

# Editorial: The Environment and Evangelization

As I write, the largest international meeting in world history, the Earth Summit (United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development) is being held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. More than 100 world leaders and 30,000 other participants, ranging from the Dalai Lama to Australian aborigines, are confronting the world's most threatening environmental perils. The summit will either be a landmark in human history or a diplomatic fiasco of global proportions.

The central premise of the summit is that environmental problems can no longer be solved at the national level. The future of humanity is threatened with ozone depletion, global warming, population growth, overconsumption of resources, etc. All of these problems require global solutions—no single country can solve them by itself. This is further complicated by the fact that when each country fights to maintain the status quo, solutions for these problems are not forthcoming. In fact, in this case, status quo usually worsens the problem. As we continue to burn excessive amounts of fossil fuels the atmosphere worsens. Thus, what is so often required to solve these problems is *cataclysmic change*.

In preparation for the summit a five-week meeting in New York City produced 24 million pages of documents. These were summarized in a 600-page "blueprint for action" called Agenda 21 and a five-page declaration called the Earth Charter. These documents have undergone serious revisions (compromises?) and it's unclear what action the summit will produce.

At the heart of the problem is the gap between North and South. The developed nations of the North have grown accustomed to lifestyles of overconsumption—using a disproportionate share of natural resources and generating the bulk of global pollution. Meanwhile, developing countries of the South are in a race to catch up with the North and are consuming irreplaceable global resources in the process. The North wants the South to slow down and be wise but the South feels it is bearing all the burden from the unrestrained industrialization of the North in the past. There are treaties to be signed which will somehow bridge

this gap and move all nations toward sustainable development—managing economic growth in such a way as to do no irreparable damage to the environment.

## *The parallel challenge*

I believe that the parallels between what is happening in the arena of global environmental issues and those we are grappling with in the task of world evangelization are unmistakable. In both cases there is an urgency related to necessary action, the need for global cooperation, the production of documents as a foundation for action, the need for restructuring to provide an adequate force to deal with the problem, a gap between haves and have nots, and the need for overcoming denial.

## *Urgency*

The churches' responsibility to reach all peoples contains a definitive urgency to accomplish this task before more lasting and tragic consequences take effect among the unreached peoples. It can be hard to imagine what it is like to live without the knowledge of Christ and many of us may still be under the illusion that these peoples would best be left undisturbed. The Scriptures call us back to biblical reality and responsibility.

We are also reminded that the future of humanity includes a place at the altar of God for all tribes, tongues, languages, and peoples (Rev. 7:9). While this is not yet the case, our commission is to bless all peoples in the present generation—making a profound impact on future generations.

## *Global cooperation*

In an increasingly interdependent world, no church or agency can separate its fate from that of the worldwide church as a whole. Failure to cooperate on a global level to face challenges such as the gap between the rich and poor, effective leadership in the churches, spiritual growth of church members, and the evangelization of those furthest from the gospel means that the whole church will suffer. Though this type of cooperation still seems to be beyond the grasp of the church, the good news is that both

interest and action seem to be on the increase in these many key issues the church faces on the threshold of the 21st century.

## *Documents as foundations*

Evidence of increasing interest in various aspects of world evangelization is most readily found in the documents produced every week as Christians around the world meet together, both within their own traditions and in broader gatherings with Christians of other traditions. Examples range from denomination or conference declarations like "The Manila Manifesto" or "Redemptoris Missio" to mission agency plans and press releases like "Decade of Harvest" right down to the minutes of local church mission committees. These illustrate the power of the Holy Spirit to work through all those who consider themselves Christians. Though the subject matter ranges from the ordination of women to the method by which justice can be achieved for the poor, frontier missions concerns are evidenced by the constant affirmation of God's plan for the blessing of *all* peoples. This is clearly something to be encouraged about.

## *Restructuring and an adequate force*

The documents provide a starting point for determining action. At the same time, it is becoming more apparent that accomplishing the goal of "A Church For Every People by the Year 2000" (or by any year in the near future) is not likely to occur with minor tinkering to the present world church system. Instead it requires a fundamental restructuring of many elements of both church and mission. These changes cannot be forced by any human authority but the documents supporting frontier missions (and the Biblical texts from which these are derived), when taken to their logical end, require them. In other words, frontier missions, when thought of not as simply another pastime, but as central to fulfilling the Great Commission, requires a massive mobilization of existing Christian resources. A few good men and women simply will not do.

## *Haves and have nots*

In world evangelization today, those

who have the gospel also receive the most attention in mission outreach. World C, the source of global evangelization resource, is the main user of those same resources—leaving little for the have nots of World A. This heavy investment both in spending and deployment of personnel among both Christian and reached peoples is way out of line with an equitable distribution of Christian resources. For World C it is evidence of a lifestyle of overconsumption.

#### *Overcoming denial*

Faced with the degree of change necessary to accomplish world evangelization, we may be tempted to deny the severity of the crisis of missions we face today and assume that we can get by with minor adjustments to business-as-usual. We may support leaders who validate our belief that the workings of missions are basically in order. We may tune out those who have another message and tend to label them "alarmist" or worse yet, "deceived". This denial runs particularly deep among those with heavy stakes in the status quo. Ultimately, action depends

on us overcoming denial because it is among the most paralyzing of human responses.

It is precisely at this point that we are now stuck. Our documents cry out for the needs of the oppressed, the disenfranchised, the marginalized, the unreached, but we are paralyzed with existing agendas, plans, resources—all militate against change and most focus on the more privileged, the reached.

At present, the status quo (with minor adjustments?) is our only vehicle for delivering world evangelization and it is woefully inadequate. The result is that global evangelization politics has so far been characterized by a sort of paralysis and denial rather than by cooperation. Agencies and churches are usually more eager to share success stories than to evaluate whether or not their efforts are making a significant dent among the 1.2 billion unevangelized persons or the 11,000 unreached peoples.

*Are we all on track to fail catastrophically?*  
And yet the promotional literature from the churches and agencies continues to assure the Christian public that

everything is working out and that their plans are on track and on schedule. This is why it is crucial now that we learn to ask ourselves "How can we know when we are failing or succeeding in our global frontier missions enterprise"? When this question can be asked with honesty and understanding we will then be able to identify what course of action should be taken. But it is exceedingly difficult to admit failure—underlining the seriousness of denial and the seeming death grip it has on those who practice it.

#### *In conclusion*

In both the environment and evangelization, the raw materials to provide for the future of humanity are available. But in both cases, the present world system threatens to derail progress and leave us far short of our goals. Now more than ever, it is time to ask ourselves if we are willing to risk changing the way we do things in order to honor both God and His creation.

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June 1992  
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