
D. The Mission of the Church in Multi-Faith Contexts



The mission of the Church points to and participates in the coming of God's reign. How can every Christian and congregation be empowered to participate in this mission? Reconciliation among people is a key aspect of this mission, especially in multi-faith contexts. How can this kind of healing occur through such means as dialogue and living and working together? How does this challenge and transform some past mission assumptions and practices? How should this be reflected in the revised mission document and in other LWF work?

Mission and God's reign

The 1988 LWF document, *Together in God's Mission*, defined mission as:

- The ongoing saving work of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and
- God's mandate to God's people to participate in this continuing saving work.¹

Proclamation of the gospel, calling people to believe in Jesus Christ and to become members of the new community in Christ, participation in the work for peace and justice and in the struggle against all enslaving and dehumanizing powers are therefore an integral part of mission of the church. All such activities point to the reality of the Reign of God and to its final realization at the fulfillment of history.³

God is a God in mission: the “sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit to the world was the supreme manifestation of divine missionary activity.”² God is love, transcending all kinds of fences and barriers built by human beings. The church continues God’s holistic mission by participating in the coming of God’s reign and witnessing to it in multi-faith and other diverse contexts.

The last two Assemblies continued to develop the theological understanding of this holistic understanding of mission. The 1998 LWF Consultation on Churches in Mission underlined and called for the LWF to revise the mission document, *Together in God’s Mission*. Here “transformation” was identified as an important mission imperative “as the church, in every context, is called to be a transforming community of God’s people.”⁴ Mission as transformation challenges local churches to be themselves transformed in order to become instruments of transformation in the world.

Every Christian is called to *mission as proclamation*, to share the gospel story in his/her context in ways that communicate God’s saving action and meaningful presence in the world.

Mission as service highlights the diaconal dimension of a faith active in love, working for the empowerment and liberation of those in need.

Mission as advocacy for justice denotes the church’s praxis in the public arena as affirming the dignity of human life and working for justice in political, economic, social and ecological spheres.⁵

God empowers mission

The question of “power” is crucial. Since the Constantinian era, Christian mission has often been linked to the oppressors rather than the liberators, especially under slavery, colonization and patriarchy. In many places, this is the predominant form of mission that has been experienced. For example,

the spirit of the Crusades dominated the Portuguese colonization. This ideology of holy war resulted in there never having been any missions in the proper sense in Latin America. There was conquest, implantation of the dominant religious structure. Mission and conquest are irreconcilable.⁶

The church is called to name how blatant and less obviously dominating powers continue to prevail in some contexts today.

On what powers or authorities does the church rely today in order to carry out its mission? What relationships of inequality and dependency are perpetuated by those who provide money and other resources for mission? How should this be addressed?

Church leadership at all levels, as well as individual Christians, are often tempted to use the pursuit of God’s mission to gain power over others, or to “make others like us.” If the church embarks on mission for the purpose of gaining control or power over others, or for imposing the church’s cultural, political, socio-economic or other agendas on communities, this becomes a distortion of mission. Mission ought not to isolate people from their communities, or

to destroy the culture of others. When the church attempts to take away what is life-giving to communities, this is not God's mission. When the church understands its call to participate in the *missio Dei* and God's in-breaking reign in the world, then the church will be involved in giving life to the community.

The LWF, member churches and congregations are called to examine their reasons for being involved in God's mission, and to name those powers which attempt to usurp God's power and turn the gospel into a commodity under human control. As a reflection of the *missio Dei*, the church's mission for the sake of the gospel is to give life freely to others. Jesus' life and death reveal that the nature of the church's mission is one of servanthood. Similarly, the church in mission is to rely on the power of God's Spirit working through self-denial, suffering and the cross, rather than on the wealth and power of the world. The fruits of mission are gifts of God, granted not through human power and wisdom, but by proclaiming and sharing the life of the crucified Lord (1 Cor 1:18, 27).⁷

God empowers all the baptized to share in mission

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses...” (Acts 1:8). The power comes from the Holy Spirit working within a community and within creation. If the power and authority of mission are always God's and not the

church's, then God's mission cannot be controlled by clergy and other leaders in congregations, churches, seminaries, mission societies, the LWF, or elsewhere. The gospel, its interpretation and God's mission belong to the whole community, and not a ruling or learned class. The Spirit is in all, for the benefit of all.

The disciples were sent out by Jesus Christ (Lk 10:1ff.) as an extension of his own mission (Jn 20:21). They received “power from on high” (Lk 24:49). The focus is on God's rather than human actions. In this way, we can understand how the doctrine of justification is central to a Lutheran understanding of God's mission and the mission of every congregation. In contexts where people try to justify their own words and deeds, mission proclaims the message that there is no need for self-justification, for it is God alone who justifies.

Every Christian is called and empowered by God to the priesthood of all believers. As Lutherans today are rediscovering this, a paradigm shift has been occurring in the church's understanding of mission, from the use of “power over” to one of “power with.” In this power-sharing approach to mission, the power of the gospel becomes relational and mutual. Through baptism, God empowers us to be participants in God's mission. All the baptized belong to a

chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of God who called you out of darkness into God's marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9).

How can the LWF support member churches toward more power-sharing approaches to mission? What does a mutual, power-sharing approach to mission mean in the *communio* relationships of the LWF, especially in situations of need? What does it mean to live out mission in solidarity in the different regions of the LWF and between the LWF member churches? Share some experiences of how this has been or is occurring.

Despite a strong understanding of the priesthood of all believers, many Lutheran congregations are still pastor-centered congregations. How can this change? In multi-faith contexts this challenge is raised, for example, by many non-Christian spiritualistic movements, which are spreading very quickly worldwide. Many of them do not have professional leaders or missionaries, but all the members see themselves as missionaries in their daily lives. This also is the case in some Lutheran congregations.

How does this challenge us as Lutheran churches? How could we become less pastor-centered, but without losing the central importance of Word and sacraments?

As the baptized live out God's mission in their daily lives, they share their experiences in the congregation, grow through their mutual sharing, and are nurtured through God's Word, the sacraments and the *communio*. In the congregation, the baptized discover their particular gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are always to be used in the context of serving the community, rather than to gain power for oneself. Pastors and other specially trained people help equip others to carry out God's mission.

Share your experiences of mission in daily life. What does it mean for a congregation to be in mission?

The congregation participating in God's mission is rooted in the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. In this mission, God's self is given to the congregation, which in turn is called to participate in God's mission of salvation and of reconciling and healing relationships between humans and the rest of creation.

Inculturating the gospel in word and deed

In a power-sharing approach, mission does not happen through monologue, but through dialogue. The gospel of Jesus Christ is manifest in diverse ways among different peoples and cultures. We must have the courage to move away from old, obsolete models toward new approaches in which the culture and values of people are appropriately respected. The commandment to love our neighbor involves more than trying to "bring him or her to Jesus." Inculturation of the gospel will happen when we become aware that there is more than one way to live out the gospel and ourselves are open to the risks involved in authentic dialogue.

We proclaim the gospel in word and deed. The way in which Christians and congregations live is in itself a witness. Word without deed can be abstract and powerless; deed without word can be misunderstood. Our witness in multi-faith contexts will be faithfully and effectively realized when words and deeds become two sides of the same coin. Working for peace, justice and the integrity of creation—which is part of mission—has to be carefully prepared and rooted in who God is and how God acts.

Thus, we participate in God's mission through

- **Words:** preaching, praying, singing, dialoguing, educating, writing.
- **Deeds:** helping the neighbor, working for peace, justice and integrity of the creation, acting in society and through politics.
- **Community life:** being present in the world, respect and openness toward others, sharing with them, meeting their needs and those of creation.

There may be times and places, where proclaiming the gospel is not possible, and the only way of witnessing is through wordless service rooted in prayer. This silent service can have many faces, such as meeting human needs or working for social and political transformation. Living out this witness can also involve suffering and in some circumstances lead to martyrdom.

It is the common responsibility of the whole church at all levels to nurture and equip Christians for proclamation, witness and service in multi-faith contexts. What more should the LWF be doing to support member churches in meeting this challenge?

If the gospel is for the entire community, then a congregation that takes mission seriously must be inclusive in its language and practices. Referring to all people as “men” excludes women, imagining God only in male terms suggests that only males are created in God’s image, using “us” versus “them” language suggests that some are not fully part of the community. Such language and practices exclude or alienate some from the community. A recurring theme in the gospels is the way in which Jesus always included people in the community. An inclusive congregation is an open community nurtured and challenged by God’s mission. Members try to live God’s mission of reconciliation in love and solidarity as a healing community, continually crossing religious, social, economic and other boundaries.

How can all people feel and know that they are welcome into an inclusive community? Discuss examples of how congregations, member churches and the LWF have transcended cultural, religious, socio-economic and gender boundaries, and through this have had new experiences of being mutually empowered.

The mission of reconciliation in multi-faith contexts

Many Christians have directly experienced reconciliation as a healing process with other Christian churches (See the chapter on “Healing Divisions in the One Church”). What about reconciliation with people of other faiths? If reconciliation is the keyword of the gospel and the starting-point of mission, this should be a starting point for relating to them.

From the perspective of Christian faith, reconciliation is a costly means of grace. It often comes at a high price, and should not be taken too lightly nor spoken of loosely. Reconciliation is much more than a pat on the shoulder, or a feeling of goodwill that seeks to overcome divisions for the sake of peace and harmony. When people are anxious about losing their power or pride, they are probably not ready for peace or reconciliation. Likewise, reconciliation within or between nations is not possible if the governing authority will not humble itself and recognize its sins or shortcomings against the people.⁸

Christians sometimes understand “reconciliation” as implying that past wounds should not be talked about, or to try to forgive and, if possible, even forget. This painful culture of silence can render dialogue as a way of reconciliation impossible. Disclosure of what has happened is a necessary first stepping stone towards the healing of the wounds.⁹

An effective method is needed in order to see the wounds and errors and

come to terms with the past. Current rifts need to be mended, whenever and wherever possible, as a sign of goodwill and a new beginning. For reconciliation to occur, a long democratic process is necessary. This requires facing facts, admitting sins, mourning, crying out in anger and hurt, and telling one's story in private and in public. Past and present conflicts must be faced openly in order to develop understanding and empathy, to overcome prejudice and exploitation, and to redress unjust structures of violence at all levels. Forgiveness may be the step toward reconciliation, and the real hope for a meaningful dialogue which attempts to strengthen the nonviolent possibilities for resolving conflict.

Where is reconciliation urgently needed in your society? Between churches? With people of other faiths? How might processes of reconciliation begin or be furthered in these situations?

Mission rooted in the love of God opens a new way of understanding through justice and reconciliation. Exclusion jeopardizes reconciliation, which is why justice and reconciliation cannot be separated. If there is to be reconciliation, relationships must be set right. This understanding of the mission of reconciliation is especially needed in contexts of injustice and violence. To seek justice and reconciliation is part of the mission of God, "who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18).

To foster reconciliation is a matter of survival. We cannot live together in this increasingly connected world without seeking to respect, understand and build bridges between one another. We must learn to think and act in multi-ethnic, multicultural, multi-national and multi-religious ways, even when we feel the tension and insecurity that are part of this process.

An important way this reconciliation is lived out is through humanitarian assistance and development with people of different faiths, as regularly occurs through the LWF work of World Service. Religious and cultural practices can both inhibit and enhance this work; they can subjugate as well as liberate. Most religious faiths and traditions favor humanitarian assistance and development. An inter-faith response to human need is often the most appropriate response, and can be more easily accomplished than cooperation in theology or institutional arrangements. Fundamentalism leading to fanaticism exists in all religious traditions, and often obstructs inter-faith cooperation. Through working together to meet human need, different faith traditions can learn from and about each other, as they live out their own commitment to peace and justice.

Interfaith dialogue

Emphasizing dialogue and reconciliation in mission is in direct contradiction to "crusading styles" of mission that seek to "win souls for Christ." Reconciliation as a healing process is a key emphasis when relating to people of other faiths. Many Lutherans have experienced that reconciliation can occur through inter-faith dialogue as a healing process. Many others remain hesitant or are even opposed, regarding those of other faiths as the enemy, or at least as those whom Christians need to convert. The 1990 LWF Assembly clearly stressed the importance of interfaith dialogue:

Since the gospel of Jesus Christ is a joyful message of reconciliation, it is deeply dialogical in character and encourages us to enter into conversation with and witness to people of other faiths or no faith, boldly and confidently.¹⁰

Interfaith dialogue is grounded in the dialogical nature of the Christian faith. God speaks to us through the Holy Spirit and our faith expresses itself in dialogue with God through prayer and dialogue with our neighbor. Our faith is based on God having taken the initiative of entering into dialogue with humanity. God did this in an unparalleled, concrete manner in Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God in our world. In order to enter into dialogue with us, Jesus Christ became a person like us, offering us salvation through his life, death and resurrection. This universal saving event in Jesus Christ is central for Christians and the basis for interfaith encounter in dialogue, prayer and living together. Dialogue is not simply an interaction of words, but living daily under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Every Christian, therefore, should be challenged to engage in dialogue with those of different faith convictions.

A Muslim theologian tells of a dialogue among three Jews:

When does the night end and the morning begin? This question was once discussed among three Jewish rabbis. The first suggested that the night ends in the moment when one can distinguish the mountains from the night sky. The other responded that, no, the new day was there when one could tell the difference between branches and leaves of a tree. The third rabbi listened to them and thought for a long time. Then he said: "The night ends and the morning begins when it is bright enough to recognize your fellow human being as your brother or sister."¹¹

Did the rabbi go too far by suggesting that we are able to look at each other as brothers or sisters? Are brothers and sisters only those who are of the same faith? As children of God, we are encouraged by God to discern the human face, the uniqueness of each creature, for then we will refrain from harming each



other and begin to seek and live reconciliation concretely in a dialogue of life. Consider the following principles for interfaith dialogue, and add your own:

- Interfaith dialogue begins when we realize and accept that multi-religious societies are a worldwide reality today. Increasingly, people of different faiths are living and working together. In a growing number of families, members belong to different faiths. We live together as couples, as families, as colleagues, and care for the same neighborhood, the same world. Dialogue focuses on the life and space we share in common.
- Since God's reconciliation in Christ involves making right relationships with the whole of hu-

mankind and creation, Christians are obliged to promote reconciliation and justice with people of different faiths or of no religious affiliation in their specific contexts.

- Another religion can seem strange and evoke generalized mistrust, prejudice and discrimination. God is at work through Christ and the Spirit, even among those who do not confess Christ as Savior. Perhaps the mistake many Christians made was to tell so much about Christ instead of partaking of him, committing our lives to him, and building bridges from both sides.
 - We must counter the generalized mistrust that disturbs peace and poisons our relationships with those of different faiths. In a relational approach, all dialogue partners have something to offer. They seek to learn from each other and treat one another with respect and integrity. There must be a learning process to build up relationships of genuine friendship. Friends of different faiths will be creative in finding practices of love and mutual acceptance. Genuine dialogue moves beyond tolerance to appreciation.
 - Rather than beginning with statements and arguments over differences, dialogue should begin with listening to the partner with empathy and mutual appreciation.
- Try to understand the other's spirituality, religious experiences and practices, learn from them and share your own faith and understandings. In this way, we can grow together toward a reconciled diversity without feeling threatened.
- Together with people of different religious convictions, we can develop a common vision of solidarity, respect, justice and compassion. This becomes especially important for our common work on human rights, as well as for addressing critical ethical, social, economic and political issues. This should be done with sensitivity toward the different social, political, cultural and religious experiences and beliefs.
 - We must challenge the ways in which groups often exploit religious differences for ideological purposes, including through violence and terror. Careful distinctions must be made between religion as a credible way of faith, and religion used as a tool for political purposes.
 - In some multi-faith situations, multilateral dialogue may be possible and necessary if genuine peacemaking is to occur. In the Middle East, for example, Lutherans have taken the lead in an ongoing dialogue among Christians, Jews and

In February of 2002 an inter-religious peace rally was held in Kandi (Sri Lanka) just days before the ceasefire was declared. Over 10,000 people came from many districts—Sinhalese, Muslims, Tamils with a large number of Buddhist monks, Catholic clergy, Hindu and Muslim dignitaries. Thousands of people walked the roads of Kandi in silent protest against the war and pleaded for peace. A Catholic priest read a statement of the religious peace committee. Buddhist priests recalled the teachings of Buddha, and a Hindu priest addressed the gathering in Tamil, pledging his support for peace.¹²

Muslims. This can include mediation, conflict resolution, transformation, counseling, comforting, confession, forgiving and being forgiven, and working for conditions that will lead to just and lasting peace.

- Develop further Lutheran theological perspectives for dialogue through the LWF and other ecumenical bodies. How can people of different religions get along according to agreed upon principles of pluralism, and undergirded by a theology of inter-religious friendship and reconciliation?

Transformation through dialogue

In interfaith dialogue we need to be open to new personal, cultural and social experiences. As we engage in sincere and honest dialogue, we ourselves are transformed. This is consistent with a transformational understanding of mission. In interfaith dialogue our eyes may be opened, we ourselves may be “converted,” as was Peter in relation to Cornelius, a captain in the Roman army (Acts 10:1–33). Cornelius held another faith and his historical, ethnic, cultural and social background was quite at odds with Peter’s.

The story is traditionally interpreted as a story about the “conversion” of Cornelius. Yet...it is clear that it is a conversion of both, Peter and Cornelius. While the conversion of Cornelius has to do with accepting Jesus Christ as the Lord, Peter’s has to do primarily with a radical change of attitudes that resulted in accepting that all human beings are equal in the sight of God. Peter’s horizon was enlarged by the encounter. It gave him a

new perspective of reality; it transformed his understanding and appreciation of God’s grace and presence in human society. His eyes were opened to the fact that God’s grace and love are gift for all, without discrimination. Equality among all human beings is the gracious gift of God. Therefore, no one can be denied it without violating God’s intention.¹³

What does the encounter/dialogue between Peter and Cornelius mean for us today?

From dialoguing to praying together?

Increasingly, Lutherans are being challenged to reflect together on what it means to act and pray together with people of other faiths, especially for the reconciliation and healing of the world. Some have found this more compelling than rational discussion of different beliefs.

Prayer is a spiritual bridge which relates us to others no matter how far apart they may be...prayer is God’s activity in us rather than our activity in relation to God. ...Muslims’ prayer is the core of their religious life and is one of the five pillars of Islam. In Judaism, prayer is one of the most dominant elements... Prayer creates among believers a bond of love and mutual understanding which in turn creates a sense of unity. Prayer is also a symbol of equality for all people who, without any racial, social and cultural discrimination stand before their Lord.¹⁴

If all human beings are equal before God, if God’s love and grace is for all, if the Holy Spirit acts beyond the Christian church, if the healing of the world is a concern we share with people of many faiths, should we not be open to the possibility of praying together with those who do not share our Christian faith?

What kinds of theological bases or guidelines are needed for the possibility of interfaith prayer?

What kind of witness would this make to the world? Admittedly, many Christians who accept interfaith dialogue would disagree with the notion of interfaith prayer. Yet, in times of deep crisis, such as after September 11, 2001, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and others came together to pray.

Mission and interfaith dialogue

In interfaith dialogue, we can discover that God's mission is greater than the mission of the church.¹⁵ Mission that seeks to share power and open eyes will recognize that God is already present and at work in a given context. Through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we may be surprised to discover a fuller and more comprehensive understanding of reconciliation as a healing and saving process.

Some assume that interfaith dialogue and mission are mutually exclusive. Sometimes Christian churches are afraid

What additional tensions and questions concerning the relationship between dialogue and mission should the LWF further explore and clarify?

of losing their Christian identity or doubting their own faith if they dialogue with people of other faiths. Such dialogue can be risky; we risk losing our safe haven, "the pulpit" of our monologue in order to enter into dialogue. We do not know in advance what direction it will take nor what the results may be. Perhaps even some "heresies" will arise. But, it is the Holy Spirit who moves us to take the risk, to move from monologue to enriching and potentially transforming dialogue.

Dialogue includes my witness and that of my dialogue partner. It is only possible if my dialogue partner and I have a clear position (witness) and are open to self-criticism. Our faith identity and convictions are not an obstacle, but rather a condition for a committed dialogue. There is likely to be an ongoing tension between being genuinely open to the other and commitment to one's own beliefs. This is especially the case insofar as religious beliefs are absolute claims. Christian mission is not incompatible with dialogue, especially when we understand mission in terms of reconciliation:

We know only in part, but we do know. And we believe that the faith we profess is both true and just, and should be proclaimed. We do this, however, not as judges or lawyers, but as witnesses; not as soldiers, but as envoys of peace; not as high-pressure sales-persons, but as ambassadors of the Servant Lord.¹⁶

Notes

¹ *Together in God's Mission: A LWF Contribution to the Understanding of Mission, LWF Documentation 26* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1988), p. 5.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴ *The LWF Nairobi Mission Consultation Report*, p. 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ E. Hoornaert, *História da Igreja no Brasil*, vol. 2 (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1979), p. 257.

⁷ *Together in God's Mission*, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 9.

⁸ Rosa Celeste Camba, "The Issue of Reconciliation in the Philippine Context and in Asia," in Jochen Motte & Thomas Sandner (eds.), *Justice and Reconciliation* (Wuppertal: Foedus Verlag, 2000), p. 90.

⁹ Wolfram Kistner, "Reconciliation and Justice," in *ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁰ *Official Proceedings of the Eighth Assembly, LWF Report No 28/29* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1990), p. 83.

¹¹ Kistner, *op. cit.* (note 9), p. 77.

¹² Religious Perspectives on Human Rights E-Newsletter, vol. 4 no. 9, February 25, 2002, p. 2, www.ahrchk.net/rghr.

¹³ Ishmael Noko, "Foreword," in Roland E. Miller and Hance A. O. Mwakabana (eds.), *Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Theological & Practical Issues, LWF Studies 3* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1998), p. 7.

¹⁴ Sebouth Sarkissian, "Ephesians 2:12-22," in *Current Dialogue 26* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, June 1994), pp. 58f.

¹⁵ *Together in God's Mission*, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 8.

¹⁶ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), p. 488.

