Liberating the Rich Church

This was one of the workshops offered at the Micah Consultation on Globalisation in Queretaro, Mexico, September 2003.

We started with the following quote from the Micah Declaration on Integral Mission:

“There is a need for integral discipleship involving the responsible and sustainable use of the resources of God’s creation and the transformation of the moral, intellectual, economic, cultural and political dimensions of our lives. For many of us this includes recovering a biblical sense of stewardship. The concept of Sabbath reminds us that there should be limits to our consumption. Wealthy Christians – both in the West and in the Two-Thirds World – must use their wealth in the service of others. We are committed to the liberation of the rich from slavery to money and power. The hope of treasure in heaven releases us from the tyranny of mammon.”

Then we together examined these 3 questions:

1. What are the obstacles we have to overcome to achieve the goal of liberation?

2. What strategies could our organisations use to overcome these obstacles, and empower a liberated discipleship on the part of rich Christians and rich churches?

3. What resources and programmes would these strategies require us to develop?

Identifying and describing the obstacles was the easy part! We had no difficulty in developing a comprehensive list, which we then processed further, placing the obstacles in 4, albeit crude, categories: Personal (P), Cultural (C), Personal Theology (PT), Institutional Theology (IT).

Obstacles identified in the workshop included:

Greed (P); Pride (P); Security – personal and Family (P&C); Marcion Theology – i.e. incomplete (PT, IT); dominant capitalist paradigm (C); ignorance and/or lack of exposure (P,C); sinful nature (P); desire for more (P); narrow church agenda (IT); poor Bible translations which inadequately capture the justice language (IT); lack of alternate models of Christian living (C); false dichotomy regarding social justice/salvation-personal piety (IT, PT); those with teaching and pastoral responsibilities may be inhibited by the fact that they are on the institutional payroll (IT); easier to follow the Christian mainstream and not “rock the boat” – fear of rejection (C, P); fear of the “social gospel” (IT); fear of the rich – money and power makes confrontation difficult (C); apathy (P); low awareness of the power of Mammon (PT, IT); inadequate understanding and teaching of discipleship (IT); lack of vision (P); paralysis by analysis (P); prejudice – blame the victim (P).

Identifying useful strategies was much more difficult. How do we challenge/subvert and change church cultures? How can we help individual Christians become more aware of and responsive to the Bible’s radical teaching on justice, compassion, stewardship and lifestyle?
One group looked at strategies in 3 dimensions:

1. Tackling our sinful nature. We challenged one another with the need to “walk the talk” and “talk the walk”, and to “preach the gospel” to ourselves daily. While we want to share our convictions regarding God’s heart of those who are poor and oppressed, we were conscious of our vulnerability to the obstacles listed above. Any strategy we develop needs to recognise this. Self-righteousness is, as always, horribly inappropriate.

2. Church Culture. We need to build on what is already in place i.e. identify and work with those whom God is already challenging and moving in the direction of integral mission. We need to expose the “Gatekeepers” in our churches to movements such as the Micah Network. We need to particularly target the next generation of church leaders (lay and ordained) in the universities and theological seminaries. We need to provide church members with opportunities for exposure to poor.

3. Tackling the Fear. There is a great need for alternative models of Christian living and Christian community, joyfully resistant to mammon and fears of insecurity. There is also a great need to challenge much of the shallow and un-biblical “living by faith” teaching. Jesus calls us to live faithfully and to live by fellowship i.e. we need to re-discover the importance of living lives of love whereby we meet one another’s needs in the household of faith. Radical models of this could do much to dispel fear.

Another group identified the following additional strategies:

- The importance of our agencies seeking to serve the churches, rather than see them as markets where we simply fund-raise.
- Encouraging the development of two-way relationships between individual “rich” churches and poor communities.
- Recognise the strategic importance of small groups (fellowship and Bible Study groups) which may be far more open to using the various educational resources we have developed than the congregation and its leadership.
- Recognising the principle that it is pastors who influence pastors, we need to provide immersion/exposure opportunities for pastors and the faculty of Bible seminaries.
- The need to challenge the “idolatry of the family”, which is often the excuse used by parents to spend excessively on their own children and avoid involvement in costly integral mission.
- The need to “rehabilitate evangelicalism” by helping it to re-learn its historical commitment to integral mission.

The workshop concluded by looking very briefly at development/discipleship education being done by TEAR Australia by way of a case study. This cannot be reproduced here, but TEAR Australia’s educational resources can be readily seen on their website at http://tear.org.au/