



Interfaith Relations and the Church

THE MISSIONAL CHALLENGE

National Council of Churches U.S.A.

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collaboration, and proclamation?

8. How has this discussion of the missional challenge of interfaith relations informed or enlarged your understanding of Christ's "Great Commission" to the Church in Matthew 28:18-20?

facets of that mission. Show us the breadth and depth of your grace. Fill us with the spirit of dialogue, collaboration, and proclamation. Help us to proclaim your good news through the words we speak and most especially through the actions we take. Guide our hearts and minds and hands, so that we may be active participants in manifesting your reign of peace, justice, and wholeness in this time and place. We pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom you are reconciling the world to yourself. Amen.

Questions:

1. What is *missio Dei* and how is it related to the mission of the Church?
2. Do you think that Jesus was a missionary? Why or why not?
3. What are some of the ways in which Christians think of mission? How do you think of it?
4. How do you understand mission in light of the presence and claims of people of other faiths? Can mission be done collaboratively with them? Or is Christian mission to be directed to them? How is mission done constructively in the midst of them?
5. What kinds of mission, if any, do you think could be done with people of other faiths in a spirit of dialogue, or an encounter of commitments?
6. In your opinion, what is the relationship between the kingdom or reign of God and the mission of the church?
7. What do you think is the relationship between dialogue,

Interfaith Relations and the Church: The Missional Challenge

In a world often characterized by spiritual apathy or unbelief and with increasing poverty, hunger, illiteracy, deteriorating health and education infrastructures, and increasing levels of violence all around us—what is the mission of the Church? As Christians and as the Church scattered, we embrace the opportunity we have to participate in the *missio Dei*, the mission of God. The *missio Dei* is the source and wellspring of the mission of the Church.

Seen through the Christian lens, the mission of God is what God does in saving, reconciling, and liberating the world through Jesus the Christ. Even when Christians vary in our interpretations of mission, we all begin our interpreting from God's reconciling act in Jesus. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians, "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us" (5:19). Jesus the Christ points to this reconciling act of God, a God who was and is on a mission of making the kingdom of God a reality. It is this mission of bringing forth the kingdom of God that Christians have been invited to share. In a world of many faiths, what might our participation in God's mission look like, and how can we faithfully pursue it?

The Reign of God: Many Facets of Mission

God's mission is holistic. It encompasses the whole of life and, therefore, assumes various shapes and approaches. God's mission is greater than any one expression or one facet of the

church's mission. Mission cannot be reduced to giving food to the hungry. It is not confined to dialogue or to social cooperation. It cannot be limited to evangelism through verbal proclamation. God's mission is holistic and encompasses the whole world and the various facets of it. God's creative, nurturing, and saving act in all of creation is an embodiment of God's mission. God's revelation in nature and history is an expression of God's mission. Mission is what God does; we, on the other hand, are called to participate in it.

Although one facet of mission is not the totality of mission, a facet is no less real or authentic. Helping the needy is an expression of one's faith and an expression of mission, even as it is not the totality of God's mission. Speaking truth to power and working for social transformation are authentic expressions of the mission of God and, therefore, part of the mission of the church. The church is an "ambassador for Christ" entrusted with the mission of witnessing and spreading the message of reconciliation to all people around the world (2 Cor 5:17-20).

The Bible offers a myriad of images for what constitutes authentic mission. Here are a few: Mission involves living like salt and light in the world (Mt 5:13-16). It means proclaiming the good news that the kingdom of God has come near (Mt 10:7). It requires sowing the seed indiscriminately (Mt 13:3-9). It entails losing our life for Christ's sake (Mt 16:25). It calls us to search for the one sheep that went astray (Mt 18:12). It necessitates our going out into the main streets and inviting everyone we can find into the egalitarian banquet of God (Mt 22:9). It demands that we observe the Second Great Commandment by loving our neighbors as we love ourselves (Mt 22:39). Mission calls us to make people into disciples of Christ and teach them to obey God's will (Mt 28:19-20).

The Book of Acts portrays a church actively and energetically

openness. As Christians we can feel free and encouraged to share our story of what Christ has done for us. Such proclamation may well lead to mutual transformation as we share with one another how we have experienced God's Spirit and grace. Furthermore, such an encounter of commitments allows for true collaboration in confronting the issues that threaten the safety and well-being of our world. This kind of authentic interaction builds trust as it strives to follow the model and the style of mission and ministry that Jesus taught.

The Bible says that we Christians love because God first loved us. Similarly, we can say that the Church participates in the *missio Dei* because we have received the benefits of God's mission of creating, nurturing, and saving the world. Jesus has told us that the kingdom of God is among us. As followers of Christ we are called to participate in manifesting that reign of God more fully, making it our mission as it is God's mission. We can celebrate this mission and be grateful for the privilege of being invited to participate in the *missio Dei*. God delights in the participation of communities of faith in this mission of God. More than being grateful for this privilege, we also strive to be faithful to the fullness, the many facets, of God's mission, acting responsively to God's leading through Jesus Christ.

Thus, in a world frequently characterized by spiritual doubt and social disturbance, and in which many faiths seek peacefully and productively to co-exist as co-inhabitants of God's creation, the Church participates in God's mission by its words and deeds as faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

Prayer

God, we give you thanks for your work of creating, nurturing, and saving the world. Let our mission be your mission, the *missio Dei*, and help us to perceive and remember the many

with compassion. Of course, while Jesus had a passion for meeting his neighbors' very human needs, he had an equally strong conviction that people needed to acknowledge God's reign in the world (Mk 1:15). He addressed people's spiritual and physical condition. For Jesus, transforming the lives of individuals led him to address multiple aspects of their lives. He invited everyone to join him in the project of transforming the world into God's kingdom, and in transforming themselves as well.

There is a way of living in relationship with others that allows and supports us in the embodiment of the mission of God in a variety of its many facets. Dialogue, as a way of being, can characterize our mission—our way of sharing the good news. Dialogue can be our vehicle in witnessing and listening. Mission, carried out in dialogical spirit, does not sacrifice proclamation and the possibility of conversion and transformation, but leads to a style of proclamation grounded in mutual respect and active manifestation of God's love, healing, power, and compassion.

Dialogue is not simply an approach, a method, a tool, or a means to an end but a way of being, a way of living. It is an attitude of life and it manifests in modes of relating that are respectful, open, humble, and other-affirming—even while holding deep convictions. Dialogical engagement, as some have suggested, is not the simple recognition of the existence of religious diversity. Neither does it mean the mere toleration of that diversity. Rather, dialogue requires us to actively engage with those who are different from us, bringing our full selves and all our convictions to the exchange. In doing so, we may more clearly identify our differences as well as our common commitments and concerns. Such an encounter of commitments allows for a true sharing of one's deepest convictions.

Proclamation then remains grounded in a spirit of respect and

performing mission. There it becomes apparent that the Christ who calls us to be participants in God's missionary task also gives us the Pentecostal fullness of the Spirit so that the church may effectively proclaim and embody the good news of salvation (Acts 1:8; 2:33). Real mission asks us both to proclaim and to embody God's love for the least of humanity in tangible and effective ways. It is natural that many contemporary churches and Christians want to share their faith with others. What the ministry of Jesus reminds us is that communicating Good News requires our actions as well as our words, a teaching consistent with James 2:14-17: "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." We proclaim through what we do, not just through what we say. St. Francis of Assisi is known for having taught: "Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words."

Jesus Sets Our Missional Standard

Interpretations of mission are varied, and controversies abound. For instance, consider the story of Baptist church members who had just returned from doing medical and construction projects at a small Christian hospital in the mountains of Mexico. Their stories of building medicine cabinets and new relationships, repairing broken bodies and clinic doors, and salvaging discarded equipment and rejected persons touched many in the affluent congregation. Nevertheless, a few in the congregation wondered if all these "social projects" did not take the team away from doing real or authentic mission.

A second story comes from a congregation of the Mennonite Church, which is a member of the historic peace churches. The

congregation asked: "When will our denomination and its academic centers stop fussing so much about peace and justice issues and get on with the gospel?" If we put the question differently, then when will our churches stop fussing so much about caring for the sick or needy, and speaking for justice, in order to get on with their real mission?

Peace, justice, healing—how are these considered "mission"? Some among us might only consider evangelism, broadly defined, or more specifically verbal proclamation of the gospel, to be "real" mission. Asked to identify the first and greatest missionary, many of us would point to the Apostle Paul, who carried the good news of Jesus Christ throughout the Mediterranean world and to the gentile nations. Yet, do we consider deeply enough that Jesus made God's mission incarnate in our midst? He claimed that the Father had sent him into the world (Jn 17:18), among people to serve them and to give his life for them (Jn 15:13). His divine mission, as announced in Nazareth, was to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and let the oppressed go free (Lk 4:18-19). In John's Gospel we see Jesus as the Son of God, revealing the love and will of God in this world. Jesus reveals the nature and practice of God's mission in his ministry and in his teaching about God and human society. God came into the world through the Spirit to usher in the kingdom of God, a holy reign of peace and justice.

Mission through an Encounter of Commitments: Collaboration, Dialogue, Proclamation

God's missionary activity is greater than what the Church does: God works through the Church and beyond the Church. Even before the arrival of the church in any place or time, God's Spirit and providential care are already present and at work. Just as God "so loved the world" enough to initiate the *missio Dei*, we

too are mandated to love and care for the world and for one another. The mission of God is not only a matter that Christians need to address faithfully and creatively, it is also a matter that confronts us with a sense of urgency: along with our heightening global connections we share the increasing vulnerability of our one world. Our plight, dreams, and nightmares are intertwined. Caring for our imperiled planet is more than Christians can do alone.

Collaboration is a practical necessity. But more than a practicality, given the universal character of the problems that threaten our future, collaboration with those of other religions may be an essential element of participating in God's transformative mission in the world. How might we go about such collaboration? Are people of other faiths also called to the task of loving and caring for the world and for one another? If we share this common calling, then how might we do mission with our neighbors of other faiths? Our faithfulness to Christ and to God's mission might be well expressed through our collaboration with our neighbors of other faiths for the good of the creation.

When we think about working with persons of other faiths, we might consider how good works, concrete acts of love and caring, might be done together with them, in order to bring the reign of God more fully into the world. How might our demonstration of love supplement or express our good news? When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt 6:10), perhaps he hoped his followers would not only see that the kingdom of God was his central teaching, but also that they might adopt it as their missionary focus.

Jesus was moved by the terrible plight of his neighbors (Mt 9:36). His awareness of their human misery prompted him to respond