

In the first of this new series, Wallace Boulton talks to Canon SIMON BARRINGTON-WARD, CMS General Secretary.

When he is in this country, he joins the commuters most mornings from Richmond. But Simon Barrington-Ward looks different from most of the press of humanity surging through the barriers at Waterloo.

For one thing, he is usually cheerful—either that or deep in thought. When the weather is cold, he steps out into Waterloo Road with his added headgear: a Sherlock Holmes deerstalker.

He can be deeply serious and passionate about fundamental issues but sits lightly to the everyday round. His clothes for the office are often informal: a roll-neck sweater under a sports jacket.

His father was the Editor of *The Times*. His own background is Eton and Magdalene College, Cambridge, where he took his degree in history and returned as dean after university lecturerships in Germany and Nigeria.

He has none of the detached aloofness often associated with academics. He is 'Simon' to everyone at headquarters and is easily approachable—that is if he has not already made the first approach himself in his relaxed, outgoing way.

He sits at one end of a third-floor office which is dominated by a large table for meetings. It is a functional office; no touches of executive luxury. There is only a single runner of carpet but the walls are enlivened with African batiks.

He is busily making notes for our meeting in his rapid, stylised calligraphy. He prefers handwriting many of his letters to dictating them. He makes copious notes in meetings.

We move to the boardroom-type table and in his first sentence about his work, the words joy and exhilaration occur. So much of his writing and speaking, and indeed his life, is shot through with these characteristics.

"We have done what I have been longing for ever since I came into this job. We have articulated our aims in a clear form."

He sees the whole of CMS activity within a circle of interchange and partnership: a flow of people, resources, money, insights, experiences.

"By means of this exchange, we work together with Christians all over the world, with three aims in mind. We work at sharing the gospel. We seek together new patterns of church life and witness; all that is understood by renewal.

"And thirdly, we join with others in working out new patterns of society, closer to the gospel society as we see it in the New Testament.

"Well, that is really something to work at in the next 10 years", he adds cheerfully.

living with questions



Combination of aims

The three aims are so unimpeachable, so obviously the task of everyone in the church, that what is distinctively 'CMS' about them?

"The combination of all three: their coherence," he explains.

"We have this great concern for evangelism. That doesn't go very deep in the church in most places world-wide, or at least not beyond certain sorts of people.

"And then we have a real commitment to transforming society.

"What a combination: evangelical, catholic, charismatic and radical, all in one. Very rare!"

He pauses and his expression becomes more serious. "But is this anything like CMS as it is? Everyone has doubts sometimes. Someone claiming to have no doubts is like a marriage that is supposed to have no quarrels.

"Sometimes I wake up with the thoughts any CMS General Secretary must have faced. What connection is there between the rhetoric and the reality? Is the right combination coming across? Are we working towards something that people can grasp?"

His face muscles are now taut, his gaze has hardened. "I ask this about myself. After all, it's not fair to ask questions of others if I am not asking them of myself."

He recognises the danger of headquarters becoming an ivory tower, from which we simply exhort others, or where we can almost be talking to ourselves.

"We keep using lots of words. We always have good stories to tell. But how much does it all correspond to reality?"

He picks up a sheaf of papers, the minutes of a Selection and Training Committee meeting. He quotes:

"It seemed to the committee that the tendency is for CMS to fall between two extremes. People with acute political awareness are not attracted, because the Society is not seen to have a corporate political stance. People with evangelistic zeal are not attracted, because the Society is seen to serve the church rather than to engage in church planting."

Learning from overseas

He recalls a discussion of Malcolm Warner's latest visit to Asia. "It's a great privilege we have to go overseas, and to hear from others who go. This is reality."

Malcolm Warner had visited Kuranagala diocese, in Sri Lanka; from which we had the magnetic figure of Bishop Wickremesinghe last year.

There he had met Arnold Mendis and his wife, founders of the Ceylon Inland Mission, who combined bubbling direct evangelism with sensitivity. It was very exciting.

In the same diocese Malcolm Warner had met a young couple working for the Christian Workers' Fellowship, doing radical social and political work among the tea workers.

They were feared by many in the church and had little support from middle-class Anglicans. But they were really expressing Christ among the workers.

Simon paused. "When it came to the discussion, some colleagues said that CMS was just being theoretical in trying to combine these two elements. People either had one or the other. We should be seen to be supporting both, which we are."

He stood up and paced the room. "But that to my mind struck a blow. What we really want is a church in which both these things can happen. Bishop

Wickremesinghe holds them both together.

"Then my mind flashed back to my own recent tour of south-east Asia, to people like Raymond Fung. He is doing astonishing work among the dockers of Hong Kong.

"He calls himself deliberately an industrial evangelist—not even industrial missionary, which has come to mean almost anything—and he comes from a Baptist evangelical background.

"But the form of evangelism for him is to create a Christian community among the dockers, which shows that Christ is with them in their struggle for political rights and in their desperate working conditions.

"This is different from what can be done by any institution that is just helping them from above, as it were.

"After 10 years, 80 dockers have been converted and baptised. There is this community where the gospel of grace bursts out in the demand for a right kind of living, of caring, for the dockers."

He goes on to tell me too about the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, which is committed to the political struggle for the Taiwanese, who are not really represented in the government, as well as running deeply searching and effective evangelistic campaigns.

He remembers also the Christian and Asian Institute in Japan. There again he found groups which are combining the two elements.

"I take some comfort from this. But they are so rare. They are hard to find. One can still have the nagging questions. Is it impracticable after all?"

"One is thrown back upon God. It may be that when you ask the most searching questions and have the deepest uncertainties, that you are nearest to new life.

"Really the doubt is a searching with God; asking him, will you do something with us in CMS and in our church?"

"I believe that it is only when we hunger and thirst in this total kind of way that real creativity comes.

"I want this for our members. I want to have this atmosphere in our General Council, in Yes, in our meetings."

New initiatives

This leads Simon to another of his haunting questions.

"If the examples are so rare and the whole aim of CMS is to bring about more, are we setting about it in the right way?"

He reminds me that we are deeply committed to the Partners in Mission consultations and he feels they raise important questions and help to get priorities right.

"But, inevitably perhaps, afterwards things carry on largely as before. Does renewal come rather from groups on the fringe of the church, as CMS once was;

from small, scattered groups?"

His hands, constantly moving to emphasise his points, are stretched out. "Could CMS get in touch with them direct, without having to wait for a bishop?"

"Of course, they would have to be recognised movements in their churches; near to what Dr Ralph Winter urges as the only way forward: new voluntary fellowships, ginger groups, as agencies of renewal. Isn't this what is happening in Asia and Africa?"

"These movements would be something like religious orders, a network alongside or within the partnerships."

Recurring theme

Interchange is a constantly recurring theme of Simon's. That vital flow of people, resources, money, insights and experiences must be central.

"But are we the right shape to make it so? Is our whole focus still too one-way?"

He smiles. "I am living with a lot of questions. But it is only by asking the 'impossible' questions, and facing them, that real growth comes.

"It is a learning process, by which the Spirit can realise the aims we have set ourselves.

"I believe we have got our aims right, and we must think deeply about the ways of fulfilling them. Our members should be asking the same questions of themselves and their churches."

This prompts me to ask him about his own local church, and he enthuses about St Stephen's, East Twickenham, and its house groups, whose members really sustain each other.

Most of them, of course, lead split lives as commuters and this concerns Simon. "If you don't live where you work, you don't belong fully to either community. Church belongs to a fairly tired corner of your life."

His wife, Jean, is a doctor with a part-time practice but is working more and more. "We are sharing the pressures of many Christians in Britain. Life is split, and is there enough time for the family?" With Simon often abroad, family life becomes even more disrupted.

Their two daughters, Helen, 11, and Mary, 8, are at the age when they need plenty of support. "The next stage in education is looming. Family life is important. Every new event should be a family affair. Like the arrival of new puppies, which has just happened."

No evasion

Simon Barrington-Ward has an inspiring vision for the future of CMS, but he knows there is no evading the complexities and perplexities of our present situation.

Questions there may be on all sides but he is not easily daunted. His perseverance and optimism spring from a pervading faith in the living Christ.

