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# Mission in the Context of Kingdom: An Ecumenical Vision<sup>1</sup>

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In my earlier lecture I noted that Luke, the author of *Acts*, records that when Jesus appeared to the disciples over a forty day period between Easter and Ascension Day, he frequently spoke with them about the “kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). It seems clear that the Lord aroused a good deal of eschatological speculation among his followers, for we hear one of them asking whether Jesus intended to restore the kingdom in Israel (Acts 1:6). But Jesus quickly quashed that kind of speculation, telling them instead to wait for the coming of the Spirit’s power. “And you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Thus Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father without providing the apostles with a clear picture of the shape of the coming kingdom, or of the scenario for its arrival. Nearly twenty centuries later the church is still trying to understand the precise meaning of the kingdom of God which comes, at least in part, through the church’s mission.

## **I. The Church Can Be the Agent of God’s Missionary Purpose.**

I asked earlier whether the church as we know it could be the agent of God’s missionary purpose. Now I want to answer that question quite emphatically: YES, the church *can* be the instrument of God’s mission, but only if it commits itself to something beyond itself—that is, beyond its own life, its own existence, and its own institutional identity. The church can be God’s instrument for mission if it is willing to live for something beyond institutional maintenance and survival, and that “something” in theological shorthand is the “kingdom of God”.

There is no question that we need to do a lot of careful and thorough biblical study on the meaning of the kingdom and its significance for Christian society, for the mission of the church, and for the mission of God. That is a priority task because we don't want to get fixated on notions of the kingdom that stem from nineteenth century liberalism, from cultural Christianity, or from the social gospel. We need to do original exegesis and study on the subject of the kingdom in the context of our own age and of our need for a fresh missionary vision. A proper understanding of the church's missionary task today depends on it.

The kingdom of God is theological shorthand, as I have said, for all that God intends for the world, for creation, for nature, for history, and certainly also for the church as the special *instrument* of that kingdom. For when we now speak of the kingdom of God as the goal of mission we speak much more carefully about "the mission of the church" than in the past, when we either ignored the kingdom in our thinking or simply absorbed it into our thinking about the church. We now are likely to accentuate the church's *response* to the mission of God or to speak of the church's role *within* the *missio dei*. We have learned to see the relation between church and kingdom eschatologically, and this has an impact on both our understanding of mission and ecumenism.

Quite obviously, the kingdom means such things as peace and justice. It means in some way the search for a just, durable and sustainable society. It means a society that facilitates participation for all groups of people, in poor lands and in developing economies as well as in the rich lands which control those economies. It means the wolf dwelling with the lamb, and the leopard with the kid (Isaiah 11:6). It means all the biblical symbols of the "peaceable kingdom".

Today our missiological focus centers, as I have said, on "seeking the kingdom" rather than on the nineteenth century goal of "church-planting".<sup>2</sup> Nowadays we seldom speak of "building the kingdom", in the words of the old "social gospel". We are apt to speak more biblically and to talk about "waiting for the kingdom", "praying for the kingdom", "heralding the kingdom", or "preparing for the kingdom". We try to be sensitive to what God is saying to the church as the bearer of the message of the kingdom.

In ecumenical missionary thinking the year 1980 was a kind of turning point, for in that year the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches convened a world conference in Melbourne, Australia, on the subject *Your Kingdom Come*. It was one of a series of world meetings on mission and evangelism that go back to Edinburgh 1910. At Melbourne for the first time, in my recollection, the kingdom was taken as the *central theme* for a mission assembly. It solidified a tendency—the shift from church-centric to kingdom-oriented missionary thinking—that had begun as early as 1950 with the work of Johannes Hoekendijk,<sup>3</sup> referred to in the previous lecture. Since that time we can say that ecumenical missionary thinking generally, and much of post-Vatican II Roman Catholic missionary thinking, and even some evangelical missionary reflection, revolves around the kingdom or “realm of God” paradigm rather than the notion that church-planting is the goal of mission.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Soritua Nababan, Ephorus of the HKBP Church of Sumatra, Indonesia, who was then presiding over the Melbourne meeting, urged delegates “to pray confidently, for the kingdom is already in our midst”, but also to “pray expectantly, for the kingdom in all its fulness is yet to come.”<sup>5</sup> Dr. Krister Stendahl, conference Bible study leader, commented that the Lord’s Prayer is “a sustained cry for the coming of the kingdom”, and in praying it we are “lifted into God’s (own) agenda by the very spirit in which Jesus taught us so to pray.”<sup>6</sup> Both Lutheran participants were probably echoing the Reformer’s catechetical thought that the kingdom of God “comes indeed of itself without our aid... but we pray that it may come in us also.” Before we think of the kingdom as a plan or strategy for action we must be clear that it represents God’s own power and gift, not our human construction. We can do no better than to adapt all our hoping, praying, and acting to the mind and spirit of the Triune God who is the true author of mission. Mission oriented toward the kingdom is thus always *Missio dei*—the mission of God—before it becomes the mission of the church. Our prayer is that at a very minimum we do not become *obstacles* to the coming of God’s kingdom and that the church, despite its weaknesses and temptations, may remain faithful and obedient to God’s intention.

## II. Mission in the Way of the Kingdom.

Melbourne gave expression to the new ecumenical agenda concerning mission done in the way of the kingdom. It was in one way a meeting focussed on prayer and expectation of the kingdom; but in another way it was a major occasion for reflecting on the *design* of that kingdom, as we can see in the presentations and reports on the major sections.<sup>7</sup>

Section I, "Good News to the Poor", sets forth the view that "in the perspective of the Kingdom, God has a *preference* for the poor." This was Melbourne's 1980 echo of the so-called "preferential option for the poor" which had been voiced by the Latin American Bishops Conference as early as 1968 (CELAM II, Medellin, Colombia [CELAM is the acronym of the Spanish "Conference of Latin American Bishops"]) and was strongly reiterated by the Roman Catholic bishops at their conference at Puebla, Mexico, in 1979 (CELAM III). The "preferential option" does not mean that the church should *abandon* the rich or the middle class to concentrate exclusively on the poor. What it does seem to mean is that because it is God's *own* preference to reveal salvation to the poor, the church should be on track with "where God is", and identify itself with the lowliest, the least, the powerless, and those who in the past have been overlooked as the objects of the church's ministry. The preferential option is in that sense a kind of remedial action to redress neglect and imbalances of the past. Much of the Bible study focussed on alleged differences between the Matthean and Lukan versions of the Sermon on the Mount, especially in the contrasting versions of Jesus' Beatitude: "Blessed are the poor" (Luke) and "Blessed are the poor in Spirit" (Matthew). Advocates of the preferential option generally defended the view that the Lukan version literally referred to those who are *materially* poor, while many westerners stubbornly clung to the Matthean version and argued that those who are "poor in spirit", however rich they might be in this world's goods, are not excluded from God's kingdom. This prompted much half-serious discussion of the question of whether the rich and secure could after all be saved, and whether there was a place in the kingdom for delegates from affluent countries.

Following the Melbourne meeting Dr. Emilio Castro, at that time Executive Director of the World Council of Churches'



Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) and later to become Philip Potter's successor as WCC General Secretary, attempted to capsulize the significance of the conference by saying that the church's relation to the poor had become a new criterion for the "authenticity and credibility of the church's missionary engagement... the missiological principle, the missionary yardstick, is the relation of the church to the poor."<sup>8</sup> Such statements had a real impact, but fell far short of making the church's relation to the poor the new *norm* for missionary activity. In spite of Melbourne 1980, it is pretty clear that the church's relation to the poor has not yet become the real yardstick of missionary faithfulness for many Protestant mission agencies.

Section IV, "Christ Crucified and Risen Challenges Human Power", came the closest to spelling out the practical implications of making the church's relation to the poor the new "missiological yardstick". The report of this section contained hard-hitting statements about taking the churches' assets and putting them on the line, risking the churches' security and prestige, and becoming not merely "churches for the poor" but *poor churches*. A lot of debate followed on what it meant to become churches *of* the poor or *with* the poor. Some said that you could not become a "church for the poor" unless you were prepared to become a *poor church*, and that would mean ridding the church of investments, pension funds, and costly edifices—all of these would have to go if the church was to take the form of a servant. That discussion went on to take in executive salaries, fringe benefits and clergy life-styles. Yet I am not aware that any of the western delegates felt compelled to go home and sell off assets or request a cut in salary. The challenge of the Risen Christ to "human power"—in this case the economic power of the institutional church—carried a deep emotional impact and brought to the surface the unexamined worldliness and secularity of many of the churches' financial practices, but it led to no sudden revolution. Yet it was not lost on the delegates that the church seen as the instrument and servant of God's kingdom would look quite different from the church seeking to extend and enhance itself.

The missionary role itself was re-invented on the basis of a different missionary model at Melbourne. At most past mission conferences, it is fair to say, the traditional missionary hero was

St. Paul in the *Acts of the Apostles*, striding from one imperial city to the next, fearlessly proclaiming the gospel of Christ crucified, confronting both religious and secular authorities, occasionally being run out of town, but everywhere establishing Christian communities. The sense of the victorious march of the gospel from Jerusalem and Galilee to Rome and the gentile world runs through the book of Acts. Somewhat akin to it is St. Peter's bold proclamation in the Jerusalem temple courts that "there is no other name under heaven by which human beings can be saved." Past missionary models have generally stressed the *triumphs* of the kingdom, even when its particular agents suffered momentary martyrdom. But at Melbourne the new missionary model was that of Jesus Christ, crucified outside the gates—outside the walls of Jerusalem—on a hill reserved for the execution of criminals and malefactors. The Melbourne "Statement", framed by Kosuke Koyama, stressed that the church was called to leave its traditional *centers* of power where the power brokers of the day—the Sanhedrin and the Sadducees—met to talk over the day's business, in order to go outside the gates to the *fringes* of society where Jesus Christ was. For Christ was always to be found with the poor, the powerless, and the "unimportant" in the sight of the world. "Go out and join Jesus where he is." Melbourne gave us a new "imitation of Christ" in missionary terms: being in the world as Christ was in the world, embodying the marks of the servant, and allowing the world to see that Christ's followers bear the stigmata of the Lord's wounds in their own persons. The movement was seemingly away from public *proclamation* of Christ crucified and risen toward *incarnating* Christ crucified in the life of the Christian community; away from an objective ministry and church-planting toward a fuller realization of the terms of discipleship as a missionary method.

At the Melbourne conference, missionary reflection began as a meditation on the prayer "Your Kingdom Come", but then came to center decisively on the synoptic figure of Jesus Christ "crucified outside the gates" as the model of missionary obedience. Pressed to its limits, this new model would come as a continuing challenge to the traditional church-centric model based largely on objective preaching, teaching, service ministries, and church planting. The Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the WCC, apparently sensing that

work on the Melbourne theme was not finished, and believing that it needed deeper exploration, has chosen for its next world conference on mission and evangelism an umbrella theme that flows directly out of Melbourne 1980. The 1989 CWME World Conference on Mission and Evangelism which meets in San Antonio, Texas, in May 1989, will reflect on the theme "Your Will Be Done: Mission in Christ's Way".<sup>9</sup> The selection of this *christological* theme, and the focus on "Christ's way" in contrast for example to "Christ as *the way*", strongly suggests a movement away from visible word and sacraments toward *ethics* and *spirituality* as the center of missionary reflection. It is too early to speculate about the wider implications of this new direction, but it seems more likely to generate reflection on the spiritual health and vitality of Christianity in the western secular world than to be productive of new evangelistic ventures or efforts to reach unevangelized people.

### III. Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation.

Is there then an ecumenical consensus on the theological meaning of mission and evangelism, and on the practical implications to be drawn from them? That would appear to be an over-statement, particularly when recent developments in the evangelical missionary world are taken into account. But one can perhaps begin to speak of a growing "convergence" with regard to mission goals and objectives. One of the best evidences of this is the CWME's statement entitled *Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation*,<sup>10</sup> a document which deserves to be far better known. It was adopted by the World Council of Churches Central Committee in 1982 and then formally presented to the WCC member churches at the 1983 Vancouver Assembly. The publication of this statement is one of the most fortunate events to occur in the field of ecumenical missiology within our decade, for it establishes a middle or "centrist" position within the ecumenical family of churches around which a great many people can rally. Its effect has been to encourage missionary solidarity rather than polarization; the statement has been applauded by many Roman Catholics and some evangelicals as affirming much that is precious in their own traditions. This is not to deny that important differences of viewpoint and emphasis remain between



the "Ecumenical Affirmation" and the positions of evangelicals and Roman Catholics.<sup>11</sup> I simply want to suggest that the WCC's "Ecumenical Affirmation" has been a source of healing and reconciliation—a kind of bridge-building effort—for relations between the major mission constituencies, and this is certainly a net gain.

In the "Ecumenical Affirmation" the World Council of Churches returns to its historic position that mission and unity are integrally related. The church's calling to world mission and its calling to manifest the unity which is given in Jesus Christ belong together. Unity is *for mission*, and mission is *in unity*. The member churches of various denominations and confessional backgrounds are together called to carry out their eschatological task of heralding the kingdom, of announcing that God's reign has drawn near in the coming of the crucified and risen Christ, and of declaring hope for a future when God will be pleased to unite all things in heaven and on earth in Jesus Christ. Mission done in competition or conflict between divided segments of Christendom undermines the credibility of the gospel promise; it destroys the evidence that God in Jesus Christ has overcome barriers and is making us one. For this reason the eschatological urgency of witnessing in the whole earth to the reign of God before the Lord comes again transforms mission and unity from competing challenges into intimate partners.

The "Ecumenical Affirmation" takes the form of a preface, a call to mission followed by a call to proclamation and witness, seven specific "ecumenical convictions" regarding mission priorities, and a concluding reflection entitled "Looking toward the Future". Listen to the ringing challenge of the preface:

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. This evangelistic calling has a new urgency today.

Many people rejoiced to hear this kind of statement coming from the WCC—people who assumed that the World Council of Churches had fallen into apostasy and who attacked it for its programs to combat racism, to bring about divestment in South Africa, and its support for left-wing causes.

In a world where the number of people who have no opportunity to know the story of Jesus is growing steadily, *how necessary it is to multiply the witnessing vocation of the church!*

Here is an emphasis previously made mainly by evangelical Christians who constantly refer to the situation of the three billion plus who have not even heard the gospel or have not heard it in such a way that it seriously addresses their situation.

In a world where the majority of those who do not know Jesus are the poor of the earth, those to whom he promised the kingdom of God, *how essential it is to share with them the Good News of that kingdom!*

Note the linkage between evangelization and the church's relation to the poor that was strongly accentuated at the Melbourne conference.

In a world where people are struggling for justice, freedom and liberation, often without the realisation of their hopes, *how important it is to announce that God's kingdom is promised to them!*

Note here especially the link between evangelization and liberation.

In a world where the marginalised and the drop-outs of affluent society search desperately for comfort and identity in drugs or esoteric cults, *how imperative it is to announce that he has come so that all may have life and may have it in all its fullness (John 10:10)!*

Note here the emphasis on re-evangelization in the post-Christian west.

In a world where so many find little meaning, except in the relative security of their affluence, *how necessary it is to hear once again Jesus' invitation to discipleship, service and risk!*

In a world where so many Christians are nominal in their commitment to Jesus Christ, *how necessary it is to call them again to the fervour of their first love!*

These statements do a nice job of balancing the historic concern for evangelization with the *prophetic* concerns of the ecumenical movement in a way that says that Jesus Christ is for *all* people. There is not one Christ for evangelicals who want to reach out to unreached peoples and proclaim the gospel to them, and another Christ for ecumenical Christians who want to liberate those who live under oppression and in the shadow of death. There is only a *single Christ* whose magisterial and dominical authority includes and extends over both.

Let us turn to the seven "ecumenical convictions" which give substance to the point about convergence. They follow a section entitled "call to proclamation and witness" which asserts that "the starting point of our proclamation is Christ and Christ crucified."

To believe in Jesus the King is to accept his undeserved grace and enter with him into the Kingdom, taking sides with the poor struggling to overcome poverty. Both those who announce Jesus as the servant king and those who accept this announcement and respond to it are invited to enter with him daily in identification and participation with the poor of the earth.

The Church proclaims Jesus, risen from the dead. Through the resurrection, God vindicates Jesus, and opens up a new period of missionary obedience until he comes again (Acts 1:11).

The "ecumenical convictions" which follow are described as perceptions held by Christians of diverse confessions and traditions "under which they covenant to work for the kingdom of God." The process by which just these seven convictions were selected as "ecumenical" is not described, but there appears to be very wide support for them as being representative.

### 1. Conversion.

It is highly significant that "conversion" comes first in the list of seven ecumenical convictions, for in recent years it has seldom been mentioned in ecumenical literature. In the "Ecumenical Affirmation" it regains its historic priority in the biblical sequence of evangelism, and in the practice of the modern missionary movement. "Each person is entitled to hear the good news." Conversion is an encounter with God revealed in Jesus Christ which includes "the calling... to specific changes, to renounce evidences of the domination of sin in our lives and to accept responsibilities in terms of God's love for our neighbour." The call to conversion is addressed to all nations, groups and families; it should begin with the "repentance of those who do the calling, who issue the invitation." Far from being a one-time emotional experience, conversion gives meaning to people in all stages of life. It relates to the covenant of baptism which is "constantly re-enacted by daily dying with Christ" to sin, to self and to the world, and "rising again with him into the servant body of Christ to become a blessing for the surrounding community." This conviction means specific changes in our life as we are converted to God in Christ through the Spirit. It means renouncing the dominion of sin and committing ourselves to the Lord's messianic ministry. It does not mean "walking a sawdust trail" but rather long-term involvement in the ministry which Christ carried out in his own life and sent out his apostles to continue.

## 2. The Gospel to all Realms of Life.

This conviction witnesses to the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all human history—including nature and the cosmos. “We cannot limit our witness to a supposedly private area of life. The lordship of Christ is to be proclaimed to all realms of life.” The church claims the right and duty to exist publicly and to address itself to all issues of human concern.

In the fulfilment of its vocation, the Church is called to *announce* Good News in Jesus Christ, forgiveness, hope, a new heaven and a new earth; to *denounce* powers and principalities, sin and injustice; to *console* the widows and orphans, healing, restoring the broken-hearted; and to *celebrate* life in the midst of death.

In doing so the church will not hesitate to venture prophetically into such areas as science, technology, bio-medical ethics, nuclear dilemmas, environmental issues, and communication. Christian witness will point toward Jesus Christ “in whom real humanity is revealed and who is in God’s wisdom the centre of all creation.” Here we see with full clarity how the move from the older church-centric missionary viewpoint toward the orientation of the kingdom has freed the church to tackle a world-encompassing agenda of human and social concerns.

## 3. The Church and Its Unity in God’s Mission.

This conviction demonstrates that while the church in the service of the kingdom may no longer be primarily concerned about extending its own institutional life—as for example in “church growth” philosophy—it is nevertheless the church which in its unity remains God’s special instrument for global mission. “To receive the message of the kingdom of God is to be incorporated into the body of Christ, the Church”, and churches are to be “signs of the kingdom” for the world. Yet, as the statement notes, there are “many betrayals of this high calling in the history of the churches”; and there are many people who are “attracted to the vision of the kingdom (but who) find it difficult to be attracted to the concrete reality of the Church.” The missionary and ecumenical task cannot proceed apart from the *continual process of renewal of the churches*:

The challenge facing the churches is not that the modern world is unconcerned about their evangelistic message, but rather whether they are so renewed in their life and thought that they become



a living witness to the integrity of the Gospel. The evangelizing churches need themselves to receive the Good News and to let the Holy Spirit remake their life when and how he wills.

Church renewal and transformation go on in many ways and at different levels. Some particular signs of it are the house gatherings of the church in China, the basic ecclesial communities of Latin America, liturgical renewal, biblical renewal, revival of monastic vocation, and the charismatic movement. A natural consequence of renewal and growth toward unity in Christ should be *common witness* and outreach among congregations, especially at the local level. "The unity we look for is not uniformity but the multiple expression of a common faith and a common mission."

#### 4. Mission in Christ's Way.

As already noted, this theme has been selected for intense study and reflection at the WCC CWME's decennial World Conference on Mission and Evangelism to be held in San Antonio, 22 May to 1 June 1989. It is predictable that we shall be hearing much more on this topic. The ecumenical conviction simply states: "Our obedience in mission should be patterned on the ministry and teaching of Jesus." It makes the observation that "an imperialistic crusader's spirit was foreign to him", and goes on to suggest that our mission methodologies—which are never neutral or value free—need to be examined to determine whether they "illustrate or betray the Gospel we announce." In every communication of the Gospel, "power must be subordinate to love." Mission done in Christ's way raises far-reaching issues of style and method. It seems to imply that sound doctrine—the old Lutheran *shibboleth*—may become less important in mission than the manner in which we *model* Christ in our behavior and in the way we present ourselves to other human beings. Do people see the stigmata—the marks of Christ—in the palms of our hands? The response of St. Thomas is very pertinent here: "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails... I will not believe" (John 20:25). "Mission calls for a serving church in every land, a church which is willing to be marked with the stigmata (nailmarks) of the crucified and risen Lord. In this way the church will show that it belongs to that movement of God's love shown in Christ who went to the periphery of life."

### 5. Good News to the Poor.

This topic has already been addressed, as it formed the centerpiece of discussion at the 1980 Melbourne Conference, where it was lifted up as a new "missionary yardstick". It challenges the church to find new ways to identify with the marginal, the powerless, the victims of racism, and those who are often isolated from help.

The Church of Jesus Christ is called to preach the Good News to the poor following the example of its Lord who was incarnated as poor, who lived as one among them and gave to them the promise of the kingdom of God. Jesus looked at the multitudes with compassion. He recognized the poor as those who were sinned against, victims of both personal and structural sin.

The proclamation of the gospel among the poor is a "sign of the messianic kingdom and a priority criterion by which to judge the validity of our missionary engagement today." Taking this criterion seriously would involve churches everywhere, but especially in the western world, in far-reaching changes in structure, life-style and mission methodology which to date are not yet visible on a large scale. Each of us can probably count on the fingers of one hand the number of ministries and congregations that are primarily dedicated to working with and among the poor.

### 6. Mission in and to Six Continents.

This conviction wishes to affirm that mission is the task of the church everywhere, and that all churches exist in a missionary situation, including churches that have existed for centuries. The movement of refugees and migrants "brings the missionary frontier to the doorstep of every parish." Christian engagement in global mission activities—i.e. in evangelization at the ends of the earth—will be "credible if... authenticated by a serious missionary engagement at home." Faithful commitment to Christ in national or local situations makes missionary concern in other parts of the world more authentic. This ecumenical conviction wants to insist on the demise of the old dichotomy between sending and receiving churches, between East and West, North and South, and to affirm that all churches wherever they exist are churches in mission. "Each local parish, each Christian, must be challenged to assume responsibility in the total mission of the Church." This should

not mean the ending of what was formerly called "foreign missions". "There will always be need for those who have the calling and the gift to cross frontiers, to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to serve in his name." But the specialized missionary vocation of "foreign missionaries" should not serve as an *alibi* for the whole church but much more become the occasion for each local church to rethink its total missionary commitment and its share in the task of world evangelization at home, regionally, and at the ends of the earth. This view of "mission in and to six continents" carries with it implications for the ecumenical sharing of personnel and resources which cannot be gone into here.

### 7. Witness Among People of Living Faiths.

No ecumenical conviction is more essential nor more troubling than this one. There is wide agreement that "Christians owe the message of God's salvation in Jesus Christ to every person and every people", but far less agreement on the Christian theological attitude toward other faiths. There is also general ecumenical agreement that "true witness follows Jesus Christ in respecting and affirming the uniqueness and freedom of others", and in not regarding dialogue with persons of other faiths primarily as an opportunity to proselytize. "Among Christians there are still differences of understanding as to how this salvation in Christ is available to people of diverse religious persuasions," says the statement, noting that "the Spirit of God is constantly at work in ways that pass human understanding." What this ecumenical conviction wishes to make clear is that Christians are not asked to surrender their own convictions as they witness to neighbors of other faith or engage in dialogue.

Life with people of other faiths and ideologies is an encounter of commitments. Witness cannot be a one-way process, but of necessity is two-way; in it Christians become aware of some of the deepest convictions of their neighbours. It is also the time in which, within a spirit of openness and trust, Christians are able to bear authentic witness, giving an account of their commitment to the Christ, who calls all persons to himself.

Further theological work on this ecumenical conviction will be a priority missiological task for the decade of the nineties, as Christians take seriously their commitment to witness in word and deed to Muslims, Marxists and "New Age" religionists.

The challenge will be to develop a basis for missionary engagement with people of other faith which is faithful to the spirit of Christ but avoids the pitfall of theological universalism.

The seven convictions end with a reaffirmation of the church's call to "be present and to articulate the meaning of God's love in Jesus Christ for every person and for every situation." This call will not succeed unless supported by prayer, contemplation, adoration and the gift of the Holy Spirit. "The same Lord who sends his people to cross all frontiers and to enter into the most unknown territories in his name is the one who assures, 'I am with you always, to the close of the age'." So ends the statement.

Despite some weaknesses and unresolved issues, "Ecumenical Affirmation" is an exceedingly valuable statement which somehow manages to synthesize our concerns for the church's traditional mission of church-planting with our newer concerns of mission directed toward the goals of the kingdom. The church is reaffirmed as a missionary instrument but it is now a very different church:

- a church living under the cross—a martyr church;
- a church acknowledging its servant character;
- a church authentically embodying and following Christ;
- a church present with the poor and homeless, and vulnerable
- a church which patiently listens and practices dialogue.

The concerns of God's kingdom are uppermost in the missionary thinking and planning of this church:

- a church witnessing to hope for the poor and the oppressed;
- a church present in all sectors, and witnessing to all realms;
- a church showing by its growing unity that reconciliation is taking place among Christians, allowing its witness to become more credible;
- a church living its life among a variety of nations, cultures and religions, speaking relevantly to people in their life situations.

#### **IV. An Ecumenical Vision of Mission: Concluding Reflection.**

Ecumenical mission is now at the point of having achieved a working synthesis between mission at stage 2—which I described as church planting and extension—and stage 3, mission



as a sign of the kingdom and oriented toward the manifestation of God's kingdom in the world. We should rejoice in this synthesis, and in my view Lutherans should also embrace it. It holds the promise of retaining what was truest and best in the older approach, while opening up the church to a vision which embraces more of God's mission in the world and is required by our eschatological vision of the kingdom. Let me now share with you six signs pointing to the presence of the kingdom among the people of God.<sup>12</sup> By means of these we can know that we are living under the reign of God:

- 1 Jesus Christ is being proclaimed as Lord and Savior.
- 2 A new community is taking form which rejects race, class, tribe or nation as the basis for its identity, founded on the work of the Holy Spirit.
- 3 Biblical *shalom* is being actualized.
- 4 The power of evil is being overcome.
- 5 Those who bear witness to the power of the kingdom and give their allegiance to it experience opposition, confrontation, and even persecution.
- 6 The eschatological prayer, "Your kingdom come", becomes the center of worship. The Christian community yearns for the coming of Christ and his kingdom, now present only in incomplete form, in its fulness.

## Notes

- 1 This is the last of three lectures delivered by Prof. Scherer at the Annual Theological Conference held at the Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon, 11-12 May 1988.
- 2 J. Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction*, E.T. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) reflects this: "... missiology is more and more coming to see the kingdom of God as the hub around which all of mission work revolves. One can almost speak of a consensus developing on this point" (203).
- 3 Cf. J.C. Hoekendijk, *The Church Inside Out*, E.T. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966) 32-46.
- 4 Oddly, the conservative evangelical community, and particularly that part of it committed to "church growth" philosophy, has now become the leading advocate of "church-centric" missionary thinking and planning.
- 5 Cited in J.A. Scherer, *Gospel, Church and Kingdom: Comparative Studies in World Mission Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987) 132.
- 6 Ibid.

- <sup>7</sup> The official report is entitled *Your Kingdom Come: Mission Perspectives*. Report on the World Conference on Mission and Evangelism, Melbourne, Australia, 12–25 May 1980 (Geneva: WCC/CWME, 1980). The North American Report is entitled *Witnessing to the Kingdom: Melbourne and Beyond*, ed. G.H. Anderson (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1982). In my own book, *Gospel, Church and Kingdom*, the Melbourne section reports are discussed on pp. 133–145.
- <sup>8</sup> Cited in *Gospel, Church and Kingdom*, 142–143.
- <sup>9</sup> *Your Will Be Done: Mission in Christ's Way*. World Conference on Mission and Evangelism. 22 May–1 June 1989, San Antonio, Texas, USA. The major sub-themes are: (1) turning to the Living God; (2) participating in suffering and struggle; (3) the earth is the Lord's; and (4) toward renewed communities in mission.
- <sup>10</sup> Found in *International Review of Mission*, Vol. LXXI/284, October 1982, 427–451; also available as a "Study Guide for Congregations", edited by Jean Stromberg, from the NCCCUSA Division of Overseas Ministries, New York City. Paragraph citations are from the IRM text.
- <sup>11</sup> For the evangelical missionary movement, the *Lausanne Covenant* (1974) remains the bench-mark statement on mission theology and practice; for Roman Catholics, Pope Paul VI's Apostolic Exhortation *The Evangelization of the People of Our Time* ("Evangelii Nuntiandi") is the normative statement. Both are examined in my book, *Gospel, Church and Kingdom*, 168–177, 202–206.
- <sup>12</sup> These signs are taken from the conclusion of Wilbert R. Shenk's chapter on "Kingdom, Mission and Growth" in W.R. Shenk, ed. *Exploring Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983)