

Our Common Task: Mission and Evangelism in Germany

A message from the Council of Christian Churches in Germany to its member churches and associated denominations and all who feel obligated to do mission and evangelism Jesus says, "I am the light of the World" (John 8:12).

In him and his word, in his nature and life God encounters humanity. It is the light of his love which penetrates the cold and darkness of sin and death and gives life. When people let this light into their lives, it does not remain without effect: "You are the salt of the earth! You are the light of the world!" says Jesus to his disciples (Matthew 5:13f). People whose lives are connected to Jesus Christ shine forth with that which Jesus places in their lives. The spice of life and the warmth of the light which he gives cannot be hidden. Where God's love touches people's lives, it acts further through that which they do, that which they say, and that which they are. Christian churches have not always been aware of this reality and its corresponding obligation. It has not been uncommon to find them hiding behind a preoccupation with themselves. But a profound change in awareness has now come about.

In a renewed questioning of their task, all churches have come to the recognition that we should be the ambassadors of Christ to all people. Our proclamation must focus on those who are far off. Our social outreach can help people to experience God's love in their lives in a practical way. And we may celebrate our worship services with the expectation that even outsiders can experience in them the presence of God. Thus it is in speaking of the one Gospel for all people that the unity of our mission must find expression. And adversely, the unity of the Church is not an end unto itself, but rather has - as Jesus prayer for unity shows - a goal: "That the world believe!" (John 17:21).

Therefore, in the last three years the Council of Christian Churches has implemented a consultation process toward the understanding of our common task of mission and evangelism in Germany. To this end, talks have taken place at different levels. In individual member churches of the Council, a series of helpful texts on this theme has been worked out. Thereby it has become clear that an awakening towards a missionary ecumenism is necessary, and that more common ground in our missionary activity is possible. We celebrate the presence of God among us in a variety of ways, and formulate important "Christian truths" differently. This indicates an enriching diversity as well as a painful separation. But we are one in the faith that the triune God desires salvation and life for all people, and we agree with one another in the conviction that our lives as churches and individuals should be vessels through which the life and love of God are offered.

The ecumenical charter stands firm: "The most important task of the churches in Europe is the common proclamation of the Gospel, in both word and deed for the salvation of all." As the Council, we turn to our member churches and associated denominations, and to all who acknowledge their obligations of missionary and evangelism, with the urgent request that we carry out all our missionary activity under the aspect of our common task, and, at the same time, to begin making every effort to reach greater unity with regard to our call to mission. Because we proclaim one God and follow one Lord, we have one message and our mission has one goal. This will also lead to greater unity in practical work: Where we have different priorities, we can learn from one another; and where we use different methods, we can respect and pray for one another.

Acknowledgement of an ultimate unity helps us in matters of ecumenical trust to be free from fears for our individual existence. We must compete in healthy ways without resorting to

contests with one another. Only in this way will we experience anew the strength of the Gospel which breaks down barriers and which can also reach human beings who have distanced themselves from the Church.

During the year 2003, many common Events are projected: The Year of the Bible, the Ökumenische Kirchentag in Berlin, and ProChrist2003 are all opportunities to bring to people the good news of Jesus Christ in new ways. But it is not only large events which help to do this. Actions such as "neu anfangen" or regional or local ecumenical "Kirchentage" and Ecumenical Pilgrim Paths are possibilities to work together even at the congregational level.

We are thankful for the many encouraging experiences which we have already had; but the degree to which lived-out missionary ecumenism at the local level can be experienced is much greater than we had realized. Together we seek contact with people in our society for whom God and the Church no longer have meaning, and invite them to make room for the reality of God's love in their lives. Together we ask with people young and old what life holds, and how - out of the sources of faith - we can realize a life of humanity and worth, free of fear, hatred, and violence. Together we speak with people of other cultures about the content of their faith and life, and share with them what Jesus Christ as God's salvation means for us. In all this, we trust in God and his promise that "a city built on a mountain cannot stay hidden" (Matt. 5:14).

This is true even when the number of those who perceive the light of God's love appears to be diminishing. God's way to humanity began with creation, and continued in the way Jesus went through the ultimate depths of human need until he threw open the gate to life and God's glory with his resurrection. God's "Yes" to humanity becomes our "Yes" to our fellow human beings; God's "No" to all that separates people from him and real life is also our "No". God's mission is also our mission. Therefore, it can only be a common mission.

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