

What Training in Mission has Meant for Me

Presentation at CWM Assembly 2006

By Jet den Hollander, TIM 1981-82

In 2006, CWM's Training in Mission programme celebrated its 25th anniversary. By that time, many former TIM participants, upon their return home, had been strategically used by their churches in education and renewal programmes. So the 2006 CWM Assembly, meeting in Jamaica, indeed felt that a celebration was called for! A huge birthday cake was shared, a TIM Quiz was played, and representatives from different decades were invited to share with the Assembly what Training in Mission had meant to them. Jet den Hollander, at that time Mission Secretary at the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Geneva, and member of the first, experimental TIM group in 1981-82, started off the testimonies with the address below.

CWM moderator, members of the Assembly, representatives at the women's and youth consultations, leadership of the United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands and fellow Training in Mission participants, greetings!

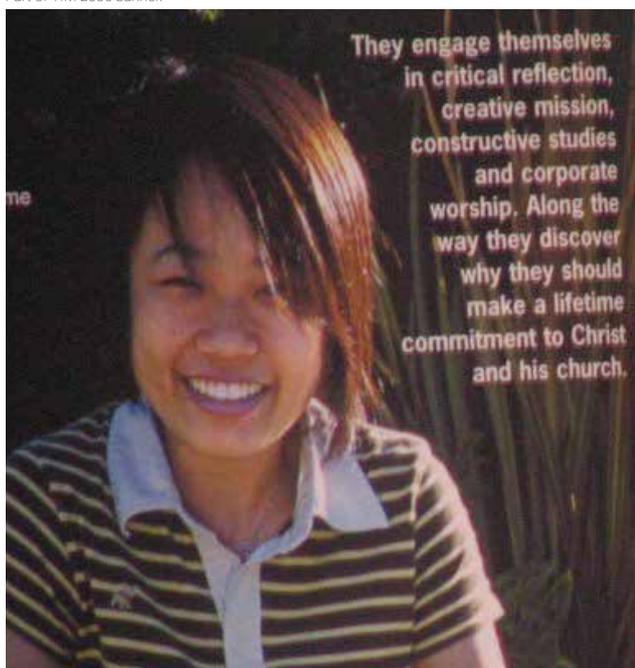
I would like to begin by thanking the Council for World Mission for inviting me to this very special event, the 25th anniversary celebrations of Training in Mission, and for the opportunity to say a few words about what TIM has meant for me. And indeed, it should be a few words, as I was told that I have 8 minutes only.

But what can you say in 8 minutes about an experience that changed your life? Because, TIM did indeed change my life, just as I know it has changed the way others have come to understand themselves, the world, God and their own role in the mission of the Church. I do not believe that anyone has gone through the TIM experience and has come out unchanged, even if the changes are different for each of us. Because TIM **problematizes** mission, and it does this differently for different persons with different histories. The entry point



TIM 2006 Presentation by Jet den Hollander.

Part of TIM 2006 banner.



of each of us into TIM is unique, the questions we have about mission and the context implied in these questions are unique and therefore what each of us learns from TIM is unique. So let me share a few aspects of what happened in my case. I went to Training in Mission with a lot of baggage. I had grown up in the Netherlands in the 60s and 70s when, as Bob Dylan sang, "the times they were a-changin'". These were the decades when the effects of decolonisation, secularisation and unprecedented levels of cultural circulation were beginning to be felt. The power balance between North and South was beginning to change. My generation was becoming aware of the terrible legacies of slavery and colonialism in which we, the Dutch, had so ruthlessly participated, and we were ashamed but also convinced that we, the new generation, were going to do far better than our ancestors. We were, obviously, the hope of the world. And of course in that vision MISSION did not fit, because that too was somehow linked to that historical legacy of domination and exploitation.

"...TIM problematises mission, and it does this differently for different persons with different histories. The entry point of each of us into TIM is unique..."



CWM Assembly 2006 former TIM participants Michelle Bennett and Jet den Hollander.

And yet, I had also grown up with dreams of following in the footsteps of Albert Schweitzer, with family stories of missionaries going overseas, with my parents and pastor praying for mission and clearly being committed to it, and with us, from the time that you were four years old, taking your 10 cents for mission to school on Monday morning. So for me, that first experimental TIM year was an opportunity to look anew at these two conflicting stories within me and for making up my mind about how mission and I hung together.

I guess I went through all the stages. First, I was delighted with what I saw. We discovered the CWM vision of partnership and heard how just 4 years earlier, in 1977, this vision had been put into a structure and a practice of multi-lateral resource sharing, and most importantly, of common power sharing. It was great to be part of the Gang of Ten and discover we could laugh and sing and pray together and feel so united as the one family of God. Hurray, the new ways of mission had been found. But secondly came the disillusion, as we realised that quite a bit of the new partnership talk was just empty slogan; that the ways our churches were operating were often still so painfully similar to those of the past; and most disconcertingly, that we ourselves were still so painfully similar to our predecessors, and so terribly human. And realizing that I could not live up to my own ideals of what a worker in God's holy vineyard should be, I was ready to give up on the idea of me and mission, and now for once and for good, I decided.

But then came the third phase, and I call it the stage of grace. Because what TIM, the focussed studies of mission in context, but in particular what the interaction within this intercultural TIM group did for me was to make me realise, finally, that God is not looking for blameless missionaries or spiritual giants, but for people who have glimpsed something of the love embodied in Jesus Christ, a love strong enough to transform the world, and that if you believe that and want to walk with him towards the beckoning future of a world where peace and justice embrace each other, that then you are by definition – not by choice but by definition - a missionary. I found grace and healing in the perspective of Lalchuanmawia from North East India who, when I argued how misguided our churches had been in previous centuries, would simply say: "yes, you are right, but you know, they brought us the light!" And I saw how Dennies Sikhosana from Zimbabwe, which a year before had still been white-ruled Rhodesia, was moved to tears when an elderly white British missionary knelt down and washed his feet as part of a Maundy Thursday service. And I came to realise that it's only by concretely living and working and praying and studying together that the hurts of the past can be healed (and let's make no mistake as to the extent that these still exist and are being perpetuated by the current global structures, including many of our church structures). It's only together that the challenges of today can be faced, and only together can we find, as it were, a second innocence to engage in a mission that is viable for today. (For, we lost our first innocence about mission, and we cannot go back to engaging in it with the same innocence of the 19th century missionaries. But what we can develop is a second innocence, a naivety that has worked through the shame and critique over the past and that, in the process of mission in partnership, recovers something of the zeal and commitment of those who went before us.)

It was the Gang Of Ten and God's use of that beautiful, crazy, difficult intercultural group from all over the world that enabled me to find my place in the Church and its mission. And it is to that praxis that I've been committed ever since in my work with CWM, CANACOM and most recently the World Alliance of Reformed Churches: to work with churches to design programmes that enable people to find their own place in the Church and its mission in response to God's invitation to share in the Missio Dei.

We still have a long way to go, in CWM, in our organisations, in our churches. But what matters now - as it mattered in that first TIM year - is that we move together, however difficult it is at times and however distant the goal seems to be. For, as Benjamin Mays (American educator, Clergyman, 1895-1984) once said:

"It must be borne in mind that the tragedy of life does not lie in not reaching your goal. The tragedy of life lies in having no goal to reach.

It is not a calamity to die with dreams unfulfilled. But it is a calamity not to dream.

It is not a disaster not to reach the stars.

But it is a disaster to have no stars to reach for. Not failure but **low aim** is sin.

CWM has always, from 1795 when the London Missionary Society was created, set its aims high, including and particularly with the Training in Mission Project.

And from the depths of my heart I thank CWM, but in particular the Gang of Ten,

- 👉 **Tekaabei Kaoma**
- 👉 **Anna Ward**
- 👉 **Eirean Wyn Roberts**
- 👉 **Eteuati Salesa**
- 👉 **Paul Reginald**
- 👉 **James Mason**
- 👉 **Dennies Sikhosana**
- 👉 **Lalchuanmawia**
- 👉 **and the late Fisher Gondwe,**

for the privilege in TIM to reach for the stars together. And we didn't reach them all. But we surely touched some!

To God be the glory.

Thank you. ■

TIM 25 birthday cake.

