

A response to
'The Mission Understanding of the Evangelical Church of Westphalia:
Facing the challenges of the 21st century'
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Dear organizers, dear participants at the International Ecumenical Conference of the Evangelical Church of Westphalia (EKvW) and the United Evangelical Mission (UEM),

It is a great honor and pleasure for me to participate in this digital gathering and offer a reflection on the draft document under discussion from the perspective of the Conference of European Churches.

I would like to begin by extending a word of appreciation to the working group that developed the draft document, and applaud its overall orientation and emphasis on worldwide mutual learning for today's understanding of mission.¹ Global Christianity and indeed world religions and diverse worldviews co-exist on the European continent. Therefore, a dialogical and receptive approach to learning, can only enhance the mission of the Church.

Secondly, I wish to affirm the description of mission as the 'heartbeat of the church', which is the foundational statement of the document. In the past two decades, churches around the world have come to an understanding that 'the church exists by mission, just as fire exists by burning. If [the church] does not engage in mission, it ceases to be church.'² (I am quoting here the document 'Together Towards Life' of the World Council of Churches). There is an inextricable bond between church and mission in terms of their origin and purpose. The church's aim is to fulfil God's missionary purpose.³ Thesis 1 of the document rightly states that 'Mission starts from the triune God (*missio Dei*)' and that 'The Christian mission did not begin with the missionary activities of the Christian churches, but with God Himself.'⁴ Mission is rooted in the vision of God's great design for all creation, i.e. in the Reign of God that was promised and manifested by Christ.⁵

¹ § God's mission, lines 20-26.

² Jooseop Keum, (ed.), *Together Towards Life – Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*, (Geneva: WWC Publications, 2013), § 57, p. 22, hereafter cited as TTL.

³ TTL § 57, p. 21.

⁴ Thesis 1, lines 35, 43-44.

⁵ *The Church – Towards a Common Vision, Faith & Order* paper No. 214, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), § 1, p. 5, hereafter cited as TCTCV.

Although the document refers to the invitation of the church to trust in the word of God and join a congregation, and to the Great Commission and the church as an institution,⁶ one would welcome some reflection on mission as a 'response to God's urging love shown in creation and redemption.'⁷ Similarly, one would expect further reflection on the function of the Christian community, of the church as the body of Christ or the people of God, and their participation in the realization of God's purposes, as well as a more explicit interconnection between God as Trinity (a communion of three persons) and the church as *koinonia*. The source of *koinonia* (communion), is the source of the very life of the Trinity. It is both the gift by which the church lives and 'the gift that God calls the Church to offer to a wounded and divided humanity [and also to creation as a whole] in hope of reconciliation and healing.'⁸

The third point I wish to underline is that mission and church belong together in the same way that mission and unity belong together. This important insight that found expression in the integration of the International Missionary Council (IMC) and the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1961, remains a challenge for the churches, as still today the lack of real unity in mission is a stumbling block to the authenticity and credibility of the fulfilment of God's mission in the world.⁹ At the Conference of European Churches we marked this shift in the understanding of mission and emphasized the interrelation of mission and unity among others by renaming the previous theological commission as Thematic Group on Ecclesiology & Mission. Questions concerning the nature of the church are, therefore, reflected in the context of the church's mission. I believe that Thesis 3 could be strengthened by a theological exploration of the interdependence of church, mission, and unity.

My fourth point has to do with today's context. The document and the program of the conference wisely discuss pluralism and religious diversity on the one hand, and the process of secularization on the other. This is the context where churches in Europe are called to fulfil their mission. The two presentations yesterday by Prof. Koopman and Prof. Grosshans provided a detailed overview of the current challenges. How does a church enter into a conversation about faith and religious experiences, about the search for God and meaning, about truths of life and hopes with people who do not participate in Christian life, who are far removed from the Christian faith or who cannot relate to it?¹⁰ This question raised in the document is of major concern for most churches at the moment, especially as

⁶ Thesis 1, lines 37-42,

⁷ TTL § 55, p. 21.

⁸ TCTCV § 1, p. 5.

⁹ See TTL § 59-66, p. 22-24.

¹⁰ Thesis 4, lines 183-191.

they struggle with a world-pandemic and the uncertainty of the future. At the Conference of European Churches, we have prepared a European Regional Pre-Assembly in view of the 11th WCC Assembly¹¹ bringing forth experiences from European churches. Their reflection on church and secularization, religious plurality and the resurgence of religion, is at the heart of our planning. 'How do we translate the Christian message in a multi-religious, secular, and religiously illiterate society?' is a principal question. We are, therefore, really keen about the reflections and conclusions of this conference and discussion process on the document.

Another significant point that the document raises is the question of intercultural development.¹² Several aspects come together under Thesis 5, as well as in other parts of the document: the question of the so-called international churches and how we demonstrate together our oneness as Christians; the question of ecumenical relations and sharing a common message and mission; and the question of mission as witness and interfaith dialogue.¹³ My sense is that the document would be strengthened by expanding on these three areas and providing a definition of intercultural development. In our work we have been struggling with relevant questions, as part of our ongoing theological reflection.¹⁴

Lastly, concerning religious and ideological pluralism addressed in Thesis 2,¹⁵ I would like to commend the affirmation of diversity and religious freedom. I believe the document could benefit from a reflection on the biblical understanding of the creation of the human being in the image and likeness of God, as the basis and source of human freedom and human dignity. I also think that speaking of respect instead of tolerance¹⁶ would strengthen the message that this paragraph conveys.

Thank you all for your attention and again sincere thanks to the drafters of this significant text!

¹¹ See https://www.ceceurope.org/?event=european-regional-pre-assembly-for-wcc-11th-assembly&event_date=2022-02-25

¹² Thesis 5, lines 194-211; cf. God's mission, lines 24-28; Thesis 3, line 143-144; Thesis 4, lines 153-158.

¹³ A helpful resource is of course 'Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World Recommendations for Conduct' published by the World Council of Churches, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and the World Evangelical Alliance available on [https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/ChristianWitness_recommendations.p df](https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/ChristianWitness_recommendations.pdf)

¹⁴ For instance, see 'The Church – Towards a Common Vision. A response based on the Consultation on Migration and Ecclesiology – Being Church in Europe Today', available on <https://www.ceceurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/MigrationEcclesiologylayout.pdf>

¹⁵ Thesis 2, lines 80-119.

¹⁶ Thesis 2, line 103.