

# “Thinking it over...” Issue #3

*This third in a series of theological reflections is produced by the LWF Department for Theology and Studies, but does not represent the official position of the Lutheran World Federation. You are encouraged to duplicate, translate and use this in local settings. Your responses are welcome: [iwu@lutheranworld.org](mailto:iwu@lutheranworld.org)*

## **INTERFAITH DIALOGUE OR MISSION?**

Frequently I am asked whether the Lutheran World Federation's engagement in interfaith dialogue means that we have to give up mission work. Does this mean that interfaith dialogue and mission are mutually exclusive, or are they inter-related?

Misunderstandings continue to exist, for example, that interfaith dialogue involves only professionals who engage in theoretical discourse which has no bearing on daily life. Since dialogue is not simply an interaction of words, but a style of life, I prefer to talk about “building interfaith relations” or, even better, to focus on *diapraxis*.

## **DIAPRAXIS**

Lissi Rasmussen defines *diapraxis* as a relationship in which a common praxis is essential. "*Diapraxis* calls for a contextual approach to dialogue where people meet and try to reveal and transform the reality they share. In such an engagement theological questions can arise and be dealt with out of which deeper meeting, a real *diapraxis* can emerge."<sup>1</sup>

Increasingly people of different faiths are living and working together; members of more and more families belong to different faith traditions. *Diapraxis* focuses on the life and space we share in multifaith contexts; it demands that people of different religious convictions develop a common vision of solidarity, respect, justice and compassion. This becomes especially important with respect to common work on human rights, addressing other critical ethical, social, economic and political issues, and working together to reconcile conflicts and to overcome violence, social-economic oppression, injustice and corruption.

## **IN GOD’S MISSION JESUS CROSSED BOUNDARIES**

Although himself a Jew, Jesus crossed the borders of the Jewish tradition in order to reach out to people of other faiths, to those who in the New Testament are described as “pagans.”

Thus Jesus participated in God's healing and liberating mission (*cf.* e.g., Mk 5:1-20). Living with and for people of other faiths belongs to God's mission, to the reign of God.

Take the example of Jesus deciding not to hear the cry for healing of a woman of another faith, "a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin" (Mk 7:26). She begged Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter. Although at first Jesus clearly stated his priority (Mk 7:27), he listened to the woman's argument. Through their dialogue, Jesus changed his mind and healed her daughter. Does this not challenge us to rethink and change our minds regarding people of other faiths through *diapraxis*? Interestingly enough, Jesus did not require the woman and her daughter to convert. In other words, he had no hidden agenda.

On another occasion, Jesus dialogues with a woman of another faith, a Samaritan, respecting her religious tradition, giving his witness, and placing both traditions in an eschatological perspective: "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (Jn 4:24).

Rather than criticizing, Jesus respected other people's religious convictions. There is no support in the New Testament for missionary "crusades" which consider others as "objects" to be converted and do not respect and seek to understand them in their religious differences. Jesus participated in God's mission by crossing boundaries and living out the indicative and imperative of love in God's mission. The imperative to love all people includes the love for people of other faiths.

## **INTERFAITH DIALOGUE: AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE CHURCH'S MISSION**

Interfaith dialogue is part of the mission of every Christian and of all churches. Christian mission is not incompatible with interfaith dialogue, especially when we understand ourselves as participants in God's mission, as ambassadors of Christ. By witnessing to the coming of God's reign in multifaith contexts, the church is an integral part of God's holistic mission.

God's love and the imperative to love even our enemies demands dialogue with people of other faiths. Love includes trying to understand the other, searching for mutual understanding and coexistence, for peace and justice. Love also includes the witness of our faith in words. Having become friends through *diapraxis* we cannot keep silent regarding our faith. We must share with one another our faith without trying to proselytize.

While some Lutherans are afraid of losing their Christian identity or even their own faith in interfaith dialogue, my own experience and that of many others has been the reverse. Interfaith dialogue can be risky. By entering into interfaith dialogue, by learning from one another, we risk losing our safe haven, the "pulpit" for our monologue. We do not know what direction the dialogue will take nor what the results may be. The Holy Spirit may move us to take the risk, to move from monologue to an enriching and potentially transforming mission.<sup>2</sup>

Interfaith dialogue is grounded in the dialogical nature of the Christian faith. Christian faith, in turn, is based on God having taken the initiative by entering into a dialogical *communio* with humanity. For Christians, the universal saving event in Jesus Christ is the

basis for interfaith encounter in dialogue, prayer, and coexistence. Every Christian, therefore, should be challenged to engage in interfaith dialogue with those of different faith convictions: "Since the gospel of Jesus Christ is a joyful message of reconciliation, it is deeply dialogical in character and encourages us to enter into conversation with and witness to people of other faiths or no faith, boldly and confidently."<sup>3</sup>

In interfaith dialogue, we need to be open to new, creative, personal, cultural and social experiences. As we engage in sincere and honest interfaith dialogue, we ourselves are transformed. This is consistent with a transformational understanding of mission. In interfaith dialogue our eyes may be opened; we might change our minds. Like Jesus in the interfaith dialogue with the Syrophenician woman, we may be "converted," as was Peter (Acts 10:1-33). "Peter's [conversion] has to do primarily with a radical change of attitudes that resulted in accepting that all human beings are equal in the sight of God. Peter's horizon was enlarged by the encounter. It gave him a new perspective of reality; it transformed his understanding and appreciation of God's grace and presence in human society. His eyes were opened to the fact that God's grace and love are a gift for all, without discrimination. Equality among all human beings is the gracious gift of God. Therefore, no one can deny it without violating God's intention."<sup>4</sup>

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*What does the encounter of Peter and Cornelius mean for us today?*

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Trying to understand the other's spirituality, religious experiences and practices, learning from them, and sharing our own faith and understandings in order to be enriched and transformed is an integral part of the church's mission. Thus, we can grow together toward a reconciled diversity without feeling threatened.

## **INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AND MISSION ARE NOT MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE, BUT IN CREATIVE TENSION**

In interfaith dialogue, we can discover that God's mission is greater than the mission of the church. As was stated by the 2003 Assembly of the LWF, "God's mission is wider than the bounds of the church." Through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we can reach a more comprehensive understanding of the gospel, and mission as a healing and saving process.

Interfaith dialogue includes my witness and that of my interfaith dialogue partner's. It is only possible if my partner and I have a clear position, witness to our faith and are open to self-criticism. Our faith identity and witness are not obstacles, but rather a precondition for a committed interfaith dialogue.

However, there is a tension in the faith commitment to witness to Jesus Christ as the way of salvation, and the conviction that God's presence and mission is greater than the mission of the church. As the World Mission Conference stated, "We cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ; at the same time we cannot set limits to the saving power of God." The report acknowledges that there is a tension and affirms, "We appreciate this tension, and do not attempt to resolve it."<sup>5</sup>

We have to live in this tension because we have to admit that we do not have the answers to all questions and should be “prepared to live within the framework of penultimate knowledge.” “We know only in part, but we do know. And we believe that the faith we profess is both true and just, and should be proclaimed. We do this, however, not as judges or lawyers, but as witnesses; not as soldiers, but as envoys of peace; not as high-pressure sales-persons, but as ambassadors of the Servant Lord.”<sup>6</sup>

I believe interfaith dialogue and witness to be integral aspects of our mission. The above tension can be a creative, enriching and transforming experience. Both *diapraxis* and witness are to be lived out in an attitude of humility, emptying ourselves (*kenosis*), because we find the center of life in the cross (*cf.* Phil 2:5-11). This attitude is intrinsic to the Christian faith, to being saved by grace. When we are weak, then we are strong (*cf.* 2 Cor 12:10).

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*The relation between interfaith dialogue and proclamation requires ongoing study and discussion in our churches. What is your reaction to these initial reflections?*

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**REV. DR INGO WULFHORST**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Sigvard von Sicard, “Diapraxis or Beyond,” in Sigvard von Sicard and Ingo Wulforth (eds), *Dialogue and Beyond: Christians and Muslims Together on the Way, LWF Studies 01/2003* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2003), p. 131.

<sup>2</sup> See David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> *Official Proceedings of the Eighth Assembly, LWF Report No 28/29* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1990), p. 83.

<sup>4</sup> Ishmael Noko, “Foreword,” in Roland E. Miller and Hance A. O. Mwakabana (eds), *Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Theological & Practical Issues, LWF Studies 3* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1998), p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> F. R. Wilson, *The San Antonio Report* (Geneva: The World Council of Churches, 1990), pp. 32 f.

<sup>6</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), p. 488.

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