

The conference Mission today, started with a very colorful opening session, that despite of being held only online, still managed to show the variety of perspectives of mission. From the beginning of the conference, one could clearly see the ecumenical spirit, in the presence of a variety of voices from around the globe.

Opening session

Even though my role was to be a **listener**, this didn't detain me from **watching**, and the first thing that came to my attention was, that the opening sessions were strongly male dominated. The first session had only one female voice, Präses Annette Kurschus who led the opening devotion (which in my opinion was very well prepared and very fitting to the conference theme and arouse the wish for more female voices) then there were four male speakers and thus a relationship of 4:1. Diversity was also lacking in the ordained/ lay balance, as all the speakers in the opening sessions where ordained ministers. Moreover, there was also a lack of generational representation in the opening session, whereas the voices of the younger generation were completely absent.

Despite these initial impressions that create room for improvement when such a meeting is prepared in the future, the opening session was very informative, and gave the whole meeting a framing. It was a successful orientation, given the fact that the meeting format was new to many participants. Moreover, it gave the listeners an introduction to the whole topic and the reason why we were had this meeting.

Session 1: Mission today facing Challenges of the 21st Century

As already mentioned above, diversity was also lacking in this session. It was dominated by four men, three of them being Prof. Dr. and one Dr. which made this session look very academic from the beginning.

The focus of this session was very much on "learning from the others", we wanted to learn from the North Americans, from the Asians, from the Africans etc. From my personal perspective and looking at the processes in the UEM, I think the attitude could have been "learning together". I am also skeptical if anyone can e.g. represent the African perspective, or the Asian perspective etc. Furthermore, when I speak as an African, then my thoughts must be limited by structures and models that are considered African, rather than my personal convictions that may often not be shared by many people in Africa.

However, despite the above mentioned, hopefully constructive criticism, this section was very informative and highlighted very interesting points including the following even if they were not the only ones:

1. Our understanding of the term mission is very diverse, this became very clear in the keynote speeches, and the presentations in the panels. For me, it is not necessarily important that we have a unified understanding of mission, and I think that is not even possible, because if we understand mission as God's mission, then everyone has a different understanding of and experience with God, so our understanding of mission will and should be diverse
2. The object of mission: through many presentations the impression was created that certain groups within the church or society seem to be the object of mission. For me this creates a gap or widens it where it already exists "us versus them". I was delighted that in some of the presentations it became clear that we are both instruments and objects of Gods mission.
3. It was very refreshing to be reminded on the importance of understanding our role and our competence radius as faith communities, in the presentation from Prof. Dr Nico Koopman for example, who explicitly mentioned the fight against poverty with the recognition that we are no economist. For

me this was a call to rediscover our role as church and how church can and should collaborate with other actors.

Although this section was heavily influenced by the “learning from...” context, it became very clear from the presentations that there are several common challenges that churches face together irrespective of where they are located on the globe, such as changes in the composition of society due to migration, populism, creation of thought bubbles and radicalization in the society, how to manage interreligious relations and differences in thoughts and believe patterns in society. All these phenomena are motivated by global trends that are interconnected and affect churches in different parts of the world. Since these challenges are quite topical and no single church can claim to have fully mastered the art of dealing with them, as became clear in the presentations, it makes sense not to learn from each other but to consider together how to deal with these challenges in mission today.

Parallel Workshops

During the third part of day one, workshops were offered that ran parallel. Since I could not divide myself into six parts to attend all the six workshops, I concentrated on workshop number six only, which dealt with inspiring practices of mission today. In the workshops concrete examples were given of how, on practical level, our understanding of mission is carried out. For me it was a reinforcement of the phrase “there are simple people like you and me, doing simple things, that together make big changes in the world”. Examples included things like simple church online presence in social media, cooking and eating together, innovative and inviting youth services, visitations to vulnerable groups etc.

This session highlighted the importance of proactively witnessing Gods love to the world, with an openness to whatever reaction the world may have towards our witness. The goal is not to make the world like us but giving the world a choice of how they want to react to our witness and respecting their choice.

Day Two.

On the second day, I was not there for most of the time, due to problems in my schedule. However, I got the chance to read the proposed EKvW mission paper, and the reactions to the paper. Below I would like to share my thoughts on the paper itself and the reactions I have read:

It is interesting to note that the paper itself is a reaction to the changed situation in Germany especially to the influx of refugees. This results in two points of criticism from my side, but also in two points of admiration towards the EKvW.

Starting with the first point of criticism, which on my side can be seen as criticism as well as praise. The point of criticism lies only in the choice of words. The document shows that the writing of the document was a reaction towards the influx of refugees in Germany, this gives the document a reactionary taste. In my view, churches should be proactive, and not reactive. God has revealed him/herself to us, and as result of this revelation, we know that God wants us to share his/her love and compassion with the world, also with the newly immigrating refugees among us, this phrasing is proactive in the sense that what the church should do is predetermined regardless the conditions: it is the task of the church to witness God’s love and compassion. However, starting with “refugees were coming so we had to form a working group”, sounds rather reactive, in the sense that the condition determined what we have to do.

On the other hand, this sentence shows in a positive sense that the church takes seriously the changes that are coming with the influx of refugees and wants to recognize and understand how it can participate in God's mission in the changed environment My suggestion would have been to change

the opening wording to reflect both, the proactive nature of the document, and the discerning attitude of the church.

The beginning phrases of the document also presented a strong “we versus them” mentality. It was we the receiving church, thinking about how to receive *them* that are migrating to us (further emphasized by the *wir schaffen das* statement). I can't say much about the working group that was formed to draft the document (as listed on page 1 of the document) because I don't know all the names that are mentioned there, but of the names I do know, with the exception of Mike Lee (who was also there with a guest status), everyone else represented the host church. In this sense I think it was a wise decision that a representative of the so-called International Churches was invited to take part in the conference and to represent the expectations of the International Churches. It would even be better if in the future this kind of documents would be prepared together with the so considered *them*, so as to eradicate the *we* and *them* mentality, and create an *us* mentality.

Positively, it became clear in this paper that the church has a clear understanding of its role as a mediator of God's love in this world, Here is the summary in three words: Inviting, Inspiring and Evangelical clearly depicts the mission of the church and is very well represented in the diagrams. This makes the whole document easy to comprehend and from a pedagogical perspective easy to teach and to explain. This was also noted in the response from the CEC, which apart of applauding the document, further cemented the understanding that mission is God's mission (*missio dei*) where we as churches have been invited to participate, and the fact that mission is the heartbeat of the Church. I personally considered these statements to be very strong, contemporary and necessary, especially now when the word mission is loaded with much criticism and there is a tendency among Christians to distance themselves from mission. The fact that mission was misused or abused in the past, does not mean that mission has become irrelevant. It is and will remain the heartbeat of the church.

The phenomenon of misuse of the term mission leads me to the second positive part of the paper, because unlike the errors in the history of mission, where missionaries were not sensitive towards cultures and other perceptions, this document puts a strong emphasis on the respect of diversities, including cultures, religions and believes. T. Jähnichen further elaborates this in his response to the document, pointing out that it is a challenge to how we do mission today. It raises the question how we can remain true to our witness and still be respectful to other cultures, religions and believes. I believe that given the history of the church, especially in dealing with other cultures, religions and faiths, this is an area where we as churches can learn together, through intercultural and interfaith dialogue, exchange and encounters.

The concept of learning together is further challenged by hierarchies that are created by economic, and historical structures. As well as by the donor and taker culture, for example, and the “us and them” mentality so often mentioned in my observation report. This was further highlighted in the presentation from Andar Palindungan where he gave an example of the UEM. It is necessary for churches to recognize that there are economic differences and that we are not able to iron them out overnight, but we as churches, in order to continue to learn together and participate in God's mission together as the body of Christ, must continually develop ways in which we do not allow hierarchical divisions to stand in our way.

Conclusion

On the whole, the conference was very informative, and dealt with a topic that is very relevant. The outcomes of the conference can be useful for churches, and scholars that are interested in the field of missiology. The conference identified areas that need further study, such as how to make diversity more visible in our churches (gender balance, representation of different age groups, ordained and

laity, etc.). The conference further showed the need to work on the *we* and *them* mentality when doing mission today.

On the other hand the conference showed how our understanding on the term Mission varies, and how we have to continue to put into consideration various aspects or understandings of mission when we are communicating. It further highlighted the role of the church in witnessing God's love and compassion to the creation. The conference further highlighted challenges that the church has in doing this noble task, but also shared some signs of hope, by highlighting examples of best practices from various congregations and churches.