

Working together in mission

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Accra invites the churches of the Alliance family to play their part in God's mission: to reflect on and respond to the challenges of the world that are, in fact, their own challenges, and to share in humanity's struggle for life in fullness. A Christian community that wants to test the authenticity of its witness is constantly called to reconsider its beliefs and its structures, to open itself through dialogue with others, to commit itself to concrete actions in the changing contexts in which it lives. In this way we remind ourselves of our "historic faith", a heritage that confronts us with the responsibility for transformation in every domain of life.

How can the Alliance churches respond to this divine calling, free from the triumphalist attitudes that disfigured mission in the past? How can we, without betraying our duty to witness, be God's effective instrument in a pluralistic world? And how can we work together in mission, thus deepening our own unity?

God's mission does not confine itself to the church

Today the Christian community, believing in a creator God who works through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, is obliged in all modesty to work for the liberation of humanity and the restoration of the whole creation alongside the "others" whom God uses for the same purpose.

We stand as churches within the divine mission (*missio dei*). God calls us to share in the divine work of transformation. God's mission does not confine itself to the church. God's spirit is as unpredictable as the wind, blowing wherever it chooses (Jn 3.8). Recognizing this will make it possible to avoid the criticisms of Christian mission that were made in the past. There was a contradiction between self-image and reality: churches saw themselves as the servants of those to whom they missioned, while in practice they dictated to them and exercised power over them. Our churches, whilst constantly guided by the gospel, must maintain a dialogue of heart and head and hands with those beyond their walls.

God's action in the life of Jesus Christ is the paradigm of an inclusive mission, animated by the vision of fullness of life. Through the way he takes, through his circular itinerary of leaving and returning, setting out and going home, Jesus Christ opens up a path for us. He invites our churches to participate in God's mission of salvation for all.¹

Concretely, the example of Jesus challenges us to become part of God's mission to liberate downtrodden peoples. The life of Jesus was filled with

compassion for those among whom he lived. He denounced evil uncompromisingly. We follow his example through acts of justice and peace. Our churches do not have a free choice between witnessing and abstaining from witness, committing themselves and refusing commitment, acting and declining to act in the face of those who are crushed, marginalized or oppressed. Our faith in God and the Messiah defines us as communities of humanizing transformation.

Humanity within and without our churches is in distress, and the whole creation groans like a woman in childbirth (Rom 8.22). God in Jesus Christ is a God that loves, welcomes, receives and saves the whole of humanity, not the church alone. God is the first to love and to accept humanity (1 Jn 4.10). The church as a whole and Alliance churches in particular can only act accordingly by accepting the others.

God's mission goes beyond church frontiers, and call us to work together with these others in promoting life in fullness. Openness to others implies hospitality. Dialogue and solidarity with those who share our hope for the fullness of life is part of our witness. Thus, our churches and communities share the love of God for the world; and his covenant command to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with Him (Micah 6.8) becomes our way of life.

Christian mission overcomes our own divisions

Christ is acknowledged by all Alliance churches as their head. Christ must become the one that reconciles and unites them all within their own fellowship. We need constantly to remind ourselves of the *semper reformanda* of our historical inheritance, and to recognize our constant need for reform. Regrettably, tradition often becomes an ideology that privileges some and permits them to exert power over others, underwriting a spirit of domination and exclusion that contradicts the gospel. Alliance churches that live in the same country or region must strive to overcome their divisions and break down barriers for the sake of unity. "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor 12.7). They must join together in the concrete practice of love, thus helping to build up a church and a world where fullness of life is promoted.

Fullness of life is not an abstraction. It is a *reality* promised to the whole church, the whole of humanity and the whole creation: God in his mercy wants to transform the whole world. It is a *reality in the process of realization* through concrete struggle, sometimes very difficult and full of suffering. "As the church now understands it, with Jesus' resurrection from the dead the power of death and all the domination built up on the threat of death have already been overthrown and their end is already in sight."² The perspective of restoring life calls us to end the contradictions in our church life that hinder the divine project. The tensions between sacred and secular, interiority and exteriority,

the abstract commitments of our solemn assemblies and the failure to realize these commitments concretely are resolved in unity. Our spirituality and our commitments are visibly embodied in visible structures and put into practice on the ground. Being and doing are no longer separated.³

Ethical implications of hope

Church action is rooted in Easter hope which drives it to build a world according to God's plan. This hope encompasses all aspects of life. Its demands are an ethical norm for all churches and all believers. They challenge us constantly to reconsider the needs of our communities and societies. God's mission embraces these needs while transcending them.

Poverty, exclusion and the destruction of the environment are consequences of a way of life that disdains God's love for his creation. The frantic desire to have more leads to a contempt for others. The will to power becomes a license to kill, destroying our neighbours and our shared environment. Faced with this threat, we cannot take refuge in the sentimental spirituality exemplified by some revivalist groups both outside and inside our churches or confine our understanding of mission to lobbying.⁴ Mission is concerned with the whole of life and demands a comprehensive ethic, the "ethic of the totality of existence" of which Calvin speaks.⁵

Zacchaeus is not condemned for his riches (Lk 19.1-10). He is affirmed as also a "son of Abraham". But dependency on wealth can blind us when seeking to accomplish God's project. For Zacchaeus his fellowmen were a source of income and were easily fooled. The Lord's love for him breaks the chains of exploitation that held him captive and, in so doing, breaks the chains that held the poor he exploited captive. He then is able to right the wrongs he has done. Zacchaeus, filled with God's peace, the *shalom* which disturbs the established order, is freed by regaining his humanity. Jesus, filled with his mission and knowing that he is the very source of mission, rehabilitates Zacchaeus and gives him a new life.

The game of horror that is played in the world defies our hope for life in fullness. But Christian hope says no to fatalism. Reinterpreting our faith from the standpoint of the future will demand the transformation of the present through a consistent practice and a spirituality of resistance. God's fundamental initiative in Jesus Christ communicates the life and the capacity to create the new order. For freedom Christ has set us free (Gal 5.1): only this free being can become creative

This is also true for our churches. The hope of the family gathered together within the Alliance must give rise to "innovative power, which opens up new horizons, new possibilities... for creation".⁶ Christian hope gives us the "courage to be" (Paul Tillich), to be self-critical, and to work for "the civilization of collective political responsibility".⁷

Let us not be like those politicians who “only learn about extreme poverty from reading statistics”.⁸ No one cries over numbers. The men, women and children who will die of Aids in Africa and elsewhere, the victims of the next ethnic conflict or civil war, the next wave of refugees, economic migrants or internally displaced people: these are flesh of our flesh and bone of our bones (Gen 2.23) and, like us, they are those for whom Christ died. Churches that confess a Lord who overcomes death by the cross must confirm that confession in action. And this is our mission.

Questions

1. Determine some of the elements which meet the needs and express the contextualization of the “fullness of life” in your community. If these elements are absent and as the call to mission is permanent, what concrete actions can your church envisage? So that this promise can be linked to the life experience of the members of the community and so that they can feel they are part of God’s family; God who calls them without any discrimination that is linked to gender, age, ethnic group or race...
2. In a context torn apart by wars, Aids pandemic, religious conflicts... the church is called to strive for change through reconciliation and compassion. Can your church determine more specifically how the message of the “fullness of life” can be proclaimed to those in power in your country? How can the church take a stand when facing those in power in our midst in the struggle against all kinds of violence?
3. What does the following Bible passage mean for our various Reformed churches: “... so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one...” (Jn 17.22-23)? Which are the factors that do not allow these churches to be united in the same country, for example? Has your church, as a member-church, already envisaged to develop a Reformed community with others which would work more efficiently in your context? Which steps have been undertaken? Which have been the difficulties? What are you going to do so that your church will commit itself to fulfill this prayer of our Lord which expresses one of the aspects of God’s mission for the “fullness of life”?
4. Following on the previous question we can say that “to witness is an intrinsic part of the life of Christ’s disciples”. As a member of the Reformed family have you already thought of working in your region in solidarity with the others concerning the common challenges facing your community? What are the two or three challenges which you are going to raise and on which you are going to work for the preparation of our 24th Accra general council?

Notes

1. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *La Théologique III: L'Esprit de vérité* (Bruxelles: Cultures et Vérité, 1996), pp.426-427.
2. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (London: SCM Press, 1977), p.99.
3. "Like God himself, [this redeeming and renewing kingdom of God] is universal and without limitation... The eschatological reign of God, whom Jesus as *Kyrios* [Lord] represents and whose power he exercises... bursts the bonds of a divided world. It embraces the religious life as well as the political one, the private as well as the social, the living as well as the dead." Moltmann, *ibid.*, p.100.
4. Cf. W Steen, "Lobbyisten für die Rettung der Welt", in *Der Überblick* 3, 2002.
5. André Biéler, *La pensée économique et sociale de Calvin* (Geneva: Librairie de l'Université, Editions Georg, 1961), p.518. Biéler rightly asks, what age needs such an ethic more than our own?
6. Kä Mana, *La nouvelle évangélisation en Afrique* (Paris/Yaoundé: Cerf/Clé, 2000), pp. 182, 186.
7. Kä Mana, *op. cit.*, p.200.
8. International Federation for Electoral Systems, dispatch, November 22 2002, p.17.