



Life in Diversity – On God’s Trail: Mission and Ecumenicity, Witness and Dialogue as Central Fields of Work of the Church

30.11.2004 | Office for Mission and Ecumenical Affairs of the Protestant Church

This statement is the result of an assignment given by the Office for Mission and Ecumenical Affairs to its Committee for Witness and Dialogue in May 2002. The Committee was asked to clarify in a theological declaration the “strained and dynamic relationship between witness and dialogue.”

Life in Diversity - On God's Trail

Mission and Ecumenicity, Witness and Dialogue As Central Fields of Work of the Church

A statement by the Office for Mission and Ecumenical Affairs of the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau (EKHN)

The text of this statement is based on a working assignment given by the Office for Mission and Ecumenical Affairs to its Committee for Witness and Dialogue in May 2002. The Committee was asked to clarify in a theological declaration the “strained and dynamic relationship between witness and dialogue”, particularly taking into account the recently growing discussion about the churches’ missionary task. This assignment led to a vivid discussion process involving members of the Office, the Committee and other interested persons, and finally the present text was produced and adopted by the Office in its meeting at the Centre for Ecumenical Work in Frankfurt on 29 October 2003.

This text intends to contribute to a discussion gaining significance, which on the one hand wants to do justice to the importance of the commission to mission, and on the other hand does not want to avoid the increasing challenge of inter-religious dialogue. Therefore there is the attempt to address both working fields of the churches, the field of “mission” and of “dialogue”, in their relationship to each other.

Frankfurt on the Main, 4th November 2003

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1. Preliminary Remark

Faced with increasing secularisation, declining membership in congregations, and generally weakening bonds to the church, the missionary task of Christians is again at stake today. The present discussion about the church’s mission, however, shows that different ideas of mission lead to different approaches and focuses in interpreting the missionary practice of the church.

Simultaneously, in the course of globalisation, the congregations find themselves within growing inter-religious and intercultural neighbourhoods. Encounters with other religions multiply, not only in the worldwide ecumenical work but also at home, and this faces members of Christian congregations with practical and theological challenges, regarding their living together with people of other faiths within the increasing religious pluralism of our present societies.

So it stands to reason to reconsider mission and dialogue as central fields of work of the church both in view of the commission to mission and of a clarification of the relationship to other religions.

2. The historical change in mission

2.1 Action fields of mission

During the past decades there have been far-reaching changes in our understanding of “mission” and of the church work in this action field. Today we recognize more clearly the connection between the classical fields of work of “overseas mission”, “evangelism” and “inner mission”. At the same time those meanwhile mostly independent working areas of “world mission/ecumenicity”, “preaching/evangelisation” and “diaconia/development aid” bring their experiences and learning processes into the present discussion about the concept of mission.

In the past decades, the mission churches have become partner churches, the mission fields became church regions where independent young churches are active. Missionary societies today work in international ecumenical networks, together with young partner churches and former sending churches from Europe and America. The missionary work within EKHN is carried out in close cooperation with the “Association of Churches and Missions in South-West Germany” (EMS) and with “United Evangelical Mission” (VEM).

2.2 Gospel and culture

The analysis of the history of mission has indicated that the idea of mission within European and American churches often was – being bound by their contexts - eclipsed by political and social ideas of colonisation. This fact required a critical examination of our concept of mission. The churches and missionary agencies have learnt that it cannot be their task to support a dominance of the Western culture. Today the gospel comes newly into non-western cultures, and through the young churches it also comes newly and critically back to the West. The open process of an encounter between the gospel and any respective culture (enculturation) therefore has also turned into a central issue in mission theology.

Current challenges for a critical relationship between gospel and culture are also given e.g. in the tendencies towards a privatisation of religion in the European societies, and in the totally different public usage of religious language and motives in the American society and politics (civil religion). The churches are now facing the task of clearly shaping the churches’ contribution to the development of the European civil societies on the basis of the gospel, and at the same time to also critically analyse the integration of Christian traditions into political

formation of opinion, for instance with regards to the United States of America.

The arguments regarding the Iraq war have proved that reference to a religious tradition needs continuous critical reflection, as was intensely articulated by representatives of many churches and religious communities in the U.S., in Europe and also in other regions. Where are limits and criteria for the public usage of religious language?

2.3 Missio Dei

Churches all over the world within their respective contexts are learning today how to understand their missionary work as participation in the ‘missio dei’: as an integrative attention for the world in action and words, that sees itself as part of God’s love and affection for this world, and therefore orientates itself to the latter.

The scriptures mention as a sign of God's gracious and compassionate affection for the world: God upholds all those who fall, and lifts up all who are bowed down (Ps 145:14), he forgives iniquity to the repentant (Ps 25), he remains faithful for ever, upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry, sets the prisoners free, gives sight to the blind, watches over the alien, sustains the fatherless and the widow, loves the righteous but frustrates the ways of the wicked (Ps 146). From the basic movement of liberation, healing and help there also comes reprimand and judgement against human arrogance, lies and injustice.

Thus the basic values of Christian life according to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount are defined as: giving priority to a spiritual culture against a purely material one, comforting the suffering, living out gentleness, compassion and righteousness, insisting to champion justice, making peace, speaking up for reconciliation and forgiveness (Mt 5 + 6). A communitarian Christian life style on the basis of those values is “light” and “salt” (Mt, 13-16); it has the potential of enlightening and taste-creating effects (i.e. creating criteria) for the living together of people, locally and globally.

According to the concept of “missio dei”, mission “is no longer understood as a special manifestation of the church in regions not yet evangelised ...; mission is a lively expression of the church in all places and all times”¹. As such an integral expression of life, mission belongs to the core identity of the Christian church.

2.4 Mission on six continents

In the worldwide ecumenical cooperation, churches increasingly learn to understand themselves as participants in a missionary calling on all six continents. They cooperate globally in ecumenical partnership, knowing well that their greatest challenge is even present at home: to live as an authentic Christian community in their respective contexts, to celebrate the love of God given to them in Jesus Christ, to grow deeper into the mystery of the relationship with God, and to attend to people at their places in action and in words. Promotion of the life of the local congregation is as well a missionary emergency as it is sharing the richness of faith in solidarity with Christian communities in the worldwide ecumenical fellowship, working in a committed way for the overcoming of poverty, injustice, persecution, misery, diseases and lack of medical care, and to integrate the contribution of the Christian faith into the work for peace, justice and the integrity of creation.

2.5 Voicing the gospel

In the course of continuing secularisation of the European societies and declining numbers of membership in the churches, the Christian congregations in Europe, too, are facing totally

new challenges. How can they contribute to voicing the gospel nowadays in the encounter with a society that is no longer shaped by the church and that is a post-Christian society?

Given the disappearing religious bonds it is also important to create more possibilities of introduction into the Christian faith even for the members of Christian churches themselves. According to their own focus and social environment, the congregations may develop creative initiatives for new encounters with the faith. We must discover where faith today becomes interesting and enables orientation: for women and men, for the young and the elder generation, for the crises and developments on the journey through life, for the debates in politics and culture, in economy and science.

In order to promote a holistic life of congregations, the following aspects may become important according to the respective focuses in the congregations: offers for spiritual growth and for critical reflection, panels for discussion on faith and social developments, awareness of the social environment and search for adequate diaconal initiatives, public manifestations (e.g. special worship services, educational events, evangelisation), maintenance of concrete ecumenical relationships, participation in the public life of the local community and in the developments of the own church, and in the relationship to other churches and religions.

No matter how parishes will choose their own priorities, we should remember that the various aspects of mission belong together: preaching the liberating love of God, diaconal and political testimony of action, as well as global sharing in ecumenical solidarity – all are interconnected aspects of the practice of the church.

2.6 Encountering other denominations and religions

In public events and during evangelisations we can see how far ecumenical learning processes and experiences have already been integrated in the inter-religious dialogue. The congregations and the institutionalised church are not islands within a sea of “heathens”. Outside the congregation, church members also meet other Christians of other denominations and traditions. Public manifestations therefore should be prepared and realized in ecumenical responsibility and cooperation, in order to counteract any wooing away of members from other churches².

Church members also meet more often people from other religions. The forming of a good living together with neighbours of other faiths and learning processes in the inter-religious dialogue are gaining weight increasingly. A responsible and holistic understanding of mission will take up the challenges and insights from inter-religious dialogue.

3. A new understanding of religions

3.1 Learning processes in the church

The churches today are in a worldwide learning process regarding the clarification of their relationship to the other religions in the world. They have learnt that they cannot in principle deny any realisation of God in other religions. Therefore the churches today are challenged to clarify their relationship to other religions and to guide the members of their congregations into a fruitful living together with persons of other faiths.

The particular proximity of Christianity to Judaism, and even – though in a different manner – to Islam plays a very specific role here. There is no other religion with which Christianity would share common Holy Scriptures (Judaism) or common narrative traditions (Islam). What is the significance of this proximity for our relations to Judaism and to Islam?

3.2 A new relationship with Judaism

In the Christian-Jewish dialogue during the past decades we have learnt that Christianity right from the beginning has been placed into a special relationship with Judaism. Within EKHN this special relationship was given expression in a modification of the basic article (of the Church Constitution), by inserting the following sentences: “Called to repentance out of blindness and guilt, the church witnesses anew to the Jews remaining being the Chosen People and to God’s covenant with them. The confession to Jesus Christ includes this witness.” This fixes the theological ground for the special relations between the churches and Judaism: the recognition that the Jews remain being the Chosen People on the basis of the unfulfilling covenant at Sinai. If God whom Christians confess as the Father of Jesus Christ is maintaining his covenant with the Jewish community, then the Christian community does not stand all alone in its relationship to God, but it stands at the side of the Jewish sister religion. The church can only exist in neighborliness with Judaism. The exercise of this special neighborliness should be accepted as a central task of the church in supporting good relationships with the Jewish communities, in promoting mutual understanding, in the common commitment against all forms of anti-Semitism, and in a participation in the Christian-Jewish dialogue.

3.3 Refusal of mission among Jews

According to the declaration on “Church and Israel” by the Leuenberg Church Fellowship in 2001, the recognition of the Jewish community remaining being the Chosen People also includes the fact that the church has no commission to move Jews to convert to Christianity: “The common interest of the witness to the God of Israel, and the profession of the sovereign act of choosing by this One God is an important argument for the fact that the churches will abstain from every single activity geared toward the conversion of Jews to Christianity”³.

In a press release of 8-9-1998 the Council of the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD) affirms, after a discussion with the Central Committee of the Jews in Germany, that all 24 member churches of EKD refuse a mission to Jews aiming at converting Jews “for theological and historical reasons”.

3.4 Models of Christian-Jewish relations

From the recognition of the everlasting validity of the covenant and the consequent refusal of a mission among Jews it follows that the church is called to develop new models for the relationship with Judaism taking into account these insights. Thus for instance the Leuenberg Declaration on “Church and Israel” sees Christians and Jews as partners who take responsibility “side by side” in their commitment for “justice, peace and the integrity of creation”⁴.

The basic renewal of the relations between Jews and Christians now emerging even in such models shall be proved in concrete projects of encounter and cooperation.

The experiences gained in the shaping of the special relations with Judaism may have a positive learning effect for practising a sustainable neighborliness with other religions as well. The congregations today are particularly challenged to clarify their relations to the Muslim community. In Germany today most of the inter-religious contacts take place with Muslims.

3.5 Relations to Islam

In a recommendation on the “Living Together with Muslims in Germany” the Council of EKD invites to take up the “task of Christian reorientation” in the relationship with Muslims⁵. Without suppressing the profound differences between Islam and Christianity, Christians may still “appreciate” the discovery of “traces” of divine truth and reality as well as “traces of the work of the spirit also in Muslims”⁶.

In the declaration “Nostra Aetate” from the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic church pleads regarding the relationship with Muslims for “making sincere efforts to better understand each other” and “to work together for the projection and promotion of social justice, the moral values and not least for peace and freedom for all people”. With a deeply felt respect the Council states: “The church also considers Muslims with great respect who pray to the Only God, the living and self-sustaining, the merciful and almighty, the creator of heaven and earth”.

Besides the clarification of the various practical questions concerning the living together with Muslims in our cities and congregations, it is also important to encourage the understanding of Islam and of Christian-Islamic relations. Since Islam relates to Abraham via Ishmael, the question arises whether the divine blessing for Ishmael as testified in the Bible (Gen 16:10ff; 17:20; 21:18) would not constitute a point of departure for the clarification of the relationship between Christianity and Islam. A decisive challenge in the dialogue between church and mosque will certainly be the question whether we will manage to find a common language for the contradictions between the Christian and the Islamic tradition, that would try to do justice to both traditions of faith.

3.6 Inter-religious dialogue

The inter-religious dialogue is still in its beginnings. Hence the Christian-Jewish and Christian-Islamic dialogue should vigorously be further developed. One point is also to promote the trilateral encounter among Jews, Christians and Muslims, and to deepen the understanding of other religions as well.

Here in the inter-religious relations, a similar understanding as to the concept of “missio dei” mentioned under no. 2 cannot be assumed, like within the Christian ecumenical fellowship. At present we cannot yet see whether a similar concept might be detected consensually in the inter-religious dialogue. It is the churches’ task as representatives of the Christian faith to take part in the search for a common basis for inter-religious dialogue and inter-religious living together in theological responsibility.

3.7 Dialogue and mission

The conscious acceptance of this task is also strengthened by the fact that church agencies and units committed to dialogue also look for other designations, instead of the term of “mission” – historically encumbered in the inter-religious encounter and in need of explanation – in order to designate the relationship of Christianity with other religions to be learned anew⁷. Where the term of “mission” is being kept, it should become clear in encounters with people of other religions that they are taken seriously as partners in dialogue and not made objects of church activities.

4. Today’s issue: witness and dialogue in the presence of others

4.1 Bearing witness and listening

From the above arguments it arises that Christian faith today must learn how to express its knowledge and its experiences of faith in the presence of other convictions. A fundamental respect for different ways of believing must also be visible in that.

According to biblical tradition Christians shall be “witnesses” to Jesus Christ at their home and worldwide: “In Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Right at the outset, this was linked with a learning process by the young community, when for instance the apostle Peter, in meeting a Roman captain who had a relationship to God even before his acceptance in the Christian church, confesses: “I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right” (Acts 10:34).

When Christians learn to bear witness to their faith at home and globally, in action and in words, also listening respectfully to other beliefs, then they will feel nearness and distance to other religious communities. These varyingly close or distant relations to others must be processed and deepened in dialogue to better understand them. The dialogue thus helps to create the fundamentals for the encounter and the living together of people of different religions. It helps the members of the churches to exercise the sustainable neighborliness, so urgently needed in this common life.

4.2 Communicating one's own faith, respecting other faiths

Any dialogue lives from personal standpoints and convictions. Given the loosening religious bond, it is important – see above no. 2 – to create more possibilities for the members of churches to practise Christian believing, spiritual growing und deepening of the ‘language world of faith’ in its relations to all the facets of the present human life. The members of the Christian churches also have to be supported in order to be able to develop the necessary competence for inter-religious dialogue and encounter. Experience in inter-religious dialogue shows that encountering other religious traditions can give a stimulating impulse for one’s own questions of personal religious identity.

Today it is not only important to be able to confess the Christian faith by means of the Christian tradition, but also to learn to express one’s knowledge in front of the counterpart from a different faith, without devaluing his or her religious conviction.

4.3 Necessary demarcations

However, dialogue is no unlimitedly open process. Sometimes it is also necessary to state some insurmountable dissonances. Not every cult can indiscriminately be acknowledged as a partner in dialogue. Following careful examination, there will also be clear demarcation, for example against destructive, inhuman attitudes and actions that glorify violence, even inside the “classic” religions. Criteria for that will have to be exactly prepared, and continuously be checked in the dialogue with other religious communities.

4.4 The contribution of Christians to problems of our time

Today humanity is challenged by growing risks in the fields of ecology, economy, genetic engineering, violent conflicts, terrorism and spreading poverty. Cooperation between religions, development of common opinions and of common projects to confront those dangers are urgently needed nowadays. The churches need competence in these central issues of the present. Which kind of essential contribution can Christians render today, and what contribution do they want to render, in the multi-religious and multi-cultural society for a dignified life in peace, justice and in the integrity of creation?

4.5 Relationship between mission and dialogue

Against this background, mission and dialogue remain central issues of church work. Mission and dialogue are “two dimensions of the one Christian witness”⁸. Mission incorporates the dimension of passing on the gospel⁹ as the offer gifted by Jesus Christ for repentance, forgiveness, liberation and healing in the midst of the contradictions, conflicts and growing risks in this world. The missionary commandment reminds the congregations that they should be able even in dialogue to account for the basis of Christian hope (1. Peter 3:15) in a language adequate for encountering other religions.

Dialogue incorporates the dimension of understanding the stranger¹⁰ and admits the insight that God-given repentance, forgiveness, liberation and healing may also be found outside of the church¹¹. Dialogue reminds the congregations to be aware in mission, too, of the unending covenant of God with humanity (Noah’s Covenant), of the unending covenant with Israel, and of the blessing for Ishmael. In the concrete shaping of the relations with other religions, congregations may learn in which of these relations there may arise partners for them as “witnesses of God” in this world.

5. Theological guidelines

5.1 God’s relationship to the world

The bible puts God’s relationship to the world and to humanity before Noah’s covenant and before the choosing of Israel and the “new covenant” initiated in Israel with Jesus Christ, as an offer to all nations. Theologically this means that God does not make his steps towards humanity exclusively through the church. God in his freedom keeps relations to humanity, and in that also to the church. That is why divine knowledge and experiences of God’s presence in principle are possible outside the church, too¹². The church must reckon to find God’s spirit, blowing where it wants, even in a place where we would not expect it. Trusting in God and standing on the foundation of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, the church may open itself to such encounters.

5.2 The commission of the congregation

In the so-called Great Commission (Mt 28:19) Jesus calls his followers to make disciples out of all nations. The vision of a worldwide learning community is created, based on the words of Jesus. Christians have the task to bring the richness of the knowledge mediated by Christ and connected with the whole biblical tradition into the talks, debates, conflicts and tentative answers of our time. The Christian witness requires communicative competence in order to impart the saving, healing and helping aspects of the Christian faith. Such a communication always is as well an invitation to participate in the learning community founded by Jesus.

In the midst of the variety of human life styles, the church is challenged to celebrate its awareness of God’s gracious love to the world, and to comply with this in the shaping of its own life and work.

5.3 Truth as an event

However, the church in its witness does not dispose of the divine truth as a possession. The community of Christians as “disciples” of Jesus stands in a continuous learning process. In all situations they can trust that truth will impose itself. This may even happen through non-Christian voices. Therefore the church when sharing its message will be ready to also listen to the message of others, and to clarify in the dialogue which meaning those voices can have for itself. It will have to decide after careful examination, to which voices it can open up, and from which it must clearly distance itself.

5.4 God's new world

The church does not bear witness to the saving, healing, helping and blessing act of God as an end in itself. It testifies to God’s action as renewal of the world, the future of which is seen in the divine recreation of heaven and earth (Rev 21:1). As a goal of church work, of Christian witness and churches’ efforts for dialogue, the New Testaments points Christians to the kingdom of God, the gracious presence of God. God’s compassionate love for this world remains the basis, the motivation and the central orientation of the church’s presence for the world, of its life and its witness in the midst of the pluralistic human society.

Notes

1. [Klaus Schäfer, Mission im Zeitalter der Globalisierung \(Mission in the Era of Globalisation\). Lecture given at Sankt Augustin, 2 March 2001](#)
2. Cf. the declaration “Auf dem Weg zu einem Zeugnis. Ein Auftrag zu verantwortlichen Beziehungen in der Mission und einer Absage an den Proselytismus” (Towards One Witness. A Call for Responsible Relations in Mission and a Rejection of Proselytism), World Council of Churches, 1997
3. „Kirche und Israel“ (Church and Israel). A contribution by the Reformed Churches in Europe on the Relations between Christians and Jews. Leuenberger Texte, no. 6, Frankfurt aM 2001, p. 72
4. *ibid.*, p. 82. – See also the discussion in the USA about new models of Christian-Jewish relations, where concepts like „sisters and brothers“ or „partners“ play a main role. (e.g. in: [John Pawlikowski, Neue Denkansätze für das Verhältnis von Christen und Juden \(New ideas on relations between Christians and Jews\), 2002](#)
5. Zusammenleben mit Muslimen in Deutschland, Gestaltung der christlichen Begegnung mit Muslimen (Living together with Muslims in Germany, Shaping Christian Encounter with Muslims). A recommendation by the Council of the Protestant Church in Germany, 2nd ed., Gütersloh 2000,p. 23
6. *ibid.*, p. 28f
7. The WCC for instance installed a special working section for “inter-religious relations and dialogue” in its General Secretariat. The Vatican has placed the “Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews” at the “Papal Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity”, thus underlining the special relationship between Christianity and Judaism. The dialogue with other religions is organised in the Vatican by the “Papal Council for Inter-religious Dialogue”.
8. Christen und Juden I (Christians and Jews I), A study of the Council of EKD, Gütersloh 1979 (3rd ed.), p. 35
9. Christine Lienemann-Perrin, Mission und interreligiöser Dialog (Mission and inter-religious dialogue), Bensheimer Hefte 93, Ökumenische Studienhefte 11, Göttingen 1999, p. 177.
10. *ibid.*
11. EKD, Zusammenleben mit Muslimen, see note 5, p. 26: “God also works outside the church”.
12. *ibid*

Revised November 2004. Translated from German Text