“TOGETHER TOWARDS LIFE”:
Reflections on the Proposed WCC Mission Statement

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This coming October, 2013, the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (WCME) of the World Council of Churches (WCC) will present a document on mission for the approval of the Tenth General Assembly of the WCC in Busan, Korea. The title of the document is “Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes” (TTL), echoing the general theme of the Assembly, “God of Life, Lead Us to Justice and Peace.”

Since the integration of the International Missionary Council (IMC) into the WCC in 1961, the 1982 document “Ecumenical Affirmation: Mission and Evangelism” has been the World Council’s only official “position statement” on

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Mission. After the Ninth WCC Assembly in Puerto Alegre, Brazil in 2006, the CWME had been working on a new statement, which went through a number of revisions, including a major one after a CWME Assembly in Manila, Philippines in March of 2012. Subsequently the document was approved for submission to the General Assembly by the WCC Central Committee in Crete, Greece in September, 2012.

This reflection on the statement will be divided into four parts. A first part will present a brief overview of the document, showing how it develops and highlighting its major foci and emphases. Part II will offer a brief comparison between this current CWME document and the 1982 document "Mission and Evangelism." A third part will highlight several of the major themes of the document, and a final part will offer a brief critique of the document and some of its parts.

PART I:
OVERVIEW

TTL is not written in what we might call the “linear” style common in Western thinking, but in a more “circular” style perhaps more at home in Asia. It is impossible to capture the complete richness of the document in the short summary that follows, but it is possible to present the major divisions and themes by which the document is developed.

TTL begins with a short “Preface,” connecting the present statement to the previous 1982 Mission Statement. Since 1982 the world in which the church participates in God’s mission has changed significantly, and so it was felt that a new statement was needed. Accordingly, this statement aims “to seek vision, concepts and directions for a renewed understanding and practice of mission and evangelism in changing landscapes.” The Preface also states that the document is addressed to a wider audience than WCC members and affiliates. It is not stated specifically, but that wider audience consists of the Evangelical churches affiliated with the Lausanne Movement and World Evangelical Federation, Pentecostal and Independent Churches, as well as the Roman Catholic Church.

Paragraphs 1 to 11 introduce the theme, and they are really a summary of the entire document. They lay out the major themes of the document—mission is rooted in the mission of the Triune God who is the God of Life, mission is carried out in the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit moves the church to protect the entire creation, the main cooperators in mission are Christians from the Global South and on the margins of society, mission is integrally connected with justice, and the church engages in a “confident and humble” sharing in the faith with includes both engagement in interreligious dialogue and sensitivity to particular contexts.

Toward the end of the Introduction we are introduced to fourfold division of the statement itself. It is built around several “key developments in understanding

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2 TTL, Preface, Lorke and Werner, 191. Hereafter I will refer to the document by paragraph number.
3 Preface.
4 TTL 8.
the mission of the Holy Spirit within the mission of the Triune God.” Reflection on these four developments, we read, “enables us to embrace dynamism, justice, diversity and transformation as key concepts of mission in changing landscapes today.”

Part I, entitled “Spirit of Mission: Breath of Life,” is paired with the idea of “dynamism.” It is the Spirit who calls the church into being, and in today’s changing landscape the Spirit directs the church in a particular way to care for the entire created cosmic order. It is the Spirit who endows Christians with a spirituality that offers them strength to carry out the life-giving transformation that is mission’s goal.

Part II, “Spirit of Liberation: Mission from the Margins,” is paired with “justice,” and develops what CWME Moderator Metropolitan Geevarghese Mor Coorilos speaks of as “the defining perspective” of the statement: that mission is understood today not as a rich, powerful “center” going to the periphery, but as the work of those on the margins who are empowered by God’s Spirit. In this way, mission seeks to bring life by working for justice and inclusivity, healing and wholeness.

Part III is entitled “Spirit of Community: Church on the Move,” and connects with the concept of “diversity.” The church comes to be by its participation in God’s mission, existing “by mission, just as fire exists by burning,” an allusion to the famous phrase by Emil Brunner. The ecumenical task, the statement insists here, is an essential part of mission, but the statement calls Christians “to an even wider understanding of unity: the unity of humanity and even the cosmic unity of the whole of God’s creation.” This section of the statement also calls for an understanding of hospitality as central to mission, particularly in the context of the massive migrations of peoples in our day. In addition, it calls for local communities to be missionary in their own context, and to develop a global vision as well.

The final section of TTL focuses on evangelism with the title “Spirit of Pentecost: Good News for All,” and makes the connection with “transformation.” It is clear about its endorsement of evangelism as “mission activity which makes explicit and unambiguous the centrality of the incarnation, suffer and resurrection of Jesus Christ without setting limits to the saving grace of God.” It is equally clear that “proselytism is not a legitimate way of practicing evangelism,” and that evangelism includes interfaith dialogue and cultural sensitivity. The church calls
human beings to personal, communal, cultural, and institutional transformation, a transformation which leads to the fullness of life.

The statement ends with ten “Concluding Affirmations” that once again summarize the whole document in terms of a “Feast of Life.” The final paragraph restates the theme once more: “The Triune God invites the whole creation to the Feast of Life, through Jesus Christ who came ‘that they may have life, and may have it in all its fullness’ (John 10:10, REB), through the Holy Spirit who affirms the vision of the Reign of God, ‘Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth!’ (Isaiah 65:17 KJV).”

PART II:
COMPARISON WITH THE 1982 “ECUMENICAL AFFIRMATION” (EA)

The first thing to notice is that TTL is a much longer document than the 1982 statement. TTL consists of 112 paragraphs, in comparison to the Ecumenical Affirmation’s 47—and so it is almost three times as long. I have already pointed out the more “circular” style with which TTL is written, and this is in contrast to the rather more “linear” style of EA. Rumor has it that the principle author of EA was David Bosch, the eminent South African missiologist.

EA begins from eschatology and human sinfulness. Its opening lines situate mission as response to the biblical promise of a new earth and a new heaven, a vision contrasted with today’s reality of “the monstrosity of human sin, the evil unleashed by the rejection of God’s liberating will for humankind.” Accordingly, “The Church is sent into the world to call people and nations to repentance, to announce forgiveness of sin and a new beginning in relations with God and with neighbours through Jesus Christ.” In contrast, TTL’s starting point is creation: “We believe in the Triune God who is the creator, redeemer and sustainer of all life.” Sin is certainly mentioned in the document—explicitly and implicitly—but the basis of mission is more geared toward working with God to continue to bring life to creation: “The church is commissioned to celebrate life, and to resist and transform all life-destroying forces, in the power of the Holy Spirit.” In addition, TTL has a more cosmic perspective, while EA is more anthropocentric.

Both documents come out the Missio Dei tradition of the WCC that can be traced back to the 1952 Willingen Conference. TTL, however, has a stronger Trinitarian focus, especially in its emphasis on the mission of the Holy Spirit within the context of the Trinity’s mission. As we saw from our overview above, the entire

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12 TTL 112.
14 EA Preface.
15 TTL 1.
16 TTL 2.
17 See, for example, TTL 4.
document is organized around the Spirit’s mission in the world and the church’s participation in that mission. This is not at all to the detriment of the mission of the Son, but it represents a fresh perspective that attempts to take into account some of the emphases of both the Orthodox Churches and the many Pentecostal Churches throughout the world today.

There is a real continuity between the earlier document and this most recent missiological reflection. Both contain emphases on working for justice and peacemaking. While TTL embraces ecology in a major way, it is not totally lacking in EA. Both speak of the Eucharistic dimensions of mission, if only briefly. Both speak of sensitivity to local cultures, and EA alludes twice to what TTL speaks of so prominently as “mission from the margins.” Both documents forbid proselytism, although EA speaks more strongly of proselytism as a sin, rather than, as does TTL, an illegitimate way of practicing evangelism.

Overall, my sense is that the newer statement has built on the older one, and in certain areas has gone well beyond it in breadth and in depth. It has truly charted a theology and practice of mission in today’s “changing landscapes.” Our next section will reflect on several of these newer perspectives.

PART III:
SOME MAJOR THEMES

The Holy Spirit

While “mission begins in the heart of the Triune God,” TTL takes pains to reflect on the theology and practice of mission from the perspective of “a renewed appreciation of the mission of the Spirit.” It does acknowledge that one theological perspective does emphasize a more Christo-centric understanding of the Spirit, but the perspective from which the statement works is much more rooted in the mission of the Spirit. The Spirit is present from the very beginning of creation and leads Israel “inspiring wisdom … empowering prophecy … stirring life from dry bones … prompting dreams … and bringing renewal …,” and is the same Spirit who takes part in Jesus’ conception and empowers and commissions Jesus at his baptism. Jesus commissions the disciples by breathing the Spirit upon them and so sends them in the same way that the Father had sent him (Jn 20:21-22), a commission that is ratified so to speak in the Lucan story of Pentecost and the growth of the community in the Acts of the Apostles. The community is the bear witness of the Spirit to the promise of a new heaven and a new earth, and the church’s task in

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18 See EA 12, 14-17, 26, 31-36; TTL 31, 45, 77-78, 92.
19 EA 19.
20 EA 21; 74.
21 EA 26; TTL 97-100.
22 EA 36 and 40.
23 EA 39; TTL 82.
24 TTL 2.
25 TTL 12.
mission, in an allusion to a phrase by Rowan Williams, is to find out where the Spirit is working in the world and joining in.26 Part of that discernment is to discover among the many spirits of the world, which are good—reflecting the Holy Spirit—and which are evil.

The Spirit, the document states, works “often in mysterious and unknown ways beyond our imagination.”27 In two other places we read about how the Spirit surprises us, leading us across boundaries, subverting our plans and those of the powerful, working through people the world least expects to be significant.28 The Spirit’s mysterious ways means that it works beyond the church in other faith traditions, and in all the world’s cultures.29 Christians can never afford to be smug, confident that the Spirit is with them: “The claim that the Spirit is with us is not for us to make, but for others to recognize in the life that we lead.”30

As far as I know, no other WCC document has thought so thoroughly or consistently about the implications of mission when reflected upon through the lens of God’s ever-present, all-pervasive, always illusive Holy Spirit.

Spirituality

The statement also reflects, if somewhat briefly, upon spirituality, which is another fresh emphasis in it. The spirituality in the statement is a transformative one. It is not only, and not primarily, about the individual, but one that endows us with energy and wisdom to serve humanity and all of creation. We cannot belong to God without belonging to our neighbor, and we need to avoid the kind of spirituality “that simply makes us feel good while other parts of creation hurt and yearn.”31

Connection with creation is one of the sources of such spirituality. The document speaks about the need for a conversion to the work of the Spirit that will lead to a “new humility” with regard to creation. Such “life in the Holy Spirit is the essence of mission.”32 While we have in the past understood mission to be something that human beings do to and for others, the Spirit leads us to understand that mission is done with all creation. In fact, “in many ways, creation is in mission to humanity, for instance the natural world has a power that can heal the human heart and body.”33
Mission spirituality “that flows from liturgy and worship connects us to one another and with the wider creation.”

Liturgy “only has full integrity when we live out God’s mission in our communities and in daily life,”

participating in the “liturgy after the liturgy,” as Orthodox theologians put it.

Mission from the Margins

Mission from the Margins, as I pointed out previously, is considered the statement’s “defining perspective” by one of its principal authors. It involves a radical reversal of perspective—from the imagination that mission is done by the rich and powerful for those who are poor and powerless to the recognition that it is among the poor and powerless where God is really acting, and where Christians are called to join in God’s work. “God chooses the vulnerable and the alienated, those at the margins, to fulfill God’s mission of establishing justice and peace. People at the margins are thus the primary agents of God’s mission of affirming life in its fullness.”

Those who are on the margins are Christians in the poorer parts of the world, in those places to which the “center of gravity” of Christianity has shifted. They are those at the margins of every society, such as “Dalits, women, farmers, Adivasis, fisher folk, sexual minorities, disabled, people with HIV and AIDS.” They are migrants in all parts of the world. People like these, who are victims of the greed of the rich and powerful, are in the best position to understand what are the deepest needs and concerns of people like themselves, and so are in the best position to lead efforts of real transformation of the structures that oppress them. They are the ones who recognize that mission today has to be a movement of struggle and resistance.

No longer, therefore, can the West set the agenda for mission. No longer can it see itself as the primary agents of mission. We in the West need to listen, to work in solidarity, to support our sisters and brothers in their struggles. Joining in with the Spirit’s work of bringing life means “discerning and unmasking the demons that exploit and enslave”—“deconstructing patriarchal ideologies, upholding the right to self-determination for Indigenous peoples, and challenging the socially embedded racism and casteism.” But this is the work of those people’s themselves.

The text does not exactly say it, but it seems to me that Mission on the Margins should open us up to be evangelized by those who are struggling to work with the Spirit of life. In them we can see the poor, vulnerable God who revealed Godself in the cross. In them we see that Christianity is not so much a way to

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34 TTL 104.
35 TTL 74.
36 TTL 17. See Ion Bria, *The Liturgy after the Liturgy: Mission and Witness from an Orthodox Perspective* (Geneva: WCC, 1996). Note 3 in paragraph 17 says that “the term was originally coined by Archbishop Anastasios Yannoulatos and widely publicized by Ion Bria.”
37 Coorilos: 9.
38 Coorilos, 12.
39 Coorilos: 10.
40 TTL 40, 43.
41 TLL 43.
another world, but a way to serve and heal this one. It is perhaps through the
service of those who have no power and no resources that we in the West might find
again the power of the good news and be converted anew to the wonder of the
gospel.

PART IV:
SOME WORDS OF CRITIQUE

TLL is a dense document, and in some ways difficult to read (at least for a
linear thinker like me!), but I do think it bears patient study. There is a lot in the
document, and there is much wisdom and challenge in it. It is not, of course, a
perfect document, however, and I might offer a few critical reflections in this final
section.

As is found in many documents written by “liberal” Christians, capitalism
gets a bad wrap in this statement. While there is certainly truth in such
condemnations of the “free-market economy,” economists often point out the
naïvité of Christians in these matters. Often some kind of modest prosperity is the
result of “capitalist” initiatives such as cooperatives or micro-businesses. Often it is
the greed of the owners of global businesses and corporations that is the problem,
not so much the capitalist system itself.

Although the document several times condemns patriarchy, it seems to
stop short of condemning sexism. It condemns racism and classism, but not sexism.
It could be because the question of women’s rights and equality is not equally
appreciated in all cultures and contexts throughout the world, particularly in some
Pentecostal and Evangelical churches. Nevertheless, the fact is that a woman,
Kirsteen Kim, was one of the major authors of the statement. There is some
recognition of women—for example, the statement that although women, children,
and undocumented workers are the most vulnerable of migrants, “women are also
often at the cutting edge of new migrant ministries.” Still, one would want to see
women’s plight and women’s roles more highly emphasized in a document that will
be the WCC’s official statement on mission in the years to come.

The statement’s treatment of evangelism is nuanced and complex, but I
wonder if it might be a bit simplified and clarified. On the one hand, evangelism is
described in terms that make it sound like what Roger Schroeder and I have called
“proclamation”: “evangelism … focuses on explicit and intentional articulation of
the gospel …” On the other, evangelism is in some ways used as a term for mission

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42 TTL 7, 108.
43 On this, see Eugene Ahner’s thoughtful reflections in Chapter 1 of his Business Ethics:
44 TTL 43, 90.
45 TTL 70.
46 See Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission
47 TTL 81.
itself—it does not exclude "the different dimensions of mission," it does not exclude "the different dimensions of mission," and includes the practice of interfaith dialogue and contextualization. I wonder if “evangelism” might simply be used as a synonym for mission itself, which is clearly a multi-faceted reality, and the clear articulation and inviting aspect of doing mission might simply be called "proclamation." Perhaps the time has come to move away from a narrowly focused understanding of evangelism.

Finally, a small style issue. Paragraphs 35, 54, and 79 are wonderful “segues” at the end of sections that prepare the reader for the next section. Paragraphs 35 and 54 nicely speak of the Holy Spirit, thus tying the proceeding and following sections together with the statement’s basic Trinitarian perspective. Paragraph 79, moving from an understanding of the church to evangelism, does not do this, however. Too bad the sentence that is 79 does not read something like: “As the church discovers more deeply, through the working of the Holy Spirit, its identity as a missionary community, its outward-looking character finds expression in evangelism.”

CONCLUSION

“Together Towards Life” does address mission in the changing landscapes of today’s world and today’s church. It may not be as concise and as clear as its predecessor document, written in 1982, but it does justice to the complex world of the twenty-first century in which it was written. It succeeds, at least basically, in embracing the theologies and ecclesiology of church communities beyond the pale of the WCC, and it presents a fairly consistent treatment of mission from the fresh perspectives of a theology of the Holy Spirit and a missiology developed from the margins. The discussion it will create will guide our thinking on mission in the years to come.

48 TTL 81.
49 TTL 93-100.