

Faith and Unity Commission

Appendix 3

Response to 'Together Toward Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes'

The Faith and Unity Commission made a decision early in the triennium to study the document of the WCC's Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*. In the past the Faith and Unity Commission has restricted any responses to WCC originated documents to those coming from the Faith and Order Commission. The decision to study *Together Towards Life* (TTL) reflects the awareness among Commission members that the question of mission has become ever more central for all our churches in our current circumstances. Most of our churches have documents on mission and evangelism and these provided a point of reference for our study of TTL.

Responses were received from members representing the Anglican Church, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Lutheran Church, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), the Roman Catholic Church, the Salvation Army, and the Uniting Church.

TTL and Local Church Documents

Those responses that used local church statements on mission as a point of departure tended to note that there was a good degree of harmony between their own documents and TTL, even if neither set of documents explicitly made reference to the other. For example, the Anglican response noted the Five Marks of Mission in this church, and the way they were able to satisfactorily hold in tension evangelism and the social justice elements of the mission of the church.

The Greek Orthodox response noted the focus on mission and unity in modern documents of this church. Most notable here were the 1920 Encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarch, which proposed a "league of churches", and the more recent 2016 Great and Holy Synod, whose central document was "The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World".

The response from the Lutheran Church noted that TTL was a timely contribution towards the church's self-understanding as a community created, sustained and sent by God to share the good news of Jesus' life, death and resurrection with the world. The LCA's 2003 document, "Our Church in Mission" was a point of reference for the response to TTL.

The response of the Salvation Army drew attention to a recent book, “Partnering with God: Being a Missional Salvationist”. The main argument of this book is that God intends that all people should be embraced by redemptive love, and that God is the missionary actively seeking our redemption; we are invited to partner or participate in God’s mission.

The response of the Roman Catholic Church noted a similarity between the underlying ecclesiology of TTL and Vatican II’s understanding of the church as sacrament of communion. This response also noted that Pope Francis has made being a missionary church the centre piece of his pastoral ministry.

The response from the Uniting Church compared TTL with the 2010 document from the UCA’s national assembly, “Towards a Theology relating to Mission”. There were few surprises when comparing these two documents as the Uniting Church’s theology of mission has always been heavily influenced by ecumenical missiology. This was evident in a number of themes: the mission of God, the mission of the Spirit; cosmic mission; mission and the market; mission and evangelism; mission and dialogue; mission and unity; and mission from the margins.

The response from the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) noted that they do not have specific law governing them or binding them to specific ways of expressing belief. Modern Australian Quakers have an antipathy to evangelism and proselytising, yet they hope that the example of their lives may manifest Christ present in each man and woman.

Learning from TTL

By allowing their own local church documents to enter into conversation, as it were, with TTL, the members of the Faith and Unity Commission highlighted areas where insights could be affirmed and also where challenges were accepted. In this sense, TTL served an important ecumenical purpose in being an instrument for deeper learning about evangelism and mission.

Most responses affirmed the larger theological framework in which mission was situated, namely the Triune God, who is the creator, redeemer and sustainer of all life. “God created the whole *oikumene* in God’s image and constantly works in the world to affirm and safeguard life” (TTL, # 1). This strong Trinitarian focus opened up a hopeful and positive view of mission in the world. “Mission begins in the heart of the Triune God and the love which binds together the Holy Trinity overflows to all humanity and creation” (TTL # 2). This renewed appreciation of the mission of the Son and of the Holy Spirit serves as an impetus to re-envision God’s mission in a changing and diverse world today.

The Quaker response noted that they would not normally speak this way. “An apophatic tradition is unable to engage in or give assent to such a characterisation and instead is likely to speak euphemistically of God

with terms such as Light and Spirit and Love ... For Quakers, God is that which is experienced and yet is beyond saying.”

Common to most responses was agreement that mission can no longer be envisioned simply as geographical expansion from a Christian centre to the un-evangelised territories on the periphery. In fact, there is a reverse mission, from the margins. The direction of mission today is more likely to be from the south than from the north. “Mission from the margins calls for an understanding of the complexities of power dynamics, global systems and structures, and local contextual realities” (TTL # 37). This raised a challenge for churches: how do they allow themselves to learn from those members at the margins? The response from the Salvation Army noted that a theological starting point is that “God is already at work in the world, working in places others might consider God-forsaken, working through people who may not acknowledge God”. A question was raised by the response of the Uniting Church: How can the NCCA support those at the margins, such as rural churches facing closure, or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members?

The Commission members observed that it can be hard to designate the Australian situation as belonging exclusively either to the West or to the Global South. The membership of congregations across most of our churches is very diverse. In this we have the opportunity to reflect more deeply on mission and evangelism in our local context.

This outlook also resonated with another aspect that was appreciated in the responses, namely that mission is in communion with others. “In communion with”, rather than “mission to others” or “mission for others”, marks an important ecclesiological outlook. Decades of ecumenical work on the nature and purpose of the church has resulted in a common understanding of the church as a communion. TTL works out the implications of this understanding for the way we think about mission. “Starting with God’s mission leads to an ecclesiological approach ‘from below’ ... Mission is not a project of expanding churches but of the church embodying God’s salvation in this world” (TTL # 58). The broader outlook proposed by TTL is leading to a renewed understanding of mission today.

Some responses resonated favourably with the critique of a positivist economic mindset. This critique deepened awareness of the significance of mission from the margins. But it also held challenges for the internal life of churches. “The highly competitive environment of the free market economy has unfortunately influenced some churches and para-church movements to seek to be ‘winners’ over others” (TTL # 62). TTL seeks to express in a positive way what mission means against the backdrop of a century of ecumenical engagement among the churches. Rather than see mission in terms of expanding membership (at the expense of other churches), mission can be seen in relation to the unity of humanity and the unity of creation. “There is a need to open up our reflections on church and unity to an even wider

understanding of unity: the unity of humanity and even the cosmic unity of the whole of God's creation" (TTL #61).

This cosmic dimension of mission was also appreciated by several of the responses. There is a growing awareness of God's creation and the danger we are facing. This was particularly noted in the responses from the Greek Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church. In both these churches, there have been statements that place creation at the heart of mission. Most responses noted the importance of protecting God's creation. This challenges those ideas that speak of subduing creation rather than caring for creation. Members of the Commission want to emphasise communion with creation. The Quaker response situated this in a broader commitment to social justice, characterised by simplicity, peace, integrity, community, equality and stewardship/earthcare.

Another important theme was the dignity of the human person and the sacramentality of life. One response referred to a spirituality of asceticism, meaning that we can see ourselves as communicants rather than consumers.

Areas for Further Clarification

The responses from the Commission members noted the different ways that "evangelism" might be understood in different churches, as expressed in TTL # 85: leading people to personal conversion; being in solidarity with oppressed people and offering Christian witness; evangelism as just one component of God's mission. However, a stronger statement that evangelism implies pastoral outreach and is not political. There is a link between what is proclaimed in worship and how people are cared for. Some people are loved into our churches.

Nevertheless, member churches are able to subscribe to the following statement in TTL # 85: "Different Christian traditions denote aspects of mission and evangelism in different ways; however, we can still affirm that the Spirit calls us all towards an understanding of evangelism which is grounded in the life of the local church where worship (*leiturgia*) is inextricably linked to witness (*martyria*), and fellowship (*koinonia*)".

The overarching theme of the document was *life*, and there were many references to life. Some responses were looking for a fuller explanation of what this meant. While some were content with a broad definition of life, others hoped for a more specific definition that was biblically based.

Conclusion

The members of the Commission wish to affirm the usefulness of this document for further reflection on mission and evangelism within their respective churches. There is also scope for a deeper reflection on the ecumenical dimension on mission. This may well take the form of sharing our stories of mission, both as

individual churches and as churches in ecumenical partnership with each other. We expect that there would be a variety of stories of mission according to different contexts.

We commend *Together Towards Life* to our churches for study and dialogue.