



Ecumenical
LETTER
on Evangelism

Ökumenischer
Brief über
Evangelisation

LETTRE
Œcuménique sur
L'Évangélisation

**Issue No. 3
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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ.

Advent season is a time for reflection, for repentance, for spiritual renewal and for gratitude. We therefore say with the Apostle Paul: 'Thanks be to God for his gift beyond words!' (2 Cor 9:15). It's the gift of Jesus Christ, the source of fullness of life for all creation. This is the gift from God we proclaim!

I am delighted to share with you our third issue of the *Ecumenical Letter on Evangelism*. Many things have happened since our last issue. I was privileged to attend, last summer in Cuba, the III Encounter of Confessional Families, organized by the Latin American Council of Churches (<http://www.clai.org.ec/>). During this meeting I shared a paper on the "Challenges to the Evangelizing Mission of the Church from a Global Ecumenical Perspective".

I also attended the **Europe Emerging Churches Workshop** organized by the Council for World Mission (<http://www.cwmission.org.uk/>) in England last October. At this workshop, I presented the paper "Evangelism in Dialogue" which is published in this ELE issue. At the workshop, we had the exciting possibility to launch the "**Ecumenical Network of Evangelists**" which will be a very important tool to support our work. Access to this Network can be found at: <http://www.ecuspace.net/>

Finally, I had the opportunity to participate at the Europe, Middle East and Africa (EMEA) Alpha Conference, which took place in London a few days ago. The Alpha Courses may be known to some of you and consist of a series of talks addressing key issues relating to the Christian faith, "An Opportunity to explore the meaning of life". More information can be found at www.alpha.org. The popularity and methodology of these Courses pose both interesting and challenging questions to evangelists globally and locally. I found the experience very interesting and I would be happy to receive your comments and views on this subject.

We pray for the Lord to continue blessing and guiding us all as we try to faithfully proclaim the good news of the gospel in our 'oikos' today.

Evangelistically yours,

Carlos Emilio Ham (cah@wcc-coe.org)
WCC Program Executive for Evangelism.

EVANGELISM IN DIALOGUE
Europe Emerging Churches Workshop - CWM
26 Oct – 2 Nov 2005

Introduction.

I would like to begin by thanking the Council for World Mission (CWM) and, in particular, my brother the Rev. Dr. Andrew Williams, for the invitation to participate in the Europe Emerging Churches Workshop”. Indeed it is a great and rich blessing for us and for the World Council of Churches (WCC).

The evangelistic mission is critical, particularly in our times. The Lord is urging us to proclaim afresh and in dialogue, the good news of the gospel, especially here in Europe. We often hear the phrase ‘no news is good news’. When our lives are dominated by a media which considers the ‘good news’ no news, our great challenge as disciples of Christ is to make the ‘good news’ a relevant news to transform the lives of people today.



What do we mean by evangelism in the ecumenical movement?

For some Christians and churches the terms “mission” and “evangelism”, although related, are perceived and used differently; for others the two are virtually identical in both meaning and content. For the WCC’s Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME), the two terms are used with some differentiation.

- a) “Mission” carries a holistic understanding: the proclamation and sharing of the good news of the gospel by word (*kerygma*), deed (*diakonia*), prayer and worship (*leiturgia*) and the everyday witness of the Christian life (*martyria*); teaching as building up and strengthening people in their relationship with God and each other; and healing as wholeness and reconciliation into *koinonia* – communion with God, communion with people, and communion with creation as a whole.
- b) “Evangelism”, while not excluding the different dimensions of mission, focuses on explicit and intentional voicing of the gospel, including the invitation to personal conversion to a new life in Christ and to discipleship (1).

The Church is not an end in itself, it is called by God to proclaim in word and in deed, the *euangelion* of God’s kingdom. For 2000 years we have said: The Church has God’s mission in the world, but we’ve got the order wrong, God’s mission in the world has the Church. The Church is not in possession of God’s mission, rather God is in possession of God’s mission, which is why it is sacred.

1 Study document “Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today”, adopted by the CWME in Morges, Switzerland, 2000, p. 2.

So the term evangelism comes from the Greek word: '*euangelion*', which means on one hand the sharing of the good news of the gospel, and on the other it refers to the messenger (angel) who brings the good news. We, as evangelizers, are messengers, carrying the good news, in permanent dialogue with the world.

"The church does not exist for its own sake, but as a community, sent by God into the world with the mission to proclaim by word and deed, the gospel of God's liberating love in Jesus Christ" (2). To say it in words of His Holiness, Pope Paul VI in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, it is about a movement "from Christ the evangelizer to the evangelizing church" (3).

Now I would like to share some thoughts and experiences which we encounter in our daily work with the churches and, how we see some of the challenges to their evangelizing mission from a global perspective, focusing especially on Europe, which is our area of focus in this workshop.

1. We should benefit from the richness and diversity of the different evangelistic theologies, realities and methods or practices.

North America and Western Europe are perceived as "post-Christian" societies. Many "historical" churches have become "pre-historical". Sanctuaries are being sold to cultural enterprises or even to other religions, pastors are being made redundant for financial reasons, since their churches cannot afford to pay them anymore, cathedrals are converted into museums. The big shopping malls are the new "cathedrals" where people go to worship *mammon*, the god of riches (Mt. 6:24; Luke 16:9-11).

On the other hand, we observe a tremendous growth and revival in the churches of the South. As the "Letter to the Churches", made public after the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism, which took place in Athens, Greece, May 2005, on the theme: "Come Holy Spirit, Heal and Reconcile. Called in Christ to be Reconciling and Healing Communities", says: "we stand now at a particular moment in the history of mission. While the centres of power are still predominantly in the global North, it is in the South and the East that the churches are growing most rapidly, as a result of faithful Christian mission and witness".

Precisely since "the missional character of the Church is experienced in greater diversity than ever, as the Christian communities continue the search for distinctive responses to the gospel and this diversity is challenging, and can sometimes make us uneasy", as the Letter continues to say, it is of critical importance to sponsor workshops and gatherings like this one, with representatives of the churches in different parts of the world in order to continue our dialogue and our partnership in mission, addressing together the challenges of the world today. This is precisely what we are trying to do in our WCC gatherings.

On the other hand, we have to admit the tremendous challenges that the Pentecostal and Evangelical churches are posing to our "historical" churches, when it comes to rescuing the evangelizing passion, which in some instances we have lost. This was precisely one of the criteria that the WCC's Central Committee took into consideration in choosing Porto Alegre, Brazil, as the venue for the WCC's 9th Assembly which will take place in February next year. The churches in the world cannot ignore the tremendous ministry which the churches of this tradition are carrying out in Latin America, and in other continents, as indigenous churches, with

2 Called to Mission (from the document "The International Mission of the Church of Sweden"). Uppsala, 2000, p. 13.

3 Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelization in the Modern World. St. Paul Publications, 1989, p. 17.

a fresh and renewed style and ethos.

Furthermore, the “historical” churches here in Western Europe are also being challenged by the immigrant churches. Again, with their fresh style of being church and of pursuing mission and evangelism, many times, even in hostile circumstances, they are a tremendous example as we try to be faithful to the *missio Dei*. We experience this fact in our Latin American Christian Community in Geneva every Sunday. The community is really a family where concrete expressions of solidarity occur all the time.

How can we create spaces of partnership in mission and in solidarity with these churches, considering that immigrants are not beggars, rather messengers of an unjust world order (or disorder)?

2. We must rescue the holistic and liberating character of the gospel.

Frequently we talk about the holistic character of the gospel, and therefore of the mission and evangelism endeavor. But nevertheless many of the structures of our churches and ecumenical movements in the North and the West reflect a tremendous dichotomy, when they try to pursue diaconia and development, emergency responses, justice, peace and integrity of creation on the one hand, and mission and evangelism on the other, as if they were two different realities. And not only this, but underlining the former at the expense of the latter. No wonder our Pentecostal and Evangelical brothers and sisters question the WCC so much in this regard!

We are called to continuously rescue the unity and complementarity of both diaconia and evangelism as concrete expressions of the integral and holistic mission of the church. This indeed has been a historical contribution of the churches in the South. But we need, of course, to avoid conditioning humanitarian aid to conversion and proselytizing in situations of need, as it has historically happened in different parts of the world, for example, in Iraq, as we speak.

But evangelism is not only holistic, it is also liberating. How can we forget the first sermon preached by Jesus of Nazareth who proclaimed with the prophet Isaiah, saying: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Lk 4: 18-19); even when the concept and the practice of liberation seems to be out of date?

In this regard, we appreciate the words of a former WCC general secretary, Emilio Castro, who said, “the only valid theological method for evangelism is conscious participation in the whole of human life and its problems. For the great mass of people, evangelism is a question not of apologetics but of life. What Gustavo Gutiérrez has said about Latin America – that the people are “poor and believing” – applies to the vast deprived masses throughout the world. The discussion is about explaining the faith in terms of joy, faithfulness, justice and solidarity” (4).

3. We should pursue evangelism in unity, as “common witness”, versus proselytism.

In times of increasing denominationalism and fundamentalism, one of the greatest challenges which the church faces today is to proclaim the good news of the gospel ecumenically, in dialogue, as “common witness”; to announce the gospel in collaboration and not in competition. We oftentimes quote John 17:21 to stress the

4 Article “Evangelism” from the Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement, WCC Publications, Geneva, 2002, p. 445-451.

“visible unity” as an end in itself, but Jesus prays to the Father for unity in mission, “that the world may believe”. Our divisions are a disgrace and proselytism is counter-productive to evangelism which should be carried out in dialogue. Our unity has a purpose, namely to bear “common witness” of the Risen Lord today.

This text of John is an “invitation to confess, a call to reorient our mission and evangelism journey, to affirm the richness of our diversities and at the same to repent of our divisions. Let us fearlessly confess the sin of creating the unnecessary tension between unity and evangelism. We establish a false option: we are either ‘ecumenical churches’ or ‘evangelical churches’. We make irreconcilables two inseparable elements of our mission” (5).

In this context, I greatly appreciate the helpful phrase of the Rev. Dr. Philip Potter when he said: “Evangelism is the test of our ecumenical vocation” (6). The challenge is then, how to evangelize ecumenically and in partnership or dialogue?

The document “Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today” quoted earlier says at the very beginning, “the ecumenical movement has its origins in the missionary movement, for the contemporary search for the unity of the church was initiated within the framework of the mission endeavour. The missionaries were among the first to look for ways and styles of witness in unity, recognizing that the scandal of Christian divisions and denominational rivalries hindered greatly the impact of their message”.

This is, of course, in clear reference to the first Conference on World Mission and Evangelism, which took place in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1910, called by the urgency of a vision, namely, “the evangelization of the world in this generation”.

4. We ought to see the relationship between gospel and culture.

The document “Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today” devotes an extensive section to this important theme, recognizing that “God’s mission has been revealed as incarnational. Mission in Christ’s way thus cannot but be rooted in a certain context, concretely addressing the challenges in that specific context. Hence the gospel is and must be ‘translatable’”, and further quotes a text from the 1996 Salvador mission conference in these words, “the gospel reconciles and unites people of all identities into a new community in which the primary and ultimate identity is identity in Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:28)” (7).

4.1. Situation of violence.

We are experiencing in Europe a tremendous culture of violence, which, of course is not limited to the “old” continent, but is extended throughout the whole world. Our world today is one of neo-liberal globalization, of increasing poverty and fragmentation by violence and ideological-based terrorism. This is why the WCC has launched the Decade to Overcome Violence and the CWME Commission chose the mission paradigm of healing and reconciliation, as we have seen in this paper, for the Athens mission conference.

5 Batista, Israel (general secretary of the Latin American Council of Churches – CLAI) in the working document “Unidad y Evangelización” (“Unity and Evangelism”), Quito, Ecuador, 2005.

6 Philip Potter’s speech to the Roman Catholic Synod of Bishops, Rome, 1974. Quoted in the 1982 document “Mission and Evangelism – An Ecumenical Affirmation”, p. 2.

7 Study document “Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today” – Op. Cit. Paragraphs 48 & 50, quoting the Salvador report, p.46.

In the conference's Preparatory Paper No. 3, CWME acknowledged that "in a time of globalization with increasing violence, fragmentation and exclusion, the mission of the church is to receive, celebrate, proclaim and work for reconciliation, healing and fullness of life in Christ".

So, in the midst of a culture of death and violence, the Lord is calling us for a new ecumenical effort, the task of a new evangelization. There is a bigger problem than the church down the road, which is the "culture of death". We are urged to promote a "culture of peace" and nonviolence with a strong prophetic voice.

4.2. Secular context.

In an extremely secular culture, like the one we have in Europe, in which most of the people are no longer driven by a Christian spirituality like in centuries before, but rather by materialism and consumerism, what is the meaning of the gospel for this culture today? How can we share the good news with the rich as well? After all many of the wealthy are poor in spirit, they are not happy, they have lost meaning in their lives, even when they have more than what they need to live with. For example, I am always puzzled by the high suicide rate in super-developed countries (in Switzerland, for example – 3 per day in a population of 7 million).

Another example, in the UK, there is reportedly a 20% decrease in church attendance, and at the same time a 60% increase in spirituality. How do the traditional church structures respond to this challenge of people "believing" and not "belonging"? How do the statistics above affect our culture of sharing the values of the gospel? **What** are the core values of the gospel for Europe today and **how** can we share them for transformation?

Many people today try to find new forms of spirituality, which explains the increase and expansion of "new religious movements", even of "Satanic" groups (which worship Satan!). Nevertheless, why was it that the Christian sanctuaries in the USA and in Western Europe were packed after the 9/11 attacks in New York City? Why did so many pilgrims go to the Vatican in the time of the death of the pope John Paul II? Was it merely because he was a charismatic leader, or were people seeking for something more for their lives? How does the reality described above challenge the evangelistic task of the Church today? How to rethink evangelism both in terms of form and content in a situation where the Christian culture plays no longer such a vital part in civil society?

I appreciate that in our workshop we are looking at fresh and innovative "mission-focused" expressions of being church, and therefore of voicing the gospel. A good example is the "Emerging church", on which we are focusing our attention during this workshop. The notions of "church from below", "shaped by the context, customized, diverse, flexible and experimental" are very effective in our times, but at the same time, we have to be careful not to drop the prophetic and challenging message of the gospel. Are we for a "soft or user friendly gospel", an "aspirin gospel", one which just makes people happy and forget their troubles, or for a gospel which brings "creative tension" (and therefore is not popular), and defies the 'status quo', the current state of affairs? The gospel of Jesus Christ is for comforting, but at the same time confronting!

4.3. Post-modern societies.

On this question of the incapacity of the "historical" churches to reach out and to engage in a meaning way with our Western societies, I find very valuable what Simon Barrow, one of the editors of the book published recently by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, has to say in the article "Re-engaging Mission with Theology in the West Today", I quote: "Simply accusing 'our culture' of being 'gospel-unfriendly'

will not do: it assumes too much about the unity of churches and too little about the diversity of faith. Christian discernment takes place within a set of traditions that are engaged both internally and externally in reciprocal disputation as well as affirmation. This always has been the case. What is new in modernity/post-modernity is that everything is up for negotiation” (8).

In our postmodern European culture in which the private lives are so sacredly “respected”, we wonder if the Christian faith is a private affair. If so, what sense does it make to proclaim the gospel publicly?

Our study document “Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today” also refers to this theme. “Through processes of globalization, the values of *post-modernity*, rooted in Western cultures, are spreading rapidly across the globe. The very identities of people are in danger of being diluted or weakened in the melting-pot of the powerfully tempting and attractive monoculture and its new set of values. The very notion of nationhood itself is severely challenged. Individualism is preferred to life in community. Traditional values which formerly were lived as public values are today being privatized. Even religion is treated as merely a private matter. Personal experience takes the place of reason, knowledge and understanding. Images are preferred to words and have a greater impact on people in terms of advertising, promoting or conveying “truths” and goods. The importance of the present moment is emphasized; the past and future do not really matter. People are persuaded to believe that they are masters of their own lives and are therefore free to pick and choose what suits themselves” (9).

In this situation, where there is an erosion of evangelistic methods and strategies, we are urged to take seriously the *kerygmatic* task and to recover our *raison d’etre* as the Church of Jesus Christ.

4.4. An increasingly multi-cultural and multi- religious context.

In this time of an “ecclesiastical winter”, as Karl Rahner defined it, the turning point for mission, in a world that is predominantly non Western, presents a universal opening: to accept the challenge of cultural plurality. It is similar to the challenge of postmodernity, namely, to accept the ‘decentrality’, the heterogeneity of lifestyles and complexity of languages (10). Therefore evangelism carried out in dialogue, is the call of our times, a dialogue, which unfortunately happens oftentimes at the margins of the institutions.

Furthermore, in today’s world, one of the greatest challenges to evangelism is to proclaim the gospel in dialogue with other faiths, when people in the West feel threatened by them. So evangelism is sharing in dialogue, our humanity in Christ, beyond Christian sectarian temptations or fundamentalisms.

As a result of increasing migration, the development of technology contributing to the expansion of the media, the changing reality of our societies, which are no longer monolithic, the relevant question here is, how can we evangelize more effectively in a changing multi-cultural situation?

Paraphrasing the Rev. Dr. Philip Potter, we can then say that “evangelism is the test of true humanism”, it is proclamation of a “good news” which ultimately tries to seek

8 Christian Mission in Western Society, Churches together in Britain and Ireland, London 2001, edited by Barrow, Simon and Smith Graeme, p. 235.

9 Study document “Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today” – Op. Cit. Paragraph 23, p.5.

10 Mardones, José María, Postmodernidad y cristianismo. El desafío del fragmento, Editorial Sal Terrae, Santander (2da. Edición), 1988, p. 154.

the betterment of humankind and furthermore of creation, in a situation of “bad news”, in a culture of fragmentation, exclusion, militarism, injustice, terrorism, imperialism, violence and neo-liberal globalization.

On this regard, Jürgen Moltmann says that proceeding on the basis of an ethic of life and a conversation among the religions, mission requires a re-reading and a re-orientation of Christian history. Mission, he says, has proceeded in three stages. The first culminated in the creation of an *imperium*, the second involved the spread of churches. Now the third involves participation in the evangelization of humanity – not its absorption into ‘church’, but dialogue and action aimed at disclosing the basis of salvation. ‘Christ came to bring life, not Christianity,’ he says (11).

Again, the document “Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today refers in paragraph 58 to these challenges in these terms: “such challenges inevitably raise theological questions concerning the nature of witness among people of other religious convictions, in relation to the nature of salvation itself. There is little consensus on this in the broader ecumenical movement. In the San Antonio and Salvador mission conferences, the situation was summarized through the following affirmations: “We cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ; at the same time we cannot set limits to the saving power of God” (12). There is a tension between these two statements, which has not yet been resolved.

Rev. Dr. Emilio Castro, in reference to the encounter with people of other religions, said the following: “This encounter is witness. In view of the missionary nature of God’s message in Jesus Christ, Christians should approach others in the same spirit of love, sharing and communication that ruled the life of the man from Nazareth. The attitude thus is not only one of respect but of acceptance of the other” (13).

Final remarks.

Summarizing my presentation, I would like to quote one of the most helpful thoughts on the theology of evangelization and our commitment to it, from Dr. David Bosch. “Evangelism as that dimension and activity of the church’s mission which, by word and deed and in light of the particular conditions and a particular context, offers every person and community, everywhere, a valid opportunity to be directly challenged to a radical orientation of their lives, a reorientation which involves such things as deliverance from slavery to the world and its powers; embracing Christ as Savior and Lord; becoming a living member of his community, the church; being enlisted into his service of reconciliation, peace, and justice on earth; and being committed to God’s purpose of placing all things under the rule of Christ” (14).

And from the CWME Athens *Letter*: “St Paul speaks of the new creation heralded by Christ and enabled by the Holy Spirit. “In Christ”, he says, “God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” (2 Cor. 5:19-20) It is this “new creation” that we hold to be the goal of our missionary endeavour. With Paul, we believe that reconciliation and healing are pivotal to the process by which that goal is to be reached. Reconciliation, as the

11 This extract comes from the book edited by Barrow, Simon, Christian Mission in Western Society, quoted earlier, p. 249.

12 Salvador report, p.62, quoting San Antonio report, p.32.

13 Article “Evangelism” from the Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement, WCC Publications, Geneva, 2002.

14 The late Dr. David J. Bosch. *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis Books, NY, 1991), 420.

restoration of right relations with God, is the source of reconciliation with oneself, with other people and with the whole of creation”.

May God, inspirer and source; Jesus Christ, communicator and the Holy Spirit, enabler of the “life-giving” message of healing and reconciliation, guide us as we try to be faithful evangelizers in Europe and the whole creation. Amen.

Carlos E. Ham (Rev. Dr.)
WCC Programme Executive for Evangelism.

QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUPS DISCUSSION:

1. How to address in practical terms the tension we find in the gospel, of being **comforting** and at the same time **confronting**?
2. **What** are the **core values of the gospel** for Europe today and **how** can we share them ecumenically for transformation?
3. What did we learn from the **case studies** which can help us to improve our evangelistic mission locally?

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We invite you to our Ecumenical Institute of Bossey Seminar on:

“MISSION AS PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL - ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVES” - 6-11 June, 2006

The World Mission Conference in Athens, May 2005, highlighted mission as participation in the ministry of healing and reconciliation. Among the challenges which need further work is the role of the proclamatory aspect of Christian witness and church life. This Bossey seminar aims at specifying content and methods of evangelism in an ecumenical perspective. Within a holistic perspective of mission and in a religiously and culturally plural world, how and where is the gospel to be shared? What are the effective means of proclaiming the gospel – which of these bring about reconciliation? What are the dynamics involved with the signs of healing that accompany such sharing? Drawing on the results of the both the Athens Conference and the WCC 9th Assembly in Porto Alegre, these are some of the questions which will be addressed by the seminar.



Staff: Rev. Dr Carlos Ham, Dr Manoj Kurian and Rev. Jacques Matthey, WCC Mission and Ecumenical Formation Team and Rev. Dr Dietrich Werner, Director of Studies at the Christian-Jensen Kolleg, Northelbian Center for World Mission and World Service, Breklum, Germany.

Cost in CHF:

Total 620.- (Registration fee 120.- + Board and lodging 500.-)

For more information and registration procedures, please visit:

<http://www.wcc-coe.org/bossey/seminars-e.html>

bossey@wcc-coe.org

A prayer for the evangelistic mission of the Church.

Lord, we pray today for your Church, carrying the gospel of forgiveness and freedom which is so much needed in our world. Thank you for those with a gift of sharing this good news in evangelism; thank you for those with a gift for sharing this good news in the way they live. Give us the courage and willingness to be your witnesses in ways that are generous and respectful, and which comes from the overflow of our love and delight in you. Fill us with your love, so that the world may believe. Amen.

(From "The Intercessions Handbook. Creative ideas for public and private prayer", published by John Pritchard, SPCK London, page 46).

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We invite you to pray for our next Assembly:

<http://www.wcc-assembly.info/>



**God, in your grace,
transform the world**

World Council of Churches

9th Assembly

14-23 February 2006

Porto Alegre, Brazil