

## **Mission in a Pluralistic Society – Why and How?**



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*Underlying question: “What could be the contribution of the churches of the western world – do the western churches have anything to give, or are we tired old churches, needing more than giving?”*

### **Presentation II: Mission in a Pluralistic Society – How?**

1. The What, the Why, and the How: The Necessary Congruence of Christian Mission

In the first presentation, we made the case that the “what” of the gospel defines our answer to the question, “why mission?”. We can sum up the argument in this way: the gospel is news about God that must urgently be communicated, because it is good news about what has actually happened. It is news not merely about the existence of God but about the character and purposes of God. It is report about the events that both reveal the character of God’s love and make it concrete for all humanity. It is the news that God’s creation is beloved, that God desires its healing, that God has brought about that healing in the event of Jesus Christ, and is now accomplishing that healing through the agency of the people he has called and set apart for that service. The salvation accomplished once and for all on Good Friday and Easter is now the outcome, the consummation, the inheritance kept for us, which we anticipate, which we announce, and for which we are sent into the world. When the early Christian world heard the word euangelion, they thought not only of the event being reported but of its universal and radical goodness and the urgency with which it must be communicated.

Now, in this second presentation, we will turn to the “how” of mission. And we will see again that the “what” of the gospel shapes the “how” of its communication. This is of fundamental theological importance for the current development of missional theology. We begin with the understanding that God’s action in history reveals God’s

character and purposes both in what it discloses, and how it discloses it. That God is entirely driven by his love for his creation is demonstrated in the care and providence with which he abundantly blesses his creation. That God is merciful and forgiving is made clear in the many ways he deals mercifully with his rebellious children, showing patience where judgment was merited. There is an insistence throughout scripture on the fundamental congruence of God's purposes and action. Rather than abstract propositions about God, biblical theology works entirely in terms of God's actions. And God's actions reveal both God's loving character and God's healing purposes.

This congruence is the over-arching theme of the New Testament formation of the church. The missional church envisioned by Jesus and planted by the apostles demonstrates the message entrusted to it by the way it actually lives out that message. Thus, the New Testament scriptures not only provide the authoritative witness to the events of salvation, but they also demonstrate authoritatively how the report of those events is to take place. The narrative told by the witness is the what, and the way that these events actually took place defines how it is to be communicated. This emphasis upon the fundamental congruence of gospel message and gospel communication is sometimes described as "incarnational," at least in English. Not all languages allow one to make this distinctive noun, incarnation, into an adjective – it is a problem in German, I know. But when it does work grammatically, it makes this point: the once-and-for-all event of Jesus Christ, the word become flesh, testified to in the four gospels, is to be made known in ways that demonstrate concretely and tangibly what this event signifies for the world. It is God's divine design that his truth be enfleshed, become knowable, and hearable, and visible through his Son, and then through those whom his Son calls and sends. Therefore, a gospel that centers on the central claim that God is love must necessarily be communicated lovingly. A gospel that makes known that God desires and brings about peace among all his creatures must be shared peacefully. A gospel about the healing and restoration of all things must be shared in ways that are themselves healing and restoring. A gospel about liberation from all forms of idolatry, demonic possession, and sinful captivity must be itself liberating.

This appears to be obvious. But the history of Christendom makes plain that it has not been obvious enough. We already discussed in the first presentation the profound reductionism of the gospel that has produced the judgmentalism that focuses upon who is saved and who is not. This reduction is so problematic precisely because it violates the necessary congruence of gospel message and gospel witness. It is not a gospel of love which ends up concentrating on who is saved and who is damned, and how we know the difference. It is not a gospel of peace if the tactics of violence and coercion are claimed for so-called Christian causes. The missional calling of the church

today is made enormously difficult by all these examples of incongruity between message and method that are scattered across our history: the Crusades, the persecution and execution of so-called heretics, the Inquisition, and wars fought over religion. Today, as we come to terms with the gradual disintegration of Christendom, we find ourselves constantly challenged to deal with the problematic legacy of such hypocrisy in our history. We are all keenly aware of the ways in which this history conditions and complicates our relationships with our Muslim neighbors.

Thus, in the missional church discussion today, there is growing concern about the integrity of gospel witness. We realize that it is not enough to stress that the church is missionary by its very nature. The recognition that the church is not an end in itself but the sign, foretaste, and instrument of God's in-breaking reign must be expounded in terms of how this congruent witness takes place. The study of our Christendom history gives us much to ponder, both negatively and positively, as does the particular history of the modern missionary movement itself. All of that must be worked on, and the learning process must be shared with our sister churches in the non-western world, so that they can learn from our mixed history. The particular challenge for us within post-Christendom societies is, however, to determine how our witness in our changed situation might become congruent with the gospel. What does incarnational witness look like for the heirs of Christendom in the west today? What does it mean for us, in our present situation in what is clearly our western mission field, to lead our life together worthy of the calling with which we have been called?

## 2. The Missional Strategy of the Particular Community

The earliest strategy for mission was the formation of witnessing communities. In Jesus' teaching and preparation of the disciples for their apostolate, he was laying out for them a vision for a distinctive community that would be the instrument for communicating the gospel of love to all those around it. He wanted his disciples to understand that their task was going to be to continue his ministry by calling together those whom God was preparing to be his witnesses, and equipping them for that task. In the words of Matthew's "Great Commission," they were to "disciple every ethnicity," to "baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," and "to teach these communities everything that Jesus had taught them." For these disciples to graduate to the calling of apostle, they needed to learn from Jesus what this revolutionary calling was all about: that it was centered in God's love, expressed in God's healing, made knowable in the witness of those who had responded to that love and experienced that healing. His earthly ministry of proclamation, signs and wonders,

all modeled the what and the how of the gospel: love of God and love of neighbor. So the disciples had to understand that God's people are called and sent to their neighbors, to those who are next to them, the people they cannot avoid and must deal with. Their message must be freely shared, setting aside human social barriers and religious class systems. The neighbors to whom they were sent included lepers and fishermen, Samaritans and prostitutes, religious leaders and political subversives, Jews and Galileans, Phoenicians and Romans, eunuchs and Roman soldiers. But, with evangelized eyes and transformed cultural sensibilities, they were to learn that God is not a respecter of persons, and that God loves all the world.

Further, those early Christians were instructed that this ministry entrusted to them would bring about the reconciliation of broken relationships like that of a prodigal son and his waiting father, the restoration to wholeness and community of outcasts like lepers and blind men and women caught in adultery, the liberation of people enslaved to demons and dishonest riches, the healing of all kinds of ailments and diseases. What they as disciples learned, they were going to do as apostles. And at the heart of their vocation would be the forming of communities that would witness to the gospel by continuing the ministry of Jesus.

The scriptures collected in the New Testament are, taken together, the written witness to this strategy as it was implemented. All of the New Testament documents are directed to already witnessing communities. The apostolic intention from the outset was the formation of such communities. The congregation, the gathered community, is the primary instrument of gospel mission. This is how the story of the people of God continues after Easter and Pentecost. It is no longer just twelve tribes but countless congregations in many cultures bearing concrete witness in local contexts that this gospel is true for all people and translatable into every culture. It was not the apostolic goal merely to save souls. God had accomplished that salvation on the cross. But that gospel was never intended to be restricted only to the vertical relationship between God and the human sinner. From the outset it was good news about peace with God and peace among humans. It is the gospel of the transformation of both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of life, love of God and neighbor, and thus reconciliation with God and neighbor. The purpose of the apostolic churches was to proclaim the fact of that comprehensive salvation, to discover those whom God has prepared to be Christ's witnesses, and to form communities in which this new way of life, worthy of the gospel, is witnessed to, is made visible.

Witness is the over-arching New Testament definition of the apostolic mission. "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." You shall be the evidence, in every tongue and culture, that Jesus Christ is

Lord and Savior. That evidence will be made visible and tangible by how you, as witnessing communities, live before a watching world. What these communities profess as their faith is to be demonstrated in what they confess with their lives.

The apostolic writings, all addressed to already evangelized communities, share in the one central purpose to continue these communities' formation for their calling. In the words so often repeated in various ways by Paul, they are to lead their common life in ways that are worthy of the gospel, of the Lord, of God who has called them. Their conduct and their message need to become congruent. Their actions toward each other should demonstrate before their unbelieving neighbors what God's love is like and how it works. Jesus tells the disciples in John's gospel, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for another" (John 13:35). Peter writes to those little witnessing communities on the shores of the Black Sea, "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere love of the brethren, love one another earnestly from the heart" (1 Peter 1:22).

Gerhard Lohfink has emphasized in his exposition of the kind of community that Jesus intended that the apostolic communities were to be characterized by "one anotherness." He points out that there are one hundred places in the New Testament scriptures where this little reflexive pronoun "one another" is used: almost always in connection to an imperative, almost always directed towards the conduct of the particular congregation. These imperatives constitute the continuing formation of these communities for faithful witness. We are not talking here about works righteousness. We are talking about the enabled obedience of Christian communities whose calling is primarily expressed in the conduct, the relationships, the decision-making, the practices of believing and witnessing communities. It is out of that matrix of evidence that the message is shared. A community can share the gospel only as it is itself constantly addressed and converted by the gospel.

### 3. The Christendom Parish and the Missional Community

The Christian church in Europe has been organized in geographical parishes since the ninth century. Congregations have been linked to towns and cities since the beginning of the apostolic movement: the Christian church in Jerusalem, in Antioch, in Philippi, in Corinth, and in Rome. As I just said, from the beginning the basic missional strategy of the church has been the formation and the continuing witness of believing communities. This meant, of course, that each of these communities understood itself to be called and sent as witnesses to the Gospel. To use the modern term, the early Christian community's identity, its sense of itself and its purpose, was

pervasively missional. Only when we understand that do we grasp the full impact of the Pauline epistles as they continue the formation of these communities for their faithful witness. It is because of their missional vocation, and for the sake of the credibility of their witness in the religiously pluralist context of Corinth, that Paul grapples so critically and yet constructively with the Corinthian Christians in his first epistle to them. If they are to be true to their calling as the saints in Corinth, then their conduct in a broad range of issues must be addressed. Most of their problems have to do with a failure to translate the gospel into their actions. Only at the end of the epistle does the doctrinal question of the resurrection come up – although certainly the debate about the resurrection may well have been the underlying issue informing and even causing their problems!

Paul writes to these congregations out of the expectation that they are continuing the witness that had originally brought them into being. In Philippians, for example, he refers to their partnership with him in the gospel from the first until now, and he speaks of their defense and confirmation of the gospel. His prayer is that their love should grow more and more with knowledge and discernment so that they will be able to determine what is in fact most excellent. This growing love is, of course, not just a feeling they have for each other, but it is the practice of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ, translated into the patterns of one-anotherness that are the Christian communities' most compelling witness before a watching world. This is how the particular community carries out its missional vocation.

Now, what happened to that understanding of congregations in mission when, over the centuries, the Christendom church lost its sense of missionary vocation? What happened when the geography itself became Christian, when people understood themselves as Christian because of where they were born, where they grew up, and who raised them? What happened when Christianity became a territorial concept rather than a missionary movement? What happens to mission when daily life is regulated by the bells ringing in the church tower, and the great passages of life are hosted and celebrated by the rites of passage observed in church: baptism, confirmation, marriage, and burial?

The loss of the missionary vocation of the church in our traditional doctrines of the church is paralleled by the widespread dilution of the missionary vocation of the local congregation. This is that reductionism at work about which I spoke in the last presentation. The idea that congregations exist to meet the religious needs of their members did not originate with consumerist religion in North America. That reduction of the congregation's mission is an old and well established pattern. Now, again, one must be careful with such critiques of the Christendom traditions. It is, of course, true

that congregational worship has always meant more than meeting individual religious needs. The architecture, the music, the whole aesthetic of worship have been focused upon bringing glory to God and proclaiming God's love to the world. Our worship liturgies have been written and refined over the years for the celebration of the gospel, the attribution of glory and honor to God. Our praise and adoration of God have been offered out of profound thanksgiving for God's grace revealed in Christ. We are heirs and beneficiaries of truly powerful traditions of worship that proclaim the gospel powerfully and formatively.

But that tradition, like the wheat and the weeds in Jesus' parable about kingdom reality, has also become a mixed phenomenon. It has become possible to celebrate the gospel and combine that celebration with the reductionist loss of the missional vocation of the congregation. It has become possible for countless Christians to understand their participation in the rites of Christian worship as the necessary things they do to maintain their savedness. It has become possible for people to compartmentalize their religion, to unlink the message of gathered worship on Sunday from the practices and decision-making Monday through Saturday. It has become possible for missional vocation to be reduced to religious observance. It has become possible for people within the boundaries of Christendom to look upon their participation in the life and practices of the church as one of the many things they do, but not their priority, not the practices and convictions that truly shape their lives and govern their actions. Would it not be rare today, within our late-Christendom congregations, to hear people talking about themselves as missionaries, describing their own lives as apostolates, gathering in the church for discipleship formation in order to be sent by their communities into the mission fields that are their daily lives? Certainly in North America, most people will talk about the churches they have chosen to join in terms of what they get out of their participation. The criterion for evaluating the quality of Sunday worship would be some variation of: What did it do for me? What did I get out of the sermon?

The missional challenge before us today is the conversion of the local congregation to its missional calling. To put it another way, the task before us is the translation of the missional theological consensus into the actual life and practices of concrete congregations in particular situations. This is the plea that I constantly hear: the theology of the missional church, whose contours we have been proposing in the growing literature on this subject, resonates. There is a broad awareness that Christendom is over and change is necessary. There is a growing clarity about the difficult challenge we face as we sort out the Christendom legacy and try to discern what is good wheat and what are destructive weeds in our traditions. But how does

this become transforming practice in local congregations? If we agree that the basic strategy of the missional congregation is the way God's mission is advanced, then how do we move towards missional faithfulness in the life and practices of our congregations? Without claiming that I can provide a comprehensive answer to this question, I will attempt to show some major trajectories of that translation process – I do this as a proposal for continuing conversation, and if God so wills, as an opportunity for our own continuing conversion.

#### 4. The Two Trajectories of Missional Conversion in the Local Congregation

##### 4.1 Missional formation and conversion is a process shaped, guided, and empowered by the Biblical word.

We stand in the strong tradition of the Reformation's commitment to the authority of the Word of God in the church. *Verbum Dei manet in aeternitatem*. This is a source of strength and comfort for us as we consider the challenge of missional conversion. The task before us is to learn how to encounter the biblical witness as the Holy Spirit's primary instrument for the missional formation of the congregation. That is the axiom for interpretation that must guide missional conversion. Let me explain this a little further. We have been emphasizing that we have ignored our missional vocation in the theologies of the church that we have formulated in Christendom over the centuries. In doing that, we have lost the ability to engage scripture in terms of its original intention and function in the early Christian communities. This is a bold claim, I know, but bear with me. We are working from the assumption that every congregation is called together and commissioned to be a corporate witness to the lordship and saviorhood of Jesus Christ. This was the purpose of the apostolic mission, and it continues to be our apostolic mandate. The corollary to this central emphasis upon our apostolicity is the understanding of the authority and function of scripture in such apostolic congregations. In the first century, the apostolic writings served the continuing formation and equipping of these congregations so that they could grow in their understanding and practices of faithfulness as they carried out their calling. In constantly changing situations and confronted by new challenges, they had to learn how to "discern what was truly excellent." They had to learn how to live their life worthy of their calling. In terms of the four gospels, they were entering into discipleship with Jesus, learning from him as did the original disciples, in order like them to be sent out as apostles, to continue and carry out his mission in the world. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" – in terms of John's gospel, the earthly ministry of Jesus

experienced and learned by the disciples was their formation for its continuation after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus and the empowering gift of the Holy Spirit.

This means that we focus our already very strong commitment to the centrality of the Word and its proclamation in the congregation on its formative power. Some of us are talking about this now as the task of “missional hermeneutics.” It is encouraging that there is a growing number of biblical scholars who are engaging this question: How did the biblical text continue the formation of apostolic congregations for faithful witness then, and how does it do so today? Engaging this interpretive approach in our teaching and preaching of the biblical word proves to be a transforming experience. We discover in the scriptures a remarkable relevance that we have easily missed under the assumptions of Christendom. But such scriptural formation is also threatening, because it lays bare the compromises and captivities that also characterize our reading and application of scripture. That leads us to a second trajectory of missional conversion in the local congregation.

4.2. Missional formation intentionally relates the gathered life of the congregation to the scattered life of its members as they move from the community into the world.

There are congregations in the United States that have put a sign up over the door, to be read by the parishioners as they leave the church, which says: “You are now entering the mission field.” This is an attempt to remind the congregation that what it does as a gathered community is directly related to the lives and ministries of its members when they are scattered in the Monday to Saturday world. This linkage is scripturally rooted in the synoptic theology of the disciples’ calling as recorded in Mark 3:13-15. There, the Evangelist reports that Jesus “called to him those whom he desired and they came to him” – which summarizes the whole biblical theology of election to witness. The text continues with the ancient and missionally very important variant, “And he appointed twelve, whom also he named apostles.” The apostolic purpose of discipleship is underlined in this ancient text – precisely for the purpose of concentrating the energies of the congregation learning Jesus with Mark on its basic missional calling. Then the text unfolds into a three part theology of the missional vocation: “to be with him, and to be sent out to preach, and have authority to cast out demons.”

The gathered life of the church is its life with Jesus, its coming together around the presence of our Lord wherever two or three are gathered together in his name. This

gathered life around Jesus finds its most powerful and formative expression in the worship of the church, and especially in its Eucharistic celebration. But, as the text shows, this “being with Jesus” does not stand in isolation from the missional vocation of those whom he gathers. You might say that the tendency of Christendom would be to put a period after the phrase “to be with him.” That would make the church into a community that focuses upon our fellowship with Jesus for our own edification – but it does not truly glorify him unless the rest of the disciple’s mandate is heard and followed. From being with him, they are “sent out to preach.” Their discipleship leads into apostolate.

Their gathered life equips and forms their missional witness. There is a profoundly missional instrumentality woven into the gathered life of the church: all that we say and do together should relate formatively to what we are saying and doing when we are not together. The praise and worship of God in our liturgies, the mutual comfort and encouragement of our fellowship, the healing and reconciliation made possible by our practice of one-anotherness, the stewardship of our corporate decision-making are not ends in themselves, but the divinely empowered equipping that makes Christian witness possible. To use the imagery of Pentecost: the presence of the Spirit in the gathered community generates those little flames over every Christian’s head, making it possible for them to enter into the world confident that they are bearers of God’s Spirit.

This understanding of the linkage between our gathered and scattered life has, of course, always been present in our traditions. The ancient greeting at the end of the liturgy – *ita, missa est* – was to remind the congregation that its celebration of the mass must always lead into its sending, its mission. But today, as we recognize how radically secularized our context has become, this linkage poses new challenges. We can no longer assume that our departure from the church is an entry into a Christian world. We must take seriously the pluralistic situation in which we find ourselves. Our western societies have become especially challenging contexts in which to bear witness to the Gospel. We are surrounded by people who define themselves as Christians but who mean by that little more than a superficial kind of religious culture. We encounter people who are inoculated against Christianity and consciously reject it – who are reacting to abusive, rigid, judgmental forms of fundamentalism and have no other concept of Christianity than those distorted forms of it. There are, then, all those many people who know nothing at all about the Christian tradition and are basically a-religious. Or they are busily inventing their own religions out of a wide array of resources – that religious culture is well documented by the sections in our bookstores labeled New Age, the Occult, Mysticism, and the like. We encounter in growing numbers people who are adherents of the other great world religions. And, scattered

throughout this great diversity there all those who, in Luther's words, "would like with all seriousness to be Christians," and who are finding that progressively more difficult.

The difficulty has to do with this confusing chemistry created by the remnants of Christendom still around us, the rapid spread of modern secularism, and the fact that we live and work in social structures that often reject any overt Christian witness, especially verbal witness. Thus, people can still describe western societies as "Christian," but it is very problematic if we assign any particular meaning to that term. As I learned when I started my first ministry in Germany, reaching out to the older youth in the upper schools who had been "confirmed out of the church," as the youth pastor who was my supervisor put it, things became very awkward if my work led to any concrete results. When some of these young people began to explore what it meant to know and follow Christ, when they began Bible studies and started praying together, and when they began to ask what their Christian faith might mean in the important decisions of their lives, their parents became alarmed. They started calling my bishop to raise concerns about what was happening with their kids. Were they becoming fanatics? I learned one of the great paradoxes of the late and post-Christendom structures we live in: It can certainly be an important aspect of respectability to call oneself a Christian. It is, however, not at all respectable to take it seriously.

The linkage between our gathered and our scattered life must take seriously the many ways in which our context, our mission field, directly challenges Christian obedience. We have long since gotten used to the idea that biblical references to idolatry and to the demonic have little relevance for Christianized cultures like ours. That third part of the Marcan text is hard for us to interpret: What should it mean for us late modern westerners that have the authority to cast out demons? Here is where we need biblical formation to help us to discern just how demonic, idolatrous our mission field has become. How do we learn to witness to Christ in a world dominated by consumerism, conspicuous wealth, and the wasting of resources for our own pleasure? How do we practice Christian love of our neighbor in a business world dominated by competition, profit and loss? How do we convincingly practice neighborly love when the norm in our societies is to put ourselves first, focus on what brings us self-esteem and claim our entitlements. How do we learn to live as followers of Christ in a psychologized society which would interpret Paul's admonition that we should "in humility count others better than ourselves" as suspiciously neurotic?

The missional congregation in today's post-Christendom world has to face the fact that its calling to be Christ's witnesses makes it counter-cultural. To be missionary by its very nature is to be alternative, to live in some way as a contrast community. At this point, we need to be willing to learn from much that our Anabaptist friends had

already discovered and were practicing four centuries ago. But, in respectful disagreement with much of the radical Reformation, we must emphasize that our alternativeness does not mean that we withdraw from the world and create havens of refuge defined by what we are against. No, our task is to be Christ's witness, as a different kind of people, in this world. John prays for his people, stressing that the world will hate them "because they are not of the world, even as Christ is not of the world" (John 17:14). But he does not pray that God should take them out of the world. Rather he prays that they should be protected from the evil one, because, as he says then, "As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world."

The missional congregation knows that it is sent into the world, and so its gathered life prepares its members for their sending, for the lives of individual as well as shared witness. We come together with our stories, our challenges, our defeats, our opportunities. God's Word addresses and forms us in our worship, fellowship, teaching, and conversation. The Holy Spirit enables us to help each other understand the resistances of our mission field, and to find ways to communicate more clearly and accessibly what the healing reality of God's love is really about. We send each other out into our diverse apostolates, equipped to be witnesses, confident that each other's prayers accompany us, ready to be used as God chooses to use us in our relationships with those God makes our neighbors. The gathering and the sending are the fundamental rhythms of the missional congregation. Jesus is present when we gather, as he promised he would be. And as the Lord to whom all authority is given in heaven and on earth, he is present in the world into which we are sent. Our calling is to demonstrate the truth and reality and power of his lordship, to be, and to do, and to say witness to the reality of his reign, already breaking in.

These are the core patterns, the trajectories of missional conversion in congregations that want to be faithful to their calling in the post-Christian mission fields of the west. They are defined by the trajectory of missional formation as a process shaped, guided, and empowered by the Biblical Word. And that formation intentionally relates the gathered life of the congregation to the scattered life of its members as they move from the community into the world. There are many signs that this process of conversion is happening. We cannot program it. We cannot specify when and how the Holy Spirit will do this work of conversion. But we can certainly try to identify the obstacles that we might be placing in the Spirit's way. We can examine together the cultural captivity of our congregations. We can discern the idolatries in our world that also bind us: the consumerism, the tyranny of the schedule, the pressure to succeed, the selfish sense of entitlement, the seductions of power and influence and popularity.

And we can open ourselves to the biblical word which will, surely, cut like a two-edged sword and lay out for us both our calling and our resistance to it.

This process of missional conversion need not be a lonely pilgrimage. We are part of a world-wide movement of witness. There is much to be learned about our missional calling as we engage with the Christian experience of sister congregations around the world. Many of you can testify to the powerful learning about ourselves that God gives us when we learn to see ourselves through the lenses of other cultures, and especially through the lenses of Christian sisters and brothers in other cultures. We have much to share in that conversation. Our own history, with its wheat and weeds, may help our sister churches to recognize the problems and risks, the compromises and distortions, that can tempt a missionary people as they move along the way of witness. We have so much more common ground now that we are also part of a religiously pluralist world.

There is a basic missional question that emerges out of all of this which should, I think, receive our focused attention in the years ahead. It arises precisely out of our hard school of learning in the Constantinian project. The New Testament does not expressly prepare the missional congregations of the first century for the possibility that they might grow to such an extent that they would become an important cultural factor in their societies. The fact that the Christian movement could gain economic and political gravity is beyond the purview of the New Testament record. But it did happen. We are the heirs and witnesses of that process. And it is happening today in the east and the south. There are cultures in Africa and Asia in which the church is growing so rapidly that it is becoming a major social force. There are two countries in Africa that have declared themselves Christian nations – based, I am afraid, on some misunderstandings they inherited from western Christendom. Now, here is the question with which we must struggle: Does the possible growth of the church in any given society to a position of cultural importance automatically mean that the missional purpose of the church changes? Does the church reach a point where it is no longer possible to expect it to lead its corporate life worthy of the calling with which it is called? Must the church that grows become a church that no longer really believes that the Sermon on the Mountain is realistic biblical formation for it? Our Christendom legacy has gradually come to the persuasion that such change, such dilution, such compromise, such captivity are unavoidable when something like Christendom happens. Is that true?

Do we not have a fraternal responsibility to engage our Christian brothers and sisters in an honest exploration of our history and the possible parallels emerging in theirs? May it not be part of our ecumenical missional mandate as well as a step in our

own conversion to share our complicated and ambiguous story not as an example of normative Christianity, but as a pilgrimage from which others can learn and perhaps be equipped to practice a more radical obedience than we have done. And could it not be that such a shared exploration might be the very way that God's Spirit recalls us to our missional vocation?