

# **Toward an Ecumenical Understanding of the Ministry of the Missionary**

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## **1.**

In order to present an ecumenical understanding of the ministry of the missionary one must first answer two basic questions: What elements should be included when describing the ministry of the missionary, and how should one proceed to select these? The most representative answer to both questions can best be formed on the basis of an ecumenical consensus statement that has been agreed to or confirmed by all or most denominations and churches. Since no such ecumenical document has yet been worked out,<sup>1</sup> one must instead look for elements of an ecumenical understanding of the ministry of the missionary which have support in the Scripture, in the ecumenical creeds (*Apostolicum* and *Niceanum-Constantinopolitanum*) and other representative ecumenical documents. Since the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity *Ad gentes divinitus* of Vatican II appeared in 1965,<sup>2</sup> quite a few ecumenical documents on mission have been produced,<sup>3</sup> not to mention documents from individual churches with bearings on an ecumenical understanding of the ministry of the missionary.<sup>4</sup> Some of these

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<sup>1</sup> The closest one has come to such a consensus document is the report *The Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission 1977-1984* (Meeking, Basil & Stott, John (Eds.), *The Evangelical - Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission 1977-1984: A Report*. The Paternoster Press, Exeter 1986). But this dialogue did not include the Orthodox church, and only the Roman Catholic members of the dialogue group were officially appointed church representatives, none of the others.

<sup>2</sup> 7th of December 1965. Austin P. Flannery (Ed.), *Documents of Vatican II*, New Revised Edition, 7<sup>th</sup> printing, 1984, pp 813-856.

<sup>3</sup> These are, e.g., "The Lausanne Covenant. Let the earth hear his voice" (1974), "The Manila Manifesto. Calling the whole church to take the whole gospel to the whole world" – both in: J. D. Douglas (Ed.), *Proclaim Christ Until He Comes. Calling the Whole Church to Take the Whole Gospel the Whole World*, (Lausanne II in Manila International Congress on Evangelization) World Wide Publications, Minneapolis 1989, pp 19-38;

<sup>4</sup> The Papal Encyclicals "*Redemptoris missio*", December 7, 1990 and the Declaration "*Dominus Iesus*", June 16, 2000 from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (Aug 6, 2000)

documents have gained general support by a substantial and representative amount of churches, such as the Lima Document of 1982, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, a document wherein both lay and ordained ministries are covered.<sup>5</sup> In addition, in the Anglo-Lutheran *Porvoo Common Statement*, visible church unity is seen to result in common life “in mission and service” (§ 58).<sup>6</sup> Other kind of documentation that demonstrates the praxis of the church through the centuries may also prove a useful guide in this connection.

## 2.

The ministry of mission is a ministry that the church has been commissioned to by Jesus Christ. Just as he was himself sent by God, his followers are sent by him to continue and further his ministry (John 20,19-23; cf. 17,18f).

This is echoed *e.g.* in *Ad Gentes* as follows: “Having been sent... the Church, in obedience to the command of her founder (Mt 16:15) and because it is demanded by her own essential universality, strives to preach the Gospel to all men.”<sup>7</sup> Further: “The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit.”<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, in the context of the World Council of Churches (WCC), a focus has been made on the missional character of the ministry of the believers (in: *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*; Faith and Order Document 181):

The Church is the community of people called by God who, through the Holy Spirit, are united with Jesus Christ and sent as disciples to bear witness to God’s reconciliation, healing and transformation of creation. The Church’s relation to Christ entails that faith and community require discipleship in the sense of moral commitment. The integrity of the mission of the Church, therefore, is at stake in witness through proclamation and in concrete actions for justice, peace and integrity of creation.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (WCC Faith and Order Paper No.111), World Council of Churches, Geneva 1982, see especially pp 20ff.

<sup>6</sup> *Together in Mission and Ministry: The Porvoo Common Statement with Essays on Church and Ministry in Northern Europe*. Conversations between The British and Irish Anglican Churches and The Nordic and Baltic Lutheran Churches. Church House Publishing, London 1993, pp 1-42

<sup>7</sup> *Ad Gentes* 1; cf. *The Catholic Church Catechism* § 849.

<sup>8</sup> *Ad Gentes* 2; cf. *The Catholic Church Catechism* § 850.

<sup>9</sup> *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* § 112.

The ministry of the missionary is apostolic in its character.<sup>10</sup> This means that in this ministry the believers have been entrusted with the Gospel by the risen Lord and have been told to perform such deeds that naturally accompany the Gospel. In other words: “Sent as his disciples the people of God has to witness to and participate in God’s reconciliation, healing and transformation of creation. The Church’s relation to Christ entails that faith and community require discipleship.”<sup>11</sup>

The ministry is primarily one that is a carrier of the Good News and may therefore be described by the name ‘evangelism’, referring to its most precious treasure. As the report from the Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission (1977-1984) confirms, one finds a measure of convergence of understanding evangelism in the two documents *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and the *Lausanne Covenant*: “To evangelise is to spread the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures... Evangelism itself is the proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Saviour and Lord.” (*Lausanne Covenant* § 4). The witness must be “made explicit by a clear and unequivocal proclamation of the Lord Jesus... There is no true evangelisation if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the Kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, are not proclaimed.” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* § 22).<sup>12</sup>

This means that the church must seek to find the intended receptors of the missionary message, the Gospel, be they nearby or far away, former believers or non-believers, religious seekers or adherents to other religions.<sup>13</sup>

### 3.

The church is not free to take up or to dispose of this missionary task at liberty. Only at the return of the Lord – the *Parousia* – at the end of times will the church be relieved of its responsibility (Matt 28,18-20; Luke 24,47-

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<sup>10</sup> The entire Church is apostolic, in as it is ‘sent’ to the whole world; all members of the Church partake in this sending, although in different ways, *Catholic Church Catechism* § 863, cf. *Apostolicam actuositatem* § 2; compare also *The Catholic Church Catechism* § 873 and *Lumen Gentium* § 20.

<sup>11</sup> *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*. § 47a.

<sup>12</sup> Meeking, Basil & Stott, John (Eds.), *The Evangelical - Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission 1977-1984: A Report*. The Paternoster Press, Exeter 1986, p 9f.

<sup>13</sup> These are categorized into three main types of people in *Redemptoris missio*, § 33.

49). The commissioning of the church is both a privilege and a duty. It is its privilege to share in the dissemination of the Good News to everyone and to share the fruits of the gospel in the lives of people notwithstanding race, gender, age or social status (Rom 1,1-5.16f; 15,15-19). While a privilege, it is also a duty to share the message of reconciliation and salvation with any one who has not yet been informed or has not yet received the message. This was what the disciples were told: “You received without cost; give without charge.” (Matt 10, 8) In addition, the apostle Paul sees his ministry as both a gift and an obligation: “Even if I preach the Gospel, I can claim no credit for it; it would be misery to me not to preach. If I did it of my own choice, I should be earning my pay; but since I do it apart from my own choice, I am simply discharging a trust.” (1 Cor 9,16f, cf. verses 19-23). This can only be so as the ministry of mission is at its heart a ministry making God’s salvation known to everyone and is therefore an expression of God’s own will (1 Tim 2,4, cf. Eph 1,7-11).

#### 4.

The ministry of the missionary is a ministry for which the entire church is a steward and which is recognised by its deeds. It is performed by individual Christians as well as by groups of these in co-operation with churches or Christian communities (so-called ecclesiastical communities or mission groups or missionary societies) throughout the world:

The whole Church and every member...participates in the faithful communication of the Gospel. Essential to its testimony are not merely its words, but the love of its members for one another, the quality of its service to those in need, a just and disciplined life and its fair distribution of exercise of power.<sup>14</sup>

None of these individuals or communities is alone able to render the ministry in its fullness. But through their shared ministry one may recognise one or more of the signs of the apostolic commission, such as the proclamation or any other (verbal or non-verbal) conveying of the gospel; signs of the Kingdom of God in the form of self-emptying service (Phil 2,5-11); health bringing and healing works (Matt 25,34-40; cf. Matt 10,8); works which convey hope and reconciliation (2 Cor 5,17-21); the speaking up for and caring for the poor and the marginalised and the oppressed (Luke 1,46-55; 4,16-21).

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<sup>14</sup> *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, § 87.

## 5.

The contents of the ministry of the missionary are further described in the so-called great commissions in the gospels (Matt 28,18-20; Mark 16,15-16; Luke 24,47-49; John 20,19-23). The ministry is about witnessing to the resurrection of Jesus, proclaiming repentance in his name and the forgiveness of sins to all nations, baptising in the name of the Triune God and teaching them to observe all that Jesus have commanded. What Jesus commanded the church to do, is evident from his proclamation of the Kingdom of God and from his attitudes and deeds. He is himself first and foremost a servant – a minister – (Matt 20,25-27; Mark 10,42-45; John 13,12-17). His preaching of the Kingdom of God is accompanied by signs of the coming of the Kingdom, such as the forgiveness of sins, care and acts of love for the sick, the people in need, for the poor and the other marginalised individuals and groups in society.

He further designates these acts of love in e.g., Matt 25,34-40, where they are described as the giving of food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothes to the naked, care for the sick, and as visiting the prisoner. Although these are kinds of services together with and on behalf of Jesus Christ that can be said to be the main contents of the mission ministry, also the prophetic voice and actions commit the missionary ministry of the church to enter a critical prophetic role where it speaks up against injustice and acts of oppression and call people back to a life in harmony with God's will.

Throughout the ages, the church has recognised its missionary work as being done on behalf of and together with Jesus Christ. In the report from the Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission, this is phrased as follows: "We all affirm that the missionary enterprise is a participation in the mission of Jesus and the mission of his Church. The urgency to reach all those not yet claimed by his Lordship impels our mission."<sup>15</sup>

In the Acts of the Apostles it is demonstrated to us how the early church understood and put into practice its missionary ministry. There are also expressions of the apostle Paul in his letters that show how he understood this apostolic ministry. It is a mission with the gospel in order to bring people

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<sup>15</sup> Meeking, Basil & Stott, John, *The Evangelical - Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission 1977-1984: A Report*. The Paternoster Press, Exeter 1986, p 35

to allegiance with God and faith in him (Rom 1,1-6; cf. 15,9) and to reconcile people with God (2 Cor 5,17-21). But Paul's own ministry also demonstrates by concrete examples that it also includes the other signs that accompany the Kingdom, that is, the acts of love (Rom 12,6-21; 1 Cor 13). One may here mention Paul's healing ministry (Acts 28,7-9, cf. 20,9-12), miraculous signs (Rom 15,19) and the collection for the poor in Jerusalem (2 Cor 9).

The signs that accompany the missionary ministry are also recognised in ecumenical documents:

As the communion of the baptised, the Church is a priesthood of the whole people of God (1 Pet 2)...serve the world by proclaiming the gospel, testifying to their faith to their way of life... It is also part of their service to the world to feed the hungry, help the poor and marginalised, correct injustice, and care for the integrity of creation, together with all people of good will. In so doing, they are in harmony with the mission of the Church.<sup>16</sup>

## 6.

The ministry is border crossing, qualitatively speaking, in that it seeks to reach with the gospel all people and groups of people who have not heard it before or received it with faith (Rom 15,15-20; 2 Cor 10,15f). That it is qualitatively speaking a border crossing ministry may imply a cross cultural or a geographical movement, a movement to both men and women, adults and children alike, to people of other social status or ethnical belonging (cf. Gal 3,26-29). In spite of the differences caused by diverse geographical, historical, cultural and religious contexts, the message is essentially one, just as the faith is one (Eph 4,4-5; cf. 1 Cor 8,6):

The apostolic faith has to be interpreted in the context of changing times and places: it must be in continuity with the original witness of the apostolic community and with the faithful explication of that witness throughout the ages.<sup>17</sup>

As a Christian Jew the apostle Paul called on the Jewish as well as the non-Jewish population in the societies he came to (Acts 17,1-3; 17,10-12; 18,4-8; Rom 1,14-17), although he had as his primary goal to minister to the (non-Jewish) peoples (Rom 15,15-21; cf. Acts 17). And he made it his

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<sup>16</sup> *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, § 83f.

<sup>17</sup> *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, § 70.

effort to engage in ministry wherever the gospel had not yet been proclaimed and wherever the name of Christ was not known (Rom 15,20).

## 7.

Mission protrudes from worship and prayer. In the worship and prayer life of the church, its members are called to undertake the mission ministry. In the worship itself, the commissioning or ordination also takes place of individuals who are given a specific missionary ministry on behalf of the church to bring the gospel further. In spite of other differences, and although there are variations in churches as to the orders of ordination, commissioning or prayers for missionary candidates, the churches commonly share one kind or other of lay or ordained missionary ministry to which individuals are commissioned through prayer (and usually also the laying on of hands).

In the Acts of the Apostles Luke tells about such a commissioning in the church at Antioch. While they were keeping a fast and offering worship to the Lord, the Holy Spirit called Paul and Barnabas to the mission ministry. Having laid their hands on them, having fasted and prayed, they sent them out (Acts 13,2-3; cf. also 2 Tim 1,6f and 1 Tim 4,14). Luke concludes in the next verse by saying that the two were sent on their mission by the Holy Spirit (v. 4). This close relation between the Holy Spirit and the missionary ministry has since been recognised by the church to be an essential mark of its existence:

Throughout the ages the Holy Spirit makes the entire Church 'one in communion and ministry; and provides her with different hierarchical and charismatic gifts,' giving life to ecclesiastical structures, being as it were their soul, and inspiring in the hearts of the faithful the same spirit of mission which impelled Christ himself.  
(*Ad Gentes* § 4)

## 8.

Mission is an expression of Christian unity and will, when the ministry is conducted in loyalty to this unity, carry witness about Jesus Christ as the Son of God and lead to faith.

In Jesus' prayer in John 17,21 he prays that the believers may be one, so that the world may believe that the Father has sent his Son. When the church expresses its unity visibly, it leads to faith. The ministry of the missionary has as its special responsibility to carry the unanimous testimony about the Son of God who has come into the world to offer salvation. In her ecumenical creeds – the *Apostolicum* and the *Niceanum-Constantinopolitanum* – the worldwide church has given a united and clear expression of its common faith that it still confesses and holds true. The ministry of the missionary has a particular responsibility for finding ways of expressing visibly and audibly the church's faith in the triune God and its unity in Christ.

Because of this, the missionary ministry will also seek visible expressions of Christian unity between sending and receiving churches and congregations (see for instance Phil 4,10-20 and Rom 15,25f). Through these expressions of unity the ministry will also encourage the church and its members to be faithful to the great commission and seeks means to reach further out (see for instance Rom 15,22.28f and 1,8-15)

In the Porvoo statement (of October 13, 1992), the natural link between visible unity and togetherness in mission is expressed in the following commitment: (§ 58.b): "We commit ourselves: (i) to share common life in mission and service, to pray for and with each other, and to share resources..." (p. 31), as well as in § 61: "Together with them we are ready to be used by God as instruments of his saving and reconciling purpose of all humanity and creation." (p. 33).<sup>18</sup>

In an ecumenical document of a more recent date, it is stated that:

Mission belongs to the very being of the Church. As persons who acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, Christians are called to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed. They are to address those who have not heard as well as those who are no longer in living contact with the Gospel, the Good News of the reign of God. They are called to live its values and to be a foretaste of that reign in the world.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Also the liturgical celebration of the Porvoo Agreement, mentioned in § 59 the *Porvoo Common Statement* had as one of its purposes to be a sign of "our commitment to engage in mission together."

<sup>19</sup> *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, § 27.

And since mission belongs to the very heartbeat of the church, it is no wonder that new areas are constantly identified in the ecumenical dialogues wherein the churches may engage in common witness. In the report from the Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission 1977-1984 the following possibilities of common witness are listed:<sup>20</sup>

- in Bible Translating and Publishing
- in the use of Media
- in community service
- in social thought and action
- in dialogue
- in common worship
- in evangelism

As one may conclude, the possible areas of common witness are only limited by imagination.

## 9.

The mission ministry is taken care of by the whole church, by the Christians in general as well as by those who have been commissioned for a specific ministry with the gospel in particular. The missionary task is given to the entire church by the risen Lord and is therefore an obligation for all Christians. At the same time there are some who through dedication and prayer have been set apart in a special way for the missionary ministry. How this is done in individual churches and denominations will vary, both geographically and historically.<sup>21</sup> But both in lay and various kinds of ordained missionary ministry are such signs recognised which show that the apostolic mission with the gospel is carried out.

Examples in the New Testament of persons who have entered a special ministry with the gospel are Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13,1-4), Timothy (Acts 16,1), Silas (Acts 15,40), John Mark (Acts 15,37-39), Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18,26; cf. Rom 16,3; 1 Cor 16,9; 2 Tim 4,19).

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<sup>20</sup> Meeking, Basil and Stott, John, *The Evangelical - Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission 1977-1984: A Report*. The Paternoster Press, Exeter 1986, pp 81-92.

<sup>21</sup> Compare what the Lima-document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* says about the Ministry, §§ 1-55.

Moreover the Acts of the Apostles and Paul's letters tell about a number of churches which have been established without the efforts of Paul and the other apostles (Rom 15,18-22) and about individual Christians which Paul himself did not lead to conversion and faith (Rom 16). These all received the gospel and came to believe through ordinary Christians who shared the gospel and their faith in Christ.

It is, however, important to point out here that it is the activities and signs of the missionary ministry that identify its presence and not the person who at any time is named a 'missionary'. Normally there may not be the need to distinguish sharply between the ministry of the missionary and the missionary himself or herself. But there is no guarantee that a person who has been dedicated to or ordained for mission service indeed carries out this ministry. He or she may rather be hiding behind the title, while lacking the deeds and witness that this very ministry requires. On the other hand, people – be they lay or ordained – who have not formally been dedicated or ordained as missionaries, may very well be carriers of the signs and works of the missionary ministry. The title 'missionary' only honours such persons who do the will of God, not those who neglect to do or take up the very task of the missionary calling. Here we are reminded of Christ's own words of doing God's, his Father's will (cf. Matt 7,21; 21,31; compare John 6,38-40 and 7,17f). Oppositely the title 'missionary' may well honour any Christian who faithfully carries out the missionary task of the church, with or without any ordination beyond baptism.

## **10.**

Here it should be added that not only those are missionaries who share the gospel with their own generation, handing out horizontally so to say. Also such persons are partakers of the missionary ministry who share the gospel with the next generation, yes indeed their own children, cf. the mother of Timothy who was a Christian Jew (Acts 16,1; cf. 1 Tim 5,4). There are also other examples in the New Testament of such persons who are conveyors of the Good News, such as the immigrant and business woman Lydia who became baptised with her entire household (Acts 16,4-5); likewise the jailer at Philippi who was also baptised together with his whole family (Acts 16,29-34). According to Matt 28,18-20 the Great Commission holds together baptism and the teaching of the candidates who are offered baptism. The

one activity cannot be said to be less a part of the missionary ministry than the other, hence the teaching of Christian faith and doctrine and the continued sharing of the gospel are as essential parts of the ministry of the missionary as is the calling to repentance and faith and baptising.

## **11.**

The sending and entertaining of missionaries is primarily the task of the local church. In this way the church may ascertain that any person who is consecrated and sent is recognised as a genuine witness and is accountable to the sending church for his or her ministry in the receiving church. If a missionary fails to carry out in the receiver church and culture his or her mission, she may be re-called or the receiving church may ask the sending church to take him or her back because they fail to recognise in them the true signs and activities of the missionary ministry.

Paul and Barnabas were sent by the church at Antioch (Acts 13,1-4) and received support from the church in Philippi (Phil 4,16) during their stay in Thessalonica. They also solicited support from the church at Rome for their planned missionary journey to Spain (Rom 15,23-24). In a similar way churches of today must see their responsibility to raise funds for mission and to send people out for missionary ministry and activities. Or, said in the words of the Lausanne Covenant:

All churches should therefore be asking God and themselves what they should be doing both to reach their own area and to send missionaries to other parts of the world. A re-evaluation of our missionary responsibility and role should be continuous. Thus a growing partnership of churches will develop and the universal character of Christ's Church will be more exhibited.<sup>22</sup>

## **12.**

If the church does not take her commission for mission seriously, there are likely to come forward individuals or groups in the church who make sure that the mission ministry is called to life and carried out through various

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<sup>22</sup> *The Lausanne Covenant* § 8.

forms of missionary service. Four historical examples may suffice to illustrate this, albeit others also are easily found:

- In the early church the ascetic and steadfast prayer life of the desert fathers initiated a centripetal missionary movement, which drew great numbers of new believers to the church.
- In the wake of the Roman Catholic counter-reformation, missionaries went to Asia, Africa and Latin America.
- The Protestant missionary revival during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a movement of spirituality which emphasised bible reading, prayer and testimony about one's own faith. It had as one of its fruits the establishment of missionary societies and sending of missionaries.
- The charismatic movement in the latter half of the 1900's lead to a new consciousness about the gifts of the Holy Spirit and about the missionary ministry which these are to serve in the church.

In spite of other things that may be said of these missionary movements within church history and their obvious shortcomings, they serve as examples of the sovereign activity of the Lord of the church within the church itself. If the church fails to be a faithful steward of its missionary ministry, the Lord of the church will find the means and persons by which the missionary ministry will be carried out.

In other words, the missionary movement is a movement that revives the very same church as it equips, strengthens the faith and the Christian identity of the believers, pours new zeal into their hearts and gives them new impulses (*Redemptoris missio* § 2).<sup>23</sup>

### 13.

Just exactly because the missionary ministry exists within a church that is a bearer of truth, the missionary ministry itself must be carried out in faithfulness to the truth and without any deceit. There are especially three ways of witnessing that neither Evangelicals nor Roman Catholics accept and which are all referred to as 'proselytism' or unworthy ways of witnessing:

<sup>23</sup> *Redemptoris missio*, Encyclical by John Paul II, issued on December 7, 1990 in: Heinrich Denzinger (ed.), *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionem et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*. Herder, Freiburg...38.ed. 1999, §§ 4890-4896.

- “when our *motive* is unworthy”,
- “whenever our *methods* are unworthy”, and
- “whenever our *message* includes ‘unjust or uncharitable reference to the beliefs or practices of other religious communities in the hope of winning adherents’.”<sup>24</sup>

Since it belongs to the fruits of the gospel to set people free, the witness carried by the missionary ministry must be faithful to the truth and avoid the crooked ways (John 8,31f; cf. 1,14-17; 17,17-19; 18,37).

## 14.

The above are all necessary elements in an ecumenical understanding of the ministry of the missionary. More elements could have been included, but this suffices to demonstrate that it is both possible and desirable to describe the ministry of the missionary ecumenically. Many of the ecumenical documents that have been solicited are related to ecumenical dialogues on church understanding and church unity. Others are directly related to the understanding of the church’s mission. As was the case with the Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission 1977-1984, it seems most expedient now that specific ecumenical dialogues should be arranged in order to come to a full agreement on an ecumenical understanding of the missionary ministry. The present contribution has demonstrated that this should be possible and that a dialogue cannot be made without reference to earlier ecumenical efforts that have bearings on the understanding of the person and ministry of the missionary.

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<sup>24</sup> Meeking, Basil & Stott, John, *The Evangelical - Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission 1977-1984: A Report*. The Paternoster Press, Exeter 1986, p 90f.

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