Putting Ecclesiology on our Agenda
Written in 1990

There are an estimated 12-15 million Christians in the Arab World. Much, if not all, that we do is affected by our attitude to these Christians. Using our western paradigms, we label many of these Christians as "nominal". Yet a study of these enormously complex churches and the people who make them up often reveals a Godly leadership and a deeply spiritual people who know much of spiritual discipline in their lives.

We have a goal to "reach right across the Arab World". This is good and right, but discipling is harder than evangelism. Therefore our goals are:

- "To establish living fellowships of disciples in areas where none exist" (church planting)
- "To encourage and teach the existing Arab church" (church perfecting)

We are going to require a much greater understanding of ecclesiology than we appear to have at the moment. Often understanding begins with asking the right questions. I would like to ask you to think about the following questions.

1. How do you think of your own church/denomination? What do you believe about such things as baptism, the ordination of women, the authority of the local church? Who has the right to take communion? What about church discipline?

2. To what extent are you willing to have fellowship with and be identified with churches and individual Christians who hold different views from your own?

3. What is your attitude to the Roman Catholic, Uniate and various sorts of Orthodox Christians?

4. What is your attitude to the ecumenical movement as it exists in the Middle East? What do you think of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC)?

5. Is the concept of "parachurch" Biblical? If our organisation is a parachurch organisation (assuming that there is such a thing as parachurch), how should it relate to the churches here in the Middle East? Should we be asking the churches here what they would like us to do? Or do we tell the local church what is our vision and hope they will let us pursue it? What are the priorities of the Arab Church?

6. How should parachurch organisations relate to each other? Would greater co-operation make them more effective?

7. What do you do if your local church is "dead"? Move to a more "live" church? Start a "live" church?

8. Are you willing to work fully under the authority of the local church leadership?

9. What if your sense of calling and your vision conflict with that of our organisation and/or the local church?

10. If you get into trouble with the authorities, who will you ask to come to your help? Those outside of the country? The local Coptic bishop?

11. If you get into trouble with the authorities and are expelled from the country, who else will be affected and will suffer as a result?

12. What if you are interested in reaching Muslims and you are told the local church isn't interested? Is it ever right to bypass the local/national church completely?

13. What about churches of Muslim background believers? Should this be our goal even in countries where there are established churches? If you are involved in starting one, what pattern will you follow? How will such a church/fellowship relate to other fellowships?

14. How do we explain our evangelical tendency to separation and disunity?

15. Do we believe that each local church should be indigenous and independent?

16. Do you believe that God can guide you as an individual through the body?

We must come up with well-thought-out answers to these and many related questions. To do so we need a clarified ecclesiology.

I would like to make ten points about ecclesiology rather briefly. I hope this will set the ball rolling. Then I would like to say something about parachurch structures and finally I would like to say something about how I see the role of our organisation in the Arab World as far as these things are concerned.

Towards an Evangelical Ecclesiology

1. The Church is not the Kingdom.

Much has been written about this in recent years. Now is not the appropriate time to clearly define the overlap and distinctions between these two fundamental New Testament concepts. However, we must develop a clear theology of these two concepts. This will help us clarify our goals in the area of social action and the development of "holistic" ministries. It will help us develop a stand on the many ethical issues such as how to interact with state-supported injustice.

2. Jesus didn't give His disciples a blue-print for the structure and organisation of the church.

For example in Mt. 18 and 19 He deals with various church issues such as discipline, forgiveness, divorce, possessions and giving, but the emphasis is on attitudes (humility and servanthood in the leaders) and the value of the individual rather than on structure and organisation.

3. The church must be careful about adopting leadership models etc. from the world. (Mt. 20:28)

By extension there is danger in adopting managerial and financial styles from the world without careful thought as to whether or not they align themselves to Scripture.

4. The teaching of the apostles needs to be taken alongside their practice.

For example in 1 Tim 2: 11-15 and in 1 Cor. 14: 33-36 we have Paul's teaching on women's ministry in the church. In Rom. 16 you have the practices that Paul approves of actually being worked out.

5. There was no single, fixed, divinely ordained pattern of church order in N.T. times, but rather variety and fluidity. For example:

- Acts 6 – the word 'deacons' is not used. What was Stephen?
- Phil 1:1 – saints with their bishops and deacons
- Acts 20:17, 27 – Presbyters/bishops/overseers
- What was Timothy?
- Eph. 4:11-13 – are all churches to have apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers?
- Acts 1:15-16 – were the apostles right?

If this statement is true, we should be careful not to judge a variety of different church structures. We should not try to reproduce a particular pattern of church order in our church planting.

6. There were many developments after the New Testament period – some good, some neutral and some harmful.

For example, by the second century of the church a separation had begun between the role of bishop and elder. These additions need careful weighing now.

7. There must have been (and still must be) a way for individual local churches/congregations to relate to other churches and organisations.

Such inter-church "organisation" is implied in Acts 15:1-21 and in Rom. 15:23-24.

8. Structures should be flexible enough for the whole church to engage in mission. (Acts 13:1-3, 14:16-28)

What was Paul's missionary band? This introduces Ralph Winter's concepts of "modalities" and "sodalities" (Churches need Missions because Modalities need Sodalities EMQ July 1971 p. 195). I don't much like the words but the concepts are very important.

9. We must resist the temptation to re-write church history to support our own views.

We will look in a while at the "radical option". This has been very successful in church history in bringing about change – but it is not the only successful option.

10. Questions of church order are secondary – related to the "bene esse" (well-being) **rather than the "esse"** (essence) **of the church.**

I would like to make a few points about the church and missions in the context of the Arab World.

It has been argued that it was missionary obedience to the Great Commission that first gave birth to the church on the Day of Pentecost. It has also been argued that the apostles were already the church before they started to evangelise. It is usual to hear that church has supremacy over mission. This is questionable, but clearly there is a symbiotic relationship between the two. The success and health of mission is measured ultimately by the quantity and quality of the churches it is able to bring into existence. However, it is equally true that the success and health of the churches may be measured by the extent to which they are involved in evangelism and mission. The Landeskirche of West Germany has 260,000 salaried workers but less than 1% of them are overseas missionaries. The Norwegian Lutheran Church has 1200 ordained pastors and 1500 overseas missionaries. This surely says something about the relative health of these churches.

I have been in MECC meetings where the validity of parachurch organisations was seriously questioned – particularly those involved in evangelism and church planting. I don't like the term 'parachurch' because it has become loaded with negative connotations. The existence of so-called parachurch movements can be defended from Scripture. They have often been a very great source of blessing and life to the church. However since they are the result of independent exercise (in our case often ex-patriate authority is exercised), they are quite deliberately outside normal church structures and are often seen as a threat to them.

As already mentioned, in his famous article Ralph Winter differentiated between church and parachurch as "modalities" and "sodalities". While you might think that introducing two new and unfamiliar words doesn't help very much, in fact it does. A church is a modality. It has no age or sex limitations. You don't retire from it at a certain age. You only belong to one church at a time and it contains families.

A parachurch group (such as ourselves) is a sodality – defined by John Stott as, "A religious guild or brotherhood established for purposes of devotional mutual help or action". (Stott, "Co-operating in World Evangelism – A Handbook on Church/parachurch Relationships" Lausanne occasional paper No. 24).

They are voluntary and usually rather loose associations that exist for a precise and rather limited purpose. They may be limited just to men (i.e. a monastery) or to women, students, businessmen etc. It could be a Bible College, a society to evangelise Kurds, to translate the Bible into Kabyle, to evangelise students or to mobilise women. People may belong to more than one group at a time. Sodalities have, in church history, proven a most effective way of getting things done. Even a monolithic church with hierarchical structures, like the Roman Catholic Church, found that orders like the Franciscans or Jesuits were able to get action much more quickly than the cumbersome establishment.

Some sodalities have demanded such commitment from their members that they have become modalities. An example would be the Salvation Army. Is there any Biblical justification for sodalities?

Biblical warrant for a "Sodality"

1. Even in the Old Testament there is evidence of sodalities that function outside the priesthood and Levitical orders. The schools of the prophets seem to be a prototype of a sodality. They had an

independent existence and were critical of the religious establishment. Their concern was the holiness and credibility of the People of God. The "company of the prophets" in the time of Elisha (2 Kings 4, 5, & 6) is an obvious example. The separation of those committed – e.g. ***"Those who feared the Lord and spoke often to one another"*** (Mal. 3:16) in the days of apostasy and spiritual decline is another example. Another demonstration of this is the rise of the Hasidim (lit. Godly people) in the inter-testamental period – a people passionately devoted to the Torah and refusing to compromise with the Hellenisation of the People of God. They developed into the Pharisees – a party of the most dedicated.

2. In the New Testament the Lord Jesus was the fiercest critic of the religion of Israel and its leaders. Although we think of Jesus and His disciples as the embryo church, a case can be made that they were a "sodality" until Pentecost.

3. Sodalities, while they can't be regarded as the local church, are still a part of the universal church. The New Testament recognises the existence of groups of two or three people. Although they are not meetings of the local church as such (Mt. 18:15-20), they do have a valid existence. They are not only valid. There are exhortations to believers ***"not to give up meeting together"*** but to exhort one another daily. (Heb. 10:25) This suggests ad hoc small group activity was a feature of first century church life since it seems unlikely that the whole congregation could meet as a local church in plenary session every day.

4. Paul and his associates appear to have enjoyed a great measure of autonomy, making their own plans and exercising authority to organise the travel plans of their own members. There may have been no formal organisation of a mission agency as we know it, but they bear all the marks of being an independent mission agency sending off their workers as circumstances required.

5. In the New Testament a good model of a sodality at work is when ***"Certain men of Cyprus and Cyrene"*** first evangelised Antioch by preaching to Gentiles with results richly blessed by God. This was an independent move by Hellenistic, Jewish Christians and was not initially either initiated or approved of by the leaders in Jerusalem. On hearing about it, the "modality" sent Barnabas to check out what was happening. Thankfully, as Luke makes clear, they were following a precedent already set by Peter in baptising Cornelius under the clear guidance of the Holy Spirit.

This new development in Antioch is typical of the way most sodalities have arisen and functioned in church history. Spirit-motivated initiatives are first taken by individuals and small groups. They are used and blessed of God and then have eventually found favour with the "church". This has been especially true at times when the churches were apostate and spiritually in decline. All reforming, renewing and restoration movements have begun as sodalities – Wycliffe and the Lollards, the Reformers, the Wesleys, The Christian Brethren, the House Church Movement, the Third Wave etc. Some of these sodalities became modalities later and were accepted as a part of the establishment.

Speaking as an Englishman, it is probably true that evangelicalism in England owes its survival to a whole series of sodalities where the energies of earnest committed Christians found an outlet for their zeal and compassion that was denied them in the institutional structures of the church. This is especially true of the energies of Christian women. They were long denied opportunity of service in the modality and found expression in sodality. In fact, in times of spiritual revival and ferment there has always been a proliferation of new missions and agencies (i.e. sodalities). This is, if you like, the "free enterprise" system of the church activity. Those involved in denominational bureaucracies easily develop a kind of "centralised economy" mentality and the wheels of ecclesiastical organisation seem to slow down to an almost imperceptible motion. So, we see that historically God has raised up eager free spirits who endeavour to speed things up by private initiatives in starting fresh structures.

An Important Qualification in the Initiation of Sodalities in the Arab World

Parkinson's Law means that the work always expands to fill the time available. So when sodalities lack clear policies and fail to state their goals of church planting and church perfecting, they merely find odd jobs and unfilled niches into which to pop unthinking volunteers. So we hear that there is a need for a teacher of English in Aleppo or Agadir, an agriculturalist in Aden or Algiers and a nurse in

Al Ain. The lists provided by some sodalities are evidence in some cases of the lack of a coherent church planting/perfecting policy and are just a "mission of the gaps" – looking for round holes to pop in some pegs. They may prove to be effective, but it will be inspite of their Missions Policy rather than because of it. It is easy to keep people really busy – especially as tentmakers – without them doing anything particularly useful in terms of church planting/perfecting.

Should we normally pursue the goal of being the Radical Alternative?

The crucial question is: How do we help to effect change in the Church of the Arab World? We know it is a "sleeping giant" that needs waking. How do we wake it? How do we help to bring revival, renewal, reformation and restoration to it?

There have usually been two answers to this:

1. Get inside the structures of the church and try to bring about change from the inside. In history many have chosen this road. John Stott, wishing to see a recovery of Biblical Christianity in the Anglican Church decided to stay inside the Church of England. The rise in the number of evangelicals and their influence in the Church of England over the last forty years is of great significance.

2. The other alternative is to develop a radically different model – a model that is as close to the ideal as possible. This model is created outside the church structures (a sodality) and it is meant to provoke change in the main body by a process of imitation – even though it is on the outside. I will call this the "radical alternative". An example is General Booth and the Salvation Army. When Booth started, he was certainly in the area of the radical alternative. He scandalised the evangelicals in England. One of the great leaders of the evangelicals in that day was Lord Shaftesbury – well known for his reforms. Lord Shaftesbury publicly called Booth 'the Anti-Christ'. He later apologised! Near the end of Booth's life King Edward VII invited him to Buckingham Palace and while there he asked Booth, *"What does the establishment think of you now Mr Booth?"* Booth's answer was, *"Sire, they imitate me!"* Indeed they did. The Church of England, for example, modelled the Church Army on the Salvation Army.

Our organisation longs to see change in the church of the Arab World. We could choose either route. Both routes have been greatly blessed by God in history. It would be possible for us to do both in different areas. My own opinion is that the bulk of our teams ought to choose to follow the "radical alternative".

I believe that we were raised up by God to be a "radical alternative". Over the years our organisation has provoked much change in the world-wide body. It is only as we remain radical that we can do this. The option you choose depends on the recruits you get. We have generally recruited people that are "radical". We have colleagues in other agencies who have chosen, consciously or not, to work inside the present structures. We may have some people who would feel more comfortable in other groups. However, I firmly believe that we should, in most places, consciously choose a "radical alternative" model of ministry in order to see change come in the Arab Church.