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The Next Step – 1

PART OF A PROCESS

The Story So Far[i]

This little book is part of a process that began in 1992, in Luton England, when the Grassroots project opened its doors and the first Grassroots team gathered. The task of the team was to develop, in Europe, a model of mission that made sense of new ways of thinking about God, about the world, and about the Church's missionary role. In 1999, recognizing the importance of the work Grassroots was doing, and perceiving that this dialogue had an importance that went beyond the team itself and their associates, Grassroots' sponsoring churches and agencies encouraged them to document it as a journey of theological exploration, and to set out what had been learned.

The result was *Whose Truth*, the little green booklet which precedes this one, and which makes a provisional stab at setting out the rudiments of a grassroots theology of mission. This stage of the process involved only the team itself, a facilitator and the Chair of the Grassroots trustees. The question was, where to start? With the church, or with the world? With themselves, or with the context? In the end, they took the decision to begin with a brief history of where they felt they stood in the history of mission itself, followed by a summary of their own story, and then to focus their reflections with the core Christian agenda of God, the Scriptures and the Church, and to see how they got on.

This fascinating exercise, though painful, was enriched by diversity of the team itself. In a group of people who knew each other well and were genuinely committed to the pursuit of truth, there turned out to be nowhere to hide from theological differences. For one member, the scriptures provided a powerful underpinning for the story of the people of God as it is played out today, while another had difficulty in seeing the bible as anything but a tool of colonial oppression. Over the christological differences, the conversation almost collapsed entirely. Was the resurrection a literal, historical fact? What about the uniqueness of Christ? If they are honest, many church-going Christians find these questions difficult, and may preface their repetition of the creed with a figurative 'Yes, but…' At the same time, church leaders who go public with doubts and uncertainties about the literal truth of the Nicene creed are regarded as controversial, if not heretical.

Whose Truth appeared in 1999. Like this booklet, it made no pretence to being a definitive statement. Before it was even printed there were team members who wished to dissociate themselves from what was said – or at least from some of the relativities and uncertainties that emerged. The team itself is always changing, new perspectives keep entering the dialogue, and the debate would have been different if it had occurred six months later, after the arrival of a member from Eastern Europe. What *Whose Truth* does offer emerges from the context of a particular type of work in a particular place among a particular group of people. Its value is three-fold. First, it exposes the inadequacy of a propositional approach in providing answers that ring true in situations of struggle and change. Second, it rang a bell with many readers, who felt it addressed their own situations in practical, useful and honest ways that they found exciting. And third, it is only a beginning: a provisional, draft statement; a stage in a process; an invitation to participation in a dialogue that seeks to make sense of what mission is for most of us today.

'Rearranging our ignorance'

From outside the team, *Whose Truth* was greeted, surprisingly to those involved, as a breath of fresh air. Comments came from Britain and abroad, from people from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds, working in cross-cultural mission, industrial chaplaincy, people's churches, local development projects, schools and so on. They also came from men and women in parishes, academic departments and clergy training, who described being weighed down by the disjunction between their church's agenda, on the one hand, and the agenda of the world within which they were either ministering, or training others to minister. As the next stage in the journey, therefore, Grassroots invited a wider group of friends and fellow travellers to join in the process and help to take it further.

These three comments came from participants in the second stage of the journey. ‘This way of doing theology,’ said one participant, ‘meets a need among people facing struggles, not because they are looking for answers, but because it offers them a way of claiming a process.’ Another commented, ‘People who are living out their experience of God in their daily struggles are constantly wrestling with what it all means, and the Grassroots process offers a promising path for reflection.’ A third said, ‘In our work, the more we find out about our context, the less we seem to know about God. What we are looking for is ways of re-arranging our ignorance: for a way of dealing with this confusion that doesn’t become canonical the moment it is written down.’

‘The task’, therefore, would not be to critique the document itself, but to take the adventure on to the next stage by saying, in effect, ‘So … *what*?’ Where did *Whose Truth* connect with personal situations? What were the issues it raised? How do you reconcile the messiness of life and the uniqueness of individual struggles on the one hand, with – on the other - the need to give content and form to mission? *Whose Truth* looked at God, Scriptures and Church. Asked to suggest an agenda for the next stage of the process, participants came up with three broad headings: authority, spirituality, and the churches’ engagement with the world. The discussions that led to this second document were broadly structured along the lines suggested by those headings, and they provide the themes of the three remaining chapters of this booklet.

Author’s note on contextual methodologies

As writer of this booklet, my (privileged) role in the process has been that of facilitator, listener and recorder. As in all listening situations, I frequently found myself asking the question, ‘Just what is going on?’ These were gatherings of people from recognizably similar contexts. They were desperate to make theological sense of what they were experiencing, and to find common ground with others. Clearly this was an exercise in contextual theology. But just what are we doing when we ‘do’ contextual theology? I would like to suggest that there are at least three identifiable methodologies operating here. I have found it personally illuminating to explore what these might be, so in the final section of this chapter, I am going to try to share them with readers.[ii]

a. The baby and bathwater approach

For *Whose Truth,* the first booklet, the *perspective* was contextual, but the *starting points* were the traditional disciplines of theology, biblical studies and ecclesiology. This led inevitably to a baby and bathwater approach to ‘doing’ theology. This approach acknowledges that there is, in core areas of theology, much baggage to be shed: baggage stemming from Western culture, institutional history, academic tradition, patriarchy and so on. On the other hand, it maintains that Christian faith has at its heart a core set of beliefs or values that are non-negotiable. This model is widely used in constructing indigenous or ‘relevant’ liturgies, and in deciding how the gospel can be preached in particular (and notably non-Western) contexts. The role of the theologian is to help sort out the core truths from the cultural accretions, until ‘what you must believe in order to be a Christian’ has been honed down to a kind of holy grail of truth without which you are not really a Christian at all. But the problem with this methodology, as the first chapter of *Whose Truth* suggested, lies in identifying what is baby and what is bathwater; or (to mix metaphors) what is empty shell, and what is the pearl of great price for which you would gladly sacrifice the world. For example, I personally would gladly throw away assumptions about the male-ness of God as irrelevant, unsubstantiated and profoundly damaging to the church; but for you, God-as-man may be non-negotiable. Or you may feel that an insistence on the historical truth of the resurrection is a non-essential: but for me this may be the cornerstone of my faith.

The baby and bathwater approach is extremely common – and also useful - among churches wishing to become more ‘culturally relevant’. However, it can lead to situations of bargaining and negotiation that reduce theological dialogue to a kind of painful haggling. It’s possible to end up with a Dutch auction, where everyone whittles away at what they believe until each one arrives at their own irreducible minimum: a kind of minimalist approach that encourages dissent and seems at odds with the grace and generosity of the living God.

b. The anthropological approach

The anthropological approach to contextual theology focuses on creation and context. God, it maintains, is graciously and abundantly present in the ordinary structures of every context and the dynamics of every situation. Human culture is the locus of divine revelation; the liturgies of life become the sacraments of the spirit; and genuine religious expression is found in the human virtues (which are also Christian virtues) of kindness, wholeness, healing, reconciliation and so on. The task of the theologian is discernment and accompaniment. As Max Warren put it, 'Our first task in approaching other people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy.[iii].' Or as Vincent Donavan says in *Christianity Rediscovered,* his account of the time he spent as a missionary among the Masai people, 'Goodness and kindness and holiness and grace and divine presence and creative power and salvation were here before I got here.[iv]' Opponents of this approach claim that it is alarming to traditionalists and subject to cultural romanticism, and as a result, proponents may go back to bathwater thinking when they feel they are being led further than they intended from the dogmas with which they grew up. At the heart of it, though, is an incarnational theology, along with a powerful and essentially catholic sacramentality, and it is almost indispensable to effective interfaith dialogue.

c. The praxis approach

The central insight of the praxis approach is that theology is not just about faith but about Christian action as well, and about the ongoing dialogue between the two. Rooted in concrete situations, the praxis approach is ultimately to do with change. A key characteristic is its insistence on the theological importance of struggle, and at the heart of it is the cross. This is the approach adopted by the liberation theologians, characterized by Paolo Freire's definition of praxis as 'action with reflection'. 'Truth,' says the Latin American theologian Miguez Bonino, 'is at the level of history, not in the realm of ideas.[v] As the Salvadoran theologian Jon Sobrino puts it, theology finds its real fulfilment not in mere 'right-thinking' (*ortho-doxy*) but in 'right-acting' (*ortho-praxis*). 'To know the truth,' he says, 'is to do the truth, to know Jesus is to follow Jesus, to know sin is to take away sin, to know suffering is to free the world from suffering, to know God is to go to God in justice.[vi]' The role of the theologian is to discern and affirm the good and to name the evil; to empower people by helping them believe in the ultimate importance of the struggle itself; and to use every possible means to ensure that the institutional Church and its leaders understand the plot and support the right side.

In practice, most of us use all these methodologies at one time or another, and sometimes we use them all at once. I think, nevertheless, that naming them is important because it helps identify some of the basic assumptions from which we are arguing, and maybe also helps us to defend our conclusions. To relate them to the current process, it seems to me that *Whose Truth* (the earlier booklet) drew mainly on the bathwater approach. In this one, the Spirituality chapter is largely underpinned by the anthropological approach, whereas Chapters 2 and 4, on Authority and Engaging with the World, adopt a praxis approach rooted in an anthropological one.

At the end of the day, though, to do theology in a grassroots way is not a matter of labels and categories: it is an engagement with a living process. Grassroots theology involves willingness to move beyond propositional certainties; to accept the provisional nature of much belief without being fazed by post-modern angst and uncertainty; and to know that out there, there are friends who are walking the same road, engaged in similar journeys, and excited by the great adventure of which they are part.

The Next Step – 2

AUTHORITY

Authority on the run
In Western Europe, we are living through a time of social, political and philosophic change, in which traditional sources of authority are everywhere under attack. Schools, government, police and family: all are under fire, and their fitness to exercise control is being questioned. Symptomatic of this is the breakdown of confidence in the political process itself, and in its ability to deliver. Religions, in particular, are castigated for peddling outdated truths about the physical world and its inhabitants, spurious and politically dangerous certainties (or on the other hand an absence of any kind of certainty), and moral messages that seem to make little sense in the context of real life pressures and dilemmas. What has gone wrong, and why this sudden lack of faith in our leaders, even those whom we elect, to govern and control our communities on our behalf?

This is not a new problem. In Europe, the Reformation grew out of one such period of change, when the spirit of the times made it impossible for an increasingly educated, urbanizing society to accept the authority and practices of a centralized Church demanding unthinking, unquestioning obedience from the faithful. The Enlightenment, with its focus on reason and science, undermined the Church's claim to be the guardian of truth, and brought about a retreat of church agendas into a privatised, spiritual realm where it became possible to believe the dictates of science and economics from Monday to Saturday, and the (incompatible) truths of institutional religion on Sunday. Today, the chickens have come home to roost, and increasing numbers of people have observed the credibility gap between what religions teach on the one hand, and grassroots reality on the other, and found it unacceptable. When this happens, Christians may buy into the contradictions; or they may vote with their feet (as more and more are doing) and leave their churches; or else they may decide to stick in there and struggle for a more earthed and relevant church which speaks convincingly to the realities of today. Participants at the Grassroots consultation were there because they had rejected the first option, considered the second, and opted finally for the third.

Nation states, as well as religions, have believed themselves to be the mediators of divine authority: history, indeed, is littered with the stories of Jewish, Muslim and Christian states that justify their actions by claiming to be personally called by God to behave in particular ways. (This phenomenon has been acted out recently and alarmingly, in the events that have unfolded since 11 September 2001.) Although individual Christian groups may disagree, most so-called 'Christian' nations would say (officially, at least) that, while they support certain 'basic Christian values', they nevertheless limit the scope of religious authority to the institutions of religion. The existential necessity of living peacefully together on our shared planet, they say, has made it vitally important for today's governments to maintain the balance of authority between the secular and the religious.

For Christians, Jews and Muslims, all authority comes from God. God's authority may be mediated through tradition, the scriptures, and/or the individual conscience, with different traditions giving primacy to different sources. There are major differences between Christian denominations in terms of the authority they exercise over the faithful. For Roman Catholics, for instance, the Church is the main guardian of divine authority, which is exercised through clear hierarchical channels; the protestant view has always put more emphasis on scripture and conscience. Both approaches essentially assume that authority comes from a God 'out there', who makes 'his' wishes known in order for them to be translated into action by 'his' people.

But supposing God is not 'out there'. Supposing God is already present in and speaking through creation, through human love, through friendship, through the struggle for justice, through human community. In that case it is not to the God 'out there' that we should be looking. Divine authority is then to found in the nature of reality itself and the disciplines through which we understand it. It is to be found in the natural kindness and mutual support that keep communities together. It is to be found in prophetic witness, which calls people back from the worship of false gods. If the spirit of God is in everyone, then it is to be found in the exercise of corporate discernment, where discerning where authority lies in a given situation becomes a matter for everyone involved. If this is the case, then this task is not just of synods and councils and bishops but a fundamental calling of the church as a whole. The problem is that the institutional churches are still far from seeing how it should be accomplished. If, as we will argue later, the so-called margins are in reality the frontline of the churches' activity and the place where their identity is forged, then divine authority is to be found in the voices coming from there: voices which may carry a truth that is inaudible to the movers and shakers who compose the position papers and encyclicals. It is to be found in the sacramental nature of reality itself and the innate feeling for what is whole and life-giving that comes from the everyday values of ordinary people.

In *Transforming Mission*[vii], David Bosch points out the implications of the *missio dei* model for our understanding of authority. The view that authority is 'out there' is no longer tenable. *Missio dei* implies that authority must be discerned where God is to be found, which is in all human life. It is the task of every community, in the light of its own context, to do the discerning and to make judgments about what God is calling its members to do. Grassroots experience endorses this. Church, scripture and conscience do have something to say: but at the level of family and community, people's lives are governed and their actions dictated by other voices, which may be so embedded in the consciousness of community that they are not articulated, but survive alongside the (often incompatible) belief systems demanded by churches, causing confusion and communal dysfunction. The history of mission is littered with examples.

One problem is that Christian thinking on authority has generally been rooted in Western cultural, moral and political norms, emphasizing Western moral and cultural assumptions, Western biblical scholarship, and individualistic understandings of human psychology and identity. In taking Christianity to the developing world, the missionaries and their successors built young churches, interpreted scriptures and preached morality according to principles that unwittingly embodied these western-cultural norms. This symbiotic connection between culture and religion led all too readily to a syncretistic set of rules and values that often had little to do with the life-giving generosity of the creating, saving, empowering godhead of our scriptures. Thus many older 'missionary' churches preached a message that prevented the development of appropriate indigenous structures in the developing world. One result, as in predominately non-Christian countries like China, Indonesia or Pakistan, is that Christian churches and institutions may be seen as havens of alien, western values that make them a political threat to the majority, and especially to religions which believe themselves to be more culturally indigenous. There is a particular problem in the case of global communions like the Roman Catholics or the Anglicans, whose hierarchies of ecclesial authority lead ultimately to Rome or Canterbury. Another result is that many Christians in the world today are struggling to banish from their ears the cultivated accents of the old white European man whose authority their Christian formation led them to accept, and to use the scriptures in new ways in order to develop new voices of authority that honour their own cultures.

Anthropological insights have much to offer to anyone wanting to understand what determines the thinking and behaviour of peer groups, families, communities and institutions; the discussion in Chapter 1 of the anthropological approach to contextual theology underlines the importance of recognizing and honouring he presence of God within given cultures and particular situations.
There are other powers at work, as well. In Western-style cultures, consumerism and materialism exercise authority over people's lives by setting up criteria by which they are valued, by excluding those who do not measure up, and by creating hopelessness among groups and individuals who come to believe that their exclusion is for ever. And then there are the 'powers' living within our heads: the caste system, racism, sexism, the gender constructions implicit in our own culture and

so on, which control behaviour and relationships, and may sanction highly un-Christlike principles of exclusion and oppression. Others - globalisation and the inevitability of poverty, for instance - are present in the consciousness of society, their authority all the more impregnable because they are taken for granted. The next section sets out some case studies, from the experience of members of grassroots networks, which show how these elements operate within real life situations.

Authority on trial

1. For many Christians, an important landmark was the Kairos Document, which was born out of the collective wisdom of people involved in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. Kairos analyses what it calls Church, State and Prophetic approaches to authority, from the standpoint of 'those Christians who live in the townships and who are experiencing the civil war that is tearing their lives apart.' In the preface to the revised second edition, the authors write, 'Perhaps the most exciting and important contribution of the Kairos Document has been its method, or way of doing theology. Many Christians here and abroad are using the model or method of the Kairos Document to reflect on their own situation.[viii]' The distinctive thing about this method was that it presented a theological document as the *outcome* of dialogue, and as a *contribution* to dialogue. What gave it authenticity was its provisionality: the recognition that it might be wrong, the invitation to correction, the acceptance that it was not the final statement, and the acknowledgement that God can use our mistakes for the purpose of revealing the truth.

2. Ecumenical situations present a real challenge to church authority. For most people involved, their primary loyalty will be to their own church's agenda. To whom, then, is the group accountable? Some would say that there is an ecumenical vision which must supersede the authority of the individual member organization: and yet what might make a member of the group put that vision before the authority of his or her own church? The outcome, all too often, is for members of the bigger, better-funded churches to get their way, while the others have to compromise. As a result, leadership within the ecumenical movement can be highly frustrating, ecumenical activity may lack the cutting edge it needs, and members of smaller denominations begin to feel that they are wasting their time in being represented on ecumenical bodies.

3. The Aids crisis in Africa has proved to be a challenge for churches. It has exposed the gulf that yawns between 'official' church positions on sexual matters, and the reality which is lived within families, cultures and communities: a gap that is often endorsed by voices much older and closer to people's lives than those of the 'missionary' churches. This is not confined to the Catholic Church's much-publicized ban on the use of condoms. Insightful church leaders from all denominations comment on their growing awareness of the gap between the moral injunctions contained in church statements on Aids, and the real-life assumptions and practice of many of those who sign up to them. It should also be pointed out that Africa's vulnerability to the Aids pandemic owes much to damage done to traditional African family life by the churches' authoritarian insistence that essential components of the Christian faith are European-style monogamous marriage reinforced by Victorian principles of modesty, especially in relation to women.

4. Two members of the group pointed out the difficulties they had encountered as partners in an inter-denominational marriage. The husband, who had had a Catholic up bringing and a Jesuit education, grew up with an unquestioning faith in the absolute authority of the Church. He then married a Scottish Presbyterian, for whom authority comes from the group, from the community or the individual conscience. Difficulties about where to marry, how to bring up children and so on presented the young couple with profound theological questions. Does authority come from outside, via apostolic succession, or does it arise from the people of God themselves? They were much helped, at the time, by an organization called Interchurch Families, and in any case, the churches themselves have, in recent years, become more accepting of 'the other'. Today, each partner has been able to accept the integrity of the other's tradition, and they have found it possible to

take part in one another's liturgies without feeling excluded or pressured into selling out their own.

5. The issue of homosexuality and of the ordination of homosexuals is currently a contentious one for many British churches. Where does authority lie? Homosexuality is not dealt with in the Scriptures, and yet when the United Reformed Church was seeking to address the issue, it said to its members, 'Consult your bibles.' Most Christians, though, have no idea how to seek guidance from the bible, or how to use the scriptures to evaluate the dictates of their own consciences. If the churches do not want to dictate to their members, then they must take much more seriously the task of educating Christians on how to take responsibility for moral decisions, and how to discern and use the resources available to them.

6. The Pastoral Letters of the US Catholic Bishops made a brave attempt to establish a dialogue about where authority lay in the context of major political issues. 'Peace' and 'The Economy' were particularly successful in provoking discussion as they progressed through successive drafts and opened the dialogue to further development. The fact that the bishops were forced to withdraw the one on Women demonstrates the difficulties, for an authoritarian institution, in being true to this approach.

Jesus and authority
In the gospels, Jesus himself is repeatedly described as speaking 'with authority'. He was not a member of a religious, social, political or scholastic elite: in fact his teachings challenged all these groups. Where then did his authority come from? From history, say the gospels. His descent from David is stressed (spuriously, perhaps in the light of the circumstances of his birth); and he is repeatedly said to be in the prophetic line that led from Moses, Elijah, Elisha and second Isaiah. But this all has the aroma of hindsight. The fact remains that his was a theologically prophetic voice, a charismatic personality that rang true at a particular moment of history, and changed the way people felt about themselves and the world. Luke[ix] describes the amazement of all who perceived the 'understanding' of the twelve-year-old boy, asking and answering questions in the temple. Mark describes Jesus' first public appearance in Capurnaum, where he reveals his power over an unclean spirit. 'They were all amazed,' says Mark, 'and they kept on asking each other, What is this? A new teaching – with authority![x]' According to Ched Myers, in this story 'the demon in the synagogue becomes the representative of the scribal establishment, whose "authority" undergirds the dominant Jewish social order. Exorcism represents an act of confrontation in the war of myths in which Jesus asserts his alternative authority.[xi]'

Mark's gospel is particularly illuminating for people who feel they are operating on the margins of society or the church. Ched Myers stresses the importance of reflecting on the kind of communities for which Mark was writing his gospel, and suggests that the community itself should be 'understood as the primary site not of reproducing dominant cultural patterns, but resisting them; perhaps it is also a haven for underground activity.' Mark's Jesus is counter-cultural to the extent of subversion. In addition to the religious and political powers, Jesus has trenchant remarks to make about the disciples themselves: their uncritical acceptance of the exclusiveness of 'the Jesus group', their competition for power, their blindness. For Mark, the real wellsprings of wisdom and insight were children, women, and servants, and to these he draws attention repeatedly. If others wanted to speak with authority they must listen to these groups and seek to become more like them. The original version of Mark's gospel ends with the women being the witnesses to the risen Lord.

Further, Jesus appeals over and over again to the authority of the ordinary hearer. 'Who do *you* say I am?' he asks. In exercising authority, he is seeking not to enhance his own power but to empower others and make them more independent. In the healing stories, for example, he attributes cures not to his own power but to the faith of the person who is healed. Healing involves believing that one has it in one's own power to change one's life. Liberation is something to be claimed, the gift of a gracious God, and not a commodity to be constantly mediated by another. And yet the Great Commission (Mt 28.18), often described as our blueprint

for mission, opens with Jesus saying, ‘All authority in heaven and earth has been given to *me*’. Authority, in Jesus’ meaning of the word, is to be passed on and used to empower others, not to promote the interests of those who hold it: a state of affairs described in the Sermon on the Mount, where the rules of the Kingdom are spelt out and the structures of power and privilege are turned for ever on their heads. Under the Lordship of Jesus, authority becomes not something that is exercised from above, but a charism to be claimed by everyone who seeks, themselves, to be a follower of Christ. The task of further disciple-making is overwhelmingly to do with enabling others, too, to claim their power.

Finally, the story of Jesus is a powerful endorsement of the provisional nature of earthly power and influence. In his baptism, throughout his teaching and at the last supper, Jesus is represented as anticipating his own death, and with that realism comes the freedom to give himself. This contrasts with the fears, hesitations and jockeying for position among the disciples. As Graham Shaw[xii] puts it, ‘Authority which has recognized its own temporary nature need not repress criticism, but can listen to it. The recognition of its own mortality is the fundamental act of self-criticism, a truth implicit in Jesus’ baptism at the beginning of his ministry.’ For us, today, the message is that the more we seek to enshrine authority in impregnable structures of power, the further we get from the models of authority proclaimed by the gospel Christ.

Missio dei and authority

We have already suggested that centralized churches have difficulty in responding to the implications of more contextually-based models of authority. In this respect, they are prisoners of their own structures, and of the assumptions held, both by lay people and by clergy, about who knows best. Where Western churches have taken root in non-Western cultures, the history and the Christian formation of church leaders and clergy have combined to devalue cultural and community norms which do not conform to those of nineteenth century Europe, often making it difficult for anthropological approaches to contextual theology to appear convincing. Conversely, churches have sometimes exercised oppressive authority themselves, or got too close to institutions that oppress the poor and do violence to the powerless: a history which makes it hard for them to exercise any moral authority at all today, though it should be said that Pope John Paul II tried extremely hard to redeem such aspects of his Church’s past.

Individual and community constructions of authority are crucial to the way in which mission is conducted. Take the more fundamentalist, conservative models of mission, where so-called ‘literal’ interpretations of the scripture are the norm, and highly individualistic responses to God are encouraged. Some people are comforted by the sense of exclusiveness and rightness. Others end up feeling helpless and defeated, because such churches seem to believe, with absolute conviction, things that experience tells them cannot be true. Empowering people to respond with more grassroots, community based approaches involves convincing them of the real truth, which is that if their hearts tell them something cannot be true, then it almost certainly isn’t. If the spirit of God is within all of us, then we have been given the authority to make such decisions for ourselves. We do not need others to tell us what we think or feel.

At the other end of the scale, some protestant churches (notably in Europe and North America) have tended to take on the colour of their context, particularly in relation to beliefs and values. The question that then arises is how to distinguish between accepted social mores on the one hand, and Christian values on the other. Grassroots theology might be thought to suggest that there isn’t much difference. But this is a dangerous assumption to make. Socially aware Protestantism may end up (as one participant put it) ‘simply shadowing western humanitarian ethics’: a point made by Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim participants at the UN conferences of the Nineties, in Cairo and Beijing. This situation is less likely to arise from genuine experiences of community-based discernment, than from middle-class humanitarians getting into policy-making positions in churches and taking up ‘radical’ positions on behalf of churches (or ecumenical organisations) that are not rooted in the real life experience and values of the poor, vulnerable groups whose interests they claim to espouse.

Of all the churches, though, it is Roman Catholic difficulties with authority that get the most publicity. It is naïve for other churches to sit back and say 'this is not our problem', or 'that is just not where I am'. The Vatican's pronouncements on – say – human reproduction are (like its position on many other issues) more clearly spelt out than that of other churches. When that is at odds with the lived experience of the faithful, at least two things follow. The first is that the poorest suffer. The majority of Catholics in the developed world make up their own minds and obey the dictates of their own consciences, while poorer, less educated, Catholics do what they are told, afraid of the eternal or temporal consequences of rebelling against the authority of the Church. The second thing that happens is that the wider church is affected by the yawning chasm between the assumptions underpinning official Catholic teaching on the one hand, and actual pastoral experience on the other. Thus the Vatican takes up a 'high' moral position on, for instance, sexual issues, and it produces ethical debate within the Catholic Church. In other Churches, it may have the effect of sanctioning illiberal attitudes and muddled thinking. In the words of the late Cardinal Bernadin of Chicago, 'It is becoming increasingly important for the whole Church that Catholics sort out their authority questions.'

We will return to the issue of authority in the final chapter, which deals more specifically with mission praxis and leadership.

The Next Step - 3

SPIRITUALITY

Experience is paramount

Story is the key concept in grassroots spirituality. By this we mean the real-life stories and experiences of individuals here and now. It is not that the spiritual traditions of the major world religions have nothing to say to people today: it's just that if the prayer, liturgy and culture of our churches do not chime with what we know from experience to be true, then we are faced with a choice between turning our backs either on our churches, or on our own histories and identities. Those of us who grew up within religious traditions often find ourselves imprisoned in a spiritual orthodoxy which claims to connect us with God, but which fails, in practice, to make sense of the real life situations we encounter. Meanwhile, for people who grew up outside organised religion, churches may appear alien and authoritarian structures, demanding obedience to out of date rules, and belief in things that are not just incredible but also entirely irrelevant to their lives. In Woody Allen's words, 'Of course there is a spiritual world, but how far is it from downtown, and how late does it stay open?'

Obvious as it seems, the journey towards a spirituality rooted in experience can be lonely, long and painful. It is often precipitated by contexts of struggle, alienation and social upheaval. One young woman grew up in apartheid South Africa, in a 'mixed race' community, where she describes the Church as being 'part of the State, not into justice issues, and so not where the people were'. As a youth worker in the townships, it was the people's suffering that enabled her to develop a more relevant and justice-centred spirituality. But none of that was as hard as being in Britain. 'Where is the spirituality here?' she asks. 'Apartheid was at least something tangible to fight against, but materialism is not.'

For a priest who grew up in a traditional Irish Catholic family in the USA, it was Vatican II and the period of 'renewal and chaos' that followed it that woke him to new excitement. Going to serve in Peru, he found the Church to be deeply conservative. Then liberation theology broke, and he found himself in a world of social conflict where issues of poverty and justice became the crucial ones. He became aware of God as an empowering force, and realized that there is no such thing as a spirituality that is not both embodied and collective.

A British woman grew up in a working class home, where church seemed conventional, authoritarian and exclusive. Denied the career she wanted on grounds of being a woman, she became a passionate feminist and seeker for justice. Later, going through a period of loneliness and isolation, she was invited to go along to church by a friend from her Mothers' group, and found it egalitarian, friendly and unpreachy. She embarked on ordination training, and was working in a military area when the Falklands war erupted. The wives of servicemen would ask her to pray (or to help them pray) for their husbands, and she became aware of the deep spirituality of those who were outside the church. Many people, she says, 'know God in different ways', and this is a huge challenge to the Church, which needs to change in order to connect with that innate spirituality which exists in everyone.

Another woman left her convent school intending eventually to join a religious order. After university, she spent a year in Chile. On returning to Britain, she worked mainly with marginalised people, including prostitutes, gay and lesbian people, alcoholics and others. This was work in which she found people's experience was light-years away from the religious assumptions and images she had grown up with: God as love, for instance, or God as father. For many people, she realized, the experience of love involved being manipulated and beaten. Fathers were often violent and abusive. In that case, what words could you use to communicate the gospel? She became interested in the spirituality of body and spirit, which led her to study drama, movement therapy and massage, and is now involved in lay missionary and multi-faith work. For her, the really critical question coming from grassroots work is not 'What can we teach in this situation?' but 'What can we learn from the experience of marginalised people?'

Along with the many other stories we could have shared, these four have certain things in common. First, they all involve contexts of social struggle and change, and the urgent need to develop new spiritual resources in order to cope. Second is the concern for justice. Third, each individual went, to some extent, through a dark night of the soul in which they had to reconstruct fundamental assumptions in order to live in truth with themselves and the people they were with. Fourth, they all had to discard any idea that they were taking 'God' to 'the people': God is there to be discovered and often it was 'they who were bringing God to me' as one person put it. Fifth, they discovered that new contexts forced them to explore new images of God: an issue that will be discussed in the third section of this chapter. Sixth, all were at some time overwhelmed by the feeling that the institutional church had no relevance to their own context. Seventh, despite repeated doubts about whether the church is capable of the change needed to engage with the world in this way, all of them have so far opted to stick it out and work, where possible, from within. And finally, this place of reconstruction is a lonely place to be. To survive it, you need friends.

Building community

Although such individual journeys are at the heart of grassroots spirituality, they are not the whole of it. The danger of listening to stories is that it can become an individualistic exercise. Instead of being empowering, the sub-text becomes, 'This is my difficult life'. It need not be like that. At the heart of the struggle for grassroots spirituality is the sense of mutual commitment, shared values and common ground, and those are often the things that give people the strength to continue which is at the heart of the struggle. As one member puts it, 'It's about connection between us, about finding other people who know what I'm talking about, finding life. It's asking how I can share my spirituality, recognize my own and my neighbour's. And how can we find fullness of life together? It's with other people that I find space for reflection, and I can understand what's going on around me and inside me.'

Creating community is not just to do with supporting individuals: it's essential to the building up of communities of faith in places where conventional religion is failing to do so. It is not always easy to discern God in the ordinariness of everyday life. Further, if there is a struggle, then it is important to identify the enemy. Materialism may look like a god, but it is often the enemy of community. Complacency, indifference, apathy and hopelessness are the enemies of struggle, and in this situation, conventional religion may not be much help. Clergy themselves may despair, as they find themselves condemned to maintaining unsuitable buildings with dwindling congregations on behalf of institutions with patriarchal, racist structures, in contexts where the real focus of mission appears to have shifted to somewhere else. Women, people of colour, young people, and others who fall outside the conventional power structures of the churches have a particular need for community. Men may also suffer if masculine roles are devalued. Community and family life suffer if the women are seen to be the powerful ones, while the community's young men have no jobs, few prospects, and no tradition of domestic or community involvement.

In such situations, the mainstream churches may be little use. One Grassroots team member is a social worker on Marsh Farm Estate, in Luton. 'People,' she says, 'need to be connected to something outside themselves. But that won't necessarily be the same thing for everyone. Each person's experience of faith is authentic, but although that seems obvious, it's still a constant challenge. For instance, lonely people need to believe that their pet animals have an afterlife. Well why not, I think. Perhaps I've got it all wrong myself….'

Grassroots spirituality involves facing up to the possibility of having 'got it all wrong'. Often, it involves the loneliness of living in another culture, where one's own experience can make the life of the asylum-seeker seem suddenly familiar. It involves encouraging the formation of groups where space is made for these experiences to be shared, and members can be affirmed in their determination to go on being there. The spirituality of networking is in its infancy, but the development of wider networks of sustenance and support is a central plank of the Grassroots project.

A Columban missionary suggests that there is an existential sequence to this kind of spiritual journey. It starts with walking, and keeping on walking even when you're tired and thinking that you've lost the map. But along the way there will be companionship, and there will also be glimmers (or, if you're lucky, flashes) of truth. Within this process there is hope, because at the end of it, there is life; and one can be sure of the abiding presence of Jesus, who said 'I am the way, I am the truth, I am the life.' Reflection on the journey involves asking this question of oneself and one's friends. 'If I follow the way, what truths have set me free? And where can I discern the abundant life by which I recognize the presence of the living God?'

Recognizing God

How, then, do we recognize God? Many people, Christians and non-Christians, speak of having grown up with alienating images of God, and of the household of God. If you come from a violent and abusive background or a cold and authoritarian one, images like father and family will not work for you. Equally, they may refuse to go away. The old, white, angry God lingers on in people's memories. The agonized figure on the cross has haunted and terrified generations of children. Women are marginalised and disempowered by the absolute dominance, in the Judaeo-Christian world, of a God who is everywhere assumed to be male. And so on.

How then is that God to be discerned, in a multi-cultural environment, and how to we learn to 'see' the living God, present in the context of every individual's journey and every nation's life? Maybe through what God does. Among the signs of God's presence are love, justice, the growth of human community, the free offer of abundant life to the poor and the powerless. If these are God's footprints, then what do they show us about God? They suggest, for a start, a dynamic presence, an energy that is making things happen. Hinduism, in common with many indigenous religious traditions, deifies sources of life and energy such as rivers and fire: a notion that is also present in paganism and some new age religious practice today. Can we then define God as a life-giving process, source of loving energy, passion for justice, affirmation for the powerless? But the Judaeo-Christian God is a personal one. God is loved, railed at, blamed, besought; God is lover and judge, guide and friend. For the majority of Christians, the imageless God seems very little different from the non-existent God.

Although power stations and oil wells do make interesting metaphors, it is difficult to imagine Christians being content to worship an energy-source or a process. What we do claim is that no picture of God can be regarded as universal. Substantive images must be treated as contextual, to be negotiated within a given 'household' or community. But therein lies a major problem for communicators. If all imagery is negotiable, then how on earth are we to talk about God at all?

Christianity emerged from two very different spiritual cultures, the Hebrew and the Greek, with Christians often describing the Greek New Testament as having superseded the Hebrew Old Testament. The Greeks described their gods as personifications of nouns: beauty, intelligence, authority and so on. In Jewish tradition, though, God is described more in terms of function. The bible opens with the idea of the spirit of God moving, creating, ordering chaos. God loves, God comforts; God heals, saves, frees, pities. Jesus judges but does not condemn; hates injustice but invites all to the feast. And God is not just to be found in activism: God/Jesus also prays, suffers, endures, is still. By describing God in terms of verb rather than noun, we move into a spiritual grammar that could help us to circumvent the cultural minefield we enter when we try to capture her or him in a noun or a pronoun or a concrete image. The challenge of discovering of bridges across the religious and cultural chasms that divide us is at the very heart of grassroots spirituality. Can it be that, in order to 'be in mission', we should be reconstructing the very language in which we talk about God'?

Connecting with the world
The philosophy of the Grassroots project is rooted in the belief that encounter with other parts of the world is important, and that open sharing of perspectives from different cultures is at the heart of mission. For many of the participants in this process, the spiritual challenge that has brought them to where they are today has come from an experience of immersion in another culture, often (but not necessarily) in another country. 'It was my time in Bangladesh that taught me what my own culture is like, and laid the foundations for what I am today,' said one young woman. Most of us (maybe all of us) who are involved in the Grassroots networks would identify at some level with that feeling.

Fifty years ago, 'globalisation' (though the word was not invented at the time) consisted of transmitting northern culture, religion, manufacturing demands and structures of government to the people of the South. (The deliberate manipulation of the global economy came later.) Missionaries who went to accomplish this task were, therefore, exposed to other cultures, where the strength of their Christian faith was expected to safeguard their certainties and protect them from syncretism. Today, more and more people recognize that faith and dogma do not come in hermetically sealed packages, that immersion in a culture is impossible without being open to its spirituality, and painful as they are, that these experiences of uncertainty are part of the deal. Uncertainty, though, is not something that religious institutions find easy to live with. In flight from puzzling reality, many Christians (and others) are attracted to fundamentalism. Here, they find a safe haven from confusion, and a culture of uncritical certainty. Grassroots stresses the absolute necessity of honest, open encounter with other cultures, and also the need to be open to the messages they carry for our own. Today, with the concept of globalisation in desperate need of redemption, the world is clamouring for models of global institutions and movements that genuinely seek justice for the poor, an end to exploitation of the weak by the strong, and the building up of cross-cultural friendships. The church has the potential to be one such movement, and that is why it so desperately needs the perspectives of mission partners from other parts of the world.

'Spirituality is global vision,' said Gustavo Gutierrez. This is equally true in Madras, Sao Paolo, Johannesburg, Abidjan, Sidney, Harlem or Hackney. This emphatically does not mean that we are in search of a kind of Esperanto culture, a spiritual Euro, which will ultimately replace local cultures with a universal one. The Grassroots challenge is to develop ways of being present that affirm local cultures and spiritualities, opening them up to the possibility of abundant life. In this task, the evidence of this particular study is that one of the biggest problems is to move beyond language: a problem referred to in the discussion of images. Two individuals may have grown up speaking the same language (be it Urdu, Yoruba or English) but cultures and experience may have given them different understandings of key words and concepts.

Words are often a poor substitute for what people really need. A Methodist minister in Liverpool[xiii], working at building community without a church, set up a bread-making project with a group of women in an upper room. Now an inclusive, multi-faith community has gathered around this venture. 'We're not just being bakers,' she says. 'Our whole spiritual life centres round the bread.' In baking the bread and giving it away, they are giving life to those who need it, but also developing a non-exclusive, mutually supportive community. On Marsh Farm Estate in Luton, the Grassroots worker says that what helps people most is sharing meals, laying the table so that it looks inviting, deciding what to eat, feeling that this is a special shared occasion. A Columban missionary in the East End of London, whose story appears in section 1 of this chapter, has a ministry of massage and body spirituality. She teaches women and men to minister to each other in ways that go beyond words, healing and affirming people whose life experience has filled them with loathing for their bodies. Words are important, she says, but words aren't everything. As individuals, and as men women and children in relation with each other, we are embodied beings, and our spirituality is rooted in our physical being. The words we use may be little more than ways of signalling to each other across the void between us.

Grassroots spirituality, therefore, is global in the sense that it embodies a concept of 'abundant life' that is universal. Bread, shared meals, the gift of being able to live in one's own body without

shame: these, everywhere, are dimensions of being fully human. In bringing together individual stories, a tapestry is woven that makes sense of the different stories in terms of the whole group or community: a profoundly reconciling process. For the missionary, though, it can be a risky and lonely voyage of discovery, and he or she will urgently need the support of groups and networks who are sharing the journey. For the goal of the journey is wholeness, and an integrated relationship with oneself, with others and with God.

The Next Step - 4

ENGAGING WITH THE WORLD

Mission praxis in the context of change
The object of the present booklet has been to draw some conclusions from the experience of people who, at a time of great change, are exploring with their lives what it means for the Church to engage with the world in new and different ways. Traditional models of mission operated on the belief that the locus of God's presence was the Church, which was where God was to be found, and whose task it was to take 'him' to a Godless world. It was the Church that gave you the assurance of salvation. Grassroots theology, on the other hand, accepts the *missio dei* principle that God is present all the time, God's grace freely offered within the history of nations and communities and families and individuals. The task of mission is to discern God's presence, get alongside and help. As Jesus' own story made clear, the Christian project of liberation and redemption is available to all, here and now in this imperfect world. It is among us, very close to us, and not in some distant, ideal future. According to this principle, our churches and Christian institutions are part of the story of salvation, but they are *only* a part of it. Where they privatise and individualise salvation, where they hem it in with life-denying rules and prohibitions, then they could be said not to be part of it at all.

Like all paradigm shifts, once you have made it, it becomes almost impossible to believe that you ever thought differently. The new logic seems self-evidently true. And yet institutional change takes time, it is painful, and it will always be met by resistance. The fact remains that for most Christians the new perspectives offered by *missio dei* have made little difference. They are comfortable with the familiar liturgies, practices and beliefs, and these are, after all, sanctioned by centuries of institutional approval. In addition, whether they are churchgoers or not, they are often heirs also to personal and family, cultural and political histories of their own which make it painful to sacrifice traditional interpretations of the Church's role.

For instance. Our forebears, many of them, believed passionately in the traditions of service which were played out in the history of mission. The pinnacle of Christian service was to become a priest or minister, or to work in a mission hospital or a church-related school or development project. To serve in this way in order to 'save souls' or 'bring people to Christ' was the overall aim of missionary activity. In those days it was simpler to know what God wanted them to do, and people found comfort and security in that. They are confused, today, by claims (coming from all over the world, but most audibly from the South) that the Christian mission project was not merely a mistake but also politically motivated, and morally responsible for many of the world's ills. When doubt enters, Christians may suffer a form of bereavement. How can the Church, for all those centuries, have been wrong? And what grounds are there for imagining that the new bandwagon is any better than the old? Unable to answer these questions, they may become deeply uneasy about the ways in which their churches engage with the world: a mindset reflected in the current struggle by mission agencies to maintain their income and their supporter base.

This does not mean that British churchgoers have stopped responding to the needs of the world, or lost interest in what is happening in 'the South'. Development agencies are perceived as organisations of professionals, their criteria sanctioned by humanitarian thinking generally, and they may find their incomes going up. 'Giving to the poor' is still an important part of one's Christian calling. But giving money, crucial as it may be, is not what mission is about. There is an urgent need for theologically grounded models of mission praxis, which will restore the faith of churchgoers in the mission project itself and help them move beyond the older paradigms of mission.

Churchgoers may also feel bereaved by the loss of the assurance that the Church is where salvation is to be found. At the end of the day, the thing that kept many believers within the Church was often the fear that they wouldn't otherwise go to heaven. Give away the old

certainties and you are handing over the keys to the Kingdom. But in Grassroots theology, God is at work through non-Christians as well as Christians. We cannot automatically assume that we are logging on to salvation and kingdom by becoming clergy or working in Christian schools or being loyal members of our local churches. And yet such certainties were comforting, they gave the church a feeling of power and influence, and an institution that failed to mourn them would hardly be a human one at all.

A Grassroots theology of mission looks at the world through the lens of the people's lives, their dreams and struggles, the things that make them laugh and cry. Churches can and do become agents for reconciliation within divided communities: but they can only do it if they are willing to open the doors and windows, shut up about their certainties, and have the courage to meet people where they are. From this perspective, different truths and different models of salvation will emerge. It is an important part of the missionary task to support churches through the process of letting go of the old, by suggesting what those truths and models might be.

Letting go: the burden of history

Many people fear that churches will be diminished, or even destroyed, by letting go of their monopoly status in relation to the Kingdom. This is not the experience of participants in this process. Many have found that in relinquishing control, a deeper engagement with the world is achieved, enlarging and expanding the church rather than diminishing it. Jesus' ministry was a story of letting go. That was a recurring theme in his conversations, both with his own followers and with the people they met. Letting go is at the very heart of the story of redemption itself, and its ultimate symbol is the cross.

Nevertheless, Grassroots theology takes history extremely seriously. People need to tell their stories of hurt and rejection, and to be heard. The storytelling emphasis of Grassroots spirituality is a way for individuals to find themselves, make sense of their history, and become more participatory members of their communities. But the stories we share will not just be individual ones. All over the world, men, women and children have cultural, political and ethnic histories, and these have to be understood as a vital ingredient in their present stories. (The truth of this is demonstrated by the events that have unfolded since September 11th 2001.) Nearer home, inter-communal conflict in a British city is never due to one thing only. Criminal gangs and right wing extremists may come into it: but it will also be to do with poverty and lack of opportunity, with poor housing and education, with centuries of colonial history and decades of immigrant exclusion, with the fear and bitterness of indigenous populations, with lack of communication, and with the failure of friendship. For reconciliation to be achieved, communal as well as the individual stories need to be told and heard. We cannot and should not hide from history.

Individuals who participated in the Grassroots process tended to speak of the legacy of history as a burden. Many were scarred by it: a Caribbean woman ostracised from her British church because of her colour; a Pakistani growing up under colonial rule, and then realising the extent to which his Christian education has cut him off from his own culture; a black South African, her biblical studies rooted in European academic theology, who felt cheated when she realised how particular readings of scripture had been used to support the apartheid regime; a Chilean, shattered to discover that the Christianity she inherited was powerless to speak to the horrors of the Pinochet regime; a British Catholic whose Protestant wife and children are not allowed to share in his church's eucharist; a priest on a housing estate who finds that the paraphernalia of church buildings and liturgy and dog-collar are actively alienating the people he seeks to serve; a woman, a young person or an old person (particularly if he or she is black), who finds him or herself inaudible just because he or she is young or old, black or female. And so on.

Public gestures of repentance for institutional or national history are popular today among groups trying to lay to rest the ghosts of the past and move forward. In this respect, there is much to be learnt from the experience of truth and reconciliation processes in South Africa, Rwanda and elsewhere: if suffering has been inflicted by one group upon another, then that pain needs to be acknowledged and forgiveness asked before reconciliation is possible. Talk of a kingdom of justice and peace is meaningless, if it does not acknowledge complicity – however unwitting - in

creating a world of injustice and conflict. It should not be forgotten that the legacy of these institutional and national histories is still alive and well and living in the bodies of many communities today.

Community and diversity: beyond the struggle
Diversity is also something to celebrate, and is at the heart of Grassroots work. In inner city areas and in poor urban housing estates, those who are able to move to the suburbs have done so; those who remain are often there because they have no choice. Poverty combines with religious and ethnic pluralism to create communities consisting of some of the most disadvantaged members of society. Schools are often poor, and health services overstretched. Yes, most people have TV sets and running water; but they are aware, nevertheless, of being excluded from the opportunities and consumer choices available to the world they see around them. Religion is rejected, often, on the ground that it offers false hope, is user-unfriendly, and in any case is totally irrelevant to people in that context. Mosque, church and temple face similar challenges in supporting their congregations, finding relevant ways of being present, and in encouraging hope and spiritual growth among the young.

Clergy in this situation find themselves in difficult situations. Just ‘being present’ may seem a feeble and frustrating role. In a multi-faith context, they are uncertain how to go about introducing the faith dimension into the debate about regeneration. Desperate to do some good, unequipped by their training to go about faith-sharing in a religiously diverse community, lacking in models of spiritual leadership for such a context, the most appropriate Christian witness may seem to be through social work. The problem is that social work stresses service delivery, and has a tendency to claim that the professionals know what people need and try to see that they get it: an approach that ignores the fact that regeneration is above all a spiritual process.

Grassroots theology suggests that ‘presence’ involves more than just ‘being there’. It involves recognising urgent issues, which are important to the community, but which apparently have nothing to do with religion. Today, more communal models than the traditional social work ones need exploring. Inner city areas require partnerships between religious, secular and statutory bodies, and in such alliances, religious organisations have a crucial part to play in leadership, engagement and implementation. When that happens, and when groups are struggling to find answers to urgent mutual problems, they may find themselves sharing their faith in ways they never dreamed of. The Jubilee 2000 campaign was one example of a common struggle that has enabled the building of alliances over a broad spectrum, inside and outside the faith communities. The process of identifying and naming a life-denying evil, in the context of shared struggle, has helped many local groups to encounter one another on the level of their different but mutually complementary faith perspectives.

In Grassroots mission praxis, struggle is an absolutely key concept. Jesus, during his ministry, recognised struggle within individuals. He gave them the power to rid themselves of the ‘demons’ and ‘evil spirits’ that inhabited them, and then to go out and get involved in God’s work in the world. He could have stayed in Galilee, healing individuals, doing good work generally and proclaiming the good news. Instead, he set his face towards Jerusalem, where he would face conflict, suffering and death. By what Jesus did (not by what he said), God has revealed God’s self as entering into the world’s struggle, and by his death, creating the new space where reconciliation and healing become possible.

The experience of struggle marks an important distinction between ‘social work’, which provides services for people, and ‘community work’, which encourages them to analyse their situations and develop their own solutions. By providing an understanding of the basic conflict between good and evil in our world, a mutual engagement with struggle gives a group a strong spiritual dimension, making it possible to share moral and religious perspectives in the context of a shared spiritual journey. A consequence of this is that faith groups working together in inner city areas frequently find themselves in agreement with each other, and at odds with prevailing cultural mores. Examples are those who took MacDonald’s to court, and the work of the Luton Council of

Faiths, with whom Grassroots produced a booklet of conversations between Christians and Muslims.[xiv]

Presence and proclamation

Previous sections have suggested that mission involves both presence and struggle. What, then, is the role of proclamation in our engagement with the world? For Christians down the centuries, mission praxis has been based on the assumption that we have a definitive truth to communicate. The traditional view was that however open and accepting one was of other perceptions of the truth, dialogue could go only so far, because those who did not believe that Christ was the only saviour were, at the end of the day, wrong. In Grassroots theology, the process of dialogue assumes openness, to the goodness and holiness that exists within other faiths, and also among many who would deny having a religious faith at all. On the other hand, what kind of Christians are we if we wimpishly avoid proclaiming the ultimate truth of the triune God whom we privately hold to be the life, hope and salvation of the world? We may be pretty good at getting alongside, at solidarity, and at welcome: but when called to share our faith, we often don't know where to start.

There is an urgent need for practical answers to these questions, which are a huge problem for mission praxis today. The answer does not lie in the denial of Christian (or Muslim, Jewish or Hindu) faith. In one school in the Czech Republic, many staff and children were from Christian backgrounds, but in that secular culture, nobody said so: and yet it would have been so much better if they had, because they could have helped each other. A Christian hospital in South India acquired a new chaplain, with liberal ideas, who insisted on removing Christian symbols from the chapel on the grounds that most of the people who dropped in to meditate and be quiet were Hindus. It was the local Hindus who thought he was mad. 'We find peace here, with your God,' they said; 'why are you so ashamed of him?'

On the other hand, the language of Christian proclamation can be deeply alienating. Examples from Luton include a Christian preacher who terrified the listening people because of 'all the stuff about the world coming to an end', and 'last judgements' designed to exclude those who had not jumped through the right hoops. Another was a woman who 'was always godding it about the place talking in that kind of goddy-speak, and you can see people shrivelling up and thinking "O Gawd……."'

'See, I am making all things new,' says the God of the Apocalypse[xv]. If church is to have anything to offer in such situations, it is to do with real lived experience, here and now. In Jesus' life, healing presence came before proclamation. After listening to the hellfire preacher of the previous paragraph, people shuffled into the kitchen area with bowed heads: and were deeply comforted to find a group of women making stew, and everyone joining in. In the dialogue of life, when it comes to communicating the good news of the God of love, the kitchen may be a more powerful symbol than the altar, and personal relationships a more powerful vehicle than formal liturgies or preaching

There is therefore an urgent need for new models of proclamation. Christian presence has traditionally presupposed the existence of buildings. The better the building, the higher the status of the church. But having no such building provides an opportunity and a challenge, requiring new understandings of community, new skills in terms of community work. Among participants in the present process there were Grassroots members from Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe and Brazil, and Columban missionaries from Latin America. Other work represented included that of clergy based on the Canterbury Estate in Bradford, the bread-making project in Liverpool described in the previous chapter, and the work with young people and women on the Marsh Farm Estate in Luton. An industrial chaplain at Vauxhall described himself as 'a joker in the pack': he has access to all parts of the plant, but without a role in the production process. He is present, people know him, and he is there for people who want to talk to him.

But this work, which in itself is proclamation, is highly exposed, and often extremely lonely. Like Jonah, the missionary often finds him or herself called to be present in situations they would

naturally be inclined to avoid. More than in the traditional church setting, the God encountered here tends to operate in unexpected ways and lead where one does not want to go. In 1993, a long, marvellous, anonymous poem appeared in a WCC newsletter. It contains this verse.

'*I had some new images of God today.*

'God went disco-dancing by mistake
Today
And didn't walk out when it wasn't what she
Expected
And God discovered
That she LIKED disco-dancing
(I wish she didn't, I hate it………)'

Apocalypse now
The distinction between proclamation and presence has become a key topic of missiological debate for contemporary Christians, and of great importance to the institutional Church. Talking about God can be embarrassing, 'un-cool', and it puts people off. On the other hand, 'just being there' can feel like a cop-out. These are well-worn tracks, and most of us have been there at one time or another. For Grassroots theology, the language of this debate is beginning to look sterile, its terms defined by history and not by the reality of the lived present. The real question is to do with the generosity of God, which is so infinitely greater than our human communities can imagine. How does God's grace speak through the lives of poor, plural and marginalised communities in today's world? How can we learn to celebrate and share it? The idea is not so much that the poor and the battered and the hungry are invited to the feast, but it is they who issue the invitations.

The idea of sacrament is important here. Just what is our eucharistic community? Hans-Ruedi Weber [xvi]suggests a bible-study focusing on the sentence 'this is my body', in which the key question is what we mean by the word 'this'. Donald Eadie[xvii] movingly describes the concept of 'eucharistic living', introduced to him by his friend Michael Wilson, dying in his mid-eighties of 'a huge, fungating, cancerous tumour on his neck'. If one is to live the eucharist, it is not just the bread and wine of the formal liturgy that constitutes the eucharistic offering, but the whole context of life. Eucharistic living is about being open to receive the gifts of God through the whole created order: through dark and light, through the creative and destructive, through the essential otherness of those who are different. It is about experiencing and expressing gratitude. And it is about sharing. Eadie refers to 'what is being shared and expressed through people he knows. He mentions Barbara, Sheila and Linda in Liverpool, bread-making and bread-sharing, being set free among people who don't trust the Church institution enough to enter it and yet who are still prepared to explore the mystery of yeast, of kneading and rising within their own stories and the stories of their communities.' He quotes the Sri Lankan priest, Fr Tissa Balasuriya[xviii], who spoke of a billion eucharists taking place where Christians share bread but still refuse to share their bread in the world.

It is common, in theological circles today, to talk about the need of the Church to 'speak prophetically'. Prophecy implies that there is an accepted worldview, and that it is the prophet's task to call people back and remind them of what they once recognised as orthodoxy. The Chilean theologian Pablo Richard[xix], in his book on Revelation, suggests that the prophetic response is not an appropriate one for our time. We are living, he says, in times where an apocalyptic response might be more appropriate than a prophetic. The apocalyptic response recognises that the world view has collapsed, and that there is an urgent need to help the community to imagine new possibilities, to develop new myths, and to form a new world view[xx]. The prophet's task is proclamation. The apocalyptic role, on the other hand, is a visionary one, requiring skills of enabling that encourage dreaming, imagining, and the forging of new possibilities.

Moving on
Most of the people involved in the current Grassroots theological process would not, for a moment, say that what they are doing is apocalyptic, although they may indeed feel, quite often, that the world is falling apart. The situations in which they live and work are, by and large, extremely concrete, bringing them into touch with groups and individuals with urgent and highly concrete problems. They also say that in starting to work in this way, they are essentially peeling the first layer off the onion, revealing layer upon layer of deprivation and need beneath it. City centres today are full of shifting populations, people coming and going, pressures and threats from many thousand miles away. One church rented a room above a women's co-operative in a city centre, used already by Falan Gong, by a self-help group for women who self-harm, and by a counselling service for women who have been raped or sexually abused. Into this community of the fragile and the vulnerable came asylum seekers, refugees, battered women and others, drawn by the unconditional welcome, and by their common need for a safe space where poverty and vulnerability are not stigmatised. It is a far cry from the average church congregation in Britain. And yet along with many of the groups and individuals who took part in this process, Grassroots gets much of its financial support from mainstream churches and mission organisations. They give this support partly because they recognise the urgency of developing relevant ways of being present in areas of great social and spiritual need. But they also give it because they are concerned to develop ways of being in mission that can change the Churches themselves, and also change ways in which they operate both nationally and globally.

Of the population of Britain, the proportion that goes to church is 7% and falling, while clergy recruitment figures are going steadily down. There must be lessons here for ecclesiological reflection. Incarnational questions must feature in these reflections, and also questions about salvation. For God is still at work in the other 93%. If the church is to find new life, then new understandings of salvation must be allowed to emerge, new theologies of presence and proclamation described, and patterns of leadership encouraged that are more appropriate to twenty-first century Britain. It is from the kinds of work we are describing, we hope, that such new life, new theologies and new patterns of leadership will come. The missionary challenge then becomes the task of communicating them to the mainstream churches in such a way that they can be heard, made to seem relevant, and have a chance of producing change. What stops grassroots people from leaving their Churches altogether is the knowledge that they are part of a wider movement that will bring change, the hope contained in that assurance, and the determination that the institutional church will hear and be changed by the messages coming out of that movement.

What is this movement like?

First, it has taken root in all Christian denominations. The major dividing lines in today's churches are not between Methodists, Catholics and so on, but between people who still live within traditional ecclesiological definitions and structures, and those who have moved beyond them and are busy exploring the new country that exists outside the citadel walls. Nobody can escape from their denominational formation: that is part of their history. But in this movement, institutional affiliation is secondary. Baptist or Anglican, Presbyterian or Catholic: what matters is the shared immersion in the struggle.

Second, it involves the building of friendships and alliances with statutory, voluntary and other religious bodies. Dogma, classic liturgies and institutional history become irrelevant, if what is bringing you together is regeneration and new life for communities, a more just and equal world, a shared understanding of what it means to be human. All have something to bring to the table. On one estate, the mainstream churches are involved in various social projects: but the biggest day of the year was when the Black-led Churches organised a street festival, and everyone turned out to take part. In the liturgy of life, the kitchen table is a more important symbol than the altar, the street-party a more powerful sign of the kingdom than the wafers that are distributed, Sunday-by-Sunday, behind closed doors in our churches. At the final judgement, it was sharing glasses of water and warm clothes that mattered, not a squeaky-clean record on credal statements[xxi]

Third, it involves reviewing communications systems. 'Church' includes not just those who are in traditional parishes and congregations. Denominational and local journals, broadsheets and newsletters must reflect less conventional ways of being church, and must affirm those who are working in them. In Bradford, there is a weekly column in the local press called Faith Matters, which has brought theological debate into the public arena, while the Art Works project has encouraged dialogue between atheists and people of faith.

Fourth, it is political. When it sees structural or corporate evil, it recognises and names it. In the temple at Jerusalem, Jesus condemns the hypocrisy of individual scribes, but commends the poor widow: but he also condemns the institutional expectations that gladly leave the poor person with no money to buy food, while allowing the rich to walk away with plenty[xxii]

Fifth, it is international. Creating global links at community level is central to its role. Bringing insights from the South to bear on Northern church and community life is a key part of its mission. Among organisations committed to this movement, there was a common commitment to bringing local people together round the Kairos Europa and Jubilee 2000 campaigns (both of them Christian initiatives). There is also a commitment to critiquing them. A West African member of the Grassroots team points out that by oversimplifying the message of Jubilee 2000, the North imposed its own limitations on the South, and for many seemingly legitimate reasons, allowed the status quo of power to continue.

Sixth, it makes judgements about what is good and holy within communities, then puts its energies into situations where that goodness and holiness are embodied. As in the parable of the wedding feast, all are invited. Nevertheless, a Buddhist friend commented that the approach was also reminiscent of the Tao-ist principle, that the valley itself determines the path taken by the water as it flows towards the ocean. You can lay on a feast for people and then drag them in, or you can provide a watering hole and they will come, bringing their contributions to the meal. Although not ruling out the wedding feast approach, a Grassroots approach aims less at lengthy invitation lists than at better watering holes.

Finally, these ways of living and working imply different models of leadership. What does it mean to be a spiritual leader in this situation? How does one avoid becoming a glorified social worker? And does it matter? For clergy in particular, these can be hugely costly situations. Take seriously a model of proclamation involving being present, living the gospel, and encouraging situations in which good news becomes incarnate, then one's whole life is put on the line. Such work may involve taking a back seat in leadership terms, encouraging others to become spiritual leaders rather than taking the lead oneself. 'The role of a bishop,' somebody once said, 'is not to be a prophet but to prevent the prophets being stoned.' For people driven by institutional goals (deadlines, corporate objectives and so on), collaborative forms of leadership can be incredibly time-consuming and frustrating. If we don't have a monopoly of the truth, if we don't know what is best for people, then the macho models of mission with which most of us have grown up have to be cast out of the window. The good news is this, though: that once the window is open, then new vistas may beckon, and the watering hole be seen shimmering in the morning light.

Grassroots work is often described as taking place 'on the margins' of the church. It certainly feels like this when one is engaged in it, and probably looks like it from the perspective of synods and church offices. But this understanding is lethal for the development of a theology of mission praxis that is genuinely rooted in a *missio dei* paradigm, which engages with the implications of Vatican II, and which hears the messages coming from our pluralist, interdependent, globalizing world today. The frontline of mission is located at those points where the church is most profoundly challenged. In Acts 15, we see the early church changed by the messages coming from its experience 'at the margins'. If the real frontline of mission was not in Jerusalem but among the 'un-clean' people of Antioch, if it was their traditional practices that gave rise to new thinking in the church, then this provides a powerful parallel for our situation today. Grassroots theology is not a kind of fringe activity, being developed at the margins and for the margins: it is happening at the very place where the Church is called to be in mission, not just in terms of engaging with the world outside itself, but in its own structures, its own body, and amongst its

own people. Institutional churches, often (like the church in Jerusalem) deafened by their own agendas, ignore it at their peril.

Epilogue
The events of 11th September 2001 occurred as we were preparing this booklet for press. If the process of reflection it documents had taken place after that terrible day, then this would inevitably have been a different paper. Nevertheless, our view is that 11th September and the chain of events that followed it provides an overwhelming endorsement of the thinking we are talking about. It was from the margins of the 'clean' world that the attack came that destroyed the twin towers of the World Trade Centre. While being horrified by the incident, and filled with grief for those who are dead or bereaved as a result of this symbolic and terrible act, one can also observe that economic and political institutions that exclude and marginalize are highly vulnerable in today's world. Those who are on the margins will not go away, nor will they stay powerless forever. It has never been more important that we should redefine our understanding of the relationship between the powerful and powerless; those with the media outlets and those whose voices are never heard; those who are included in the world's agenda, and those who are not. It is not bombs and mutual destruction that will bring reconciliation. It is the experience of hearing each other's stories and honouring each other's scriptures; it is the willingness to listen to those other, distant voices, speaking in other tongues and out of other cultures; it is realisation that we all share the same watering hole, and that all are invited to drink from it; and it is the commitment to changing the way things are so that these things can happen, because maybe we have got it all wrong after all. And that, for today, is the message of Grassroots theology.

Preface for 'The Next Step'
'The Next Step' is the second in a series of occasional publications which are seeking to reflect on the developing theology of mission which has been emerging through the ten years experience of the mission partners and projects of the Grassroots programme.

Grassroots is an ecumenical mission and development education programme, founded in 1992. It is staffed by an international team of people from Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe working mainly in the multi-cultural, multi-religious environment of an English industrial town but also in other local contexts. It is developing a model of mission which is at once committed to the grassroots perspective of particular localities and at the same time to integrating the local with other, global perspectives, particularly through personal experience of world church mission partners.

A first paper, *Whose Truth? : A Grassroots Perspective,* (1999) edited by Gillian Paterson was the outcome of the programme staff's attempt document their experience so that it could be more widely available. In 2000 Grassroots recognised the need to widen the process and so joined with the Columbans (a Roman Catholic missionary order) to organise the next consultation attended by about 25 people. On this occasion Gillian Paterson was invited to write a booklet of her reflections on the main themes which the consultation participants had raised and explored: authority, spirituality and engaging with the world. The account which follows refers on several occasions to Grassroots process, theology, spirituality. The word Grassroots refers in these cases to the specific activities initiated by the Grassroots Programme but involving others who are concerned with similar issues at the grassroots.

This second small booklet does not bring this process to an end. It is just *The Next Step.* Grassroots is engaged in an attempt to embody a new, emerging worldview in how mission is understood and practiced. *The Next Step* will be shared with partners and friends of Grassroots in Britain and other parts of the world as an encouragement for those who share the vision of seeking faithfully and effectively to participate in God's mission in the world, rooted in the Christian tradition in all its diversity (where the complex issue of authority needs constantly revisiting), motivated and nourished by the spirit of justice (since we are committed to a spirituality that is integrated with 'kingdom' action), and working alongside those in the margins (since we cannot truly engage with the world unless we are enabling the voice of the voiceless to be heard).

Between the consultation and this publication the events of 11th September have sharpened our consciousness or the urgent need to keep the local and the global within single frame of reference. They also add a sense of urgency to the importance of the topics we have been exploring.

We are very keen to hear your response to this booklet and to seek further ways of debating, reflecting and taking action together.

The Revd Les Oglesby
Chair of Grassroots Trustees
November, 2001

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[i] For a fuller version of this story, see *Whose Truth,* a Grassroots discussion paper published in 1999
[ii] I have found two books particularly helpful in this process. They are: Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies,* Maryknoll Orbis 1985; and Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology,* Maryknoll Orbis 1992
[iii] MAC Warren in the Introduction to John V Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence Amid African Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963)
[iv] V Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (Maryknoll: Orbis 1982)
[v] J Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation.* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975)
[vi] J Sobrino, quoted in Hennelly, *Theological Method*
[vii] David J Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll Orbis 1991
[viii] The *Kairos Document: A theological comment on the political crisis in South Africa*, London CIIR 1986 (Revised Second Edition)
[ix] Lk 2, 46-47
[x] Mk 1, 27
[xi] Ched Myers*, Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, Maryknoll Orbis 1988
[xii] Graham Shaw, *The Cost of Authority: Manipulation and Freedom in the New Testament,* London SCM 1983
[xiii] See final chapter for her story
[xiv] *Christian – Muslim Dialogue: A Common Thread*, published by Luton Council of Faiths
[xv] Rev 21,5
[xvi] Hans-Ruedi Weber, *Experiments with Bible Study*, Geneva WCC 1981
[xvii] In an address to MWM (Methodist World Mission) entitled 'Eucharistic Living'
[xviii] Tissa Balasuriya*, Eucharist and Human Liberation*, Maryknoll Orbis 1979
[xix] Pablo Richard, *Apocalypse: A People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, Orbis Maryknoll 1986
[xx] A view endorsed by the events of 11 September 2001
[xxi] Matthew 25
[xxii] Matthew 12, 42; Luke 21, 3