

**International Ecumenical Conference "Mission today
Dr. Hubertus Schönemann, Director of the Catholic Office for Missionary Pastoral Care
Response to the current Understanding of Mission
in the Evangelical Church of Westphalia from a Catholic Perspective**

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,
thank you very much for your invitation and the possibility of a resonance from a Roman Catholic perspective. You know: There are as many different understandings of mission in the Catholic Church as there are in the churches of the Reformation. So I can only very briefly offer you thoughts from one who has been accompanying such discourses on a missionary church in a working unit of the Bishops' Conference since 2010.

It is very good that the Church of Westphalia assures itself of its mission communicatively, in view of the socio-cultural contexts and in ecumenical dialogue with partners from the world church. Unity and mission belong together. The World Mission Conference in Edinburgh in 1910 is considered the birth of the modern ecumenical movement. Thinking about mission overcomes individual denominational "churchities", but points to the "church of Jesus Christ", which we mean when we acknowledge baptism in the other denomination.

The theses describe it: the understanding of mission has entered a new phase. It does not take place elsewhere (in the countries of the South, for example), but everywhere and contextually, also in the European countries. It is no longer to be understood one-dimensionally and asymmetrically, but dialogically and interactively. Hopefully it does not aim at a re-Christianization or a restoration of conventional popular church as it existed in Europe for a long time. Hopefully, it seeks to break down the Gospel message of God's merciful love for the now and present it in a good way.

Many important questions are in the bag: What is faith actually? What outward form does it take? How does God act when He gives faith? What is the significance of the testimony of believing people for the initiation of faith, for its maturation and deepening (whether "normal" Christians, theologically educated people or officials)? What is the status of the church, what forms of belonging and community are possible? What form will it take in order to carry out its mission in a credible way?

I would like to pick out three central points from your draft of an understanding of mission and deepen them or think them further in a constructive-critical way.

ONE: God's mission and our mission

It is good that you see the inner principle of mission in the *Missio Dei* (thesis 1). It is communion in God Himself, His mission of Word and Spirit-power, which the Church carries out in the "extension of the mission of the Trinitarian God." God's love flows over the well's edge and the living water is received and freely passed on into more well bowls. But whether God's living word should be identified so quickly with the church's proclamation, as it seems to be in the progress? After all, the theses also address the fact that "the word of God is not unambiguous" (line 338) and "listening to God" is more than Bible reading, worship and preaching (line 336f). The so-called "Great Commission" (Mt 28) should not be isolated, but embedded in the overall theological context of the Gospel of Matthew: with the promise in the sermon on the mount to be salt of the earth and light of the world (Mt 5). With the parables of following the lost sheep and rejoicing over the lost coin. Then a more comprehensive understanding of mission than "only" the ecclesiastical (word) proclamation and the conversion of the sinner to the baptism and teaching of Jesus' disciples emerges.

In the theses, we are reminded of creation, of accepting and shaping the life that is given by God. Perhaps we need to discover more strongly than we have done so far what is proper to creation as an important part of the mission. Perhaps Christians will then become more attentive to people who, out of a non-Christian or even non-religious basic attitude, live

certain values, are social, reach out to others. And in my perception, there are fewer and fewer questioners and seekers (which, after all, indicates a gap or a defect) who are just waiting for someone from the Church to show them the right way and fill their gap. Do we first have to declare people to be defective beings in order to come with the saving message? In my opinion, we should work out more strongly what the goal of the mission is. How can redemption, substitution, conversion, and salvation be connected as motives to the living world? Church mission efforts are often in danger of always immediately identifying the invitation of God with the invitation to the church as it is now: "We invite to our worship services and design inspiring opportunities for encounter with the fullness and beauty of the biblical message" (lines 68f). The litmus test of mission is whether we would do it even if it did not benefit us as an institution (no members contributing financially, users of church "offerings," social capital, etc.).

(Offered hospitality (Z. 393) challenges one to examine one's own designs and processes, one's own framework designed aesthetically and in terms of content in a certain way, one's own implicitly given preconditions for participation. To seek hospitality from others and to be invited requires yet another attitude. There, it is according to the rules of others. I have to behave myself. In the ways of hospitality, an attitude can be practiced of how I can understand and appreciate the other, even if I cannot convince him of my truth).

(To the *Missio Dei* also belongs the idea of pastorality: what is at stake in the proclamation is already mysteriously at work in the addressee and wants to be brought to light in the relationship and encounter).

TWO: From the objects to the subjects

Missionary communication should be symmetrical and interactive, at eye level between equal partners. No asymmetrical, one-line and ultimately lecturing communication. This is linked to intercultural differentiation. In the text, ethnic cultural differences are mentioned worldwide and in the context of Germany with the phenomenon of migration (lines 217-220). I would like to extend this to life worlds. They are very differentiated in Germany and Westphalia. Milieu research tries to describe these processes. In this respect, too, there are many who have "no closeness to or experience of the Evangelical Christianity currently found" (cf. Z. 219f). The positive challenge of symmetrical communication means here to spell the Gospel anew with individual milieus, to express it in a new way. In this sense, the theses are very much in favor of transforming people from objects to subjects, from affected to involved. Thesis 8 rightly promotes "changing ourselves, understanding what sustains us and showing what we love" (lines 331ff). Unfortunately, this breadth is then further interpreted in some places somewhat "churchy" or "bourgeois": "weekends with Sunday rest, church feast days and holidays, rituals at stations in life" (Z. 383f) is then again quite institutionally conceived. The situation of the pandemic shows us: people commit independently at home what is important to them and what nourishes them. Can a church not see itself as a companion that helps people to find their own life profile and to "celebrate the fullness of life" (line 387), even if it does not necessarily correspond to the church diction: personal, family and group rituals in which life is celebrated and interpreted, so to speak "life-world sacraments".

In this context, I stumbled upon fresh X being referred to as new places of encounter with people in other contexts and milieus "outside the church" (lines 406-408). Is this only a prelude to the actual, a forecourt of the "heathens"? Isn't fresh X precisely about experimenting with new forms of expressing faith, as the Church of Jesus Christ, in order to discover the Gospel message in an even richer and more diverse way?

THREE: Who are we?

The theses repeatedly attempt to mediate between the two poles of openness to many and our own profile. On the one hand, listening and dialogue should be conducted with as many different people as possible, but on the other hand, one's own (evangelical) identity should be sharpened. Possibly this represents the "squaring of the circle". Could it not be - despite the marketing world around us - precisely the "profile" of Christians that they do not always have to "frantically" worry about their own profile, but can let go of how the God they proclaim "empties himself" in love (cf. Jn 1:8) and how the apostle who "became all things to all" (cf. 1 Cor 9:22) makes it possible for this very God to encounter them? To shape the space of mission means: to go out into the other of ourselves in order to have the message reflected from there once again in a new way and to hear it differently ourselves. It is about God's mission for a good life for as many as possible, about justice and sustainability, about life possibilities, about the worldly and social space as a place of probation.

CONCLUSION

Each text is a condensation point of a preceding phase (product) and has a dynamic into the future. It thus represents a vehicle of understanding (process, pragmatics). The dialogue on mission that the theses document is important and valuable.

It can lead you and us further to subsequent questions:

What basic missionary attitudes need to be practiced?

How can a cultural change be promoted within the established church?

What experiments in ecclesial community can be attempted that give such a "mission" a credible shape?

Which (also non-church) partners do we see, so that something of God's kingdom is realized in the social living space, even if the church as an institutional representation of religion may not grow and may take seriously and accept a permanent situation of being scattered ("diaspora")?

Thank you for your attention and I wish you a good further journey together.