

Evangelism Today: New Ways for Authentic Discipleship

Report of Ecumenical Conversation on Evangelism

The purpose of the ecumenical conversation

The ecumenical conversation on evangelism (EC 08) addressed and assessed the key challenges and opportunities in the global changing context of evangelism, and emphasized the urgency to recommit anew to our witness to God of life. Moreover, the conversation highlighted the importance of a common witness to the gospel of life in inter-denominational as well as inter-religious contexts, while addressing evangelism in relation to conversion and the concern of proselytism. This ecumenical conversation also aspired to present new concrete approaches for the work on evangelism and the importance of discipleship in secular contexts in particular.

Narrative report of the proceedings

Preamble

In our age of globalization and alienation, God, the source of all life, brings about transformation through justice and peace in every part of the world within concrete socio-political, economic, and cultural contexts. Called to participate in this transformative mission, the participants of the ecumenical conversation recognized that the incarnation of God in Christ demands that evangelism be rooted in Christ and expressed in culture. The new landscape of mission opens up new possibilities and challenges for evangelism by making Christ and his work of reconciliation relevant to all people here and now. Therefore, evangelism and discipleship, embracing creativity, innovation, diversity, and transformation, becomes an imperative for each local community. Thus, it becomes a necessity for all Christians to explore, seek and discern God's ways for us to proclaim the good news in new ways.

Proceedings

The group had about 70 to 80 participants in each of the four sessions. In each of the first three sessions, two resource persons spoke on a theme. This was followed by a

creative audio-visual performance by Teatro Ekyumenikal (the cultural theatre group of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines). Following that, participants met in smaller discussion groups of about ten in order to reflect on and discuss specific questions related to the inputs of the session. At the end of each session, every group reported back and the outcomes, the affirmations, and the challenges were collected.

Session 1. *Prof. Kirsteen Kim spoke on “God of Life: Evangelism Today,”* relating the theme of the conversation to the theme of the assembly, “God of Life, lead us to justice and peace.” She emphasized the importance of our contribution to the life of the world, being members of the one body of Christ. She reiterated that the life we have in Christ is the good news itself. Furthermore, she highlighted that the “Gospel becomes life-giving in its effects mainly because it challenges injustice, oppression and marginalization, and works for peace, well-being and healing.” She concluded that witnessing to the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit to the good news for all people is both our duty and our joy.

Rev. Dr Wonsuk Ma spoke on “Today’s Global Context of Evangelism and Its Challenges and Opportunities.” He began with a brief overview and observations on a millennial shift in global Christianity. He pointed to the fact that despite the increase of the global population during the last century, the global Christian population dropped significantly. He also referred to the fact that only for a short period (around 1910), world Christianity surpassed the one-third line of world population, remarking that this challenge entails new parameters for evangelism. The clear verbal proclamation of Christ’s good news needs to remain the basis for evangelism, where possible. Moreover, evangelism needs to be truly “holistic” through life, word and work. Peace-making is an indispensable part of Christian witness, in particular when living among other faiths. He also pointed out the importance of developing theologically “the prophet-hood of all believers” and of fostering south to south exchange of missionary gifts.

In the discussions during Session 1, the group recognized that evangelism also calls for prophetic witness and political participation to bring about justice and peace. They affirmed that this is part of discipleship. They also recognized the importance and urgency for evangelism to start with teaching and discerning what God requires of us. They asserted that focus on the love for our neighbour is an expression of our love for God. The group affirmed that evangelism, justice, and peace are interconnected. Peace and justice may exist without evangelism, but authentic evangelism always brings justice and peace. They emphasized that evangelism today needs to address the issues of migrants, racial profiling, discrimination, and violence. The good news of Christ becomes true and meaningful only when bringing liberation to all people – the

oppressed and the oppressors. Discipleship was affirmed as drawing people to Christ to be his witnesses, and not merely focusing on the numbers or namesake conversions. Effective evangelism is the outcome of bridging the gap between worship and daily life. It was affirmed that worship needs to equip us in our discipleship to translate our faith in our day-to-day lives.

Session 2. *Rev. Christoph Anders offered “A German Perspective” on the document, “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct.”* Through case studies and examples, he brought to light why and how this document received wide attention. He acknowledged that it has become popular primarily due to its language, the description of contexts, the united work of many ecumenical partners and churches, and the importance of mission ethics as a subject in a multi-religious context. Twenty churches and ecumenical organizations, he stated, have committed themselves to the venture of engaging with the document and relating it to the life of local churches and communities. Among other things, he pointed out the three following areas of discussion to be dealt with: the need to listen to each other, the need to answer through acts and deeds, and the need to find new ways to put this document into practice in our own contexts.

Fr Indunil Janakaratne Kodithuwakku Kankanamalage spoke on “Conversion and Proselytism” also on the basis of the “Christian Witness” document. Distinguishing the terms “conversion” and “proselytism” from one another, he reaffirmed that evangelism is at the heart of *missio Dei* and that God’s outreach is to the whole world. He pointed to the scriptures as the basis of the fact that the missionary trust belongs to the very nature of the Christian life. Nevertheless, the church, while being faithful to this entrusted mission, needs to fight against two temptations: the “mere humanization of Christian mission” and “triumphalism and exclusivism.” In his input, he also highlighted the following three points: first, the conflicting understanding of Christian evangelism in relation to the issues of conversion and proselytism; second, the debate on conversion and religious freedom; and third, the importance of the document on “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct.”

In the discussions during Session 2, the group emphasized the need to distinguish between proselytism and evangelism, discerning what we are doing in our own countries. It was noted that in countries like Ethiopia, the issue of proselytism is very prominent. It causes tensions and hostility leading to negativity. Therefore, the importance of distinguishing the two from each other and focusing on evangelism can be a way forward with positive outcomes. Situations in different countries were shared to bring to light the negative impact of misunderstanding evangelism for proselytism and the rifts that it can

create within communities. The urgency for new ways of doing evangelism in today's changing landscape of contexts was deeply appreciated.

Session 3. *Ms Volba Aleinik spoke on “Evangelism as Authentic Discipleship”* looking at evangelism and personal participation from the perspectives of repentance, obedience, and learning from Christ. She stated that “all of these forms of life and ministry in the church contribute to the church’s evangelism if there is a continuous effort to be obedient to God and his word, to repent of our sins and mistakes, and to learn from Christ.” She also mentioned that in existing church organizations and activities, the representation of youth, children, and women are not enough to reach all people. She emphasized that there is a large variety of gifts given by God to be offered to all. Speaking on formal discipleship, she referred to the Orthodox Christian Mission Centre and the benefits from our participation in the spiritual brotherhood of men and women, where people make the choice to live as disciples. Concluding, she referred to the importance of networking with other mission organizations globally and through ecumenical organizations.

Rev. Dr Opoku Onyinab spoke on “New Ways of Doing Evangelism.” Beginning with the affirmation that “Evangelism is the live wire of the church,” he emphasized that the core of the message does not change; instead it is the contexts that keep changing. Therefore we must attempt to bring new ways of evangelizing. He addressed the following as important elements in new ways of doing evangelism: diversity and innovation; trans-generational gospel; and the communication of the gospel according to the thinking pattern of the people who are being addressed. Moreover, he identified certain important tools for doing evangelism in new ways. To this end, he emphasized the importance of the use of media and technology, the arts, and music when doing evangelism. He also pointed out the value of working with small groups. He concluded that counselling and rehabilitation centres are important fields of evangelism, adding that Christians should be encouraged to become involved in politics.

In the discussions during Session 3, the group urged that we are cautious of people forcing communities to convert to Christianity against the values and principles of authentic evangelism. Doing evangelism presupposes adequate training (capacity building) in order to be efficient in applying practical methods. The group also pointed to the significance of sharing personal stories as part of our common witness. Participants also affirmed that there are different creative forms of sharing and working with different communities; the appropriate and attractive methods should be chosen in accordance with each respective context.

Session 4. After the presentation of the rapporteur's report, the floor opened for participants to discuss the affirmations and the challenges that came out of the three previous sessions of the conversation.

Ecumenical affirmations and challenges emerging from EC 08

The following affirmations and challenges need to be addressed by churches, ecumenical partners, and the WCC.

Affirmations¹

We the participants of EC08 believe and affirm the following:

1. Evangelism points to Jesus Christ. New life in Christ that comes through the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ demands that we share the good news in an authentic manner.
2. We urge that initiatives be taken to build inclusive communities in Christ at all levels. (LC, EP & WCC)
3. The sharing of the gospel must be relevant to the basic needs of the people, including material and spiritual. (LC)
4. We urge that LCs be equipped in mission and evangelism to explore, experiment, experience, and embrace new ways for authentic discipleship. (EP & WCC)
5. We need to make connections between discipleship and embodiment. We need not emphasize only numbers in relation to Christianity. We aim to change the reality of communities in conflict or at war into embodying Christ and his way of life. (LC, EP & WCC)
6. Discipleship needs to be in words and action. Justice and peace are some of the significant expressions of our discipleship and evangelism. We need to live out the kingdom of values and recognize that this in itself is a form of evangelism. Our lifestyle needs to communicate the good news of Christ. (LC, EP & WCC)
7. The integration of evangelism and peace and justice can be achieved by new emphasis on discipleship. Discipleship is educating and enabling others to live that life. We need to see how we can bring together initiatives on mission, evangelism, discipleship, justice and peace, and interfaith relations rather than dividing them for the sake of job roles. (EP & WCC)
8. Congregations should act in collaboration with the communities they are placed in, and not become strangers. Individuals should be equipped to collectively

¹ LC = local congregations /churches, EP = ecumenical partners, WCC

be neighbours both within and beyond the local churches/congregations. (LC)

9. Discipleship is drawing people to Christ to be his witnesses. Churches are encouraged to collaborate in deepening discipleship. (LC, EP)

Challenges

We the participants of EC 08 recognize and acknowledge the following as challenges that need to be addressed further:

1. How can the desire for new life in Christ be rooted in our local churches? (LC)
2. Mission challenges us to connect the vertical and horizontal relationships: How can we bring the needs of the broken world into our worship? (LC, EP & WCC)
3. Evangelism proclaims the good news but the church's proclamation sometimes has no connection in contexts in which there is inequality, suffering, abuse, human rights violation, etc. How can we make visible these connections? (LC, EP & WCC)
4. How we can build new models of discipleship that will enable communities of different faiths to live together? (LC, EP & WCC)
5. How can we make evangelism holistic? It should not be a mere proclamation of the good news, but it should also bring about transformation on the individual, communal, and social levels. (LC & WCC)
6. We are called to become neighbours to those in need. How do we become neighbours and not strangers to one another? (LC)
7. Our perceptions about people outside the church should change for the better. How can we recognize the work of the Holy Spirit beyond the boundaries of the church? (LC, EP & WCC)
8. Mission in many contexts requires revival of current church members. (LC)
9. Evangelism is the responsibility of both lay and clergy. How can we equip all believers to share their faith? (LC)
10. How can we establish common ground to share the good news that many will understand? (LC, EP & WCC)