Walking Alongside the Poor: A Practitioner’s Perspective on Integral Mission
Saul and Pilar Cruz

This paper reflects the main issues we have been experiencing and learning through our work alongside the poor for the last thirteen years. When we started Armonia Ministries Jalalpa Ravine, a place of desperate poverty in Mexico City, we had to put into practice what resonated in our ears as integral mission among the poor. There were few material means to start with, although over the years we received the help of Tearfund, Armonia UK Trust, Orangewood Presbyterian Church of America and many other friends. From the very beginning it was an attempt at a fresh and contextual response, in flesh and blood, to questions about the gospel in terms of its relationship with the world, Christ's body, the poor and our responsibility towards them in Mexico City.

Our work exists inside a hermeneutic circle of reflection and action that begins its movement, directions and emphasis with questions inspired by the tradition of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES), the ideas of numerous spiritual parents and the important life-time work of John Stott, both in his books and through The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity which he founded. These help us to explore ways to construct a bridge of relevant and meaningful dialogue between the Bible and our worlds.

Walking alongside the poor became the purpose of our lives out of obedience to Christ, compassion for the needy and feelings of holy indignation when we see that beings like us, created in the image of God, have to survive under humiliating conditions. We began by wondering how Jesus' words could become a reality among the poor of our day. How would it be possible for the new humanity in Christ to show his compassion to a world in need? How could we give evidence in an intelligent, contemporary, embodied and significant way of God's compassion; of our obedience; of our prophetic responsibilities; of true love? How will justice, respect, harmony, co-operation, and an infinite number of other yearnings of God towards the needy, ever be seen in our city, our country and our world?

The Contemporary Church and Jesus

To describe our ideas and ways of working we have to begin by pointing out the obvious difference between the total knowledge and wisdom of God and our limited knowledge. We acknowledge the difference between the perfect revelation of God in our Lord Jesus Christ and our limitations in understanding due to our cultural constructs and the beliefs that we sustain. It is the difference between the work of the Holy Spirit and our limited obedience. We affirm, therefore, that we have a very limited and imperfect knowledge of this world. We as individuals in our processes of constructing descriptions of the world are bound by the beliefs and premises that exist in our worlds.

---

1 This paper also appears in Justice, Mercy and Humility, ed. Tim Chester, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003)
Our work as practitioners was not based on great knowledge and a clear, preconceived approach. It was made as we learned to walk with those the Lord gave us the privilege of loving in the slums of our city. And as such it is based on a hermeneutic circle of reflection and action. Thus we have come to understand that we relate to communities (as to the Word and to God himself) through an understanding which modifies our relationship with those communities. We consider that practitioners construct, through their own understanding and descriptions, the interactive processes in which they are involved.

So we had to begin by doing something with the differences we could observe between Jesus' actions in the gospel and the church's actions in our day. There were, of course, many areas of concurrence, but on observing the narratives of what Christ did, such as in Matthew 9: 31-35, one is surprised by Jesus' extraordinary actions. We see a compassionate Jesus going through towns and villages with open eyes while today's Church continues mostly trying to attract people – sometimes only to their local subculture – by means of all kinds of attractions in desperate, temple-centred activities. We see Jesus active every day in contrast to a Sunday-centred church. In contrast to an unbalanced church that chooses to emphasize only some aspects of the gospel, we see Jesus in perfect balance: teaching, preaching and healing. And while we are in disagreement and in endless discussion on what to do for the downtrodden, we see Jesus harmoniously preaching to the human spirit, educating people and healing their bodies. We do not see Jesus devoted to the formation of experts in people's problems, but rather to the formation of disciples. We see him training people of faith that will work following his principles when faced with similar problems, but in different times and places. We see Jesus educating faithful people who can take in prayer to the Father what their eyes and their hearts tell them of the vast problems of the harassed and helpless among them. People who dare to pray that the work of God may be done among us.

We kept wondering if it was possible to ask the Lord of the harvest to give us, today, renovated eyes, hearts and hands to be his contemporary disciples. Was it possible to integrate the hermeneutic tradition with an approach in which the practitioner-community relationship is our main preoccupation? Can we be emancipated from the perspective of the missionary work from the 1950s and learn to be compassionate Christians and a transforming presence in this contemporary world? This is not meant disrespectfully. The 1950s' idea of taking the church elsewhere was noble, necessary and revolutionary. The problem is that over the years it has become stagnant, distorted and anachronistic. It basically became the notion of bringing people to a temple on Sundays to re-educate them in the elements of the kingdom of God in heaven and our citizenship in it without emphasising the prayer of Jesus for the kingdom of God to come to earth and its transformational powers among us. It became a practice in which Christian service was relegated to meeting-centred, member-only activities and only in a few cases proclamation, education and service to the whole surrounding community. It became the detachment of thought and compassion; of eyes and hearts and of hearts and hands.

Many practitioners like us, who started from pragmatic, classic or programmatic backgrounds, are now in the middle of a transitional phase. We are attempting to
integrate old and new perspectives – certainties of basic Reformation Christianity with new sets of premises about our present day responsibilities and ways of being involved in this process. What we have observed in the field raises questions that do not merely pertain to community intervention programs. Instead they challenge the very notion of work among the poor and the identity of the practitioner. It is, in fact, a way of thinking that questions the foundations on which our understanding of the divine commission is based and questions the way in which we put it into practice.

As a consequence, we are trying to develop a perspective on learning and relating to the community that questions the traditional premises that define practitioners. In this transition, we have found ourselves faced with a number of challenges. These include:

1. a questioning of the traditional goals of community facilitators, workers, practitioners and missionaries towards which traditional community work was developed
2. a demystification of the practitioner’s transformational skills
3. a consideration of which voices should participate in the community transformation process

1. Questioning Goals

Considering the first challenge – questioning the traditional goals of community work – we have come to question the nature of the relationship between practitioners or missionaries and the poor community members which is implicit in the goals of traditional church-related community work. Traditionally, a dualistic and hierarchical relationship is emphasized and in an implicit way the practitioner’s culture is the ideal. As such it is assumed that the practitioner’s culture does not need any kind of transformation. The practitioner is seen as the person who understands human needs and the one who dictates how development should occur. The traditional approach tells us that the cure of all disadvantage is linked to the precise identification of what is wrong. This cause of disadvantage should be destroyed or changed with a suitable program. Under these assumptions the practitioner is a program expert who has all the answers. Therefore the practitioner leads the practitioner-poor community member relationship. He or she will determine what the correct variety of experiences is, the kind of abilities community members should have and what the desired results are.

2. Demystifying the Practitioner's Skills

Our reflection on the second challenge – the need to demystify the practitioner’s skills – has led us to the conclusion that you cannot impose values. Plans, possible programs and even personal behaviour should be considered from a relational perspective without favouring one description, explanation or understanding above any other. This is usually the opposite of the basis upon which encounters between the practitioner and poor community members usually take place and on which the practitioner bases their actions. It is, in fact, in acute contrast to the somehow generally accepted notion that concedes to churches, agencies or practitioners the power to change clients through their use of technical tools and financial resources.
Sometimes people think that the poor think little or not at all. The fact is that their thinking is undervalued. They think just the same as anybody else does and should have the opportunity to be heard and to enrich us. ‘Do not think of yourself more highly than you should. Instead be modest in your thinking, and judge yourself according to the amount of faith that God has given you. We have many parts in the one body and all these parts belong have different functions.’ (Rom. 12:3b-4, GNB)

All community and individual behaviours are a function of their cognitive and symbolic processes. Their interpersonal behaviours cannot be considered mere responses to what others do. These thinking processes are not absent because of the absence of food or resources. That is why they have their own values, what we call ‘the culture of the poor’. The practitioner’s interventions through activities, technology or programs then do not have a transformational effectiveness in themselves since the practitioner’s efforts are linked to the way in which the community members interpret his or her actions. Therefore for many years we had to learn how to construct new relationships in love and trust. A bridge of mutual trust, confidence and support is necessary and happens through three elements:

a. The non-verbal, but unique power of compassionate love
A genuine preoccupation with community priorities and concerns was the initial element of our communication. That demanded, of course, an extensive investment of time and resources in others, rather than in the construction of our own buildings and responding to our organizational needs. This led us all to a mutual trust. Through this stage many believed in the love of Jesus, but it was not enough.

b. The construction of a common language
In spite of its imperfection, we use our language to create and recreate our relationships and our conception of our worlds. So in our encounters with the community we use language to create our own shared perceptions of realities and relationships. We are trying to stop emphasising any hierarchical difference between us and freely open ourselves up to listen to the ideals of the kingdom alongside their descriptions, understandings and local meanings. All these practices produce a possibility of change and new knowledge for the other and for ourselves. More people were becoming Christians, but it was not enough.

c. A common space for communal reflection
We all created a common space for communal reflection – what we call ‘a space for transformation’. This common space is a space where we could meet – no longer us and them, but all together. We understood that we needed relational conversations – not classic teaching. We need a mutual effort to transform - *in the context of the word of God* – ourselves, the local culture and all the multiple possibilities for perceiving responsibility: love, suffering, crisis, family life, children, elderly people, sex, money, food, supporters, service to others, friendship, music, art, the indigenous people, education, politics, the Bible, our devotional life, the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit and so on. These do not constitute a syllabus in the usual way, but are the expression of our interests. In the midst of these conversations, thanks to our dear Lord, transformation started to occur in very powerful ways.
3. Participation in Transformation

The third challenge is to consider which voices should participate in the community transformation process. Transformation occurs in the context of interaction. God has given us a foundation by communicating with us through his word and the myriad of different methods he employs to convey his plans, love and desires for his people. So, as human beings interact – with God and one another – he inspires us to share our part in this diversity through our different voices: the words, colours, songs, rhythms and languages he has given us in his greatness, mercy and transforming power. The possibilities are infinite and exhilarating as in God there is no fixed mode of body-wide behaviour, praise or worship. In Christ we have the potential to express and experiment God’s will. We can experiment with what is pleasing and perfect in our time, culture and location – time after time. In his body the voices of young and old, women and men, are harmonized to bear out the love made real in this world; the love that is a living sacrifice to God. Submission to God’s will and expression of God’s will are the voices that transform lives and transform communities.

But what are we to do with those undesirable behaviours and thoughts that could undermine our communal life in Christ? We started a slow, but critical fight not just to substitute an undesirable value with its opposite, but instead to try to understand that change occurs through stability; that autonomy takes place through constraints; that freedom is only found through obedience; and that in limits we find possibilities. Without noticing, we stopped telling others who wanted to change their behaviour just to be the opposite of what they were, instead we started to create possibilities together as we were discovering that we were members of the same body of Christ. As can be seen, these processes demand of the practitioner an attitude of humility, dependence on God and an intense learning process.

If the practitioner must be an expert in something it should not the contents of people’s lives so as to tell them how to be or what to do in every instance of life. Rather their expertise should be in the process of integral mission that starts in one’s own eyes, heart, hands and mouth. They should enter into the process that in Christ moves back and forth from compassionate service to the formation of multiple relationships and possibilities for Christian transformation in the multiple dimensions of life. The practitioner’s responsibility is primarily creating a space in which people can have significant relational conversations among themselves and with God. Integral mission, where the kingdom of God is brought into being in our social realities, relies upon this facilitating role of the practitioner.

It seems to us that the idea of a development agency or practitioner as an architect of change among the poor should be abandoned. When it comes to defining a community problem the true nature of the problem is rarely an external cause such as the absence of water or means. In most cases poverty in a given community is related to the interpersonal and social dynamics that maintain the problem. If we observe carefully problems appear in the way that people interact according to a series of values and beliefs. Their new interactions determine a series of beliefs, securities and behaviours
that affect community life reciprocally. In that sense, called as we are to transformation among the poor in Christ's name, as practitioners we can define our role as that of participants and facilitators in the construction of interpersonal relationships based on the local and international, present and past, beliefs of Christ's body.

The Apostle Paul's teaching has been an extraordinary source of ideas for us on how this process of transformation can occur. Consider some critical ideas in Romans 12-15:

Do not conform any longer to the values of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. (Rom. 12:2)

So in Christ we who are many form one body and each member belongs to all the others. (Rom. 12:5)

For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by God and men, let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. (Rom. 14:17-18)

We have learned that we trigger a process of change in communities if we are successful in interfering with the cycle which keeps people locked in futile debate. But what does that mean? It seems to us that guidelines for practitioners could be identified as the following:

- a body of Christ challenge to the present, damaging ways of thinking through the introduction of differences; that is, real love, concern, service, sacrificial giving of time, resources, presence, gifts, interest and so on (not just an opposite to their current way of living)
- the proposal of different possibilities of living or of some event according to the power of salvation in Christ and the values of the Kingdom of God
- new ways of connecting relationships, behaviours and events in the community
- the introduction of mutual interdependence as members of the same body

The intervention which introduces differences can only be the one that is 'recognized' as such by the community or member of it. Can we go as far as saying that no matter what the practitioner does, the result will always be determined by the community member’s choice of what is useful for his or her change? People have even been given the freedom to resist or ignore the voice of God. We have to pay a lot of attention to this matter as we still do not understand how our conversations, histories, examples, readings and teachings are used by the Holy Spirit to bring about change. For example, what makes a relationship a process of correct, good and desirable learning? What gives a conversation an effect on other conversations? What makes a reading and a conversation around a story in the word of God become the point of reference for change for a person or a whole community?

Concluding Observations

Perhaps we could conclude with some intuitive observations from our interaction with the communities with whom we work.
We have to go to the poor if we want to meet them. It is not necessary to disguise ourselves as poor, but it is critical to form interactive relationships of trust for mutual transformation in the process of generating a new common language and new sets of common beliefs. Love is the fundamental way to communicate the desire of creating a common space for conversation, care and exploration of new possibilities for transformation.

Given an interactive relationship, the practitioner’s questions, concrete examples, readings from the Bible, comments or the direct invitation for repentance of sins and the acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour challenge the coherence of the community member’s values, descriptions, explanations, attributions and belief systems. This provokes a response from the community member – a reconsideration of their preconceptions.

Every time that an alternative Christian value, description, explanation or attribution is offered by the practitioner or a community member, the other members tend to integrate such possibilities into their belief systems. In a transforming relationship, a challenge to the community’s held beliefs ruptures the coherence of their belief system and obliges the individuals to generate a new coherence that incorporates the new ideas. The most significant change in a community member’s explanations, attributions and values occurs when a concrete example or believable account is given by the practitioner or by Christian members of the community to bear out their previously offered explanations and attributions. In this sense it is not sufficient solely to offer different points of view, it is also necessary that the Christian practitioner or the Christian community demonstrate the theory in practice.

Take, for example, Ephesians 4:27. ‘If you are a thief, stop stealing. Begin using your hands for honest work, and then give generously to others in need.’ (GNB) This change is facilitated if the community members have experienced the possibility of generating different points of view.

All these processes take time, humility, patience and prayer. We learn as a community in the light of the Lord’s infinite love and possibilities. And we pray that we can keep learning as we serve, walking alongside the poor, until he takes us to our eternal home.