

Together in mission

Voices from the regions

Africa

The tremendous growth of Christianity in Africa presents Alliance churches on the continent with opportunities and many challenges, the African consultation on mission said.¹

Participants recognized the long history of Christianity in Africa, stretching back to the early church – see, for example, the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 – and gave thanks for the men and women, local and foreign, who have spread the gospel throughout the continent in more recent times. The church today seems to be growing fastest among the poorest peoples of the world.

They confessed that mission has often been reduced to only one of its dimensions, or viewed as a tool for the expansion of the church or even of a particular denomination. It has devastating historical associations with “such evils as slavery, colonialism, imperialism, racism and sexism”.

Alliance general secretary Setri Nyomi spoke on the mission implications of the Debrecent call to “recognize, educate and confess” with regard to economic injustice and environmental destruction, and pointed to the need to overcome fragmented and disunited ways of doing mission.

Isabel Phiri of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians contrasted colonial interpretations of mission, in which spreading the gospel often went hand in hand with European imperial expansion, with the biblical understanding of mission as God establishing a relationship with God’s world. In their mission practice, churches need to learn from Jesus, who saw mission as bringing out wholeness in people.

André Karamaga, an Alliance vice-president, noted that the role of culture, as a vehicle for carrying the gospel to Africans, has often been ignored. At the same time, mission activity has sometimes fostered a tribalism that churches today must strive to overcome. Effective mission requires a constant interplay between gospel and cultures.

Leading African missiologist Tinyiko Maluleke argued that the close relationship between mission history and western colonial expansionism has left some deep scars in the African psyche and in African church life. Africans need to begin their mission engagement by naming who they are and to articulate their mission understanding in highly contextual terms.

Group discussion revealed that evangelism is central in churches’ understanding of mission in Africa. Second in importance is the African cultural context: mission cannot be effective unless local cultures are taken seriously. The socioeconomic challenges faced by Africans ought to inform the practice of

mission. Religious pluralism, with Muslims and followers of traditional African religions living as neighbours alongside Christians, must be taken into account.

Effective mission in Africa today requires a multidimensional but Christocentric understanding, the consultation said – an understanding that includes contextualization, gender justice, proclamation, liberation, and the local church in social action. This will require churches to “deepen our knowledge of scripture”, “adapt and reconstruct church structures” and “rethink some of the ways in which we do, teach and learn theology”.

Effective mission means understanding the gospel in a holistic manner and rejecting a dichotomy between gospel and culture. Rather, African churches must endeavour to understand culture in all its dimensions – economic, social, political and religious. Patriarchy is still a challenge to the mission of the churches, as is their own identity as African churches.

In their structures, liturgies and theologies, churches need to take better account of the impact of modernity and globalization on African communities, and to see human and ecological issues as one, since God’s love for the world is one.

The combination of poverty and disease, exacerbated by the stranglehold of neoliberal globalization, continues to ravage many parts of Africa, most devastatingly in the HIV/Aids pandemic. HIV/Aids must become central to the life of the churches in all its dimensions.

Many African countries are young democracies without established democratic cultures. Corruption is widespread. Several countries are in the midst of destabilizing wars, or have just emerged from conflict. A mission response demands that the churches learn from historic Christian peace movements and recent African church involvement in conflict resolution, and that they root out corruption from their own structures.

To maximize the mission opportunities offered by the explosive growth of Christianity in Africa, participants committed themselves to breaking the yoke of dependency. They expressed a desire for structures to help Christians in the south work better together and to offer support to African immigrant churches in Europe and North America.

Islam as well as Christianity is growing in Africa, especially in such countries as Sudan, Ethiopia and Nigeria. There is the risk and often the reality of religious conflict. Mission requires a more solid understanding of Islam and the ways in which it is lived on the African continent.

Participants said that they were willing to see constructive initiatives such as the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (Nepad) as part of God’s mission, which is larger than the church.

Asia

Constructing an Asian missiology for the 21st century

“‘*Dewa*’ is the term for mission in Islam. It is an invitation to a spiritual life; it is not a demand for conversion.” – A Muslim participant

“The word ‘mission’ is problematic. We need to find a new word for mission which has a more invitational connotation than imposing one value over against other values.” – A Hindu

“A convergence of the fundamental values that Asian faiths share must be found.” – A Buddhist²

In Asia, as in other parts of the world, Christian mission has been questioned by many in the past and present. One of the key problems has been its close association with western colonial power, politically, economically and culturally. This question has been tackled with some success but is not yet resolved.

A second question is Christian mission’s exclusive attitude towards the religions and cultures of Asian peoples because of their difference from Christianity on the theological and cultural levels. In recent years, the rise of religious fundamentalism in both Christianity and Asian religions has aggravated this problem.

Missiological thinking and practice in the 21st century must take the interfaith dimension seriously. God has created diversity and a pluralistic world. We recognize that all religions teach similar values: compassion, equality, justice and human dignity; the ideologies we encounter in Asia also stress these values. We say, therefore, that those who do not practise these values do not truly believe their religions or ideologies. We invite all believers to cooperate in practising these values, as this would obviate the need for conversion or *dakwah*.

The mission of life emerges as a common mission for all faiths and demands the united effort of all peoples and religions.³ Saving the creation is the most urgent concern for religious communities in the face of neoliberal economic globalization and the current hegemonic geopolitical strategies. In this perspective, all peoples are the subjects of mission, which embraces all living creatures. Mission shifts from a church-centred to a life- and people-centred paradigm.

Several world religions and major civilizations arose out of the experience of the Asian peoples. Their cultures are diverse and rich, with much wisdom to offer for life in justice, peace and harmony. The mission of life and for life must draw on the rich religious, spiritual and cultural wisdom of the Asian peoples.

Participants affirmed twelve principles in constructing a new missiology:

1. The united efforts of all peoples and religions can better solve the global crisis of life.

2. The construction of a new missiology requires Christian mission to repent humbly for political domination in Asia.
3. Life in fullness should be a focus of mission in the face of neoliberal economic globalization.
4. The new missiology should honour the wisdom of women.
5. People and life are the pivot of mission.
6. Mission is to enable life to flourish.
7. Mission should be an invitation to life, not conversion.
8. Mission means living together and acting together for life.
9. The construction of a new missiology needs a new space for new vision.
10. Mission demands a *kenosis* of power and greed, and an alternative understanding of power.
11. Healing and the restoration of a whole life is the concrete mission task today.
12. The renewal of all religious faiths and faith foundations in Asia is needed.

Caribbean and North America

Western missionaries in the Caribbean preached Christianity as a “civilizing gospel” to indigenous peoples (Amerindians) they described as “little men”, Africans who they said were not worthy of the gospel, and East Indians they described as uncivilized, uncouth and dirty. The missionaries used Christianity to integrate these people in the social order of the plantocracy.

History helps us to understand the past so that we can transform the church to reflect Christ better, redefining mission in ways that challenge structures of domination, colonialism, racism and sexism. “Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery,” Bob Marley sang in Redemption Song. Today’s independent churches internalized the theologies of the colonizers and need to be cleansed of this colonial mentality. Mission calls for integrity in relationships between sister churches in the Caribbean and North America.⁴

There have been significant changes in recent years in how churches approach mission. These changes include:

- Understanding that both word and deed are integral to the witness and mission of the church; and that one without the other is deficient;
- Dialogue with other denominations and religions;
- Mission integrating social needs;
- Recognition and integration of women in mission;
- Greater coordination of social outreach;
- A shift from clergy-centredness to including lay people;
- Caribbean churches becoming independent from their “mother churches” in North America and Europe; and
- Southern churches becoming “sending churches”.

Justice in the Reformed understanding is a pillar of mission. This challenges churches to work together more effectively on public policy, theology and outreach, finding creative ways to sensitize and involve local congregations, and being open to partnerships with people of other faiths and civil society. Although economic globalization is complex and difficult to understand, the realities of interregional economic injustice are significant mission challenges. This raises an important question: which framework makes it easier to convey the urgency of economic justice – confession or mission?

Poverty in both the Caribbean and North America is higher amongst women than men. In Canada, 20% of women live in poverty; the most vulnerable are First Nations women, women of colour, women with disabilities, immigrants and the elderly.

In the Caribbean, poverty is strongly feminized. Households headed by women are among the most disadvantaged economically and have been on the increase since the 1970s. Women are restricted by child-bearing and child-rearing and often lack the time and resources to organize, apart from networks for economic survival. They are still struggling for recognition of women's rights.

Mission strategies to change the situation of women include emphasizing the importance of their experiences, confronting their subordination in the church, challenging biblical support for women's subordination, organizing women for effective participation, and building alliances with civil society.

Churches in North America find the heart of mission in Mic 6.8: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Missionaries in colonial times brought the gospel, mixed with negative elements, to people of colour throughout the world. Today the church is reviewing, reassessing and rebuilding mission. We must be prepared to listen to and learn from each other and to regard the other as a partner. Mission must honour diversity and cultural difference and address such social problems as race, violence, HIV/Aids.

Churches in the Caribbean need

- to study again the meaning of *missio dei* and to reinterpret the gospel within the social, political and cultural context of the Caribbean;
- to examine their political situation, examining the shift from British colonialism to "Americanization" and economic dependency;
- to rid their societies of suspicions related to race, colour, language and religion and the "divide and rule" mentality;
- to revise the language in which they speak of God, eg God as omnipotent male or master (as in slave and master); and
- to develop more Caribbean expressions in worship, eg music, drama, story.

One of the main challenges of churches in the Caribbean is the lack of trained personnel to serve the church. Too often Caribbean pastors trained in the north remain in the north. Churches within the region must cooperate in leadership development.

Evangelism is another major challenge for churches north and south. Churches need to share experiences of church growth, reflect together on why many churches are shrinking, and identify what aspects of the Reformed tradition attract members. Personal witness, offering comfort and visitation in the context of need, is the most powerful form of evangelism. There is often a discrepancy between how a congregation sees itself and how the community views it. The church must be seen as a church without walls that is hospitable to people. Music and culture are key instruments for church renewal, especially with young people. Evangelism is an invitation and an offer, rather than a demand for conversion.

There needs to be a common understanding of mission, built on churches' commitment to justice as opposed to historical divisions and doctrine. Churches in the south should be encouraged to share threats and challenges from their current realities with churches in the north. Together they can then make joint advocacy and take joint action to address injustices in systems, policies, conditionalities and unfair agreements made under the pressure of powerful states and institutions.

There are many experiences of partnership in mission. Some churches have moved towards cooperative giving and multilateral decision-making. Where bilateral partnerships exist between the north and south, integrity should be encouraged through mutual covenants, mutual planning and two-way cultural exchanges. The Caribbean and North America council for mission (CANACOM) is a structural expression of multilateral cooperative giving and decision-making within the two regions. Traditionally reflective in its approach to issues, the Caribbean and North American area council (CANAAC) should become more active in transforming relationships and mission partnerships.

Europe

The now familiar idea that Christian churches – Reformed churches included – are quickly “changing their face” or that their demographic gravity centre is moving southward tells us something not only about their growth in Africa, North-east Asia or in Latin America but also about their present situation in Europe. There too they are changing. Once national churches, some of them are realizing that they are now Christian churches within increasingly pluralistic societies. Once large churches, many of them are getting smaller. Once powerful and influential in public matters, some of them are realizing that their voice is hardly heard. Once the only answer on offer to the question of human salvation,

some of them are now being compelled to compete with other spiritual organizations for the free individual's choice.⁵

These changes – often seen in terms of the disempowerment of Christian churches, (secularization), the consequent growth of religious pluralism and the growing importance of the free individual's religious choices – can also be described in a more inductive way.

From Scandinavia to Southern Europe, pews are often empty, most church members are “holiday Christians” and the minority of regular attenders is ageing. In 1991, almost 40% of Czechs declared themselves “without religion”; 10 years later, it was almost 60%. Membership in the Church of Scotland declined from 953,000 in 1980 to 607,000 in 2000. The number of people who leave German churches is three times as high as that of people who join them. Church attendance dropped by no less than 20% during the last decade in some western European countries. Church affiliation is often very low among people under 30.

No wonder that the “lived missiology” of Reformed churches in Europe is deeply marked by the present and future challenge of secularization. This complex, multifaceted trend has a different profile in different European regions. In central and eastern Europe, secularization was primarily a programme sponsored by the atheist communist state. It included the confiscation of church property and the marginalization of churches in the public arena. As a result, religious life became a matter of private concern, and church life became more introverted and other-worldly. In western and southern Europe, secularization is primarily a cultural process, induced by the Enlightenment, of moving from a religious to a nonreligious way of construing meaning and grounding action. Its consequences for church practice today are often described as “belonging without believing” and “believing without belonging”.

Which are the emerging challenges to the mission of Alliance churches in a context marked by secularization, growing cultural and neo-religious pluralism, individualism, and societies with markets that are becoming market societies?⁶

European churches are challenged to rethink the proclamation of the gospel in word and deed, going beyond the violence of old and new forms of sectarian proselytism and colonial missiology and the idea that mission and evangelism no longer makes any sense in today's world in general and in Europe in particular.

Christian mission and evangelism in the European context today has to do with new forms of Christian presence and witness in the public sphere as well as private life. These include “moments of missionary contact” that respect the freedom of people who seem neither to regret the loss of religion nor to be searching for meaning; new forms of church life such as the “open churches” of some large urban areas that try to transcend the polarity between the traditional congregation and specialized ministries; and the engagement in diaconic work and solidarity with the growing number of poor and excluded.

The challenge of a renewed public ecumenical witness includes particularly the test case represented by immigrant or diaspora churches, primarily charismatic and from sub-Saharan Africa, that are rapidly changing the face of European Christianity, especially in the large cities and often without the “host” churches noticing.

These new churches raise a wide range of questions ultimately related to the way Reformed European churches, which often mirror a monocultural situation that no longer exists, will shape their witness to the gospel in response to challenges such as the worldwide economic injustice that leads to waves of migration, the racism that is endemic in European societies and the violence it inspires, the widespread fear of cultural and religious pluralism, the trend to exclude these exiles from welfare protection, the vitality of their spiritual life and their mission “from below”, and – last but not least – forms of Christian unity that go beyond traditional “white” ecumenism. What kind of fellowship are rich and white European congregations and churches seeking to establish with the poor African, Asian or Latino congregations and churches next door?

Latin America

Between systemic exclusion and Reformed identity

“Mutual learning for the renewal of mission” captures very well the spirit of the Latin American consultation on mission. Participants shared experiences, theological views and concerns about Christian mission at a time of systemic exclusion and the quest for spiritualities of survival. They reflected on the missiological implications of the central biblical notion of covenant. They heard stories of crises in Argentina, Colombia and Venezuela and learned about ways in which Reformed churches sought to respond to those crises.

If we analyse the responses by representatives of Aipral member churches to the questionnaire that was sent to them prior to the consultation, we can identify eight important concerns.⁷

Globalization and neoliberal power

Some churches point to the materialism that is leading to a new concept of relations between people and between nations, and the influence of the theology of prosperity in the churches. To be up-to-date today, it seems, means to develop this materialistic mentality. The theology of prosperity and neoliberal power are two sides of a coin, and this currency is polarizing church life.

The reality of poverty

Latin American churches are worried by the gulf dividing poor from rich, often reflected in deepening poverty in their own memberships. More and more they need to create projects to help poorer believers, but they also need to keep in

view the structural realities that generate poverty and to interchange their experiences on the ways in which churches with modest resources can confront the problem of poverty.

Presbyterian and Reformed identity

Almost all churches point to the need to redefine their traditional self-understanding in the face of new religiosities. Churches existing in history cannot treat so central an aspect of their life as worship as timeless and immutable. They cannot ignore the new liturgies or the renewal in Christian music and hymnody.⁸ Reformed identity can no longer be reduced to the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Heidelberg Catechism.

Church and society

This is a constant theme in contemporary church history – not surprisingly, since pastoral ministry in the Reformed family must integrate creatively the church's own concerns and “internal” life and the challenges posed by national sociopolitical life. It is especially pertinent whenever we face new spiritualities living in a world that is more metaphysical than historical.

Proliferation of sects and new religious movements

Churches ask for help in discriminating between the new forms of religion on offer and in understanding them ecumenically rather than confrontationally. In addition, some Protestant theologies copy the practices of “new age” groups: sermons in our own churches, for example, sometimes copy the intellectual “positivism” that these groups promote.

Church growth

This preoccupation is central in almost all AIPRAL churches. The church must seek to win over sectors of the population, without falling into neo-charismatic euphoria or doing violence to Christian ethics. The fever for growth in some groups is not helpful, since it runs the risk of cheapening Christian grace and reducing the gospel to a simplistic philosophy. This is a question that the churches want to confront with honesty.

Contextual theology

Churches also mention the need to earth the Reformed faith in their different Latin American settings. They want a theology that goes hand in hand with a sincere spirituality – that is not so much “in the head” that it extinguishes the yearnings of the heart. They are under great pressure to turn their back on the concrete social realities that affect their members and the churches themselves. Obviously, they must learn from the one-sided emphases of the past: what the parishes want first of all is pastoral care and attention, not macrostructural

analyses! But the Reformed tradition will make a distinctive contribution to Latin American church life when it takes economics and society seriously and integrates these realities successfully in its preaching and education.

Formation of leaders

In keeping with Reformed tradition, the churches stress the importance of an educational strategy to form a generation of men and women committed to communicating the gospel. Good Christian witness depends on the effective formation of lay and pastoral leaders.

Lively discussion was sparked in the consultation by a paper read by Prof Arturo Piedra, from San José, Costa Rica. Piedra, a professor of theology and church history, used some categories of contemporary mass culture – relativism, hedonism and individualism – to describe what he calls a neo-charismatic, neo-Pentecostal type of Protestantism, a “Protestantism of apostles and prophets”. What is at stake in the remarkable growth of this “postmodern face of Protestantism” in Latin America, he contended, is the way Reformed churches in Latin America relate to their “Protestant, Reformed and Presbyterian heritage”. Are they seeking to be reforming churches in Latin America today?

What will be the future of Reformed churches in a context in which the religious “market” is shaped, on the one hand, by an economic system that generates human exclusion and environmental degradation, and, on the other hand, by the competition between the major religious player, the Roman Catholic Church, and strong emerging players, namely big neo-Pentecostal churches and evangelical churches that appropriate classical and contemporary Pentecostal practices and strategies of growth?

Groups focused on issues of Reformed identity in Latin America. Participants criticized decontextualized, unemotional forms of worship and the marginalization of women in church life, and made proposals for worship renewal, greater inclusiveness in the churches, and social welfare. One group dealt with conflicts inherited from the missionary age, changes in the theological profile of partner churches and the need for Aipral to pursue these discussions. The consultation asked Aipral to include the renewal of mission in its future programmatic work.

Middle East

“It seems that mission is we are sitting in a boat and there are a lot of fish in the sea and we fish them and put them in the boat. But that is not how some of us understand mission.”

“Mission is someone who comes from outside, from somewhere else.”⁹

Mission among Middle Eastern Evangelicals¹⁰ is a controversial word, marked by its history. The western missionaries who brought Protestant Christianity to the region in the 19th and 20th centuries came from outside, both geographically and culturally. They engaged in educational and medical work that endures to this day, but they also made converts, often among the “nominal” adherents of the various brands of Orthodox Christianity. “Mission is always linked in our mind with proselytism, taking people from other churches and bringing them to our churches,” said one participant in the Middle East mission consultation.¹¹ Proselytism by Evangelical Christians is resented by both the Orthodox and the Muslims; in some countries, proselytism of Muslims is against the law and carries legal penalties; in others, it is not illegal but can have serious practical consequences for the proselytized or the proselytizer or both.

Many churches prefer to speak of ministry or service or outreach rather than mission. In the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), general secretary Riad Jarjour replaced the negative word “evangelism” by “the church as a proclaiming entity”.¹²

There are differences in understanding what is meant by mission. At the beginning of the 20th century the Near East School of Theology played an important role in refocusing the understanding of mission among the established Protestant groups. There was a shift from evangelism to witness. At the same time, new Baptist or Pentecostal missionaries who still understood mission in the traditional way began to plant churches. To this day there is a tension between these more “evangelical” churches and many of the churches in the Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches.

There are also differences in emphasis. The churches headquartered in Lebanon speak of witness and testimony: “I am less worried about recruiting people into the church than about whether the church is an effective witness in society.” The Evangelical Church of Iran says, “People need to know Christ personally and start a relationship with him... We know that we should preach the gospel to them, we should have progress if we are to remain an active living church.” Making disciples is the priority and the first step.

In Morocco proselytism of Muslims is forbidden, but the Evangelical Church in Morocco says that “we should not conclude too quickly that ‘evangelization’ is impossible”. It is important that the church should be present as a witness to Christ – by existing and maintaining its worship, through dialogue, and by making use of all possible openings.

This difference in emphasis does not create hard and fast lines. The Iranian church recognizes that “we are also called to be instruments of God’s peace and justice and... the channels of God’s love for all people around us”. The churches that stress witness wonder whether witness is enough.

Mission and dialogue

Middle East Evangelicals are not ashamed of their history: “It was a wonderful thing: people needed to be liberated from their spiritual bankruptcy, and Protestantism did that.” But many recognize that success came with a price: cultural estrangement.¹³ “We are proud that we have been able to reshape society, but we did not allow society to reshape us... [Our] spirituality and liturgy is completely western.”

Hence the role of the Evangelical churches in ecumenism and dialogue.

Dialogue can be mere talk that changes nothing. But it can be more. It can be cross-fertilizing, when we really encounter the others, learn from them and allow their witness to challenge our living at its very roots. And it can perhaps be what one participant called “incarnational dialogue” – when we *become the others*. “The more I reflect on my discipleship, the more I believe I have to become an Orthodox, a Muslim. And this is the mission.”

It is an identity question. How are Alliance churches in the Middle East to be Protestant without being western? How are they to be at home in their own cultures, alongside Orthodox, Catholic and Muslim neighbours, without losing their distinctive contribution to church and society in the Middle East?

Mission and justice

Lebanon suffers from a wave of corruption, accentuating inequality of wealth and work, and from environmental irresponsibility, reflected in air and noise pollution, careless water management, poor town planning, and litter in the countryside. Looking at economic and environmental questions globally, within the framework of covenanting for justice, might help the churches to look at them locally.

The National Evangelical Union of Lebanon works with the new Lebanese underclass: migrant workers. In many houses, maids from Ethiopia, Madagascar or Sri Lanka work for a pittance and are treated like dirt. “It’s a form of racism and a form of slavery... Having a maid is like having a refrigerator.”

Armenian Evangelicals are alive to social and political injustice, but have not focused on economic or environmental issues. Every year on April 24, they remember the Armenian genocide and in that context recall what is done today to the Palestinians and others.

In Iran, as in some other Muslim societies, discrimination against Christians under Sharia law is a pressing issue for the churches.

Mission challenges

The biggest challenge identified by the consultation is survival. Christians in many Middle Eastern countries are tempted to emigrate: political restrictions and socioeconomic realities do not encourage them to stay. Theory and practice are fragmented: there are disconnections between theological education and the work of the pastors, between the theology of the pastors and attitudes in the congregations. The churches need a Protestant vision for the Middle East in the 21st century and they need spiritual revival.

Women in mission

In 1875, when the World Presbyterian Alliance was established, there were already several women's mission societies and boards. Women's work in "foreign and home missions" was largely unrecognized and is poorly documented. As well as sending missionaries, women's societies raised funds for mission work through "cent and mite" societies. The first gathering of women in the Alliance took place at the fourth general council (London 1888), where women met to share their experiences, especially in mission work, through women's mission societies and boards. The fifth general council (Toronto 1892) established an international union for women's foreign missionary societies connected with the Alliance. Thus began a global network that was referred to as "the little sister of the Presbyterian Alliance", with the motto "A Girdle round the Earth". Another half-century was required before the "little sister" was allowed to grow up, and women took their rightful place alongside men in the councils of the Alliance.

Women understand mission as a call to proclaim in word and deed the good news that God cares about the broken and marginalized and to serve those in need. They are involved in many mission projects to alleviate poverty, violence and lack of access to health and education. Their ways of doing mission are informed by the specificity of contexts and cultures and value the interplay between practical work and theoretical discussion. Women understand the importance in seeing themselves through the eyes of others and are able to look beyond the boundaries of religious difference in a common quest for justice and human rights.

God's hospitality is like offering a calabash or glass of cool water on a hot steaming day, or washing the feet of a tired traveller you invite into your home. It brings comfort, warmth, safety, security and shelter. It gives food to the hungry, love to the lonely and broken-hearted, hope to those in despair, and peace to those who live amidst violence. Too often the rich look at the poor on the streets through dark sunglasses or tinted windscreens as they drive uncaringly by. God's hospitality must be reflected in mission: it requires that the churches go to the streets and invite the homeless in. The churches must listen to, learn from and stand in solidarity with the poor and marginalized.

Women challenge patriarchal patterns of domination and subjugation in churches, cultures and societies. Leadership that uses power over rather than power with people obstructs an agenda for transformation in which women and men can build partnerships of equality. God's mission shows no partiality and does not use domination to rule over others (Gen 11.1-9; Acts 10.34). Women question male images of God as "plantation massa [master]", as a father (who often is never around or when he is home is drunk and abusive), as a violent warrior, and as the one who is powerful and controlling and to be feared. History has shown us how destructive these images can be and how they were used by colonizers, including missionaries, to enslave people. Churches need to include women's perspectives and visions in creating new paradigms of mission as a gateway to empowerment and reciprocity. They need to look for what is liberating and brings wholeness, affirming diverse cultures and building a culture of respect. Gender injustices must be addressed and barriers broken that prevent women from participating fully in the life of the church.

Women's stories of mission describe partnership and solidarity as essential elements in working in the midst of brokenness and pain for justice, healing, and renewal. Mission is seen as spiritual parenthood: "My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you" (Gal 4.19). Mission is seen as "midwifery", describing the ways in which women enable communities of people to bring forth new life.

Mission in unity

"As we met, we realized how close we are in our teaching, in our understanding of the life and mission of the church and in the forms of church government. Though we may differ in certain perspectives, we are one in confessing Jesus Christ as God and Saviour."

This statement in 2001 from seven small Reformed churches in Uganda is echoed in other mission in unity encounters. Division within the Reformed family is often taken for granted. Not until churches come together do they realize how much they have in common and how failure to express these commonalities in visible community makes their witness less credible and effective. This is why the mission in unity project was set up in 1999: to be a catalyst and a helping hand as Reformed churches, colleges and communities search for new expressions of mission in unity.

Mission in unity is more than mere collaboration

Churches everywhere agree that, theologically speaking, mission and unity are two sides of one coin – two aspects of being the one body of Christ. But what does this vision of the church imply for the churches as social realities, each with its own history and context?

That disunity and infighting do not enhance credible witness is obvious. There is truth also in the old adage “doctrine divides, mission unites”. In the 19th century, it was unity for the sake of mission that brought Reformed church leaders together for the first general council of the World Presbyterian Alliance (Edinburgh 1877) and the first International Congregational Council (London 1891). In our own time it is, for example, the experience of joint mission ventures that now leads the three Alliance churches in Guyana to consider forms of church unity.

On the other hand, mission *praxis* can also divide, when there are different perspectives on what God calls the church here and now to be and do, and one group believes that separation is the only course open if one wants to remain faithful to the gospel.

This suggests that each situation of disunity needs to be understood on its own terms, for there are no univocal answers or universal solutions. At the same time, mission in unity studies show, and Reformed churches increasingly acknowledge, that our churches tend too easily to split.

In 2000, the mission in unity consultation organized by the Southern Africa Alliance of Reformed Churches said: “We confess... that we are guilty of the sins of disunity and have failed to overcome the status quo of Reformed divisions. We affirm... that Christ calls us to be one in his name and to form one confessing and witnessing communion. We commit ourselves... to give fuller expression to the oneness given in Christ as – locally, nationally and as the Southern Africa region of the Reformed family of churches – we urgently seek to heal our divisions.”

This means more than churches now doing together what they used to do separately. Mere collaboration leaves our identity untouched. The challenge is to rethink the calling of the church and the churches, recognize unity as God’s gift, search for ways to give this visible expression, and be changed in interaction with the others.

There are boundaries to cross but also boundaries to respect

How far do we need to change in interaction with others? What of our identity do we need to retain and what to let go? Which boundaries need crossing and which respecting?

These questions come up in all mission in unity encounters but especially in discussions between mainline and immigrant churches in the north. Immigrants, frightened of losing themselves in a strange and often hostile culture, retreat into the familiarity and support of their ethnic group. Mainline churches often overlook the immigrants in their midst or fail to open their doors to them or welcome them only conditionally (you have to become like us). Or they see immigrants only as objects of mission (we’ll help you) and not as partners in mission (come, and let us complement each other).

The pluralism and diversity of our globalized world often frightens churches, both mainline and immigrant, pushing them into closed identities. But it is in fact a *kairos*, an opportunity to learn unity in diversity by practising it, as several congregations of the United Protestant Church of Belgium are discovering. “It hasn’t been easy or painless – more like an ‘unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies’ experience,” the church reports. “But, like the grain, our church life is being renewed, we are rethinking our mission, and we are attracting new members, including Belgians who haven’t been to church for years.”

The key question is not whether immigrants join existing churches or form their own minority churches, but how both groups learn to respect the other and to relate to each other in ways that affirm the unity of the one church, so that their own identity is no longer a flight behind protective barriers but a starting point for crossing boundaries that exclude.

Mission in context

How we understand mission has everything to do with how we understand God and ourselves, which in turn has everything to do with our circumstances.

It is often the apocalyptic visions of Daniel and Revelation that sustain Christians in war-torn Angola. A pastor writes: “When the women come to Bible study, it is also and perhaps primarily to meet up with one another, to tell each other who has died and who is ill and needs a visit, and to look into each other’s eyes and be assured that they’ve made it into another day. They may not use the word ‘mission’ very much, but they help each other and people in the community to survive, and it is from each other and from the word of God that they get the strength to keep going, to ‘endure to the end and be saved’ (Mt 24.4-13).”

A European student, 8,000 kilometres to the north, says that “for me mission makes sense because I believe that the world can change, that each of us is called to be Christ’s eyes, hands and feet on the way to the beckoning future already inaugurated in Jesus”.

Do we live with an apocalyptic or an eschatological hope? These examples illustrate how our understanding of mission is always contextual, not just because mission challenges vary in different times and places, but also because mission agents have different beliefs about what they can achieve as God’s partners and how God’s new heaven and earth will come about. Mission in unity programmes seek to take seriously the contextuality of mission, without assuming *a priori* that there are indeed areas of mission where different actors can work together in unity.

Notes

1. The consultation, which was held in Yaoundé, Cameroon from November 16 to 21 2003, was attended by over fifty church leaders, women leaders and youth leaders from Alliance churches in Africa. It was at this consultation that the Alliance of Reformed Churches in Africa (ARCA) was launched.
2. These quotations are from the mission round table that took place from November 25 to 28 2003 in Bali, Indonesia. Asian Christians together with friends from Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu communities wrestled with what Christian mission means in Asia today. This open discussion with participants from other faith communities advanced the ecumenical debate on Christian missiology, which has usually been confined within the Christian circle.
3. Since 1999, Christians and Muslims in Indonesia have struggled with communal conflicts that have claimed tens of thousands of innocent lives.
4. The Caribbean and North American mission consultation took place in Georgetown, Guyana from December 1 to 6 2003 and was preceded by a Caribbean women's mission consultation. The World Alliance is grateful to the Guyana Presbyterian Church, Presbytery of Guyana and Guyana Congregational Union which hosted the meeting and assisted with local arrangements. The Alliance appreciates its collaboration with the Caribbean and North America council for mission (CANACOM) in planning the meeting, contributing valuable insights and sharing financial support. WARC member churches from the Caribbean and North America were invited to send two representatives each to the consultation. The Protestant Church in Curaçao and the Church of Scotland in the Bahamas also joined the consultation. Other participants included representatives of the Caribbean and North American area council of the World Alliance (CANAAC) and the Council for World Mission (CWM).
5. In the absence of a European regional consultation on mission, we have based these notes on Christine Lieneman-Perrin, Hendrik M Vroom and Michael Weinrich, eds, *Contextuality in Reformed Europe: The mission of the church in the transformation of European culture* (Amsterdam/New York : Rodopi, 2004), which includes a section on "Mission, Secularisation, and Proselytism"; *Jesus Christ Heals and Reconciles: Our witness in Europe*, the theme paper of the 12th assembly of the Conference of European Churches (Trondheim 2003); and "Open space: The African Christian diaspora in Europe and the quest for human community", *International Review of Mission* 89/354 (July 2000).
6. After the second world war, western European societies espoused the model of a social market economy. Thanks to neoliberalism, the welfare provisions of this model have come under increasing pressure. In central and eastern Europe, the command economies of the communist period had already moved a long way towards market socialism before being subjected to free-market "shock therapy" after *die Wende*.
7. Aipral, the Alliance of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches in Latin America, was originally founded as an independent association. At the 23rd general council (Debrecen 1997), it became the Latin American area of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. The consultation on mission, which took place in São Paulo, Brazil, from June 23 to 26 2002, was held in conjunction with Aipral's 10th assembly.

This meant that the participants were mainly pastors, elders and church officers, rather than mission officers, missionaries or missiologists.

8. As it unfolded, the Aipral assembly constantly signalled this as one of the important challenges facing the Reformed family.
9. Quotations are from questionnaire responses by churches in the Middle East and North Africa or from discussion in the Middle East mission consultation.
10. The preferred term for Protestant Christians in the Middle East. It doesn't mean "evangelical" in the western sense. The Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches (FMEEC) links mainline Anglican, Lutheran and Reformed churches in the region. Alliance churches in the Middle East and North Africa fall into three groups: small foreign or expatriate churches in Algeria and Morocco, a large Coptic church in Egypt (the Synod of the Nile, roughly 300,000 members), and smaller churches based in Lebanon or Iran (the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, the National Evangelical Union of Lebanon, the Evangelical Church of Iran, the Union of the Armenian Evangelical Churches in the Near East).
11. This small consultation was held in the Near East School of Theology, Beirut, in October 2003. It brought together representatives from the Evangelical Church of Iran, the National Evangelical Union of Lebanon, the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, and the Union of Armenian Evangelical Churches in the Near East. Unfortunately, because of visa difficulties, the Synod of the Nile was unable to send a representative.
12. Riad Jarjour, a minister of the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, served as MECC general secretary from 1994 to 2003.
13. The chapter on Protestants in Antonie Wessels, *Arab and Christian? Christians in the Middle East* (Kampen: Pharos, 1995) is tellingly entitled "Aliens at home".