

Setting a biblical standard in Christian witness

The increasing stridency of those accusing Christians of wrongdoing in mission has made the task of developing a joint document on ethics in mission urgent.

by John Langlois



The past decade has seen increasing allegations that Christians are engaging in unethical conduct to induce people of other faiths, in particular the poor and vulnerable, to convert to Christianity with various incentives, financial or otherwise.

To counter these (usually false) allegations the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) of the Roman Catholic Church and the Office on Interreligious Relations and Dialogue (IRRD) of the World Council of Churches (WCC) got together five years ago to articulate a response.

The WCC invited the Religious Liberty Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance to join in the task. These three bodies, representing nearly 90 per cent of the world's Christians, have launched the results of their work in a five-page document on the principles to be respected when Christians share their faith.

The increasing stridency of those alleging wrong has made this task urgent. After the tsunami in December 2004 accusations were made that evangelical Christians demanded that people who were homeless or starving should convert to Christianity before receiving aid. In 2009 a congressional commission in Sri Lanka accused more than 400 non-governmental agencies working in Sri Lanka of unethical conversions.

They accused evangelical Christians of taking advantage of those living in poverty by demanding conversion before the provision of aid. Hindus in India have long complained that Christians in their country were acting unethically, subjecting Christians to murderous attacks.

Radical Buddhists and Hindus in a number of Asian countries have demanded anti-conversion laws making the inducements to unethical conversions a criminal offence.

This would include a prohibition on Christian educational and medical work, which are seen as inducements. Radicals target "Christians" generally, often not differentiating between Catholic, protestant or evangelical Christians. All are accused indiscriminately.

That is not to say that Christians have not fallen short of the high standards set in scripture. That is hardly surprising considering there are over a billion professing Christians in the world today. Indeed this was acknowledged in Article 12 of the Lausanne Covenant of 1974 which reads: "At ... times, desirous to ensure a response to the gospel, we have compromised our message, manipulated our hearers through pressure techniques, and become unduly preoccupied with statistics or even dishonest in our use of them. All this is worldly. The Church must be in the world; the world must not be in the Church."

For the first time, the "Recommendations for Conduct" clearly state the biblical standard expected of followers of Christ in their witness to Him. The launch of the document in Geneva on June 28 was a historic occasion because the document itself is historic. It is hard to think of other occasions when virtually the whole of the Christian church worldwide has come together and agreed on a common set of principles for Christian conduct, certainly not for hundreds of years.

As Dr Geoff Tunnicliffe, Secretary General of the WEA said at the launch, the agreement on the text is a major achievement and a historic moment.

In his address at the launch Cardinal Tauran summed up the principles set out in the document in the words of 1 Peter 3:15-17: "In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to every-one who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak badly against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil."

In a nutshell that says it all. The Bible usually does.

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