing journey—those belonging to binational movements such as PANAAWTM (Pacific Asian and North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry) and PAACCE (Pacific Asian American Canadian Christian Education ministries, a project of the National Council of Churches U.S.A., of which The United Church of Canada is a member), individual mentors such as Katharine Hockin, with her challenge of transforming our understanding of mission from clone to companion, Letty Russell, with her image of "church

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in the round,"¹ and my colleague Marilyn Legge and her vision of "the grace of difference."² All these I want to lift up and honour, because they have given me both inspiration and the courage to keep asking questions of myself and of others.

The *missio dei*

For I do not presume to bring answers, but simply to help raise pertinent questions as we engage in the effort we are gathered to pursue these three days together. The stated purpose of this consultation is "to develop and cultivate an integrated, shared approach to fostering healthy congregations and ministries that participate fully in God's mission." My assignment was to reflect on how Bishop Mark MacDonald's challenging insights might point to the possibility of developing a postcolonial ecclesiology. As I continued in my preparations, however, I soon realized that I needed to put some parameters around my assignment and to make my own stance clear. This consultation is bound by the time frame and socio-economic political context of 21st century Canada. My personal "bias" is a feminist intercultural one, a conviction that the feminist goal of liberation for all and the commitment of the United Church to becoming an intercultural denomination ("where there is mutually respectful diversity and full and equitable participation of all Aboriginal, Francophone, ethnic minority, and ethnic majority in the total life, mission, and practices of the whole church," from "A Transformative Vision for The United Church of Canada," action at 39th General Council, August 2006) inform my faith understanding of contemporary mission and ministry.

So what is God's mission, this *missio dei* that world mission conferences and missiologists agree constitutes a "paradigm shift" from the earlier view and practice of "missions" as sending personnel to far-off lands to convert local "non-believers" to Christianity and thus expand the church? Feminist theologian and scholar-activist Letty Russell explains that the mission is God's, not ours, and that as participants in God's mission we must look to repairing and making new our relationships with creation (Letty M. Russell, "God, Gold, Glory and Gender: A Postcolonial View of Mission," *International Review of Mission* 93, no. 368 [January 2004]). Marilyn Legge takes us a step farther, from being givers to being partners, and from being solely actors to being recipients as well, noting that we ourselves must seek healing in solidarity with others, as well as in our relationships, and that justice and love must be a standard for all reflections on mission (Marilyn J. Legge, "Re-negotiating Mission: A Canadian Stance," *International Review of Mission* 93, no. 368 [January 2004]).

We are called to be the church

What kind of church do we need to be in order to participate in God's mission in this way? Is our stated ecclesiology adequate to the task? As members of The United Church of Canada, every time we recite the United Church's "New Creed" we remind ourselves and the world of our official communal understanding of church:

¹ Letty Russell, *The Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1993).

² Marilyn Legge, *The Grace of Difference: A Canadian Feminist Theological Ethic* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

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We are called to be the Church:
to celebrate God's presence,
to live with respect in Creation,
to love and serve others,
to seek justice and resist evil,
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
our judge and our hope.

This, it seems to me, is quite an eloquent way of articulating our church's "mission statement." No wonder whenever I have shared our contemporary creed south of the border, my audience has envied me. But we need to ask ourselves, to what extent have we and our "ministry base," whether it be pastoral charge/congregation, hospital/university campus, educational centre, outreach/community/ministry, Conference office, or General Council unit, been able to en flesh such a statement?

Breaking out of the box

Thus it appears that, theoretically, at least, we in the United Church do have an understanding of the church that is not being confined to a building. Does it follow that we also see God's mission as taking place outside church walls?

One morning last week I was listening to the CBC broadcast *Metro Morning* (in the Toronto area) when I heard a voice that sounded like that of Keith Howard. It was. Keith, Executive Director of The United Church's Emerging Spirit campaign/project, was being interviewed about the campaign's "counter ad" (in print and online), "There's probably a God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life" in "provocative response" to the transit ads being sponsored by the Freethought Association of Canada, which said the same thing but with there being "no God." What better evidence than this of engaging the public in an arena definitely outside the box? It reminds me of another occasion when God talk "jumps the box," in Bishop MacDonald's imagery of the out-of-bounds cranberry bushes: the flurry of public debate in the 1990s, stirred up by *The Ottawa Citizen's* interview with then Moderator Bill Phipps over points of Christian doctrine, including how literally the Bible is interpreted. Many in this room can share other examples—those engaged in the "greening" movement and those engaged in community ministry, for starters.

Why a postcolonial, feminist, intercultural ecclesiology?

The ecclesial "box," however, refers not only to a church's visible physical structure, but also to its invisible internal structure. Sometimes it is the internal structure that boxes people in. When that happens, God's mission is stifled, and what is called for is a way to work with justice within the structures of our churches, as well as out in the world (Letty M. Russell, *Women's Voices and Visions of the Church*, 2005, 14–16). Such is the case when women are denied an equal "place at the table" in exercising their full discipleship and/or leadership potential, or when minority and marginalized members are not treated as full participants and their histories and gifts are not acknowledged. Here is where postcolonial theory can help us think things through.

What is "postcolonialism"? In its literal meaning, "postcolonial" refers to that period in world history after the rule of largely European powers (French, German, Dutch, Portuguese, and, of course, British, on whose empire at one time the sun never set) has ended, and nations

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had re-established their independence, especially in Asia and Africa. Sometimes a hyphen between the "post" and the "colonial" helps to indicate that this meaning is intended. But as our church's study "Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire" has shown, the reality of colonialism has not disappeared; it has only assumed new forms as neo-colonialism, brought about by the economic globalization of transnational corporations. How does "postcolonial" as a conscious approach help us to confront this new reality?

In 1978 Edward Said, a professor of English literature at Columbia University, proposed in his work *Orientalism* that "the Orient" (from the near/middle East and extending to the "far" East) was basically a political and ideological creation of the West. Beyond a simple notion of historical periodization, therefore, postcolonialism refers to a way of critiquing the West in the period from the Enlightenment to the present (Wong Wai Ching, *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, 2000). Postcolonial studies began as a study of history and literature, looking at the effects on others of European colonization (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, 1989). Soon biblical scholars were applying this method to their reading of biblical texts in an "oppositional" or "contrapuntal" reading, juxtaposing the experiences of the exploited and the exploiter, exploring the colonial presence concealed in the biblical text, and seeking to make clear and visible the Bible's paradoxical potential to oppress as well as its capacity for liberation (R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 2002).

A postcolonial reading enables us to break out of the box of the "book" as it has been traditionally interpreted, delving beneath the victor's account to reach the victim's, seeking the voices not heard, the stories not recorded. Feminist scholars have been doing this for decades, of course. Now Aboriginal, third-world, and "minority" scholars are urging us to look at biblical narratives anew, from the experience, for instance, of the Canaanites rather than that of the Israelites (see Robert Allen Warrior's "A Native American Perspective: Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians" in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, 1991 & 1995). Such reading unveils the colonial consequences if not the motivations of the Great Commission, or the subtle shift of claiming Jesus to be the Messiah (for the Jews) to his being the saviour of the world (thus negating the indigenous "saviours" already existing in the world's religions and cultures (Musa Dube, "Reading for Decolonization [John 4:1–42]," *John and Postcolonialism: Travel, Space and Power*, ed., Musa W. Dube and Jeffrey L. Staley, 2002). Postcolonial biblical interpretation, it appears, may suggest going beyond the "book" to challenge Christians to consider God's presence and action outside not only our churches, but also our scriptures.

So what?

If we are open to rethinking God's mission beyond "box, book, and preacher" along postcolonial, feminist, and intercultural lines, what are some possible implications for our various ministries? How far are we prepared to "decolonize" ourselves and those in ministry with us? In our theological education/ministerial formation and other educational endeavours, dare we include in "church history" not only the development of the church in Europe and North America, but also the story of the global church usually relegated to "the history of missions"?

In our faith formation for the young and the not-so young (new Christians), are we courageous enough to acknowledge injustices against Aboriginal and other marginalized groups in Canada, and to study their histories of exclusion and oppression as part and parcel of the history of the United Church?

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In our social action, are we willing to continue "mending the world" along with our sisters and brothers of all faith traditions? In our commitment to being an intercultural church, can we move beyond serving a variety of food, singing global hymns (some even in their original languages), and having scripture read in languages other than English, to sharing decision-making power with formerly excluded constituencies? Are we ready to remind ourselves that such commitment is a way of living out the church's previous commitment to racial justice (anti-racism policy statement: "participate fully, organize for diversity, act justly, speak to the world," 37th General Council, 2000), and thus be supportive of mandatory training in racial justice for all ministry personnel? And, running through all these challenges, are we prepared to affirm the leadership and nurture the leadership potential of the women and girls in our midst?

The church we are called to be

In view of The United Church's commitment to seeking right and just relationship with Aboriginal communities and congregations, and in light of 2009 being the UN year of Indigenous Peoples, let me share with you a few of the "givens" for a "church of tomorrow" that Aboriginal Christians, especially women, could agree to be part of, as discussed by Pamela Jean Owens, one of the participants at the World Council of Churches' North American regional meeting, in "Native American Women and Church" (*Women's Voices and Visions of the Church: Reflections from North America*, eds. Letty M. Russell, Aruna Gnanadason, and J. Shannon Clarkson, 2005). The church of the future should avoid all systems of hierarchy, should treat the land it occupies with respect, remembering that the very concept of land ownership was not a Native/Aboriginal concept, should try to learn to communicate with Aboriginal people in a non-linear and non-dualistic manner more in keeping with their traditional modes of expression, and must listen actively to the voices of Aboriginal women and let them determine their own identities.

How far are we willing and ready to work toward letting the Spirit mould us into this kind of church in order for the *missio dei* to have a chance? And, if and when we are willing and ready, what support would we need, and what allies can we count on? To complicate matters even further, postcolonial analysis points out that often we are "hybrids," both colonized and colonizer, depending on the context, and thus cannot claim to act only as oppressed or oppressor in all circumstances.

Such are some of the musings and wonderings I share with you as we seek to move "beyond box, book, and preacher" to be a church that can invite those in our midst to engage in God's mission in the world.

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