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From Grassroots: An Invitation to Dialogue

Grassroots is an international group of people from Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe, founded in 1992, and working in the multi-cultural, multi-religious environment of an English industrial town. It is supported by mainstream British churches and mission agencies and by European organisations, in the belief that it will develop a model of mission which is relevant to the complex, secular context in which most of us live today.

In the six years of its existence, members of the group have developed ways of thinking about God, about the Scriptures, and about the Church, which they and their supporting agencies believe are of wider significance. The Grassroots Trustees urged the staff team to find ways of documenting this experience so that it could be more widely available. Early in 1999 Gillian Paterson was invited to work with the group, to help it give structure to its thinking, and to identify the main issues which surface when one tries to write it down. The next step would be to write a paper - provisional, maybe, but nonetheless a real statement about where the group is now - and to circulate this around other people and groups within the churches which are also feeling the need to develop new and more relevant perspectives on Christian thinking.

The following paper is the result. It is divided into five sections. Section 1 is a highly concentrated mini-history, designed to explain briefly where Grassroots sits within the theology and practice of mission. Section 2 gives a more detailed description of Grassroots itself, its work and its context. Sections 3 to 5 deal, in turn, with its thinking on God, the Scriptures and the Church.

This is not a definitive statement, though. Rooted in the conviction that grassroots thinking, to be true to its ethos, must be provisional, this should be regarded as a discussion paper which is open to perceptions, thoughts and experiences of people from all over the world who are struggling with similar issues. It is an invitation to dialogue, addressed to anyone who is committed to the search for truth in the difficult circumstances of our world today.

We hope that this will stimulate your thinking and that you will want to engage with the debate. Please send responses to Grassroots and these will form the basis of a future consultation to carry the reflection forward. We look forward to your contributions.

Brian Davies OBE
Chair of Grassroots Trustees

WHOSE TRUTH? A GRASSROOTS PERSPECTIVE

Gillian Paterson

*"But I am still running, trying to capture that by which I have been captured".
Philippians 3:12*

1. Developments in mission thinking

Missio dei

The late twentieth century has seen huge changes the way we understand the relationship between North and South. If they thought about these things at all, most people who were born before 1965 probably grew up with a relatively unquestioning belief in the superiority of Northern culture, technology, economic models and political processes. It was true that countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America now had their own elected (or self-appointed) governments, but it had not seriously occurred to most North Americans or Europeans to question the appropriateness of Northern values and practices for these developing nation states: states which in any case were still locked into neo-colonial economic structures. Meanwhile, leaders in the professions and in government had themselves been educated in institutions built on Northern models, and found it difficult to believe that indigenously developed alternatives might work better.

As early as the 17th Century, missionary priests and others had pointed out the importance of developing indigenous churches, with local clergy and culturally appropriate liturgies. Nevertheless, with the exception of maverick groups and individuals, the Church's mission during the colonial period and afterwards was bound up with the establishment of European-style church structures, and local churches which were as similar as possible to the 'mother' churches in the north. The direction of mission was firmly North to South. Leaders in churches of the South were largely European or North American. The health and education institutions they founded and maintained were usually modelled on those which the missionary educators and health professionals had experienced in the North.

Religious imagery was exported along with the rest. Even today, God is often an elderly, learned white man who lived in Rome or Canterbury and felt most at home in modern European languages, or in Latin. Or maybe he was an authoritarian, inflexible presence, insisting on the literal truth of scriptures and an unquestioning acceptance of propositions which emerged from quite different cultural and religious contexts. Western imagery has proved remarkably resistant to change. In the churches of the Southern hemisphere, it is still common to find lovingly displayed pictures depicting a gentle, golden-haired Jesus carrying a woolly lamb through a field of primroses.

If they are asked, the Churches will state, mostly truthfully, that their goals were not political but spiritual: to bring more people into the Church (which was where God and Jesus were to be found) and to offer them salvation, eternal life and the bible. It was uneasily admitted that many non-Christians did good things and acted in apparently Christian ways. Nevertheless, it did not seriously occur to the churches that different faith traditions were legitimate roads to God. Maybe these people were in fact Christians, even if they did not know it themselves. The assumption was that God worked only through his own chosen family, the Church, by which they often meant the Christian denomination to which they belonged. Outside the Church there was no salvation.

Today, there is a growing acceptance that the locus of salvation is the world itself. The narrative of salvation is not just the bible, but the whole of human history. The primary source of mission is not the Church, but God, whose nature it is to be in mission. The Church is not taking its own God to the godless world, because God is already there. As the Roman Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx puts it, "Outside the world there is no salvation".

This way of interpreting the Church's role in the world is known as the *missio dei* model of mission. To develop it has been the concern of theologians, in all regions of the world, since the 1930s. It is forcefully promoted in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, and underpins the work of the World Council of Churches and its family. It is implicit in the work of liberation theologians in Latin America, who identify with the church of the poor; in the contextual theology and the theology of struggle which came out of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa; in the work of Asian theologians, living as a minority Christian community in a highly religious culture; in the feminist and black theologies of North America and elsewhere; and in the universal insights of creation theology and the Christian ecological movement. In *Transforming Mission*, published in 1991, David Bosch identifies *missio dei* thinking as an important element in the 'paradigm shift' which has occurred in the way we think about God, and hence about mission.

In exploring these ideas, contemporary missiology has engendered great energy in some circles, and considerable alarm in others. *Missio dei* involves the church in learning to 'read' the world, in order to discern the active presence of God, and also in order to identify the presence of those factors which stand in the way of God's activity. The Church's role is then to take a stand against the powers which seem to prevent the realisation of God's kingdom, and then to get alongside God's action and help. This is very different from the old view, that the Church's key tasks are maintenance, and the promotion of church growth.

Bathwater theology

For the mission agenda of the Church, the ecclesiological and scriptural challenges of 'the new paradigm' are overwhelming. The task of building up the church by getting more people into it may have been difficult to achieve, but at least it was relatively easy to understand, and the feeling of having the monopoly on salvation was good for morale within congregations. If the Church's central task is not to create more churchgoing Christians, then what is it supposed to be doing? If salvation itself does not depend on going to church, then why bother to do so? If God is everywhere and in everything, engaged in a continuing self-giving that happens without the intervention of Christians, then what is the church there for at all?

Contemporary missiology has therefore given rise to a time of great uncertainty and loss of confidence. Bosch describes the way in which shreds of the old paradigm still linger, or are lovingly preserved, in the thinking of those who believe they have fully embraced the new. Even where people find it impossible to argue with the principle of *missio dei*, there are still major question marks hanging over its implications for the practice of the Church. We want to be true to our understanding of the multi-dimensional, infinitely generous nature of the divine; but we love the Church, most of us, and we do not want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Thus there is a temptation to operate, simultaneously, within two mutually incompatible paradigms of mission. As in other faiths, mindless fundamentalism promises a safe haven from uncertainty, and the implications of the new paradigm may quite simply be axed from the consciousness.

It is therefore a priority for churches, and for those organisations who exercise mission responsibilities on their behalf, to identify and implement models of mission which answer some of the questions, address the uncertainty, and suggest new ways forward for the Church. In Christian thinking today, just what is baby and what is bathwater? A major challenge for missiology is to seek to identify what must be lovingly fed and nurtured, and what may be legitimately be allowed to go gurgling down the plug-hole.

2. Grassroots

Grassroots brings together a number of related strands in the history of twentieth century mission thinking. The first is the idea of *missio dei*. The second is the philosophy of One World and its implications: that mission must be from everywhere to everywhere, and that for the world to be a fairer and more peaceful place, the North must learn to hear the voice of the South, and be willing to change. The third is the recognition that the locus of salvation is the whole of human history, and not just the Church. The fourth is the implication for mission of the theological concept of incarnation: that God's kingdom, always universal, is always particular too, incarnate in a particular time and place, and in the lives of particular people, so that the experience of immersion, or incarnation, is central to a practice of mission which has integrity.

Grassroots was set up in 1992 with the help of the Methodist Church and the development agency Christian Aid. Today, it is supported by Methodist, Anglican, Roman Catholic and United Reformed churches in Britain, keen to develop and disseminate models of mission which reflect the urgent need for a more just, peaceful and interdependent world. An ecumenical group, the men and women who make up the Grassroots team come from Africa, Asia, Latin America and Britain, from mainstream churches committed to working for a more life giving and people-centred society. They have links with grassroots organisations and networks in many parts of the globe who are working for the same things.

In Britain, Grassroots contributes to the ecumenical Christian and interfaith networks and to national organisations committed to pluralism, reconciliation and the relief of poverty. The team has proved to be an invaluable resource in clergy training and in theological education, where Southern views on the theology and practice of mission might otherwise not penetrate. Grassroots has taken an active part in Kairos Europa, a network which brings marginalised people together to challenge the current economics of Europe as they operate both within Europe and in the world. They are part of a project called Building Plural Communities, which brings together representatives of ten plural communities across Europe.

Grassroots is also deeply committed to working with the communities and churches in its own environment: a commitment which it believes to be fundamental to any practice of mission which has integrity. So given the importance of the idea of incarnation in Grassroots theology, it is worth looking fairly closely at the context in which the group lives and works.

It is based in Luton, a medium-sized industrial town, about 30 miles north of London. Other towns in this area tend to be elegant and expensive commuter areas, and one might have expected that Luton, with its exceptional road, rail and air links, would be the same. Despite the existence of patches of affluence, this has never happened. Its economy suffered from

the recession in British manufacturing. Unemployment grew, crime rates rose, pressure on social services increased, there are many disaffected young people, and poverty is now widespread.

Nevertheless, Luton can also be a colourful and exciting town, mainly because of the many families, originally from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, who have made it their home. At lunch time, the streets may be busy. Outside the kebab houses, men queue, chatting gently. Languid waiters lean against the doors of the tandoori restaurants. Women wait outside the school for their neat dark-haired children. Shops windows glitter with embroidered shawls and saris, salwar kameez, bright jewels, sequined slippers. A market stall is selling mangoes, okra and green bananas. In one street, there are three separate butchers advertising halal meat.

Luton has the usual range of Christian churches, their congregations reflecting the global nature of the locality. In addition, it has large and established Muslim, Hindu and Sikh communities, and a small Jewish community. These struggle to maintain familiar values, and to bring up children to withstand the moral and spiritual alienation they find in the majority population. Most people, though, would say that they find little relevance in established religion, although many say they believe in some spiritual reality beyond the getting and spending, and the daily struggle to survive. Already marginalised by a consumer culture from which they are largely excluded, and by a society whose values are derived from that culture, they are marginalised in addition by churches whose structures and liturgies developed from and for a very different kind of world.

With its multi-coloured communities, its different faith groups, its economic contrasts and its links with other parts of the globe, Luton defies any attempt to understand religion in a unitary way. In this, Luton is like many other urban areas on our planet. Luton is the world in microcosm.

Luton, then, is the context within which Grassroots has made its home. Here, a young Gambian is working with groups of poor women on a housing estate; a Sri Lankan Catholic is engaged with disaffected young Muslims at local level, and in issues of inter-faith dialogue within the more academic and institutional level; a Brazilian Methodist is active in community work, and in the church community itself, and a woman pastor from South Africa is doing parish work and developing biblical studies in the neighbouring town of Hitchin. It is from such experiences as these that the theological perceptions come, and are then shared and developed in parishes, churches, dioceses and theological courses, both locally and nationally.

But Grassroots is more than an organisation, more than a network, more than a group of theologically charged individuals with a passion for fair play. It is an attempt to see what happens when you bring together people with very different national, ecclesial and theological backgrounds, earth them in a particular social and economic locality, ask them to develop ways of thinking

about church which are open to other Christian traditions and other faiths. Inevitably, this has meant facing tensions, not just within communities, churches and theological institutions, but also those which arise from the diversity that exists within the group. Grassroots, with its diverse membership, its links with the wider church, its commitment to dialogue and reconciliation within a plural environment, and with its essentially ecclesiological agenda, is a microcosm of the Church in the world. Its life and work are rooted in theology. In the process, it is hammering out a vision God and scriptures, Church and kingdom, which may be of real importance to churches and to Christian organisations today.

3. The Triune God

Big-enough God, small-enough God

At the turn of the millennium, we are living through a time of great philosophical, political and theological uncertainty. The globalisation of the market and of communications, the perception that science does not explain everything, the realisation that Western culture and political systems have failed to deliver the goods to the majority of the planet, the growth of communities from the South in all Northern countries, the development of the women's movement in all part of the world: these are among the factors which have all led, within all major religions, to a re-examination of the old certainties by which God was defined.

As people of faith, in order to operate at all on a day-to-day basis, the last thing we want is to have to go back to the drawing board every morning and re-define the God to whom we pray. We need to be able to say, "God is like this, or like that." Encountering somebody else's view of God can therefore be confusing, alarming or exciting, or all three at the same time. This does not just apply to dialogue between Jews and Hindus, Christians and Muslims. Even within the same faith tradition, people's understandings of God are coloured by their own identity and experiences. Abraham's picture of God was different from John the Baptist's. The God who is portrayed as a bookish old white man may possibly be experienced as a kindly father figure if you are educated, European and male. If you are a black Christian woman from a South African township, your reaction will be coloured by your own, very different experiences of bookish old white men, and also of fathers. For a Pakistani Muslim or a Tamil Hindu, it will differ again, or for an unemployed young Caribbean man living on a housing estate in Luton. For all of them, the experience of sharing their understanding of God with others may prove painful, and they may resist what they hear. On the other hand, given honesty and openness and a safe place for such a dialogue to take place, they may find their own faith and their own understanding has been expanded and enriched by the experience.

"Man", said Plato, echoing an earlier Greek philosopher, "is the measure of all things," thus setting out a belief which was to prove a defining one for European thought for over 2000 years, and which has made it almost impossible for Europeans to understand the thought processes of non-European cultures. More recently, for Europeans and North Americans, the attempt to measure God, define God according to our own human limitations became a project of the Enlightenment. But this quantifiable God has become increasingly difficult to defend in a post-modern, pluralistic world. Grassroots theology emphasises the multi-dimensional nature of the divine. In a plural community, God is to be encountered everywhere, discernible in love and affection, challenge, engagement, faith in the future, the ability to look beyond the present and act as if a better world was a real alternative.

From within all faith traditions comes the growing conviction that God is to be sought and experienced at the heart of every individual. A closer relationship with this 'god-within' is the goal of the individual's deepest desires, and we are connected to each other by the quest for it. But if it seems that this god-within is closer to us, and more intimately bound up with our being, than the images of god implicit in the different faith traditions, then equally, the god-beyond - the transcendent God - is bigger than any of our faith traditions are often prepared to acknowledge. In Grassroots spirituality, embracing the paradoxical mystery of God's big-ness on the one hand, and of God's closeness and particularity on the other, is as important (and also as difficult) as anything else.

The quest for God can produce an unnerving feeling of being engaged in a journey whose goal one has yet to identify. The growth in religious fundamentalism is to some extent a backlash against this post-modern experience. And yet, painful as it is, facing the uncertainty and engaging in the journey is no longer optional for the contemporary Christian who is trying to live fully and with integrity within his or her own times, and to keep faith with the God whose loving presence is to be discovered at the heart of all life.

The resurrection alternative

The life and work of Jesus is a source of inspiration for Grassroots. Like Jesus, Grassroots' main starting point is the desire to affirm disadvantaged and marginalised members of society. Like Jesus, Grassroots is deeply concerned with what goes on in religious institutions as such, but it is also concerned with reaching individuals who no longer find them relevant, and look elsewhere for inspiration and support for their own journeys. When the churches are comfortably defending the status quo and looking after their own, Grassroots challenges them to be true to the example of Jesus.

Nevertheless, of the three persons of the Trinity, it is over the christological questions that tensions are most likely to occur, not least within the team itself. Was 'the Christ-event' unique, for all people and for all time? What actually did happen at the resurrection? Is salvation achieved only through the mediation of the Jesus Christ? For Grassroots, the common basis seems to be the search itself: the struggle to express theological truths in new ways, without falling back on language which somehow no longer seems to ring true.

It is frequently observed by Christians engaged in inter-faith activity that it is less threatening to share one's faith with a Muslim than with a Christian whose church background is different from one's own. In genuinely communicating with people whose orientation is different from one's own, there may be times when it is difficult to preserve one's identity as a Christian at all, in any meaningful way: and this may put strain on colleagues, who are desperately clinging to christological certitudes. When

they perceive that the faith of their fellow Christians is slipping into relativism, they may themselves have the sensation of looking into the abyss.

The difficulties become most acute in talking about the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the closer you get to real dialogue with people of other faiths, the greater they become. It is tempting to fall back on a historical, Lucan view, that Jesus died because he was a good man, and that is what happens to good people. But to do so is to betray the most powerful and liberating offering that the Christian tradition has for the world, which is its belief in the gift of salvation.

Just what does the central myth of the dying God actually mean in Grassroots work? It seems that in order to answer this question, one must, at some level, experience the world as a place of suffering. This is not a problem for Grassroots members, who mostly come from emergency situations within their own countries, and have been involved in struggles against oppression, or poverty, or civil war. It is more of a problem when they get to Europe. There is an emergency, yes, but it is different. It is to do with hopelessness and purposelessness; it is to do with materialism and the denial of personal worth that comes with it; it is to do with consumerism, and exclusion from the culture of consumerism. It is to do with individualism and the denial of social solidarity. It is to do with structures which convince you that change is impossible: structures whose greatest danger lies in the fact that they are invisible. Because it is so difficult to put one's finger on the life-denying forces, then it is easy for people to lapse into lethargy, to choose to be powerless.

And yet many of the people with whom Grassroots works do experience the world as a place of suffering. You may have social security payments, running water and a TV set, but still be poor and lonely and afraid to go out at night. You can still find yourself, in your early twenties, with no prospect of real work. In a culture where materialism is a god, you can perceive yourself and your family (if you have one) as being for ever excluded from the charmed circle of those on whom that god has smiled. And worst of all, you can allow yourself to become convinced that there is no alternative.

Yes, resurrection is a problem for non-Christians: it can be a problem for many Christians, as well. But if we don't grasp the nettle and talk about it, then we lose the opportunity to affirm 'the radical new' which the resurrection stands for. The message of the cross is that suffering and death are not the end. There is always an alternative. Within 'the Christ event' itself, there is a promise which is liberating: that 'they' can destroy you physically, but they will never, ultimately, win.

'What happened at the resurrection' will continue to be a crucial issue for theologians, historians and others to grapple with. It could easily become a source of controversy within the team itself. But in a divided world, in urgent need of healing, how far should we allow ourselves to be imprisoned

by the difficulties we have, with our human minds and time-bound understanding, over the exact historical events and biological processes of the first Easter? Grassroots, therefore, concerns itself less with what actually happened than with what it can mean for the world today. Jesus was a Jewish man, who lived at a particular time in history, and died on a cross. But Jesus did not remain on the cross, and what happened next is a mystery which theology can only partly help us to understand: a mystery which, in many parts of the world, is a source of hope and strength in oppressive situations.

At the core of Grassroots theology is the fact that it brings together people from all parts of the world, each coming from his or her own place in the struggle for life. You are forced into discussion, yes, or into deconstruction if you want to be. But you do not have to sign up to a christological orthodoxy in order to belong to Grassroots. The consequence is that people from all kinds of faith tradition (including none at all) are able to say 'I am part of Grassroots,' and mean it.

Moving beyond

Anticipating his own murder, Oscar Romero said, "If I die, I shall live on in the people of El Salvador." An important New Testament model is the pentecost experience which, in Acts, marked Christ's gift of his spirit to all human beings, and the creation of the Church itself. It is in the breaking down of barriers and the sharing of cultures, languages and traditions, that undreamed of power is released and the New Jerusalem entered. The Tower of Babel is a structure of sin, and two thousand years later, it is still there, standing in seats of government, cathedrals, mosques and temples, and probably also in my back yard. The fundamental insight of Pentecost is that we are one people, but we don't know it.

The difficulties experienced by Grassroots theology in talking about the first two persons of the trinity are largely absent from its view of the Holy Spirit. The belief that God's spirit is everywhere has its place in all religious traditions. Despite its trinitarian implications, it is not, in general, a problem for non-Christians. Gandhi found the concept helpful and challenging. Muslims are not uncomfortable with it. What then is distinctive in Grassroots' theology of the Holy Spirit?

In Christian theology, evidence of the Spirit's work is to be found in change and movement. The Spirit moves upon the waters, provides the energy for creation and the renewal of creation. She operates through the gifts and the diverse natures of human beings to provide the richness and variety of the world. Most distinctively, she brings together people and groups who are different, and enables the growth of trust between them. In our time, the message of the charismatic movement is that it is through the power generated by the Holy Spirit that people are brought together, and new life generated in groups which have lost hope.

The book of Acts shows the spirit of Jesus at work in the lives of the disciples and building up of the early church. Here, as in much contemporary Christian imagery, the image of the tongues of fire descending from above suggests that the Holy Spirit comes from outside the individual or the group. Grassroots is closer in spirit to the trinitarian theology of St John's Gospel, where there is no ascension, and Jesus is alive already in the community, through the Holy Spirit, as God is alive in Him. Recognising this, the Grassroots task is the creation of what the Quakers call a 'healing area': a space for renewal and reconciliation, where walls can be broken down.

There is a movement in history through which the spirit is blowing, and that movement is erupting at grassroots level, through grassroots groups and communities in all parts of the world built on principles of reconciliation and economic justice. The task of Grassroots and its allies is to affirm them in the local area, communicate the message coming from them to the churches, and bring them into the international community of organisations committed to similar aims

So the Spirit guides, gives courage, and helps us to move into new spiritual spaces. But the Spirit's gifts are not always comfortable. Over the centuries, many Christians have also found themselves led into places they did not want to go. Far from home, in an alien environment, their own faith and ways of thinking challenged by what they find, Grassroots people may find themselves insecure, lonely and confused. They are challenged to examine certainties they never knew they had. On the other hand, this is a spiritual road which some of the world's greatest saints have travelled: the journey which leads beyond proposition, beyond the baggage of institutional religion, into a space where the life of the body seems to be taken up into the life of the spirit. Just occasionally, one may get fleeting glimpses of this space that lies beyond the pain: in Grassroots theology, a space which is most likely to be found by the way of struggle.

4. The Scriptures

A bible for everyone

New thinking about the nature of God and the role of the Church was broadly outlined in the first section of this paper, along with its consequences for missiology. This new thinking has led to an explosion of interest in biblical studies, as it has become apparent that the bible itself has so much to contribute to our understanding of the work of God in a pluralist society, and our own role in it. One happy result has been that international dialogue about the bible is now almost entirely ecumenical in its nature. Less happy is the fact that the biblical studies which are taught in theological colleges all over the world are still largely based on Northern scholarship and interpretations. In spite of the growth of interest in 'third world theologies' within academic departments, there is little awareness in church circles in the North (or, sadly, in much of the Church in the South) that there is a distinctively Southern contribution to be made to mainstream biblical studies.

Nevertheless, biblical studies was one of the first academic disciplines to respond to the challenges of post-modernism, as scholars responded to the insight that the bible cannot be understood in a unitary way. It may read as historical or literary text, or as an expression of a particular context. It may be read as a political text, or a foundation text for liberation theologies. One may read it from the standpoint of a woman, or a black person, someone from the North, or someone from the South. It can all be very unnerving for Christians who have grown up looking to the scriptures for certainty, and it is not surprising that the new richness in biblical thinking has been accompanied by a growth in fundamentalist insistence that the bible is the literal truth, for all times and for all contexts: a position which it is very difficult to maintain with integrity, given (at the very least) the contradictory things the bible has to say. It is not the Bible which is the Word of God. It was in Jesus that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and from that central truth our further insights must flow.

Grassroots brings men and women from Africa, Asia and Latin America into the British churches. If they come from an situation in which they have been involved in liberation or contextual theology, they will have had the excitement of experiencing the bible as a force for change. Nevertheless, men and women from the South will bring their own histories to the study of the scriptures. For many people whose Christian formation was within colonial-model churches, the bible may have come to seem like another weapon in the armoury of colonialism.

Churches can gain enormously from reading the Bible in a contextual way. It is particularly vital for students of theology to learn to do so, because it helps people to see that God's self-revelation to men and women takes place in a particular context, and is influenced by real events. This encourages a holistic understanding of faith, where spirituality and daily life are more

likely to be seen as integrated. In our compartmentalised society, it is still very easy to read the Bible as a purely spiritual text. In Europe and North America, for instance, it is usual to regard one's own history as something quite separate from the history of the people of God, who are exclusively to be found within the Christian churches. To Latin Americans, on the other hand, they are the people of God, and their story is the same story as that of Joshua, Elijah, Jesus, St Paul, and contemporary history becomes a continuation of biblical history.

Many of the key stories in the Bible are about situations in which God acts on behalf of oppressed or marginalised people. The real significance is often lost on British churches, whose culture and history may protect them from perceiving the relevance, for their own society, of the Bible's insistence that its poorest and most marginalised members are the favourites of God. By reading the story of Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7, Matthew 15) in the company of a black South African woman, churchgoers in Hitchin may acquire an entirely new understanding of the text, which will enable them to interpret and act on it in original and personal ways. In Grassroots' work within local communities, too, this breadth of understanding has had a dramatic effect. Team members often meet with people who come from different faith traditions, with women on the housing estates who have lost any faith they ever had, with youth groups or music groups who have no religious faith at all. These may be bowled over by the experience of talking about God in the company of a young Brazilian, deeply involved in the struggle for economic justice in his own country.

Heirs to a biblical tradition

That which already exists, however imperfect, often has the status of 'the given', which cannot be changed. Under the tyrannical eye of the status quo, visionary alternatives may appear fanciful and unrealistic. Grassroots is one such alternative. Straddling the margins of the church, neither outside it nor fully inside, it works, in an unconventional way, among those who are on the margins of society, and it tries to articulate the message coming from there and deliver it to the mainstream.

In this, it is heir to a long tradition of biblical prophecy, culminating in the life and ministry of Jesus. Focusing on the process of choosing the 'kingdom alternative' when making either/or choices, Walter Brueggemann² calls this tradition 'the imaginative Other', or in his later work, 'the imaginative Or': the place where Yahweh's action is concentrated within the context of royal tradition, settled government, established religion. In Joshua 24, the prophet presents the now-prosperous children of Israel with an either/or choice. They can live in prosperity, and let the economy work for the rich as if there were no 'other way', or they can embrace God's (economically naive and impractical) covenant with Moses, set out in the book of Deuteronomy, of which the principle of Jubilee is one particularly visionary element, and see what difference that can make to the way they run the nation.

At the scene of the Transfiguration, says Brueggemann, the disciples saw Jesus accompanied by Moses and Elijah: an experience which is followed by Jesus' suggestion that he is in some mysterious way a re-incarnation of Elijah, a fulfilment of the tradition of which Elijah was part (Matthew 17). In Matthew 11, a similar connection is made between Elijah and John the Baptist. In Luke 4, Jesus is at first rapturously received in his hometown. What finally infuriates the good people of Nazareth is his insistence that the 'good news to the poor' which he has come to proclaim is the same good news that is embodied by the prophets Elijah and Elisha: news that was directed to those who were outside the framework of established religion.

Grassroots people tend to come to Europe from situations of oppression or violence. Where people do not have enough food, when people are dying around you, it may be easy to see what the 'other way' might be, relatively simple to understand the narrative, and one's own place in it. Coming to the North, they may find themselves confused and disorientated. Of the three great themes of the Old Testament (exodus, exile and the building of the temple), they may, in the past, have identified most closely with the theme of exodus. Here, they find that the popular view appears to run something like this: that things are basically OK; that the temple may not be perfect, but it is part of the system, and therefore a 'given'; that those people who don't benefit from the system are probably either lazy, disorganised or undeserving; and that anyway there is no alternative to the status quo. They may find that the experience of being poor and marginalised in the North is comparable rather with the exilic experience of the Jews in Babylon, where resistance must be achieved initially by a liturgical or emotional departure from the mainstream, by the creation of alternative space within which to stake out one's own identity and understand one's place in the narrative.

Grassroots is a faith community with an ecclesial agenda. 'What', it asks, is the reality of the world church? What happens when we see our own theological and ecclesiological 'givens' in the light of other cultures, other imaginations, other ways of interpreting the scriptures? Can it be that, for too long, the Old Testament has been silenced by the christological certainties we take to be implicit in the New? Is it possible that the very words by which we identify the First (or Hebrew) Testament have the effect of devaluing the revelations it contains? What is required for the churches in the North to learn to live in a way that is true to the tradition of Moses, Joshua, Elijah, Elisha, Second Isaiah, John the Baptist and Jesus?

5. The Church

A church or not a church?

Grassroots is an ecumenical faith community, whose task is to contribute to a new understanding of what the church could be. It is supported by mainstream churches, and Christian mission and development agencies, as part of their effort to encourage the process of change within the Church. These organisations believe that Grassroots will point the way for local congregations and parishes to move towards a new understanding of their own place in the world, and of what the Church can potentially become. In the process, they hope that individual Christians will find their faith becoming broader and more relevant, and their spiritual resources expanding. They also hope that the Grassroots experience will provide models of living and working which will inspire others and therefore be used more generally.

Grassroots members talk of attempting to create a new myth of Church. In Luton, it has created a friendly and neutral space for religious discourse. Here, Muslims and Baha'i's may discuss the concept of prophet-hood, and Christians and Muslims reflect together on the concept of 'Umma' and 'Koinonia'. Jains have their monthly meeting on Grassroots premises. When the Borough Council wanted a partner in community development, the Education Department invited Grassroots to provide faith visitors for work in schools. It has become a focus and a resource for organisations, up and down the country, and also in Europe, who are needing to relate to groups with similar concerns. Members receive regular invitations from church groups and theological courses who are looking for a Southern perspective on global issues.

Grassroots priorities reflect a particular concern about a growing value-vacuum in a Europe which seems to be obsessed with its own economic progress, while poverty increases, and inter-communal violence exposes an urgent need for successful models of plural communities living together. Today, economic and political developments in Europe are causing major concern in countries of the South. Grassroots, therefore, has become an important participant in Europe-wide social networks, like Kairos Europa, Building Plural Communities, and the European Commission project 'Soul for Europe', whose members are Christians, Muslims, Jews, Humanists and others. Outside Europe, it has particular links with plural communities in the Sudan, South Africa and Sri Lanka: all places where inter-religious hatred and violence are tearing communities apart.

There is a risk that this description makes Grassroots sound unattractively earnest and worthy. In practice, this is not the case. Grassroots' most attractive and accessible characteristic is the priority it gives to friendship. Over the past seven years, it has become an invaluable resource for groups and individuals who are working at the cutting edge. I personally have

known the organisation ever since it set up shop, in 1992. I have visited, telephoned, faxed or e-mailed on countless occasions, on any number of subjects. I have often received help. Always I have received a warm response, a listening ear, and sensible comments.

Friendship is an ecclesial concept which deserves more attention than it gets. The cutting edge is a lonely place to be. For a movement to result in change, forms of networking are needed which are more personal than newsletters, e-mail lists or telephone trees. Such movements need to be communities of people who have a shared agenda, and are committed to helping each other, as individuals, in the exciting but difficult business of taking that agenda forward.

For the friendly outsider, the other really striking thing about Grassroots as a community is the feeling that one is going into an on-going, open theological conversation, which does not dry up, and in which one is invited, as a friend and as part of the network, to join. Sometimes this may result in a sense of excitement and anticipation, of mutual exploration. Sometimes there is a terrifying sense that the distance between the members is so great that the centre will not hold at all. Within a broadly shared practical agenda, there is no hiding place for theological differences, and this leads to a quality of dialogue which - however painful it sometimes is - has, nevertheless, the dangerous excitement of a great adventure.

The geography of the margins

Grassroots has tended to define itself as being 'on the margins' of the Church, working with people who are 'on the margins' of society, and communicating their theological, cultural and political insights back to 'the mainstream'. This has led to an important debate about the concepts 'mainstream' and 'margins'. Are we perhaps wrong in supposing that the core of the Church is what happens on synods, in cathedrals and in church offices? There are strong christological precedents for thinking that the place where the Church is most definitively The Church is at the cutting edge of its mission.

In practice, this is a debate about the nature of the Church. Maybe this kind of radical activity represents a relocation of the centre, as opposed to a departure from it. Uncomfortable with an understanding of church which is defined by mainstream/ margin geography, biblical scholar Ched Myers³ suggests that the infinity symbol offers a helpful model, its continuous backwards/ forwards, inwards/outwards character implying a dynamic conversation which emphasises 'the ec-centric nature of ec-clesia'.

Grassroots is not the only place where this debate is taking place. I have recently finished writing a book marking the end of the World Council of Churches' programme, 'The Ecumenical Decade: Churches in Solidarity with Women'⁴. It has been observed, by men as well as by women, that the Decade's title suggests that women are outside the churches, or (to use the above terminology) 'on the margins' of them. Defenders of the title respond

that this only describes the reality, which is that in terms of leadership, decision-making and sacramental roles, most churches are still male-dominated institutions. 'Nonsense!' comes the answer. 'Women, in effect, are the Church, most congregations would collapse without their attendance and their (mainly unpaid) work, and it is no longer unusual to find local congregations with all-women clergy and a predominantly feminine ethos.'

Once again, one is into a debate about the nature of the Church itself. By pretending that culture and identity are to do with numbers of members, is one ignoring the reality of power and authority, and who exercises it? Because if so, one is hiding one's head in the sand. On the other hand, when making the statement that particular types of people are 'on the margins', is one in fact reinforcing the state of affairs one is trying to change, and providing the institution with a self-fulfilling prophecy?

These questions have everything to do with the feeling of individuals about their Christian identity. As a woman, or as a person deeply committed to inter-faith dialogue, I may feel that I can no longer live with the definition of Christian (or of Christian woman) which holds sway within my own church. How far can I genuinely be said to belong to a church from which I feel so alienated? What I may feel like is a marginal being, poised for flight or fight, whose Christian identity is stretched almost to breaking point by the experience.

The concept of marginality emerges from reflections on institutions and cultures, and like many other ecclesiological questions, the answers are likely to emerge from the discipline of anthropology. Nevertheless, "the margins" is actually spiritual territory. To live there is to experience the wilderness, and the wilderness experience has provided the source-material for the words and deeds of the greatest prophets.

Narrative and struggle

Liberation theology, in its heyday, took Britain and North America by storm, and for a while university theology departments in the North worked assiduously to develop equivalent ways of 'doing theology' in their own contexts. But the liberation theologies of the third world were forged out of blood, sweat and tears. The powers which created the emergency situation were known to everyone. In European countries, the powers often appear to be 'hidden' in the structures of the status quo. In academic departments, individuals are largely protected from the blood, sweat and tears of the poorest and most oppressed members of the community. In conversation, recently, with a well known British theologian, I heard him say, dismissively, 'Oh, liberation theology! All that confrontational stuff about struggle! Very outdated, very eighties.'

Listen to the Grassroots team talking about their own experience in the South, and the word 'struggle' crops up repeatedly. They come from a variety of contexts of real oppression, including a South African township, a

community working for land rights in Brazil, a reconciliation centre in Sri Lanka, an education and peace group in Khartoum and so on. Grassroots' wider network of groups and friends include men and women from a much broader range of national and community contexts in the South. The work in which they have been engaged, and which they have brought into the arena of theology, includes campaigning for economic justice, or for an end to racist structures, or for a decent life for poor people, or for the oppression of women to be recognised, or for reconciliation between different religious communities, or for democratic rights that are exercised without coercion or corruption. They have also worked for change within the churches, which often manage to coexist peacefully (and mutually satisfactorily) with the political structures that support poverty and oppression, violence and injustice. They are no strangers to the theologies of liberation which have emerged from their own contexts in the past decades.

Listening to the present team talking about the work in Britain, however, it is interesting to note that the word 'struggle' is conspicuously absent. "When I think of struggle, I think of South Africa, says a young woman pastor. "But now I am beginning to adopt a new definition. Here, struggle comes out of structure. Here, the plagues are not poverty and violent crime so much as wealth, materialism, suicide. I have to turn myself upside down, because this is the reverse of the plagues with which we struggle in South Africa."

At home, says another member, "you can't help getting involved in the struggle. Here, it's less straightforward. The oppression is not so obvious. Exclusion is just as real, but it is easier to say "don't make a fuss about it". You don't realise you are choosing to be powerless."

"Here," interrupts somebody else, "you don't feel the energy of the struggle. The enemy is hidden in the invisible structures which prop up the status quo, and not many people are competent to question them. It's as if the struggle is what unites you, but you can't struggle unless you can see the enemy."

"But surely groups with an enemy must be weaker," says another. "Are we saying that groups with an enemy are stronger? Because now I come to think of it, that's where my energy comes from. When I know who my enemy is, I feel more engaged. I know what the struggle is". "Otherwise," says the young woman who started this conversation, "Otherwise, how on earth are you supposed to understand the narrative itself, the one you're living in?"

In his ground-breaking trilogy on the nature of the Powers, North American theologian Walter Wink analyses what is happening here. The structures within which we live, he says, are not neutral. Nor are they unchangeable, peopled as they are by human beings not very different from ourselves. They are sustained, however, by invisible principalities and powers, whose biggest confidence trick is to convince us that the status quo they have

created is the norm, and without the status quo of 'the system', we are lost. In *Engaging the Powers*, Wink says:

'An empire is, by its very nature, a system in a permanent crisis of legitimation.... That is why propaganda is so essential to it. People must be made to believe that they benefit from a system that is in fact harmful to them, that no other system is feasible, that God has placed his divine imprimatur on this system and no other.'

Later in the same volume, he compares the European and North American situation with the Babylon experience of the Jews, many of whom found comfort and prosperity in exile, and ceased - in spite of preserving formal religious observances - to provide a liturgical and spiritual space where one can step outside the status quo and see it for what it is.. After 400 years of being ruled by a foreign power, Daniel's prayer to God for help seems to fall on deaf ears (Dan 10) because he is operating from within a system which has convinced him of its own inevitability. His brainwashing by the Persian culture has become, in effect, a form of idolatry. Despite the passion and urgency of his prayers, he can no longer hear the voice of Israel's God.

Being 'on the margins' may be uncomfortable, but it also is a place of privilege, because from there you may be in a position to perceive the nature of 'the struggle'. Jesus prayed that his followers should not be taken out of the world, but protected from its evil (Jn17). Naming the evil of the world is an important dimension of Grassroots theology. A spirituality of struggle involves the creation of physical and spiritual space where this can take place, where "the beast" of the book of Revelation is recognised for what it is, and where holiness and goodness are affirmed. The greatest challenge is how to enable this knowledge to be communicated to the rest of the system.

Holiness and goodness

Grassroots theology, therefore, demands a re-examination of the myths, liturgies and sacraments which define the Church's own 'sacred spaces'. Take the Eucharist, for instance. This holiest and most heavily protected of the Church's rituals re-enacts the story of the last supper, and in the early church it was celebrated by an actual meal: good news, of course, if you were hungry. In today's church, tiny wafers make no dent on physical hunger. Even if you were starving, wolfing down the communion bread would be regarded with shock-horror by clergy and other church-goers. The shared eucharistic meal is primarily a spiritual reality. Just what is going on here, asks Sri Lankan theologian Tissa Balasuriya.

In *Eucharist and Human Liberation*, Balasuriya sets out the case for giving new contexts (or restoring original ones) to the myths that underpin our sacraments. The eucharist, he says, has lost its content by becoming separated from the need to satisfy hunger. The modern understanding of eucharist has been created by the powerful, and the powerful are not hungry. By divorcing the sacramental from the real life concerns and activities of the

poor, the Church loses the opportunity to affirm the holiness that is present in human life. By denying that women are fit to perform sacramental duties, it encourages the lie that what God has created is in fact a two-tier humanity: a lie with which people from the South are only too familiar, having grown up with the racist structures and assumptions of the colonial church.

In Christian circles, the will within the ecumenical movement to bring churches together has led to some vigorous debate about the theology of sacrament. Creation theology has stressed the sacramental character of the planet itself, and defined damage to the environment in terms of the defilement of a holy of holies. Many people feel uneasy about the apparently automatic character of the Church's sacraments, and what they see as the churches' attempt to imprison the God of creation within their own rituals and liturgies. The church itself, surely, is called to be a sacrament of Christ, the ultimate Sacrament. If God is within the community anyway, why then is the community not potentially sacramental? Do we seriously believe that the moment of death may not be sanctified without the administration of 'the last rites'? If the love of God is open to all, if it is God and not the institution who makes things holy, then how can one justify situations in which sacraments are jealously guarded, and admission refused to all but paid-up members of the particular faith group? Many people therefore find the language of sacrament unacceptably exclusive.

Grassroots theology regards the whole of life as potentially holy, but not automatically holy. It is God's grace which makes an experience sacramental, and not the Church and its rituals. The sacraments are among the ways in which God's generous presence is mediated to individuals, and to the community. The point of them is to enable us to name and celebrate what is holy in creation and in human life. The liturgy that matters is the liturgy of our lives, hallowed by the God of our faith. The point about the eucharist is that it enables us to honour all meals, not just the communion meal which happens in a church.

The concept of priesthood is a significant issue for Grassroots theology. All believers, it says, are priests. A former Roman Catholic priest from the South talks of his former unhappiness at being "saddled with monastic spirituality". People say to me, "You left the priesthood?" and I reply, "No, I claimed my priesthood." Paradoxically, the most important task of ordained ministers is to enable the priesthood of all believers. Equally paradoxically, the task of believers is to ensure that their churches are led and organised, their liturgies conducted, and their sacraments administered in ways that stress their relevance to the world.

If all life is potentially holy, and if it is God who makes things holy, then holiness is also contained within those secular or political movements which are pointing towards the kingdom. It is difficult, though. A secular movement, having secular aims, will also have an ideology which, in its

absoluteness, will inevitably bring it into conflict with the kingdom of God. Take, for instance, the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. Christians took part in it because they believed it was a rooted in kingdom values of justice and equality and taking the side of the poor. Many saw the struggle for the new South Africa as a holy war. And yet terrible atrocities were committed in its name. In the struggle against the Nazi regime in Germany, after an immense moral struggle, Dietrich Bonhoeffer made up his mind that his most effective contribution to a kingdom solution would be to murder Hitler.

So of course Christians must be involved in secular movements, and of course they must recognise the sacredness of the struggle. Nevertheless, hard as it is, people of faith must learn to distinguish between the ideology of the movement and the demands of the kingdom of God, and to make judgements accordingly. It is not the movement itself that is sacramental: the point is that sacramental space needs to be created within it, where that which is holy may be affirmed, celebrated, and released into the community of struggle itself.

A hermeneutic of mission

Incarnation, in the theological sense, is always universal, always particular. It is the nature of the kingdom of God that it is incarnate in history, and history is where the narrative of salvation is worked out. The Church, though it is not in itself the primary location for salvation, has a hugely important and challenging role in making 'God's project in history' happen, and in bearing witness to the reality of that project. The world may be the context within which 'God's project is worked out,' and our scriptures and our traditions are the story of this project. Our theology is the attempt to make sense of these, and to draw conclusions about what we should actually do. As the pilgrim people of God, we and people of different faiths are called to make choices, and to be aware that those choices are in some mysterious way important to all humanity.

In an age of globalisation, this scenario is not as unthinkable as it was a hundred years ago. The capacity of the communications industry is becoming bigger by the day. Global movements are supported by the global superhighway. Travel is cheaper and more accessible. The ecological and environmental movements stress the inter-relatedness of our world, and this, along with forays into outer space, has given an objectivity and perspective to our view of the planet. At the turn of the century, this huge canvas is the context of the Church's mission.

Grassroots is the incarnation of the ideal of globalisation in a particular time and place, in the lives of particular people, and the task of Grassroots is mission. Team members from the South are, in effect, missionaries to the North, although they often find that the colonialist associations of this term make it difficult for them to use it about themselves. Personally, they face the pain of becoming outsiders in an alien society, the certainty that they will

be challenged by the diversity that exists within the team, the growing awareness that they will have to change in order to survive. They do it because they believe that the pain of change is part of the one-world experience. Mission is not about newsletters, the internet and international travel. Many people, engaged in mission today, are increasingly realising that a theology of mission inseparable from a theology of incarnation. Incarnation was a risky and uncertain business, and so is mission.

For the churches which support Grassroots, the hope is that it will develop a model of mission which others can use, and which will help move Christians and others in the North towards a new understanding of what 'being the Church' can mean in a rapidly changing, diverse, and increasingly interdependent world. But doing theology, doing ecclesiology the Grassroots way requires courage. There are no easy answers to the challenges, and these can be alarming for churchgoers, who may see the status quo as being founded on unalterable propositions, hallowed by scripture and true for all people at all times. These Christians may well fear that in loosening its monopoly on God, the Church is entering the supermarket world where you buy into whatever religion suits you on any particular day of the week, and that they will be left with nothing but a trendy, 'anything goes' syncretism, in which all that they love and value most about their faith has been thrown overboard.

"Do not be afraid" is one of the most frequently repeated instructions in the bible. In a multi-cultural environment, a central challenge of missiology today is to develop ways of doing theology that are relevant to it, and also models for dialoguing with people who are different from ourselves. God is bigger than any of us can understand from the (necessarily limited) perspective of our own background and experience. Real life, like real history, is many stories. For a Christian, attentive to the meaning of incarnation, a mission orientation depends on perceiving the whole of life as the context for the gracious action of the god of love.

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