

# Identity and Transformation: The Oxford Lectures of Vinay Samuel 1998-2006

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## Abstract

This paper presents some of the key ideas of Vinay Samuel from notes on his lectures given at OCMS from 1998 to 2006. It demonstrates Samuel's struggles with large agendas of transforming cultures through communities, and communities through institutions. Samuel emphasises God's will for his people called to demonstrate diversity in unity. This diversity is the product of the gospel and the true inclusivity that Jesus brought rather than an inclusivity of contradictory beliefs and practices. God's people bring as their gift the Christian scriptures, which are the source and resource for their mission and an understanding of personhood, community, communication, justice, peace, hope, reconciliation, freedom, history, identity and transformation. As the very resource for his wrestling and speculation, God's word and his people (from all cultures and races) are the resource for bringing transformation to people, communities, cultures, and the world. These intense notes are offered to them.

## Introduction

The essays in this collection mark the retirement of Vinay Kumar Samuel from the directorship of the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, after over twenty years of commitment to founding and realising the vision for the centre.

This essay has been developed from notes of lectures taken as they were delivered by Vinay at OCMS from 1998 to 2006. His lectures there, to Christian researchers, have naturally focused on the nature and role of Christian scholarship in the non-western world. My task has been to collect the various notes that I have taken of these lectures as they have been delivered over this period of time, and try and distil for a wider audience the common themes that emerge. I have written the material up as extended prose without referencing particular lectures which are all unpublished. This is to facilitate ease of reading and flow of argument. Most of the language and expression is taken verbatim but inevitably there are areas where connections and some interpretations are

expressed.<sup>1</sup> In most of this presentation Vinay speaks in his own voice, and in his own first person. The underlying theology of mission can be accessed in 'Mission as Transformation'<sup>2</sup> and *Mission as Transformation*.<sup>3</sup>

What we are presented with is very much work in progress, much like Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*: not so much a *magnum opus* of a fully developed missiology, but investigations, questioning, critiquing and then, frustratingly for a systematiser, critiquing the critique. The result is a series of highly stimulating and illuminating studies that spark discussions, argument, and shifts in paradigm. These often made their hearers confess to having their whole framework changed in addressing the whole question: Does Christian faith from a biblical basis really bring change to communities and cultures, and if so how. This is a major challenge today. Can Christian faith change the criminal by dealing with the factors that produce criminality; does it change the alcoholic? Does it change the person who is sexu-

ally unfaithful? Does it change the person who is oriented to those of the same sex?

Vinay tackles large issues in his lectures: Christian engagement in the worlds of development, communication, nation building, political movements, religious pluralism, and academia. We begin with the world of academia.

## **Theological Scholarship**

Vinay holds that our track record as Christians is that while we may have messed up, societies shaped by the Christian faith have enshrined freedom and promoted the economic and social well-being of all far more significantly than any other faith. Yet, despite its enormous output, he is sceptical about the impact and influence of evangelical scholarship. In India Mother Teresa and in the United Kingdom Princess Diana seemed to have more impact on the developments and changes in the culture than evangelical scholarship. One reason is that theology was dethroned in the western academy, so that it has to prove its relevance by the criteria of other disciplines than its own. This suggests a parallel of asking scientific study to prove its relevance entirely and solely in the field of psychology in order to be accorded value. In the areas of social vision, political and economic life and the values of science, theology and in particular evangelical theological scholarship appears to have made little impact.

### **The Nature of True Christian Scholarship**

Vinay's knowledge of the Brahminical world in India alerts him to the fact that knowledge can mean possessing the secret keys to knowledge, which are passed on to an elite. Possession of these keys is a means to maintaining supremacy, ensuring survival and oppressing and enslaving others. The mere fact that scholarship is done on Christian themes by Christians does not protect Christians from themselves using their scholarship to further their careers and position, or from being arrogant. He vividly recalls that Bishop Spong of Newark proclaimed just before the 1998 Lambeth conference that the African bishops were only one step up from witchcraft. By contrast Jesus proclaims that the truth will make you free. We can then define scholarship as a pursuit of truth in weakness and suffering because of commitment to the weak of the world. So then what is the culture of scholarship that will liberate and empower people?

For Vinay, Christian scholarship is a way of reasoning and reflection that reflects a Christian view of the world. The way we reason and reflect is scholarship. Reason is using our minds; reflection is to look at the way in which intellectual thinking takes place. Christian scholarship is to do with ideas, concepts and values (not just the processes of reasoning and reflection) that are drawn from Christian theology and reflect Christian faith commitments. It is a way of understanding what is real. Christian Scholarship is a way of viewing reality, economic, social, and political; both realities that is concretely real and that which is behind concrete reality. It has to do with plausible explanations that make sense, that are seen to be true. It has to do with seeking deeper explanations and giving deeper descriptions of reality, going beneath the surface.

### **Majority World Theological Scholarship: Local or Global?**

Non-western theological scholarship must develop in full recognition that it functions in a global world of capitalism and change. Non-western Christians are part of the same global reality and thus part of the same questions globally: 'We have some particular questions like poverty and religious plurality. But we have the same struggle to make sense of Christian faith against these realities. We need to take seriously the questions of the enlightenment. We cannot bypass them. This is the danger of doing PhDs only in India and Africa without taking seriously the scholarly traditions of the west.' It is for this reason that Vinay engages robustly with notions of building indigenous churches and indigenous theologies. He challenges views of indigenisation, and the role of the non-western church which proceed as though they had no relation to global realities.

If global Christianity is going to be present in the non-western world, then the question is: What is the scholarly contribution of non-western global Christianity to global Christian scholarship. Vinay refuses to allow African, Asian and Latin American Christianities to be confined to their own region. They are all global players. The emphasis on contextualisation must not be interpreted as 'ghettoisation'. There are a number of reasons for this. First: God destroyed the tower of Babel. He was against an imposed unity on humankind. He wanted the diversity of each culture to share its gifts. Each culture must share its gifts internationally.

Second: There is an important difference between indigenous and universal religion. The pressure from the secularised Christianities of the west and north suggests that there will be contextual and local Christianities in each region. This will leave the Christianities of the west and the north free to develop their own cultural Christianities without accountability to global fellowships. This would be to follow the path of indigenous religions. World religions have systems of belief and practice. They are universal, not just for one people and one culture. They are driven by the desire to convert, displace and supplant other religions.

However there are strong historical pressures to counter. The reality is that the producers of intellectual discourse have been in the west. The space for theological enquiry for 2000 years has been occupied by the west. The space that is allowed for mission reflection by the two thirds world is in the field of strategy and practice. The west still dominates the field of intellectual and theological enquiry and production. Those who hold the power, and the funds, do not give enough space for two-thirds world churches and their leaders to do these things.

A focus on the local alone neglects the role of the colonial era in shaping the local. The colonial era defined two-thirds world cultures as primitive and immature. The colonial era meant that two-thirds world cultures could only participate in, not initiate intellectual and theological agendas. So that the indigenous churches can take part in the global theological task, the focus must be on what is universal to the churches. That is the Bible. If Christian scholarship is scholarship done by Christians then the non-western world should be predominant in that production in the future. But it will not follow western patterns. Non-western scholarship will develop not isolated intellectuals but intellectual communities who read each other and produce scholarship.

Such scholarship will engage with important dimensions in their cultures: the honour of God; doubt in the context of faith rather than knowledge; a moral vision for society; resources of the community; the testimony of narrative; and the tension between Christian experience and the sacred text. In particular such scholarship will realise that religious people have keys to unlock Christian treasures because they are far more committed to religion than evangelicals who are shaped by western secularism.

## Religion, Culture and Identity

The secular west destroyed the role of religion in defining society and is now paying for it. So the church needs to consider how to shape society by true religious cooperation. We cannot allow anti-religious secularism to define the public square. Our allies against secularism include moderate Islam. If we do not dialogue with them, Radical Islam will position itself as the only religion able to take on anti-religious secularism. Christians must therefore learn to identify moderate Islam, learn to work with it and create space and opportunity for sharing the gospel.

Every religion has a positive force. God is at work not in systems but in people of other faiths. The moment you say 'My God is at work in you', you are gently opening them up to understanding what he is doing. That is where our evangelism is opening them up to Christ. Western culture has lost the ability to use the word God as the subject of an active verb. But we are God's people and are to look at everything as belonging to God and in the light of God. The struggle for western culture is to make sense of religion. There is a cultural divide between white Christians and people of other faiths who are at home with religion. They still recognise that religion must make sense of our world; that there is order in creation and that religion reveals order in creation. In western societies, religion is marginalised to private life so people do not know how to relate religion to life.

In some religions, there is a desire to flee the world. It is a flight from the alone to the alone in the pursuit of the inner self's liberation from individuality: the flight from everything to drown yourself in something else. In traditional Islam and Judaism there appears an unbridgeable gap between God and the world. Christian faith is unique in the way it embraces the world and seeks to transform the world. Because Christian faith claims that God acts in the world, Christian faith is deeply involved in the world. The present context in the UK is that the struggle for people of other faiths is the issue of identity. As we relate to people of other faiths we must recognise that religious tradition plays a most significant role for them. They see the self-seeking and self-gratification of the world as originating in Christianity.

Our question is how communication with them takes place in such a natural way that it does not offend. They are fellow travellers as we seek to recover the place of religion in our socie-

ties today. We are fellow travellers in religion for society. We can share our perspectives because we believe that God engages in the world and becomes incarnate in Christ. We cannot say that we all share similar convictions. And the experience of people coming together when calamities occur is essentially a contrived experience. We cannot share worship with people of other faiths, because worship assumes so many things that cannot be assumed.

However, we can share our vision of society and family. Christian faith is unique in the way it embraces the world and seeks to transform the world. We can start with the questions of living and sharing in this country. We can get 10-20 families together to discuss how we can help our children. Are the children of Christian families any better than their's in accessing religion in today's world? We can ask Hindus about their response to evil which they hold to be illusory.

We can share that the fallenness of creation is shaped by human sin. We can show how Christ became human to restore the whole of creation, and how his death and resurrection takes the fall and sin seriously. We must not talk with them of sin without relating it to creation. They say the whole of creation is totally flawed and was never meant to be redeemed. We must always speak of creation being redeemed otherwise we slip into Judaism, or Islam or Hinduism. God became incarnate not to satisfy his righteousness but to redeem me. What kind of a Dad gives his child a gift to redeem himself? God humbles himself to redeem creation. Likewise, we can share with Muslims how the gap between God and the world, which for them is unbridgeable, is closed through Christ and his cross. If they begin to understand who Christ is they will have to draw on their cultural resources. They have the keys to unlock our treasures because western Christians are ninety nine per cent naturalists and people of other faiths are far more committed to religion. In an enchanted world, God is around.

Our passion is to understand where they are and share our narrative in a way they understand. I have a right to share my narrative. We should weave our invitation to Christ into the way we share our Christian experience. The separation of invitation from experience was able to take place when a lot of people accepted the basics of Christian faith. We can talk about the resources and renewal of their own religion. The best of Hinduism and Islam will be recovered in the dialogue

with Christianity. We must enable Hinduism to recover the best of Hinduism. It will point people to Christ. Dialogue with Christians will enable Islam to recover the best of Islam.

The work of the Holy Spirit is in people, not in symbols and systems. We should not worry about leaving our conversations and encounters unfinished or incomplete. This will leave them wanting what is really real. We will have implanted the seeds of longing which can only be fulfilled in Christ. At the same time we must recognize that a blinding process also takes place. Evil is also at work blinding people.

Freedom of religion and freedom to choose religion are at the heart of democracy. Religious freedom is a pre-requisite for building a modern nation. We must therefore stress the need for freedom for Dalits to convert from Hinduism and Moslems to convert from Islam. We need to support Christian activity that expresses freedom. But we must take care not to undermine the national role and identity of people. Unfortunately much evangelical work from the west is self interested to establish its own hegemony and seek its own partners. It thereby distorts the evangelical contribution to nation building.

We need allies in our work of nation building. Christians cannot build nations single-handedly. Who are these allies to be? They are often middle class people who are anti-religious and sexually promiscuous. This is precisely the lifestyle that Bin Laden attacks. Christians need to ally with people who believe in God. Therefore our theology of religion cannot be such that it communicates to our partners that we believe they are in total error and darkness. If they do form this impression, they will not work with us.

### **Transforming Culture**

For Vinay, effective transformation has to do with transforming culture. Culture to him, has to do with identity; it enables meaning and is something that people have in common. Culture is a set of subsystems which reflect the collective life of a community. Culture consists of what we share across different groups in a community, and differentiates one community from another. Culture helps us understand continuity and change. It provides significance and provides goals for common action. It is expressed in texts, signs and values. Religious language and moral codes are all examples of cultural subsystems. Those who focus on

development must approach culture holistically, both high culture and low culture, both political and economic behaviour. Culture is an identity shaping forces and, thus, must be taken seriously. It is at the heart of religion and communal values.

The functionalist approach to culture looks at how the different aspects of society are constituted and interrelated to form a cultural whole. It is based on careful field work and observation of how groups behave. It assumes that if you observe something carefully, you can explain it. It is based on the enlightenment view that if you can understand the problem, you can find the solution. It also holds that a person's culture determines their judgments. In this view a development person can only present themselves as a facilitator. But the functionalist approach does not focus on change. The ecological and materialist approach looks at a society's relation to its physical environment. People who work in cold climates have to work hard. They developed science to master nature because they could only grow food in a three month period to feed them all year. People in hot climates with abundant sun and rain all year do not have to work hard. The structuralist approach to culture looks at structures at the heart of culture, which shape different patterns of family life and political power. These are usually binary: male/female, or nature/nurture.

Are we imposing structure on what we see or are we discovering it? Are there universals in culture? Is the notion of sin or of justice universal in all cultures? People are afraid of articulating universals. But people are quite happy to prescribe the universals of freedom or free trade, or sexual preference without having to justify themselves. How do we decide on the universals? Is it through a sacred text or through the decision of the people? Will the experts decide? Is it what has been handed down? If we take the latter approach in the non-western world we will never get out of poverty. Who sets the cultural agenda? Christians should take part in shaping the cultural agenda so that we can shape cultural transformation. We can bring to societies the issues of the role of religion in society, the role of freedom, the place of reconciliation, the role of the state in relation to civil society, and ideas for the solution of poverty. One of the most important theological ideas for Christians to take to societies is reconciliation. Is reconciliation possible without repentance and forgiveness? Is social repentance and forgiveness possible?

Cultural transformation takes place when we examine dominant cultural paradigms (frameworks of explanations) and root metaphors (such as the priority of the male or the sacredness of motherhood) and challenge them in the light of scripture.

There is a culture of poverty that keeps people poor: their habits, customs, systems, ways of thinking and traditions. This view came to the fore after the collapse of communism. A social activist sees such a culture as an asset and seeks to develop what is positive in the culture. But this view is criticized as it seems to make the poor responsible for their poverty. Another view focuses on the culture of the oppressor which needs to be changed.

### **Identity**

Religion is a subsystem of culture (other subsystems are ideology, common sense and rationality). Religion is deeply related to culture, and at the heart of culture is identity. Culture is what makes people comfortable with who they are. That is why we need to look at the forces at the heart of culture, religion, community, families and continuity. Religious identity is now primary for many people. Given the attack on religion by secular forces in the west, it is understandable that the struggle for people of other faiths living in the UK is the issue of identity.

Identity answers the question who am I? Dignity answers the question what am I worth? And transformation answers the question what am I to become? But identity is not just a personal matter. It inheres in communities. So can we talk of the identity of community in the same way as we talk of identity of persons? And then can we talk of transformation in the community in the same way as we talk of the transformation of persons? Does community have a self, a being? God has personhood and is community, as three persons in one God. So we can say that in the Christian view, a community has personhood.

A Christian view of persons is of the inalienable value of a person as someone responsible for their own actions with a free choice. People are responsible for their own destiny. God gives them the conditions and capacity for exercising that choice. Any restrictions on that freedom have to be justified or addressed with relation to the common good. Human flourishing is always personal, communal and related to the common good.

Persons cannot exist without being part of a community. At the heart of personhood are three things: freedom, love and uniqueness. Community is order. The community provides, recognizes and guarantees the identity of a person. And so communities must treat every individual with the same respect as they treat the whole community. Does the encounter with the gospel relativise or reinforce a community's identity? Through the gospel, the identity of community, like that of a person, is cleansed and recovered.

But cultural and community transformation depends on the cleansing and recovery of institutions. Social transformation takes place through the transformation of institutions. We have got to build up the right institutions, address the right institutions and initiate transformation in the right institutions to really see community transformation. Otherwise we are always relegated to personal transformation and transformation in the margins. We need to ask if the major institutions of cultural and community influence believe in God. What is their attitude to religion? Do they draw on transcendence?

### **Towards a Framework for a Theology of Development**

In communicating with the poor, we must use frameworks that are genuinely Christian rather than secular. We tend to think of projects as activities that we must give for the poor. We undervalue the hunger of the poor for ideas. The Kingdom of God is a real kingdom, not just a set of ideas we use to understand our goal or a religious picture of justice, peace and hope as a set of ideas to understand our world. The Kingdom is something that is happening in history. It is here, operative now and rules. We need to understand where in the world the Kingdom is working and link our work and involvement to what God has said he is already doing. This is what the theology of the kingdom is and what development is all about. Christ only knows one history. He is the Lord of all history. There are different dimensions that can be distinguished but not separated. We do not go into development with Christian ideas. Christians go into the world of development and say "Where is God in this world and how do I find him?"

The key theological themes for our involvement in development are justice, peace, hope and grace.

### **Justice**

In the Biblical understanding of justice, if justice is not done, all the foundations of the earth are shaken (Ps. 82.5). The whole of human reality, all the connections between people, nations, resources, nature, and communities are built on relationships of justice. One of the questions to ask of any development activity is - how does it fit into God's understanding of justice? God himself defines justice. He is a judge. This is not limited to individuals. It has to be for all nations.

God presides in an international council. At the heart of justice is something that goes against partiality. Justice is for those who are victims - 'maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed' (Ps. 82.3). Justice also has to do with those who create victims, who impose injustice. "How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality?" God's understanding of justice asks who the victims are and who the villains are.

Justice is restoring people to what God intends them to be. 'Maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed.' This implies identifying their rights, affirming them, advocating them, and delivering them. There is deliverance from spiritual evil, political oppression, and from bad culture. Rights have to do with all these things. There is protection of people from having their rights slowly eroded. Whose rights and what rights are to be defended? There is also accountability to a larger group and towards God. So the components of Biblical justice are delivering and defending rights, maintaining rights and accountability.

### **Peace**

Shalom, peace has to do with restoration of broken relationships. Ephesians 2 10-21 says that Jesus' death on the cross is the means by which God creates a new relationship between hostile and warring communities. The very heart of development is to ask how we can respond to broken relationships, broken by poverty, broken by oppression, broken by injustice to poor people by those who are powerful. Shalom is reconciliation and restoration.

How can we restore those relationships that have been broken? Shalom is not only the process of reconciliation, it is the state of being reconciled. It is a restoration. Reconciliation of the rich to the poor requires spiritual attitudes. It cannot be on the rich's own terms. How can there be reconciliation without forgiveness, and how

can there be forgiveness without the willingness to pay a price? It's very difficult for communities to pay a price. Yet we talk about peace without creating a space for forgiveness.

Development is about reconciliation and forgiveness. As relationships are broken they can be restored because the possibility of forgiveness is always there. Reconciliation should be a public truth that is relevant for all people in society. It is not just for Christians only, but true reconciliation in society is never possible without Christ.

How many development projects have as a goal that shalom should emerge from their efforts; that people will be able to understand what it means to live in reconciliation, dealing with conflict, hostility and difference? Has anyone written a development project with those criteria of success?

Shalom is also to enable things to be as God intended – people trusting each other, building each other up, caring for each other, bearing one another's burdens, walking with each other and being transformed by each other. So shalom deals with hostility, and with things fitting together.

### **Hope**

The third theological theme is hope. Hope deals with the future. Peace and hope flow into and inform each other. Hope is the movement towards the future that enables us to live in the present. Hope operates in the present by informing, energising and empowering the present. Hope operates in the present as empowerment, vision, direction and framework for decision-making. The future is guaranteed so there is for the hopeless signs of what God has already done. God uses hope to motivate and empower us and help us recognize that all our efforts will not fail because we are touched and shaped by grace.

Out of justice, peace and hope four themes emerge: freedom, personhood, grace and stewardship. Freedom is the result of being apprehended by truth, and frees a person from themselves in discipleship and obedience to Christ to serve others; it leads to service rather than self-expression. The biblical understanding of freedom has to do with gift, not something that you pursue and achieve. Freedom in the western understanding is to define the good and pursue it. This is the freedom of the few with the enslavement of the many. We must vigorously resist this with the Christian understanding that freedom commits

me to become a slave of Christ.

Personhood is missing in much development theology. Restoring people's personhood is to restore their identity and location in space, time and social structure. The Trinity is our model of personhood so personhood is always in a relationship. I am not a person unless I know what it is to be in a mutual relationship. Persons are those who learn mutuality.

In the community of the poor, what would people rather have – identity or liberation from economic injustices? Pentecostals succeed among the poor because identity is very important for them and determines their personhood. The gospel has a liberation paradigm and an identity paradigm. My identity as a Christian relocates me and liberates me into a new context. It is relocation to a new identity. Identity always trumps liberation. The gospel relocates the person from being in the context of poverty to being in the context of the Kingdom of God. They were powerless and are now empowered by the Holy Spirit. Christians who get involved in liberation activities without addressing identity change always end up having neither a sustained liberation nor a real identity change. Conversion gives you a new context in which your identity is developed. It energises people to bring justice, rights and hope. They should for example, claim, seek and ask for their rights when they are experiencing an alien identity imposed on them. All these are part of the gospel experience. When people act as if only one aspect were important they are being given a diluted gospel.

A person who comes to Christ in a Pentecostal context has been 'relocated'. The very power of the Gospels starts the process of change. Eventually the person makes it. The person who has been told "this is liberation" gets frustrated because he does not see what the liberation is. He still remains poor and struggles for a goal that continues to recede while the development worker and organizations receive their salaries and funds. That is why we need to define what it is that changes. This requires that we understand personhood and how development builds personhood.

### **Grace**

Grace is a community and social concept. I discover grace as I live in community [the personal pronoun refers to Vinay]. Grace is God's action in your midst giving you what you do not deserve

but enabling and empowering you through the Holy Spirit. The gifts and empowering of the Spirit are an experience of grace. At the heart of grace is God's gift of success which combines with human gifts. Development must provide space for people to experience that God alone can bring change. It is only the grace of God that will eventually break down oppressive systems, break the heart of the oppressor, and bring forgiveness, reconciliation, justice and opportunity.

Finally, we are given responsibility as stewards. We are given talents to use. Without stewardship I will not build responsibility into people's lives. Without grace I will not enable people to believe that they can do it with God and his word. Without freedom I will not be able to enable people to believe they have the right to make choices and people will not have the ability to see what they are liberated from and to. The understanding of personhood helps me to experience identity and liberation, reforming and renewing their identity. I need to enable people to experience a personhood where their identity is relocated into the kingdom, and where they experience true liberation for themselves and for their communities.

## Understanding Communities

How much of the material on community development is based on a secular idea of community? The church is one model of the kingdom, but not the only one. What understanding do we have of the church? There is a belonging dimension and a journey dimension. The church is a pilgrim community, defined by its journey not its boundaries. There are communities that are defined by belonging such as nationalistic communities, and there are communities that are pilgrim communities that are always seeking to become better than they are. Where they are going define them rather than where they are at present. What holds us together as Christians is the journey with Christ to a better land. Communities of the poor need to understand themselves not as those trapped but as those on a journey. Belongingness is important but it is also important to have a journey dimension. The problems arise when the church regards itself as an exclusive community.

Who will define the communities of the future? A most important instrument that shapes community is capital and money. This produces a model of community that everyone aspires to, exclusive gated estates. Will the poor trade their

poor housing and wonderful sense of community for the gated estates that exclude others? If community is constituted by communication, then communication people need to know about a theology of transforming communities. If community has to do with transformation, then development people need to know about a theology of transforming communities.

Community has much to do with what is in the mind of people, with their own self-description. It has to do with the way people see themselves as members of something. Community is a definition that comes out of the mind of people, not that is imposed from outside. Community is not something then that is imposed. It is assumed and accepted.

There is an erosion of the understanding of community in modern states. The modern state emphasizes individual subjective rights. The State is the institution that ensures those rights. The space between the individual and the State is filled with voluntary associations of individuals who monitor and influence the state. So the idea of community fades into civil society. Civil society is these voluntary societies. In modern states it is voluntary associations of people who see themselves as communities. That's why the dominant groups in society today apart from the State are NGOs and the media. These two entities are constantly dialoguing with the state on behalf of individuals and general communities. That is why at OCMS we have post-graduate studies in Development and in Communication. But communities that have existed primordially because of geography or race or because they have had a sense of community for generations, are fading away.

There was also a colonial definition of community. The British saw a huge number of communities in India. So to define and control them they imposed the two categories of caste and religion. They did not allow the communities to define themselves. Ever since then we have struggled with that definition of what a community is. Primordial communities gave way to enumerated, defined, fixed communities. This is the colonial definition of communities that we are struggling with. This definition is in the interests of the State. The State can define and control the community because it can undermine the original community power.

There was also the entry of capital which gave rise to the idea that communities have to progress. A new narrative was born that communities have

to move in a certain direction. So the original social capital that maintained the cohesion of the community was transformed into economic and political capital and made to serve the purposes of progress, modernization, development, economy and political participation.

In India, the very people who were the ruling classes prior to British rule quickly used their social capital to reinvent themselves for their own advancement. The ideas of progress, freedom and participation were all introduced into communities who themselves were much more interested in their cohesion and values. New narratives were introduced to become 'progressive' communities. The idea of communities with history, memories, boundary and strata does not fit into this modern idea of community shaped by capital. These older ideas are under pressure to modify and adapt. Those communities who resist are called regressive or even terrorists. For capital on the other hand, nation is the only community, so the focus is on governance and politics for capital's sake. But for community social capital is the emphasis and so how do we build up social entities to remain strong?

## A Theology of Communication

Theology as sure knowledge is for professors of theology to debate in doctrinal argument arising from the interpretation of texts. I want to focus on theology as wisdom – stories and narrative that make sense of our world – and theology as praxis which focuses on that which brings change and transformation. Theology as praxis looks at the relationships of change, and sees things in the dualities of power, oppression and powerlessness.

There is communication as proclamation because of the assurance we have, and communication as wisdom, because something makes sense. Our communication takes place today in the context of radical 'perspectivalism'. We cannot speak of what reality is, only about our perspective of reality. We live in different contexts side by side, with different ways of viewing the world. For some people it matters a great deal if they do not speak to their mother for a week; for other people it does not matter if they do not speak to their mother for five years. How do we as Christians respond to plurality? This is a challenge to our view of truth and our own identity? Who are we and what do we stand for?

In a culture, communication provides cohesion, continuity, clarity and authority. It is also important to show that what you are communicating is connected with the rest of life. And communication needs to be credible, and therefore be capable of communicating knowledge and truth.

The Bible has three models of communication. There is the *incarnation*, a journey from wealth to poverty, power to powerlessness, taking on a different identity. This enables us to be authentically in different contexts. Incarnation is more than a bridge; it is to be part of two contexts at once. Secondly, there is *discipleship*, constantly learning, discovering, and pointing to the truth. We are not imprisoned in one another's perspectives; we are a sign, which points to the truth. In a world of opinions there is no truth. But as a disciple I point to the truth, live it, incarnate it, believe this not believe that. As a learner we can point to reality even though we cannot define or describe it perfectly. Thirdly, there is *worship*. Christian worship is not trying to relate to God, it is drawing people into the world of God. It is communication as participation in God's activity. It reflects deep communion, the communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The best Christian journalists are those really energized by worship and who can really communicate the quality of that experience through a programme and articles to enable people to enter into communion with God.

Communication is always a public act, communicating public truth in a public space in relation to public good and public evil, truth which cleanses and renews people. Truth will really describe and highlight evil. The theological themes that inform this are the doctrine of creation, in the aspects of personhood, community and creation. The theology of the kingdom helps us to understand that God deals with us historically with both liberation and identity. If our identity is not renewed by relation to Christ, then the force for liberation is diluted. If we renew identity with no liberation, then all we do is market an identity. So communicators should be seeking to frame and reframe issues to create space for the gospel.

## Community

Most of us cannot exist without communities. But all communities do not enable persons to flourish as persons. The philosophical challenge and the theological challenge today is, how do we have communities?

Communities and persons are inseparable. There is no such thing as personhood. Individuals can exist without a community. We are not talking about individuals. We are talking about persons as people with identity, dignity, and a desire for transformation. Persons cannot exist without being part of a community. But all communities do not enable persons to flourish as persons.

We are embodied persons. At the heart of personhood are freedom, love and uniqueness. These three fundamental qualities make us persons. The first is the ability to make free choices. We are not animals, we can make free choices. The second is the ability to enter into loving relationships, out of freedom and love. The third is the ability to be unique, i.e. we are not like anybody else. There has to be only one Vinay Samuel in the whole of creation in the past, the present and the future – it cannot be repeated. Our unrepeatable-ness, that we are unique. we will never be cloned; that is a sense of personhood; that is personhood.

However, the tension is between order and freedom. My personhood comes out of my making these free choices, free relationships, and being an individual with rights. Yet I cannot do this unless I'm part of a community which is the community of order. My freedom is only in relation to order. Freedom is defined by the community. What is community? Philosophically, it is the organized totality of human relationships. It is defined by the group. A person is subordinate to the organized whole. The organized whole, i.e. the community, provides and guarantees the identity of a person. It confirms me as a self, my uniqueness. You know, I cannot claim I'm unique. Somebody else has to name me and say, 'You are Vinay Samuel'. I cannot keep claiming that. Some state will have to, if somebody else claims that name, say, 'No! We recognize only one Vinay Samuel, that one, not you.' So my selfhood, my uniqueness, all these are, really, recognized by the community, this organized totality of human relationships. Personhood is contingent on community.

Does community itself have a self, have a being? Or is community just a collection of all of us? These are some deeply important philosophical questions that we have to think through, otherwise we'll be making wild statements about community transformation, social transformation, and using the language of community without being scholars who are careful with the way we use words.

Theologically we talk about community and

the common good. Community has to do with the common good, the goods we share in common, not only my personal rights – but common rights, the common good, what is commonly shared. The community holds the common good. Is truth a common good or is truth personal? Are values a common good? These are all theological questions. Is personhood being, or an expression of being? Do we use the word, 'God is a personality', or 'God has personality'? That means we're saying God, by very nature, has personhood. And personhood in the Trinitarian God – God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – means God is community. So community has a personhood, and we can talk of communities as persons. We can treat communities with the same respect as we treat persons. The opposite is true as well: communities must treat every individual with the same respect as they treat the whole community. Community can never say the community is far more important than the individual, the individual is only a fraction of the person – the community is the whole person.

A Christian understanding of Trinity and community raises some of these theological questions. A person's self for example, is not something that is inside us, but that which is in a communicative relationship with others. Self is that which is always in communication. Self is not that isolated thing called the soul which is in complete isolation. It is in constant communication with God, against God, or with other people – hence, it is a communicative self. The community is that which provides communication and helps us to have a real sense of self. Many people talk of lack of self-esteem. Lack of self-esteem is not something that is internal to the person himself, even though sometimes psychiatrists think that way; it has to do with their situation in a community and the possibility or the lack of possibility of communication, which continues to strengthen and build the self. So community is very important indeed. So persons are in social time and space. A person is a social concept. It is not an individualistic concept. And therefore, it's a community concept. It is in the social world that we construct ourselves.

Can we talk about the character of a community? All these are theological challenges. Let me turn to some Biblical responses. Theologically, we have constantly been affirmed in the knowledge that the Church is a community. It's a counter-cultural community of disciples who are primarily addressed by God's laws and impact. God's laws, God's values, the Kingdom of God, are primarily

addressed to the community called the 'People of God' which is to be a counter-cultural community, a community of the Kingdom of God in the midst of all kinds of human communities. (Romans 11:1-2)

Samuel examines the Biblical understanding of community here. Romans Chapters 9-11 is a critically important section, where Paul thinks through two communities: the Jews and the Gentiles. He sees first the question of identity, dignity and transformation. Identity has to do with who I am. Dignity has to do with what I am worth. Transformation has to do with how I change, where I go, what I become. So the three aspects of identity, dignity and transformation are important for individuals and for community: Who am I? What am I worth? And, where am I going?

The same is true of community in the Biblical sense. Identity is first. Jews and Gentiles both start with a given identity. What does Paul say about the given-ness of the Jewish and Gentile identity? Does he say, 'Your identity as a Gentile is reinforced, your identity as a Jew is reinforced? Or is it relativised? Does the encounter with the Gospel relativise or reinforce a community's identity? This tension continues in mission and transformation. Lamin Sanneh talks about the possibility of both, though he stresses the reinforcement and recovery of identity. In his book, *Translating the Gospel*, he talks about how when the Gospel comes to a community, and addresses its identity, by sharing the Gospel in the community's own language it enables that identity to be recovered. He does not talk adequately (in Vinay's estimation) about how that identity is judged and how aspects of it are discarded, how it is reinforced, recovered and then reinterpreted and relativised.

As far as the Gentiles are concerned, Paul says, your identity as Gentiles is not rejected. It is not entirely recovered. It is cleansed and recovered: i). It is reinforced - you are Gentile Christians, you have not become Jewish Christians. ii). It is reinterpreted - you are no longer Gentiles in the same way you once were, you are a different kind of a Gentile who does not any longer believe in that same god; you're following in a different path. iii). But it is also relativised - you can not use your Gentile identity to define yourself any more. You are more than a Gentile. You are a Christian Gentile now. You're a Christian; you've been given a universal dimension. iv). You are transformed and have been given a transforming power by the work of the Holy Spirit who enters into your iden-

tity and introduces transformation.

So, we have been transformed to be inclusive. This identity of Jews and Gentiles becomes a community which is mutually transformative with mutual accountability and support. This is a brilliant way of looking at these two communities, and Paul focuses on that very much in the Jew and Gentile situation. In Romans Chapters 9-11, and of course in the gospels, we have the whole understanding of a universal community. Firstly, there are particular communities like the Jews and Gentiles. Secondly, in the Bible, you have the universal community which is the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God, the Church, is the universal community. In its local expression it is always particular - it could be a Gentile church, it could be a Jewish, African or Asian church. But there is a definition of it which is universal. It is a universal community.

The universal community and the community narratives have universal Biblical content and historical particular content. We need to relate the two. For example, our character as Christians is the same. The ethical content is universal. Is it particular? There is a degree of particularity. Let's look at the Jews and Gentiles. There was an ethical dimension: the ethics for Jews and Gentiles were universal, all of them had to do the same thing, whether you were a Jew or a Gentile. Whether you were an Arab, a Greek, a Chaldaean, or from any part of the globe at the time, you still followed the same ethic. But there were certain concessions for your particularity. The Jews did not eat pork, but the Gentiles could be allowed to eat pork.

So there were certain particularities, and that kind of a degree of ethics - both historical: universality with particularity. This is one of the problems as we begin the study of what homosexuality is. Some people are saying, 'It may be alright for you, but it's not universal. Homosexuality is a particular thing for particular communities at a particular time, and that is the real struggle.' We have to recognise that's a real challenge, we can't just dismiss it and say, 'Aaaarrgh, its not right.' No, we do have to say, 'Hold on, is it really - does the Bible really say it's particular, and not universal?' Thus, it is a very important struggle between the universal community and the particular community of churches. It is critically important. If the Church cannot define these relationships between the universal and the particular, clearly we have very little to communicate to the world today.

## Unity and Diversity in the Christian Community

There is much emphasis today on diversity. What is the Bible's understanding of acceptable diversity? Acts 2.9-12 puts it this way: Parthians, Medes and Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphilia, Egypt and parts of Libya near Cyrene, visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts from Judaism), Cretans and Arabs, we hear them declaring the wonders of God in their own tongues. At this significant event in the constitution of the Church of God, we have a glorious picture of its diversity in unity: hearing and receiving the same good news in diverse native languages, joining in common praise to God and experiencing his miraculous presence and acts. As the Church grew among different ethnic groups and geographical locations, St Paul would later describe it as the "mystery of the Gospel" that Gentiles (a word used to describe all ethnic groups other than Jews), are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers in the promise in Jesus Christ. (Eph. 3.6).

What are the implications for ethnicity? When used to describe a community, we mean that a community has certain features that are a stable core: cultural features and psychological traits that distinguish a community from other communities and persist through time and space. This definition stresses the given inherited nature of ethnicity and assumes there is a fixed unchanging core to the identity of a community. Some ethnicity definitions focus on belonging to a group. Membership of an ethnic group does not confine you to one place, nation or religion. It focuses on shared origins and traditions.

The USA stressed assimilation - one nation out of many. The only identity allowed to emerge out of immigrant cultures was an American identity. The Europeans however, influenced by the French Revolution, stressed tribal and ethnic identities which were recognised by the state. Recently the US has moved away from assimilation to multiculturalism - recognising and affirming the integrity of the culture of an ethnic group. Multiculturalism has been the dominant policy for the last 30 years. In colonised nations in the 20th century new nations emerged and stressed their national identities. In the past 20 years these are being overtaken by cultural, ethnic and religious identities. This represents a strong desire to preserve

values, traditions, and some styles of behaviour inherited from parents and grandparents. Facing racial and cultural prejudice as minorities, communities stress their ethnic identity as a defence against prejudice and hostility. For many Christians in minority communities, there is an increasing understanding that their ethnicity is God's gift and they must discover how God will use it for the common good. Our affirmation and celebration of our ethnicity must also relate to our universal identity as humans created in God's image.

### Human Diversity

The biblical narrative that seeks to explain diversity of human languages and cultures is Gen. 11.1-9 the story of the Tower of Babel. The story identifies the central drive of human culture as a drive for autonomy from God, banishing God from his own creation. In a free fall from the Garden of Eden, human pride wills greatness for itself even to occupying heaven. As Calvin noted it is to make earth as heaven. It is to ensure the name and fame of the human community.

There is no suggestion in this narrative that God's judgment of sowing confusion and causing dispersion of humanity is a judgment on different languages, diverse cultures and ethnicities. Different languages and cultures are not the result of God's curse. God uses them later as vehicles to praise him (Acts 2) and to respond to him in their cultural identities (Acts 15). Languages and cultures on the contrary are God's gifts to address the pride and violence of human culture. No one language or culture becomes exclusive and dominant thus driving humanity to a godless future. God's gifts to humanity are received and refracted through different cultures, leading to mutual correction, accountability and dependence and so reflect God's purpose for humanity.

Fallen cultures continue to seek exclusiveness, where distinctiveness becomes an excluding mechanism. They seek to dominate the world leading to oppression, violence, ethnic cleansing and holocausts. The history of the world is littered with cultures, civilizations that considered themselves as final and enduring forms of human society on earth. It continues to be a feature of some contemporary societies and generates ethnic violence.

In the Old Testament there is a clear affirmation of the unity of humankind from the one set of parents and one act of creation. There is also the

recognition that diverse communities developed from that beginning. There is no hint to suggest that such a development was the result of God's curse or a legitimate outcome. What is stressed is the freedom of God to use any community, the Israelites, the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Egyptians and Persians for his purpose. Each is considered as part of God's universal family. Through his chosen people in Abraham, God proposes to bless all nations. The dispersal of humanity in Gen. 11 is followed immediately by God's announcement of the promise of Abraham in Gen. 12. The promise focuses on all nations. The beneficiaries of the promise are the very nations created by the dispersion of Gen. 11. Abraham is the instrument to bless all nations (cultures). Intercommunity relations are to be based on mutual blessing rather than fear and hostility.

In the Old Testament no culture is privileged at the expense of others. The choice of Israel as God's people is not predicated on their superior or exclusive culture but on their marginal status among the peoples of the world. They are to be instruments of God for the blessing of all peoples of the world. The diversity of humankind is founded in the one God of all peoples. God is not geographically or ethnically bound. He is not an ethnic God like other gods but is the God of all 'ethnicities'.

The universality of the one God is not a homogenizing unity. It is affirming and inclusive of all ethnicities. The wholeness of human diversity is founded on the universality of the one God of all. Without it human diversities will become violent and destructive. Any distinct ethnic identity needs a universal grounding if it is to be the source of blessing to humankind as God intends rather than a source of conflict. This universal grounding is not a liberal notion of our common humanity but recognition of the one creator God who created humans in his image, and purposes they be united in him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together (Col. 1.17)

### **Human Unity**

Pentecost is the event, which inaugurates the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham affirming the unity of humanity through the Spirit and in Christ in the midst of the diversity of 'Ethnic Identities'. The curse on human hubris which began at Babel is addressed in the blessing of the Spirit at Pentecost.

The Holy Spirit provides the universal grounding for our Christian identity as Children of God. Jews and Gentiles with their different ethnicities are all "Abraham's seed" "heirs according the promise' (Gal. 3.29) But the reception of the Spirit and affirmation of our identity as members of God's family also relativises our ethnic identities by placing them in proper perspective. Paul writes "you are all Sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus . . . There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free male nor female for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 2.26, 28). The Oneness gifted by the Holy Spirit is the goal of every ethnic identity. No ethnic identity is an end in itself. It is the context in which the Holy Spirit demonstrates his power to create and sustain human unity.

This is a central theme in Paul's teachings. In Ephesians 2.15, Paul writes that God's purpose is to create a new humanity out of the divided and mutually hostile human communities. This is the mystery of the Gospel that through Christ shed blood on the cross (Eph. 2.13) and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2.22), the church will display the human unity God intends to demonstrate through his people to both heaven and earth.

Human unity is predicated on our common human personhood in biblical teaching. Every human being is created in God's image. That is the source of our personhood. That is also the basis of our moral accountability. The entire regime of universal human rights assumes there is a universal acceptance of the meaning of what a human person is. It is only in biblical religion this is clearly affirmed and becomes the basis of God's dealings with humanity as a universal category.

Biblical teaching is unique in stressing the whole person - body mind and spirit. Seeing personal identity in a disembodied spirit as some faiths do devalues our cultural /ethnic identities which are physical, tangible expressions of personhood. A biblical view of personhood takes human cultures seriously and so affirms our cultural identities. Our cultural diversity is also grounded in our common personhood as creatures made in God's image. So we are responsible for each other and to each other as 'neighbours'. The idea of neighbor is only possible within the understanding of our common personhood.

### **Human identity**

The idea of identity is at the forefront of today's cultural struggles. There is much support for affir-

mation of cultural identities. There is also as much fear as affirmation. Socio-cultural and religious identity struggles continue to be at the heart of much contemporary violence in all the six continents of our world. Some movements seem to be dedicated to using identity to cultivate and promote conflict.

Biblical teaching affirms the following: i). Our common human identity as human persons made in God's image is God's gift to us. ii). Our ethnic identities are developments in human history and products of human culture. There is no clear teaching in the Bible that they are created by God. But human creations can also be part of God's purposes. God takes the created ethnic/cultural identities and firstly does not privilege one over the other; secondly he prevents identity conflicts from destroying humankind and through the work of his Son Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit creates a basis for the inclusion, embrace and transformation of all ethnicities. iii). While ethnic identity is not the result of God's curse in biblical teaching the work of Christ on the cross has relativised all ethnic identities. Here biblical judgment is on the way ethnic identity is fixed by communities and used to oppress, marginalize and enslave other communities. Cultural judgments replace God's law in our relations with other communities. Biblical Teaching stresses that Christ's death deals directly with the sinful human condition.

Ethnic identities in Christ are then released from their own enslavement to prejudice and violence and become the basis for making a new humanity where the gifts of each ethnicity renewed and transformed contribute to the transformation of all humanity.

### **Faith and Ethnicity**

The growth of ethnic churches among Diaspora people indicates that ethnicity is a key factor in the identity of a local church. Ethnic churches are the sites where Christians from minority ethnic backgrounds worship together but also sites for preservation, transmission and production of ethnic cultures. It is the ethnic church which provides the legitimating of some ethnic practices though they are no longer common in the majority culture like obedience to parents, gender roles etc. It is the ethnic church which provides a spiritual basis for moral values and norms. It even sacralizes them. It provides a Christian worldview

related to ethnic culture.

The local church is the local community for most Christians from minority ethnic cultures. It has a significant role in shaping and transforming ethnic identities of its members. It is essential that the church is equipped with adequate biblical teaching for this task. It is possible that much of what happens at present is an unreflected assertion of ethnicity with the resulting marginalization of women, youth and children seeking to relate given ethnic traditions to contemporary life and challenges.

God is building his house of many rooms. I believe this is a metaphor about many ethnicities that will be part of the Church universal. The work of the Holy Spirit is both creative and unifying. The Spirit in freedom facilitates the development of the unique gifts of each culture. The Spirit addresses the fallenness of each culture, the areas where evil has got embedded, judges it and transforms it. The Spirit moves to express the unity of God's people in developing mutuality through submission and service.

Is the work of the Holy Spirit described above evident in our churches? This is a serious question for us. The New York Times Magazine had an article on Pentecostalism by Benjamin Anastas. Writing on the Azusa Street Centennial program, Anastas reminds us that Charles Fox Parham who introduced William Seymour to the tongue-attested baptism was 'horrified at the race-mixing' he witnessed at Azusa Street and turned to the Ku Klux Klan in later life.' Edith Blumhofer of Wheaton College says 'Pentecostalism is just like every other religion in that respect. It can promise Heaven, but it can't change the world.' Can we affirm that this is not the whole story; that the promise of the Spirit is all its fullness is being experienced in our churches?

It is here we must recover the biblical teaching of reconciliation. Col. 1.19-20 states that God reconciles all things through Christ's blood shed on the cross. Christ's work of reconciliation has both vertical and horizontal dimensions. As sinners we are reconciled to Christ. As sinners whose sin includes hostility, prejudice and violence to neighbors, Christ's work of reconciliation enables us to be reconciled to our neighbors. Reconciliation is to restore and reconnect all that has been ripped apart by human sin. Communities were meant to be connected to each other for mutual flourishing. Sin as seen in the murderous act of Cain brought violence, anti-life attitudes and mur-

der in human relations. God sets limits on human violence so that it will not consume all of humanity. Further God sends his Son to reconcile the world. At the heart of reconciliation is forgiveness which opens the way for restoring and transformation. Christian churches must demonstrate the practical experiences of reconciliation in their own ethnic relationships and share this as God's gift through them to the world.

### **Celebrating our Ethnic Diversity for the World**

It is not enough to celebrate our ethnic particularity in our ethnic churches. It is necessary to explore, discover and receive all the particular gifts of God through his Spirit. God wants to give these gifts to our ethnic community for the edification and sanctification of all. We must continue to rejoice in and renew and transform our ethnicities as God's people.

However, it cannot end there. Affirmation of our ethnic identities is not the goal of the kingdom. It is a fruit of the work of the Spirit. The goal is the emergence of the new man in Christ made out of many. A new humanity where all ethnicities developed by human creativity are relativized, renewed and find their rightful place and play their appointed role in the proclamation, demonstration and reception of the kingdom of God.

This requires moving beyond our ethnicities. How do we do this? Firstly, we must become uncomfortable with our bounded identities. We find security in them from prejudice and hostility. We find assurance that what is uniquely ours will not be lost to future generations. But for Christians a further calling to find true unity in the diversity of God's house as our gift to this divided world must make us explore beyond our cultural boundaries. Secondly, we must start connecting, relating and developing relationships of mutual-ity of accountability and service. Thirdly, we must begin to address the embedded evil in our cultures – the prejudices seeded by the evil one, the attitudes sacralised by our pride and will to rule, our blindness and incapacity to see others as God sees them. Fourthly, we must make this a priority in our churches.

#### **Social Capital**

That is where the concept of the social capital becomes critically important. For the church,

social capital is an important resource. The social capital of the community is that which it holds as the resource for its transformation. And I use the word social, not merely in the context of horizontal; I use the word social in the fullest possible sense – both spiritual and social and economic: all the relationships; all the values; all the characters. That, which is created by our relationships and our coming together by our sense of unity, is the social capital.

A community's dignity is its social capital. When there is a deficit of the social capital, that community has its dignity threatened. The dignity of that community is threatened when its social capital is incapable of dealing with the challenges of society. If a community is struggling to deal with the political challenges, with the social challenges, or HIV-AIDS, it is beginning to realise that it no longer has the social capital to struggle to deal with its own self worth and dignity.

One of the key issues now in China is the weakness of the social capital of present Chinese society. How is it seen? Chinese societies were never as corrupt as they are today. China is unable to control corruption among its own people or to discipline its young. Inability to control, in the sense of discipline and in the sense of identity means that you are beginning to lose out, and you feel ashamed of yourself. You feel ashamed of the stories of your culture. When people talk about you and say, 'Aaaarrgh, those people can never be trusted, give them money today.'

One of the saddest things for me was when I attended a meeting with (Chancellor of the UK Exchequer) Gordon Brown. He was announcing the international finance facility. The head of the Jubilee 2000 campaign was talking about a letter he received, which said in 2000 when the campaign resulted in 23 Highly Indebted Countries of Africa having all their debts forgiven, I was delighted and I wrote to you saying, we won! The Jubilee campaign achieved its purpose! Three years later, I saw a report in the newspapers which said that all those countries are now, three years later, more indebted than they were before their debts were forgiven. How can you have a sense of dignity when as a country, as a community, you are told you can't cope with life? Your social capital as a community is incapable of dealing with the pressures. That's the meaning of social capital – and it is to invest in the building up of social capital so that the community is not weak, but strong.

And that is what the Church is all about. It is

full of the social capital which the Holy Spirit enables to flourish. Generated by the Spirit of God, by Grace, in relationships of love, reconciliation, compassion, commitment, forgiveness – these are the things that help regenerate the social capital.

## Community and Transformation

Biblically, I believe there are two movements: one, a vertical movement of transformation, the other is a horizontal movement of transformation. The vertical movement is transformation into greater and greater understanding, greater truth, greater knowledge, and greater exploration of God's purposes for us. It is much more an understanding of God's purpose and God's desire, moving towards Him. It is the transcendence of a community, the movement of a community upwards in a sense closer to God, and closer to reality.

The other movement, horizontal transformation, is in the area of your own change in social systems, in the understanding of and ability to deal with sin, corruption, social breakdown, selfishness, and ability to build up systems which both have order, as well as enable people to flourish. In the way in which transformation takes place, there are three tools:

i). History: A community's own sense of understanding is through its history, in the way it understands and draws on its history and in the way it devises narratives to explain its identity. Its own identity and history can be a powerful force of transformation, not merely as a positive source, but also as a negative source. We were like this, we don't want to be like this. If our relationship, if the way we treat our women and children was terrible, we must overcome that negative damage of our history, and move forward. We keep rewriting our history and making it positive. One of the wonderful abilities the Church gives to people and the Gospel gives to communities is the ability to deal with history realistically, to use it as a transformational resource rather than as something that masks their real history.

ii). Memory: We can produce imaginary memories, how we memorialise our community. What are the memorials, the signs, the icons, the symbols of the community that can be powerfully transformative rather than merely affirmative?

iii). The role of institutions in community transformation: Communities don't get transformed by individuals. Communities are transformed primarily by institutions. All the sociological studies today

suggest that it is institutions at the heart of culture, at the heart of communities, which are the sources of culture production and cultural transformation. There are two types: the institutions which are at the heart of culture, heart of communities, and institutions which are at the margins of communities. Can we produce new institutions which can transform culture from the margins? That is the thesis of social transformation of a lot of Christian evangelical groups – at least, in the non-western world. We are a marginal small group, we are in the margins, but we have the Gospel, and from the margins, we will transform. Is it possible for marginal communities ever to transform the larger community? Can they transform themselves as marginal communities, because they're always in the margins, and they're always under pressure from the larger institutions which define them and destabilise them overnight? Or do we build bigger institutions?

So, social transformation happens through institutions. Many times we tend to forget, especially as evangelicals – believing that as long as you transform people, cultural communities get transformed. No! We've got to build up the right institutions, address the right institutions, and initiate transformation in the right institutions, to really see community transformation. Otherwise, we are always relegated to personal transformation and transformation in the margins.

Two the most secular countries in the world are Britain and South Korea. South Korea is in fact more secular than Britain. And here, we talk about all the wonderful growth of the Church in South Korea. Why? Fundamentally in spite of all the wonderful church growth, cultural transformation is not taking place because the institutions which produce culture, which define culture, which transform culture, the Christians have abandoned and have never taken over. They are busy building mega-churches, not culture, whereas culture was being taken over by secular people. It's as simple as that.

The same thing is happening in the US. In this country too (UK) – if you take the major institutions of cultural influence and community influence, ask: do they believe in God? Do they draw on transcendence? In fact, what is their attitude to religion? Negative. So, cultural transformation and community transformation does not take place without capturing institutions.

### **Acts as a Mission Resource for Transformation**

Acts addresses three missiological issues: Church and mission, mission and scripture, and the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ in the context of other cultures and religions. It shows clearly that only as a Church practices mission does it understand theology.

Mission is the mission of the God who sends. From chapters two to thirteen we see that God sends. It is his mission. The framework of *missio dei* is the framework of salvation history, promise and fulfilment, the fulfilment of God's promise. Scripture is the evidence of promise, and the activities of mission in scripture (and in later history) are the evidence of fulfilment. So mission is the expectancy of the fulfilment of promise. This is not a matter of conceptual certitude. God has promised in history and has acted to bring the fulfilment of the promise. This fulfilment is in history, not outside. So angels ask the disciples after Jesus' ascension: 'Men of Galilee, why look into the sky. This same Jesus will come back.' The consummation is not a flight from the world or history. This provides the framework to interpret the world, to reinterpret the history of God's people, and interpret all the past on the basis of the future. So the world is given the freedom to kill God's Son. The world has interpreted history in such a way that it uses its freedom to kill God's Son. But the early sermons in Acts say: Look at it this way, the world loses. Paul reinterprets the dominant Greek culture.

The Spirit who partners the disciples in their mission is God and is poured out indiscriminately on everyone in the church. The mission of God is directly commissioned by God. No further commissioning is necessary. You do not need anyone to tell you to go and do mission. It happens. Mission is recognised not initiated. We have here the beginnings of the Trinitarian shape to mission: the Father sends, Christ achieves, and the Spirit enables. The poor were not neglected. Their needs became significant and central. The disciples responded to human need.

The question of leadership was very important. Seven spirit filled people were commissioned as evangelists to respond to the needs of the poor. They were not just social workers. We also see leadership that undermines mission in the story of Simon Magus. How easy was it for Simon Peter to denounce Simon Magus. How the church has changed in that money defines and

shapes mission today. If mission is releasing and witnessing to the power of God, then power is not self-authenticating. Power is primarily for conversion. Power is not for power's sake, it is to enable people to do mission. Leadership has to deal with power. So the question is how power becomes the servant of the church. Peter rejects all earthly power. He had absorbed from Jesus Christ a whole set of attitudes about money and power.

Persecution is a hallmark of mission. When the church suffers, it grows. As the church faces suffering it expects to grow and does grow. Is the growth of the church without persecution appropriate growth? Persecution ensures the quality of growth as well as numbers.

Proclamation is simple witness at every opportunity. The disciples engaged in a spontaneous and simple witness. They did not engineer the accompaniments of outcomes or outputs. There are no definitions of what the outcomes will be. They will be whatever God gives. But the goal of all witness was conversion. In some cases there were miracles (which is what attracted Simon Magus) in other cases there were no miracles (as in the case of the Ethiopian Eunuch). One set of cases was not seen as any more or less acceptable as the other. There was also the involuntary strategy where the church was scattered by persecution and the word of God was scattered. So there was indiscriminate mission. This was strategy by surprise. God surprisingly allowed persecution, the church was scattered and so the word of God was scattered. Luke's use of 'the word' shows that there was not only the witness of events but also sharing the word. People are the bearers of the word. As they scatter the word, that produces mission.

With Paul, a clear strategy emerges. Paul goes to cities, centres of communication, and to places of worship. He goes to temples and to places where people debate. He begins an important process of planning, programming and strategising. He said, 'Let's go to the riverside where people are gathered.' Paul was dealing with the ancient and arrogant culture of the Greeks, and behind them of the Persians. He did not deal with it on an ad hoc basis but with a strategy. He took the view: "My God is already at work ahead of me." This view opens people up to the gospel.

The conversion of Paul the persecutor to Paul the proclaimer is paralleled by the conversion of Peter. Peter, the Jew, was converted to a univer-

sal gospel. The decision of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 was mind-boggling: to let the Gentiles who had not been shaped by thousands of years of God's word as God's people, develop their own form of Christianity. What gave Peter the confidence that other cultures could do as good and as faithful a job in expressing the Christian faith? What made him say, 'this gospel came to us, but we will give it to them do develop as they like?' The confidence was in the Gospel, not in the missionary; the confidence was in God's action among the Gentiles. This confidence probably came from Paul's confidence that God was already at work. For Paul had discovered God was at work in people he despised and persecuted. The very people whom Paul thought were enemies of God were the people among whom God was working. The local church could have a global mission and send people out. This was not congregationalism, for the congregation had a universal vision.

When Paul is before Felix he is dialoguing with the state. He insists that he has done nothing against Caesar or the Jews. Christian mission is no against the state, it is against the powers. Mission makes universal claims for Jesus and the universal significance of Christ for all the powers is a continuing theme in the church. While this entire mission is going on – moving from spontaneity to strategy, expressing concern for the poor, experiencing persecution, there is theology being worked out. We see a theology of gospel and culture being worked out in chapter 15. We see Peter in chapters 10 and 11 experiencing Gentile conversions and working out how Gentile Christians relate with Jewish Christians. We see a theology of mission in relation to the State in terms of the relationship of Jesus as *kurios* with other lords. There is a constant interplay here between theology and practice. Only as a church practices mission does it understand theology.

## Conclusion

This essay has ended with an overview of the Book of Acts. Vinay hardly ever lectured without

reference to a biblical passage of more than a few verses – sometimes a chapter, sometimes a whole book. He was always referring to and reflecting on biblical passages. As he has argued above, the Word of God is the universal that all Christians share. The Word of God has been his constant resource for reflection. As a result his thought is dynamic, regularly putting contemporary matters of Christian mission in the world in a new light. Thus this essay only hopes that it has captured the reflections offered at the time. More are bound to come.

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## Notes

1 Readers wanting to access his earlier work are referred to Chris Sugden, *Seeking the Asian Face of Jesus* (Oxford: Regnum International 2000) and Chris Sugden, *Gospel, Culture and Transformation* Chris Sugden, (Oxford: Regnum International 2000).

2 Vinay Samuel 'Mission as Transformation' in *Transformation* (19) 4, October-December 2002, 243-247

3 Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden (eds.) *Mission as Transformation* (Oxford: Regnum 1999)