

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *European Journal of Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_european-journal-theology\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_european-journal-theology_01.php)

# The World Council of Churches' Mission Statement 'Together Towards Life': Mission, Evangelism and *Missio Dei*

## *Ida Heikkilä*

### ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Das Konzept der *Missio Dei* (die Mission oder Sendung Gottes) hat bereits über 60 Jahre lang das missiologische Denken geprägt. Während die genaue Bedeutung des Konzeptes unklar bleibt und vieldeutig ist, leben die entscheidenden Prinzipien der *Missio-Dei*-Theologie in der Missiologie der Gegenwart weiter, wie dies an der jüngsten Erklärung des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen

deutlich wird: „Gemeinsam für das Leben: Mission und Evangelisation in sich wandelnden Kontexten“ (2012). Dieses Dokument unterstützt vornehmlich eine *Missio-Dei*-Theologie, d.h. dass die Sendung von Gott ausgeht und nicht von der Kirche. Es besteht allerdings keine Kohärenz bei den Folgen dieses Prinzips. Darüber hinaus fügt das Dokument dem Gesamtbild neue Elemente hinzu; so legt es einen Schwerpunkt auf das Werk des Heiligen Geistes.

\*            \*            \*            \*            \*            \*            \*            \*

### RÉSUMÉ

La notion de *missio Dei* a orienté la pensée missiologique depuis plus de soixante ans. Bien que la signification exacte de ce concept soit ambiguë, les principaux éléments de la théologie de la *missio Dei* sont toujours influents en missiologie, comme cela apparaît dans la nouvelle déclaration sur la mission du Conseil Œcuménique des Églises intitulée, en français : *Fais-*

*nous vivre de ton Esprit : une dynamique missionnaire renouvelée* (2012). Ce document est en accord avec l'affirmation centrale de la théologie de la *missio Dei*, à savoir que la mission est celle de Dieu et non pas celle de l'Église, mais il est inconséquent en ce qu'il ne tire pas les conséquences de cette conviction. En outre, il ajoute de nouveaux éléments au tableau comme l'accent très appuyé sur l'œuvre du Saint-Esprit.

\*            \*            \*            \*            \*            \*            \*            \*

### SUMMARY

The concept of *missio Dei* (the mission or the sending of God) has already been shaping missiological thinking for more than 60 years. While the exact meaning of the concept is ambiguous, the main tenets of *missio Dei* theology live on in contemporary missiology, as is clearly seen in the newest mission statement of the World Council

of Churches, 'Together towards life: mission and evangelism in changing landscapes' (2012). The document adheres to the central affirmation of *missio Dei* theology, i.e. that the mission is God's and not the Church's, but it is incoherent with regard to the consequences of this conviction. Moreover, it adds new elements to the picture such as a strong emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit.

\*            \*            \*            \*            \*            \*            \*            \*

## 1. Introduction

The document 'Together towards life: mission and evangelism in changing landscapes' (hereafter TTL) was published in 2012 by the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) of

the World Council of Churches (WCC). Since the integration of the International Missionary Council, the predecessor of CWME, in the WCC in 1961, the document 'Ecumenical affirmation: mission and evangelism' from 1982 had been the only official statement on mission issued by the

WCC. Both the theological and symbolical value of TTL are therefore great.

'Together towards life' consists of 112 paragraphs of which the last 12 form the 'Concluding affirmations'. The central theme of TTL is the mission of the Holy Spirit within the mission of the Triune God (*missio Dei*), the treatment of which takes place under four main headings: 'Spirit of mission: breath of life', 'Spirit of liberation: mission from the margins', 'Spirit of community: church on the move' and 'Spirit of Pentecost: good news for all'. Within this framework, justice, transformation, 'mission from the margins'<sup>1</sup> and the affirmation of 'life'<sup>2</sup> become the key concepts.

*Missio Dei* theology is one of the most elementary building blocks not only of TTL but of contemporary missiology in general.<sup>3</sup> Although many people acknowledge that the concept has its problems, only few question its status as a metanarrative of mission. Neither have any alternative ways of perceiving mission gained wider recognition. Since the main tenet of *missio Dei* theology is that God is the primary agent in mission, all alternative models would easily be combined with returning to the old 'church-centred' way of seeing missionary activity.<sup>4</sup>

The discussion around the meaning of *missio Dei* has momentarily subsided but the concept continues to affect contemporary missiological thinking both formally and in terms of content. 'Together towards life' is an instructive example of this. The aim of the present article is to find out what understanding of *missio Dei* TTL represents and to assess what kind of a missiology it leads to. The questions of the role of the Spirit in relation to the Trinity and the nature of the Kingdom of God are given special attention.

## 2. The linguistic and theological origins of *missio Dei*

The Latin term '*missio Dei*' can be translated both as the 'mission of God' or the 'sending of God'.<sup>5</sup> The concept itself is older and the characteristic trinitarian thrust of *missio Dei* first occurs in a preparatory document for the International Missionary Council's conference held in Willingen in 1952.<sup>6</sup>

The term *missio Dei* is vague in the sense that it can refer both to the 'sending performed by God' and to 'God's being sent'.<sup>7</sup> This elasticity has, from the beginning, allowed the term 'to function in the most divergent trains of thought', H.H. Rosin

purports.<sup>8</sup> To Wilhelm Richebächer it seems that 'everyone reads into and out of this "container definition" whatever he or she needs at the time'.<sup>9</sup> Rosin argues that the biblical understanding of *missio Dei* includes both aspects: God sends his Son, Father and Son send the Holy Spirit, only the Father and the Trinity are not sent; however, God is not only the Sender but also the content of the sending. While contemporary missiology mostly holds the opposite, Rosin points out that in traditional trinitarian terminology *missio* is predominantly passive, referring to God's being sent.<sup>10</sup>

David J. Bosch describes the *missio Dei* theology that sprang up at Willingen as follows:

Mission was understood as being derived from the very nature of God. It was thus put in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology. The classical doctrine on the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another 'movement': The Father, Son and the Holy Spirit sending the church into the world. ... In the new image mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. ... To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love.<sup>11</sup>

What is 'the classical doctrine on the *missio Dei*' that Bosch speaks of here? The content that Bosch gives this doctrine, 'God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit', leads us back to the classical Catholic paradigm of the divine processions and sendings. The background to this paradigm lies in the theology of Augustine, who was the first to introduce a distinction between the immanent and the economic Trinity.<sup>12</sup> To Augustine, the being sent of the Son means his being known to proceed from the Father; likewise, the being sent of the Holy Spirit means his being known to proceed from the Father.<sup>13</sup> Thus, sending has primarily or – as some purport – only epistemological value.<sup>14</sup>

Thomas Aquinas further develops Augustine's reflection on the Trinity. In part I of his *Summa Theologiae* he distinguishes two inner-Trinitarian processions: the first one is the generation of the Son from the Father, the second is the spiration of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son.<sup>15</sup> Aquinas understands the 'being sent' of a divine person as, on the one hand, the procession of origin from the sender, and, on the other, as a new

way of existing in the world. Hannes Wiher summarises Aquinas' reflection as follows: the sending of a divine person is 'the eternal procession of the sent person with a temporal effect produced in creation'.<sup>16</sup>

Like Augustine, Aquinas makes a distinction between '*missio*' and '*processio*'.<sup>17</sup> In more recent times we find a similar structure in the theology of H.H. Rosin, who claims that these two terms should be clearly distinguished from each other in trinitarian terminology. According to Rosin, sending is not primarily a movement within the triune God himself, but the communication of one divine Person through another Person to the creatures.<sup>18</sup>

Georg F. Vicedom, the populariser of *missio Dei* theology, reasons in a similar manner to Augustine and Aquinas; like them, he connects sending primarily with the economic sendings of the Son and the Spirit and associates the term with learning to know God. The outcome of his argumentation is, however, completely different: the sending of God is not only his making-himself-known to mankind as a secondary step apart from his real, eternal essence, but it is his coming to them as his real self. Vicedom writes:

God reveals himself by accomplishing the sending by himself. If there were no *Missio Dei*, we would neither have any revelation. He sends his Word to men and reveals himself by coming to them himself in his Son through the Holy Spirit.<sup>19</sup>

Yet another statement in the quotation from Bosch above calls for attention: Bosch determines the additional movement of the Son and the Spirit sending the Church as the most characteristic trait of the 'Willingen version' of *missio Dei*. The biblical justification for assuming this additional sending seems plausible, as the Latin Vulgate uses the verb *mitto*, 'to send', both of the sending of the persons of the Trinity and the sending of the disciples.<sup>20</sup> This trait does, however, not necessarily define early *missio Dei* thinking. Vicedom, for example, does not explicitly point to an additional sending besides the sendings of the Son and the Spirit. In his theological model, the Church is not independently sent but 'co-sent':

Outside of this *Missio Dei* in Jesus Christ there cannot be any more sendings today. Everything that occurs as sending after his *missio* is gone out from him, determined by him, encompassed by his sending, is a continuation of his sending through himself.<sup>21</sup>

Vicedom differs from Bosch's definition of *missio Dei* theology also in another way: he does not clearly ground the mission of the Church in the being of God, even though he sees God's love as the ultimate ground for his turning towards humankind in mission.<sup>22</sup>

### 3. The ambiguity of *missio Dei*

The preceding reflections show that Bosch's seemingly simple definition of *missio Dei* theology is by no means unproblematic or unequivocal, but that, as already noted, the language of *missio Dei* conceals a multitude of different theological orientations. John G. Flett elucidates this ambiguity:

It can, at one level, be simply stated: the missionary act is grounded in, and flows from, the very nature of the triune God. Drawing on the Johannine 'Great Commission' (John 20:19-23), the Father's sending of the Son includes the second movement of the Son sending his church in the peace of the Spirit. Push deeper than this, however, and it becomes evident that *missio Dei* lacks coherence. Significant ambiguity surrounds axiomatic phrases such as 'God is a missionary God', 'the church is missionary by her very nature', and 'the church participates in God's mission'.<sup>23</sup>

Flett argues that *missio Dei* is not primarily a constructive but a critical concept, which, by grounding mission in the Trinity, aimed at distancing Western missions from their colonialist association.<sup>24</sup> Besides the trinitarian stress, there were other contemporaneous developments, notably the emphasis on the missionary nature of the Church and the eschatological orientation to the kingdom of God, which shared this ambition. The three affirmations mentioned can all be gathered under the rubric of *missio Dei*, but the two latter affirmations have developed independently from the doctrine of the Trinity and are only superficially coordinated with it.<sup>25</sup> Besides the colonialist charge, the emphasis on the Trinity grew as a reaction to an alleged 'unitarianism of the Son'.<sup>26</sup>

While the doctrine of the Trinity establishes a formal framework for *missio Dei*, it does not form its material substance, Flett claims.<sup>27</sup> According to his criticism, 'other forces, be those expansionist desires or ideal political forms, substantiate the actual motive, method, and goal' of the missionary act.<sup>28</sup> Eventually, *missio Dei*'s grounding for missions is basically anthropological.<sup>29</sup>

The problem of *missio Dei* is not only that it is not sufficiently based on the doctrine of the Trinity but also that its understanding of the Trinity is deficient.<sup>30</sup> *Missio Dei* creates 'an undue breach between who God is in himself and who he is in his economy'.<sup>31</sup> This single lack is the result of all the concept's contemporary problems, Flett states.<sup>32</sup> Because of this incoherent understanding of the Trinity, proponents of *missio Dei* theology disagree on the central question whether the missionary obligation of the Church is derived from the redemptive purpose and acts of God or from his nature.<sup>33</sup> The connection between God's missionary being and the human act remains ambiguous, 'with either divine agency disqualifying the human or human agency usurping the divine'.<sup>34</sup>

The language of 'sending' is supposed to bridge the gap between the trinitarian groundings of mission and the mission of the Church.<sup>35</sup> Flett explains:

Participation in God's mission equates to human participation in God's divine life. Insofar as the Christian community participates in Christ's history, she participates in the life and thus the sending of the Trinity.<sup>36</sup>

Flett points out that while such a position validates mission, 'it affords no criteria for differentiating between the sendings constitutive of God's triune being and the range of other sendings incorporated by *missio Dei* theology'.<sup>37</sup> God's sending nature is abstracted when its connection to the particular sendings of the Son and Spirit grows thinner. As a result, the gap between God and the world is not bridged but established. The mission of the Church becomes the means of overcoming that gap.<sup>38</sup>

As a reaction to the described dichotomy between the sending being of the Trinity and the particular sendings of the Son and the Spirit, another *missio Dei* approach sees Jesus' particular sending as the basis of the Church's mission. This Christological emphasis sets *missio Dei* within an eschatological framework: in becoming human, Jesus began an event that awaits its fulfilment in the *parousia*; the Christian community's missionary activity is her obedient response during the interim period. In Flett's view this account of *missio Dei* creates space for the human missionary act by emphasising the future return of Jesus Christ to the detriment of his present acting.<sup>39</sup>

#### 4. Does TTL represent *missio Dei* or *missio Spiritus*?

'Together towards life' does, at least apparently, ground the mission of the Church firmly in the Trinity:

Mission begins in the heart of the Triune God and the love which binds together the Holy Trinity overflows to all humanity and creation. The missionary God who sent the Son to the world calls all God's people (John 20:21), and empowers them to be a community of hope.<sup>40</sup>

Mission springs from the innermost being of the Triune God. Its first expression is the act of creation.<sup>41</sup> God invites the whole of creation into this 'life-giving mission'.<sup>42</sup> The presupposition for creation's ability to take part in this mission seems to lie in communion; God himself is a life of communion, and he draws creation into that communion.<sup>43</sup> This thought is, however, not sustained consistently throughout the document, while participation in God's acts remains the dominant basis for the Church's mission. In any case, TTL's contention that creation's life and God's life have been entwined from the beginning actually makes the assumption of a substantial gap between God and humanity needless.<sup>44</sup>

It was noted above that Augustine and Aquinas associate *missio* primarily with the economic sendings of the Son and the Spirit. Their reflections stand in clear contrast to the *missio Dei* theology of TTL, not only because TTL involves a much wider range of activities in 'sending' but most importantly because it does not restrict sending to God's economy. In TTL, sending or mission is an emanation of the trinitarian love into creation, and thus it involves both procession and sending in the classical sense. The statement that God is a 'missionary God' signifies that sending belongs to his innermost being.

Despite TTL's trinitarian starting point, the Triune God remains an abstract and distant initiator. Instead, the Holy Spirit takes a key role in involving the creation in God's mission:

What is clear is that by the Spirit we participate in the mission of love that is at the heart of the life of the Trinity. This results in Christian witness which unceasingly proclaims the salvific power of God through Jesus Christ and constantly affirms God's dynamic involvement, through the Holy Spirit, in the whole created world. All who respond to the outpouring of

the love of God are invited to join in with the Spirit in the mission of God.<sup>45</sup>

To TTL, the role of the Spirit in mission is so central that the essence of mission can be defined as ‘life in the Spirit’. The Spirit is, in fact, the primary agent of the Triune God’s mission in the world. Christians – or as a matter of fact, ‘all who respond to the outpouring of the love of God’ – are only secondary actors, answering to the Triune God’s initiation by participating in the Spirit’s ongoing work.<sup>46</sup> To Metropolitan Mor Coorilos, the moderator of CWME, this means that the Holy Spirit does not work in the Church alone, but also outside of it.<sup>47</sup> Because of this, ‘God’s Spirit can be encountered in all cultures and faith traditions where life in its fullness is affirmed’, Mor Coorilos states.<sup>48</sup>

One could argue that the Son has withdrawn from the scene in favour of the Spirit. The incarnation or Jesus Christ’s continuous presence in the sacraments or in the Church more generally are not thematised in the document. Jesus’ historical life and work are pointed to on several occasions, but even then it seems that the Holy Spirit working in and through him gets the main attention, as can be seen in expressions like ‘The powerful presence of the Holy Spirit, revealed in Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord, initiates us into the fullness of life that is God’s gift to each one of us’ and ‘The Spirit which was in Christ Jesus inspires us to a self-emptying and cross-bearing life-style.’<sup>49</sup> Christ’s real divine presence and action both in his first coming and in the period before his second coming are thus undermined.

TTL describes two different ways of understanding the relationship between the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ in mission. The first understanding sees the Holy Spirit as fully dependent on Christ, as the One who comes after the Son has gone to the Father. In this alternative, the Holy Spirit is seen ‘as the continuing presence of Christ, his agent to fulfil the task of mission’.<sup>50</sup> The second understanding sees the Spirit as an independent actor who works in ways mysterious to humans and leads them into the ‘whole truth’ (John 16:13). In this alternative, the Holy Spirit is seen ‘as the source of Christ’, which presumably means that it is the Spirit who leads people to Christ and into his Church.<sup>51</sup> While TTL claims that both understandings are attested to in the Scriptures, the first of them does not play any real role in the document; the role of the Spirit is clearly seen as in

the second perspective.<sup>52</sup>

As we saw at the beginning of this article, the emphasis on the mission of the Holy Spirit within the mission of the Triune God is a conscious expression of TTL’s ‘renewed appreciation of the mission of the Spirit’.<sup>53</sup> What is, however, probably not intended but results from this emphasis, is that the *missio Spiritus* is accented in such a manner that it overshadows the mission of the Trinity. The Spirit becomes an autonomous actor whose work does not stand in relation to the other persons of the Trinity or with the whole Trinity. Thus, trinitarian theology remains, in like manner with Flett’s criticisms, only a façade.

### 5. Witness as participation in God’s mission

In TTL, participation in God’s mission ‘by’ and ‘with’ the Spirit results in Christian witness.<sup>54</sup> Although it is God who empowers humans to bear witness, witness is the purely human side to God’s mission.<sup>55</sup> This interpretation is confirmed by the fact that TTL uses the term exclusively about human action in the world. Accordingly, God as a witness is not thematised. The mission is God’s, whereas witness as an act belongs to human beings.

Is it unthinkable, then, that witness, in the same way as mission, could have its archetype and foundation in the inner life of the Trinity? A prospective anchoring of the theology of witness in the doctrine of the Trinity is a highly interesting perspective, especially as it is not without biblical foundations, as Flett points out:

Witness is the nature of the Son’s relationship with the Father (John 14:19), the Father’s relationship to the Son (John 5:32), the Spirit’s relationship to the Son (John 15:26), the Son’s relationship to his disciples (Rev. 7:9-10). Witness is not something beyond which the community will move in the *eschaton*. It is the very nature of the *eschaton*, for it is the very nature of the history that is the human fellowship with the divine.<sup>56</sup>

It must, however, be noted that Flett’s comment refers more to the economic than the immanent relations of the persons of the Trinity. Thus, witness is involved in the category of ‘sending’ rather than that of ‘procession’.

The foundation of the commission to witness lies in Christ’s sending of his disciples: ‘After his

resurrection, Jesus Christ appeared to his community and sent his disciples in mission: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21-22).<sup>57</sup> As an essential part of this sending, Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit into the Church (John 20:19-23).<sup>58</sup> By the Holy Spirit, the disciples 'were formed into a new community of witness to the hope in Christ'.<sup>59</sup> In reality, however, this sending carried out by Jesus is not decisive for TTL; even though it might apply to Christians, it is primarily the Spirit who involves the whole of creation in the mission of God.

The acknowledgement that it is God who 'moves and empowers the church in mission' allows TTL to speak of the Church's 'continuation' of the mission of God.<sup>60</sup> The term is also used with reference to the continuation of the work of Jesus by his followers.<sup>61</sup> The language of participation in God's mission is, however, more typical to the document.<sup>62</sup> The use of these terms does not seem fully reflected, as if it would clearly point to a certain understanding of the presence or absence of the persons of the Trinity in the world. What is clear, nevertheless, is that the language of continuation is not used when speaking about the Spirit, who is undoubtedly present and active in the world and has not ascended into heaven at any point.

## 6. The Kingdom of God as the goal of witness

As noted before, one of the central affirmations of *missio Dei* theology is that the final goal of God's mission is not the Church but his kingdom, which is a reality wider than the Church. God acts both in and apart from the Church and calls the Church to participate in this activity.<sup>63</sup> However, from its very inception, *missio Dei* theology disagreed on whether God works first in the world or first through the Church.<sup>64</sup> Some claimed that God first acts through the Church, which mediates his reconciliation to the world, whereas others argue that God acts in the world and calls the Church to participate in this act. In the first approach, mission is largely equated with the faithful operation of the word and the sacraments by the Church.<sup>65</sup> Vicedom represents this approach well. To him, the kingdom of God is expanded through the proclamation of the gospel and the ministering of the sacraments. God binds his *missio* to these two.<sup>66</sup> In Vicedom's model the goal of *missio Dei* is to call all of humankind into the kingdom of

God and thus save them out of 'the kingdom of this world', the world where the devil rules.<sup>67</sup> Outside of the kingdom, which is equated with the Christian Church, there is no redemption or communion with God.<sup>68</sup>

The second approach, by contrast, affirms that 'God is first of all present in political events, in revolutions, in upheavals, invasions, defeats', since the political world is the primary arena of God's renewing and liberating activity.<sup>69</sup> In this approach the focus of the gospel is historical and social change. The gospel does not stabilise, but revolutionises. Accordingly, the contemporary action of the triune God is one of breaking down and building up.<sup>70</sup> The mission of the Church consists of identifying these revolutionary acts of God and participating in them.<sup>71</sup> To Flett, the problem of this orientation is that the criteria for this identification are lacking.<sup>72</sup>

TTL is vague on whether God's mission in the world is primarily carried out by the Church or if the Church only participates in God's transforming and revolutionary action in the world. This ambiguity, which probably results from different views among the contributors, is acknowledged even within the commission itself.<sup>73</sup> That being said, the latter emphasis clearly prevails in the document.

Vicedom is clear about the point that Jesus Christ 'does not bring men a kingdom of outward happiness'. Christ does not promise them an easy life or success, but a life of suffering because of him.<sup>74</sup> The kingdom is finally realised only with Christ's return, when he destroys the kingdom of the world.<sup>75</sup> Although TTL shares Vicedom's eschatological anticipation, the differences with his view are radical. The fullness of life, peace, justice, liberation, healing and reconciliation that are hoped and strived for in TTL are very clearly this-worldly, even though they simultaneously have an eschatological dimension.<sup>76</sup> 'The good news of God's reign is about the promise of the actualization of a just and inclusive world', the document states.<sup>77</sup>

In general, TTL does not see the kingdom of God as opposite to the world but as continuous with it: 'God's purpose for the world is not to create another world, but to re-create what God has already created in love and wisdom.'<sup>78</sup> Thus, the reign of God does not come in the place of human existence but 'permeates' it.<sup>79</sup> This process is described in terms such as 'transformation' and 'renewal'.<sup>80</sup> As a result, there is no ontic dif-

ference between the kingdom and the world; the difference lies only in the degree to which God's peace and justice are realised. This means that the kingdom is ultimately a mind-set that is built of values.<sup>81</sup> The world turned into the kingdom of God is a better world, so to speak.

The classical question of whether the kingdom of God has already come in its fullness or whether it is realised only on Christ's return, is still to be dealt with here. TTL speaks of God's 'coming' or 'promised' reign (par. 2, 39, 59, 78 and 89) and of 'the new heaven and earth, when God finally will be "all in all"' (par. 15). On earth, there are 'signs of God's reign'.<sup>82</sup> The Church is such a 'sign of hope and an expression of the kingdom of God here on earth'.<sup>83</sup> These expressions underline the eschatological character of the kingdom and imply that it is not fully here yet, even though there are signs and expressions of it.

At the same time, the reign of God is 'at work in the world' and the churches are called to 'bring it about'.<sup>84</sup> TTL offers the following synthesis:

The Church's hope is rooted in the promised fulfilment of the reign of God. It entails the restoration of right relationships between God and humanity and all of creation. Even though this vision speaks to an eschatological reality, it deeply energizes and informs our current participation in God's salvific work in this penultimate period.<sup>85</sup>

It is difficult to form a coherent picture of all these statements. An analysis by Tormod Engelsen proves to be helpful here. According to Engelsen, there are two basic ways of perceiving the kingdom of God: it can either be understood as 'the reign or rule of God over the whole of creation' or as 'the present and final salvation that God offers in Christ'. The former understanding sometimes includes redemption in Christ and the latter sometimes includes ethical and social transformation.<sup>86</sup> In the former alternative, the kingdom is relatively independent of the Church. The realisation of God's will in the world is a central emphasis. The kingdom will be fully realised in this world only in the future, and the process includes the whole of history. Therefore, the realisation of the kingdom happens primarily in and through the social and political realm. In this model, the Church is a 'witness to or a participant in the realization of the kingdom'.<sup>87</sup>

In the latter alternative, the kingdom of God is equated with eternal life in the new creation. In

the present life, the kingdom can be experienced 'as a foretaste of life to come'. God's rule over the world is primarily seen in terms of creation and preservation. The ethical aspects of the kingdom are not excluded, but it is emphasised that the Church and its mission are the main instruments in working out the peace and justice of the kingdom and serving the world in its needs. In this understanding, the Church is seen as the people who belong to the kingdom.<sup>88</sup>

An analysis of why the mentioned affirmations tend to combine and form these distinctive models must be left for another instance; here it can be stated that TTL clearly represents the former model. Nonetheless, as the two understandings of the kingdom of God share some traits, the latter model also finds some support in TTL, for example when it comes to the emphasis on creation.

Interestingly, TTL speaks more of the reign of God than of the kingdom of God. As the discussion of the relationship between God's kingdom and his reign is outside the scope of this article,<sup>89</sup> it suffices here to point out that the language of reign is more inclusive than that of kingdom, since the latter awakens questions about who belongs to this kingdom and how it relates to the created world, whereas God's reign stretches over the whole world and even cosmos.

Finally, in TTL there is a peculiar tension between the statement that the world must be transformed into God's kingdom and the conviction that God himself is on a mission in all cultures and religions, in the whole of creation. If mission is completely in the hands of God, what powers have kept the world from transforming into a kingdom of peace and justice? The document does not mention the Fall at all, sin only twice in passing and the devil only twice, both without any constructive role.<sup>90</sup> 'Evil spirits' are mentioned in paragraphs 24, 25 and 102, but their role in the whole is not explained. The main counterforces to God's mission are 'forces, powers, and systems which deny, destroy, and reduce life'.<sup>91</sup> As this kind of structural evil stems from human beings, they become the main antagonists of God and preventers of his mission. Human beings have thus a weak capacity to contribute to God's mission but a very strong capacity to withstand it.

## 7. Conclusions

This article has shown that the main tenets of *missio Dei* theology – the emphasis on the Trinity



as the source of mission, the kingdom of God and the missionary nature of the Church – are equivocal and that different interpretations of the concept lead to clearly different conclusions regarding the nature of the Church's mission. This ambiguity is clearly seen in 'Together towards life: mission and evangelism in changing landscapes'. While the document is clear about the fact that God, not the Church, is the primary agent in mission and that the whole of creation is invited to participate in this mission, the rest remains open to very different readings.

TTL is a good example of the kind of *missio Dei* theology which attracts the criticism of Flett. It does not succeed in putting the missionary activity of the Church in a clear relationship with the Trinity and thus remains disconnected from it. In TTL, the Church's participation in the work of God means primarily transforming this world into the kingdom of God by furthering justice, equality and the like. That God's reign and the presence of the Spirit are to be identified in the realisation of social justice on earth is considered self-evident and is not justified in any way. The reader is left asking whether it is a coincidence that the content of God's mission coincides so well with the contemporary non-religiously founded human rights thinking.

In TTL, the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Trinity is problematic. The Trinity remains an abstract idea and the Son is left without any real role in the ongoing mission of God, whereas the Spirit takes a very active role in the world. The independent role of the Holy Spirit allows for the desired dynamism and diversity, as the action of God in the world is not limited in any concrete way, but it also creates a vacuum that can be filled up by almost anything. Due to the omission of the role of the Word of God in mission, the danger of sliding into relativism is real.

Considering the complexity of the locus of the Trinity and the relatively long and vivid interpretation process of *missio Dei*, it is not surprising that TTL does not end up with one clear and univocal definition of the concept. Further, the all-encompassing nature of *missio Dei* means that reaching a common understanding of the concept requires prior agreement on many disputed questions such as the role of the Church in God's plan of salvation, God's way of acting in the world and the relationship of evangelising and alleviating pain in mission. On the other hand, clarifying the meaning of *missio Dei* could result in convergence with

regard to the questions mentioned.

Nevertheless, given the described ambiguity of *missio Dei* theology, a more thorough explanation of TTL's own understanding of the concept would have been essential. Simply referring to the previous work of the CWME as a basis for this theological orientation is insufficient. One reason for this omission might be that the CWME itself does not share one understanding of the concept, as Engelsviken points out.<sup>92</sup> This problem has to be taken into serious consideration by the ecumenical missiological movement in future dialogues if it wishes to achieve theological convergences that are justifiable and long-lasting.

Ida Heikkilä (1986) is a PhD student in Ecumenism at the University of Helsinki. Her address is Vidnäsinkatu 12 A 1, 67100 Kokkola, Finland.

### Endnotes

- 1 'Mission from the margins' means the insight that mission does not take place from the centre to the periphery or from the privileged to the marginalised, but vice versa. Thus, those who were previously the objects of (Western) mission, the poor, suffering and needy (who are often in developing countries in the South), are actually the subjects, the primary agents in God's mission. God's involving of the marginalised in his mission serves his purpose of bringing 'fullness of life' to all, while these people discern best what enhances life. See Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, *Together towards life: mission and evangelism in changing landscapes* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2013) 6, 37, 107.
- 2 The purpose of God's mission is fullness of life for the whole earth. This means above all peace, justice, liberation of the oppressed, healing and reconciliation of broken communities and the restoration of the whole creation. Fullness of life is the criterion for discerning where the Holy Spirit is at work. WCC, *Together towards life*, 1, 43, 102.
- 3 David J. Bosch assesses that 'the understanding of mission as *missio Dei* has been embraced by virtually all Christian persuasions'. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: paradigm shifts in theology of mission* (American Society of Missiology Series No. 16; New York: Orbis, 1991) 390.
- 4 For this discussion, see e.g. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 392–393. Neither does Tormod Engelsviken regard a return to the previous 'church-centred missiology' as possible, although he clearly acknowledges that the current consensus on *missio Dei* theology is one of terminology and not of theo-

logical substance. See Tormod Engelsen, 'Missio Dei: the understanding and misunderstanding of a theological concept in European churches and missiology', *International Review of Mission* 92/367 (2003) 481–497, 486. According to Jacques Matthey, the overcoming of the ecclesiocentric approach is one of *missio Dei*'s lasting achievements. Jacques Matthey, 'God's mission today: summary and conclusions', *International Review of Mission* 92/367 (2003) 579–587, 580.

5 <http://latin-dictionary.net/definition/27044/missio-missionis> [accessed 09-03-2017].

6 John G. Flett, *The Witness of God: the Trinity, missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the nature of Christian community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 123.

*Missio dei* is first clearly linked with the doctrine of the Trinity in a preparatory document for the Willingen conference entitled 'Why Missions?' The two big names behind this document, which is also called the 'American study', are Paul Lehmann and H. Richard Niebuhr. Flett, *Witness of God*, 123. However, at Willingen itself the doctrine of the Trinity was absent from all keynote addresses and it is not found in any of Willingen's published findings either; see also H.H. Rosin, *Missio Dei: An examination of the origin, contents and function of the term in Protestant missiological discussion* (Leiden: Interuniversity Institute for Missiological and Ecumenical Research, 1972) 6. Some reference to the doctrine of the Trinity appears only with the final report of the conference; Flett, *Witness of God*, 152. In the aftermath of Willingen, Karl Hartenstein created the term *missio Dei* to summarise the main findings of this final report; see Wilhelm Richebächer, 'Missio Dei: the basis of mission theology or a wrong path?', *International Review of Mission* 92/367 (2003) 588–605, 589.

Most evaluations of Willingen join in Flett's account, but they vary slightly in their assessment of the role of *missio Dei* theology at the conference and its various reports. See e.g. Richebächer, 'Missio Dei', 589–590; Engelsen, 'Missio Dei', 482; Rosin, *Missio Dei*, 6–7; and Kevin Daugherty, 'Missio Dei: the Trinity and Christian missions', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 31.2 (2007) 151–168, 163.

It was Georg F. Vicedom who used the term for the first time both exhaustively and systematically in *Missio Dei: Einführung in eine Theologie der Mission* (1958), and brought it into general use; Rosin, *Missio Dei*, 6. While Vicedom distinguishes between God's work in creation and redemption, in the 1960s *missio Dei* came to mean God's work in general, his redemptive work becoming an integral part of his creative work and his preserving work in history; Engelsen, 'Missio Dei', 489. In the 1970s, the trinitarian groundings of missions fell into oblivion. Only during the mid-1980s the con-

cept of *missio Dei* re-emerged with some theological weight. When it did, descriptions of *missio Dei* simply referred back to the final Willingen statement. Flett, *Witness of God*, 160.

7 Rosin, *Missio Dei*, 14–15.

8 Rosin, *Missio Dei*, 25.

9 Richebächer, 'Missio Dei', 589.

10 Rosin, *Missio Dei*, 14–16.

11 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 390.

12 Hannes Wiher, 'God's Mission and the Church's Mission', in Bertil Ekström (ed.), *The Church in Mission. Foundations and global case studies* (Globalization of mission series; Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2016) 67–93, 71.

13 Augustine, *De Trinitate*, IV, XX, 29; at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1301.htm> [accessed 12-09-2017].

14 Wiher, 'God's Mission', 71, for example, is an advocate of the latter alternative.

15 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 27, a. 1-4; q. 36, a. 2; at [http://www.documenta-catholica.eu/d\\_1225-1274-%20Thomas%20Aquinas%20-%20Summa%20Theologiae%20-%20Prima%20Pars%20-%20EN.pdf](http://www.documenta-catholica.eu/d_1225-1274-%20Thomas%20Aquinas%20-%20Summa%20Theologiae%20-%20Prima%20Pars%20-%20EN.pdf) [accessed 12-09-2017].

16 Wiher, 'God's Mission', 71. In his judgement, this system makes the movement of God towards his 'economy' a secondary step apart from what he is from all eternity. Accordingly, it does not belong to God's essence to reveal himself. Wiher, 'God's Mission', 71, 72.

17 Wiher, 'God's Mission', 71, 72.

18 Rosin, *Missio Dei*, 13.

19 Vicedom, *Missio Dei*, 39; my translation.

20 Wiher, 'God's Mission', 68.

21 Vicedom, *Missio Dei*, 45; my translation.

22 Vicedom, *Missio Dei*, 39.

23 Flett, *Witness of God*, 35.

24 Flett, *Witness of God*, 5, 36.

25 Flett, *Witness of God*, 36, 76.

26 Flett, *Witness of God*, 123.

27 Flett, *Witness of God*, 5.

28 Flett, *Witness of God*, 40.

29 Flett, *Witness of God*, 77.

30 Flett, *Witness of God*, 9.

31 Flett, *Witness of God*, 17. His multifaceted argument develops through his book and is not easily summarised here.

32 Flett, *Witness of God*, 9.

33 Flett, *Witness of God*, 161–162. 'Two forms of *missio Dei* developed relative to each side of this distinction. Those who emphasised the "acts of God" tended to go toward the more established patterns of church structures and missions, with the effect that mission became reduced to the action of the church in her mundane practices, especially the Eucharist. Those who emphasised the "nature of God" sought a more direct connection between mission and political involvement.' Flett, *Witness of*

- God*, 198.
- 34 Flett, *Witness of God*, 221. In *missio Dei* theology, the relationship between God's divine act of sending and those sent by him has been seen in different ways. Some emphasise God's sending initiative as the negation of human agency. Jesus' once-for-all completion of reconciliation has achieved everything, so missions cannot establish the ground for, nor substantively contribute to, God's act; Flett, *Witness of God*, 38. Others coordinate divine and human activity in the way that God's mission occurs where the Spirit is at work, and where the Church engages in missionary activity. A third approach develops sending without reference to God; the Church is the primary agent of the mission of God. While it is possible to distinguish these notions of agency, most treatments of *missio Dei* blend all three. Flett, *Witness of God*, 39.
- 35 Flett, *Witness of God*, 40.
- 36 Flett, *Witness of God*, 41.
- 37 Flett, *Witness of God*, 41.
- 38 Flett, *Witness of God*, 18. To this problem Flett offers his own solution, a 'revised *missio Dei* theology', in which God solves the problem of the gap between himself and his creation in himself; *Witness of God*, 30. 'The plenitude of the Father begetting the Son in the unity of the Spirit means that an "above" and "below" in an outward-turning history belongs to the one God's perfect life.' Already before the creation of the world, God's being anticipates his movement into the economy. In himself God 'bridges the gap between the above and the below'; Flett, *Witness of God*, 288. 'Human beings do participate in the being of God, but in a differentiated fellowship of action established by the factuality of the incarnation. The uniqueness of the hypostatic union and the asymmetrical nature of divine and human fellowship ensure the necessary distinction between missions and every historical accident. No direct connection forms between the missionary being of God and the Christian community'; Flett, *Witness of God*, 221. God's acting for the human is thus not a second step beside his own life. This means that God continues to act in relationship to the human in the twofold form of 'Jesus Christ's objective completion and the Spirit's subjective accomplishment of reconciliation'; Flett, *Witness of God*, 289.
- Flett develops many aspects of his missiology in his recent *Apostolicity: The ecumenical question in world Christian perspective* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2016), in which his main proposal is that mission is the crux of apostolicity, but the theology of mission in relation to the Trinity is not built up in any significant way.
- 39 Flett, *Witness of God*, 43–44. His critique might be true of some representatives of this kind of Christ-centred approach, but, in my opinion, it does not do justice to Vicedom. The eschatological emphasis on Christ's *parousia* does not result in his being absent from the world, since he is continuously present and at work through the preaching of the word and the sacraments. See Vicedom, *Missio Dei*, 25.
- 40 WCC, *Together towards life*, 2.
- 41 WCC, *Together towards life*, 103.
- 42 WCC, *Together towards life*, 1. That the whole creation is involved is not explicated in the paragraphs referred to, but becomes very clear from the big picture of the document.
- 43 WCC, *Together towards life*, 19.
- 44 WCC, *Together towards life*, 19.
- 45 WCC, *Together towards life*, 18.
- 46 WCC, *Together towards life*, 3.
- 47 Mor Coorilos, Geewarghese, 'Mission towards fullness of life', *International Review of Mission* 103.1 (2014) 39–46, 41.
- 48 Mor Coorilos, 'Mission towards fullness of life', 45.
- 49 WCC, *Together towards life*, 56, 103.
- 50 WCC, *Together towards life*, 16.
- 51 WCC, *Together towards life*, 17.
- 52 WCC, *Together towards life*, 16. This second understanding can for example be seen in paragraph 15, where the work of the Spirit is described as 'mysterious and unknown' to humankind, and where the Spirit's economy in creation and redemption is mentioned without reference to the Trinity. WCC, *Together towards life*, 15.
- 53 WCC, *Together towards life*, 2.
- 54 WCC, *Together towards life*, 18.
- 55 WCC, *Together towards life*, 1.
- 56 Flett, *Witness of God*, 224–225.
- 57 WCC, *Together towards life*, 14.
- 58 WCC, *Together towards life*, 57.
- 59 WCC, *Together towards life*, 14.
- 60 WCC, *Together towards life*, 111.
- 61 WCC, *Together towards life*, 50.
- 62 Participation in God's mission is spoken of in the following paragraphs: 4, 21, 45, 78; 'Participation in God's ongoing work' is mentioned in paragraph 43.
- 63 Flett, *Witness of God*, 51–52.
- 64 Flett, *Witness of God*, 55.
- 65 Flett, *Witness of God*, 53, 54.
- 66 Vicedom, *Missio Dei*, 25. Engelsviken, who like Vicedom is a Lutheran, is a more recent proponent of this emphasis. He suggests that 'a Lutheran understanding of the church as the instrument for God's grace through the word and the sacraments could help us to see the central role of the church in mission for the growth and coming of the kingdom. The church has not only a witnessing or participating function in what God is doing in the world, but it has a sacramental or instrumental function, in that the mission of God is carried out in and through the church as its primary locus. The

- deeper theological reason for this is that humans are saved only by faith in Christ, and that this faith comes by hearing the gospel, preached in word and deed'; Engelsviken, 'Missio Dei', 485–486.
- 67 Vicedom, *Missio Dei*, 21–22.
- 68 Vicedom, *Missio Dei*, 23, 28.
- 69 Flett, *Witness of God*, 54.
- 70 Flett, *Witness of God*, 145.
- 71 Flett, *Witness of God*, 148.
- 72 Flett, *Witness of God*, 53.
- 73 Engelsviken, 'Missio Dei', 491, referring to a comment by the secretary of the CWME, Jacques Matthey.
- 74 Vicedom, *Missio Dei*, 24.
- 75 Vicedom, *Missio Dei*, 26.
- 76 WCC, *Together towards life*, 43, 102.
- 77 WCC, *Together towards life*, 46.
- 78 WCC, *Together towards life*, 36.
- 79 WCC, *Together towards life*, 47.
- 80 The transformation of the world is referred to in paragraphs 3 and 10, the renewal of the whole creation in paragraphs 1, 103, and 105.
- 81 The values of the kingdom of God are spoken of in paragraphs 7 and 91.
- 82 WCC, *Together towards life*, 51.
- 83 WCC, *Together towards life*, 54.
- 84 WCC, *Together towards life*, 47, 25.
- 85 WCC, *Together towards life*, 44.
- 86 Engelsviken, 'Missio Dei', 483.
- 87 Engelsviken, 'Missio Dei', 483.
- 88 Engelsviken, 'Missio Dei', 483.
- 89 Vicedom sees 'the reign of God' (*die Herrschaft Gottes*) as a paraphrase of *Missio Dei*; Vicedom, *Missio Dei*, 16. For a longer discussion on the theme, see Vicedom, *Missio Dei*, 17–18.
- 90 'Sin' is mentioned in paragraphs 52 and 84, 'sinfulness' and 'sinful' in paragraphs 36 respectively 49, and the devil in paragraph 25. Paragraph 25 also mentions 'the beast', i.e. the devil.
- 91 WCC, *Together towards life*, 30.
- 92 Engelsviken, 'Missio Dei', 491.