

Section 1

CONTEXTS OF MISSION

That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What is this conversation which you are holding with each other as you walk?" And they stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" And he said to them "What things?" Luke 24:13–19





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As God's incarnation took place within a specific context (Luke 2:1–2), God's mission always takes place in particular social, economic, political, religious, and cultural contexts. Present contexts are certainly different from that of Judea 2,000 years ago, but God's reign still breaks into a specific context in today's world. Thus, engaging in mission requires prayerful discernment of the signs of the times and a faithful reading of the contexts. For an effective contextual and holistic mission, the church is challenged to engage in context discernment and analysis at local and national levels, keeping in mind the impact of global and regional factors on local contexts. This document attempts to highlight some aspects of global and regional contexts, while urging the local church to continue to deepen the process with its own contexts.

1.1. Discerning and naming the contexts of mission

The contexts in which people live shape and influence their understanding of the world, the gospel, and themselves. Therefore, the church cannot assume that its view of the world, of others, of the earth, and of God, is universal. It names its contexts

to help it *be* in the world without being assimilated *by* the world (John 17), and to discern those things and people in its contexts that God seeks to transform, reconcile, and empower.

Naming a context does not consist simply in enumerating factors pertaining to the context. It involves identifying, analyzing, knowing, and categorizing in order to transform the context. It is a cooperative venture of conversation and dialogue, listening and speaking, acting and observing, giving and receiving. Interaction is an essential part of the process of naming and discovering the context of mission. Sometimes an outside voice helps the church to see its own context in a new light. More specifically, marginalized and excluded voices reveal contexts in new ways, sharpening the church's focus in mission.

In analyzing its context, the church may ask, among other things, questions relating to situations requiring transformation and/or healing, situations of conflict and reconciliation, and situations of control of power – its abuse, misuse, or the lack of it. Understanding contexts requires naming the realities and powers that are operative in the world; this includes naming both the powers of evil and the power of God. Sin, destruction, broken community and individual relationships, and ecological degradation reveal a way of life that is not as God intended. Contexts, however, are also places and situations where God is already working to bring God's promised reign to fruition. These are places where God's people are active in various callings. These are also events where the good news is proclaimed, the voices of the oppressed are heard, injustices are addressed, and creation and all people are restored to health. Mistakes may be made in the church's efforts to name its contexts. Yet without comprehending the contexts, the church may simply assume that the way things are is the way they are meant to be.


1.2. Voices that name the contexts

There are many important voices in the world which name the contexts and to which the church needs to listen carefully and intentionally. The cries of the poor, the oppressed, the excluded, and the forgotten and silenced point to the destructive arrogance of the powerful and the need for the in-breaking reign of God in Christ, where there is justice and inclusion in a life-giving community. The corrective new methods of interpretation of women's theologies, the creative voices of youth, and the testimonies of those who have experienced God's empowering presence and work in their community, enable the church to discern where in its context transformation, reconciliation, and empowerment are called for.

The scriptures, as they are shared in context, provide a different set of lenses with which to view the world and its operative values and ideals. As Jesus did when he opened the scriptures with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, the scriptures help the church evaluate its own contexts from a broader historical perspective and from the perspective of God's intentions for the world. Likewise, theological and confessional documents, with themes such as justification, grace, Word, and the sacraments, shape how the church views its contexts from a new perspective. Ecumenical engagement and the results of ecumenical and interfaith dialogue also provide a different perspective and may give new or clearer glimpses of God's reign breaking into the world, along with new possibilities and challenges for mission that may have been overlooked.

Prophets in society, within and outside the church, describe the reality of different contexts. They may

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be scientists, sages, concerned women, or voices calling out in the wilderness of people's lives. They may call into question the church's assumptions and challenge it to revisit its priorities and ideals. God's creation also raises its voice to name contexts. It bears witness to the glories of God (Psalm 19:1–4), a God who delights in nourishing the physical, emotional, and spiritual life of all creation. It also painfully decries human greed and wanton violence that cause untold devastation and desolation of the environment.

There are other voices to which the church needs to listen and other analytical tools that it can use to name its context, but not all of them can be discussed here. This section describes some basic ways and tools for the church to start discerning and naming the place to which it is called to participate in God's mission and thus engage in the hermeneutical spiral.

1.3. Changing global realities affecting global and local contexts

God's mission and the resulting mission of the church take place in ever-changing contexts. The church's contexts differ

from place to place and the forms of contexts may change. Nevertheless, despite constant changes and differences in contexts, there are certain overarching themes that present themselves as the church looks at the contexts of mission at the beginning of a new century. The examples given here, however, are by no means an exhaustive list of all the factors that the church needs to take into account concerning its context. In exploring its context, the church will see how issues of context affect its life and witness. It may also ask what other factors are important in shaping its context and how these factors have both positive and negative practical implications for people involved in God's mission.

1.3.1. The complex effects of globalization

The turn of the century was marked by historically significant changes, among them the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the cold war, the rise of superpower hegemony, the dismantling of apartheid as an official justification of racism, and the information technology revolution that opened the way to globalization. Different parts of the world have become increasingly interlinked as a result of improved means of transportation and communication technologies. In general, globalization has had a considerable impact on all aspects of societal life: economy, politics, culture, communication, and the individual's sense of value and morality. On the one hand, globalization has brought a number of benefits in different aspects of life. Improved transportation allows people to travel widely with greater flexibility and efficiency and to meet people of different cultures in their own contexts. Communication technology such as the Internet has fostered the democratization of information, which can no longer be controlled or manipulated as easily by the state. Scientific and technical knowledge, best practices in different fields of human endeavor, and expectations and opportunities are shared across regional and national frontiers.



To some extent, globalization has also enhanced public scrutiny of governments, increased people's ability to respond quickly and flexibly to crises, and facilitated awareness of human rights and their abuse around the world. Socially speaking, it gives one a sense of the familiar wherever one is, and ecologically speaking, it sharpens one's sensitivity to the finiteness and interconnectedness of the ecosystem.

On the other hand, with its promotion of individualism at the expense of community, globalization has widened the gap between people, nations, and the wealthy and the impoverished. The adverse effects of neoliberal economic globalization, with its emphasis on profit making, competition, consolidation of conglomerates, and private ownership of means of production, have reduced the economy of many countries, especially in the South, to one of sheer survival. Local economies are at the mercy of transnational corporations, which dictate the course of the globalized economy. Some corporations have more wealth – and thus more power – than the majority of the world's governments. In addition to their debilitating debt burdens, impoverished

nations suffer from the ill-effects of the commodification of life and bodies, the Westernization of culture, and the feminization of poverty. As a result of cash cropping, agribusiness, and severe climate change, many nations of the South are unable to maintain food security. Every year, millions of families and entire nations find themselves worse off economically. The number of educated young people without a job is on the rise.

Consumerism, an essential element of the neoliberal economy, comes as a challenge to the church in mission. While a high level of consumption is required to stimulate the market-based economy, the market mentality, which attributes market values to everything, including morality and religion, fuels and promotes consumerism. An economy that thrives on spending more rather than saving is detrimental to the sustainability of the earth's resources for future generations. Advertising has encouraged consumerism even in places where poverty predominates.

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It often blurs the distinction between wants and needs and its emphasis on purchasing rather than recycling has a detrimental effect on society and the environment.

The church in mission is challenged to address economic injustices and to question any view that defines or evaluates people according to their wealth or market value (cf. LWF Working

Paper, *“Engaging Economic Globalization as a Communion,”* May 2001).

As the globalized consumer economy continues, the devastation of the ecosystem intensifies. As rainforests continue to be destroyed and the use of pesticides has increased to maximize profits, the amount of land suitable for growing crops has decreased due to growing desertification. The trend toward corporate farming has generated unemployment and consequent migration from the countryside to the cities, highlighting the connection between ecological and economic issues. Encroachment of certain predatory aspects of Western civilization to other areas of the earth, rapid world population growth, and harmful cultural traditions have led to the extinction of many species of animals and plants and threaten the delicate balance of fragile ecosystems.

Technological advances and modern conveniences have often come at the expense of land, air, and water. Pollution by chemicals, noxious emissions, and radiation threatens the well-being of all creation. God’s creation has suffered greatly at the hands of sinful human beings. Yet, at the same time, technological advances have allowed people to discover, trace, and eliminate other harmful practices and substances. For example, pharmacological advances and the discovery of radiation’s role in diagnosing illness have saved countless lives throughout the world.

1.3.2. Technological contexts

Along with globalization has come an increased use of technology and greater access to information. Information technology has both positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, people can communicate with each other more freely and immediately, and the ability to store, retrieve, process, and disseminate information has increased. People are



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also able to transcend the traditional geographical boundaries of religions. Information technology may also allow the church to reach out to people who have withdrawn from institutional religious communities.

On the negative side, “virtual” contact may become more important than personal contact. Moreover, information technology runs the risk of increasing the gap between those who have access to this technology and those who do not. The wealthy have easier access to technological innovations than the poor, driving a greater wedge between the affluent and poor nations and individuals of the world.

There is a flourishing global market in the genetic engineering of animal and plant life. Genetically modified food is creating new dependencies, even though the physiological consequences are not yet known. The genetic patenting of indigenous plants by global agricultural corporations develops and supports the ongoing process of dependency and deprivation of the right to ownership of Southern countries.

While globalized women’s movements have opened doors for many women in terms of affirming their rights over their own bodies, the globalization of economics and entertainment media has increased the exploitation of women as surrogate mothers and has reduced women’s bodies to objectivized commodities or ovum donors. The possibility of knowing a child’s sex before birth has led to an increase in abortions of female fetuses in places where male children are considered more desirable.

The ability to do something does not necessarily mean it is right. Scientists exercise significant power in a world that idolizes technology, and there is a temptation to abuse this power for military and other aims. As it engages in mission and gains a glimpse of God’s in-breaking reign in Christ, the

church encounters ethical dilemmas about the value and use of technologies. It has to take seriously into account what is appropriate and keep in mind cultural integrity and public accountability.

1.3.3. Health contexts

Advances in scientific knowledge and technology have led to considerable progress in combating various diseases and other threats to health. Nevertheless, despite technological progress, the world continues to struggle with health issues. The intensity of that struggle, however, differs from one continent to another. Even in the twenty-first century, the connection between illness and poverty is striking. In many countries in the South, and also in pockets of poverty in affluent countries, the poor are more prone than the rich to ill-health. Illness weakens the frail economies of the countries of the South.

Today’s world is marked by different physical, mental, psychological, emotional, spiritual, and relational and social illnesses, some of which are acknowledged, while others are kept hidden and are the object of denial. Among the latter are killer diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria, which devastate entire continents. HIV/AIDS has reached pandemic proportions in many countries of the South. Economic, cultural, and other factors have affected the ability of some countries to react appropriately. Although primarily a health issue, it also creates serious social and economic problems, among them an increasing number of orphans and the inability of families

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affected by AIDS to provide for themselves. In some places, children and women are becoming much more vulnerable and burdened. Educational health programs are important, as is the need to break the silence about this illness and other health issues. The church has had trouble talking about this issue publicly, yet this crisis constitutes a challenging opportunity for the church in mission.

Illness may result in permanent impairment. Disabling conditions, however, are not illnesses. Approximately 10 percent of the population in any given country have one of the five broad categories of disability: physical disability, blindness, deafness, intellectual impairment, and mental illness.



Such people face discrimination when seeking employment and at their place of work. Public buildings, work places, and even churches are not always accessible to people with ambulatory problems. Increasingly, churches are making efforts to provide ways for people

with disabilities to participate fully in church life and work (e.g., sign language interpretation for the deaf). Working with others in educating society to remove physical obstacles and cease the stigmatization and exclusion of people with disabling conditions is an urgent challenge for the church.

1.3.4. Violence in the world

God's mission has always taken place in the midst of a violent world. The crucifixion was an act of violence against God and, indirectly, against humanity and all creation. The mission of the church began in the midst of persecution and violence. Violence, in

all its forms, overt or covert, has always been used to gain power over others. It is a potent tool used by those with power or seeking power to control, suppress, or enforce change for their own benefit. It is a sin.

War and conflict: Violence, conflict, and war occur between or within nations as power struggles to maintain or increase control over limited resources and achieve uncontested superiority. In the past, conventional wars may have been fought by the military with predetermined rules of engagement. More recently, insurrectionists, rebels, and warlords have engaged in armed conflict. Innocent civilians, especially children and women, are dragged into these conflicts and used as pawns, shields, and targets. The use of terror as a forceful means to break the enemy has always accompanied armed conflict. Today's technological advances make this form of violence even more lethal, physically and psychologically.

War brings untold suffering, disease, and poverty to the most vulnerable, the elderly, women and children, and to succeeding generations. It devastates infrastructures and the environment.

Equally destructive is the covert violence of geopolitical and economic warfare on impoverished nations. This occurs when aid is contingent upon adopting various policies that benefit the giver at the expense of the recipient. The illegitimate debts of countries in the South, and the facilitation of investment across borders to maximize profit to the detriment of those countries where investments are made, are examples of covert violence. Poverty itself is a form of violence, for it robs people of their human dignity, health, and well-being.

Structural and systemic violence: Violence occurs when social structures are founded on and maintained by privileged groups for their own

benefit. Patriarchal structures, for instance, do not recognize the rights and equality of women. Migrant groups are exploited and immigrants treated unjustly for ethnic, racial, sexual, or religious reasons. Social stratification is another form of social violence. The “untouchables,” or those with the lowest social standing in society, are often unjustly excluded. Social or political structures such as dictatorship, oligarchy, and patriarchy have always resulted in systemic violence. It foments the suppression of human and civil rights, the implementation of unjust political policies, and the unilateral imposition of regional values, ideologies, and economics. Gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and even language have been used as the basis on which people have been excluded or rendered voiceless. In extreme cases, this can lead to so-called ethnic cleansing and genocide. Throughout history, systemic violence has not gone unchallenged. Counter-violence, including the use of terror at national and regional levels, has caused protracted suffering and destruction.

Violence against women, children, and the weak: Violence is also the cause of terrible suffering in the home, often directed against women, children, the elderly, and



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the disabled. Such people can be abused physically, sexually, and mentally. Battered women are isolated from nurturing, supportive communities in order to exercise greater control over them. Violence may also take the form of inequity in salaries and opportunities between men and women, and “glass ceilings” in the corporate sector. Exclusive language renders silent and nameless half of the world’s population (cf. LWF document *Churches say “NO” to violence against women*, 2001). Children may be malnourished or denied education. Violence includes forcing children to fight in wars and into prostitution and child labor.

Violence against the elderly and the ageing occurs when institutions destroy their dignity or sedate



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them heavily, or when their own children and society abuse them financially, socially, physically, or intellectually. The wisdom of the elderly is often rejected or suppressed, their contributions in transferring values and experiences of life to new generations forgotten. The church in mission is called to address this violence in ways that encourage community rather than isolation from community.

Violence in religion and in the church: Religious fanaticism is a sad fact of human history. It breeds violence that may be directed inward in attempts to purify and cleanse the church or

religious body, or outward, against people of other religions or even other denominations. In one sense, this is violence in its worst form, for it justifies itself in the name of

religion and in the name of God. This violence has been practiced overtly by fanatical zealots in all religions, and covertly through misinformed views and understandings of other religions, which directly influence the understanding of mission.

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The church is not always the victim of violence, though that is often the case. The church has also been violent towards its own members. Colonial churches exercised power over developing mission churches, often preventing the younger churches from forming their own leadership and sense of mission. Abuse of power and disputes over property by church authorities have often been the cause of church conflicts. Women have been subtly and obviously excluded from leadership and oversight positions in the church, and their voices, as well as those of youth, have been silenced or ignored.

Violence seeks to isolate and separate people from their communities and from their sources of nurture and hope. It treats people as less than human. Violence is a sin that attempts to suppress and negate all signs of hope and community in God. The church in mission is called to name and shame this violence and walk with those who seek justice and peace for their empowerment.

1.3.5. Religious, cultural, and political contexts

In many parts of the world, in spite or because of violence and calamity, there is a surge in spirituality: people are seeking new forms of spirituality to satisfy their longing to belong. Often, the institutional

church does not seem to offer the spiritual satisfaction they seek. In many countries in Europe – described by analysts as post-Christian, postmodern, highly secularized, and market driven – churches have experienced extensive loss of membership due to a general lack of interest in church life and mission. What had been referred to as Christendom is no more. New or rediscovered forms of religion are instead taking advantage of the search for spirituality. Some have left institutional religions to develop rediscovered cultural roots, to engage in spiritism, or to embrace secularization.

A new challenge for the church in mission, especially in the North, is to address the religious and cultural plurality in its midst. Large-scale migration of people across regions and continents, seeking financial opportunities or fleeing from oppression and violence, has led to an ever-larger diversity of religion and cultures in the major cities of the world. Religious cultures are no longer isolated from each other. In such multicultural situations people feel that their self-understanding or identity is brought into question. They seek their roots and a meaning or purpose in life. Many are involved in constant processes of self-construction or “identity projects.” This is evident in youth culture and among migrants, but it is also a feature of most people’s lives. Identity projects happen at both the individual and collective level, when people endeavor to shape or reshape their individual or collective identity, or even try to rewrite history. This perspective may help explain the causes of regional conflict, and may also shed light on the increase of fundamentalism and nationalism. Churches in host countries to immigrants or refugees are challenged to engage in daily interaction through dialogue and hospitality.

One response to increasing religious plurality has been a reactionary fundamentalism, with its strong desire for groups to protect themselves and their

identity from outside influences or to recover a passionate loyalty to an idealized traditional religious belief. The need to recover or emphasize the fundamentals of one’s faith is important and empowering to the self, as the inherent dynamics of fundamentals have a transforming influence on the individual, the religious community, and the wider society. Fundamentalism, however, makes absolutes of such fundamentals and imposes them upon everyone in the community. When it is connected with political and economic power, reactionary fundamentalism can be used to justify opposition or violence to outsiders.

A comprehensive cultural shift, described as the transition from the modern to the late or postmodern society, has been identified as one of the most challenging contexts of mission. This cultural shift is closely associated with globalization and considered as its social, cultural, and religious repercussions. It is characterized by a radical questioning of received conceptual schemes and what was previously held as truth and authority. Nothing can be taken for granted in science, religion, or the search for stability in family patterns or traditional forms of authority. In a world where the meaning of language and hermeneutics is



given prominence in the scientific community, the feeling of insecurity will rise. When theological truth is questioned, the mission of the church in the world is challenged. By means of global processes of influence these phenomena, arising in the North, do not remain there, but are already felt in different parts of the world.

Christians live and work in different political contexts. There are differences of opinion over whether governments participate in or oppose the mission of God. People may confuse the reign of God with political power, especially when the term “Kingdom of God” is used. Good governance makes it tempting to assume that it is “blessed by God” and that such a system is ordained for all cultures. Every system of governing, however, imposes its contextual and

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ideological perspectives upon society. The imposition of political ideologies may silence the voices of people, rob them of their dignity, foster systemic violence, or lead to global conflict. Bad governance

may hinder access to adequate educational, health, security, or organizational resources. Yet God’s mission takes place in the midst of the ambiguities of these contexts.

1.4. Context and theology

Some of the realities of present day contexts, which have implications for the church’s mission and theology, have been named. The disciples on the Emmaus road saw their context differently when Jesus opened up the scriptures and revealed himself to them as the resurrected Christ in the breaking of the bread. This enlightenment was necessary for them to make sense of and to address their context

in a way that would help and empower them for mission. The church, too, needs to reflect critically on its theology and practice of mission in the light of the Word of God made alive by the Holy Spirit within each context.

Context and theology relate to each other in a dialectical and dialogical manner aptly described as a *hermeneutical spiral*. Theology traces its origin in the hearing of the Word of God in context, followed by faith commitment. The “faith active in love,” born of the hearing and working of God’s creative Word, expresses itself in praxis; that is, an activity that seeks to incarnate the gospel in the life and context of a community. Christian theology is a faithful reflection on God’s being and acting in the world and on the praxis of the church and the individual. Theology of mission, more specifically, reflects on God’s mission and on the church’s response to Christ’s gracious call to follow him.

As it reflects on praxis, Christian theology is necessarily contextual: while it addresses the context, it is influenced and to a deeper extent conditioned by the context. Theology, therefore, needs to be challenged continuously and transformed by the Word of God from scriptures. The disciples on the Emmaus road had their acquired theology about the Christ challenged and transformed by the risen Christ. A theology that is capable of articulating God’s mission must be transformed continually by the Word heard in context and in praxis.

Moreover, theology, drawing from a long history and wealth of Christian tradition and confessions, sharpens the church’s analysis and naming of the context. Serving the missional church faithfully in the dialectical tension between praxis in context and the creative word of God, theology enables the church to think clearly about its engagements in the world and strengthens the church’s understanding of its reason for being.