

## **LIVING IN GOD'S MISSION TODAY**

(A&P 2019, p. 245–57, 39)

### **INTRODUCTION**

The last time the Committee on Church Doctrine commented on a Theology of Mission was in the Acts and Proceedings of the 1991 General Assembly, p. 245–47. That particular report, which was adopted by the Assembly, was in response to a much larger report brought by the Board of World Mission. Since 1991, our world has undergone many changes and we are finding ourselves in a fresh and challenging context for mission. In the midst of many other creative efforts within The Presbyterian Church in Canada to respond in new ways to our task of mission, the Committee on Church Doctrine offers the following report as a statement on our Theology of Mission.

In preparing this document, the Committee on Church Doctrine also listened to our ecumenical partners and engaged the latest document prepared for the World Council of Churches meeting in Busan, Korea. That document is titled “Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes” and was written by a widely representative group of churches including Pentecostal and Evangelical churches who are not members of the WCC. Citations from this document reflect the deep and growing consensus around the whole global church on God’s profound loving mission to creation and our place and role in it as the church.

### **MISSION?**

In our time and context in the West today, the word “mission” is used in many different contexts and for a number of different purposes. For example, businesses have mission statements that articulate their organizational philosophy as well as their marketing or sales ambitions. Governments have diplomatic missions in other countries that enable or facilitate relations between the two countries. Individuals will sometimes speak of their personal mission, thereby giving some sense of their particular identity and goals. And of course, congregations and other church bodies write mission statements in order to define and orient their local activities. Given this variety of uses of the word “mission” in the contemporary context, some theological work is required to achieve clarity about what the word should or might mean for the church today. As always in any theological work, it is appropriate to begin with a dose of humility, acknowledging that the church has often made mistakes and failed to adequately witness to God’s love in relation to our neighbours. As Presbyterians in Canada we have been confronted with past failures and abuses in our mission to First Nations people. We are now deeply aware, through the process of confession and repentance, that we need to constantly examine ourselves in the light of God’s call.

On the way to this end of a theology of mission, it will be helpful to provide a brief historical sketch of the ways the church has spoken on and understood “mission”. Through much of the 18th through 20th centuries, the church spoke about mission in terms of activities or programs pursued at some distance from the local congregation – mission was something done in other lands and in cultural contexts that differed from our own. In line with this, “missionaries” were people sent off to serve in these far-away places. Through the course of the 20th century, churches also began to associate this word with more local outreach activities. Thus, diaconal ministers, who taught and worked in new and alternative contexts within Canada, were often referred to as missionaries. Also, local churches started to speak of their activities in social care and justice as mission activities. As a result, when we use the words “mission” and “missionary” or speak of a “mission statement”, we refer to a wide variety of activities by which congregations and other church bodies reach beyond the boundaries of their own life.

Turning to the specifically linguistic or etymological aspect of the question, we note that the word mission comes from the Latin word *missio*, which is itself a translation of the Greek word *apostello*. *Apostello* is a word we will recognize for its New Testament provenance and meaning: “to send”. In this sense, we recognize that the word apostle simply means “missionary”. Turning also to the earliest creedal formulations of the church, we can further note that “apostolicity” is one of the marks of the church, as in the Nicene Creed where we read: “we believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic church”. All of which leads us to a preliminary thought, that perhaps the church is most truly the church when it fulfills its missionary or apostolic identity. Or to put it in simple English: The church is most truly the church – it is true to its apostolic and missionary identity – when it is engaged with the task of being sent. In fact, the best word we can use in English for mission is “sending” or “to be sent”.

Therefore, speaking both descriptively and prescriptively, the church is a called and sent people – or a people who have been given a particular task. And faithfulness to this task implies dynamic engagement with the world around us. Since the beginning of the church’s history it has moved, crossed boundaries and extended into different cultural and linguistic contexts with the task of bringing the message of the gospel. It is this dynamic commitment, sacrifice and movement that Christians have associated with “mission”, with “apostolicity” and with the “sent-ness” of the church. This is clearly captured in the aptly titled Acts of the Apostles, which describes the actions of the earliest missionaries – of the ones sent by God into the world with the gospel.

The whole New Testament is a product of the sent-ness or mission of the church. What we mean by this is that the letters of Paul, other epistles and also the Gospels themselves, were written in response to the church engaging the world with the gospel. Paul, the missionary, wrote his letters to respond to the needs of new and burgeoning congregations outside of Palestine. The four Gospels came into being as ways to communicate the gospel story in different situations where the message of the risen Jesus had set down roots, which is one of the reasons that each gospel-writer tells the story slightly differently. Each made an attempt to express the gospel in ways appropriate to a particular time and context. We can say that in a very basic way, the New Testament is a record of the early mission of the church. It provides examples of how the Holy Spirit led the church to respond to new and different situations. Sometimes this is clearly spelled out, as we can read in the story of the first great Synod of the Church in Jerusalem where the church struggled with how to formulate and live its faith in the new and different Roman and Greek cultural contexts (Acts 15).

The word mission thus reminds us that the task of making the gospel known in our situation and context is a task that requires the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that inspires and guides us to find new paths that are without obvious precedent.

During the global missionary expansion of the church in the 18th and 19th centuries, new challenges became apparent as missionaries had to discern ways to translate the Bible into different languages and to deal with cultural phenomena not previously encountered. We continue to face similar challenges in our fast-changing world. We have to find new words and even new deeds to show faithfulness to the gospel message as missionaries encountered new and unknown situations. We draw on the history of what Christians have done in the past (captured in the New Testament and mission history) and also participate in the task of discerning together, under the guidance of the Spirit, how to be faithful in ever new situations. The words “inculturations” and or “contextualisation” of the gospel came to be used to describe this process. Especially in Africa, Asia and South America, the understanding of mission within the minds of missionaries began evolving in ways that were more aware of these adaptations. Yet, in these centuries, mission was still one directional – from the North (Western Europe and North America) to the South (Africa, Asia and South America). Mission was thought of as impacting those in the South while the North remained the same as before in its Christian practice.

Today, since the gospel has spread around the whole planet, we also work with the idea of “inter-culturation” in which we learn how Christians from different cultures and experiences do things differently. Now, as we have become more aware of how things work in our situation, we can be mutually enriched and grow in our depth of insight into the meaning of the gospel. For example, we learn songs from other parts of the world, discover how other Christians have read the same Bible in different ways in their contexts and languages and learn how they see things we miss completely and vice versa. The learning and understanding of mission has become mutual as the Christians of North and South learn from each other.

During the 20th century, as Christians thought about their task to be sent into the world, they realized that there was a more fundamental truth in which the church's mission was rooted. Namely, that God was on a mission and that this mission began at the moment of God's creation of the universe and continues with God's saving actions in the world. This idea of “The Mission of God” or, in Latin, *Missio Dei*, became a subject of both consensus and much discussion in the Ecumenical and Evangelical movements of the 20th century. Most recently, in the World Council of Churches meeting in Busan, Korea the Council spoke this way of mission:

Mission begins in the heart of the Triune God and the love which binds together the Holy Trinity overflows to all humanity and creation. (WCC Together Towards Life [TTL], Busan, p. 4)

It is to this idea that we now turn.

## THE GREAT MISSION OF GOD

In 1932, the Reformed Theologian Karl Barth gave a lecture to the Brandenburg Missionary Conference in Berlin. German churches, particularly in the Rhine Valley, developed dynamic and very effective cross-cultural missionary efforts around the world. Barth was not always sympathetic to these movements since his experience of the rise of National Socialism in Germany created a concern that cultural needs, selfishness and arrogance could undermine the challenges and demands of the gospel. He felt that many in the mission movement were not critical enough of these developments in their own context. At that point, of course, Europe had gone through World War I in which people and nations who called themselves Christians killed each other in brutal ways. Many Christians realized there was something wrong with the basic assumption that European missionaries would travel to other places with the idea that their way and message were superior – particularly when their own behaviour and house were not in order.

Moreover, Barth was concerned that mission simply meant a focus on “saving souls” without looking at the gospel’s demand for justice and love, thus creating a watered-down gospel. Dietrich Bonhoeffer would later call this “cheap grace”. In his lecture, Barth challenged mission leaders not to be arrogant in presuming they were good people bringing the message to bad people but rather to recognize that they too were sinners in need of ongoing repentance and of God’s grace. He also, by way of this argument, said that only God could be the true missionary. He was emphasizing that all our efforts as Christians are only possible and effective in as much as we recognize that all those actions arise out of God’s first “mission” (grace) to us.

This idea of God’s mission lay dormant for some time, until one of Barth’s friends, a mission leader named Karl Hartenstein, picked it up and insisted that we think seriously about the mission of God before and as, we speak of any kind of mission for the church. This idea became an important point of discussion in 1952 at the International Missionary Council in Willingen, Germany. This idea of the “Mission of God” as the primary source and inspiration of the mission of congregations and churches has become one of the most important developments in our understanding of mission. Today, as we in The Presbyterian Church in Canada think about God’s great mission, there are several things of which we should take note.

First, we believe in God who is beyond our imagining, the very God who is sufficient in God-self – Father, Son and Spirit – dwelling in mutuality and love. Yet, this wonderful God chooses to embrace humans and creation within God’s love and delight. Therefore, we understand God as the One who chooses to pour this love and delight into a creation that is itself intended to become a friend and joy to God. It is as if God is so full of love that this love overflows into this thing we know as creation. The whole universe and all that we can imagine are part of the overflowing, loving action of God. One of the themes of the three major creation stories in the Bible is that God declares the goodness of creation and takes delight in the creation. On the very first sabbath, we learn in Genesis 2, God blesses and hallows time (the seventh day), which suggests the blessing and making holy of the whole creation. There is, here, a kind of cherishing and setting apart of creation on God’s part. Then also from Proverbs 8, another creation account alongside those in Genesis 1 and 2, we learn more explicitly that God delights in creation and in humankind. In this divine altruism, in God’s act of pouring out love in the creation, we witness the first and primary action of mission.

As the story of creation unfolds, humankind is given a mission or a task. This task includes the command to thrive and to practice creation care. In fact, the “dominion” task described in Genesis 1:27 is qualified by the serve and protect or tend and care task described in Genesis 2:15. Out of the overflowing love of God, creation comes into being, including human creatures. We, the human creatures, now have a love task of our own, to delight God and to do so by delighting in one another and caring for God’s creation. We can describe this mutual mission of God and humankind as the first and primary mission of all things. We learn in Genesis 1:27 that humankind, man and woman together as a community of love, are also created to reflect this loving and creating quality of God. We can think of this relationship as an expression of God’s intention for wholesome, caring, respecting and mutually delighting human relationships. This is described as the image of God that we carry. To live as those who delight God and to tend and care for creation is our basic missional task. This is the task that we are sent into the world to do. This is how we live as ones who carry the image of God. Such conclusions as the above are also echoed in the recent World Council of Churches statement on Mission and Evangelism in the following way:

God did not send the Son for the salvation of humanity alone or give us a partial salvation. Rather the gospel is the good news for every part of creation and every aspect of our life and society. It is therefore vital to recognize God’s mission in a cosmic sense and to affirm all life, the whole *oikoumene*, as being interconnected in God’s web of life. As threats to the future of our planet are evident, what are their implications for our participation in God’s mission? (WCC M&E, Busan, p. 5)

Our God, in this way, is a missionary God (Living Faith 9.1.1). We in turn are a missionary people. As we learn in the narrative of Genesis however, while God’s overflowing love knows no bounds, humankind fails in its mission by striving to transcend our limitations and become like God. We call this sin. Disobedience is defined by the arrogant and sinful human attempt to cross the limitation God has set for us. It is important to understand this disobedience against the backdrop of God’s willingness to limit God-self in creating the universe. Before creation, God is complete in the mutual indwelling of Father, Son and Spirit, with no obligations to care or relate outside of this loving inter-subjectivity. Yet with creation God gains a kind of partner and a partnership that places a voluntary self-giving limitation on God. God’s request for us to recognize our limitation thus reflects the self-limitation God placed on God-self. In the human failure to faithfully live out its first mission to delight God and to care for creation, God’s own mission continues with God’s grace extending and reaching towards all of us and the whole of creation in God’s acts of redemption. The Old Testament scholar and theologian, Walter Brueggemann neatly summarizes one of the key messages of the Book of Genesis thus:

When the facts warrant death, God demands life for his creatures.

This divine insistence on life represents a second aspect of God's mission to and for creation that must be recognized. God insists on the redemption of creation and promises that despite the sinful rebellion, murder and self-centredness of humankind, God shall yet redeem creation.

This redemptive impulse of God, born out of God's love for creation, is demonstrated over and over again in the Old Testament. The echo of this redemptive impulse is revealed in God's staggering promise to Abraham that in him all families or nations of the earth will be blessed (Genesis 2:3). God's redemptive care is captured in the giving of the law and the message of the prophets that calls for a transformation of the world from one of violence and exploitation to justice and love. For us as Christians this redemptive promise becomes decisive as we see God taking on human form in Jesus Christ. This sin-shattering act of God in Jesus Christ fulfills and affirms the deepest movement towards redemptive justice and love represented in the ancient biblical texts of the Hebrew people. This journey of God – a movement from beyond creation to becoming part of creation in Jesus Christ – is the decisive act and moment of God's great mission for the redemption of creation. In this act the self-limitation of God takes on a scope that impacts every single thing in creation. In Jesus, God does not just engage in a mission to us – the Word became flesh and dwelt among us – but God takes on our image to demonstrate what it means to be carriers of the image of God. By doing this God shows us in Jesus Christ, through his humility, life, death and resurrection, what it is to be a creature that delights God and cares for God's creation.

God in Jesus Christ is the great redeeming missionary. Based on the early Christian reflection on this redemptive mission, as given to us in the New Testament, we learn that this redemption is for the salvation of our lives but also for the bringing together or reconciliation of all things. In Colossians 1:20, the author quotes an early Christian hymn which tells us that Christ did not only come to reconcile people – though that is certainly the central truth of the gospel – but that God came to reconcile or bring all things in creation together. This wide idea of God's mission of redemption is also reflected in John 3:16 when we are told that God so loved the world (cosmos) that God gave God's only son; also in 1 Corinthians 15:28, we learn that God will become all in all. The ultimate end of God's mission is this bringing together of all things in a mutually delighting reconciled relationship with God. This is the good news that we bring!

## **THE FIRST HUMAN MISSION**

Now that we have explored the two great movements of God's mission – God's act of creation plus God's redemptive love towards creation in Jesus Christ – we can take a further step to think about our mission as human beings.

It is clear that the first mission given to humankind, as expressed in the stories of Genesis 1 and 2, still stands. We are called and equipped and sent by God to be God's delight in our care towards one another and for creation. In Genesis 2:15 this task is described with two words often translated as “to tend and to care” for the garden. Alternative translations have also emphasized the ideas of to serve and to protect. We can take “the garden” here as representing the good created order God has made. God made this to delight and rest in it (Genesis 2:3). We see also in this first mission that humans are created to be in community. It is not good that we are alone. We are not created to be solitary individualists striking out on our own. We are created to be together, with others. The first hint of this comes in Genesis 1:27, which has a double character. First it tells us that God created humankind in God's image, then it qualifies this by saying “man and woman God created them”. The language moves from singular to plural. In the same spirit Genesis 2 tells us that while the first human delights in the other creatures, they do not provide sufficient companionship to the human. Companionship occurs when a community of two is created in sameness, “bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh,” as well as difference. This insight shows how fundamentally important it is for humans to live in community with fellow human beings who are both the same and different. In this text the main theme is the creation of human community that reflects the loving companionship of God. In the first instance this community is described in terms of the love and wonder between the created human beings – a love and wonder that also may come to expression in the great variety of human relationships before God. To be together in a missional task of delighting God by serving and protecting God's beloved creation, while we fellowship with God in love, is our first call as human beings. Perhaps that is what the Westminster Shorter Catechism means with its famous claim that our chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever.

It is important for us as Christians to remember that in our communities and in all our actions, budget decisions and relationships, we are called to be such serving and protecting and delighting creatures before God. We are of the earth and of creation. In fact, the name Adam is a play on the Hebrew word *adama* which means mud or earth. We are of the earth, for the earth, delighting in and with God. This is our primary mission as humankind. The bringing together or reconciling of all things sung in the hymn of Colossians 1 includes this human mission. Not just

Christians but every human creature has this call. Part of redemption is to return to this call and to re-engage our primary mission. It is encouraging to see how these profound theological insights in mission are reflected in the latest ecumenical deliberations within the World Council of Churches in its statement:

The mission of God's Spirit encompasses us all in an ever-giving act of grace. We are therefore called to move beyond a narrowly human-centred approach and to embrace forms of mission which express our reconciled relationship with all created life. We hear the cry of the earth as we listen to the cries of the poor and we know that from its beginning the earth has cried out to God over humanity's injustice (Genesis 4:10). (WCC TTL, Busan, p. 9)

As we are in loving communion with God and one another, delighting God through our worship and through our actions to serve and protect creation, we return to our first redeeming mission on the earth. In profound hope we look forward to the time that God will be all in all!

## THE HUMAN MISSION OF REDEMPTION

We have mentioned that God has moved toward the creation in a second great missional movement, in Jesus Christ. We call the story of this mind-challenging, self-giving act "The Gospel" or simply "The Good News". To accept that the Divine Being, which made all things, is like this – so immensely loving and radically humble as to take human form and even submit to death at human hands – is truly shocking. It is worth noting, here, that there is a great contrast between the brash consumerism of the Christmas season and the profound message of the story of God coming in human form in Advent. This contrast is even more painful when we realize that Christmas consumerism in many cases represents the destruction and exploitation of creation, the very opposite of our first mission as human beings.

Nothing we can do compares to this supreme act of self-giving mission that God implements in Jesus Christ. In the event of the cross and the resurrection Christ reconciles humankind to God. Through the resurrection, God's loving grace flows to all of humankind. This gift has to be embraced, accepted and lived out by turning back to God – and we bear witness to the good news in our own embrace and acceptance of this loving grace. In thinking about the act of witness we also acknowledge the real possibility that God's grace may be rejected due to human sinfulness. Indeed, in this possibility of sinful resistance there is a kind of warning – a warning we ourselves must heed and which we share with others, that there is separation from God. This separation is represented by the words *sheol*, *gehenna* or *hell* in the Bible. These words are metaphors for darkness, suffering and alienation. Perhaps the most powerful idea of hell in the Bible is represented in the God-forsakenness of Jesus himself (Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34). Jesus himself experiences this alienation from God with us and for us, that we might share in life with God. Whatever mission we engage in can only be a tiny particle in relation to the great reality of God coming to us in Jesus Christ to shatter the power of sin and hell. Yet, even in this great act of redemption God seeks to delight in us once again as human creatures by inviting us into the task of reconciling all things. In John's Gospel Jesus is recorded as giving the following, surprising mission charge to the disciples: "As the Father sent me so I send you" (John 20:21). Now it is true that in this scriptural passage two different Greek words for "sent" are used – Jesus is described with *apostello* (a strong word) while the sending of the disciples is described using *pempo* (a weaker word). Yet we should not make too much of this difference since in John 17:18 Jesus uses the same verb (*apostello*) for his own sending as well as that of the disciples. From this we can extrapolate that we as followers of Jesus have a part in God's redemptive mission to all people and creation. It may be a humble part as creatures of the earth but it is a part in which God delights. In Matthew 28:19 the gospel writer reminds us that Jesus sends us to make disciples of all peoples.

Calling people to turn to God's reign in Christ (repentance), to embrace his reconciling work (faith) and to follow him as disciples is therefore central to our mission within the great loving mission of God. The redemption of the world, the healing of creation and the bringing of justice to all depends on people who urgently love God and work for God's reign.

How then do we participate in this second redemptive mission of God? To uncover this, we could and should focus on some of the key texts of commissioning in the gospels, including the texts above from the Gospel of John. However, it is also appropriate to begin by trying to discern the larger picture of the gospel. Discerning this larger context and logic entails our exploration, as far as is humanly possible, of God's great intention for creation. When we think of our mission, we need to return without fail to God's loving mission as our guide. In asking what creation is for and about, we begin to discern what our place and task is within this creation. We have already seen that our first mission is to delight God in a fellowship of love as we thrive in serving and protecting creation. We have concluded that this is an important aspect of glorifying and enjoying God. However, what the shorter Westminster Catechism does not say is that God delights in us first – thus we are speaking here of mutual delight. As painful and as brutal as our present reality may be – given our state of rebellion against God (sin) – God seeks life for us and

desires that humans and everything in creation, should move toward loving, reconciled fellowship with God and one another. This is truly Good News!

The early Christians concluded that this reconciliation was accomplished and made possible through the death of Christ (often expressed in the phrase “through his blood”) and his resurrection. Something powerful, cosmic and universal happened in the death and resurrection of Jesus (Living Faith 3.4.3). Somehow in these events in time, God entered into the damaged creation itself so that everything that is without God may be brought back into fellowship with God (salvation). This event in time determines the ultimate outcome of all things. Yet this event in time is also one that unfolds temporally – we are welcomed into that unfolding process and to have a place within it. In the most basic sense we participate in this reconciliation through the gift of faith, by which we re-enter our original mission to be God's delight. We bear witness to and participate in, God's great redemptive mission in Jesus Christ – we become missionaries or missional – through our mutual delight with God and creation and by inviting others to join with us in it. By the Holy Spirit we become who we were intended to be and do the things we were created to do – thereby also becoming witnesses in the wider world.

In the Acts 1:8 we learn that we are to be the witnesses of Christ locally and to the utter ends of the earth. That book tries to show how early Christians engaged in this mission and made surprising, adaptive changes as they reached beyond their situations and cultures – according to their faith in the risen Jesus and for the greater mission of God. The Gospel of Matthew in turn tells us that our task is not just to be and to witness but also to take those drawn to fellowship with God and help them live back into their original mission. It uses the phrases “make disciples of all nations” and “teaching them to obey all”, which are reminiscent of God's promise to Abraham that in him all nations will be blessed. Our task in this redemptive mission is therefore to participate in the blessing of other human beings.

As we find our life and joy and hope in Christ, we are to invite others into this reality by sharing the story of Jesus and by creatively establishing places and moments where the new life of Christ comes to expression.

### **MISSIONING TOWARDS THE END OF ALL THINGS**

When we live our mission, delight God and live in loving fellowship with God and one another, we are on a journey towards a hopeful future. When this section-heading speaks of “the end” of all things, it is not thinking of end as the death or ultimate ceasing of all things – rather, “the end” refers to an ultimate purpose or goal. When Jesus commissions the disciples and sends them out, promise and hope are at the heart of the task. We are only going into the “world” and into creation because we are filled with hope and vision for a new and better future. The Bible is full of promise. From the earliest stories in Genesis, through the giving of the Law and the Prophets, to the story of Jesus himself, we are promised a new future. This promise echoes through the history of creation. God will do a new thing. This new thing is not just bringing back the ideal garden of the past but a new and transformed reality where all things live with God in reconciled love. This future is often captured by the vision of the prophets – it is most graphically and metaphorically painted in the Book of Revelation when it speaks of the New Jerusalem and the new Heaven and the new Earth. To have a mission and to be on a mission and to be missional is about being grasped by the love and delight of God as we live for this new coming future, which is with us in part and is also coming towards us in full.

As Christians and as Presbyterians in Canada the heart of mission for us lies in this powerful and inspiring hope for the future that is a gift from God. Our action in mission is not so much an obligation as it is a joyful and thankful response to the loving mission of God. God creates our world and works toward and accomplishes its recreation by entering into the creation. We, in turn, grow in our relationship with God through loving fellowship and by witnessing to God's love in working for justice and caring for creation. The Presbyterian mission theologian, Lesslie Newbigin described our role as the church as a foretaste of the promise to come. In a moving series of lectures, he also talks about the church's mission as being a sign of the coming of God amidst the rubble of the world. When we speak here of the church as being a sign or foretaste we reflect the Gospel vision of mission as being salt and light in the world (Matthew 5:13–14; Mark 9:50; Luke 14:34). The big picture is that God's mission to us in Jesus Christ is the ultimate great sign of God's grace to us. Christ himself is the one true sacrament – a visible sign of God's invisible grace – and we as the church are to be little signs and tastes, of the goodness of God's grace in the world. There is therefore a sense in which we can say our mission is to be a sacrament for the world. The world around us needs to be able to see and taste hope in us. This might sound abstract but it has some very practical implications for us as Christians and as Presbyterians in Canada today. It is to the implications of this understanding of our mission that we now turn.

## **DISCERNING OUR MISSION TODAY – THE WHOLE CHURCH TAKING THE WHOLE GOSPEL INTO THE WHOLE WORLD**

Mission in the first place is Mission with a big capital “M”, which is God’s mission in creating all things and God’s redemptive mission of grace towards us clearly demonstrated in Jesus Christ. We in turn have our smaller missions as God’s people in the world. From the above we learn that our first mission is to fulfill God’s original intent for us. We are to be and return to be the people God created us to be. This means that we are to be people in reconciled and just community with one another and God. It means that we are to be people who serve and protect and respect the wonder of God’s creation. It means that we are to be God’s delight in our worship and praise of God in communion with God as we live out this mission in the world.

The implications of the first reconciliation or return to God – the thing we Christians call repentance – is that we cannot brook ongoing division, in-fighting and rejection of one another. Our task is to be constantly working towards reconciling with one another as we respect our mutual differences as creatures of God. At no time will we be perfectly together in community but, at all times it behooves us to work towards reconciliation with one another in love. That is why getting along as the people of God is so important in most of the New Testament texts and the Pauline letters. Early Christians had trouble with getting along and so do we, yet, our primary mission as creatures is to do just that. It is a getting along not just in words but also in deeds of mutual justice as the Epistle of James points out so poignantly (James 2:15–16). To work at respecting and loving one another in community is not an optional extra for our congregations; it is part of our primary mission as creatures of God and image bearers of God. When we do this, the world around us will taste and see hope, we will be a sign of God’s coming grace – we will be witnesses. In Presbyterian congregations in Canada we have often failed at this task, unable to agree to disagree in love, unable to look different from a world of injustice, envy and hatred.

Together with living in community with one another comes the mission of serving and protecting, indeed celebrating God’s creation and creatures around us. Our choices as Christians matter. What we do with carbon emissions, what we do with litter, consumerism, global economic exploitation and what we do in relation to the ecology of God’s earth matters. This is not an optional extra or a fad; this is at the heart of what it is to believe in God the Creator of heaven and earth. Our attempts at dealing with this cannot simply be motivated by how much money we will save but rather by how seriously we take the mission God gave us as creatures. Our mission is to be committed Christian creation carers, serving and protecting God’s creation. When we live like that, when we speak and work prophetically for changing cultural and political systems for the good of the earth, we will be a foretaste and sign of hope in the world – we will be witnesses.

Together we are God’s church, we are called together not just to enjoy the wonder of God’s love and grace but also to carry such love and grace to the whole world. The church is in its very nature missionary. This is true for the global Christian church, it is to be true for The Presbyterian Church in Canada and it is fundamentally true for every local Christian community – the congregation. As the Swiss Reformed theologian, Emil Brunner reminded us in his Gifford lectures offered in 1932, “where there is no mission there is no church”. The challenge before us as Presbyterian Christians in Canada is to ask unceasingly about our missional task as community, to measure every effort and every session decision against this task and to examine even our budgetary decisions in its light. We are to ask ourselves if we are salt and light in the world around us? We are to ask if we are visible signs of God’s grace.

### **MISSION IS EVANGELISM (LIVING FAITH 9.1.2)**

As concluded above, we also have a place as signs and foretastes in the world of God’s redemptive mission. Simply living as described above will witness to God’s love and creative intent but we also have the ministry of reconciliation as Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 5. There we learn that we are to be proclaiming, telling and, dare we add, singing that God makes all people and all things God’s friends through Jesus Christ. In fact, the text in Corinthians reminds us that God was in Christ reconciling the cosmos (world) unto God-self. To preach this message we need to be engaged in working at our being reconciled with one another and God’s creation. Our mission is to be witnesses to this.

Its core is to invite our fellow human beings to move from unbelief to a deep trust in God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Such a journey from unbelief to faith is not simply a journey of heart and mind but also a journey of action in our following of Christ as disciples. This journey is individual for each person but never individualistic. The journey towards faith and discipleship is inextricably linked to the witness of the people of God (the church) living together with justice, integrity and love. Our evangelical proclamation is not to be arrogant implying superiority but rather a corporate witness of those who are beggars telling other beggars where to find food (Living Faith 9.2.1). We cannot change people and things around us. We cannot convert others or make them see the truth. That is God’s work by

the Spirit (John 16:8). We can, however, bear witness as a community of living witnesses – a people of love and a people of praise. This proclamation and this witness is called evangelism in our tradition. The World Council of Churches document on Mission and Evangelism puts this poignantly:

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. Such sharing is to take place with both confidence and humility and as an expression of our professed love for our world. If we claim to love God and to love our fellow human beings but fail to share the good news with them urgently and consistently, we deceive ourselves as to the integrity of our love for either God or people. There is no greater gift we can offer to our fellow human beings than to share and or introduce them to the love, grace and mercy of God in Christ. (WCC TTL, Busan p. 30)

Furthermore, we have to remember, together with our friends in the wider ecumenical church that,

Evangelism is mission activity which makes explicit and unambiguous the centrality of the incarnation, suffering and resurrection of Jesus Christ without setting limits to the saving grace of God. (WCC TTL, Busan p.29)

The missional challenge before us as Presbyterians in Canada is to live like this in our communities and personal lives. We are to consider in how many ways we could more explicitly express this mission. For example, is our church supper only about raising money or is it about celebrating God's love together and enjoying fellowship in community? Many of the things we already do express God's great mission including food banks, Out of the Cold programs and other forms of outreach. We need to understand the connection between these things and what we believe about God's great mission and intent for creation. The issue of our mission is not so much instrumental as in "how many people can we get to join our church and contribute to the budget", as it is about how to live authentically as the people God created us to be? Are we a foretaste and a sign, a sacramental pointer in our community to the love and grace of God? Can we imagine everything we do and every budgetary decision we make as a congregation in the light of our understanding of God's mission?

Nevertheless, in doing so, we should never shirk from boldly, urgently and lovingly sharing our faith experience and inviting others to follow Christ in community (Matthew 28:16-20).

## **THE SPIRIT OF MISSION**

Emil Brunner, who is mentioned above, coined the now famous phrase, "the church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning." We can observe in addition that the fire that animates the church in mission is the Spirit of God. As God, the Creator's Spirit moved over the chaos to call creation into being and as God breathed life into the first human creature, so all mission in the church exists only through the sustenance of and by the Spirit of God. The ecumenical consensus of Christian churches powerfully acknowledges this reality,

Life in the Holy Spirit is the essence of mission, the core of why we do what we do and how we live our lives. Spirituality gives the deepest meaning to our lives and motivates our actions. (WCC TTL, Busan, p. 4)

Authentic mission can only arise out of communities that live in a deep spiritual communion with God and with one another. This community is only made real by the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, this community is strengthened and sustained by listening to God's Word, worshipping together and participating in the sacraments. Our action in mission that flows from this is creatively called "The liturgy after the Liturgy" by our friends in the Orthodox churches. They maintain with good reason that authentic mission grows out of people transformed by their participation in the worship and praise of God. We as Presbyterians have much to learn from them and others who excel in enhancing and animating the worship of God. For, it is where our congregations can live in a vibrant creative worship of God, that the Spirit of God can come and empower us to engage the overwhelming challenges of people alienated from God, through selfishness, evil, hunger, ecological destruction and suffering of the world. A missional spirituality is a spirituality soaked in prayer and in the worship and praise of God in our local congregations.

## **OUR MISSION IN A GLOBAL AND MULTI-FAITH COMMUNITY**

Given our reflection so far, we also have to reflect missionally beyond our own immediate context, on the reality of our global world. Today we live in a "global village" of interconnected relationships. Not only do we survive in the web of life of God's biosphere, we also live in a web of cultures, religions, peoples and nations. Some of these en-webbed relationships are warped by the sinful reality of personal selfishness and global economic exploitation. Part of living out our creation-affirming mission that protects God's created web of life, is to examine our own participation as congregations and individuals in economic practices that exploit and hurt God's creation and our fellow human beings in other parts of the world. In response we need to work together for social and political



change that will build just institutions in our local and global context. Today vibrant Christianity has also grown strongly in the poorer and marginalized countries of the world. We have much to learn by receiving wisdom and love from these fellow Christians around the world. As The Presbyterian Church in Canada, we share in partnership with many Christian communities around the world through service, presence, development work and advocacy for justice (Living Faith 8.4). Our congregations in Canada often include people from diverse communities around the world. Through these connections and partnerships, we live and learn together in mission. We have much to learn from one another about the impact of our own choices and behaviours on the lives and well-being of those who have joined us. Mission in this global context calls us to a true partnership of listening and serving with respect in love as we examine global structures of economic exploitation. Many of these sisters and brothers are carrying out God's mission in ways that can inspire and challenge us. In this reality our missional witness is also to be open to receive the loving ministry of all and to repent of our own ways that mar and hurt others in the world.

Our local and global context also places us in the midst of people who follow other faiths than our own or no faith at all. Following our subordinate standard, Living Faith, we need to remind ourselves that relating to those of faiths different from ours requires deep respect for their human dignity as creatures of God and an openness to discern "truth and goodness in them", which Living Faith describes as the work of God's Spirit (Living Faith 9.2). As we do so we may also learn from them, co-operate for the good of God's creation and discover God at work as the Spirit blows where it wishes. In love we bear witness as Christians in a Spirit of humility to the embrace, forgiveness and love we found in Christ. We do so, as cited from the WCC document above "without setting limits to the saving grace of God". (WCC TTL, Busan, p. 29).

### **THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES**

The God of covenant and creation is made manifest by a mission of redemption and re-creation in our world – a mission that is embodied and fulfilled in Jesus Christ and realized through the moving of the Holy Spirit for the well-being of all of God's creation.

It is only on account of the triune God's loving mission to and in our world that human persons come to know God and enter into relationship with God. Those who love God also love the world God is redeeming and they are decisively located in that world.

The Holy Spirit, sent by the Father and Son, is alive in the world, sustaining all creation and bringing about the renewal and reconciliation of all things.

The Holy Spirit reconciles and renews individuals and communities, opening hearts and minds to the way of the risen Jesus Christ – a life of repentance, reconciliation, compassion, righteousness, justice and peace.

The Holy Spirit creates the church, drawing women, men and children together into the resurrection life of Christ, into the triune life of God and into meaningful relationships with one another and with the wider human family. The Holy Spirit equips the church for service in the mission of God.

The Holy Spirit brings the church to life in a global context as the gospel of Jesus Christ is 'translated' into various languages and cultures. Through conversations within the global church we learn more fully what it means for the good news of God to be inculturated and we discover dimensions of the gospel we would never otherwise have encountered.

The church's worship, language, structures and activities must embody and be responsive to the fact that it exists at the point of intersection between the triune God of love and the world (people, communities, cultures) that is the object of God's re-creative work.

By the power of the Spirit and in unity with Christ, the church is called to be a community that witnesses to the joyful and hopeful reign of Christ. The Spirit leads the church to celebrate and support manifestations of the reign of Christ where it discerns them in the world.

### **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHURCH AND CULTURE**

The church is called to both appreciate culture as given by God and also to be a culture shaper – influencing culture in ways that enrich the shared life of humans in community.

The church endeavours to discern the ways in which it has become affected by negative dimensions of culture and betrayed the gracious rule of Christ in the world.

The church, through the moving of the Spirit is called to live in a vulnerability that is appropriate to its union with a crucified and risen Lord.

The church, through its life in the Spirit strives to become a community that manifests the truly human one, Jesus Christ. We are to be signs of God's reign within our cultural context.

The church is called to be open to learn from the wider culture. It seeks also to test, challenge and, change the culture's assertions in the light of the gospel under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The church seeks to demonstrate hospitality to the surrounding culture, whether within the church's walls or outside those walls. The church must also be prepared to accept hospitality from the surrounding culture and community and recognize God at work beyond its boundaries.

The church must have courage to take public and political action guided by the Holy Spirit according to the life-giving reign of God that sets people free for full, meaningful and eternal life.

### **CONGREGATIONS AND NEIGHBOURHOODS**

As signs of God's reign, congregations are to give evidence of welcome, openness, celebration, love and deep faith in Christ and do so before the eyes of watching neighbours.

As those called to be in loving relationships with others, congregations are to become familiar with their neighbourhoods by living attentively, openly and prayerfully alongside the individuals, families, businesses and community organizations present there.

As those who love their neighbours, the people of congregations should make a habit of walking through their neighbourhood, praying for their neighbourhood, entering into conversation with those who live and work in the neighbourhood and should become aware of the struggles, concerns and joys of its neighbours.

As those who humbly work with one another and God, congregations should seek to partner with others in the local community to create "threshold spaces" of engagement – spaces where the church is neither the host nor in a position of power but where the church humbly gives and receives hospitality.

As those open to discover God's work in the world, congregations should work in careful partnership with organizations that manifest signs of the reign of Christ in their neighbourhood.

### **THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH'S MUSICAL WORSHIP**

The church's musical worship is a gift from God that allows it to express the richness and depth of life in Christ – lament, hope, joy, service, justice, redemption, peace, reconciliation, resurrection and grace.

The church's musical worship (lyrics, rhythms and melodies) is to be a witness. Through it we can connect to the culture around us and speak in a language and rhythm familiar to our neighbours.

The church's musical worship provides congregations with a vehicle to be attentive to the context in which they live – this attentiveness could be expressed instrumentally, lyrically and musically.

The church's music should seek to link with the questions, aspirations and pains that are particular to the wider cultural context.

The church as a worshipping community should share musically with the community around it – listening compassionately for themes and struggles that provide an opportunity to witness to the reign of Christ.

The church should be in touch with and share in the music of global Christianity – so that it can learn from and be shaped by the gospel's inculturation in other contexts.

### **PRACTICES OF MISSION**

In its life together in Christ and in the moving of the Holy Spirit in its midst, the church is shaped by particular practices of mission.

Christian practices of mission must be rooted in the life shared in the risen Christ. Through its pursuit of spiritual practices, the church becomes a missional sign of the reign of Christ and is drawn into the triune life of God. The church invites the wider community into its practices that they might discover Christ in community and through the ministry of the Spirit.

The core practices of the church are proclaiming the Good News of Christ (by which it witnesses to the Living Lord Jesus Christ), baptism (by which we are engrafted into Christ and receive our missional vocation) and the Lord's Supper (by which we live in the hospitality of Christ and are nourished for our missional vocation).

The church lives in the practice of humble repentance, continually turning and returning to follow Christ more fully.

The church lives in the practice of ongoing praise and worship of God both as individuals working in the world and as a community when we gather.

The church lives in a continual practice of intercession for the world around us and particularly in seeking justice for those who suffer and are most vulnerable in our community and around the earth.

The practice of service and hospitality is expressed as we prayerfully open and share ourselves, our lives and our apartments/homes and our resources with each other, seeking to embody the hospitality of God in Christ. As individuals, families and congregations we must develop practices of hospitality and let our spaces be hospitable spaces. In these ways we live in love.

Through the practice of dying with hope in Christ, Christians witness to the reign of God.

Through the practice of supporting and accompanying those who are suffering and dying, the church witnesses to the love of Christ.

Through the practice of prophetic dialogue, the church brings hope for a renewed, reconciled and just world by working for justice in our local and global institutions.

Through the practice of protecting and caring for creation and by refusing an exploitative approach to it through consumerism, we honour God.

By respecting human limitations and needs for sustenance and rest, we practice Sabbath keeping.

Under the inspiration and guidance of the Spirit, we may also discover many additional practices through which we, together, embody the resurrection life of Christ.

Leadership in the missional context means:

- teaching and proclaiming the gospel of God's love in Christ as this is set forth in scripture and as it has been lived and understood over time,
- inviting women, men, children and families into spiritual practices that draw them deeply into the triune life of God: prayer, Sabbath keeping, hospitality, fasting and reconciliation,
- prayerful discernment of ways the Holy Spirit is at work within the congregation and the wider community, manifesting the reign of Christ,
- exercising self-care as a Sabbath discipline and receiving care from others,
- exploring and identifying ways that a congregation's ethos or structure or self-understanding prevents it from faithfulness to its missional identity,
- helping the church to discern its embrace of cultural elements that represent a refusal of Christ's reign,
- inviting the people of God into ways of living, working, advocating and serving that manifest the reign of Christ in the world,
- helping God's people to interpret the culture around them and to discern its beauty and truthfulness or acknowledge its unfaithfulness,
- exhibiting imagination and courage (risk-taking) as the church continues to move us from the nominal faith expressions of Christendom to the engaged embodied generosity and hospitality and integrity,
- demonstrating the possibilities of imaginative risk taking – trusting that Christ is Lord of the church – and that the Spirit is alive bringing the reign of Christ to the world in every new ways and in every context.
- Leadership is loving service of God's reign through relationships of integrity within the church and not about managing people or processes or structures or conflict – according to the 'managerial' controlling spirit of modern culture.

**Recommendation No. 1** (adopted, p. 39)

That “Living in God’s Mission Today” be affirmed as a faithful statement on mission.

**Recommendation No. 2** (adopted, p. 39)

That “Living in God’s Mission Today” be commended to the agencies, presbyteries and congregations to be used for their up-building and understanding as they embark on and participate in God’s mission.