



Conference on World Mission and Evangelism

Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship

8-13 March 2018 – Arusha, Tanzania

Document No. **PLEN 05.8**

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Mission Agency Reformed by the Call to Discipleship

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Introduction: Imperative for mission organisation

The Council for World Mission (CWM) names as its mission statement – “Called as partners in Christ to mutually challenge, encourage and equip churches to share in God’s mission”. This statement resonates with the theme of this World Mission Conference, “Moving in the Spirit, called to transforming discipleship” and particularly, the focus for this plenary session, “Transforming the world, equipping disciples”.

For CWM our partnership in Christ is the imperative for engagement with churches. Through this understanding of our relationship with Christ, we dare to claim the right to hold each other accountable to a pattern of discipleship that is grounded in the mission to which Jesus committed himself and for which he died. In 1977, when CWM was born, we divested ourselves of the outmoded mission paradigm, which presumed that some had more “light and truth” to impart than others; and where mission was dominated and coloured by mono-cultural norms and values of the global North. While it may be said that the early missionaries had no choice than to present the gospel through the lenses of their cultural understanding and social location, the result was that indigenous cultures were decimated, plurality and diversity discarded and the spirit of community, with all its freedom and life-breathing potency, lost.

1977 introduced a new era and ethos in mission thinking and practice for the missionary societies that came together to form CWM. This new era is marked by divestment of dominant donor-recipient power arrangements, discovery of our mutual accountability and interdependence and a decision to accompany each other in taking our call to discipleship seriously. This journey has been a very challenging one for us. We have had to learn along the way lessons of trust, of letting go and of embracing alternatives and options we least thought possible. Desmond van der Water, former General Secretary, in reflecting on the first thirty years of this journey, asked whether we could now speak of mission accomplished. A good provocative question, which only reveals that mission can never be fully accomplished because every moment offers new challenges and opportunities, calling the church into a constant state of reformation.

My contribution to this plenary, therefore, is the story of our struggle and search for a model of engagement with God’s mission that is grounded in a spirituality of hope, informed by a missiology of radical engagement and propelled by the invitation of Jesus to a lifestyle of reversal. Our present strategic direction commits us to interlocking priorities centred on enabling member churches to develop missional congregations; and we named empire as the context in which this mission finds expression. With this commitment to mission in the context of empire, compelling us to counter-cultural values and

transformative praxis, we have come to recognise that the courage and consistency required is costly to the neat and well-ordered community of church. However, if we would take seriously the call to move in the Spirit, within the context of a groaning creation, the choice is clear – transformative discipleship, which is hope-inspired, radical in nature and functions in reversal. Herein lays the task of mission organisations/agencies.

Mission grounded in a spirituality of hope

Hope is at the centre of CWM's mission for such a time as this; and we regard it as God's gift to the oppressed, the dislocated and the restless. We affirm that hope springs from the bowels of discontent and provides the spiritual energy that keeps us restless yet resilient until our change comes. We believe that as long as we remain discontented with life, as it is, we are in a mind-set to reject this social order and to search for something different and better.

We believe that God's gift of hope is that which inspires us to radical engagement with the world as we know it, to the end that healing may be experienced by all and peace become the new basis for life in community. For us, hope is rooted in the subversive theology of the resurrection. Jesus of Nazareth was killed. We all stand to face death in the end, however, for many in the world, the end is constantly present, and the very air they breathe is mixed with the stench of death under systems that steal, destroy, and kill. And they die, in infancy, in their youth, in poverty, before they even live. The news that even death could not hold him is beyond radical. And the invitation to "Go tell my disciples that I am risen"; to regroup and carry on the mission for which Jesus was killed is revolutionary.

Theologian Jürgen Moltmann, in his book "The Sun of Righteousness, Arise!" discusses the central role of resurrection in Christian theology and observes that the resurrection connects the actual event of Christ overcoming death to the promise of God's hope for cosmic renewal. This has a critical role in Christian theology if not, in fact, the mandate for mission itself. Moltmann argues and correctly so, that in the light of the numerous crises in the world – human and ecological - we have come to see ourselves and even the earth as mortal, as only born to die and in many cases, cruelly. This backdrop gives the illusion that the death-dealing structures of our times have the last say. That death wins. But we know that is not how it ends. The resurrection guarantees us that death does not triumph, and therefore let us not be so willing to be surrounded by it. The Church is called to 'believe in the power of resurrection and prepare the way for the kingdom of God in the context of today's apocalyptic horizon'. The Church must awake to the fact that with the raising of Jesus, God himself has arisen, to fulfil his promises to all those he has created'. Moltmann summarises that the hope for the resurrection of the dead is not an answer to the human yearning for immortality; it is a response to the hunger for righteousness and justice'.

Mission informed by a praxis of discernment and radical engagement (DARE)

In a time when imperial powers, systems of oppression and violence continue to exploit, divide, despoil and threaten our world, CWM offers the DARE as a vital voice of counter-imperial consciousness. As an international mission organisation, we have wrestled, since the 1970s, with how to de-colonise mission - its theory, theology and praxis, and how to proclaim fullness of life through Christ at a time when all of life is threatened. CWM, through DARE, clarifies its prophetic role in the present political and social landscapes and in allegiance to the God of life who, according to the prophet Mary, brings down the mighty from their thrones.

DARE, as discernment and radical engagement, enables CWM to participate in the formation of disciples for our moment and time, sending a clear signal, first to ourselves and then to the world, that our loyalty and obedience is to the God of life, who calls us to take on the life-giving mission for which Jesus lived and died. DARE declares that we are on the side of the radical, communitarian Jesus who dared to name “thieves and robbers” as the destroyers of life and presented himself as God’s mediator and messenger of life in fullness – an alternative to the eternal Rome of his time.

Mission responsive to Jesus’ call for a lifestyle in reversal

According to Matthew’s gospel, Jesus’ calling of his first disciples was set in the context of the forces of empire that enticed and seduced him to consider power, popularity and pleasure over the principles of obedience and faithfulness to God. Jesus having resisted the temptations presented himself to the community as one not easily sold to the scandal of seduction. His call “Come follow me” is a statement of defiance and an invitation to depart from the incentives and inducements that could mar the perspectives of his would-be followers and brighten their prospect of making any positive and life-changing difference to the world in which they lived. In Mark’s gospel, Jesus encounters King Herod, in all his pomp and glory, throwing a party for the officials and nobles of society. Jesus refused to join the party; instead, he and his disciples retreated to the desert, and a large crowd followed them. Those who followed Jesus and his disciples were the ordinary people, those who were not so privileged to join Herod’s party because they did not measure up to the social criteria. Jesus invited his disciples to feed the crowd, an invitation that shocked the disciples; but demonstrated for them that Jesus was actually inviting them to a reversal of mind-set.

Behind the safe doors of our churches, we have learned to label the chaos of reality as secular and therefore not the task of Christian disciples. One pastor may have believed just that once upon a time, but he soon came to realise that one act of obedience is better than a hundred sermons and that to be Christian is to share the suffering of God in the world. A time came when obedience to Him meant liberation from the narrow view that the minister’s consecration to the mission of God excludes political and social activism, which are considered secular. He said that “it was not enough to bind the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel but to seize the wheel itself”. He also said, “When Christ calls a man (or woman) he bids him/her come and die”. Reverend Dietrich Bonhoeffer answered this very call when he rose up against Adolf Hitler’s Nazi regime.

Here we may also draw insight and inspiration from David Livingstone, a pioneering missionary of the London Missionary Society, whose courageous and inspirational words live on:

“I am prepared to go anywhere, provided it be forward.... All that I am I owe to Jesus Christ revealed to me in His divine Book... If you have men who will only come if they know there is a good road, I do not want them. I want men who will come if there is no road at all.

Transformative discipleship is about life in reversal, a readiness to go against the grain of culture, to confront power, challenge status quo and exemplify a lifestyle marked by the courage to stand up for what is right and commitment to pursue justice and peace. In this regard, discipleship interpreted contextually, is alert to the signs of the time, attuned the urgency of Jesus’ call to follow him and positioned to offer a path to liberation and hope. Transformative discipleship calls us to think through the meaning of life in the midst of turmoil and consider ways of response in light of the call of Jesus of Nazareth to join him in establishing an alternative community, based on justice and peace, a community in which all are accepted and embraced, and none refused or excluded.

Conclusion – Holding fast to the reformation agenda

In a rather moving presentation to the WCRC General Council, in Leipzig, Germany, distinguished Professor Jürgen Moltmann challenged his audience to consider that “the ecumenical movement is missing the reformation agenda”. Moltmann made this call against the backdrop of the many complex and controversial issues on the agenda of the General Council and his sense of the temptation into which we so easily fall, to compromise mission out of convenience or need to maintain the neatness of the organisation. Speaking later in that said General Council, I agreed with Moltmann’s assertion and argued that the reformation agenda is being stymied by our love for remaining the way we are and maintaining the way we are viewed, irrespective of how many categories are created and excluded in the process. We say that it is in the interest of the unity of the church; but I fear that true unity, true communion is being compromised, even sacrificed by this ‘colonisation of the imperial logic’.

If this World Mission Conference would be true to the WCC’s commitments in ‘Together towards Life’ then transformative discipleship is a central concern; and the call for mission agencies to accept its role in missional formation is critical and urgent. This call for reformation is meant to ground us, to take us back to the foundation of our calling and to stir in us a passion for walking with Jesus in radical “troubling (of) the waters” of our time.