

TOGETHER TOWARDS LIFE:

MISSION AND EVANGELISM IN CHANGING LANDSCAPES

A STUDY GUIDE FOR USE BY COURTS AND COMMITTEES WITHIN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA

The Committee on Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations and the Life and Mission Agency commend this study guide to congregations and committees of the church. While it is part of the “study and report” recommendation from the 2014 General Assembly, with responses to be sent to the committee by the end of January, the committee is very much aware that the primary value in this document is to foster lively theological discussion within The Presbyterian Church in Canada on mission and evangelism in church today. That discussion can take place at any time and your feedback will be appreciated by the committee both for communicating back to the World Council of Churches and also to share within our own church. The committee, when it went through the study, could imagine that the fourfold presentation of the document and study: Spirit of Mission, Liberation, Community and Pentecost could form a very fruitful Lenten study.

The committee is grateful to The Rev. Dr. Ron Wallace for his work in preparing this guide.

INTRODUCTION

Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes is the second of only two statements on mission and evangelism to have received official approval by the World Council of Churches (WCC) since the integration of the International Missionary Council (IMC) and the WCC at the New Delhi Assembly in 1961. Since the integration, the WCC’s Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) has carried on the work of the IMC. Both of these statements on mission and evangelism were written collaboratively by members of the CWME and are the result of a lengthy process of ecumenical discussion carried on both within the CWME and beyond.

The Central Committee of the WCC approved the first official statement, *Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation*, in 1982. The new statement, *Together towards Life: Mission in Changing Landscapes*, was approved by the WCC’s Central Committee in September 2012, and then presented to the 10th Assembly of the WCC at Busan, Republic of Korea, in the fall of 2013. The new statement is not meant to supersede the previous one but rather to supplement and complement it.

There have been a considerable number of changes in the context in which mission and evangelism take place since 1982. Among these is the increasing awareness that the centre of world Christianity has moved from the countries of the Global North (primarily Europe and North America) to the countries of the Global South (Africa, Asia and Latin America), the accelerating decline of church membership and therefore amount of influence of churches in societies of the Global North, the rise of post-modern worldviews among younger generations, the increase in migration of peoples from one country to another that is a result both of economic globalization and climate change, and the refusal of marginalized peoples everywhere to accept their traditional place at the bottom of their societies. These

are just some of the more prominent features of the “changing landscapes” of mission and evangelism that the new statement seeks to address.

It is the prayer and hope of the WCC that *Together towards Life* will have a broad appeal, one that will extend even wider than WCC member churches and affiliated mission bodies, and that it will lead both to a renewed vision for, and a renewed understanding and practice of, mission and evangelism both within and beyond the WCC family of churches.

To facilitate the reception and discussion of *Together towards Life*, and hopefully to help churches everywhere to review and renew their current understanding and practice of mission, the statement has been made available on the WCC website (oikoumene.org). It has also been published in book form together with a four-session study guide that includes Bible studies, examples of contemporary witness, prayers and songs. Included with the book is an accompanying DVD that contains video on the history and activities of the CWME and the texts of eight preparatory studies, the most important results of which were incorporated into the final text of *Together towards Life*.

The study guide produced by the WCC would be an excellent resource for any of our Presbyterian Church in Canada congregations considering a four- or five-week study on mission and evangelism in the changing landscapes of our contemporary world. However, it was not prepared to be used as a resource for a session, presbytery or church committee that would have time for only a one-session discussion of *Together towards Life*, whether at a started hour, as one item on a lengthy agenda of business or even at a special meeting; hence, the writing of this study guide, which is much shorter and, hopefully, better suited to such a purpose.

OVERVIEW OF THE STATEMENT – ITS STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

Together towards Life begins with a short preface entitled *New Affirmation on Mission and Evangelism*, which provides basic historical information on the why and how of the new affirmation’s journey from conception to official approval. The preface states the purpose of the new affirmation: “It is the aim of this new ecumenical discernment to seek vision, concepts and directions for a renewed understanding and practice of mission and evangelism in changing landscapes.”

To facilitate easy citation and reference to its contents, the paragraphs of *Together towards Life* are numbered from 1–112. Paragraphs 1–11 introduce the major themes of the document, presenting in the first ten paragraphs a summary of the document as a whole. Each of these first ten paragraphs ends with a question related to the special concern of that paragraph. Paragraph 11 introduces the four chapters that develop the major themes introduced in paragraphs 1–10.

The first of these chapters is titled *Spirit of Mission: Breath of Life* and deals with issues related to the theme of mission and spirituality. The second chapter is titled *Spirit of Liberation: Mission from the Margins* and deals with matters related to issues of justice and injustice in the world, in the church and in life as a whole. The third chapter is titled *Spirit of Community: Church on the Move* and deals with

issues related to the topic of mission and ecclesiology; that is to say, mission and the doctrine of the church. The fourth and final chapter, *Spirit and Pentecost: Good News for All*, deals with topics related to current issues in mission and evangelism.

We are told in paragraph 11 that reflection on the matters discussed in these four chapters will enable us to identify and embrace four key concepts that are essential to understanding and participating in mission today. These key concepts are dynamism, justice, diversity and transformation. They are linked with the four chapters that form the main body of *Together towards Life: dynamism with Spirit of Mission*, justice with *Spirit of Liberation*, diversity with *Spirit of Community*, and transformation with *Spirit of Pentecost*.

Together towards Life concludes with a section that presents ten affirmations on mission and evangelism in the changing landscapes of the world today, paragraphs 102–111, that arise out of the material in the four chapters in the body of the statement, and are also the statement's response to the questions that are raised in paragraphs 1–10 of the introduction.

DISCUSSING THE STATEMENT

The 140th General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada passed a motion to the effect that *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* should be sent to the courts and committees of the church for study and report by January 31, 2015. How can this best be done in the one or two hours that most of our presbyteries and church committees will be able to devote to this document during a stated hour or at a special meeting?

There will be little to nothing of any value that will come out of a discussion of this document at a session, presbytery meeting or church committee unless the participants in the discussion have done their homework; that is, unless they make the time to carefully, thoughtfully and prayerfully read the document, at least once, and preferably twice. Once to get the gist of the document and a second time to see how the parts fit together and how the discussion advances to its concluding affirmations. It would be even more helpful, if having read the text of the document carefully, that all participants take some time to think about what implications the statement may have for mission and evangelism, as currently understood and practiced at individual, congregational and national levels within The Presbyterian Church in Canada. For example, what in this document affirms our current understanding and practice of evangelism, and what is there that challenges us to rethink our current understanding and practice?

A worthwhile discussion also requires a good leader. A good leader is a prepared leader. Church courts and committees which take up the challenge to study and report on this document should appoint someone to lead the discussion who is good at leading discussions and is willing to devote the time needed to becoming reasonably knowledgeable about the document and its contents before the meeting. The discussion leader should not be expected to make notes of the various points and comments made during the discussion of the document. Someone else, with a gift for taking good notes,

should be appointed to such a task. The discussion leader already has more than enough to do and to think about.

Together towards Life is only 40 pages long. That is not too much to ask anyone to read by way of preparation, but it is a lot of material to ask any session, presbytery or committee to deal with adequately in the short period of an hour or two. Flexibility is required. What works in larger church courts and committees may not work in smaller ones. Smaller courts and committees may not have the time required to give the whole document the scrutiny it deserves. They may find it more useful to zero in on one or two of the matters dealt with in the document that are of particular interest or relevance to their situation. Larger church courts and committees may find it helpful, once the discussion leader has introduced the document, to break into small groups. Four would be ideal, each of which will then discuss and report back on one of the four main sections of the document. If this is the case, the small group leaders should be chosen in advance so that they can adequately prepare for the task. And as before, someone else should be appointed or volunteer to make notes and to report on them.

To facilitate group discussion of *Together towards Life*, questions relevant to each of the four main chapters in the document are presented below to stimulate conversation and lead it in a productive direction.

Spirit of Mission: Breath of Life

This chapter is notable for its emphasis that the universal role of the Holy Spirit in creation and the particular role of the Holy Spirit in redemption must be understood together. Together they embrace the mission of love that is at the heart of the Trinity—a mission in which all those who love God are called to participate. The chapter presents two different understandings of the role of the Holy Spirit in mission. Paragraph 16 presents a view that is generally characteristic of Protestant churches, and paragraph 17 a view that is characteristic of Eastern Orthodox churches. Compare the two views and their implications for mission. What can we, in The Presbyterian Church in Canada, learn from Orthodox Christians that may enable us to understand and to do mission and evangelism better?

Paragraph 19 calls us “to move beyond a narrowly human-centered approach and to embrace forms of mission which express our relationship with all created life.” Paragraph 20 tells us that “eco-justice cannot be separated from salvation.” What are the implications of this call for a wider understanding of mission and for evangelism, as currently understood and practiced in The Presbyterian Church in Canada?

One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is the gift of discernment. Paragraph 25 tells us that “the churches are called to discern the work of the life-giving Spirit sent into the world and to join with the Spirit in bringing about God’s reign of justice.” How, in practice, are the churches to do this? How can we be sure that our mission is truly aligned with that of the Holy Spirit and not with the spirit of the times or with some other spirit?



What does it really mean to speak of transformative spirituality? Are there legitimate forms of spirituality that cannot be described as transformative, as outlined in paragraph 30? It is common within The Presbyterian Church in Canada to describe many of our ministries as maintenance ministries. Maintenance ministries essentially preserve what already exists. Is there such a thing as preservative spirituality? How does a church whose spirituality is essentially preservative make the transition to a church whose spirituality is essentially transformative?

Spirit of Liberation: Mission from the Margins

Who are the marginalized in our country and in the wider world? How does our understanding of mission and evangelism change when we no longer look at the marginalized as simply the objects of mission but as transformative agents of mission? Are we open to having our ideas, our theology and spirituality, even possibly our very way of life, transformed by the God-given mission of the marginalized?

What does it mean to speak of mission as struggle and resistance? Are we as a church willing and able to stand alongside the marginalized in our world, not just as leaders and advisors, but as those who will take advice and are willing to follow where others lead?

Paragraph 46 tells us that “the good news of God’s reign is about the promise of the actualization of a just and inclusive world.” Is The Presbyterian Church in Canada truly an inclusive church? What kind of people feel welcome and accepted in our congregations? What kind of people do not feel welcome and accepted in our congregations? What are we prepared to do to ensure that everyone feels welcome and accepted?

What does it mean to speak of mission as healing and wholeness? Are Presbyterian congregations places where people can expect to experience healing and are able to become whole? What could we be doing better as a church to ensure that our congregations truly are places where healing occurs and wholeness is achieved?

Spirit of Community: Church on the Move

Paragraph 57 tells us that that the church of God and the mission of God are inseparable, that the church does not have a mission but rather it is the mission that has a church, and that the church exists by mission, just as fire exists by burning. That mission is the essence or very being of the church, and there is no such thing as a church without mission because a church without mission has ceased to be a church. Do you agree? Why or why not? If it is true that church and mission are inseparable, why do we still have members in our churches who think that mission is optional? Is the reason a failure of leadership or of education, or both?

Paragraphs 59–66 deal with matters related to mission and the visible unity of the church. When Jesus prayed for unity among his followers in John 17, the unity envisioned was not an end in itself. Unity was for the sake of mission in order that the world might believe. The lack of visible unity harms the credibility of God’s church and God’s mission in the world. To mitigate this very real problem, the separated churches are called in paragraph 63 to engage, as much as possible, in what is called common witness. What is common witness? How intentional is The Presbyterian Church in Canada, at both the national and congregation level, at engaging in common witness with other branches of the church and in praying and working for the goal of Christian unity? What more could we be doing at both the national and the local levels?

Paragraphs 70 and 71 of *Together towards Life* call the church to a mission of hospitality. The churches are challenged to cross ethnic and cultural boundaries, to become places of refuge for those among us who are marginalized—the poor, the mentally and physically challenged, migrant workers, and new immigrants. What is your congregation doing to exercise a mission of hospitality to the marginalized in your community? What more could your church be doing?

Paragraphs 75–77 of this chapter refer to the changing role of local congregations in mission and evangelism, not only in their local context, but also internationally. There are an increasing number of local congregations who are engaging in international mission work directly, sometimes in co-operation with, sometimes apart from, the mission work of the national church. Paragraph 76 applauds the result that “many inspirational and transformative linkages are being formed between churches that are geographically far apart and located in very different contexts.” At the same time, it cautions the churches that these linkages bring not only possibilities and benefits, but also potential pitfalls. What are some of the benefits and what are some of the potential pitfalls? How can mission be done in such a way as to encourage both local church initiatives and, at the same time, maintain and strengthen long established national church partnerships in international mission when both are dependent on the same source of funds, namely, local church members? Are there some forms of mission that are best done nationally and some that are best done locally? Who decides, and how is the decision made?

Spirit of Pentecost: Good News for All

Paragraph 83 of *Together towards Life* tells us that “evangelism is sharing one’s faith and conviction with other people and inviting them to discipleship, whether or not they adhere to other religious traditions.” It also tells us that “there is no greater gift that we can offer to our fellow human beings than to share and introduce them to the love, grace, and mercy of God in Christ.” If, as Christians, we really believe that there is no greater gift we can offer others than the willingness to share our faith in Christ, why is it that so many members of The Presbyterian Church in Canada find it difficult and are reluctant to do so? If the gospel is truly “good news,” why do our attempts to present the gospel to others too often come across as “bad news”?

Paragraphs 85–92 of the chapter speak about the importance of doing “evangelism in Christ’s way.” Acknowledging that evangelism has sometimes been done in ways that betray rather than embody the



gospel, a distinction is made between “authentic evangelism,” evangelism that incarnates the gospel, and by implication, “inauthentic evangelism,” evangelism that betrays the gospel. What is “authentic evangelism” and what forms of evangelism are not authentic but rather betrayals of the gospel?

Paragraphs 93–96 of the chapter deal with issues related to evangelism and interfaith dialogue. The two are said to be distinct but interrelated. In paragraph 95, it is stated that “evangelism is not the purpose of dialogue,” however, because dialogue involves a mutual sharing of faith commitments, “sharing the good news of Jesus Christ has a legitimate place in it.” If this is acknowledged, why are some Christians suspicious of dialogue and therefore reluctant to engage in it? What should The Presbyterian Church in Canada be doing, if anything, to encourage our members to engage in what is sometimes called the “dialogue of life,” that is, informal discussion of religious similarities and dissimilarities between friends and neighbours in order to better understand and appreciate one another’s religious convictions?

Paragraphs 97–100 of *Together towards Life* address issues related to evangelism and the diversity of human cultures. The plurality of human cultures is acknowledged and celebrated as a divine gift from a God who loves diversity. There is no one privileged branch of Christianity that is the standard by which all are forms are to be evaluated. The gospel must be incarnated in every culture and God worshipped in every language. The diversity of cultures and the diversity of Christian life and worship that this entails are not problems to be overcome, but rather, things to be experienced, celebrated and enjoyed. This is particularly important for those who live in a multi-cultural country like Canada. There are still too many people in our country who are fearful of those who are different, think differently, dress or eat differently, and worship differently. What can we as a church do to address this fear and liberate our fellow citizens, including even our fellow church members, to celebrate, love and rejoice in diversity, even as we also celebrate, love and rejoice that we are all members of one human race, created in the image of God?