

“Reconstructing Mission Towards Healing and Reconciling Communities”.

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1. What do we mean by God’s mission?

I would like to begin by quoting an extract from the Council for World Mission’s electronic newsletter, CWM News, issued on 21 April 2008 under the title “Parishioners bid farewell to Welsh church”, which stated the following: “A Welsh church has been auctioned after falling congregation numbers forced the CWM member Presbyterian Church of Wales to sell the property. More than 100 people attended the final service at Orrell Presbyterian Church of Wales earlier this month. It opened its doors in 1902 and was the first church to be built in Orrell, Bootle. But membership has dropped in recent years to just 16 people and the church did not have the 200,000 pounds (US\$400,000) needed for the renovations to keep it open. Past members traveled from as far as Lincolnshire and Wales to attend the final service, which was followed by a buffet prepared by some of the members”. Rev David Evans, minister of the church, talked about its history and some members told of their own experiences. "The members were very happy about the service itself but sad that it was the last service. Some have been there for more than 40 or 50 years," he said. "If we had had congregations like we had on Saturday we wouldn't have been closing at all."

What do these news tell us about the way we carry out the “Great Commission”? Or should we rather refer to it as the “Great Omission”? Oftentimes, some “historical” churches, especially in the global North, have become “pre-historical”, having lost their passion for sharing the gospel in a fresh and relevant way in their secular, “post-modern” or “post-Christian” societies. As we have seen, sanctuaries are being sold to cultural enterprises or even to other religions; pastors are being made redundant for financial reasons, since their churches can not afford to pay them anymore, cathedrals are being

converted into museums. The big shopping malls are the new “cathedrals” where people go to worship *mammon*, the god of riches (Mt. 6:24; Luke 16:9-11).

But the God’s mission is also developed in the global South. As we expressed it in the “Letter from Athens to the Christian Churches, Networks and Communities”, written at the end of our **Conference on World Mission and Evangelism, held in Athens, Greece, May 2005, under the theme: “Come Holy Spirit, Heal and Reconcile: Called in Christ to be Reconciling and Healing Communities”**, “We stand now at a particular moment in the history of mission. While the centres of power are still predominantly in the global North, it is in the South and the East that the churches are growing most rapidly, as a result of faithful Christian mission and witness. The missional character of the Church is experienced in greater diversity than ever, as the Christian communities continue the search for distinctive responses to the Gospel”¹.

Of course, the God’s mission is not just about filling churches with people (or having to sell them if they are empty). The French Roman Catholic Priest Alfred F. Loisy (1857-1940) once made the observation that **“Jesus came preaching the Kingdom, and what arrived was the Church!”** Indeed, one of our problems is that we fall in the temptation of proclaiming the church as an end in itself instead of God’s Kingdom. As the Presbyterian Church’s (USA) pastor Dirk Ficca pointed out, “for 2000 years we have been saying: ‘the Church has God’s mission in the world, but we’ve got the order all wrong: **God’s mission in the world has the Church**. The Church is not in possession of God’s mission, rather God is in possession of God’s mission”.

In this regard, I appreciate this remark from the Church of Sweden: "The church does not exist for its own sake, but as a community sent by God into the world with the mission of proclaiming by word and deed the gospel of God's liberating love in Jesus Christ"².

¹ Matthey, Jacques, edit. “Come Holy Spirit, heal and reconcile!” Report of the WCC Conference on World Mission and Evangelism, Athens, Greece, May 2005. WCC Publications, Geneva, 2008, p. 324. See also the CWME Conference’s website: [Hwww.mission2005.org](http://www.mission2005.org)H

² Called to Mission (from the document "The International Mission of the Church of Sweden"). Uppsala, 2000, p. 13.

Part of the problem has been the tendency of some churches, fundamentally in the global North, to **separate mission from diakonia**. In fact, ecumenical structures such as the WCC have been victims of this artificial dichotomy. The gospel teaches us that **diakonia is part of God's mission** as a way of empowering people by giving them the chance of hearing and living **the good news of a liberating God**, who stands against the evils of exclusion, and many churches in the global South experience this reality.

Therefore, “**mission**” as defined by the WCC’s Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) in its study document “Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today” (2000), “**carries a holistic understanding: the proclamation and sharing of the good news of the gospel by word (*kerygma*), deed (*diakonia*), prayer and worship (*leiturgia*) and everyday witness of Christian life (*martyria*); teaching as a means of building up and strengthening people’s relationship with God and with each other and healing as wholeness and reconciliation into *koinonia* — **communion** with God, communion with people and communion with creation as a whole**”³.

And let’s not forget that evangelism is part of mission as well. The CWME goes on to say: “‘**Evangelism**’, while not excluding the different dimensions of mission, focuses on the explicit and intentional voicing of the gospel, including the invitation to personal conversion to a new life in Christ and to discipleship”⁴.

2. Mission in solidarity with the oppressed and marginalized.

In his book “A Passion for Unity”, Emilio Castro, former General Secretary of WCC, notes in his essay “Evangelism: Ecumenical Frontiers Today”: “This is the only valid theological method for evangelism: **conscious participation in the whole human life and its problems**. When all is said and done, for the great mass of the people,

³ Matthey, Jacques, edit. “You Are the Light of the World”. Statements on Mission by the WCC (1980-2005). Statement “Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today”. Op. cit., p. 63.

⁴ Matthey, Jacques, edit. “You Are the Light of the World”. Statements on Mission by the WCC (1980-2005). Statement “Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today”. Op. cit., p. 64.

evangelism is not a question of apologetics, but of life. Gustavo Gutiérrez once said that in Latin America, people are **‘poor and believing’**. Much the same could be said of the vast deprived masses of the world as a whole... Our challenge is **to explain the faith in terms of joy, faithfulness, justice and solidarity**. We are called **to bear witness to the God of justice, hope, consolation and reconciliation**, seeking to identify with the poor and the marginal”⁵.

This call becomes increasingly urgent when listening to the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who said the following on the 20 May 2008 at the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva: **“when life is rough, you really understand the meaning of the gospel”**, and the fact is that life is getting rougher every time, with the increase in food prices, right now, as we are speaking, and that is only one element of the present crisis!

As the document “Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation” says, “in a world where poverty is a reality, where injustice, inequality and exploitation are daily experiences for millions and where people seem to have lost hope – **it is imperative that Christians share a gospel that is truly good news to the poor**. The poor are victims of the oppression of an unjust economic order or an unjust political distribution of power... Announcing the Good News to the Poor is beginning to render the justice due to them. The Church of Jesus Christ is called to preach the Good News to the poor, following the example of its Lord who was incarnate as poor, who lived as one among them and gave them the promise of the Kingdom of God. Jesus looked at the multitude with compassion. He recognized the poor as those who were sinned against, victims of both personal and structural sin”⁶.

Dom Hélder Câmara (Brazil, 1909-1999) once said: **“When I feed the poor, I am called a saint, but when I ask why the poor are poor, I am called a communist”**. So the question is how to **deconstruct** a mission which is in complicity with the *‘status quo’*,

⁵ Castro, Emilio. A Passion for Unity. Essays on Ecumenical Hopes and Challenges. WCC Publications, Geneva, 1992, p. 37.

⁶ Matthey, Jacques, edit. “You Are the Light of the World”. Statements on Mission by the WCC (1980-2005). Statement “Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation”. Op. cit., p. 22.

with a world suffocated by “neo-liberal globalization”, exclusion, ideologically based terrorism, fragmentation, increasing poverty and degradation of the environment, and **reconstruct** the God’s mission. We are called to promote a mission devoted not so much to “feed the poor”, but to raise the tough questions, asking **why** are they poor, marginalized, oppressed, and to do something about it.

3. Reconstructing Mission.

In his classical book “Transforming Mission”, David J. Bosch writes the following: “The title of this book (...) is ambiguous. ‘Transforming’ can be an adjective describing “mission”. In this case, mission is understood as an enterprise that transforms reality... mission, in this perspective, is that dimension of our faith that refuses to accept reality as it is and aims at changing it. “Transforming” is, therefore, an adjective that depicts an essential feature of what Christian mission is all about ... ‘Transforming’ can, however, also be a present participle, the activity of transforming, of which ‘mission’ is the object. Here, mission is not the enterprise that transforms reality, but something that is itself being transformed”⁷.

I like this quote that David J. Bosch uses to describe the notion of “Reconstructing Mission”. Attempting a similar analogy, I would say that “Reconstructing” describes the need to change, rebuild and transform the world in which we live and serve, while urging us to analyze critically the content and methods of the mission God has entrusted us with.

Professor Joshva Raja, from the Church of South India, comments on the following in his article “Reconstructing Mission: Creating Common Spaces of Peace with Justice among the Diverse Communities”: “**reconstruction as mission means to go beyond a mere critique of the structures, to develop an alternative world which is a new Creation in Christ where all would live in peace**”.

⁷ Bosch, David, J. Transforming Mission. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1991, p. XV.

Are you familiar with the AGAPE (Alternative Globalization Addressing Peoples and Earth) programme of WCC and related organizations? The idea began in the WCC General Assembly of Harare (1998) and the call was launched in the Assembly of Porto Alegre (2006). The AGAPE booklet, published in 2006 by the WCC, pleads for “**An Economy of Life**”. It reminds us that the main characteristics of **God’s household of life** are:

*The bounty of the gracious economy of God offers and sustains abundance for all; *God’s gracious economy requires that we manage the abundance of life in a just, participatory and sustainable manner; *The economy of God is an economy of life that promotes sharing, globalized solidarity, the dignity of persons, and love and care for the integrity of creation, *God’s economy is an economy for the whole oikoumene, the whole earth community; and *God’s justice and preferential option for the poor are the mark’s of God’s economy⁸. **God is calling us today to reconstruct mission taking into consideration this “Economy of Life”.**

3.1. Reconstructing Mission as “common witness”.

In times of increasing denominationalism and fundamentalism, one of the greatest challenges which the church faces today is to proclaim the good news of the gospel ecumenically, in dialogue, as “common witness”; to announce the gospel in collaboration and not in competition. We often quote John 17:21 to stress the “visible unity” as an end in itself, but Jesus prays to the Father for unity in mission, “that the world may believe”. **Our divisions are sinful, disgraceful; they are counter-productive to the mission endeavor. Our unity has a purpose, namely to bear “common witness” of the Risen Lord today.** We, of course, witness positive examples and sings of hope like this World Mission Conference, which is co-sponsored ecumenically by the Methodists for World Mission, the Anglicans in World Mission, Christian Aid, Christians Aware and the Methodist Church⁹.

⁸ [Hhttp://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/public-witness-addressing-power-affirming-peace/poverty-wealth-and-ecology/neoliberal-paradigm/03-05-agape-background-document.html](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/public-witness-addressing-power-affirming-peace/poverty-wealth-and-ecology/neoliberal-paradigm/03-05-agape-background-document.html)H

⁹ <http://www.mwm.org.uk/>

This text of John is an invitation to confess, a call to reorient our mission and evangelism journey, to affirm the richness of our diversities and at the same to repent of our divisions. **Let us fearlessly confess the sin of creating the unnecessary tension between unity on the one hand and mission and evangelism on the other.** We establish another false dichotomy: we are either ‘ecumenical churches’ or ‘evangelical churches’. We are rendering two inseparable elements of our mission irreconcilable.

In this context, I greatly appreciate the helpful phrase of Philip Potter, also former General Secretary of the WCC, when he said: **“Evangelism is the test of our ecumenical vocation”**¹⁰. The challenge is then how to promote the God’s mission ecumenically and in partnership or dialogue.

The document “Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today” quoted earlier states at the very beginning that **“the ecumenical movement has its origins in the missionary movement**, for the contemporary search for the unity of the church was initiated within the framework of the mission endeavour. The missionaries were among the first to look for ways and styles of witness in unity, recognizing that the scandal of Christian divisions and denominational rivalries hindered greatly the impact of their message”¹¹.

This is, of course, in clear reference to the first Conference on World Mission and Evangelism, which took place in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1910, called by the urgency of identifying a vision, namely, “the evangelization of the world in this generation”. In fact, **the ecumenical movement is preparing to celebrate in 2010 the centenary** of this historical event and we are grateful that one of the workshops in our Mission Conference here will be conducted Dr. Daryl Balia, the International Director, on the theme “Edinburgh 2010 – the plans and the promises”¹².

¹⁰ Philip Potter’s speech to the Roman Catholic Synod of Bishops, Rome, 1974. Quoted in the 1982 document Mission and Evangelism – An Ecumenical Affirmation, p. 2.

¹¹ Matthey, Jacques, edit. “You Are the Light of the World”. Statements on Mission by the WCC (1980-2005). Statement “Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today”. Op. cit., p. 62.

¹² H<http://www.edinburgh2010.org/H>

3.2. Reconstructing Mission in Secular and Postmodern contexts.

In an extremely secular culture, like the one we have in Europe in which most of the people are no longer driven by Christian spirituality like in the previous centuries, but rather by materialism and consumerism, **what is the meaning of the gospel today?** How can we share the good news with the rich as well? Many wealthy people are not happy, their lives have lost their meaning even though they have more than they need to live.

In the UK, for example, there is reportedly a 20% decrease in church attendance, and, at the same time, a 60% increase in spirituality. How do the traditional church structures respond to this challenge of people **“believing” and not “belonging”**? How do the statistics above affect our culture of sharing the values of the gospel? **What** are the core values of the gospel for Europe today, such as community sharing, solidarity, love, hope, reconciliation and healing, and **how** can we share them for transformation?

Many people today try to find new forms of spirituality, which explains the increase and expansion of “new religious movements”, even of “Satanic” groups. Nevertheless, why was it that the church buildings in the USA and in Western Europe were packed after the 9/11 attacks in New York City? Why did so many pilgrims go to the Vatican at the time of the death of Pope John Paul II in 2005? Was it merely because he was a charismatic leader, or were people seeking for something more for their lives? How is it that the reality described above challenge the mission task of the Church today? How to rethink or reconstruct mission both in terms of form and content in a situation where the Christian culture plays no longer such a vital part in civil society? Are we for a “soft” or “user friendly gospel”, an “aspirin gospel”, an “opium gospel”, one which just makes people be happy and forget their troubles, or for a gospel which challenges us and brings us a “creative tension” (and therefore, which is not popular), and defies the ‘status quo’, the current state of affairs? **The gospel of Jesus Christ is for comforting, but at the same time confronting!**

On this question of the incapacity of some “historical” churches to reach out and to engage in a meaningful way in our Western societies, I find very valuable what Simon Barrow, one of the editors of the book published recently by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, has to say in the article “Re-engaging Mission with Theology in the West Today”: “Simply accusing ‘our culture’ of being ‘gospel-unfriendly’ will not do: it assumes too much about the unity of churches and too little about the diversity of faith. Christian discernment takes place within a set of traditions that are engaged both internally and externally in reciprocal disputation as well as affirmation. This always has been the case. What is new in modernity/post-modernity is that everything is up for negotiation”¹³.

In our postmodern European culture in which private lives are so sacredly “respected”, we really wonder whether the Christian faith is a private affair. If so, what is the point in proclaiming the gospel publicly?

3.3. Reconstructing Mission in increasingly multi-cultural and multi- religious contexts.

In this time of “ecclesiastical winter”, as Karl Rahner defined it, the turning point for mission in a world that is predominantly non Western presents a universal opening: **to accept the challenge of cultural plurality**. It is similar to the challenge of post-modernity, which some claim is rooted in Western cultures, namely, to accept the ‘decentrality’, the heterogeneity of lifestyles and complexity of languages¹⁴. Therefore, **mission carried out in dialogue is the call of our times**, a dialogue which unfortunately happens often at the margins of the institutions.

¹³ Barrow, Simon and Smith Graeme, edit. Christian Mission in Western Society, Churches together in Britain and Ireland, London 2001, p. 235.

¹⁴ Mardones, José María, Postmodernidad y cristianismo. El desafío del fragmento, Editorial Sal Terrae, Santander (2da. Edición), 1988, p. 154.

Furthermore, in today's world, where nations in the West feel threatened by people of other faiths, **one of the greatest challenges to mission is to proclaim the gospel in dialogue with them.** So **mission is sharing in dialogue our humanity in Christ,** beyond Christian sectarian temptations or fundamentalisms.

As a result of increasing migration, the development of technology, which contributes to the expansion of the media, the rapidly changing reality of our societies, which are no longer monolithic, the relevant question here is, **how can we reconstruct mission for it to be more effectively in a changing multi-cultural situation?**

In fact, the “historical” churches here in Western Europe are also being challenged by the immigrant churches. Again, with their fresh style of being church and of pursuing mission and evangelism, they are many times a tremendous example even in hostile circumstances, as we try to be faithful to the God's mission. We experience this fact in our Latin American Christian Community in Geneva every Sunday. The community is really a family where concrete expressions of solidarity occur all the time. **How can we create spaces of partnership in mission and in solidarity with these churches, considering that immigrants are not beggars, rather victims of an unjust world order (or disorder)?**

Paraphrasing Philip Potter, we can say that “evangelism is the test of true humanism”, it is the **proclamation of the “good news” which ultimately seeks the betterment of humankind** and furthermore of creation in a situation of “bad news”, in a culture of fragmentation, exclusion, militarism, injustice, terrorism, imperialism, violence and neo-liberal globalization, which threatens the web of life.

In connection with this, Jürgen Moltmann says that **mission requires a re-reading and a re-orientation of Christian history** on the basis of an ethic of life and of dialogue among the religions. Mission, he says, has proceeded in three stages. The first culminated with the creation of an *imperium*; the second involved the spread of churches. Now, the third involves participation in the evangelization of humanity – not its absorption into

‘church’, but dialogue and action aimed at disclosing the basis of salvation. ‘**Christ came to bring life, not Christianity,**’ he says¹⁵.

Again, the document “Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today” refers in paragraph 58 to these challenges in these terms: “such challenges inevitably raise theological questions concerning the nature of witness among people of other religious convictions, in relation to the nature of salvation itself. There is little consensus on this in the broader ecumenical movement. In the San Antonio, Texas (1989) and Salvador, Brazil (1996) Mission Conferences, the situation was summarized through the following affirmations: “**We can not point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ; at the same time, we can not set limits to the saving power of God**”¹⁶. There is a tension between these two statements which has not yet been resolved.

With reference to the encounter with people of other religions, Emilio Castro said the following: “**This encounter is witness.** In view of the missionary nature of God’s message in Jesus Christ, Christians should approach others in the same spirit of love, sharing and communication that ruled the life of the man from Nazareth. Thus, the attitude is not only one of respect but of **acceptance of the other**”¹⁷.

As we work towards reconstructing mission in increasingly multi-cultural and multi-religious contexts, new insights on spirituality are important. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the Council for World Mission and the World Council of Churches sponsored a workshop on “Spirituality of Resistance, Liberation and Transformation” last May in Cuba, in response to the initiative of the “Oikotree movement”: an ecumenical project that attempts to identify and live out spiritualities that put justice at the heart of faith. In the final “Communiqué”, the participants stressed that “**justice movements require a new solidarity among religious groups and all peoples of conscience**

¹⁵ This extract comes from the book edited by Barrow, Simon, Christian Mission in Western Society, quoted earlier, p. 249.

¹⁶ Salvador report, p.62, quoting San Antonio report, p.32.

¹⁷ Article “Evangelism” from the Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement, WCC Publications, Geneva, 2002.

(secular and religious) and thus we affirm and honor the full multiplicity of spiritualities that enliven such movements”¹⁸.

3.4. Reconstructing Mission towards Reconciling and Healing Communities.

In Europe, we are experiencing a tremendous **culture of violence**, which, of course, is not limited to the “old” continent, but is extended throughout the whole world. As it was stressed before, our world today is one of neo-liberal globalization, of increasing poverty and fragmentation by violence and ideological-based terrorism. This is why the WCC has launched the Decade to Overcome Violence and the CWME Commission has chosen **the mission paradigm of healing and reconciliation**, as we have seen in this paper, for the 2005 Athens Mission Conference.

In the conference’s Preparatory Paper No. 3, CWME acknowledged that “**in a time of globalization with increasing violence, fragmentation and exclusion, the mission of the church is to receive, celebrate, proclaim and work for reconciliation, healing and fullness of life in Christ**”¹⁹.

So, in the midst of a culture of death and violence, the Lord is calling us for a **new ecumenical effort, the task of reconstructing mission**. There is a bigger problem than the church down the road, which is the “**culture of death**”. We are urged **to promote a “culture of peace” and nonviolence** with a strong prophetic voice. This is why the ecumenical movement is in the process of preparing **The International Ecumenical Peace Convocation (IEPC)**, which will be the Harvest Festival of the Decade to Overcome Violence and at the same time a planting season for fresh initiatives. The Convocation will take place in Kingston, Jamaica, in May 2011, under the theme: “Glory to God and Peace on Earth”²⁰.

¹⁸ [Hhttp://www.oikoumene.org/en/news/news-management/eng/a/article/1722/spirituality-energizes-an.html](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/news/news-management/eng/a/article/1722/spirituality-energizes-an.html)

¹⁹ Matthey, Jacques, edit. “Come Holy Spirit, heal and reconcile!” Report of the WCC Conference on World Mission and Evangelism, Athens, Greece, May 2005. Op. cit., p. 23.

As the “Letter from Athens”, quoted earlier, puts it: “St Paul speaks of **the new creation heralded by Christ and enabled by the Holy Spirit**. ‘In Christ’, he says, ‘God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.’ (2 Cor. 5:19-20) **It is this ‘new creation’ that we hold to be the goal of our missionary endeavour**. With Paul, we believe that reconciliation and healing are pivotal to the process by which that goal is to be reached. Reconciliation, as the restoration of right relations with God, is the source of reconciliation with oneself, with other people and with the whole of creation”²¹.

“Reconstructing mission, as Professor Joshva Raja has written recently is ... to attempt to reconstruct the Kingdom of God through the lives of people who are influenced and challenged by the message of Jesus Christ. **As new creation in Christ, people are invited to practice and implement in their lives a new relationship, a new covenant and a new way of life that will bring humanity together, close to God and to each other**. Such an act of reconstructing what is divided and destroyed in human world, is the holistic approach to mission in the world today”.

Final remarks

Reconstructing mission provides the occasion to build “healing and reconciling communities” in increasingly multi-religious and multicultural settings, to celebrate and share experiences of healing, compassion, forgiveness, hope, solidarity and reconciliation which are also happening in our world and not always portrayed in the media. We often hear the phrase “**no news is good news**”. When our lives are dominated by media which considers the “**good news**” to be **no news**, our great challenge as disciples of Christ is to make the “**good news**” relevant news to transform the lives of the people today; so we are

²⁰ [Hhttp://www.overcomingviolence.org/index.php?id=2913](http://www.overcomingviolence.org/index.php?id=2913)H

²¹ Matthey, Jacques, edit. “Come Holy Spirit, heal and reconcile!” Report of the WCC Conference on World Mission and Evangelism, Athens, Greece, May 2005. Op. cit., p. 325.

called to be a missional and evangelizing Church, one which proclaims the good news of the gospel in word and in deed, and as Timothy says, "... willingly, even if it isn't the popular thing to do" (II Tim. 4:2).

As Archbishop Tutu said in his speech at the Ecumenical Center referred to earlier: "Evil, injustice, oppression, all of those awful things, they are not going to have the last word. Goodness, laughter, joy, caring, compassion, the things that you do and you help others to do, those are going to prevail". Indeed **we don't know what the future holds, but we do know Who holds the future.**

May God continue to bless us all, as we try **to reconstruct the God's mission towards healing and reconciling communities, in fullness of life for all!** Amen.