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Pilgrimage Towards Life
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Pilgrimage Towards Life: How the Ecumenical Movement and Change of Mission
Bring Us Forward in the 21st Century

The ecumenical movement in the 21st century is a movement of change—a change of hope where the roots of advocacy and solidarity are spread, and the voices from those long silenced will be heard. The ecumenical movement is a space where witness to what needs to be changed, discussions of how to change it, where to start and where to go, are all important. Dialogue becomes important when participants are invited to the table for conversation. The ecumenical movement in the 21st Century brings these parties to the table—where voices can be heard.

The ecumenical movement has been referred to as a pilgrimage, in that those involved in the movement do not remain stagnant, or think the work is over. This is why I prefer ecumenical movement to ecumenism, because it isn't something that is just studied, it is something that has to be "doing"—action. It is with these roots in the ecumenical movement that the changing face of mission has occurred.

The World Council of Churches drafted a document called "Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes" that went before the Central Committee in 2012 on the island of Crete, Greece. The document passed, and while it will be drafted again, important issues were raised in the ecumenical vision of mission and evangelism. The document, Together Towards Life (TTL) starts with the affirmation, "We believe in the Triune God who is the creator,

redeemer, and sustainer of all life.”¹ It is through the Trinity that mission begins. The Trinity binds together humanity and creation. This means that we care both for humanity and for the world entrusted in our care. TTL is very helpful in learning how all of this is possible through the love of Jesus Christ and through the acts of the Holy Spirit. “We are commissioned to continue seeking God’s justice through a liberating and healing ministry,”² and because of this, we have to be bold and take a stance. We cannot sit idly by. My question though is still the same, how? Yes, Jesus empowers us through the Holy Spirit, and when we read the Bible we see how we are called, but how do we act? How do we go and help our brothers and sisters around the world? I also believe this begins with dialogue, which is what the WCC works toward: “Mission spirituality is faith that God will transform the whole world through our participation in God’s life-giving mission.”³ Yes, we are motivated, but how does this become practical? One of my favorite statements in this article is: “The church is to be in the world but not of the world.”⁴ Because to be of the world is to accept the world’s values and standards; however, we are not called to that because people are being exploited and lives are diminished. There are oppressive structures and people left on the margins. We are called to be the agents of restitution, justice, and members of a reconciling body.

TTL is an important document for the Church to implement. As the ecumenical movement is a pilgrimage, mission is a pilgrimage as well. It is not

¹ Jooseop Keum, ed. *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*. (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches Publication, 2013), 4.

² *Ibid.*, 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

stagnant nor does it mean change does not occur. For both the ecumenical movement and mission are going towards something, and as the document in its title directly states—towards life – this is a life-affirming document. It is not perfect and will still have drafts later to come, but the importance of mission in the 21st century is addressed, for mission is not at the margins, but with the margins. The people who are at (or in) the margins have a voice that has been long silenced. We do not speak for the voiceless, because those who have been ignored have a voice; it is simply that we are not listening. According to Stephen Beavens, “Spirit is at work among all cultures. The Spirit is at work calling us to join in. Spirit is at work in the hearts of all women and men. It is Jesus who shows us the face of God and in the resurrection shows the Spirit to us.”⁵ We are called to work together for justice, recognizing people of all cultures, times and places. We are not to go somewhere and say we will do mission here! No, we are to find out where mission is happening and join in.

While this document has beautiful theology around the Trinity, and reason for implementation of this new idea of mission, it is important to think how different this truly is. Speaking from my context of the West, the United States has often been viewed (and rightly so) as the empire—the persons with power that are often domineering of others and *the* controlling power. Missions has often been seen as *at* or *to* the margins, and very rarely spoken of as *with* the people who live *in* the margins. If we are to take seriously what this document is calling us toward (life) it means our concept of who we are, and who we are to be, must change. When

⁵ Stephen Beavens. “The Spirit of Mission.” Mission Plenary. World Council of Churches 10th Assembly Busan, Korea. November 1, 2013.

thinking of the United States as a global power, we have to remember to take a step back, to not be the ones who continuously use our voices, but empower those who have been *forced* to silence and *overlooked* to use their voice. This mission policy is not only a policy of mission and evangelism, but a re-working of how we view the Other, and perhaps a policy that will one day get us to recognition of the true *oikoumene*, where all lives are valued.

Two-thirds of Christians live in the Global South. This means that the West, specifically the United States, while vastly wealthy, does not hold the majority. If the church is going to reach and serve the poor, the church must be poor. The Church needs to be poor and serve the God who came as poor so that the world could be fed. This is important for those of us in the West to hear. As the Church is in decline, and many churches are dying, what will provide the momentum to help us move forward? I am not saying to live into the utopia where money doesn't matter, or to the point where the church cannot pay its bills, I am saying we must be poor. Meaning, personal financial wealth is not of the utmost concern, but of the needs and wellbeing of all of humankind. Therefore, my status of worth is not my financial bracket, but of my concern of all of God's kin-dom. This means the church then, too, is poor. It means our security is not found in the four walls of a sanctuary, or the location in the most populace part of the country. In the West, we have become so focused on the building that we have forgotten that church can happen where two or three are gathered, wherever that is. The sacred is not the building; we are the sacred—where our feet touch is sacred, for we have gathered in God's name.

Reverend Cecilia Castillo Nanjan spoke of mission in Latin America to the Global Ecumenical Theological Institute students who gathered in Busan alongside the Assembly. She said that in Latin America, people talk of post-modernity, but has modernity even arrived? And if so, for who?⁶ This is an important question, for often when we hear of “America” most persons are speaking of the United States. We forget about our brothers and sisters in Central and South America. So, when we then talk about mission, we must remember that it is not a top-down approach. It is not the superhero swooping in to save the day. Paraphrasing Nancy Cardoso (from Portuguese), “Losing time, losing friends, losing one’s voice and memory we have already become close to losing that we forget about leaving, we simply survive.”⁷ Life is more than just surviving; it is a call to aid everyone to thrive. Mission has to also be about women raising their voices about the denial of gender justice and political freedom. For we are to denounce crimes against human rights, collecting the smallest coin from each coin, seeking to lead a good life. We are to value God’s reign and witness to the Holy Spirit’s work in our God-filled lives,. Our witness is more than a testimony for the goodness we have been given, but is lived out in community—supporting and lifting up one another.

It is in this call for mission in the 21st century that we must recognize that mission is about justice and peace, and essentially we are called to prayer. “The quest for justice and peace is central to the church’s mission; it is the call of Christ to the Church. In the quest for justice and peace we recognize the significance of all

⁶ Cecilia Castillo Nanjan. “Mission in Latin America.” Mission Plenary. World Council of Churches 10th Assembly Busan, Korea. November 1, 2013.

⁷ Nancy Cardoso. “Oikos Tree Movement.” Madang Workshop. World Council of Churches 10th Assembly. Busan, Korea. November 6, 2013.

creation and each human being in relationship to God and each other.”⁸ This is where the theme of both the Central Committee Meeting in Crete and the Assembly in Busan come in: “God of life, lead us to justice and peace.” This is the first time an Assembly theme has been a prayer. I believe this theme of the Assembly shows the changing face of the ecumenical movement in the 21st Century. Where we search for justice and peace in a world where God has given us all life. It is because God is the source of life that we can affirm that we are mutually accountable to one another. Our power is a shared power, not a hierarchical one. When we share power, we also share in our vulnerability. God became incarnate in Jesus Christ, who came into this world poor, and identified with the marginalized, the outcast, the broken. This is how we are called to be in the world. This is why the changing landscape of mission is so important to me. “In considering mission in the context of ecumenism in the 21st century, we reaffirmed that missionary activities and ecumenical dialogue require respectful relationships, accountability and trust.”⁹ We do not choose a top down approach, but a mutual affirmation of the gifts God has granted all of us.

Having first come across this document in Crete, Greece and then in Busan, South Korea provides contexts that I never thought I would come across. I grew up in rural North Carolina, and went to college in North Carolina. I moved to Louisville, Kentucky to gain a Masters of Divinity, and in my time here, I have traveled on two opportunities with the World Council of Churches. The ecumenical movement is now at the heart of my own being, and the new understanding of mission is just as

⁸ Melisande Lorke and Dietrich Werner. *Ecumenical Visions for the 21st Century: A Reader for Theological Education*. (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council Of Churches, 2013), 376.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 375.

much a part of that. I name both of these countries, not to brag, but to highlight that as a white woman of the United States, I was the other in both contexts. While I do not consider myself on the margins, not knowing much of the contexts I was in provided me new insights about mission. For when missionaries go into new places, it is not only important to know the context in to which they are going, but to be involved with as much of the culture as one can. Again, this means not a top-down approach, but a collaborative approach. One that seeks to name the hardships of everyday life—in their own language! Therefore, it is important that we learn as many languages as we can, and strive to continue learning the history of other countries, because while it may seem that it does not matter to people directly related or in your life, we are all connected in the Body of Christ, and this means we hold one another accountable.

When churches and other organizations such as non-profits get involved in mission and the ecumenical movement, especially in terms of initiatives for peace and non-violent reconciliation, then it gathers more of a broader perspective of persons to be involved. When we discuss the importance of human dignity, then no matter what religious affiliation people come from, the ecumenical movement can progress. TTL states that mission will no longer be *at* the margins, but *with* the marginalized. This is important, because the World Council of Churches sees the importance of all individuals having a voice. This is important because those involved in the Assembly can take this model back to their home churches. The Assembly's action items do not only affect those who are delegates, but the

universal Church. I think not only will this be beneficial to the areas the church will be going, but also for young people to see that all voices are to be heard.

Also important for the ecumenical movement and mission in the 21st Century is the change in globalization. Justice issues such as oppression, poverty, lack of land reform, unjust and imbalanced trade relationships, wars and conflicts, health concerns, financial crises, etc. are all tied in to the care for God's creation, both in terms of the human and natural world. I believe this is where the mission strategy is best applicable. For when we do things together, not as a power-force coming to change you, but in dialogue and conversation, then we can tackle the issues that plague our world. It is the concentration of power always held by the small minority that impedes the progress of justice and peace in our world. I believe that we need to look at reconciliation between our selves as human beings and reconciliation with the planet entrusted into our care. When we begin to dialogue and work together in partnerships, then we are best able to overcome issues of poverty, oppression, trade, war, and all the issues that lay in the hands of the powerful few. When we work together, then the few no longer have power, and the Church can become the aid we are called to be.

If we are to be in dialogue with one another, we have to hear everyone's voice. The new mission statement calls for all to be heard, and for all to serve. The privileged life (as we see it in the United States) is for a select few. We should and must share in the fullness of life of everyone (including creation), and in order for that to occur we have to challenge the conventional methods. TTL teaches us that we are to transform power into a shared power, and that this is done by giving the

power to the poor, moving the privileged few to the margins and the Global North to the Global South trading places. It is not that we people of the United States take a sideline approach, but we should step back, and allow all persons who have been silenced to raise their voice—to share in mission that we do not know it all, and that the heartbeat of our world is not the economy but the one who lived in and among the world calling us to do justice. The one who came to live in the world lived a poor life, stood up against those in power, condemned the economic injustices, and called us to do the same. Matthew 28 is not just a phrase to skip over, for we are called to teach, to serve, and be served.

All Christians and all churches are called to be messengers of hope in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and this is not a pompous and arrogant act. It is a humbling of ourselves, sharing our faith and convictions with others. This is not an arrogant task, but a gift for us to receive and give. This gift calls us to embark on a new mission, where greed does not rule our lives, and the economy of materialism changes to the economy of life. May we not only *try* to live into this hope, or read these words, but to live an active life challenging oppressive forces so that all persons can experience the richness of the economy of life. May we feed and be fed by word and deed—may we break and share bread together as One in the Body of Christ. As Nancy Cardoso said, “Hope, sharing bread, but we need to deal with the courage of breaking the capitalist empire.”¹⁰ May our Eucharistic feast not be one of exclusivism, but one open for all. And may we share this Feast not with the privileged few, but on the margins, together as One. May the Spirit of mission – the breath of life – breathe into

¹⁰ Nancy Cardoso. “Oikos Tree Movement.” Madang Workshop. World Council of Churches 10th Assembly. Busan, Korea. November 6, 2013

us all new ways for mission, new ways for viewing the world, and new ways of viewing one another as *imago dei*.

Missio Dei, God's mission, is not a solo act done by God, but a call to us as well. God is One who acts in history and in creation, and works to provide the fullness of life to all through peace and reconciliation. This is not a metaphorical act, or a prayer we pray on Sunday morning. It is something we live into with our whole bodies, fighting for the rights of the bodies of others. For when we do mission, when we are called to help others, and when we give those on the margins the place to speak, the place to teach us, then they are no longer dehumanized. Jesus came in a human body. Jesus died in the flesh. Our Christian life is not just a spiritual one, but a bodily one. For those who have been oppressed have disconnected themselves from their own bodies due to the horrific evils of our world. Mission has to be bodily, an affirmation of our whole selves, and a mission to be present *with* the margins, not only in prayer, but in action. Mission is not a solitary activity, it is not an activity of the Global North, nor is it an activity of the privileged few—but one that calls us together through all of life.

In order for mission to be effective we have to change the current perspective, just as we have to change many things in our lives in the 21st Century. We are called not to raise up the God of the free-market economy, but the God of all life, so that all may prosper. My prayer is that no one acts like a superhero swooping in to save others, for we already have a Savior. But we all have the power to change the conditions we are in, maybe not individually, but collectively. As One, we can.

This prayer is more than a prayer, but a call to action. It is a hope that we can act together, gathering all together to value one another and provide human dignity to those who have lost their own sense of worth.