

We are neighbors in an ever-widening human community. Intersections between the Church of Westphalia with its middle-class worshipers and the inhabitants of communities with less privilege are occurring with much greater frequency. We live now in a global context in which deep understanding between peoples of theological, social, and economic differences is crucial both to the health of the human community as we know it, and to the work of mission in the 21st century.

In the 8 Theses outlined in this document on mission, the Church in Westphalia lays a very strong foundation for mission in the 21st century. It recognizes the pluralities and multiplicities of contexts, cultures, and theologies that will challenge evangelists and disciples. It calls for an embrace of that plurality as a gift from God. It recognizes that dialogue between cultures, deep listening from the seat of privilege that many of us occupy, and the agency of the less privileged are all essential components to its evolving mission.

If I were to offer two critiques of the Theses, it would be an invitation to introduce into the document two pieces that could strengthen the foundation of its mission in the 21st century. I believe both of these concepts are well aligned with the good work already done in the development of these principles.

The first would be a recognition of Liberation theologies that developed in the latter half of the 20th century. These theologies surfaced as a critique of and replacement for traditional western theologies that served to authorize and justify colonialism. Current manifestations of these theologies from the context of privilege can be seen in the rise of fascism, the demonization of the refugee and immigrant, and the pending destruction of the planet.

Action and praxis are the hallmarks of these new theologies. Ideas that do not inspire or induce actions relevant to the needs of the poor, the oppressed, and the victims of injustice are irrelevant. For disciples of privilege from middle class upbringings, the work of recognizing the manifestations and impact of that privilege is important work. Actions that lead to the dismantling of that privilege are critical.

The second critical concept for mission in the 21st century that I would invite consideration of is the notion of accompaniment as a model for mission.

Mission in the 21st century will require full recognition of the poor and the oppressed as agents of their own spiritual, political, and communal well-being. Any praxis or action that the Church engages in as a pathway to relief for those who suffer unjustly begins not with remedies imagined from the places of middle-class privilege, but from the communities in which the suffering is being endured.

Accompaniment models of mission grow out of a genuine love for all humans, a love that begins with the kind of open dialogue and deep listening across cultural boundaries that the 8 Theses call for.

That kind of love will not tolerate suffering in the heart of another. Such love feels deeply called to action on behalf of the suffering and oppressed. That kind of love sees the one who suffers as an agent of their own transformation rather than simply a victim without imagination or capacity. That kind of love is present to assist rather than to direct.

In conclusion, I think the Church in Westphalia has written an important document. The 8 Theses as composed hit all the right tones. I believe the addition of language affirming theologies that emerged from the context of oppression rather than privilege and an invitation to practice an accompaniment model of mission would strengthen an already well-composed document.