

Towards Life and Justice

Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission's Theological Foundation and Principles of Cooperation



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Foreword

According to the constitution of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission (Felm),

The purpose of the Association is to be involved, as an international representative of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, in the mission of the Triune God in the world by preaching the Gospel among non-Christians and by practising Christian charity.

In mission work, the Association serves our Church and its local parishes and Churches in foreign countries as components of the worldwide Church of Christ.

The Association has committed itself to observing the Confession of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF), the Church Order and the ecumenical agreements.

In line with its regulations, Felm adheres to the ELCF confession of faith, church order, and church policies. Felm is also an ecumenical agent and committed to ecumenical principles. Lutheran foundations as well as ecumenism have characterised Felm throughout its history. At an international level, Felm has worked in cooperation marked by different contextualised understandings of faith. This has enriched missiological thinking, as well as influenced cooperation in Finland.

According to a broad ecumenical understanding, mission is taking part in the triune God's activity in the world. The Church is a sign of God and an agent to fulfil God's purpose. This is why the Church proclaims the Gospel of reconciliation in Christ to all people and points towards the fulfilment of the kingdom of God.¹ Felm's mission statement is expressed as a holistic mission. The message of the Gospel belongs to the whole person and to all creation. Martin Luther observed in his Ascension Day sermon that Christ's command to the Church was to proclaim the gospel to "all creation", which does not only apply to people, but the gospel needs to be "heralded so that all creatures can hear it."² The resurrected Christ has become the Lord of all creation. Mission, in the words of Luther, is like throwing a stone into water, creating waves and ripples that spread and chase each other. The message of the gospel advances in its own power, while encountering new challenges.

Due to its operational environment, Felm needs to define its approach to contemporary confessional and ecumenical issues relating to the Church's mission. Felm's previous official theological document was published in 2002.³ Subsequently the Lutheran World Federation and World Council of Churches, among others, have published theological documents on mission to which Felm has also contributed. Indeed, the mission of the Church involves increased collaboration between churches. Moreover, the Church's centre of gravity has been

¹ See WCC 2013a; WCC 2005.

² Luther 1942m 500, 514.

³ *Lähetys; Yhteinen usko – yhteinen tehtävä* (SLS 2002).

shifting to the Global South. All of this requires clarity regarding each agency's missiological understanding and objectives.

Felm's board has decided that its activities should be developed in light of denominational and ecumenical documents. Among other things, these documents highlight that mission should be understood as participation in the activity of the triune God, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in the world in which creation and humanity are suffering due to sin. Mission includes the need for contextualisation and dialogue, activity in the midst of conflict and disagreements, the demand for justice, as well as mission from the margins of society. Everyone is called to participate in the mission of God in the world.

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Seppo Rissanen

Felm's Executive Director

1. Introduction

1.1. Global environment and Felm's Mission

*Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: as soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near.*⁴

As the instrument of God's mission, the Church operates in religious, cultural, historical, and political contexts. The Church is called to evaluate these realities, continually praying for the ability to see God's presence in them. Understanding the signs of the times helps the Church to stay focused on its task of giving all "their food at the proper time."⁵

As Felm articulates the theological foundations for its activities, it does so in the context of the following global trends.

And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world...

The percentage of the world's population committed to different religions is projected to increase over the next years.⁶ Of the main world religions, Christianity and Islam will grow faster than the general population growth. This means that globally religions will become increasingly significant and influential. However, competition between different religions can also lead to new conflicts. Meanwhile, materialism and unnecessary consumerism will also increase globally.

Christianity's centre of gravity is shifting rapidly to the south and the east. This change will form new centres for Christianity. Empowered churches bring their own theological and cultural perspectives to the discussion. This includes, for example, new ethical questions arising from their operational environments, as well as the demand for justice with respect to the global Church.

The Church's new centres are also strikingly missional in their approach. This, however, does not necessarily mean networking and working together with established agencies. The rapid growth of new Christian denominations and movements suggests that the Church of the future will be increasingly segmented.

The greatest growth within the Church has been happening among Neopentecostals and Charismatics, as well as among the so-called independent churches, which are not directly linked to historical churches and denominations. These movements tend to focus on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, seeking empowerment and energy, and they often place an emphasis on charismatic leadership.

The power struggles between different factions within Islam will increase. Also, among other world religions, tension and confrontation between modernising tendencies and tendencies

⁴ All biblical references are from the New International Version.

⁵ Matt. 24:45

⁶ Johnson and Grim 2013, Table 4.1.

seeking to preserve tradition will also be rendered more visible. Radical forms of religion will receive wide coverage in the media.

Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death...

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the human rights of many oppressed groups, such as women, children, and minorities, is weakening increasingly. Despite numerous campaigns, violence against women has not decreased. Poverty and conflict cause insecurity in the lives of children and young people.

At the same time, the security of those defending human rights and those helping in crises has diminished. The activity of non-governmental organisations is being restricted in many countries, and the defenders of human rights are facing threat and imprisonment. The associated risks for people involved in humanitarian aid are growing.

Increasing limitations in freedom of religion indicate the decline of human rights. Up to 77% of the world's population live in countries with "high" or "very high" levels of restricting freedom of religion.⁷ In nations where violations against freedom of religion are prevalent, other human rights violations are also common.

Global inequality is increasing. The gap between the poor and the rich is perceivable between different nation states, but also within nations. An ever-smaller percentage of people possess an ever-larger share of global wealth.

Inequality also fuels different forms of discrimination, like islamophobia, xenophobia, and antisemitism. In Western countries, minority groups are also increasingly targets of discrimination. Riding on the wave of xenophobia, populist political parties are also gaining power.

There will be famines and earthquakes in various places.

Population growth and climate change are the greatest global challenges of our time. Fluctuations caused by climate change result in a growing number of increasingly serious catastrophes. The unpredictability of weather patterns accelerates the rise of poverty and creates vulnerability to new conflicts caused by limited natural resources. Water, forests, and other natural resources are decreasing due to climate change, as well as significant population growth and general pollution.

We are moving beyond the sustainable limits of nature. The world's fresh water resources are declining and the earth's fertile surface is diminishing. Small-scale farmers are suffering from the unpredictability of rainfall. In theory, the world is still producing enough food, but it is unjustly distributed.

The proportion of the global population living in cities has doubled since 1950. In the future, the majority of the poor will inhabit cities.

⁷ Pew Research Center 2011, 17.

Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.

Terrorist attacks around the world – of which those targeted against the USA in 2001 were arguably the most imposing – have led to an ongoing war against terrorism. The various parties in the conflicts have continually changed their approaches and tactics, with terror attacks becoming increasingly violent and visible. The human rights violated in this conflict have resulted in nations acting independently of their own accord, without being held accountable for their transgressions. The use of religious rhetoric has become more explicit among both Christians and Muslims.

The growing number of conflicts has raised the global refugee population to over 60 million for the first time since the Second World War. Half of the world's refugees are children. Many of the countries that are receiving refugees are also vulnerable to conflict. Large numbers of refugees put pressure on the economy and security, leading to further instability.

Watch out that no one deceives you.

New technology has transformed the nature of communication. Technological developments have both enabled new ways of acquiring knowledge and improved opportunities for education. More people now have access to knowledge. In a remote African hospital, it is now possible to receive and utilise the latest scientific findings in real time. Information and communication technology also offers possibilities for extensive communication for churches with limited resources.

However, knowing how to communicate is also a question of power, and poses challenges for individuals and communities. As the amount of available knowledge and the speed of communication increases, it is becoming more difficult to verify the truthfulness of the knowledge available. Information networks have also enabled radicalised views to spread with unprecedented ease.

The vision of a diverse multicultural world in which capital, news, skills, and people move freely is becoming a reality. At the same time, media platforms are used to promulgate cultural and religious exceptionalism, emphasising the superiority of one's own group and leading to further polarisation.

1.2. Mission of the Church's in changing landscapes

I chose you and appointed you so that you might go...

The Christian Church is called to go into the world and bear witness to Christ. Historically, different circumstances have produced different understandings of the notion of “going” and of the nature of mission. The word *mission* is a broader concept than missionary work, which, narrowly understood, indicates mere action. As a concept, mission includes action, but also the theological and ecclesial foundations that ground this action.

The South-African missiologist David Bosch has discussed different missiological paradigms from various historical periods and the ways in which they have changed.⁸ According to Bosch, as the Church entered the 1990s the ecumenical paradigm replaced the modernist missionary paradigm. The term ‘paradigm’ refers to the basic principles and perspectives that determine one’s view of the world and guides one’s action in it. The main values guiding one’s actions are also included in the missiological paradigm. New churches, which were not dependent on European intellectual frameworks but focused on contextual and liberation theological perspectives, influenced the birth of the ecumenical paradigm. There is reason to believe that the ecumenical paradigm has been in opposition to the modern missionary paradigm, which saw missions as a one-way movement from the north to the south and from the west to the east. The ecumenical paradigm is based on partnerships, acceptance of differences, cooperation, and mutual interaction between churches. It speaks of the common ecumenical mission, rather than the missions of different churches and missionary organisations.⁹ In this document, the Church’s mission is also seen as the Church’s shared task.

Due to the challenges of our age, the missiological paradigm is changing again. The change is characterised by God-centred thinking and God-focused theology. In contrast to static and stationary ontological thinking, people have started discussing mission as movement. The Roman Catholic theologian Stephen Bevans proposes a concept of God whereby God is a verb, movement, or even a dance, in which all creation and humanity are invited to participate.¹⁰ Emphasising movement is also a characteristic of our Lutheran theology. Luther speaks of love’s movement towards the beloved. In this God reaches down to the darkest depths of humanity, where the movement of life and love has been extinguished.¹¹ God as self-giving love births and creates newness in human beings and takes them to the source of life.

All mission begins with God, the one who is concealed and yet is made incarnate in the human condition as the real Saviour. Since the Willingen International Missionary Conference (1952), the Trinity has been the focal point of missiological discussion. In recent years, the theology of creation has also become more prominent, as well as dynamic God-centeredness, where the Holy Spirit’s role as the initiating and inspiring power has been underscored.¹² The liberating message of love’s fulfilment in Christ has become both an emancipatory and empowering source for a theology of the cross, which calls people into solidarity with the weak and the needy.¹³

Contextual theologians have also brought with them a strong prophetic edge for the Church’s mission. ‘Prophetic’ means seeing, acknowledging, and speaking on behalf of others. Liberation theologies have traditionally been built on strong spiritual foundations.¹⁴ Indeed, a

⁸ Bosch 1991

⁹ See Andrew Walls (2011), “Missions or Mission. The *IRM* after 75 Years.”

¹⁰ Bevans and Schroeder 2011, 9-18.

¹¹ Tuomo Mannermaa’s *Kaksi rakkautta* (1995) analyses Luther’s concept of love through the notion of movement.

¹² For the development of missiological thinking at an ecumenical level see Keum 2013.

¹³ Kari Kopperi (2015) has talked about the love of the cross (*ristin rakkaus*).

¹⁴ In particular, the first generation of liberation theologians wrote from a rich spiritual perspective; see Gutiérrez 1974; Oduyoye 1986; Tutu 1979.

renewed spiritual dimension in missiological discussion has been recovered in a polarised world. It fortifies human life and serves as the message of those who have been ostracised. As religious thinking globally has caused tension, it seems ever more important to stay focused on the essential, the source of all life and value, namely, God.

The increasingly changing world with migration and the shift in Christianity's centre of gravity has altered missiological thinking. Neopentecostalism, Charismatic movements, and independent churches are of interest to researchers, because they are challenging the historic churches.¹⁵ That said, in some of the new churches the poor and the suffering are being exploited for financial and personal gain.¹⁶ Religious growth has brought a renewed spiritual emphasis to ecumenical missiology, as well as highlighting the need for a critical approach.¹⁷

...that all of them may be one...

From an ecumenical perspective, the World Council of Churches' two new documents – *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2013) and *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (2012) – also highlight mission as movement.¹⁸ The first document emphasises the missional nature of the Church. It seeks to call churches into unity by emphasising that the Church's unity is a witness to the world. On the one hand, the ecumenical movement was birthed on the foundations of mission, and on the other, practical ecumenism has been at the heart of cooperation between churches at a grassroots level. An ecumenical common witness is the Church's mission at its best. Our own church is a missional church and Felm functions as its missional agency.

Over the last 150 years, Felm's partner churches and other collaborators have brought inspiring ideas about God, life, and humanity. We are grateful to our partners for all that we have learnt from them. It is possible to speak about God in diverse ways and we have been enriched by our common journey. Many of this document's emphases will be familiar to our partners, particularly the holistic approach to the Church's mission, as well the focus on contextualising that appreciates differences and recognises the face of Christ in otherness. God guides Christians to encounter others by sharing the goodness they have received and by suffering together in times of need.

The Lutheran World Federation's document *Mission in Context* emphasises the need to have a contextual starting point for the Church's mission.¹⁹ The World Council of Churches' work *Together Towards Life* has been written almost completely from a non-Western perspective. Both documents also challenge their readers towards holistic mission, underscoring creation's inherent value.²⁰ *Together Towards Life* calls for mission from the margins, where changing power structures and ways of thinking break down the dividing walls between groups of

¹⁵ Regarding global changes and missiology see Kim 2011.

¹⁶ See LWF 2007.

¹⁷ See especially TTL 2012.

¹⁸ *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*. Faith and Order Paper No. 214. WCC Publications. Geneva (WCC 2013a); *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*. Geneva: WCC (TTL 2012).

¹⁹ *Mission in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment* (LWF 2004).

²⁰ See also *Kiitollisuus, kunnioitus, kohtuus. Suomen evankelis-luterilaisen kirkon ilmasto-ohjelma* (Kirkkohallitus 2007). This document is strongly grounded in theology.

people. The phrase ‘mission from the margins’ is understood as the God-talk of neglected people groups and individuals, which has the power to touch and change the way people think and act. In this way, the Christian message transforms human destinies and empowers people to live in a dignified manner. The Church is on its way to the kingdom of life, where the last shall be first. In missiological discussion, this point of departure is essential.

...that the world may believe...

The unity of the Church (*koinonia*) is closely linked with its missional task.²¹ In the midst of hostility, wars, inequality, and hatred the Church speaks of the goodness of Christ. In this task the Church is also continually re-orienting itself, as its prophetic task applies also to its own structures and actions. Being prophetic challenges one to look behind familiar power structures and ways of thinking. It highlights the value of humanity, creation, and just action. Prophetic dialogue both hears and listens, but does not remain silent. In religious dialogue, it acknowledges and confesses Christ, whilst respecting different worldviews and religious beliefs.

...I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit...

The second chapter of this document explores the theological foundations of mission. In doing so, it leans on both ecumenical and our own church’s agreed documents, as well as biblical principles. This document is grounded in our Lutheran confession. It also draws on international missiological discussion, as well as insights that we have gained from our partners. The aim of the second chapter is to explore basic principles from this existing rich dialogue, which grounds our activity.

The third chapter focuses on action, denoting those areas that are central to Felm’s work. The chapter discusses principles and perspectives on action, rather than specific activities or projects. Felm’s basic principles for action are ecumenism, cooperation among churches (ecclesiasticism), (check), the visibility of Christian witness, international diaconia, advocacy, and the defence of human rights.

We are grateful to our partners in Finland and further afield for their ecclesial and academic cooperation. We also want to express our thanks to all the academic parties and church partners that we have been able to consult regarding this document. We invite everyone to join the Church’s mission, our common action and joy, and shared effort. Love sends us on the move.

²¹ See WCC 2013a § 13.

2. Theological Foundation of Felm's Mission

2.1. God's mission in the world

As the Father sends the Son and the Holy Spirit, in the same way the Church has been sent to the world. This is God's mission.

God's mission is essentially a self-giving mission emanating from love: God as Creator gives us the whole creation. Christ gives us himself, and the Holy Spirit gives us all her gifts.

The Church and Christians are partakers in the triune God and God's mission.

Felm's entire body of work is based on the idea of God's mission, in which the Kingdom of Life and Love breaks into our midst, and Godself guides the Church towards the fulfilment of life.²² The concept of God's mission arises from our belief in the triune God, as Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit: Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of life.²³ God has revealed themselves as love. God's nature is self-giving. God gives us all what God is and what God has: both God's love and good deeds. God's love is fulfilled in the actions of the three Persons of Trinity. God as Creator gives us the whole of creation, Christ gives himself and his good deeds, and the Holy Spirit gives us all of her gifts.²⁴

The Creator is the most holy and the highest. At the same time for humans, God is a mystery beyond all comprehension and in creation the discernible source of all life. God is the beginning and birth giver to all life.²⁵ God also renews and sustains all that exists. Creating is God's giving activity; God gives life and everything that is necessary for sustaining and protecting life.²⁶

The Creation's beauty, regenerative ability, and greatness bears witness to God. The Creation participates in God's mission and speaks to individual human beings and the whole of humanity.²⁷ God's goodness as the Creator means that God looks after all creation by enabling crops to grow, giving humans the ability to look after their offspring, and by providing animals with food and shelter. The role of the created is to be thankful and to follow the calling to live out their dignity as the created. As persons and members of communities, humans are called to live abundant and responsible lives in God's world. Abundance stems from receiving and enjoying life's mental, spiritual, and physical gifts with

²² TTL (2012 § 112) speaks of eschatology as the feast of life.

²³ See LWF 2004, 23-26. The concept of *Missio Dei* became central to missiological discussion after the Willingen conference in 1952. It challenges the common colonial idea of mission as a European and Western missionary enterprise and calls for a broader understanding of mission as God's mission.

²⁴ Kirkkohallitus 2007, 34.

²⁵ In matrilineal and matriarchal cultures, the image of God as mother and the one who births life is prominent. God's motherly features are also found in the Bible; e.g. Hos. 11:3-4; 13:8; Gen. 32:11-12; 32:18; Isa. 66:13; 42:14; 49:15; Jer. 44:25; Ps. 131:2; Matt. 23:37; Lk. 13:34. Woman as the image of God see Gen. 1:26-27.

²⁶ Kirkkohallitus 2007, 34.

²⁷ TTL 2012 § 22.

others. Responsibility means using one's gifts for the benefit of others. It also implies sharing natural resources equally with all people, who together reflect the image of God the Creator.

People, however, have not lived according to their God given dignity. The world is filled with consequences of the Fall: suffering and agony caused by human selfishness and seeking one's interests at the expense of others, denial of human value and dignity, and abuse of creation. Humans have not honoured their Creator, or drawn from the source of life and love's uniting power. God therefore sent God's only begotten Son into the world to save it. "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him... Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (Jn. 1:10, 12). God was born into the world as a human being alongside humans, as the child of Christmas among the poor and neglected, in the midst of animals in a manger. God stepped down into the world that God had created (Jn. 1:11). God was born in a particular time and place in human history, into a culture, and religion. God was born with a human body and mind, with the ability to sense, experience, and think. In Jesus, God revealed Godself to humanity and manifested God's love towards all created things. In Jesus, the source of all life and love was especially seeking out those who longed for the renewer, healer, and redeemer of life. God's love towards the whole of creation is best revealed on the cross, where God carried the sentence of death for the sake of humanity. In Christ's death we have received new life and in his judgement freedom. It is only "by his wounds [that] we are healed" (Is. 53:5). The joy of Easter is joy for the freedom of God's creation and of their new life with Christ. "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself" (Jn. 5:26).

God's mission springs from the love of the triune God.²⁸ Through the Holy Spirit, God still creates anew, calls and saves the whole of creation. The Holy Spirit both opens hearts to receive Christ's full salvation and liberation, and renews and gives birth to faith. Through the Holy Spirit, the sinner is given mercy and is united through baptism as a participant in God and God's goodness. This is how the Holy Spirit makes us participants in holiness.

Through the word and sacraments, the Church as the body of Christ participates in the Holy Trinity, which is characterised by love and unity. The Holy Spirit sends the Church into the world. Just as the Father sends the Son and the Son sends the Holy Spirit, the Spirit sends those that belong to Christ into the world (Jn. 15:26; 20:21, Acts 1:8; 13:2-4; Rom. 8:9).²⁹ This is how the Holy Spirit unites Christians into God's mission in the world, and guides the Church to work for life as well as towards the world to come.³⁰

²⁸ TTL 2012 § 2. The Trinity is often described as the Holy Community, particularly in African and Asian theologies. In these theologies the Church's collective nature emanates from God as a community, and from the interaction and love between the different Persons of the Trinity; see Vähäkangas (2002) "African approaches to the Trinity"; Pöntinen (2013, 337-361) "Community of God and the Prophetic Mission of the Church". See also Kärkkäinen 2007, 296.

²⁹ Regarding the Trinity and sending see Saarinen 1994, 144; Haapiainen 2014; see also Kirkkohallitus 2010.

³⁰ TTL 2012 § 112. TTL speaks of "Life" with a capital letter, which is a reference to God.

2.2. The Church and God's mission

The mission of the Church is to participate in God and his/her action in the world. The Church's nature is to be missional.

In the same way that Christ has given himself to creation, the Church also gives itself as bread and water for a world in hunger. This is how the Church shares the good news with all creation.

To be the Church is to be united with Christ and other Christians beyond all cultural and social barriers. In the community of the Church, everyone has their own place and role.

The Church is an instrument of God's mission in the world that continually grows and renews itself.³¹ The Holy Spirit births the Church through the word and sacrament.³² In this context, the concept "Church" refers to the global and ecumenical community of saints, in which Christians live in a relationship with God and where the Holy Spirit continually births faith and love. By its very nature, the Church is communion with Christ and other Christians. The Holy Spirit exists as that love which unites the different members in the body of Christ.³³ When speaking of the Church in theology, the focus is on a unity within the large variation of Christians and the connection among Christians. The "church" as an organisation, as local congregations, and different church denominations, seeks to present the word and sacrament and live out acts of love.

The Church is missional in its very nature.³⁴ The missionary Church proclaims the good news of salvation in Christ always and everywhere. It opens its doors for those who have not yet heard the message of Christ. Simultaneously, the Church nurtures those in its sphere through the word and the sacraments. The purpose of Christ's Church is also to serve through acts of love to the poor, sick, lonely, and all those who need comfort and help.³⁵ Just like individual humans, the Church also needs to continually experience the healing power of the word, as well as grace, in order to live and participate in the mission of God. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, the Church is being renewed and brings hope to the world.³⁶ The Church of Christ and the communion of saints exists wherever faith, hope and love reign through the word and the sacraments. This communion by its very nature invites everyone. It is open, hospitable, and all encompassing.³⁷

³¹ TTL 2012 § 58.

³² WA 40/I, 71, 19-25.

³³ Kirkkohallitus 2007, 37.

³⁴ "As a divinely established communion, the Church belongs to God and does not exist for itself. It is by its very nature missionary, called and sent to witness in its own life to that communion which God intends for all humanity and for all creation in the kingdom;" WCC 2013a § 13. See also LWF 2004, 2; Kirkkohallitus 2010, 7-8.

³⁵ WCC 2005 § 35.

³⁶ Hope and transformation are combined in unity. See TTL 2012 § 30.

³⁷ See TTL 2012 § 8-10. According to the Lutheran confession, it is impossible to fully define or distinguish the invisible communion of saints in the world, as Jesus describes separating the goats and the sheep from each other only at the end of time.

As the communion of the saints, the Church is attached to the triune God. Its relational nature reflects the communion of the divine Persons in the triune God, and God's loving presence as the creator and builder of true unity. The mission of the Church in the world is to be sent out. This mission is not just action, but living a missional life in existence in and with God.³⁸

2.3. Contextual mission

The mission of God is contextual. Contextuality implies that something is grounded to a specific setting. In the same way that God was born as a human being into a specific historical time and place, God's mission is directed towards particular times and places. In this way, God draws close to people.

Contextual mission is culturally specific. It means following Jesus into those human realities, where there is a longing for the Saviour and Redeemer. This leads to an appreciation of different religious perspectives arising from different cultures. Contextual mission empowers people to challenge those structures that oppress and enslave.

The mission of God is always a contextual mission. The Ecumenical confession of faith in unity of one Church is a story about the Creator, Redeemer, and the renewing Spirit of God.³⁹ This narrative encompasses an individual Christian's life in its various stages, as well as the life of Christ's Church. Effectively our lives are intertwined with God's own story in the world. According to the Lutheran tradition, God truly appears as God for humans only when God comes *to* us and is specifically God *for* us. Without having this temporally and physically specific presence and encounter with God, our talk of God becomes misguided and meaningless.⁴⁰ God is never far from anyone nor distant from their personal situation.

The Church's mission is also contextual. It means that its mission is always related to a particular time and place, history, religion, and culture.⁴¹ This is how the Church's mission reflects God's mission in Christ and points to the incarnation.⁴² In practice, this means that all interpretations of Christian faith are culturally bound while being capable of galvanizing positive change through love that arises from the Word of God. As members of the body of Christ, we each represent Christ's Church by carrying out different tasks and by functioning

³⁸ TTL 2012 § 29.

³⁹ See the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. It is worth noting that the Church's creeds are also context specific. According to Eeva Martikainen, confessions have moved from being normative, textually, and historically focused to being dynamic and contextual confessions of the faith; see Martikainen 2002, 29-32, 177-182. Antti Raunio (2014) speaks of creeds as narratives.

⁴⁰ "For those (theologians of glory) have no other understanding of God than that of philosophy, namely, that of metaphysics. According to this, God is separated from creation, like Aristotle says, the true God is the one who inwardly reflects on creation. But what has this God to do with us? Even the devil knows God in this way and knows God to be truthful. Therefore, on the contrary, when theology teaches about the knowledge of God, the God that is known and received is the one that is not able to close themselves inwardly, but comes out to us, so that we would know God as God for us;" WA 43, 240, 22-28.

⁴¹ See LWF 2004, 36.

⁴² In Luther's theology, the incarnation plays a central role in love's movement towards the sinner. Contextual theologians regularly speak of the continuing incarnation, by which they mean the historic incarnation and contextualisation that follows from it.

in different cultural contexts. We can only understand the Christian message in our own context, and in light of our own anthropology and worldview. Our common faith and differing interpretations enrich us. Indeed, one of the tasks of the Church's mission is to recognise, respect, and work with those wisdom traditions and religious interpretations that stem from different cultural contexts.⁴³ In this cooperation, respecting another culture and appreciating its interpretations of Christian faith leads to greater mutual understanding.

The contextual nature of the Church's mission also means following Jesus into those human realities where people seek and long for salvation and liberation. Jesus encountered sinners and the ostracised in their world. In following Jesus, the Church is also sent to those places where there is a need for a healer, saviour, and liberator. As the body of Christ, the Church feels the pain of the world within itself. The mission of the Church reaches out to those people and groups who are in greatest need of love and solidarity. The Church and Christians reflect that love, which they themselves have received and which overflows from within them towards others. As Jesus was sent "to proclaim good news to the poor... freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Lk. 4:18-19), the Church is also called to carry out this same task. In the same way that the Holy Spirit has been sent as an Advocate, so the Church of Christ advocates for those who need it. Thus, the mission of the Church inevitably seeks to change those societal and social structures that oppress or corrupt the image of God within each person.⁴⁴

2.4. Holistic mission

The word "holistic" refers to an approach that takes into consideration the whole of creation. It considers body, soul and spirit. Holistic mission sees human beings in their entirety and as part of creation. It does not separate acts of love and proclamation of the good news, but rather unites them together.

God sustains the whole created order, both the realm of creation and human society. Holistic mission refers to an approach that takes the whole of creation into consideration.⁴⁵ The mission of God in Christ encounters the various ills caused by evil in the world. In Christ God reconciled the suffering and pain that poverty, sickness, death, war, and the oppression of people and creation have created for both the oppressor and the oppressed.

Holistic mission is prophetic mission.⁴⁶ It seeks repentance, wholeness, and reconciliation between people and God. Holistic mission is grounded in both the inherent value of humanity and of God's wider creation, as well as in Christ's atonement and the Holy Spirit's guiding

⁴³ TTL 2012 §27. Regarding contextual mission, see LWF 2004.

⁴⁴ See *Mission and Evangelism - An Ecumenical Affirmation* (WCC 1982).

⁴⁵ TTL 2012 § 4.

⁴⁶ In this context prophetic does not refer to being charismatic, but to the Church's spiritual and social influence in the world.

presence. The Holy Spirit leads Christians to seek reconciliation, justice, peace, and love for all people.⁴⁷

From its inception, the mission of the Church has been holistic. It includes sharing the good news, prophetic proclamation, and works of love (diaconia).⁴⁸ In Lutheran theology, words of faith and works of love belong together.⁴⁹ Jesus himself taught, proclaimed, healed the sick, and fed the hungry. He became our food and drink to satisfy our hunger and thirst. Through his body and blood, we receive eternal life (Jn. 6:53-59). As the body of Christ, the Church also proclaims God's holistic mission and itself becomes food and drink for a hungry world.

Different cultural worldviews bring different perspectives into the Church's mission. A more dualistic Western worldview often seeks to meet practical, physical needs through development work, whilst failing to address the spiritual needs of humanity. That said, some might see the Church's mission as mere spiritual work, and thus fail to see the value of God's physical creation and the needs arising from humanity's material and embodied existence. Thus, holistic mission is an approach that considers the holistic nature of creation and human life, and does not separate material and spiritual reality from each other. This all-encompassing approach not only reflects the Church's tradition but is in line with those cultural outlooks that emphasise a holistic worldview, namely those which have a deep appreciation for the wholeness of life.

Holistic mission takes note of human needs and rights. It is not simply a reflex response to the basic human desire to help, but it listens and is characterised by mutual interactions with other people. In doing this, it follows Jesus' example of serving others.

2.5. Creation and the Church's mission

God is present in God's creation, which reflects its Creator's holiness. God's salvific action is also directed at creation and the creation also participates in God's mission in the world. Humans are responsible for protecting the creation.

God is present in everything that has been created. The whole of creation reveals God's work and nature as a giver. As the creation is a place where the presence of the holy God may be found, we can say that the creation is itself also holy and reflects the holiness of its Creator. Therefore, humans should honour that which has been created and receive it as God's gift. All creation in which God is present is a gift through which God gives Godself. They are gifts and in them God gives Godself. Nothing that has been created exists solely for itself, but to enhance the life and wellbeing of other creatures. Creation thus forms a type of "order of giving love", in which every creature exists for others. This follows from the idea that God

⁴⁷ LWF 2004, 32-35; TTL 2012 §112.

⁴⁸ See LWF 2004, 36-37.

⁴⁹ E.g. "Love each other with gentleness. There is no lack of those to whom you can do good. The world is full of people who need help from others. This is essentially the doctrine of faith and love. Theology at its shortest and longest. At its shortest it is about words and sentences, but in practice and reality love is longer, deeper, and higher than the whole world"; WA 40/II, 74, 23-27.

has primed created reality in line with God's own divine nature as the giver of all good things.⁵⁰

Creation is therefore also an agent of God's mission. Nature calls people to peace and rest, as well as to harmony and wholeness. Nature speaks of God as the Creator and Redeemer of everything that has been created. A holistic concept of God's mission does not only include humanity at the centre of mission, it sees humans as part of the wider creation and as partakers in God's mission, alongside other created things.⁵¹

The Church's holistic mission recognises that God's saving activities apply to all of creation (Mk. 16:15). According to Scripture, the whole of creation groans and waits for its liberation (Rom. 8:19-20). The groaning of creation is visible in natural disasters, as well as in global warming and other human-made ecological problems. The decline of clean water in the world is a major concern for all living things. Creation groans under the catastrophes caused by pollution and climate change.

God's kingdom breaking through the cracks, calls upon the Church to look after and to protect nature. The Church's mission does not only consider creation, but enhances its wellbeing and calls people to work and look after the natural environment as imbued with the life of God (Gen. 2:15). In doing so, it participates in both maintaining and sharing life.

2.6. The Church's mission and human dignity

Human dignity is invaluable. Each individual and social group is created in God's image. Therefore, no person is more valuable than the other, and there is no group of people who holds greater value over another.

God became a human being so that each person could have life in its full scope. The Church's mission is to fulfil this principle of the fullness of human life among all people.

...

The mission of God is not just a contextual and holistic mission, but it also recognises the inherent human value of being created in the image of God. "Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness...' So God created humanity in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:26-27). Humanity, male and female, were created to be like God. According to John's Gospel the same Word that birthed humanity in creation became "flesh and made his dwelling among us" (Jn. 1:1-3, 14). Through Christ human beings are whole and perfect. In Christ's reconciling work, people are renewed in order to experience the fullness of life. This is life lived responsibly together with God, creation, and others. God has called people to complement one other as God's image bearers and to live lives worthy of their inherent human value.

In the Church's mission, humanity's value is irreplaceable. This applies to every single person and all groups of people. Human value and richness are often reflected in cultural

⁵⁰ Kirkkohallitus 2007, 35-36.

⁵¹ TTL 2012 § 22.

values. Nonetheless, churches need to continually evaluate their cultural and religious norms and how they relate to the social reality of people. The concept of human value raises questions for Christians regarding economic and social dysfunction, as well as harmful cultural practices. In each cultural and religious context, there are attitudes and practices that offend and compromise inherent human dignity. The unequal treatment of women, oppression of certain people groups, and racism are too often fuelled by religious, and even church based, movements. Elevating economic profits over human worth affronts humanity's inherent value. In the same way, malnutrition caused by poverty, neglecting the human value of children, young people, the elderly and the sick, and ostracising the disabled are offences against humanity. The Old Testament already speaks of the responsibility to look after the poor and the neglected: "For the LORD your God... shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners" (Deut. 10:17-19). Since every aspect of humanity is valuable, human sexuality also needs to be protected from exploitation. Human value cannot be measured in monetary terms or in the light of negative religious attitudes, which are dismissive of the human body and sexuality. Every human is a reflection of God in their whole being. God became a human so that each person could "have life, and have it to the full" (Jn. 10:10).⁵²

The mission of the Church fulfils this principle of the fullness of human life with respect to people's spiritual, social, and bodily needs. The Christian message dismantles those walls between humans and people groups that fuel or create inequality. This is based on Jesus' full humanity and divinity.

2.7. Mission from the margins

Mission from the margins is alien to human understanding. God did not come to the world in a blaze of majestic glory, conversely, the mission of God is that of the crucified and resurrected Christ. In the same way, the Church's mission is birthed at the margins of life and it itself creates new life.

Mission from the margins is speech about God by the broken. It is mission arising from the liberation of the marginalised, oppressed, poor, suffering, and enslaved. Mission from the margins is the mission of the individual and communal; it is the life of the Church. This mission creates renewal in the Church. As the Church is renewed, it becomes present in the lives of suffering people.

Mission from the margins strives for both inner spiritual wholeness and outward change. It draws oppressive power structures to our attention. Christians are called to dismantle all those ways of thinking and structures which dehumanise life by isolating and supplanting people. Mission from the margins calls everyone to moderate and just living.

Christianity is birthed from the cross of the one condemned to death, from God's wounded heart, and from the joy of new life. In human terms Christianity is born from the margins of

⁵² TTL 2012 § 43-49.

life: it is born out of poverty, displacement, enslavement, and death on the cross. God approaches people in their own lives and experiences of marginalisation. God comes *from* and *to* where people are wounded, without life, and in need of Saviour and Redeemer. Our weakness and wounds unite us to Christ's wounds and resurrection, as well as to his Spirit who makes all things new. God's mission gives life in the midst of death and sin. It gives joy instead of sorrow, and freedom instead of chains. It gives peace and hope in a world that is restless and devoid of hope.

The mission of God also touches communities, particularly those groups that are neglected and wounded. It seeks to commune with those who experience the consequences of societal sins, such as oppression and neglect due to unequal distribution of resources, racism, sickness, or simply for being different in some way. Jesus embodies this mission when he teaches that it is easier for the poor to enter the kingdom of God than the rich; tells the parable of the camel and the eye of the needle; describes Lazarus and the rich man; reflects on the widow's offering; and encounters the woman at the well of Sychar. When Jesus spoke about the coming of the kingdom of God, he placed a particular focus on the discriminated: "Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame" (Lk. 14:21). Jesus spoke about the radical nature of the kingdom of God and how it defies human wisdom, in his teaching that the last shall be first, that the visibly sinful are closer to the kingdom of heaven than the scribes and Pharisees, and that the one who has been forgiven much, loves much.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount describes God's way of seeing the world paradoxically, which challenges conventional human wisdom. The God who created the world out of nothing, still seeks to be present where there is a longing for the Creator and emptiness and nothingness. God's love in Christ is directed towards suffering, pain, and seeming worthlessness. "For God does not save others, except the sinners; does not teach others, except the foolish and those who understand nothing; does not make rich others, except the poor; does not bring to life others, except the dead. However, not simply those who imagine themselves to be these things, or assume that this is who they are, but those who truly are and acknowledge themselves to be these things."⁵³

In the words of Jesus, God's mission takes one "to the very ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). It speaks to people's inner darkness, as well as to a world longing for redemption, both near and far. God's mission empowers the weak and calls them into God's kingdom, where they, as the Church of Christ in the power of the Spirit, proclaim liberty to the captives and sight to the blind. The Letter of James reminds us: "Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?" (Jm. 2:5).

Mission arising from the margins means inner spiritual life and external awareness to perceive the destructive consequences of abuses of power and sin. The world is still divided between those who have the physical means for a good quality of life and those who do not. The purpose of the Church's mission is not to bring the marginalised into the centre of power, but to break dividing walls, and the thought patterns and power structures that maintain them. The World Council of Church's document *Together Towards Life* mentions these structures

⁵³ WA 56, 427,1-6 in Mannermaa 1995, 48.

as paternalism, patriarchalism, racism, the caste system, and discrimination against indigenous peoples, the sick and the disabled. It also points out the unjust distribution of resources in the global economy.⁵⁴ The document encourages the dismantling of these distorted structures and in so doing, empowers those at the margins, rather than simply incorporating the marginalised into the sphere of Western welfare without changing those structures. The message of the cross empowers and gives hope to those living at the margins. It calls those at the centre to repent from the sin of selfishness, which is causing discriminatory power structures and ways of thinking that depreciate the value of humanity and wider creation.⁵⁵ This is how the kingdom of God, which is governed by peace, justice, and love, breaks forth.

Historically, missionary work has often moved from the centre of power towards subjugated nations. Colonial approaches attempt to divorce people from their own culture and join them into European frameworks. Paternalistic concept of difference, view one's own cultural and religious traditions as superior to those of the others', and thus seek to disseminate one's own civilization everywhere. They typically pity others, rather than mutually respecting and loving the needy. However, the Church's history should not be read simply from this perspective. That is, the work of the Church has also been characterised by a good knowledge of different languages and understanding of cultures. Moreover, paternalism is present in every culture.

Those at the centres of power throughout the world still oppress minority groups and seek to benefit from ruling over people groups. In churches and religious circles, people also face abuse, as those in power seek to gain financially or increase their spiritual stronghold. A sign of the Church from the margins is its inner spiritual life in God. This inner life helps one to recognise wrong structures of power, which develop dependence instead of enabling empowerment, justice, and peace.⁵⁶ Consequently, mission from the margins is prophetic by nature.

The Lutheran contextual view of God as "God for us" enables a different starting point for the Church's mission, in comparison to the concept of "God for you", which easily creates borders and value differences between "us" and "them". The inclusive idea of "God for us" focuses on opening and broadening the word "us", in order to transcend financial, social, cultural, religious, and organisational barriers. In today's mission, it applies to the multiplicity of diverse partnerships that lead to mutual enrichment, as people learn from each other's views and religious perspectives. The voice of the marginalised changes and renews the Church's mission. The perspectives of different groups of people also bring to the Church's common table a plethora of theological riches that benefit both the seemingly well off and poorer Churches.

Mission from the margins challenges every Christian and all churches to break down barriers and to engage in mutual mission. It seeks God among the poor and the marginalised, because God is present where the objects of God's love are; namely, humanity, weakness, and imperfection. God came into the world's margins to liberate all, who believe in Christ.

⁵⁴ TTL 2012 § 29-54.

⁵⁵ TTL 2012 § 32-33, 46, 49. TTL speaks of those in power emptying themselves of their rights.

⁵⁶ Ks. TTL 2012 § 38-42.

2.8. The Church's mission and theology of religions

Christ's death on the cross and his resurrection open in the most glorious way God's unlimited love towards all people.

The Church and the Christian see and recognise a brother and sister in people of other faiths. They embrace with gratitude the goodness, which another person and their religion represents.

A mark of contextual mission is also an appreciation of different wisdom traditions and religions. The biblical narrative of salvation did not occur within a vacuum. Already in the Old Testament, a portrayal of God's salvation history takes place among and through encounters with other religions. The writers of the Old Testament were forced to reflect on other religions.

In the New Testament the words of Jesus, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" have challenged the Christian Church from its inception. How should the truth about Jesus, which is believed and proclaimed by the Church, relate to concepts of truth in other religions and worldviews?⁵⁷ The Church's mission, which has surpassed cultural and language barriers, has faced this question from the beginning. As Finland becomes more diverse in terms of religion, this question also increasingly challenges the Church in Finland.

In Lutheran theology, it has been common to speak of two types of divine revelation: general revelation and special revelation. General revelation is God's communication: "God is not simply a distant first cause nor an impersonal power, but God acts in creation and history and encounters us personally."⁵⁸ Lutheranism still teaches that people by nature have knowledge of God and God's law. This awareness of God also shows itself in humans intuitively sensing moral law, which in most religions is reflected in moral instruction along the lines of the Golden Rule.⁵⁹ That said, true and perfect knowledge of God is not possible without the gospel and Christ. God's general revelation on its own will not lead people to the right destination, that is, to the real knowledge of God. It allows people to attempt to reach God by themselves, but fails to take them there.

Therefore, in encountering other religions one needs to ask, what is the relationship between the so-called general revelation and the special revelation found in Christ? One response – particularly common among Roman Catholic theology – is that "grace does not destroy nature." In other words, the revelation in Christ builds on general revelation. Both general and special revelation are the work of the one and the same God. All of creation is directed towards the same destination, namely, God. This approach maintains the idea that real and saving knowledge requires special revelation in Christ, which implies both the proclamation

⁵⁷ When reflecting on this question from a Christian perspective, it is common to also quote Acts 4:12: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

⁵⁸ *Suomen ev.lut. kirkon katekismus*, 12.

⁵⁹ One classic justification for God's presence and activity in other religions is found in the Apostle Paul's speech on the Areopagus: "God is not far from any one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being'" (Acts 17:27-28).

and receiving of the gospel. In a sense, the gospel purifies and fulfils the goodness and truth found in general revelation.⁶⁰

In the light of Lutheran theology, is it possible to acknowledge that God has used other religions to reveal God's will and to mediate salvation? Moreover, what is the status of other religions, once the gospel has been proclaimed and heard? Does the Christ-revelation and the gospel close the door for other ways to salvation? Does it purify the good in them? And does the Church see other religions as salvific even after the Christian revelation has been shared?⁶¹

The Lutheran tradition and teachings do not deny recognizing and acknowledging God's good work in other religions. We believe that all good things are from God. We maintain the uniqueness of Christ, and believe that the revelation in Christ, particularly through Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, manifests God's boundless love towards all people in the clearest way.⁶² All people have the right to receive this gospel. The proclamation of the gospel of peace and reconciliation in word and deed are tasks given to the Church. This is the Church's mission, which the Church must fulfil with humility.

In this mission the Church and Christians see and recognise a brother and sister in those who believe otherwise. They receive with gratitude the goodness that another person and their religion represent. Therefore, encountering other religions is first encountering people who believe otherwise, through everyday dialogue. Other aspects of dialogue include representatives of different religions working together for a common good (e.g. community development projects);⁶³ theological dialogue reflecting on similarities and differences in belief; and spiritual dialogue exploring the spiritual life and religious experiences of different religions. The Church's encounters with other religions and religious dialogue are centred on Christ and his gospel. This also calls the Church to continual renewal and to more fully understanding and living out the gospel. The Church needs to have an active role in dialogue between different religions. In doing so, the Church advances the mutual understanding of religions and their peaceful coexistence.

Coming to know the religious other, and the religious beliefs of others, helps the Church and Christians to understand people's faith and convictions. It also aids the Christians themselves to better understand their own faith and thus to become more deeply rooted in it. Therefore, a

⁶⁰ This so-called *praeparatio evangelii* idea has been criticised for viewing other religions as mere springboards into Christianity and thus seeing the non-Christian as "less than" in comparison to the Christian.

⁶¹ Different approaches in theology of religions are often categorised into three or four models with respect to how they relate to other religions. At the risk of oversimplification: (1) exclusivism claims that salvation is only found in one's own religion; (2) inclusivism believes that the truth of one's own religion fulfils that which is good and right in other religions; (3) pluralism maintains that all religions effectively have some common foundations (e.g. a concept of the "holy") and that religions lead eventually to the same destination ("there are many ways up the mountain"); (4) so-called post-pluralism appreciates the distinctive characteristics of each religion, without trying to harmonise their real differences.

⁶² "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near" (Eph. 2:14-17). In modern theology of religions there is also the view that it is possible to encounter Christ outside of Christianity. This means that although the Church is tied to Christ's revelation, God's saving activity goes beyond the Church.

⁶³ So called *diapaxis*.

respectful approach, which values other religions and their adherents is part of the Church's very being and the only genuine way to exist and live out its calling.

2.9. The Church's mission, peace, and reconciliation

The Church's mission is to call everyone into peace and reconciliation with all created things. Peace is creation's rest and a manifestation of the unity of life with the Creator. Peace is more than the absence of war. It is wholeness, common wellbeing, healthy mutual relationships, and serenity. Jesus promised his peace to his disciples. Through the cross of Christ, God established peace with all of creation. The Holy Spirit brings about peace and reconciliation, and equips Christians for this work.

The Church's mission is to call everyone into peace and reconciliation with all created things. Peace is creation's rest and unity of life with the Creator. Peace is about unity and relationships that enable peaceful living. Peace is more than the absence of war. It is wholeness, common wellbeing, healthy mutual relationships, and serenity. Peace is also a sense of creative freedom, whereby people can be themselves. Peace plays a central role in Jesus' teaching. In his farewell speech, Jesus promises peace to his disciples (Jn. 14:27). Through the cross of Christ, God established peace with humanity. Peace makes one whole, and unites different people and groups of people.

The Church is both the receiver and conduit of peace. The Church's mission is to act for peace and reconciliation. In this task, the Church functions in the midst of wars, violence, and conflicts. The work of peace and prayer for peace are the Church's ongoing roles.

To achieve peace and reconciliation, the Church's mission is to challenge negative frameworks of thought between opposing parties, to help them overcome their enmity, and to banish the threat of military conflict. For centuries, unhelpful ways of thinking and myths about otherness have caused hatred, stigmatised people, and categorised people in relation to class and caste. By these myths about otherness, we mean beliefs regarding different people groups that justify harmful power structures, inequality, and enmity. These ideas impact both those who believe in them, and those whom they are about. Thinking leads to action; hatred to conflict and war.

Reconciliation requires forgiving and being forgiven. Hence, the way of reconciliation between different groups and individuals is often difficult. Working through the traumatic experiences of communities can take generations, and dismantling difficult oppressive relationships can require distancing on both sides. The message of peace creates a refuge, it reduces hatred, and gives hope for tomorrow.

The path of reconciliation also applies to issues between different ethnic groups. Emphasis on the otherness of certain people and existing inequalities mean that many marginalised groups continue to be marginalised. The mission of the Church pays particular attention to the situation and identity of those people groups who find themselves in such a predicament. Also in religious interactions, negative perceptions regarding other religious communities

continue to feed the divide between communities. The Church's mission holds peace between religions as its aim and works to establish peace between different religions and religious groups. In doing so, it proclaims the peace of Christ and his loving presence in the world.

Postcolonial approaches focus on deconstructing negative western myths about otherness, as well as on the mental, spiritual, and physical violence caused in former colonies. The mission of the Church calls for the dismantling of colonial ways of thinking and exposing the inequality they have caused. True reconciliation needs to connect historical reality with contemporary experience. Without this, churches cannot be healed from their past and work with others in a genuine manner.

In the Church's mission, peace and reconciliation emerge from Christ's forgiveness and the Holy Spirit's healing touch. A mission of the Church that does not arise from walking on this loving road of reconciliation, itself needs healing, restoration, and forgiveness to enable its participation in God's mission in the world. This is how God's mission guides the Church on the path of peace and reconciliation, preparing and equipping Christians on their common journey towards the holy God, who is the fullness of life and eternal peace.

3. Felm as an ecclesial agent and a social advocate

3.1. Felm as an ecumenical and ecclesial agent

The Church in this world belongs to God's mission as its instrument. Felm functions within this Church both in Finland and throughout the world. All of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church's congregations are Felm's communal members and participate through the annual general meeting in Felm's decision making. Almost all of the congregations have contractually agreed to cooperate with Felm. Felm fulfils the mission mandate of these congregations in the countries in which it is active.

Felm is one of the mission agencies that has a contractual agreement with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland for organising missionary work. Like other organisations who have signed this agreement, Felm has a "responsibility in its activities to the church's confession and decisions, as well as to fulfil the church's agreed mission strategy and operating principles."⁶⁴ This agreement binds Felm and other mission organisations to act together in God's mission while honouring one another. Felm represents a broad spectrum of spirituality. The diversity of different spiritual movements serves the mission of God. The basic agreement requires Felm to report any changes in its partnerships with international mission and ecumenical agencies to the church's centre of missions.

Felm is an active participant in the work of the ecumenical movement, particularly with and alongside the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches. As of 2013 Felm has been one of the World Council of Church's specialised ministries in mission and development work. It is a member of the Finnish Mission Council and a partner organisation of the Finnish Ecumenical Council. It also has a partnership agreement with the Lutheran World Federation. In fellowship with the World Council of Churches, Felm operates in line with its own principles by following the ecumenical concept of mission and by participating in the activities of the World Council of Churches. Felm also participates actively in the work of the Church's international humanitarian development network, Act Alliance.

Internationally Felm usually works with local Lutheran churches, but from an ecumenical basis increasingly with other churches. Cooperation with its partners is guided by mutually signed agreements, which also define the theological principles of the cooperation.

3.2. Felm and Christian witness

The Church's essence includes unity, sharing of the good news, and diaconia. Sharing the good news, that is, Christian witness, is also Felm's task. Felm's purpose, in line with its rules, "is to participate as an international agent of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland in the triune God's mission in the world by proclaiming the gospel among those who

⁶⁴ See "Perussopimus lähetystyön järjestämisestä Suomen evankelis-luterilaisen kirkon ja Suomen Lähetysseuran välillä." 14.06.2013.

are non-Christian...”.⁶⁵ The rules also note that “In its missions the association seeks to serve our church, its congregations, and churches abroad, who are part of the universal Church of Christ.” Therefore, the task is both to reach out to those who are outside of the Church, and to strengthen existing congregations and churches.

Felm’s understanding of Christian witness is based on Jesus’ life and teachings about the kingdom of God. The signs of the kingdom are joy, peace, and justice (Rom. 14:17). Felm has a goal of strengthening its work in areas in which less than 10% of the population are Christian. Through this aim with its partners, Felm wants to boldly cross geographical, cultural, and social boundaries to bear witness to God’s love in both word and deed. Sharing the good news brings hope and empowers marginal groups, when they are lifted up and are given opportunities as full members of the Church and society. Felm works among marginalised groups together with its partner churches.

At the heart of crossing boundaries is encountering others. Without these encounters, the Church and people do not grow.⁶⁶ In good encounters, respect for others and acceptance of differences are mutual. Christian witness is a type of encounter which shares both faith and common humanity.⁶⁷ In faith, God is present and draws near to people whom God has created and redeemed. Encounter has just as much to do with meeting people as it does with seeing different realities. In good encounters, the unique value of people is recognised and protected.⁶⁸ Sending missionaries has always meant sending people into everyday work and conversations. To this day Felm trains and sends co-workers to share the good news in the spirit of love and unity.

Felm supports the activities of their partners but also encourages an element of independence to ensure a sustainable future for these activities. Strengthening the churches also means supporting theological education and providing stipends and scholarships. Through theological education, Felm seeks to develop both contextual theologies and theological dialogue and understanding that crosses contextual boundaries. Felm supports dialogue to enhance community and cooperation.⁶⁹

Together with its partner churches, Felm reflects on the aims of holistic work and on appropriate social-ethical principles. Felm seeks to strengthen its partners by supporting their church work. The work among adults, women, and children includes diaconal education.

Bible translation work and the publication of Christian literature strengthens the status of indigenous languages and in doing so enhances cultural and personal identity. Increased use of one’s mother tongue also magnifies a contextual understanding of faith among both church communities and individuals.

⁶⁵ SLS 2011 § 2.

⁶⁶ The direction of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland’s activity until 2020 speaks of the missionary Church as the Church of encounter. “In connection with the Church people encounter God, their neighbour, and the reality of their own life;” Kirkkohallitus 2014, 1.

⁶⁷ WCC 2011, 3.

⁶⁸ WCC 2013b, 3.

⁶⁹ The World Council of Churches’ statement on unity notes how old questions still divide the Church. New questions challenge the Church and create new walls both within and outside the Church. Nonetheless, the Church is called into unity; WCC 2013b, 1-3.

3.3. Felm as an agent and renewer of diaconia

The unity of the Church is demonstrated in its threefold action of sharing the good news, worshipping together, and engaging in diaconia.⁷⁰ Felm's holistic mission leans on these three dimensions in the life of the Church.

Felm's work not only reflects a holistic approach to mission, but is also characterised by the principles of Lutheran diaconia.⁷¹ Each dimension of the Church that reflects life falls within a broader definition of mission. Project based development work is part of diaconia, even if its funding comes from national or international sources, or if the project is carried out by a secular organisation. As the agent of the Church's mission, Felm connects the work of non-Church agencies to the broader sphere of faith, hope, and love; to that reality which the Church lives out every day in word and sacraments, proclamation, and acts of love.

By nature, diaconia is inclusive. A person's ethnic background, language, skin colour, religion, gender, age, health or other external features do not influence their ability to participate in the Church's diaconia, as either someone who receives help or who administers it. Another basic feature of diaconia is that there are no preconditions for receiving help. Diaconia encourages participation and seeks to be empowering. Diaconia does not give bread from those who have to those who have not, but rather it acknowledges that we are all in need. This is why we come to the common table and break bread together for the nourishment of all, starting with those who are in greatest need.

Felm's concept of diaconia is grounded in justice. Notwithstanding financial models, it seeks to change realities that marginalise individuals and groups, and cause physical and psychological suffering. In different eras and situations, prophetic diaconia bears witness to God's will. In line with the principles of holistic mission, prophetic diaconia applies to all of creation. In its prophetic role, it reminds people of the sanctity of creation and human dignity. It exposes violent structures that threaten the goodness and beauty of God's creation.

The prophetic dimension of diaconia means moving beyond traditional caritative thinking to actively changing the world. As an expression of the Church's inherent being, diaconia cannot but create something new. By challenging human selfishness and the unjust structures that stem from it, diaconia brings God's wondrous and universal salvation to a specific time and place. In this prophetic act of service, the world encounters the face of the saving God.

In the midst of catastrophe, diaconia saves human lives and relieves suffering through the means of humanitarian aid. Felm is committed to internationally recognised humanitarian principles, and commonly accepted norms and standards for guiding its actions. These include the Code of Conduct and Sphere Standards approved by the Red Cross and other non-governmental organisations.⁷²

Felm's different aspects of diaconia – church cooperation, development cooperation, prophetic diaconia, and emergency relief – are closely connected with one other. This enables

⁷⁰ Kerygma, leitourgia, diakonia.

⁷¹ LWF 2009.

⁷² *Code of Conduct; The Sphere Handbook: Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response.*

natural continuity between the different activities; that is, seamless transition from everyday diaconia and development work to emergency relief and vice versa.

3.4. Felm as an advocate

The holistic message of salvation does not only apply to people's eternal destiny, but also to their material reality. Hence, the Church also needs to influence society as an advocate. Felm's advocacy is based on the Church's prophetic nature. The prophetic Church proclaims God's love and God's good will towards the whole world. God desires justice in the world and the liberation of people from oppressive structures. For God this is true worship. "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to lose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter — when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?" (Isa. 58:6-7). The prophetic Church serves the world and is a community of people that participates in the world's suffering. This Church is outward rather than inward looking. It demands the renewal of distorted and corrupt societal structures. It addresses real issues and consistently advocates for those who lack economic, legal, and other forms of social power.

Advocacy – which follows the example of Christ's activity on earth – is part of the Church's mission to bring good news to the entire world. Together *with* and *on behalf of* the poor, advocacy focuses on underlying causes of poverty and seeks to bring justice. It supports development by influencing politics and the implementation of policies. The work of advocacy is directed at those in power, so that they can see the needs and rights of the marginalised.

In its work, Felm treats each person equally, regardless of religion, nationality, language, age, social standing, sexual orientation, or any other defining feature. As the international agent of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, Felm is committed to these principles in every area of its work.

According to Jesus' teaching, to love God and to love one's neighbour are inseparable in the Christian calling. Consequently, caring for the needs and wellbeing of others should be self-evident to the Christian. Advocacy is at the heart of the Church's identity and an activity that stems from the Church's very being. It is also a moral duty. The Church has a role to ensure that those in power both understand and uphold their responsibility to maintain justice and righteousness, whatever this might look like in their context.

Advocacy does not simply try to make people aware of existing problems. It seeks to change politicians, practices, structures, decisions, and attitudes that sustain poverty and injustice. It confronts those in power and the structures that maintain injustice. It looks for long-term solutions to address situations that have created poverty and inequality, in a manner that empowers those involved to be the agents of change themselves.⁷³

⁷³ "The why of advocacy – the biblical basis". Tearfund.

Structures that cause poverty and prohibit human rights from flourishing include discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, and religion; the inability to bring change democratically; unjust and discriminative legal systems and practices; and social inequality. Felm addresses all of these in its advocacy. We encourage and support our partners to approach the issues on the basis of justice. Justice is enacted when people participate in decisions affecting their lives and the lives of their communities. Empowered people and communities are no longer willing to be silent, but have the courage and ability to express their needs, and to seek help when necessary. We also support the advocacy work of the local churches and organisations that we collaborate with. The aim is to improve the status of the most vulnerable and to amplify the voice of local communities in decision-making. As a social agent and advocate, Felm works closely with its partners with the aim of finding new methods and approaches for social change that arise from their local cultural contexts.

In Finland, we are in dialogue with ecclesial and political decision makers, so that decisions regarding developing countries take into consideration human rights, politically coherent approaches, and conflict sensitivity. We influence people's understanding and attitudes through our communication and global citizenship education. We invite people to make a difference by participating in our various campaigns and events. Felm engages in advocacy both alone and together with churches, non-governmental organisations, and other agencies.

3.5. Felm as a defender of human rights

The United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) defines the basic human rights. Ever since the Enlightenment, many nations have included definitions of human rights and individual freedoms in their constitutions. As well as the UDHR, there are numerous internationally binding human rights agreements. Human rights can be categorised into rights of participation, equality, and freedom.

Although human rights emerged in the context of Western European and North American political developments, the UDHR was not born in isolation from the Christian worldview. The World Council of Churches committed itself to human rights in its first general meeting. Later ecumenical gatherings have further endorsed this commitment and have raised concerns about serious violations of human rights.

Churches and denominations have justified their commitment to human rights either by the Roman Catholic concept of natural law or by making analogies with the Christian faith. For example, there have been reflections on belief in the triune God and justification of the sinner. As discussed above, according to the Christian faith, God has created each human being in God's own image, likeness, and as a co-worker. This grounds the dignity of each individual, which itself is not a human right but its very foundation. God's actions are just, each person is equal before God, and God demands justice from people as they live together. The message of the gospel cannot be divorced from the fulfilment of human rights in God's kingdom.⁷⁴ All people, despite their national or social background, are invited into this

⁷⁴ Lk. 4:16-21.

community of faith. The sacrament of baptism is a powerful expression of equality.⁷⁵ The Church bears witness in the world concerning each person's unique value, freedom, equality, and call to follow the will of God. Every person has the right to participate in this community. There is no form of discrimination in the sight of God.⁷⁶ The life of the Church and the individual Christian must demonstrate God's kingdom and the fulfilment of love among humanity. This requires standing up against powers that rob people of their dignity.

The abolition of slavery is linked to the explosive growth of the early church. Slavery was seen to contradict the message of the gospel concerning human equality and love for one's neighbour. In the modern world, as the Protestant churches began their missionary work, the abolition of slavery and resistance to racism again became central issues. In our time, activities to stop human trafficking continue along this same trajectory.

In ecumenical documents, the principle of equality requires the Church to be inclusive.⁷⁷ "Justice, solidarity, and inclusivity are key expressions of mission from the margins."⁷⁸ Neglected people are not only the targets of God's mission, but its agents.

Recently churches have increasingly highlighted how religious freedom is a basic human right. Many violations of human rights, and even persecution, have stemmed from denying people religious freedom. In a widely affirmed ecumenical document, religious freedom is defined in the following way: "Religious freedom including the right to publicly profess, practice, propagate and change one's religion flows from the very dignity of the human person which is grounded in the creation of all human beings in the image and likeness of God."⁷⁹

Felm is committed to fulfilling the principle of equality in participation in its own activities, as well as in cooperation with its partners. Felm works for the realisation of all human rights. We work wherever human rights are threatened.

Through its actions, Felm seeks to participate in a holistic mission, which acknowledges the unique value and dignity of human beings and the wider creation. The Gospel of Mark encourages us: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation" (Mk. 16:15).

⁷⁵ "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:26-28).

⁷⁶ TTL § 46.

⁷⁷ LWF 2009, 31.

⁷⁸ TTL § 107.

⁷⁹ WCC 2011, 3.

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