

## ***The Mission of the Church in the Changing Landscapes of the 21st century***

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Undeniably churches are faced with major global developments instigating many changes in all spheres of life. The changed and continuously changing landscape of our century has opened up new challenging opportunities for Christian witness to the world. In response to these challenges and opportunities, the global church has and still is changing itself, promptly adjusting and re-defining its mission being the living body that it is; the Body of Christ.

One of the major marks of mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> century relates to the fact that we live in a globalized culture, a globalized world. Therefore, we are members of a globalized church reality as well.

We cross ethnic, religious and cultural lines just by walking out of our home or our office and crossing the street. I am sure some of us don't even need to leave home or our work place to do so! It seems as though there are no more cultural lines to cross. Only cross cultural lives to live!

Naturally, churches have been trying to re-adjust their missionary vision as well as their actual mission work according to this reality, giving to the mission of the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century first of all a "cross cultural" mark. As Christians we are commissioned to "go" and make disciples of all nations. Yet, the global becomes local so often that our encounter with "all nations" already begins in our respective contexts. Hence, mission becomes a dynamic cross-cutting movement; a cross cultural journey, a missionary pilgrimage, through diverse cultures and religions, beyond geographical boundaries, towards the Kingdom of God. And for those we are already part of it, the commission is not only to bring forth the message of the Good News. It is to invite all people to join in this missionary pilgrimage we are part of.

The reality of cross cultural mission has been shaped by a number of factors. Two of the major ones are themselves signs of the changing landscape of our times. The first is the explosive, one could say, growth of the church in the global South-East, running parallel to the adverse decline in the North-West. The mission fields of the past century have established their own churches, most of which are fervently mission oriented with tremendous impact on the mainline churches of the North-West with the reverse flow of missionaries from the south and the east. New mission churches emerge introducing new expressions of witnessing to the Gospel, through different cultural as well as theological interpretations of the Bible.

The second is migration; closely yet not identically related to the missionaries from the global south. The previous century and the dawn of the new one is marked by the unprecedented movement of populations because of financial, political, conflict or even climate change reasons. The cultural and religious pluralism particularly in the global north-west creates a whole different setting for the mission of churches.

Migration together with the strong global missionary currents have radically reshaped the global perception of mission, bringing to life numerous “new mission churches”, new religious movements and cults, new forms of witnessing to Christ. On one hand, these new mission expressions, many self-identified as non-denominational with strong evangelical drive, mostly take roots within secular societies, in need of spiritual revival or even re-evangelization. On the other hand, the “hosting” local churches challenged already by the latter are additionally called to define their own mission *vis a vis* migrant churches and the changed mission landscape.

These diverse pluralistic frameworks have significantly contributed to the development of a contextual missional approach. Doing mission in context is nothing new; especially if one brings to mind the very contextual language of the New Testament! The difference now is that there are no more geographical boundaries between different contexts; we do not need to travel from Galilee to Samaria or to Judea; local churches progressively become parts of a larger community of churches within their own (maybe long-ago established) historical context and for their witness to be effective needs to be addressing the respective context of each one in the “neighbourhood”. Along this approach in mission work valuable “tools” are the enculturation of our message as well as a dialogical attitude.

The latter, that is dialogue, has become a key trait of Christian mission among other faiths. Advocating the value of all people created in the image and likeness of God, a dialogical mode of respectful co-existence and mutual learning gives already positive signs for the future of Christian mission in the midst of this pluralism of religions.

The past century was also marked by the vast multiplication of churches, denominations and movements, together with the immense growth of the Evangelical, Pentecostal, charismatic and neo-charismatic churches. At a first “reading” a number of concerns could have (or actually have) been raised as to whether Christianity is drifting further way from unity in the midst of such a diversified even competitive at times landscape, challenging churches to redefine their theological self-understanding on questions of unity, ecclesiology and of course their mission in today’s world. A closer evaluation of this development though points to two interesting facts; one, that mission in our times is as co-operative and relational as ever before! And two, that a fresh understanding of inclusivity in relation to mission is introduced.

The mission of the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is characterized by the explosive number of cross-cultural partnerships in mission projects even between churches in different corners of the world! Short-term as well as long-term projects are taking place in a

spirit of interdependence, mutual accountability and respectful cooperation around the globe. On the practical side, of course one should not overlook the impressive advancements in technology and communication which have significantly contributed to the shaping of these new paradigms in mission work and cooperation as well.

Coming to the second point, the view of mission is increasingly becoming holistic. Such notion renders mission an all embracing act of love on personal, social, cosmic scale for the salvation of the entire *ktisis*. The recipients of God's mission and therefore God's grace and love extend beyond notions of the past. Through the discernment of God's Spirit at work in the world and the discernment of spirits (in non-Christian cultural and religious contexts) a new paradigm in mission has surfaced both in inter-Christian but also inter-religious encounters.

The prophetic dimension of mission necessitates the building of relationships not only with God but also with people; irrespectively of their social, cultural, religious identities. The very transformative power of mission is founded upon the building of reconciling communities of people in solidarity (in particular with those who are mostly in need of the Good News) able to bring transformation to the world; for such transformation to be achieved a long term-view of mission and much diligence is necessary. The prevailing global culture of haste and impatience needs also to be transformed by the Lord who "directs our hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance" (2 Thessalonians 3:5).

I would like to conclude by pointing out that the mission of the Church in today's changing landscapes is marked by the enormous diversity of global and local expressions of Christian faith and the many new ways of witnessing to Christ. In the all embracing, holistic view of mission as *koinonia* (being in communion with God, all peoples and the whole of creation), mission is much more than bringing forth the good news; it is the eagerness to receive back the good news as the gospel of life is embedded in different contexts; but it is also the promptness to understand that God's Spirit is indeed working across cultures, churches and religions but first and foremost the Spirit works among people. Among human beings who come to life, are sustained in life and anticipate eternal life because of the infinite love of a life-giving God whose mission extends beyond any humanly known boundaries.