

Being Connected: Engaging in Effective World Mission

Episcopal Conference: *Everyone, Everywhere*

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Everyone, Everywhere! When I saw that title my first thought was 'Wow! What a great title for a conference on mission'. And then as I pondered it a bit more, as I engaged with it, and tried to figure out what I could add to those two words in a talk like this, I was struck by the fact that one of the things this title points to is about *connections* - about the relationships and networks and connections that engage everyone, everywhere, and about what this might say to our understanding of Christian mission in this generation. And so I have titled my paper, 'Being Connected'. And while there is a lot one can say about being connected, here today I want to reflect on just three things. Being connected as a statement of (i) fact; (ii) faith; and (iii) function.

(1) Being connected as a statement of fact.

We are connected. That is a clear statement of fact. We are connected in this world whether we like it or not. Today, more than any previous time in human experience, people of the globe are connected to one another in clear and obvious ways. Perhaps the most obvious is the way that we are connected via modern information technology, through global television networks like Al Jazirah, CNN and the BBC, the internet, email, skype and cellphones. Also, international travel is much easier now than it was fifty years ago, so we can move around the globe and stay in contact with our families wherever they are. Sitting here in Baltimore I can email colleagues at work, send smses to my children, and chat with my wife via Skype. I am thousands of miles away, but I am connected.

*But this connection goes even deeper.* We are connected by global events and global happenings. Giant sporting events like the Olympics and World Cup Soccer provide ways for us to celebrate our connections to people from around the world in exciting ways. But often these connections arise because of crises. I know we in South Africa felt connected to people in the USA during the terrible times surrounding the events of 9/11. We all felt connected to the people of Asia suffering in the wake of that catastrophic Tsunami in December 2004. We feel connected to the people of Burma suffering at this present time, like I know many of us feel connected to ordinary people in Zimbabwe at this time of a burgeoning humanitarian crisis on the back of a political disaster. And in the work that I do around HIV and AIDS, I know that there are many good people in many parts of the world who feel deeply connected to this health crisis in sub Saharan Africa.

*But this connection goes even deeper.* It is not just a connection of feelings and good intentions. The connections we have via email and the internet, and our ability to know what is going on in and feel connected to Burma or Zimbabwe is itself a symptom of the fact that we are connected via a global economy, a global market, a global way of production, distribution, consumption and waste. We are connected by our common access to

and use of Coke a Cola, McDonalds, Microsoft, Levis, Toyota, Nokia, and Mastercard. Things that are mined in Africa are taken to Europe where they are manufactured utilising components that are added from Asia, and then sold on the North American market by people from Latin America. We are also aware that in many ways we are connected by one very key commodity – oil. We are becoming daily more aware of how the connections impact up on us and our wallets. No wonder people tell us we are living in a global village.

*But this connection goes even deeper.* This global economy is not a benign village in a romantic valley on a green hillside. This is a village that has a chief, and headmen, and favoured families, and poorer families, and women who collect the water and the firewood, and beggars living on the scraps on the edge of the town; and lepers who aren't allowed in to town. And the price of having a stall in the market is too high for some families to trade their goods. What I mean is that it is one thing to talk about a global village. It is another thing to start talking about who runs the village; because every village is run by someone. And when we think about the global economic market then it is clear that there are people who control it so that there are winners and losers. And here I am pointing fingers at the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation and the International Monetary Fund, as well as those who run and profit from the large mega corporations, the oil companies and the weapons manufacturers that have budgets bigger than the size of many countries.

The economic data is clear: there are people who are getting richer and people who are getting poorer. And the point is that those who are rich and those who are poor are connected via this economy. I'd even go so far as to say that this economy results in some people are getting richer because other people are getting poorer. And within that disparity, there are even greater disparities between men and women - what scholars call the feminization of poverty. Women are poorer because of the ways in which they are connected to men. It is the connection that does it. This is the reason why some of the anti-globalisation theorists talk about the need to de-link from the global economy. They promote de-linking as an option precisely because they recognise that it is the *link*, the connections, that causes the trouble. I myself am not sure that one can simply delink from these connections, but I can understand where they are coming from.

*But this connection goes even deeper.* This skewed connection is not something that happened overnight, or last week, or last year, or because someone woke up and invented it. This connection is rooted in 500 years of colonial conquest. Human beings have always sought to be connected via exploration, trade, conquest, or proselytism. Empires are characterised by their reach, their ability to be connected. We have known about the Roman Empire, the Islamic Empire of the middle ages, Napoleon's Empire, and the Chinese Empire. But the connections we have now, and which characterise our world today, are connections that began with the Christian expulsion of Muslims from Spain followed by the Western voyages of discovery to the New World, Africa, and the Pacific. These connections were the forerunners to slavery, colonialism, and globalisation. There were winners and losers, but the thing that made for winners and losers was the connection itself. The slave master could only be that by being connected to the slave. The slave could only

be a slave by being connected to the master. *It was the connection that did it.* The colonial power could only be that by being connected to a colony; and the colony was only such because of its connection to the colonial power. *It was the connection that did it.* And it is this history that shapes our current global connections.

And now I want to point to an interesting irony about this connectedness. In some ways, the connectedness of the modern economy, of globalisation, of information technologies, wilfully excludes. It pushes out. We have to understand this carefully. The United Nations, for example, speaks of the digital divide. The fact that so many people in Africa do not have access to information technologies such as email or the internet, and which is both a symptom and a cause of being excluded from the wider economy. So it is true in one sense that people are poor because they are *not* connected. But from another perspective it is just as true that it is the way the system is set up to connect people which causes that exclusion. It is the connection, or the shape of that connection, infused with power and privilege, which promotes exclusion. To understand the exclusion, you have to understand the connection. And of course this helps us understand another side of the connectedness, namely the issues of diaspora and refugee communities – as people try to deal with exclusion by desperately seeking new ways of being connected.

*But this connection goes even deeper.* Our economy, our way of life, our way of organising our society so that we can put food on the table and clothes on our bodies, is not just a connection between human beings through relationships of production and distribution; it is a connection between us and the earth. We often don't think about that, but that doesn't make it any less true. I am certain by now that we all are aware of the deep connection between economy and ecology. They both come from the same Greek word, *oikos*, which means home or household. *Oikos-nomos*, which means rules of the household, are the words from which we get our English word, economy. *Oikos-logos*, which means the wisdom of the household, are the words from which we get our English word, ecology. The point is simply this – they are both about the same home, the earth.

The rules of the home and the logic of the home have to be in harmony otherwise something is going to go wrong. And something is going wrong – we know that from all the data on climate change. The economy and the earth are in conflict, not because there is no connection; but because there is a very deep and profound connection that we have ignored. And the interesting thing is that the connections that we have been talking about above, the connections of the economy, and history, and communications are all connected to the earth. Our access to the earth, to land, to water, to food, to restorative beauty, are all mediated through our other connections.

So what am I saying? We are connected. That is a fact. Everyone, everywhere is connected. We are connected through technology, sports, tsunamis, commodities, oil, markets, World Trade Organisation policies and the like, all of which are rooted in a history of connection. And we are deeply connected to the

earth, because we have only this one home. But, and this is the point, *that connection is not neutral*. It is a connection that is shot through with power and privilege. There is a pyramid of power. The connections put us in touch with everyone, everywhere – but also shape how we are in touch. We are connected, that is a fact. But it is just as much a fact that we are connected in certain ways. Everyone, everywhere does not benefit equally from the connection.

## 2. Being connected as a statement of faith.

This is the context in which we are called to be engaged in mission, which is why it is so crucial to identify it, speak about it, think about it. This is why I began there. But let me just pause for a moment and say this: I have spoken considerably about the pyramid of power, and of power disparities above. This is not to preach guilt and demand remorse, because I know that as a white South African professional heterosexual male I myself hardly represent the side of the angels. I also know that you are here precisely because you care about these things. So I hope that I am preaching to the choir. But I also know that choir members often fall asleep in church, and then the task of the preacher is to wake them up and remind them why they are doing what they are doing. So I have understood my task at the start of this conference to wake us all up, by raising issues to prominence so that they can be out in the open and talked about, and not assumed.

But I am also not about preaching guilt and remorse, even to the choir, because that is not the way of the Gospel. All that I have said about connection is the *context* in which we are invited by God to participate in God's mission. For the Christian faith speaks directly to this issue. Being connected then is not just a statement of fact. It is a statement of faith. As a statement of faith it does not and cannot replace the *fact* of our connection, but it does give us a new way of seeing, and some important resources with which to engage that connection. There is so much to say here, but I want to point to four key theological resources that remind us that everyone, everywhere is connected.

First, at the most obvious and simple level, we are connected by belonging to the church. The church is nothing if it is not about being connected. Our baptism vows are personal indeed; but in baptism we are drawn into the wider family of faith, the body of Christ. (Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 12:12) We don't just go to church, we *are* church. And that connection is one that draws us into relationship with everyone, everywhere, and I would add, everytime (if there is such a word!). Two things here remind us of this. In the first place we understand this church to be 'catholic', which comes from the Greek word *catholikos*, meaning general or universal. It was applied to the Church as a way of dealing with schism and heresy, and is probably best captured by the phrase of St Vincent of Lerins in 434 when he defined it as "that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all." (I wonder if the organisers of this conference were aware of the connection to St Vincent when they decided on the title for the conference: Everyone, Everywhere?) To be a

*catholic* church then is to be a connected church. It is to be 'the communion of saints', a collective of believers that goes backwards and forwards in time, but also which spreads out over all the inhabited lands.

Secondly, we are reminded of our modern word, ecumenical. It comes from the same root word as economics and ecology, *oikos*. It is a transliteration of *oikumene*, which meant the whole inhabited earth. To be church is by its very nature to be ecumenical, to be in fellowship with everyone, everywhere (Gal 3:28). This presents new challenges in our day and age, of course, because of the reality of religious pluralism within the whole inhabited earth. What does it mean to be connected to people of other faiths and of none? How do we vision this? I have no quick and easy answer here, other than to say that our connectedness within the church surely cannot be itself a new way of excluding others. If we are talking about 'being connected', then let us remember that the Latin root for religion, *re-ligare*, means to 're-connect'. Is this a vision to which the world religions can re-commit?

I would say that there is a Christian contribution to this, because our connectedness is rooted in God not ourselves. And we have always understood God to be the God of the world, not just the Church. Indeed, whilst our first reality of being connected in faith is in the experience of the church, this connectedness as the People of God is rooted in and takes its shape from a deeper and wider reality, namely the connectedness within the Godhead. The trinity, the relationship between – in tradition language – the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; or the Creator, the Redeemer and the Sustainer; or however we choose to name the three persons of the trinity; the doctrine of the trinity reminds us that God is a connection, or perhaps, God is connection itself.

Being connected is important for people of faith, because God is connected in God's very being. The relationships of equality and reciprocity within God shape and define what we call church; and in a wider sense should shape and define our world (John 17:22,23). And they do this because they point in a very deep way to our connection as human beings. We are made in the image of God, *imago Dei*. And because God is Trinity, we are fundamentally *imago trinitatis*. At our deepest level of being human, in our fundamental identity as children of God, we cannot be anything but connected; because of who God is. The trinity stands therefore as a powerful reminder that being connected is a statement of faith.

But the Gospel says more than just that God is connected to Godself within the trinity. The Gospel is an announcement that God has opened that connection to the world. For the Incarnation is nothing if it is not a statement of connectedness. *Emmanuel*, God is with us (Matthew 1:23). In Christ, God has become connected with humanity, with human life, with human struggle and human hope. As John has it, "The Word has become flesh and dwelt amongst us." (John 1:14). Out of the love that is within the Trinity, God has reached out to the world in Christ, that we might be connected in the embrace of grace (John 3:16). And it is not just the fact of the incarnation that is about connectedness, but the story of the incarnation is itself a story of God connecting to humanity in a very specific way – in table fellowship with sinners and outcasts,

in conversation with untouchables, across cultural, ethnic and religious barriers. This then is the third way in which we can recognise that being connected is a statement of faith.

The fourth way in which our faith speaks of being connected is in mission. All the great missionary texts are texts about being connected. "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19); You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria until the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8); and: "there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." (Acts 16:9). In recent generations we have recognized how connected this is to the work of the Holy Spirit, for mission happens in and through the power and presence of the Spirit. As the trinity embraces us with God's grace in the sending of Christ (the incarnation), so in the power of the Spirit the world is embraced in God's mission. Nowhere is this made more clear than in John 20:21 & 22, when the resurrected Jesus commissions his disciples to participate in the *missio Dei*. "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit"."

The Spirit drives the Christian community into mission; crossing boundaries, connecting everyone, everywhere. The book of Acts introduces us to Jews, Samaritans, Greeks, Ethiopians, Egyptians, Romans. Indeed, when we think of Paul's missionary journeys, then we recognize how he moved across the Mediterranean connecting with new communities, and having establishing new churches how he ensured that they stayed connected with one another, and with the churches in Jerusalem and Damascus. His letters to these churches are, of course, another huge pointer to the importance of being connected. This missionary dimension of the Christian faith, this desire to share and to engage with others, with everyone, everywhere, is a further reminder that being connected is a statement of faith.

Yet at the same time, we need to pause here. Christian mission is – or should be – an outworking of the connectedness known in the Trinity, witnessed to us in the incarnation of Jesus, and undertaken in the power of the Spirit. But if the truth be told, Christian mission in the past 200 years – the great period of Christian missionary endeavour – has been a strange mixture of this response of faith and of the colonial connectedness we spoke about earlier. For there is no doubt that the spread of Christianity around the world has been directly related to the way in which western Christian nations took control of the seas, and expanded their empires to the furthest corners of the globe. Mission got mixed up with colonial adventurism, with cultural invasion, and with the expansion of markets for industrial capitalism. It became just another pole around which privilege and power spun; this time between mother churches and daughter churches, missionaries and indigenous priests, sending agencies and receiving natives. And all of this makes mission a very complicated animal to understand and to appreciate. But, if the truth be told, no more so than in the first century of the Christian era.

Scholars have regularly noted that Paul's missionary journeys were made remarkably easier by the existence of Greek culture and the Roman Empire, by the very fact that Jerusalem, Antioch, Thessalonica, Ephesus and

Rome were *already* connected. Those people were connected by the Empire, rather than the gospel. However, and here is the clue that I have been angling towards, Paul set out to re-shape those connections rather than to reinforce them. He sought to rethink and reorient the connections between people in new and transformed ways, ways that were not dependent upon the relationships that were determined by the empire and the dominant Hellenistic culture, relationships of power and privilege, of hierarchy and subjugation. In that sense, Paul was visioning the oikumene as an alternative to Empire, or as we might say, as an alternative to globalization. It was a different way of being connected.

We know that he sometimes didn't get it right; and we know that those who wrote in his name often seemed to miss the point; but Paul recognized that being connected was a statement of faith that provided a way into challenging and changing the ways people were connected through hard facts. I think that is what mission meant to him:

To share the depth of the connectedness within the trinity, known to us via the connectedness of the incarnation, and experienced by us in the connectedness of the communion of saints with everyone, everywhere – and to do so within a context in which everyone, everywhere was already connected, but in ways that did not reflect the connectedness of the Trinity revealed to us in the incarnation.

In this sense mission is about conversion, a transformation of the mind: a conversion from the connectedness of the Roman Empire, to the connectedness of the oikumene; a transformation from being connected via Hellenistic culture to being connected via the catholicity of the faith.

#### Being connected as a statement of function.

Phew! OK. You probably are asking: what does this all have to do with real life? What does it mean practically? And you're wondering what this has to do with the theme: Engaging in Effective World Mission. You'll be pleased to know that I am interested in that question too, which is why I think that we have to deal with the third theme: being connected as a statement of *function*. To get to this point, however, I want to connect the two previous statements. I suggested that we are connected both as a statement of *fact*, and a statement of *faith*. We have to hold these two things together. If we drop the first one, we will drift off into some make-believe land in which we fail to recognize the reality of this world, and its pyramids of power. Too many Christians dwell in such a land, and as a result their missionary work simply contributes to that abuse of power. If we drop the second one, we will slide into the pits of despair and cynicism, fully aware of the reality of the world, but having no vision of an alternative. Too many activists and development workers inhabit that space. We have to hold together these two realities.

I think this is what Paul did, and this is what his missionary journeys and letters are about. Drawing on this, I want to suggest the following:

Mission is not about making connections. We are already connected. Mission is about transforming that connectedness so that it resonates with the connectedness within the trinity, made known to us

in the incarnation. Everyone is sent everywhere, within this movement to bear witness to other ways of being connected.

I want to be quite strong about saying that mission is not about connecting, it is about *transforming* that connectedness. We have to recognise that we are already connected. And any missionary activity is played out on a stage that has already been set. It's task and its challenge is to transform that connection so that it is bent towards the connectedness that is at the heart of our faith. That is why mission is such a crucial task in our world today, and why everyone, everywhere is called to participate in this mission. And that is why I want to speak of being connected as a function around four concerns.

*4.1. Being connected and power disparities.* Mission has to take seriously the power disparities in the world. We cannot be naïve about this. Being so, bedevils our missionary calling and undermines the gospel. Let me illustrate what I mean by this. When Christians from an American church go to a community in Africa, this missionary exchange is not played out on a social Tabula Rasa, involving equal partners. To pretend that it is, is duplicitous. Those Christians belong to the American empire, have US passports and return airtickets, and pension funds that are invested in companies that are paying low wages to workers in Africa. They live in a country that has a long and abusive relationship to Africa, through slavery, the cold war and through international debt mechanisms. They speak English, and usually hope the Africans will speak English too. Clearly that is not their fault, and the point is not to make anyone guilty by association, or to call for a moratorium on such visits. To do so is also duplicitous because it fails to recognise that stopping church groups from going on mission visits is often a smokescreen to hide the deeper reality of the power imbalance. It also undermines the fact that our faith calls us to be connected with everyone, everywhere.

No, I would argue that the issue is to encourage such connections – but to foreground the question of power disparities. To visit mindful of the history, of the existing connections, of the imbalance. And to focus on this; to ask how mission is a witness to the *oikumene* rather than a servant of globalisation. And that means to go in humility, to listen, to be surprised, to be divested, to learn, to be converted. Mission cannot be about Americans taking the gospel to Africans, but about Americans and Africans transforming their connection so that it bears witness to the gospel.

*(2) Being connected and respect for particularities.* The incarnation is about God's way of being connected, and it is a way of respecting the particularities of culture and language. God is born into a particular culture not a universal culture, speaks a particular language not a universal language, eats a particular food not a universal food. He is in that sense a particular human being not a universal human being, who in that particularity nonetheless is fully God and fully human. The incarnation, in other words, is an affirmation of particularity because it recognises that God can be fully present in a particular culture. We have continued to recognise that truth through what some have called the 'translatibility' principle, namely that the Bible



can be translated into particular languages and still be the Word of God. The Bible in Zulu is no less the Word of God than the Bible in Hebrew. That, if you think about it, is a pretty radical principle.

And it is a profoundly missionary principle. Well the missionaries didn't think much about it, they simply did it – they spent their time learning languages and translating the Bible into particular languages so that the gospel could be heard in people's mother tongue. Some of us in the South would argue that for all the mistakes that they made, on *this* point the missionaries were deeply radical for they inadvertently initiated the movement of the gospel from the global North to the global South. The question now is, in the face of the connectedness of globalisation and the market economy, of Coca Cola and Nokia, Toyota and McDonalds, do we still see our connectedness in mission as a way of respecting the particularities of others; or is our mission activity just another way in which we are participating in the cultural monopolisation of the world.?

*(3) Being connected in the face of death and dislocation.* So let's raise another key issue, namely, that the disparities of power lead to death and dislocation, and that mission as a way of being connected has to deal with this fallout. We surely are all aware of this. The crises that we see played out around the globe are crises of death and dislocation. They are not there because the system is failing; they are there because it is doing what it is designed to do. They are the collateral damage of globalisation. The way that the world is connected, and the power disparities that characterise that connection, are going to lead to injustice, inequalities, racism, xenophobia, ill health, refugees, civil wars, hunger, pollution.

From a perspective of faith there is a kind of inevitable and depressing circularity in this. When relationships are right, when we are connected in the pattern of the trinity known to us in the incarnation, then there is Shalom. Shalom is about peace, both as a means and an end. Shalom is about being connected in a certain kind of way; and when we are then there is shalom is the community, in the world. It is when the 'being connected' goes wrong, that that injustice, oppression, poverty, and ill health are going to appear on the scene. That is not rocket science. That is Bible Studies 101. That is Moses and Isaiah, Amos and Jeremiah. Hosea and Micah, Jesus and Paul. And the mission of God, God's mission in this world is always about shalom. About revisioning, reconnecting, recreating the world to reflect something of the trinity itself.

So mission can never, never be divorced from issues of poverty and injustice, hunger and sickness, exclusion and death. And I would go so far as to say that the reverse is true. The church gets it wrong when it tries to engage the issues of poverty and injustice outside of a framework of mission. Being connected, with everyone, everywhere, means working at this. It means responding to these issues, not as charity, but as a conscious effort to re-shape the connections of the world that cause this kind of dislocation and death. It means not acting out the paternalistic power relationships that are shaped by the world, but always seeking to do things within the connectedness of the body of Christ.

*(4) Being connected and mission in the heart of the Empire.* So finally we must say something about mission at home. If mission is about everyone, everywhere; then there is not just mission out there in exotic foreign lands; but there is also mission in the home neighbourhood. When we talk about engaging in effective world mission, we can easily think that this is what happens out there in the world. But if what I have been saying is even half true, then people in the USA are already connected in some ways with people in the rest of the world, and mission might be working on the US side of the connection. That is a crucial way of thinking about world mission. There are people in your congregations and in your neighbourhoods, and in your cities who are connected to the world via their work, their travels, their families. These are good people, and they have great influence. It may be that new and effective strategies for working on this side of the connection have to be discovered, and this in the same of world mission.

There are models for this of course. In South Africa, one of the ways we had to deal with apartheid was by working with the white community, challenging them to think about their connection to black reality, raising questions of conscientious objection, simple lifestyle, ethical investments, humility. Today also, in gender awareness work, we have realised that you cannot just deal with consciousness raising amongst women, there has to be work with men on models of masculinity. Likewise, I think in the face of our global connections we have to work with those in the North, those who benefit from the connection, those who damage the environment the most through their economic activity. Once we see that we are already connected with everyone, everywhere, then we start to see that there is a whole area of home mission here that is not to be divorced from world mission. That division can only happen if we do not realise the depth of the connection that already exists both in fact and in faith.

And so we come to the end of what I can and need to say. We are connected. That is a fact. It is also a deep part of our faith. And it needs to be lived out. We need to function in mission in ways that recognise both realities – our connectedness in fact and in faith. There is so much to do in engaging in effective world mission, and I have just touched on a few issues. I pray and trust that in the workshops, and the discussions and the worship and the coffee breaks, you will use your energy and your wisdom to vision new ways of being connected with everyone, everywhere.