

**A New Obedience:
Why the 210-year-old Church Mission Society has turned
itself into a community
*John Martin***

"It seems that what is required of us is not new ideas, but a new obedience to those God has given us already." John V Taylor, General Secretary Church Mission Society, 1963-73

Last year the Church Mission Society, founded in 1799, was formally acknowledged by the Church of England's Advisory Council on the Relations of Bishops and Religious Communities. CMS is now a mission community alongside some very famous and venerable orders.

In one sense there is nothing terribly new about this. CMS has always had a significant community feel about it. It's a membership Society. Some members even refer to CMS as their "family". Implicit has always been a commitment to pray, live with the spirit of generosity and support mission work financially. Part, of course, of the adjustment in this move to community represents members seeing themselves as engaging in mission, not just supporting mission.

CMS was in fact founded by people who were part of an urban community. Members of the Clapham Sect, sometimes known as The Saints, lived in close proximity around Clapham Common. It was from here the campaign against the international slave trade was founded and fuelled. Their inspirer was William Wilberforce MP and they shared with him a wide-ranging political, social and spiritual agenda.

At home The Saints wanted a wholesale reformation of "manners" - a nation at ease with itself, with an end to corruption, abuses and vice. They established Sunday schools to extend literacy among the poor and Bible Societies to foster biblical literacy. Abroad they wanted people everywhere to have the benefits of the Gospel of Christ, hence their commitment to form CMS. So CMS has its roots in community living and action.

On the other hand, CMS becoming an acknowledged community represents something that is new and timely. It runs deeper than mere activism. It grows from a recognition that the world in which we live has changed, that many of the familiar mission models no longer work. As Professor Andrew Walls and many others have made clear, institutional Christianity in the UK and Europe is in recession. The heartlands of a missionary movement that spread the Christian faith to every point of the compass during the past 300 years are now, in the words of Philip Jenkins, a "spiritual malarial swamp".

The CMS move to community is an endeavour to raise the bar about how to be followers of Christ and how to be church today in the mission context in which we now find ourselves. Samuel Escobar, an influential contemporary voice in world mission has written, "Before searching for methods and tools of

communication of a verbal message we must search for a new style of missionary presence relevant to this moment in history."

We know from Christian history, from the earliest decades of the life of the church onwards, that missionary presence has often been expressed in community. Communities come into their own particularly in places where Christians are a minority or have to live in a hostile environment.

The first Christians in Jerusalem experimented with the common life. We can speak of the desert fathers and mothers. There is the mostly-forgotten story of the Persian church, a missionary enterprise far more substantial than most people realize, whose advance, which even reached China and Afghanistan, was fuelled by monastic communities. Then, of course, there is the story of the advance of Christianity into northern Europe with religious communities in the forefront.

In our day there seems to be a movement of the Spirit whereby many diverse groups are recapturing a vision for community as a route into mission. While many long-established religious communities seem to be waning - even closing down - at the same time we are witnessing the emergence of community in new forms. There are many examples: Northumbria, Church Army, Lee Abbey and the Eden Project to name a few.

Some, but not all, are institutionally-based. One of the best attended fringe seminars at the recent Greenbelt Arts Festival was a presentation on small mission communities. Almost spontaneously, in different parts of the British Isles, lay-led small groups are pursuing community living. Some are deliberately locating in "hard" contexts, prompted in no small part by a need for a deeper sense of belonging. They want to contribute to urban regeneration, and the care of underprivileged children, long-term unemployed people, asylum seekers, and the sick. They want to experiment with living simply and getting involved in the care of the living environment.

With CMS there are no plans to require people to be part of a residential community, wear habits and the like. As happened with The Saints at the end of the eighteenth century, CMS will be a "spread-out" community. The best metaphors to sum up the vision are the biblical metaphors of salt and light: Christ-like people in action to influence the world around them.

The CMS community represents continuity but there are aspects that are new. CMS members have traditionally signed a simple declaration in which they undertake to pray, support the mission work of the Society and "commend the Gospel by what I do and what I am." Now members will make seven promises which significantly beef up the commitments CMS members have always made. They raise the bar by inviting members to regularly review their spiritual life and be deliberately missional in every aspect of life.

CMS has among its members many who aspire to be like that. For many years it has operated The Salt Fellowship, a network of self-supporting professionals working in international postings, who seriously engage with the

local culture, become part of the local church and find ways to share their faith in challenging, cross-cultural contexts.

CMS deeply appreciates that mission involvement is not just for the professional or the Religious. Go to churches in Britain's inner cities where the Muslim community out-numbers church adherents and you may well find CMS people. They may have worked for some years in the Middle East or Pakistan. They speak Urdu and connect harmoniously with their Muslim neighbours and find creative ways to share their faith. Or go to rural districts where the global crisis in farming has taken a huge human toll. You will find that people affected can look for support from the Farm Crisis Network, where a high proportion of coordinators formerly worked as agricultural missionaries outside Britain.

It is the people of God, all sorts and conditions of them, responding to Jesus' call to be like him, to be drawn into his way of life: the way of love. But it was always such. *f*

For more information about CMS see the website www.cms-uk.org/

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