

Together in mission

A letter on mission renewal
addressed to all member churches
of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches
and to all women and men from churches around the world
who are gathering in Accra, Ghana, in July–August 2004

Dear sisters and brothers,

Grace to you, and peace in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.

We rejoice and give thanks

We give thanks to God, who in the mystery of creation and redemption has freely and graciously entered into covenant with the whole earth community. We give thanks to our Lord Jesus Christ, who has called us to be partners in God's mission, co-workers in the *missio dei* (1 Cor 3.9), and has sent us forth in the power of the Spirit to be witnesses to the whole inhabited earth (Acts 1.8) of God's present and coming reign.

We give thanks for the past and present witness of the churches of the Reformed and reforming tradition, who, in fellowship with the wider ecumenical family, are seeking to proclaim the gospel of reconciliation and salvation, justice and peace, healing and wholeness, in word and deed. We particularly give thanks for women, who have played a significant but often unacknowledged role in the mission of our churches.

We rejoice in the ways in which our churches in different regions of the world are seeking to witness to the gospel today. In Africa, for their vitality that brings out the liberating power of the gospel among the poorest people in the world. In the Caribbean, for their call to witness in multicultural settings. In Latin America, for their zeal for our confessional heritage and for equipping the saints for mission (Eph 4.12). In the Middle East, for their commitment to witness, evangelism and Christian unity. In Asia, the home of world religions, for the beginnings of a people-centred and life-centred approach to Christian mission open to the insights of Asian wisdom. In the Pacific, for the churches' voices of solidarity with aboriginal communities and of concern for environmental justice. In North America, for their willingness to rediscover mission in their own society. In Europe, for their concern for new forms of Christian presence in the public arena in highly "secularized" settings.

We affirm all these efforts as part of the living witness of our churches in building up the household of God (1 Pet 2.4ff), in fellowship with other churches throughout the whole world.

Searching together for mission renewal

As we listen to what the Spirit is saying to our churches and try to discern its meaning for our life and work as a church fellowship, we are not only inspired but also challenged. We look not to the past, but to the future, so that we may “run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Heb 12.1-2).

In 2002, the Alliance launched a new study on mission.

The goal of this study is “not just a statement on mission but the renewal of our churches for a fresh understanding and engagement in mission”. It is designed to pay attention to recent developments in the study of mission, but more importantly, to “the lived missiology of the people of God in the contemporary world” – to what our churches are actually saying and doing in mission.

What we need, we believe, “is a focus on mission that will produce fresh missiological thinking and energy in response to the new contexts in which Reformed churches find themselves at the beginning of the 21st century”.¹

The first step in the study was a preparatory meeting in Geneva in July 2001. In June 2002 and October-December 2003, a series of regional consultations was held in São Paulo (Brazil), Beirut (Lebanon), Yaoundé (Cameroon), Bali (Indonesia) and Georgetown (Guyana). In addition, contributions were made by the mission in unity project jointly sponsored by the Alliance and the John Knox International Reformed Centre, and by recent consultations on women in mission and missiology.

The mission study is an important part of the journey of our fellowship to Accra and beyond. It seeks to respond to the call of the 23rd general council (Debrecen 1997) to member churches to recognize, educate and confess their faith with regard to economic injustice and environmental destruction. It is part of the worldwide process of gathering around Christ’s promise of life in fullness for all.

Listening to the Spirit through mutual learning

What we have learned so far in this mission study leads us to underline the importance of interregional sharing and interregional action in mission. Such interregional exchanges imply a sharing of gifts, mutual learning, and intercontextuality in mission. They require a reconsideration of unequal power relationships in mission (2 Cor 8), and the rejection of a vertical, top-down approach, with far-reaching implications for our life in the *oikoumene*.

Our churches raise questions of identity in their practice of mission. Identity is something that both grounds us and holds us back. It is not enough to make a statement summarizing past wisdom, in continuity with an outdated mission tradition. Mission means risking our identity for the sake of the gospel, losing and saving our life in order to discover, once more, who God is calling us to be.

Some churches speak of a crisis in Christian mission. In many quarters, ecumenical missiology is questioned, and dubious older missiologies have been revived. Our mission practice is fragmented, and there are gross inconsistencies between what we say and what we do.

If the gospel is to be heard as “good news” by the peoples of the world, then we need a missiology that is not church-centred but people- and life-centred. The need for such a “paradigm shift” is reflected in the following perspectives on mission that have emerged from our study so far.

The renewal of mission requires the discipline of repentance

The renewal of our mission as the people of God among all God’s peoples requires the discipline of repentance and confession.

This is why we have linked our mission study to the process of covenanting for justice in the economy and the earth that began in Debreccen. In order to bear witness to what is good and acceptable and perfect in a world of growing economic injustice and environmental destruction, we must be transformed by the renewing of our minds and not conform ourselves to the present order (Rom 12.2).

Mission has often been understood and practised as a current flowing only in a single direction: from north to south, from rich to poor, from the powerful to the powerless, from male to female, from white to black, from “Christian” civilization to godless cultures. This reduces mission to something that some people do to others, rather than a common sharing in God’s mission of love for the whole world.

Mission has often been understood and practised in oppressive and even militaristic ways. In many contexts, Christian mission is seen as the religious face of western colonial and neocolonial domination. This perception is strengthened when the language of the gospel is abused to legitimate immoral and illegal wars against societies that are predominantly Muslim.

Mission has often been understood and practised in a narrow, impoverished manner. Sometimes by overspiritualizing salvation, to the neglect of systemic threats to the life of the poor and the excluded. Sometimes in terms of a sectarian proselytism in which the conversion to Protestant churches of people already baptized in other Christian churches in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is seen as a criterion of authentic conversion to and election in Jesus Christ.

Many of these misunderstandings and misappropriations of Christian mission persist in various forms in our own days. Our common call to witness in preaching and service to God’s coming age – an age of life for all God’s peoples and God’s earth community – summons us to repentance and conversion.

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The mission of Jesus

Our participation in God's mission as individuals and churches must ultimately be modelled on the mission of Jesus (Jn 3.16 and Jn 20.21). The gospels tell us that when Jesus saw the crowds, "he had compassion for them" and "went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness" (Mt 9.35-36).

Though he was in the form of God, the Lord Jesus emptied himself (Philippians 2). Though he was rich, he became poor, so that we may become rich in his grace. A *kenosis* of mission is required in our identifying with the Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, with the poor and excluded (Matthew 25). Mission should begin with powerlessness, not power. The power of the gospel will be made perfect in our weakness (2 Cor 12.9f).

How did Jesus understand his mission? "The Spirit of the Lord is on me," he said, quoting the prophet, "because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Lk 4.18f).

We learn from this passage that mission is the fruit of the Spirit. We see that mission is multidimensional: it includes evangelism and proclamation, the pursuit of (economic, social and gender) justice, the ministry of healing, and the need to break the chains of injustice and the yoke of dependency. Mission is service (Jn 13.12-16). It is acting in compassion (Mt 14.13-21), reconciliation (Mt 5.43-45) and unity (Jn 17.20-23).

The household of life – towards new "postcolonial" missiologies

The theme of our 24th general council is taken from a biblical mission statement: "I came that they may have life, and have it in fullness" (Jn 10.10).

We associate mission in Jesus' way with a range of images related to the household of life: communion or *koinonia*, partnership, hospitality, stewardship, inclusiveness, and gratuity.

The household of our common life is a gift from God, but it is now in disorder and in need of rebuilding and repair. A household (*oikos*) missiology embraces three fundamental aspects of our lives whose names have their root in the same word *oikos* or household: economy, ecology, ecumenism. It therefore includes the evangelical struggles against economic injustice, ecological destruction, and the walls of hostility – new and old – that obstruct Christian communion, human fellowship, and interfaith solidarity.

Our common household is embedded in particular cultures, and can never be captured in a generalized understanding imposed from above. It expresses itself in stories and folk tales, art and song, food and friendship. The idea of household is always plural. Households need to exist alongside other

households. Mission, thus, implies neighbourliness. In our image of household, we do not discriminate between the private and the public spheres, between what goes on inside and outside the house, between the centre and the margins of the world.

The household image emerged from women in mission and draws on women's insights. We lift up this image because we believe it has important implications for our understanding of mission and needs to be developed further.

Likewise, we observe a new emphasis on the Holy Spirit in mission, visible in the challenge of Pentecostalism and in our encounters with other spiritual traditions.

Some draw on the understanding of mission as midwifery, following Gal 4.19; others on neglected New Testament commissions that emphasize the power of weakness, for example, Lk 1.38, Jn 12.14-17; still others on sections of the Hebrew Bible, such as Mic 4.5 or Amos 9.7, that offer new perspectives on the relationship of the people of God to other spiritual traditions. We therefore foresee the emergence of new "postcolonial" missiologies that reject the dominating and power-centred missiologies of the past, and affirm the need for self-emptying in mission.

Challenges to the churches in mission

A wide door for effective work has opened to us, and there are many challenges (cf 1 Cor 16.9).

Our study so far leads us to highlight seven of these.

1. *How inclusively should our churches understand the word "mission"?*
If mission is witness (or just evangelism), does this mean that our engagement in service or in the struggle for justice is not mission? If everything is mission, does this mean that nothing is?
2. *How are our churches to understand and practise mission in the context of economic injustice and environmental destruction?*
The *missio dei* is the mission of a God who redeems the oppressed from their burdens (Ex 6.6) and brings them out of the house of slavery (Ex 20.2) into the household of life, and sets a rainbow in the clouds as a sign of the covenant between God and the earth (Gen 9.13). How then are we to understand the mission of our churches?
3. *How are our churches to understand and practise mission in the context of a new imperialism and aggressive war?*
The *missio dei* is the mission of a God who puts down the mighty from their seat, and scatters the proud in the imagination of their hearts (Lk 1.51f). How then are we to understand the mission of our churches?
4. *How are our churches to understand and practise mission in a world of cultural diversity?*

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One church, one faith, one Lord: but how are our churches to interpret the one gospel faithfully in the many cultures and contexts of our world?

5. *How are our churches to include women's perspectives and visions in creating new paradigms of mission?*

Women's stories of mission describe partnership and solidarity as essential to working in the midst of brokenness and pain for healing, transformation and the renewal of creation. Mission as midwifery describes the ways in which women enable communities to bring forth new life.

6. *How are we to overcome the many conflicts and divisions within the Reformed family that separate us from one another, sap our energies and blight our witness to God's reconciling love?*

This requires joint reflection on our understanding of the nature of the church, the authority of Scripture and the work of the Spirit, in the light of the Reformed heritage and the insights of other confessional traditions; theological education and formation that nurture a vision of "my church as one part of the body of Christ" and "my truth as partial and in need of the truths of other parts of the body"; and most critically, the transformation of inherited north-south mission relations so that they foster rather than hinder creative, united and authentic witness.

7. *How are our churches to understand and practise mission in a world of many faiths?*

How do we hold together dialogue and evangelism in interfaith contexts? How do we understand the place of other religions within the *missio dei*? How do we distinguish true witness from proselytism? How do we work with people of other faiths in the common quest for peace, justice and the defence of the earth?

Together in mission: an invitation

We believe that the churches of our Alliance, within each region and across regions, have much to teach and to learn from one another in mission. In the study so far, we have taken a first inventory of what our churches are saying and doing in mission, but we are sharply aware that this is just a beginning. We invite our churches and their delegates in Accra to extend and deepen the mission study in the period following the general council, and to make it their own.

When our 19th-century forebears encountered one another in the mission fields of the south – at that time, mission was still from north to south – they set up the World Presbyterian Alliance (1875) and the International Congregational Council (1891) to do mission better by doing it together. Later, WARC member churches began to view mission ecumenically, with a certain loss of confessional awareness as an unintended consequence. Now we invite our churches and their Accra delegates to ask:

What would it mean to understand our fellowship today as a community of Reformed and United churches working together in mission, related to other churches and mission organizations in the ecumenical world?

Mission as our gift and our task

As we close this letter, we turn to our God in prayer. Mission is given to us as a gift, and we accept it as a task.

Loving God, you have been with all peoples since our creation, and in many ways, you have made yourself known to us as Father and Mother; in you we live and move and have our being.

You have sent your Son Jesus Christ to invite us on a journey of mission, to reconcile the world to yourself, to announce your reign and to redeem creation.

You have sent your Holy Spirit to inspire us, to revive us, to renew us and to extend your witness in us through so many peoples, cultures and religions.

We praise you and we bless you,

For generations of our forebears, women and men, who had been faithful witnesses to the message of the gospel, both in word and deed.

And for those whom you call and send out today, in the power of the Spirit, in solidarity with the poor and the despised, to preach the gospel to all nations, to administer the sacraments; to teach in your name, to work for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation, to enter into friendship and fellowship with all peoples.

We thank you that in all parts of the earth, a community of love has been gathered together by their prayers and labours, and that in every place your servants call upon your name.

The kingdom and the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. *Amen.*

Grace and peace be with you all,

Setri Nyomi, general secretary,

on behalf of all who have taken part in the mission study so far

Note

1. These phrases are from the report of the department of theology to the executive committee in 2000, *Executive Committee Minutes 2000*, pp.73.