Energising Community:
Theological Education's Relational Mandate

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1. Introduction

In his delightful and deceptively simple book, *Christianity Rediscovered*,[1] Vincent Donovan told of his work among the Masai people of East Africa, who appeared to have no interest at all in Christianity despite the best effort of the church through education and medical outreach. So he told his bishop that he would dissociate himself from these and would 'just go and talk to them about God and the Christian message.'[2] For one whole year, once a week, he spent an hour in the early morning talking to all the members of one particular tribe. At the end of the year, he asked them whether they would decide for Christ, and if so, baptism would follow. But he told them however that baptism would not be automatic for everyone, but only those who have really listened to and understood the gospel message. Those who have missed many sessions, or are deemed to have little understanding or scarcely believe would not be baptised. At that point, the tribal leader, Ndangoya, stopped him gently but firmly and said:

> Padri, why are you trying to break us up and separate us? During this whole year that you have been teaching us, we have talked about these things when you were not here, at night around the fire. Yes, there have been lazy ones in this community. But they have been helped by those with much energy. There are stupid ones in the community, but they have been helped by those who are intelligent. Yes, there are ones with little faith in this village, but they have been helped by those with much faith. Would you turn out and drive off the lazy ones with the ones with little faith and the stupid ones? From the first day I have spoken for these people. And I speak for them now. Now, on this day one year later, I can declare for them and for all this community, that we have reached the step in our lives where we can say, 'We believe.'[3]

The statement by Ndandoya, 'We believe,' says it all!

The organisers of this consultation have referenced our topic to the book, *The R Factor*, by Michael Schluter and David Lee,[4] which highlights the importance of relationship and community in society, especially in government and the marketplace. The book served as a powerful critique of the modern industrialised world of today, and argues that only through the restoration of 'relationism' in society can there be true personal fulfilment and a stable global order. The conceptual framework of 'relationism' clearly derives from the Christian values of the co-authors. But it is significant that the historical genesis of the book also came out of Africa where both authors worked in their younger days![5]

2. Defining the Problem--Western Individualism Versus Community

The problem which this paper seeks to address has been set out by the organisers as follows: '*In what sense might community be considered a mandated priority for theological education? Why*

mandated, for whom, to what end, with what limits?' The issues are raised in the context of 'the majority world's wholesomely endemic responsiveness to the values of community, over against western preoccupations with individualism,' and are to be further developed 'by reflection on how this valuation of community could further reshape theological education in the majority world to its benefit, and then how a transforming back-flow into western theological education might be encouraged?'[6] We begin with the tension between individualism and community.

The Christian understanding of the person-in-community is often split into two opposing poles, individualism and collectivism. In individualism, the person is completely free, autonomous and ultimate in all his beliefs and actions. The individualist treats social solidarity and communal authority with disregard. Collectivism, in more recent discussions, refers to the collective ownership of property, especially land and means of production and, by implication, a high degree of government or social control over individual life. This is the basis for various forms of socialism. In the majority world and more traditional societies, other forms of collectivism or community are found, built on tribal, ethnic, religious or group solidarity, Within such societies, every member comes under the subjection of communal control or those in authority in the community.

Underlying the concern of this consultation is the idea that, in moving away from the various forms of communal control and shared commitments, western societies have gone too far in the direction of individualism. This has infected that church as well. How can we recover a proper place for community in Christian life and thought, especially in theological training?

Individualism is probably found in all cultures, but manifested supremely in modern western culture. Various roots for this in the west are traceable but there is general agreement that it goes back to the Greeks. In his sustained critique of the pervasive dualism in western thought, *Being and Relation*[7], Carver Yu argues that this way of thinking is rooted in Greek metaphysics, especially in the concepts of nature (*physis*) and substance (*ousia*).[8] The pre-Socratic Greeks understood the universe as a rational order which is 'complete-in-itself, self-subsistent and self-motivating.' The concept of nature*,* which came out of this background, was used to express 'the notion that things or the totality of things all have the fundamental principles of determining what they are immanent in themselves, that things exist in and through themselves. That means, things are to be explained in virtue of themselves without recourse to anything other than themselves.'[9] Plato later built his theory of 'Ideas' upon this concept of reality as 'reality-in-and-through-itself,' which has no place for any dynamic interaction or interpenetration. This laid the seed of individualism in western thought.[10] Similarly, Aristotle developed his notion of substance on the concept of being as 'being-in-itself.' Each substance has a particularity of its own, having its identity in and through itself, and identified as a substance precisely because it is self-subsistent. The world is composed of discrete substances and any relation among individual entities composed of discrete substances is merely accidental.[11]

Yu goes on to suggest that Descartes built his understanding of the self upon these Greek philosophical ideas, rooted in the concept of reality as 'being-in-itself.' For Descartes, the self-conscious 'I' in *cogito ergo sum* ('I think, therefore I am') is implicitly understood as a substance, which is self-subsistent and needs no others for its existence.[12] The self or 'ego-subject' subsists in its own self-consciousness, without intrinsic relations to the world or to other selves. Thus was born the autonomous self which lies at the heart of modern individualism.

Although influenced by Greek philosophy, Christianity took a somewhat different path rooted in the biblical teachings. It sought to combine a strong emphasis on commitment to community with an intense concern for the dignity and value of the individual. The latter was undergirded by various emphases in the Bible. These include the doctrine that every human is created in the image of God (Gen 1:26), the love commandment (Mat 22:37-39), and the affirmation of the equality of all in Christ (Gal 3:28). These and similar ideas in Christian theology not only drew attention to the importance and value

of the individual person but, as Harold Berman has argued, also helped lay the foundations of the laws on civil rights and liberties, and other principles of modern democracy in the west.[13] It is important to emphasise that this unequivocal stress on the fundamental equality of all humanity, irrespective of race, religion, gender or creed is not found in any other religion or culture, or, at least, not stressed with the same clarity. Of course this is a terribly politically incorrect statement to make in today's world. But the facts are undeniable.[14] Nevertheless, over the centuries, these ideas have become intertwined with similar ideas that emerged out Greek philosophy and the Enlightenment.

The net result today is that the modern world has seen the emergence of an individualism that has both Christian and pagan roots. With the decline of Christianity and the emergence of a modern worldview largely domesticated by the Enlightenment, the commitment to community weakened, leaving the autonomous individual increasingly to reign supreme. Thus in one sense, individualism represents the triumph of Greek metaphysics and Enlightenment thought; but from another perspective, it is a Christian heresy! It is this perversion which led to the irresponsible exercise of individual freedom in many parts of the west today, the object of Solzhenitsyn's searing critique in 1978. Speaking at Harvard's Commencement, he asserted: 'The defense of individual rights has reached such extremes as to make society as a whole defenseless against certain individuals. It is time, in the West, to defend not so much human rights as human obligations.'[15]

To sum up, as one writer puts it, from the Christian perspective 'Individualism is the development of one aspect of the Christian understanding of the person-in-community. It needs continuous correction from those who understand that the self lives only in relation with others.'[16] It is to this that we now turn.

3. **The Need to Recover Community**

Following from the above, the most important reason for emphasising community in life and thought is the need to recover a proper Christian understanding of the person-in-community. But another good reason for our effort to reemphasis community is because communal modes of thought and life remain important in the world at large. We begin by looking at this first.

a. *The predominance of communal thinking in many parts of the world today*

In many parts of the world, life and thought are still centred around the community. Vince Donovan's story of evangelism among the Masai illustrates this clearly. He came to understand that if he was to baptise them, he had to baptise either the whole tribe or none at all. This way of thinking is obviously foreign to many of us. But it does give us food for thought, especially on an issue like paedo-baptism: Will our differences over this ever be resolved theologically, or do we have to turn to anthropology for an answer? Other examples abound.

Cultural anthropologists like Paul Hiebert have repeatedly drawn attention to this as well. Contrary to the assumptions of many western missionaries, communal thinking predominates in many parts of the majority world. In these places, Hiebert writes, 'the basic building blocks of the society is not the individual person but a group. People do not see themselves as autonomous, but as members of the groups to which they belong ...The most valued human qualities are those that help preserve group loyalties and maintain congenial social relationships. Qualities needed to achieve certain individual goals are secondary.'[17] This implies that missionaries who come with an individualistic mind-set will be perceived as relationally superficial, impersonal, antisocial or even lacking group loyalty!

It is important to note that we are not here speaking merely about traditional societies and a world that is soon passing away. Even within western societies there is an increasing quest for a recovery of community, of which Schluter and Lee's book, *The R Factor*, is only one indication. Perhaps the one

book that speaks most clearly of this trend, even though in a rather different sort of manner, is Samuel Huntington's book on *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*.[18] His thesis is simple: increasingly people will seek refuge in their respective cultural or group identities, based on such as history, tradition, race, religion and language. This trend is being fuelled by globalisation on the one hand and resurgences of indigenous cultures in non-western societies on the other. Cultural identities will increasingly shape global politics in the coming days. Huntington's thesis was written soon after the collapse of the Iron Curtain; we have seen enough since to note its essential correctness,. The point that needs noting is that, if cultural identities will shape the geo-politics of tomorrow, surely it will fundamentally shape the church and world mission too. And any discussion of cultural identities in most parts of the world today brings us right back to the importance of community.

b.   *Biblical and theological considerations*

But there is an even more important reason for us to recover the community today in life and thought, and that is what the Bible and Christian theology teach. This is well summed up in the statement, 'Elaborating the 2009 Consultation Theme,' drawn up by the organisers of this conference. It states:

> This entire theme should then be taken deeply into biblical and theological warrant, grounded and opened up there, not least in terms of the community-formation intended by creation and by redemption, the Fall as relational rupture, the relational purpose of the Cross, salvation as reconciliation, the place of the church, the body of believers, within God's present redemptive programme, the relational dimension of all biblical ethics, the corporate nature of the Final Hope—and all this rooted in the nature of the Trinity, and in the relational love-intention that is foundational to God's character and His deeds.[19]

To try to elaborate on this in any detail would take a whole textbook, if not a library! What I shall seek very briefly to do is to draw attention to some of these important biblical and theological themes that undergird the importance of community.

(i)   God's purposes in creation and redemption

God's relational purpose for humanity in creation is clearly seen in his creating humans, male and female. This is clear from God's words, 'It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him' (Gen 2:18). This relational aspect of human existence was made doubly emphatic in the words 'they shall become one flesh' (Gen 2:24).

But it is not just in the creation of man and woman in Gen 1 & 2 that we see God's relational purpose for humanity. There is much more. We see this most clearly when we begin to look at the consequence of sin in human life in Gen 3. Sin came and our human relationship with God became broken (Gen 3:24). But sin also led to the disintegration of the human personality through guilt, shame and fear (3:7-10). The human's relationship with oneself is now broken. Next, man's relationship with his wife became broken through fault-finding, blame-shifting and inordinate desire instead of self-giving love (3:12, 16). Finally, humanity's relationship with nature is now broken through the curse of sin and judgment (3:17-19). In other words, whereas humans were created to live within a total set of wholesome relationships, sin has wrecked it all. Francis Schaeffer sums all this up as follows:

> First of all, man is separated from God; second, he is separated from himself, thus the psychological problems of life; third, he is separated from other men, thus the sociological problems of life; fourth, he is separated from nature and thus the problem of living in the world, for example, the ecological problems. All these need healing.[20]

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It is against this background that we realise how shabby and weak sometimes our doctrine of salvation has become. It was David Bosch who pointed out that the tendency to individualise and spiritualise salvation has been endemic in western theology since Augustine, in part because of the Platonic influence which prioritised the eternal soul over the temporal body.[21] The earlier evangelical embrace in much of the 20th century of a similar understanding of salvation certainly contributed to what is sometimes termed a 'Protestant individualism.' Thus it is important to remind ourselves that we are created to live within a total set of relationships—with God, with ourselves, with fellow humans, and with nature. Salvation is not concerned only with saving spiritually the individual person, but also with the redemption of the whole creation and the healing of all our broken relationships, including communal ones.

This finds its outworking in the message of the Bible. In the Old Testament, God was not just interested in saving one individual, Abraham, but a whole nation, Israel. His words to Israel, 'I will be your God and you will be my people' (Ex 6:7), which summed up His purposes for them, was a constant refrain throughout their history. The same emphasis is found right through the New Testament where the church is referred to as the 'flock' (Jn 10:1-30), 'the people of God' (Eph 2:11-22), 'the Body of Christ' (1 Cor 12), 'the family of God' (Rom 8:15ff), 'the community or fellowship of the Holy Spirit' (Phil 2:1), and various other terms almost all of which are rooted in community.

This is perhaps most clearly seen in the 1 Pet 2:9 where four communal metaphors for the church are thrown together, as if for emphasis: 'But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession…' And then there is, of course, the image of the church as the 'Body of Christ,' in which all members are mutually dependent (1 Cor 12; Eph 4:1-16), supplemented by the theology of spiritual gifts, wherein different ones are gifted differently to complement one another, so that together we make one whole. If the above examples do not suffice, it needs to be pointed out that English readers of the Bible often fail to realise that many of the indicatives ('you are …') and imperatives ('you shall …') are couched in the plural 'you', rather than the singular! Finally, even with regards to church leadership, the terms deacons and elders/presbyters almost invariably appear in the plural or in a plural context. In other words, from the biblical perspective, a Christian in isolation is a contradiction in terms.

The above is an all too brief summary of the place of community in God's purposes for His people in both the Old and New Testaments. Yet, important as this may be to our thinking about relations and community in Christian thought and life, there is something even more fundamental—it is the nature of God Himself!

(ii)   The nature of God

In discussions with strict monotheists, Christians unconsciously find their belief in a Trinitarian God somewhat of an embarrassment. But that is because we have forgotten how intellectually robust is the doctrine of the Trinity!

The belief in a monotheistic creator presents us with a paradox that is not easily resolved. Can God be both self-sufficient and personal? On the one hand, if he is self-sufficient, he is perfect in himself and needs no created world to love. On the other hand, if he is personal and perfect in his personality, it means that there must be an external object for him to love. This would mean that God needs someone external to himself without which his personality cannot find fulfilment, thereby implying that he is not self-sufficient. It is doubtful that this can be resolved rationally. But in the doctrine of the Trinity, this is fully resolved because of the perfect love relationship that exists within God through perfect mutual indwelling of the three Persons in each other.

Conversely, without the doctrine of the Trinity, it is not possible to describe God as both perfectly self-sufficient and personal. If God is fully personal, then he cannot be self-sufficient because he needs

the universe and his creatures with whom to relate. But if God is perfectly self-sufficient, he cannot be conceived of as being fully personal. This leaves us with two alternatives, neither of which is particularly adequate or attractive from a Christian view-point. The first is a strict monotheism which tends towards *absolute transcendence*, e.g. the Islamic doctrine of God. The other alternative is some form of *impersonal monism or pantheism*, e.g. Vedantic Hinduism's concept of *Brahman*, the 'Ultimate Reality,' which is beyond description by human language.

Against this background, we can fully appreciate the doctrine of the Trinity in Christian theology. Because God is Trinity, He is fully perfect both in His self-sufficiency and His personality. Therefore it makes perfect sense for the Bible to say 'God is love.' And through the eternal love relations within the Godhead between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God models community for us. Further, through the Great Commandment (Mat 22:37-39), wherein we are reminded that our most important duty as humans is to love God and to love each other, God calls us to live in community. Thus in direct contrast to Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, the Christian asserts, 'I love and am loved, therefore I am'! The Christian finds perfect fulfilment for his/her individuality in community.

4. **Theological Education and the Road to Community**

In light of the above discussion on the need to recover the place of community in theological education, we shall now look at how building relationships and enhancing community thinking can be incorporated into our training programmes.

a. *Knowing and thinking relationally*

Descartes' idea of the thinking individual contributed much to the presupposition in the modern world that reason in its analytical rationalistic form, with its stress on logical argumentation and conceptual analysis, is the primary means of knowing. Yet this gross distortion of reality can easily be disproven. Just ask any Christian group, even in the west, how did each person come to know Christ? Probably the largest number will tell you that they came to faith because someone with whom we have a meaningful relationship (parents, siblings, friends, colleagues, etc.) brought us to Christ. Depending on where you are, a substantial number (especially in the majority world) will probably tell you that they came to faith through an experience of the presence or the power of God. The smallest number will have come through to faith through intellectual argument and analytical reason! The point is that most of us 'know' through relationship and experience. Reason, as logical argument and conceptual analysis, often merely serves to help analyse, understand and conceptualise our faith, and not to ground it.

Building on the work of Edmund Perry and others,[22] I would like to suggest that our knowledge of God comes through three distinctive media, namely *reason*, *experience* and *relationship*. The first is reason, where we know primarily through conceptual analysis (including empirical reasoning) and logical arguments. This is, as noted earlier, the main approach to knowing found in modern education. The second means of knowing is experience. It includes both inner 'psychical' or spiritual experience, such as found in meditation, worship, prayer, visions, ecstasy, and the like, as well as experiences of God's power through signs and wonders. The third means of knowing is via *relationship*. It can be knowledge of God that is mediated to us through our relationship with a human intermediary such as a friend, parent, pastor or spiritual mentor. But it can also be an immediate transaction between God and the individual Christian, through a direct relationship with Him.

The point that is being made is that we do not come to know God only via reason. We come to know Him also through experience and relationship as well. Further, it should be noted that these three approaches are not three distinctively separate and water-tight approaches to knowing. Rather, there is considerable overlap and merging at the boundaries of each approach. Thus with respect to any experience of God, coming to know God involves not only our *religious experience* but also our analysis

of it through the use of *reason*. Again, knowing God through *relationship,* whether via another person or directly with Him, invariably involves some sort of *experience*. For the purpose of this paper, further discussion will focus primarily on the knowledge of God through relationship.

It is not just in real life that we find that knowing comes through reason, experience and relationship. We find these different ways of knowing clearly enunciated in the Bible as well. Most of us have relatively little difficulty reading Paul. Much of what he wrote has a logical flow, which modern minds like ours usually follow with greater ease because we have been taught to give priority to reason. But the Gospel of John tends to give us far more problems, until we realize that his modes of argument are not merely analytical and logical, but often experiential and relational.[23] The following are some clear examples in John's Gospel of knowing via relationship.

> 4:39; 'Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony.' (*Comment: Their belief is linked to their relationship with the woman.*)

> 8:43f, 47; 'Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires ...Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.' (*Comment: Jesus' words were opaque to them because they did not belong to him.*)

> 10:14, 16; 'I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me … I have other sheep … and they will listen to my voice.' (*Comment: How do the sheep know the shepherd's voice? Well, how does a baby recognize mummy's voice?*)

> 14:15; 'If you love me, you will obey what I command.' (*Comment: Obedience, which follows from knowing and accepting something to be true and good, flows out of a loving relationship.*)

> Perhaps the clearest illustration comes from 5:39 & 42. Jesus told the Jews: 'You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life …' (*Comment: Like good evangelicals, the Jews searched the Scriptures, yet did not find the truth! In other words, good sound biblical exegesis, using careful reasoning, did not lead them to the Saviour. Why?)* 'I know you do not have the love of God within you.' (*Comment: Because there was no love relationship between them and God!*)

The above is a small selection of verses from John's Gospel which illustrate the point being made, that is: we *know* God not merely through reason alone. Similar examples can be found in other parts of Scriptures. If we try to use reason alone to understand these verses, we will always be stumped by their logic or the apparent lack of it. This should be enough to warn us against our modern over-reliance on reason as the primary means of knowing. But unfortunately, that is the way almost the whole of our theological curriculum is shaped.

In a recent conversation with a clinical psychologist,[24] he made a comment that gives another side to the point being made here. He noted that behavioural changes in human beings come about as a result of changes, not primarily in the left side of the brain (which deals with logical reasoning), but rather in the right side (which deals with emotions, etc.). The difficult question is how do we do so? Some of what follows will hopefully have something useful to say on this issue in theological education.

b. ***Thinking relationally in theology and ethics***

The need to think relationally must be built into the way we actually go about doing theology, both in its methodology and the content. We will look at three examples.

(i)   The authority of Scriptures

Evangelical theology is rightly concerned with the defence of the authority of Scriptures. The solution that many conservative scholars have taken is to use the concept of inerrancy, which in its best form means that the text as originally given (not as we have today) is free from error with respect to all that God intended. Some find the arguments in support of this approach satisfactory. Others feel that the arguments are rationalistic and problematic, because, given the critical problems in the Bible, they end up 'dying the death of a thousand qualifications.' What can be said is that this approach is clearly shaped by Enlightenment rationalism, which assumes that you can prove the authenticity of God's truth by human reason alone. John Calvin was no less familiar with some of the critical problems in the Bible. But being a pre-Enlightenment person, he defended biblical authority by affirming that 'Scriptures must be confirmed by the witness of the Spirit.'[25]

It would appear that we can build a much more robust doctrine of scriptural authority if we can combine the conservative defence in its best forms using reason, with a parallel appeal to our personal relationship with God and to our experience of the Bible's divine authority in real life. Thus our belief in scriptural authority is also rooted in a God who can be trusted to speak truthfully about himself, and in Christ who bears truthful witness to his Father, and whose revelation comes with its own self-authentication through the inward work of the Spirit. Moreover this authority is confirmed to us in our daily experience of God's presence and the powerful name of Jesus, which includes the signs and wonders of the Holy Spirit. This shifts the defence of scriptural authority from one centred purely on *reason* to one which includes that, as well as our *relationship* with God and our *experience* of him.

(ii)   Relational ethics

A second example can be found in the way we do ethics. Christian ethics as we have it has been largely written in the west, which tends to prioritise principles over relationships. The assumption is that ethical decisions are made primarily as individuals and based on moral-legal principles. But how does such an ethic work in situations where relations take priority? The complexity of this is well illustrated by a very well-known story in the Confucian classics.

> The duke of Sheh informed Confucius, saying, 'Among us here there are those who may be styled upright in their conduct. If their father ha(s) stolen a sheep, they will bear witness to the fact.'

> Confucius said, 'Among us, in our part of the country, those who are upright are different from this. The father conceals the misconduct of the son, and the son conceals the misconduct of the father. Uprightness is to be found in this.'[26]

The point is that in the traditional Chinese value system, *yi* (uprightness or righteousness) is not defined by moral-legal principles alone. It is also defined by the obligations of a person's family and social relationships.[27] This explains in part the importance of *guangxi* (relationship) in Chinese culture even today. This is not only true in China, but in many other societies as well. That is why Christian ethics developed within a western cultural context cannot easily be applied without modification in non-western cultures.

Examples of these abound. For example, Christian ethics formulated in the west treat bribery as unambiguously morally wrong. Yet anyone who has lived in the majority world knows that applying this in a black-and-white manner is well-nigh impossible, if not pastorally irresponsible in many situations![28] In many parts of the world, it is assumed that relationships are sealed with gifts of some kind or other, or gratuities of sorts are given for 'favours' obtained. (In the west one does not pay bribes but only gives 'tips' or pays 'professional fees'!) This does not make paying in any and every situation morally right.

But it does mean that we need to rethink the way Christian ethics is worked out in different parts of a multicultural world, especially in a context where the line between a bribe and a gift is not easily drawn. Another example concerns the tensions between the nuclear family, strongly taught in western Christian ethics, versus extended families found in most part of the majority world. Could it not be that one of the key obstacles to discipleship and holiness in non-western churches is that we are too dependent on ethical teachings developed in the western cultures and have thus failed to really wrestle with Christian ethics in a contextually relevant manner?

It would appear that the way forward is to develop a pastorally-sensitive ethic that holds in proper tension moral-legal principles (based on *reason*) on the one hand and social obligations (based on *relationships*) on the other. But much work along these lines needs to be done by churches in the majority world.

(iii)   A 'macro-ecclesiology'?

A third issue concerns ecclesiology. Whilst it is true that the independent local church has existed since the Protestant Reformation, it really has come into its own in the 20th century, with its worldwide proliferation. Whereas earlier ecclesiological discussions have dealt with issues related to and between denominations, evangelical writings in recent decades have centred almost entirely on the local church, often with the megachurch set up as the ideal! To what extent this is driven by Protestant individualism, and also the Reformation emphasis of the true church as the *coetus fidelium* (assembly of the faithful), and therefore ultimately invisible, can be endlessly debated. But the long and short of this is that modern day evangelicals, to borrow a distinction from economics, by and large have reasonably good micro-ecclesiologies, but many have hardly any macro-ecclesiology at all. Most independent churches today have little or no accountability at all to anyone other than themselves.

This brings us right back to the issue of relationships and the Christian community. Unless this problem is addressed, I fear that what will happen as the 21st century moves on is that evangelical Christianity will splinter into as many forms as there are independent churches!

c.   *Structuring community into theological training for spiritual formation*

The third area where the concern for relationship needs to be structured into our training is spiritual formation. Some years ago when we were planning for a new seminary campus, it was suggested that we should have primarily double rooms for our students. One western missionary immediately asked, 'Why can't we have single rooms?'

In thinking about the question two incidents come to mind. The first concerned a woman student who had managed to quarrel with every one of her roommates over a two or three-year period. When gently confronted over this by a faculty member, she told him in no uncertain terms that it was none of his business! But two weeks later, she came back rather apologetically to him and asked to speak to his wife. That began a path of healing for her brokenness which was caused by a wayward father who deserted the family when she was barely one or two years old. Today her ministry has been such that she is in process of being recruited to join the staff of one of Britain's leading evangelical churches. I think of another man who managed to quarrel and fight with all the students from his part of the majority world while they were training for ministry together in a college overseas. When these friends gently confronted him about his attitude and behaviour, he turned round and accused them of being an insecure bunch, hence the real source of the relational difficulties. This man went back to his home country and left behind him two messed-up churches in his pastoral ministry before quitting the scene! These two incidents summed up my response to the question of why we should not have only single rooms!

It was the early Methodist under John Wesley in the 18th century Evangelical Revival who contributed greatly to the popularisation of the use of small groups for spiritual formation in the modern period. Their use of the class and band meetings as the primary means of pastoral oversight led the emergence of a holy people, which was one of the key reasons why the Methodist revival was sustained for a hundred years on both sides of the Atlantic.[29] Most seminaries use small groups in some form or other. But the question is how seriously are these treated as part of the curriculum, and how deep are the relationships? In one group that I had worked with, one student gently confronted another, 'From the time you came into the seminary, you wanted to show everyone that you know more than anyone else!' That was pretty hard stuff which the student concerned never really wanted to hear. Again, the end result was that he left the ministry after a few years under deeply grievous circumstances!

The above examples clearly point to the need to structure community into the life and curriculum of seminary. Apart from what have been discussed, another example is to get students to do some of their assignments as joint projects, putting academically strong and weak students to work together. Joint projects have long been used in places like business schools, so why not in seminaries? After all, in real life situations in church ministry, we rarely work alone. One other example is the submission of confidential reports by seminary authorities to the students' sending churches. These were used both in the British theological college I went to, as well as the seminary I taught in in Malaysia, although I understand that this practice can be legally problematic in a place like the USA. However, such reports should never be sent behind a student's back to the church authorities, but should always be openly discussed between the relevant seminary authorities and student concerned before being sent. This maintains the Christian integrity of the practice, thereby strengthening relations because of the trust thereby engendered.

d. *Structuring community into church for mission*

This brings us to the role we assign to relationships and community in mission, something already highlighted by Vince Donovan's story of the Masai. Others have similarly drawn our attention to the same theme. And the question that it poses for us is how do we teach evangelism and mission in our colleges? In his book, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*,[30] George Hunter, tells the story of the evangelisation of the British Isles and Western Europe by the Celtic church, under the leadership of St Patrick of Ireland from the 5th century onwards. He suggests that the Celtic model can teach us much about the re-evangelisation of the west today. He notes that the community was central to their 'missionary ecclesiology.' They went out as monastic communities and reached out to whole pagan communities through building of relationships, before inviting them to faith. In contrast to the one-to-one individualistic approach so prevalent today wherein we present the gospel, invite a person to believe, and then welcoming them into the church thereafter, the Celtic model took a different approach. Hunter sums it as follows:

> (1) You first establish community with people, or bring them into the fellowship of your community of faith. (2) Within the fellowship, you engaged in conversation, ministry, prayer, and worship (3) In time, as they discover that they now believe, you invite them to commit....The Celtic model reflects the adage that, for most people, 'Christianity is more caught than taught!'[31]

Hunter goes on to argue that, based on his own research and that of John Finney,[32] most people come to faith through relationships and encounters with faith communities. He sums it as follows: 'Finney cites Professor Robin Gill's observation that, for most people, "belonging comes before believing." For this reason, evangelism is now about "helping people to belong so that they can believe."'[33] This, he suggests, is the way forward for the reaching the west again today.

Hunter's point finds support from various sources, including how some small groups are structured in a megachurch like Willow Creek. A *Christianity Today* article, 'Community is Their Middle

Name,[34] tells of how community is fostered through many small groups within the church. Two of the various types of groups used are particularly instructive. One kind is composed solely of divorced people, and any new comer finds immediate rapport because all have gone through similar pains and struggles. Another is made up of retired motor mechanics. They begin each day with prayer and worship, and then spend the rest of the day rebuilding old cars that have been abandoned. These rebuilt cars are then given by the church to poor people in the neighbourhood who cannot afford cars. Whatever criticisms Willow Creek has faced recently, no one can fault such an approach to mission!

e. *The goal of our training*

One final matter for our reflection concerns the goal that we seek in theological education. Often the answer to this question is that we are training leaders for the church. Further, carried along by the secular tide of the marketplace, many in the church have been emphasising the CEO model, based on the work of such as Peter Drucker.[35] This is particularly (but not solely) true within megachurch circles. Clearly this model is open to serious critique. To begin with, where do we find an emphasis on training leaders in the New Testament, especially when the two key metaphors for ministry are servant and slave? But space precludes further discussions on this point. However, it is important to note that in reflecting on his Masai experience, Donovan suggested that the western church has been mesmerised by two idols: 'Individualism on the one side, and organization on the other, with little room for community in between.'[36] Perhaps we can now see clearly where the CEO model for the pastor comes from!

It is time that we recover more appropriate models of leadership for the church of the 21st century. And whatever else needs to be emphasised, relationship and community must be central. These are required by the New Testament models of servant and slave (which call us to service in the community), as well as shepherd (wherein a clear relationship exists between shepherd and sheep). Moreover, the church often forgets that, as noted earlier, in the New Testament context leadership is primarily corporate in nature. The terms 'elders/presbyters' and 'deacons' invariably are in the plural or appear in a plural context.

One immediate implication of this is that we must avoid appointing faculty members primarily because of their academic achievements, based on the modern secular university model. This would not only lock us into the individualism of much of modern university training, but would also reinforce the false notion that we learn primarily through left-brain intellectual reasoning. If we are serious about recovering community then the faculty members must exemplify this to the hilt. They must be men and women with both learning and authentic life-cum-ministry experience, so that even in the training process they can impart these intellectually as well as relationally.

5. **Summing Up: 'Why mandated, for whom, to what end, with what limits?'**

In the preceding sections I have attempted to answer from various perspectives the question with which we began: *In what sense might community be considered a mandated priority for theological education?* I will conclude by responding to each of the subsidiary questions by summing up briefly earlier arguments.

First, why the relational mandate? The answer is that this has to be reemphasised today because we need to move away from the autonomous individualism of modernity and to recover the proper Christian understanding of the human person as an individual-in-community. The latter is not only taught in Scriptures as God's purposes for humanity, but also rooted in the nature of God in Himself as Triune God. Moreover, not only is there a realisation that in many parts of the majority world community takes precedence over the individual, but the need to recover community is increasingly being recognised even in the west today. Secondly, the answer to the question for whom is this mandated is that it includes all

Christians and, particularly, faculty and students involved in theological training. We do not come to the knowledge of God, nor can we communicate that knowledge, through logical and analytical reason alone. Effective learning, spiritual formation and mission need to be done in the context of the community and strong relational bonds. Thirdly, what ends would such a recovery of the community and relationships lead to? The first is that relational thinking enables us to arrive at a sounder and more relevant theology; the second is that it will help us produce more wholesome and holy ministers of the gospel; and the third is that the recovery of a relational mandate will lead to more effective mission.

This leads us to the final question: Are there limits to the emphasis on community and relationship? Certainly! Earlier it was said that the idea of the individual, with all his or her rights and freedom enshrined, clearly came out of Christianity, and not from any other culture and religion. From the Christian perspective, therefore, when the community predominates to the extent that the individual's identity and dignity as a person made in the image of God is lost, then the community has become manipulative, domineering and even destructive! This can happen everywhere, including in Marxist societies wherein an individual's identity is totally subsumed under the community, in the name of the collective good of the State and the Party. And we see expressions of the same in many parts of the majority world even today. Thus the church's goal must always be clearly focused on guarding against a rampant individualism on the one hand, and a dysfunctional community on the other, in order that both the individual and the community will find true fulfilment in the Kingdom of God!

[1] Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1978)

[2] Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, p. 1 5.

[3] Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, p. 92.

[4] Michael Schluter & David Lee, *The R Factor* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993).

[5] Schluter & David Lee, *The R Factor*, p. 4.

[6] Para.1 of the brief for this conference, 'Elaborating the 2009 Consultation Theme.'

[7] Carver T. Yu, *Being and Relation: A Theological Critique of Western Dualism and Individualism* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987).

[8] Yu, *Being and Relation*, pp. 49-63.

[9] Yu, *Being and Relation*, p. 67.

[10] Yu, *Being and Relation*, pp. 78-86.

[11] Yu, *Being and Relation*, pp. 88-98.

[12] Yu, *Being and Relation*, pp. 98-105.

[13] See Harold J Berman, *The Interaction of Law and Religion* (London: SCM, 1974), pp. 49-76. With respect to the whole western legal tradition upon with modern democracy with its clear affirmation of human dignity, freedom and equality rests, Berman wrote: 'These principles ... for Western man as a whole ... are, above all, historical achievements created mainly out of the experience of the Christian church in the various stages of its life ... These successive ages of the church have created the psychological basis, and many of the values, upon which the legal systems of democracy and socialism rest' (pp.72f). See also Ronald J. Sider, *The Scandal of Evangelical Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), pp. 79-156, 171-190.

[14] See for example the brief treatment of this theme in Howard Peskett & Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Message of Mission* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003), pp. 37-44.

[15] Alexander Solzhenitsyn, 'A World Split Apart,' Harvard Commencement Speech (June 8, 1978).

[16] Roger L. Shinn, 'Individualism,' in *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, eds., John Macquarrie and James Childress (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1986) pp. 295-7; here p. 297.

[17] Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), p. 122.

[18] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

[19] 'Elaborating the 2009 Consultation Theme,' Para. 1.2.

[20] Francis Schaeffer, *Death in the City* (London: Intervarsity Fellowship, 1969), p. 76.

[21] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission—Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Missions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), pp. 215-217.

[22] Edmund Perry, *The Gospel in Dispute: The Relation of Christian Faith to Other Missionary Religions* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1958) pp. 99-101; David Hesselgrave & Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods and Models* (Leicester: Apollos, 1989), pp. 205f.

[23] I would add that John's logic is often not linear but often circular or spiral, both of which are common in our multicultural world.

[24] Dr Wei-Jen Huang, Faculty Member, Northwestern University Medical School. He refers to three books, Allan N. Schore, *Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self: The Neurobiology of Emotional Development* (Hillside, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994), *Affect Dysregulation and Disorders of the Self* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 2003), and Daniel J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are* (New York, NY: Guildford Press, 1999). He says that these are 'based on state of the art research , which validated the biblical truth that it is love that heals (it's the felt grace, the emotional experience of being validated, understood and cared for that transforms people, not the left brain intellectual debates)' (in personal communications, 29 Sept 2009).

[25] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 Vols., ed. John T, McNeill (Philadephia, PA: Westminster, 1960), Book 1, Chap. VII. As Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 'The Church Doctrine of Inspiration,' in *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1959), pp. 203-218, has noted, the development of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy took place in the post-Reformation period in response to certain rationalistic tendencies. For the Reformers, inerrancy was an implicate of their doctrine of inspiration. And 'since the Holy Spirit himself attests the word which he has given, there can be a relative unconcern in relation to its human qualifications' (p. 212).

[26] *The Analects of Confucius*, XIII, 18, Legge's translation, various editions.

[27] See further Tan Che-Bin, 'Ethical Particularism as a Chinese Contextual Issue,' in *The Word Among Us: Contextualizing Theology for Mission Today*, ed. Dean S. Gilliland (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1989), pp. 262-281, here p. 266.

[28] See Bernard T. Adeney, *Strange Virtues: Ethics in a Multicultural World* (Leicester: Apollos, 1995), pp. 142-162.

[29] See e.g. Howard A Snyder, *The Radical Wesley & Patterns of Church Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1980), especially pp. 53-64 on small groups.

[30] George G. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West ...Again* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000).

[31] Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, pp. 53f.

[32] John Finney, *Finding Faith today: How Does It Happen?* (Swindon: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1992).

[33] Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, pp. 55.

[34] Verla Gillmor, 'Community is Their Middle Name,' *Christianity Today* (Nov 13, 2000), pp. 48-68.

[35] See, e.g., 'Churches as Businesses—Jesus, CEO,' *The Economist* (Dec 24, 2005), pp. 51-54

[36] Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, p. 89.