

Mission in Unity

Presenter: Setri Nyomi, General Secretary, World Alliance of Reformed Churches

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."
(John 20: 21)

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28: 18 – 20)

"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17: 20 – 21)

We live in exciting historic times. The opportunity and responsibility for engagement in the mission to which God has sent us is ever present with us and calls for a new sense of urgency. It is for this reason that I am so grateful to God that the PCUSA is once again demonstrating its commitment to being effective in mission. I see this consultation to pause and reflect on what that mission entails for our era is an expression of that commitment. It is the same desire to stimulate how WARC member churches engage effectively in God's mission and for mission renewal in our era that led the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to put in place a study on Mission Study between 2001 and 2004.

Unfortunately, rather than engage in critical reflection on the cutting edge of mission today, and daring to walk where God has sent us, the church often finds itself allowing societal issues emerging in the era in which we live to divide us. Often such divisions are not on the basis of theology. They are on the basis of ideology, different perspectives on justice, on gender, on race, on the economy, on the environment, on who to include or exclude on one basis or another and other factors. They are also often on the basis of what mission body (national, regional or congregational) is paying those who engage in mission, and what values and "messages" accompany the "investments" they make in the mission. These factors are often unconsciously normative in our biblical hermeneutics, and therefore often we find it easy to justify such divisions on biblical or theological grounds. This I maintain is a sign that there is a lack of clarity in our understanding of our mission. So long as we are thus divided, the church will be issuing mixed messages and will not be faithful to the one who has called us to go and make disciples of all nations and to do mission from a perspective powerlessness.

It is this trend that makes it very critical for us to reflect on mission in unity in our consultation. Mission in unity is so urgent in our world today.

In Reformed thinking, mission is at the heart of our understanding of the church. Where the church is facing dwindling numbers and challenged at many fronts, to revitalise the church we have to reclaim the centrality of mission and move beyond a state in which we are yielding to every issue that threatens to divide us. We have to clarify mission understanding relevant for our era and also to overcome distracting divisions, so that our mission can be effective.

Comment [U1]: or: theological in nature, but based on ideology

We cannot expect the manner in which mission was carried out in times past, in the past centuries to continue being effective today. Such expectations may lead to nostalgia for “the good old days when the church could measure success in terms of visible growth in numbers at home and abroad”. In place of this exercise, we have an opportunity to engage in new reflections on what God’s mission is today. The 2001 to 2004 Mission study of WARC that I referred to earlier affirmed that this is an area in which churches need to be strengthened all over the world.

In its letter to the churches, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches affirmed that our participation in God’s mission must be modelled on the mission of Jesus (John 3: 16 and John 20: 21). Drawing from the second chapter of Philippians and other biblical passages, the letter declares:

Though He was in the form of God, the Lord Jesus emptied himself. Though He was rich, He became poor, so that we may become rich in His grace. A *kenosis* of mission is required in our identifying with the Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, with the poor and excluded (Matthew 25). Mission should begin with powerlessness, not power. The power of the gospel will be made perfect in our weakness (2 Corinthians 12: 9ff)¹

One way of summarising our mission understanding can be through the words of Peter. We are a people called from a state of darkness, a state of being “no people” into participation in the marvellous light of God (saints, people of God) through faith in Jesus Christ. And all this has come to us by grace. Once we have tasted of this salvation through grace, our gratitude leads to declaring “the wonderful deeds of God who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light”². How this translates practically needs to be explored from generation to generation. Our challenge therefore includes interpreting this calling for our times. Since it is something we have received by grace, and not because of our financial or political superiority, how we interpret this calling for our times must be done following the self-emptying example of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Challenges

The early church understood the importance of engaging in mission in unity. The high priestly prayer of our Lord Jesus and the value of unity that he constantly presented inspired this. The early church as portrayed in the second and fourth chapters of the book of the Acts of Apostles are a constant reminder of the value that was placed on engaging in mission in unity. Even though the communalistic model that was established did not last long, it at least pointed to the importance attached to unity.

There were many challenges right from the beginning. The early church did not easily yield to those challenges being reasons for division. It sought solutions to challenges so that they could keep united for the sake of engagement in effective mission. So in the sixth chapter of the Acts of Apostles, the leaders addressed the threatening division between the Hebrews and the Hellenists. In Chapter 15, it was around the issue of the extent to which new non-Jew Christians were to be forced to heed Jewish religious customs. There were many other challenges. But the impression we get from the witness of the early church and in fact the biblical accounts lead us to believe that they too, like in our days were faced with tremendous challenges that could have seduced them towards divisions or fragmented ways of engaging in mission – However, they constantly sought to live

¹ *Reformed World*, Volume 54, Number 1, March 2004, (Mission, Justice, Covenant) p. 8

² Paraphrasing 1Peter 2: 9

above all divisive tendencies and to engage in the mission to which they were called with a spirit of unity. This is an example that we do well to follow.

The question then is – How come that the church is so divided in the way we carry out our mission? The Reformed family seems to have a notorious reputation for division. I am grateful to God that in recent years, signs of convergence have been coming in the US scene. The formula of agreement between Reformed churches in the Lutheran church, the CUIIC initiative, and others are examples. But there are new signs of division also. Around ethical issues, around justice issues, around war and peace, most times around ideological rather than theological lines, new divisive tendencies are looming.

Regarding mission in particular, we have many countries in which there may be four five or six Reformed and Presbyterian Churches, but which are not engaged in mission together and may not even share information on how each is engaged in mission. Often such divisions do not result from painful breaks. They are simply a sign of how the church came into being. If you go into a country in which one church came from Scottish mission effort, another came from a USA mission effort, and yet another came from a Canadian mission effort and for a hundred years they had not learned how to engage in mission together, this is what happens. Today, the danger may even be greater. It may be a congregation in Texas and a congregation in New York engaged in mission within miles away from one another, and yet the two very well-intentioned mission actions may not be communicating with one another. How can we present the message of reconciliation which is at the heart of the good news if what is seen is the fragmentation.

In a world in which we would like to see the efforts we make bear fruit immediately, it is indeed very important for those who are engaged in mission to do so in a manner in which we can truly experience the results of the one who has called us into mission – not results in a way that fits the worldly competitive values. The era in which we were satisfied that we sent a few dollars to a mission agency and they did all the hard work and sent all the missionaries, so we can sit back and relax are gone. Many local congregations are interested in not only sitting back and relaxing but to ensure that they are faithfully engaged in the mission. This is great – but it also comes with a blind spot. It comes with the temptation to do it the way the world does – almost as a worldly commercial enterprise. We put in the resources, the labour and we have to see the dividends – It is OUR INVESTMENT AND OUR MISSION. Therefore the competition and fragmentation creeps in. If we can count how many missionaries our congregation has sponsored, and quantify the results in terms of people becoming Christian, we are better than those who can't. Is this kind of competitiveness healthy?

I am not discouraging the passion for mission. I am discouraging the manner in which we buy into the world's competitive models in how we carry out mission. I am so grateful for the missionaries who came to my part of the world and faithfully brought the gospel. Today we are Christians, thank God. However, I am not happy that for the most part in Africa, we have created tribal churches. Because of the manner in which they worked – with specific people groups – my church can identify itself with one or two particular ethnic groups in Ghana. The Presbyterian Church of Ghana can mainly identify itself with three or four ethnic groups, etc. The Presbyterian Church of East Africa can identify itself with one or two tribes in Kenya, the Reformed Church in East Africa can identify itself with one or two tribes. A research in Africa will show the same trend in Nigeria, in South Africa and in other parts. The story could have been different if they had made more efforts in carrying out their mission in unity.

I hope in this 21st century we will be effective in our mission engagement and rise above any temptation for divisive ways of engagement in mission.

Mission in unity also challenges us to take on the perspectives of all the people of God. The WARC mission study has taught us that the church in its history has neglected the perspectives of women in how mission is carried out. Women have for the most part been in supportive roles rather than been allowed to use their gifts at the vanguard of mission. This is a sign of mission in disunity and has led to loss of vitality for the church. To be effective in mission today, we need to take full account of the gifts of women and men in God's mission.

Today, it is clear that where the church is growing, young people have been very important in this growth. The question is, to what extent are we including the gifts and expressions of young people in how we engage in mission. Newer and sometimes not so credible churches have chanced upon what it means to honour the gifts of young people, and in some cases, these young persons have been at the forefront of attracting their peers. What is our practice in the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches. To what extent are young people experiencing us as welcoming their gifts in how we carry out the mission of God.

Mission in unity entails all the people of God, young and old, women and men, lay and clergy, using their gifts to the glory of God. It entails our seeing participants in God's mission with new eyes – not in the categories of senders and recipients – but co-workers who are acting in unity. In this sense those who welcome mission partners are equal participants in the missionary activity. Resources and those who make them available do not lead towards a power relationship, which distracts from the mission to which we have been called. Such collaboration is at heart an expression of mission in unity.

The wealth of experience and facilitating expertise that church mission offices and mission boards have gained is therefore more important now more than ever before. I therefore hope that our commitment to mission unity that will make our mission effective entails that we do so using fully the resources available in our World Mission division. In my working with churches all over the world, I see well meaning people and congregations with passion for mission which I welcome go on their own to so called "mission fields" and made many mistakes. Some of these have led to mission problems of which they are unaware, others have left behind further divisions or other more serious problem. The most publicised example is that of the team which went from a Presbyterian Church in Korea to Afghanistan and were faced with a hostage crisis – with tragic consequences for their pastor and one more team member.

That particular crisis has now sparked a discussion in Korean churches and the secular press on the manner in which mission needs to be carried out. In my visit to Korea in September 2007, the question I received the most was what I thought about changes that were called for. Among other things, I indicated that I would hope that Koreans and all other Christians in the world with passion could learn how to carry out mission in the spirit of unity with their partners in other parts of the world. There were churches in Afghanistan and other neighbouring countries which they could have co-operated with, and who could have been strengthened to do that mission without Koreans ever needing to step foot in Afghanistan.

Our World Mission Divisions have the experience of the years to bring perspectives and understandings, which will truly enhance the effectiveness of our mission and help us avoid mistakes and dangers. They are also aware of the partnership relationships, which we have which could be assets in our carrying out mission. They can facilitate our bilateral missionary

commitments as well as point us towards multilateral mission engagements. These are the mission engagements that are not necessarily between two settings – e.g. missionaries from PCUSA going to a setting in Asia or Africa. But rather mission engagement that strengthens mission in many countries and in many fronts.

We also engage in mission in a particular global context today, and we need to take that context very seriously. The contexts include the kind of world in which we live today in which

- a large number of people are either economically disadvantaged or bear the heavy consequences of unjust economic arrangements.
- the pluralistic communities in which Christians live alongside persons of other religions – some of which have learned to live together, and others being volatile with open conflicts.
- The feelings of increased insecurity in the world – often the result of a complex array of political and economic factors and policies.

We and our partners live and minister in these contexts. Many of the PCUSA's partners in mission live and witness in the Global South affected by these often very difficult issues which need to be taken into account in mission thinking. They would want their partners to take their realities very seriously as we pray together and journey with one another in God's mission. We need to covenant for justice together and be partners both in presenting the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ and in creating a more just world, and in developing together how to witness as well as be in dialogue in multi-religious contexts. Our consciousness of engaging in mission in unity demand that we do not take these factors lightly.

Mission in Unity

In the light of what I have said so far, I want to point to three action areas for our reflection and consideration.

1. In view of the urgency of mission at home and abroad, I thank God for the passion for mission that many congregations have. How can those the passion for mission at home and abroad be done in a manner that exhibits mission in unity? How can we live above the temptation to go it on our own? I am grateful for a consultation of this kind where partners can think together about these questions. Whatever we do, our decisions around resources and the personnel that actually do the mission must be subjected to the one who sends us all – not just the ones who have the resources. It entails a new discipline between all partners involved in any mission engagement. It calls us to use the term “partnership” in a manner that gives true meaning to the word – not simply as euphemism for the old sender-recipient paradigms. It takes seriously the partnership relationships. The passion for mission can lead to effective mission if we place the value for engagement in mission in unity at the heart of how we carry out what we have been called to do. Recent experiments that WARC's Mission project has been carrying out under the title “Making a Difference programme” has been an eye-opener in many ways. In its current phase, churches in South Africa, Rwanda and Belgium are engaged in a very healthy process of learning from one another and making a difference in their different contexts. Results from this can then be multiplied to affect other contexts.
2. Immigrant churches in the USA provide us with another possibility for doing mission in unity. Many come from churches with which the PCUSA is a partner. In recent years, I have seen many signs that congregations and Presbyteries are taking this opportunity to engage in mission in unity right here in the USA. However, there are also far too many incidents in which the immigrant churches are simply tenants in our sanctuaries – using them when we do not need

them, and congregations are simply satisfied with collecting rent and making sure that the immigrant communities leave their sanctuaries clean after their worship services. With immigration patterns being what they are, the PCUSA needs to look at this area as a very important opportunity for engagement in mission in unity. Here too the challenge includes not using partnership simply as a euphemism to cover unhealthy power relations. There can be great opportunity for partnership in mission – not only between congregations, but also with partner churches. Both sides can learn much and also offer much to one another.

3. It is especially in the area of mission engagement that we need to take new steps constantly to overcome divisions in the Reformed family in particular as well as in the church of Jesus Christ as a whole. This requires constant renewal of our mission thinking relevant to current contexts as well as attention to how mission engagement is taught in our theological institutions. This is why theological education for mission in unity is an important feature in WARC's mission project. If how we carry out mission is going to be effective then what emerging pastors and church leaders are exposed to in theological institutions can play some key roles. However, education for effective mission is not only limited to theological institutions. The training and orientation facilitated by the World Ministries Division when mission co-workers are being commissioned is one important such educational opportunity. The education here can also take into account the current global contexts.

In all these I hope we can constantly commit ourselves to engaging in mission with a sense of unity. Our Lord's prayer that we might be one that others may believe is as relevant today as it was 2000 years ago. Bilateral mission engagement forms the bulk of what we do. A mission in unity orientation helps us know that even our bilateral mission engagement has to be done as a part of a larger multilateral mission. This is what mission agencies and bodies such as WARC keeps in our view. We are not alone. We are participating in God's mission. We cannot ignore the multilateral nature of our calling, and bodies we belong to which help us engage in mission multilaterally. Among other things the gifts we have from bodies we belong to which keeps the multilateral focus of our mission contribute to our understanding of the contexts in which we engage in mission so that even our bilateral mission and the mission of all our partners can be effective.

Some critical questions

Since my role here is not to simply prescribe solutions, but to stimulate the reflection that we all do together as we think of mission in unity, let me close with some of the questions that we raised in the mission letter that we sent out in 2004 –relevant to this theme³:

1. How are our churches to understand and practice mission in a world of cultural diversity? One church, one faith, one Lord: but how are our churches to interpret the one gospel faithfully in the many cultures and contexts of our world?
2. How are our churches to include women's perspectives and visions in creating new paradigms of mission? Women's stories of mission describe partnership and solidarity as essential to working in the midst of brokenness and pain for healing, transformation and the renewal of creation. Mission as midwifery describes the ways in which women enable communities to bring forth new life.

³ *Reformed World*, Volume 54, Number 1, March 2004, (Mission, Justice, Covenant) pp 9 and 10. The following seven questions are taken directly from the WARC's letter on mission addressed to all member churches and to all women and men who gathered in Accra for the 24th General Council in July-August 2004.

3. How are we to overcome the many conflicts and divisions within the Reformed family that separate us from one another, sap our energies and blight our witness to God's reconciling love?
4. How are our churches to understand and practice mission in a world of many faiths? How do we hold together dialogue and evangelism in interfaith contexts? How do we understand the place of other religions within the *Missio Dei*? How do we distinguish true witness from proselytism? How do we work with people of other faiths in the common quest for peace, justice and the defence of the faith?
5. How are our churches to understand and practice mission in the context of economic injustice and environmental destruction? The *Missio Dei* is the mission of a God who redeems the oppressed from their burdens (Exodus 6:6) and brings them out of the house of slavery (Exodus 20:2) into the household of life, and sets a rainbow in the clouds as a sign of the covenant between God and the earth (Genesis 9:13). How then are we to understand the mission of our churches?

Conclusion

Mission indeed is at the heart of our understanding of God and the church. Let us renew our commitment to overcoming divisions and pursue partnering relationships and engagement in mission in a manner that exhibits the unity for which the Lord who sends us into mission prayed. Let us recognize that God's church in different parts of the world is committed to engaging in this mission in a way that honours God and strengthens the church in the different parts of the world. Let us work together on this. To God be the glory.

Setri Nyomi (Rev. Dr.)
WARC General Secretary