'Mission and Power' – The relevance of the Edinburgh 2010 discussion in the theological engagement with violence

Author:
Cornelius J.P. Niemandt[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department Science of Religion and Missiology, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Correspondence to:
Nelus Niemandt

Email:
nelus.niemandt@up.ac.za

Postal address:
Private bag X20, Hatfield, Pretoria 0028, South Africa

The ecumenical conference in Edinburgh in 2010 identified the issue of 'Mission and Power' as one of the pressing mission themes for our generation. Christian mission has always been associated with power. The promise of the risen Christ was that his followers would receive power when the Holy Spirit came on them. History, unfortunately, recounts how Christian mission became backed by force and violence, the very opposite of the kind of power and energy associated with the Spirit of God. At the Edinburgh 2010 conference this violence in mission was studied as expressed in churches' relations with indigenous peoples. This article engages violence theologically and ecumenically by inviting the Edinburgh 2010 discussion into the reflection on violence in the democratic South Africa, as it was presented as a contribution to a wider discussion on violence in South Africa. This is done with the following objectives in mind: (1) to better understand the interplay between violence and power against the background of a broader global and ecumenical discussion of this issue; and (2) to suggest clues for the theological reflection on violence that may help to create a powerless, space-creating discourse that opens up thinking and contributes to healing and justice. The article concludes by building on the Edinburg 2010 *foundations of mission* as dialogue and proposing prophetic dialogue as a powerless discourse: 'Transforming the meaning of mission means that … God's mission calls all people to work together for healing and justice in partnerships of mutuality and respect.'

Introduction

'Is God violent?'

Brian McLaren, described by some as one of the leading voices of a new reformation and others as a controversial Christian leader, poses ten questions to Christians in his search for a new kind of Christianity (2010). One of the significant questions is: '*Is God violent?*' Is God incurably violent and is faith capable of becoming a stronger force for peace and reconciliation than it has been for violence in the history of the Christian faith? (McLaren 2010:19).

The challenge to theology and the churches in South Africa discussing *Violence in the democratic South Africa* is to answer these kinds of questions. Is God violent? This short but comprehensive question calls much of our faith story, as told and retold in both Testaments and church history, to mind. It reminds us of the complexity of a Christian life in this world. The scope of the question, the sheer weight of history and the global nature of the Christian faith, compels South African churches and theologians to engage it ecumenically. Violence and a sound Christian response to it are never limited to one location or denomination. In the face of violence, we are called, in the language of Edinburgh 2010, to work together for healing and justice in partnerships of mutuality and respect (Edinburgh 2010 Common Call).

Violence, power and the church

A discussion on violence cannot escape a discussion of power. Although the understanding of these terms is highly varied and problematic, violence and power has been intertwined since the very beginning of the Biblical stories. The Bible is a book written from the underside of power – an oppression narrative (Bell & Golden 2008:121). Jesus Christ suffered a violent death. The church was born in the midst of violent persecution of its first followers, its story, tradition and theology fundamentally shaped by the witness against the powerful of its time. The powerless rag-tag followers of a crucified faith healer were subjugated by a powerful empire. From its very beginnings, Christianity was no easy matter (Gonzales 2008:31). It was in the eye of this violent storm that Christian mission had to find its direction.

The very concept of power is ambiguous and it is beyond the scope of this article to explore all the configurations of power. Power can be understood in positive and negative ways. Power refers

to the capacity and ability to shape the life of people and communities. Power can also refer to the capacity and ability to dominate or hurt other people. Christian mission has always been associated with power, the kind that positively shapes the life of people and communities. The promise of the risen Christ was that his followers would receive power when the Holy Spirit came on them. Although this power could be described as a practical power enabling those who have this Spirit to perform the missional tasks given to them and not so much in the sense of political authority (Robinson & Wall 2006:34), this power shook the political and cultural world of the Roman empire. It eventually had *global* implications and would infuse and animate the proclamation of the good news in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the entire world (Balia & Kim 2010:87).

History tells the story of the way this power enabled the church to bring the gospel, but unfortunately also the story of the interplay between this very power, violence and the corruption of power. In the first era of Christianity the church grew rapidly, perhaps by as much as an estimated 40% per decade. Cox called this the Age of Faith, characterised by diversity, energy, vitality, suffering, persecution and courage (McLaren 2010:11). But soon the Age of Belief, which is frequently called the Constantine era, dawned. A significant part of Christianity, let us call it Western Christianity (or *corpus Christianum*), entered into a troublesome alliance with the very empire that tried its utmost to violently inhibit and even stop the growth of this church. The Christian church became, in the words of Gonzales (2008:112–220), the *Imperial Church*. McLaren (2010:12) describes this Age of Belief as the Christianisation of the empire and the imperialisation of Christianity. The power, promised by the Founder, soon became distorted in this particular era of the Christian story. The positive content and direction of power changed. Power was used to dominate, hurt and kill. McLaren (2010:12) mentions that, during its first 250 years, the bishops of the church participated in the identification and execution of about 25 000 people as heretics. The religion founded by a nonviolent man embraced the violence the founder rejected. The church energised by the missionary power of the Spirit, somehow lost the plot and the promise of the fruits of the Spirit. Power took on sombre and destructive qualities. McLaren (2010:12) says: 'The religion that grew in response to a man that was tortured and killed by the Roman Empire was now torturing and killing others in league with that empire.' Christian mission became backed by force and violence, paradoxically the opposite of the kind of power and energy associated with the Spirit of God. In the Crusades ordinary men, woman and even children were persuaded that mission and Holy War was the same and that it was acceptable to kill Muslims for their love of the Lord (Kim 2009:86). This was followed by a military model of mission (Kim 2009:86) – the complex colonialising system of merchant power, colonial violence and ecclesial hoodwinking that allowed Western power to conquer, subjugate and evangelise significant parts of the globe under the banner of Christ. Power became a tool of colonial imperialism – what Twiss (2010:2) calls the misappropriation of the Biblical narrative by co-opting it as

a tool of suppression. In the South African context, it took many shapes and configurations. It played a significant role in the socio-political history in the time of colonisation (see Cochrane [1987] & Villa-Vicencio [1988]). The destructive use of power in apartheid South-Africa, ignored, condoned and supported by many churches, has been well described (see De Gruchy [1986] & Saayman [2007]). Most recently, the Iraq War of 2003 is an example of the use of religious arguments in propagating war by Christians (Huber 2010b:8). Over the centuries the misuse of power resulted in the loss of the transforming power of the Spirit. This misuse of power – power over the other – has led to harm, sin and alienation.

The international council organising the Edinburgh 2010 conference identified this very issue as one of the pressing mission themes for our generation (Balia & Kim 2010:4; Carroll 2011:4). Missionary thinking must be engaged in public dialogue (Koyama 2010:50). Misuse of power is certainly not the complete picture of 'Mission and Power'. Many stories can be told and many case studies presented that will balance out these perspectives. Violence and its justification and promotion with seemingly religious reasons is found in many religions and can be described as one of the mega-problems of the 21st century (Huber 2010b:1,9). Yet, power can be positive. Christians are bearers of the reconciling and healing power of the Spirit. The missionary endeavour is to help people see that the Christian faith represents a different kind of power, the real and working power of God for today – '… that Jesus Christ is not only about eternal reward but shalom for this life' (Twiss 2000:102). This study is done with the same mind as the expression of Aboriginal people quoted in the study process of theme four at Edinburgh: 'We walk backwards on the long road into the future together, looking to our past to shape our journey forward' (Balia & Kim 2010:109).

Ecumenical reflection at Edinburgh 2010

The church is, from its inception, a worldwide church (Kim 2009:74). Reflection on and discussion of *violence in the democratic South Africa* can never be done in separation from the world wide Christian community and in isolation from global trends and globalisation as such. The emergence of World Christianity (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:239; see also Jeyaraj 2009:55) or Christian mission that has become truly international (Escobar 2003:19), emphasise the relevance of an ecumenical discourse on power and violence. Significantly, another ecumenical event, the Uniting General Council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches meeting in Grand Rapids in July 2010, also focused on the very same issue of 'Mission and Power' and the role it played in the submission of American First Nation People. One of the keynote speeches by Richard Twiss (2010; see also Twiss 2000) was on the issue of violence. In the closing message from the Uniting General Council, the assembly stated:

> We, in all our diversity, acknowledged with thanksgiving our opportunity to meet in the traditional territory of the Odawa,

Ojibwa, and Potawatomi Native American peoples. Despite a history of devastation and loss, in which the Church was complicit, they extended a gracious welcome to us and gave honour to those visiting their land.

(Message from the Uniting General Council, World Communion of Reformed Churches 2010)

This study reflects on Edinburgh 2010 and engages violence theologically by inviting the Edinburgh discussion on 'Mission and Power' into the reflection on violence in the democratic South Africa. This is done with the following objectives in mind: to better understand the interplay between violence and power against the background of a broader global and ecumenical discussion of this issue. The aim is to enrich the South African discourse with the theological insights and discernment of ecumenical partners. Another objective is to suggest clues for the theological reflection on violence that may help to create a powerless, space-creating discourse that opens up thinking and contributes to healing and justice.

At Edinburgh, transforming the meaning of mission was understood to mean '… God's mission calls all people to work together for healing and justice in partnerships of mutuality and respect' (Edinburgh 2010 Common Call). In his discussion of mission as the 'Church-with-others' David Bosch (1991:381) spoke about the seemingly fundamentally irreconcilable creative tension between the church perceiving itself as the sole bearer of a message of salvation or as an illustration in word and deed of God's involvement in the world. This 'creative tension' was visible in Edinburgh. Perhaps the broad ecumenical nature of Edinburgh and the presence of so many Christian traditions led to the formulation of a creative expression of this issue in the Edinburg 2010 Common Call:

> Trusting in the Triune God and with a renewed sense of urgency, we are called to incarnate and proclaim the good news of salvation, of forgiveness of sin, of life in abundance, and of liberation for all poor and oppressed. We are challenged to witness and evangelism in such a way that we are a living demonstration of the love, righteousness and justice that God intends for the whole world.

(Edinburgh 2010 Common Call)

Padilla (2010:17) drew attention to the fact that Christian mission involve both evangelism and social responsibility and the fact that this approach gained wider and wider acceptance, even in evangelical circles. The term that became quite popular is *missio integral* – a term that regards being, doing and saying as inseparable dimensions of the witness to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. The church must be shaped by a very particular ethical character with specific attention to righteousness and justice. The Lausanne movement explained in Cape Town (in 2010) that 'integral mission' is the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel:

> It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ

(Lausanne III 2011:19)

In the Edinburgh Common Call, the association of Christian mission with power is continued, but in a fundamentally different way than the violent and sometimes militant call to march under Christ's banner in a crusade or to share the gospel through force and coercion. Power is redefined. Now the church is called to witness to Christ today by sharing in God's mission of love through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. In section 4 (Edinburgh 2010 Common Call), the assembly states:

> 4. Disturbed by the asymmetries and imbalances of power that divide and trouble us in church and world, we are called to repentance, to critical reflection on systems of power, and to accountable use of power structures. We are called to find practical ways to live as members of One Body in full awareness that God resists the proud, Christ welcomes and empowers the poor and afflicted, and the power of the Holy Spirit is manifested in our vulnerability.

(Section 4, Edinburgh 2010 Common Call 2010)

In the last section of the Common Call, Edinburgh 2010 looked forward to Christ's coming in glory and judgement, experiencing his presence in the Holy Spirit: '… we invite all to join with us as we participate in God's transforming and reconciling mission of love to the whole creation.' This article suggests clues for the theological reflection on violence, convinced that the fruit of the Spirit can emerge whilst looking forward to Christ's coming and living in the present reality of God's Spirit.

A brief summary of the study process on 'Mission and Power'

Edinburgh 2010 identified nine pressing mission themes, one being 'Mission and Power' (Carroll 2011:4). The international council described the brief for the study group working on this theme as follows:

> The study group will recognise that mission is practised in a world shaped by various forms of power: spiritual, political, military, financial and international; raising issues of culture change, human rights, ecological sustainability and inequalities in the production, distribution and consumption of resources. It will consider tensions and asymmetries resulting from the exercise of power and how these affect the sharing and communication of the Gospel message and life. It will assess the function of both power and weakness in our understanding and practice of Christian mission.

(Balia & Kim 2010:264)

The report was part of a bigger publication on the whole study process, *Witnessing to Christ today* (Edinburgh 2010 Vol. II), edited by Daryl Balia and Kirsteen Kim.

The mandate of the study group on theme four was to reflect on power relations in mission since 1910. The group decided to study this theme as expressed in churches' relations with indigenous peoples. Eventually the group focused on Canadian residential schools, described as a century and a half of Christian mission which has had profound effects on First Nation, Inuit and Métis peoples – the Aboriginal peoples of Canada (Balia & Kim 2010:86). Authors involved in these cases wrote their stories, drawing on material from their

personal and families' experiences of residential schools. A number of international responses on these narratives were consolidated in a report.

In terms of the report, I start with a brief introduction on the ways Christian mission has always been associated with power. The introduction focuses on Constantine Christianity and the way Christendom emerged full-blown, '... infusing the West's social institutions and self-perception in its ... violent ascent to global hegemony' (Balia & Kim 2010:88).

The report discusses a case study describing Canadian residential schools and the interaction between policies adopted in these schools, power and mission. The goals of mission to Native peoples was to get Native peoples to do three things: (1) adopt European ideas of material value and wealth connected to resources of the land; (2) accept the growing social-liberal way of life with autonomous personal well-being and individual competitiveness; and (3) to sever connection to belief that the totality of creation is possessed of a spiritual nature. These behaviours became the focus of the application of power in mission – the government's and the churches' – in operating residential schools (see also Twiss 2000:45–47).

The study recounts the narratives of survivors and other people involved with the system. There is a section that contains twelve edited extracts that provide a glimpse of how the misuse of power has touched, and continues to affect the lives of people and communities worldwide.

The report concludes with a theological reflection on the issue and states that force does not teach a gospel of love (Balia & Kim 2010:88). This eloquent conclusion provides an excellent clue to the theological reflection on the relation between 'Mission and Power'. It exposes the fallacy that assumed that the good news of the gospel could be shared through force and coercion. The study group concluded:

> We know from the lessons of history that North American colonization is just another configuration of the relationship between gospel and power which has led to acts of enormous evil perpetrated against the innocent. We know that in every instance the use of power for forcible conversion has given way to destructive outcomes.
>
> (Balia & Kim 2010:106)

The study group on theme four presented a number of priorities in the theological reflection on the relation between 'Mission and Power'. The following is of particular significance for the discussion on 'Mission and Power' in the broader context of violence in a democratic South Africa:

1. Repentance and atonement involve the powerful listening and learning, giving up place of power, giving power to those harmed by past mission to tell us how they feel …
2. Anti-racism and inter-culturalism involve learning ways to avoid giving power and authority to Christianity as expressed by some cultures, over Christianity as expressed by others.
3. Lifting up the voices of marginalized and subjugated peoples means those with monetary power and relational power can support the powerless in documenting, recording, sharing

their stories, experiences, insights, knowledge, arts. It means integrating the voices of the powerless in all aspects of mission and ministry, including decision-making structures and theological education and formation. It also means requiring the powerful to maintain a self-critical stance about continuing complicity in empire and structures of domination in church and society.

4. Transforming the meaning of mission means that we need new models of mission emphasising sharing the work of defining mission and sharing the exercise of power.

(Balia & Kim 2010:110–111)

'Mission and Power' – Enriching the South African discourse

The author attended Edinburgh 2010 and was deeply moved by the events and the implication of the events for church and theology in South Africa. The work done in the study group of theme four, 'Mission and Power', as well as the discussions during the conference can enrich the South African discourse. It is presented as an affirmation of Koyama's call that missionary thinking must be engaged in public dialogue (2010:50). Although the case studies focused on Canadian residential schools, the similarities to issues South African as well as the relevance of the broader discussion on 'Mission and Power', and the way this led to violence in the name of the Gospel, are quite obvious. Much has been written on the role of power and the violence associated with mission in the South African mission narrative. This article will not attempt to list or catalogue the close relation between 'Mission and Power' in the South African context.

It will rather focus on enriching the South African discourse by reflecting on the way in which Edinburgh 2010 laid the foundations for a theology of mission and its relation to power. Edinburgh 2010 stated that missionaries and churches are '… susceptible to the self-serving myopias of the powerful' (Balia & Kim 2010:88). More often than not, programmes and social interventions intended to serve those in power's concept of the gospel proved to be instruments of destruction, leading to cultural and social genocide. To replace one culture with another means that the 'inferior' culture must be stripped away (Balia & Kim 2010:92,105). Interestingly enough, the Uniting General Council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches spoke similar language in the report from the section on Mission:

> The First Nations Peoples reminded us of our responsibilities as participants in God's mission (missio Dei) and the need to repent of any forms of mission praxis that disempower or dehumanize. Mission, bearing witness to the justice of God and overcoming the wrongdoings of the past, requires intentional and continuous efforts of de-linking the historical and enduring connections between slavery, colonialism and Christian mission.
>
> (World Communion of Reformed Churches 2010:1–2)

Koyama (2010:50), in a contribution titled, 'Commission One after a Century of Christian Violence: The Search for a larger Christ', explained the background of this kind of thinking as worldview associated with Augustine. In this worldview there are two worlds, one pious and the other impious. This

image of two opposing worlds has increased violence by justifying theologically the destruction of the people named enemy. Koyama (2010:42) warns that the continuation of this conflictive dualism threatens the entire human family – 'The complexities and ambiguities of human existence do not allow such self-serving distinction.'

Edinburgh rejected the idea that indigenous peoples are without agency, ignorant and devoid of the capacity to engage and decide for themselves (Balia & Kim 2010:90). This frame of mind suggested that these peoples represented a less-than-civilised aspect of creation that needed to be fully reworked. It was done as if these people entirely lacked the image of God, and redemption looked like remaking them in the image of Europeans (Balia & Kim 2010:92). In the Common Call sounded at Edinburgh 2010, the positive alternative has been formulated in the conviction that all are made in the image of God. This is an important contribution and means that God's people will draw on one another's:

> … unique charisms, challenge each other to grow in faith and understanding, share resources equitably worldwide, involve the entire human being and the whole family of God, and respect the wisdom of our elders while also fostering the participation of children.
>
> (Edinburgh 2010 Common Call)

It is stated that much of colonial-based mission practise had, according to many from that era, the best interest of the indigenous peoples at heart. Yet it failed to consider the deep connectedness of these people to the land of their forefathers and mothers, and the understanding that the land was possessed of a spiritual essence. The issue of 'Mission and Power' confronting us in South Africa is the same as that faced by the study group: how do we discuss the nature of the spiritual?:

> Do we continue to embrace forms of dualism as the foundation of our theologies, and therefore, our missiology? Or do we view the world, and our mission in it, in more clearly holistic terms? In light of the nature of creation and its Creator, can we begin to conceive that there is something more spiritually intrinsic to all of creation that frames the lives of the people and, therefore, the conversation about conversion and redemption?
>
> (Balia & Kim 2010:93)

The good news of the gospel can never be shared through force and coercion as force does not teach a gospel of love. Any configuration of the relationship between gospel and power that leads to evil perpetrated against the innocent is never in the field of power intended by Christ when he promised the power of the Spirit (Balia & Kim 2010:106). It is in weakness, vulnerability and foolishness that God's power to save is manifested. Reflecting on the South African situation, Edinburgh makes a significant contribution because it reminds us of the challenge to offer the gospel from *below*, from a place visibly distant from political and economic power: 'Contemporary witness to missio Dei calls for collective humility …' (Matthey 2010:259).

One of the important contributions of Edinburgh 2010 is that it lays the groundwork for a missional spirituality that embraces weakness and vulnerability and collective humility. This can also be described as a kenotic spirituality. It offers God's vulnerability to heal ours give hope to the world (Matthey 2010:260).

The challenge is to formulate a theology of mission and its right relation to power. It has already been said that Christian mission has always been associated with power – the power of the Spirit. Did Edinburgh 2010 provide any clues for the theological reflection on violence?

Clues for the theological reflection on violence that may help to create a powerless, space-creating discourse

The Edinburg 2010 discussions on the *foundations of mission* proposed an understanding of mission as *dialogue*. In the context of inter-faith dialogue this is described as a dialogue that is aimed at showing forth the love of God and bearing witness to the virtues of God's kingdom (Balia & Kim 2010:28). Dyrness (1994:40) speaks of a Spirit of embrace – the Spirit who issues from the rich relationship of the triune community and who lures people into fellowship with the triune God and opens them up for one another. Bevans and Schroeder (2004:348) used similar language and concepts when they summarised resent mission theology in three major strains of understanding mission: mission as participating in the life and mission of the Trinity, mission as continuation of the mission of Jesus to preach and witness and service to the justice of God's reign. They called the synthesis of these three strains *prophetic dialogue.* One of the important contributions of Edinburgh 2010 is the emphasis that mission, as participation in the mission of the triune God, can only proceed in dialogue and can only be carried out in humility.

The question, 'Is God violent?', invites dialogue. In the context of a discussion of 'Mission and Power', this dialogue will focus on the power of the Spirit. A Trinitarian understanding of mission as participating in the life of the triune God shifts the focus to the mission of the Spirit. Christian mission is finding out where the Holy Spirit – the one who promised his power to the church – is working and joining in (Kim 2009:1). Edinburgh 2010 started its discussion of 'Mission and Power' with the statement that Christian mission has always been associated with power – the power of the Holy Spirit (Balia & Kim 2010:87). The power of the Spirit is not compelled by human might. It is grounded in Jesus' self-giving nonviolent love for all. It is the power of embrace. The transforming, embracing power of the Spirit invites people into the life of God through grace and acceptance, not fear and violence. The only way to create space for the Spirit's power to arrive and invite us in co-operation with God's mission, suggests Pete Rollins (2006:36–37), is by way of a *powerless discourse*. Prophetic dialogue is a powerless discourse. Referring to 1 Corinthians 2:1–5[1], Rollins shows that power discourses

1.Corinthians 2:1–5: 'And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. [2]For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. [3]And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, [4]and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, [5]that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.'

are at a level of command that seeks to persuade and wants to tell people what they ought to think. He describes the difference between power discourse and powerless discourse by explaining the distinction between the ideas of a hint and an order:

> Take the example of two people in a room. If one has authority over the other and commands the other to close the door, the other will of course close it, regardless of whether or not he or she likes the authority figure, since if an authority gives a command, obedience is the sole requirement. Yet, in opposition to this power discourse, the powerless discourse is analogous to one person saying to their equal that they are a little cold. In this way, one speaks in such a way that hints (but does not demand) that they would like to see the door be closed … The hint speaks to the heart and will only be heard by those with a sensitive and open ear.

(Rollins 2006:37)

Central to his idea of a powerless discourse is the idea that God stands outside our language regimes and that God cannot be colonised via power discourse:

> This means that the Christian faith is extrapolated via a powerless discourse which, at its most evangelical, attempts to create a space in which others can seek for themselves. Consequently, one of the roles of the Church is to provide a sacred space for this exploration.

(Rollins 2006:41)

Paradoxically, the power of the Spirit is revealed and the essential way of participating in God's mission is manifest, where neither God nor any part of his creation is colonised via power discourse. The powerless discourse of the hint reminds us that we are a people born from a response to hints from the divine. We are called to be hints of the divine. Participating in God's mission, this means that we open up thinking and offers hints rather than orders. Sweet (2020:28) calls this 'nudging'. It is to nudge people to pay attention to the mission of God in their lives and to the necessity of responding to that initiative in ways that birth new realities and the new birth. We embrace rather than coerce. We become vulnerable by endeavouring to be questions rather than answers and forming spaces where God can give of God (Rollins 2006:42). It is a choice to become vulnerable and becoming sensitive to the vulnerability of others.

But the question remains: 'Is God violent?' Perhaps Edinburgh's response, if the assembly were to be confronted with this question, would have been to repeat that God resists the proud, Christ welcomes and empowers the poor and afflicted, and the power of the Holy Spirit is manifested in our vulnerability (Edinburgh 2010 Common Call). Discussing violence in a democratic South Africa from the perspective of 'Mission and Power' is nothing less than a political discourse. In this context Hauerwas and Willemon's (1990:47) reminder is quite appropriate – that the overriding political task of the church is to be the community of the cross. This is done in the conviction that the Christian message includes a preferential option for nonviolence (Huber 2010a:6).

The study group working on theme five – 'Forms of missionary engagement' – suggested as much by describing

vulnerability in mission and mission without power (Balia & Kim 2010:121; Kim & Anderson 2011:140–147). Mission is an exercise in vulnerability as we share in God's reconciling purpose which was achieved by God becoming weak and helpless, particularly in the sacrifice of Jesus (Balia & Kim 2010:122). This vulnerability reminds us that we do not ourselves overcome violence; we can only bear witness to the 'Overcomer of violence' (Kim 2009:255). Koyama (2010:44–45) emphasised this point in his essay in preparation for Edinburgh 2010. In this age of pluralism and globalisation, the gospel of Jesus Christ is problematic to all religions and civilisations. Nevertheless, the gospel has the power to embrace, baptise and mobilise them for the purpose of the gospel because of the mystery of Christ's lowliness.

The core of God's mission is the cross. When mission encounters power, we can only offer vulnerability. This cannot be grasped by human wisdom, but only through the power of the Holy Spirit, who nudges us towards God's creative, healing and saving power (Matthey 2010:259). This creative, healing and saving power opens the way for healing and justice in partnerships of mutuality and respect, to use the Edinburgh language. It must go beyond a theology of mission that embraces powerless discourse to challenging structures and systems which dehumanise and destroys the dignity and self-respect of people. It must lead to a church that lives redemptively, shaped by a very particular ethical character with specific attention to righteousness and justice.

Perhaps our theological response to violence could be to engage in a powerless, embracing, space creating, discourse that opens up thinking and offers clues and hints to the new possibilities of a life in the power of the Spirit. According to Rollins (2006:21), theology is not a human discourse that speaks of God, but is a place where God speaks into human discourse. Therefore the appropriate way, I think, to take up the challenge violence poses to theology and the church is for the church and theologians to become that place where God speaks: 'Through our word and actions we seek to be the site of revelation through which people encounter the life-giving Word of God' (Rollins 2006:21).

Where God speaks, his children can only but listen. Reflecting on the history of violent power and the power of violence in South Africa, Edinburgh 2010 reminds us that powerless discourse involve '… the powerful listening and learning, giving up place of power, giving power to those harmed by past mission to tell us how they feel …' (Balia & Kim 2010:110).

Acknowledgements

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