

Reflections on the Mango Tree Church

In the last paragraphs above [Ed's book review from last week] I've been signalling questions that I'd like to talk about with GKPB pastors and leaders. But there's been no real opportunity for that in our time here. I've met four of the (I think) five people at the top of the church's administration, but only for the briefest of conversation. Should that door yet open in our final two weeks here, these are some of the topics on my list.

1. McKenzie's history is a story of success, the story of a Mango Tree Church that seems always to be a winner. Were there no losses, no mistakes, no conflicts, no failures? There is a hint of something happening in 1988, "a period of in-house, tough, tense ecclesiastical brokerage," McKenzie says, but we get no further information other than that when it was over the "church had shed a few leaves and some of its fruit, but it was surviving to face a new day in new ways." You don't have to be a space scientist to know that there is a chapter missing here.
2. We've learned that there is another written history of the GKPB, different from McKenzie's, but we've never seen it. And if we did, we'd need a translator since it's only in Indonesian. How does that retelling go?
3. As far as we have learned there is no doctrinal statement, no confessional document articulating the GKPB's theological commitment. The word Protestant in its name, as everyone knows, can mean most anything. As one of my teachers said years ago: It can mean "Here I stand." It can also mean "But I can also stand over here as well, and maybe over there too."
4. Just as an outside observer in our second week here, I

think I saw the consequences of this lack of confessional criterion. The bishop had invited in a team from The Vineyard of Portland, Oregon USA. He and a few pastors had been in Portland and liked what they saw and heard, so the invitation went out. I attended one of the sessions where the entire Vineyard team, 44 of them, was present, giving their testimony and praying for the spirit's outpouring on the several hundred participants. As the Vineyard folks went down the rows praying for this one and that one standing in the large room now cleared of chairs, a number fell to the floor "slain in the spirit," with corresponding sound effects of barking, crying, shouting, screaming. A few GKPB pastors (bishop included) were on the floor involved in the process, but the vast majority of clergy were at the sidelines clearly skeptical that this was genuinely Christian, let alone Protestant. I only heard bits and snippets of the discussions that ensued when the Vineyard team went home. But a theological manifesto might have helped. It surely is better than the one proposed to me by a Balinese pro-Vineyard pastor: "We will sample whatever we can of Christian options available and then we will decide what is fitting for our Balinese context." Here was a case where some did and some didn't—and they were all Balinese.

5. The image of the mango tree church needs testing. When Jesus uses a tree image in the gospels, he talks about people as trees bearing fruit. He begins by speaking of the fruit (good or bad), but the root of the matter is the roots of that tree, where people are grounded. Jesus offers to root people in the Gospel that he brings, the Gospel that he is. So the ministry of Jesus (and ours too as his disciples) is to uproot people from the soil in which their lives are planted and re-plant them into the Gospel.

6. Is it possible at all to plant the Gospel into a culture, any culture—Balinese or any other? The Gospel is a message. If you want to talk about “planting” it, then human hearts are the seedbed, not that person’s culture. The ear, says St. Paul, is the organ of faith. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing comes when the Good News is proclaimed. How do cultures “hear,” if they can hear at all? Where are the ears? Whose ears? Which human ears in a culture count when Christian witness tries to get a culture to listen? Are they the Brahmins or the beggars? Jesus gave a clear answer to that.
7. At root is the fact that every culture has a cultus. Cultus is where the term culture comes from. A culture’s cultus is the pattern of worship it urges on its people, the sacrifices and ceremonies addressed to the god(s) at its center. Whether the culture is religious or secular makes little difference. Cultus happens in every culture. Thus the gods of secular America’s current culture are (among others) pleasure, profit, prestige, power. The holy places for liturgies to these deities are Wall Street, Hollywood, the Pentagon, sports arenas. Any talk about inculturating the Gospel must find out what cultus is working in the given culture.
8. I learned recently that one of the GKPB pastors is doing a graduate dissertation relating to this. As I understood it, he’s examining some of the critiques that have been raised about the image of the mango tree church. One that relates here is voiced by Christian converts from Balinese Hinduism, who were driven out, persecuted out, of their villages because they deserted the old cultus and its contexting culture. Such people, it is said, don’t think it’s a good idea to context the Gospel in Balinese culture. They can imagine nothing worse, yes, contra-Christian, than to shape their Christian faith and life by

that antithetical culture of oppression. For them, it seems, the newness of the Good News is not only a new cultus (worshipping Christ) but a new cultural context for that life as well. That sounds plausible. I hope I can see his thesis when it's finished.

9. On that topic, didn't Jesus say: "New skins for new wine"? Try to put the new wine in the old skins and the skins will burst and the wine be lost. That doesn't mean: Go western. But it surely tempers the inculturation agenda, calling for the same theological precision, the same sort that first century Christians needed vis-a-vis the two cultures that they faced: Jewish and Hellenistic. Since they too got persecuted for being threats to the local culture, they must have been creating a new culture for their new wine—from their new wine.
10. An offhand comment I heard during our first days here was that the mission theology shaping the GKPB was taken more from the work of Karl Rahner, 20th century Roman Catholic star theologian, than it was from the Dutch Reformed theologian Hendrik Kraemer. In H. Richard Niebuhr's classic book of just 50 years ago, Christ and Culture, he gives Luther a separate chapter, distinguishing his theology of culture from both the Roman and the Calvinist paradigms. Granted all of these are "western" theologians. But if the GKPB claims the term Protestant in its name, why Rahner? Why not Kraemer—or even Luther?
11. Finally a disturbing statistic. McKenzie says that "by 1970 GKPB church membership was nearly 7000." Last Sunday one pastor told me that the current (1999) membership was "about 8000." What does this mean?

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