

Community Mission in the intercultural, inter-religious environment of Europe

Basel, 5th February 2005

Author: Prof. Dr. Ralph Kunz, Professor für praktische Theologie, Universität Zürich

Community Mission

in the intercultural, inter-religious environment of Europe

List of contents

I “Mission Impossible”

- A. An Impossible Basis**
- B. “Impossibility” in the History of Implementation**
- C. Missionary Either-Or**
- D. State Church versus Missionary**

II Mission Possible

- A. Theological Rehabilitation**
- B. Possible Mission Types**
- C. A Formula**
- D. The Intercultural and Inter-religious Context in Europe**

III So much will be possible ...

I “Mission Impossible”

A film with the catchy title “Mission Impossible” was a great box office hit a few years ago. The plot is drawn on the pattern George W. Bush uses to govern his country: There are bad guys and good guys. In the attempt to prevent a list of agents being stolen, a whole team is wiped out – except the hero! Consequently he is suspected of being a mole and has to go undercover. Now he has to try to clear his name, find the real traitors and exact his revenge. It is only logical that he does not always keep to the law in this undertaking. After all he has to restore law and order. Hunt, played by Tom Cruise, consistently manages the virtually incredible and superhuman. The highlight of the film is the daring leap out of the burning helicopter.

If we draw a comparison between his mission and the mission of Jesus there is one fundamental difference: the gospel ends tragically. Only the team survives, the hero dies. Jesus is betrayed and killed. No one avenges him. The mole kills himself. But that does not restore justice. For Roman law was not broken. The castigation and condemnation of Jesus was legally correct! And anyone who thinks that his team has a mission after such a story, such a disaster, must be a fool.

Christian mission, ladies and gentlemen, is totally impracticable. Mission impossible! Mission in the name of Jesus is impossible, isn't it! There are many who think like this, though from quite different motives. I should like to start my paper on community mission with a reflection on these impossibilities before going on to focus more sharply on the possibilities of mission in the intercultural, inter-religious environment in Europe and defining the limits more clearly.

a. An Impossible Basis

When the community remembers, in the liturgy, the night Jesus was betrayed it is bearing testimony to His death; until His coming. Seen on a human plane, the community believes in a completely impossible possibility! Its mission is based on the unique phenomenon of the resurrection of Jesus after the crucifixion. Everything depends on whether this was true. The gospel must pass through the eye of this needle. Mission begins with the unreasonable demand: imagine, the impossible *is* possible. Life is stronger than death. Imagine, the women were not mistaken. He really was resurrected from the dead. The community has no other voice but its own to bear testimony to this impossible possibility credibly. It has no other hands and no other feet. It shines with its given light. It has no proof, no secret files, no helicopter and no super weapons. Its mission is continually threatened with failure either by the oppression of other powers or by a powerful church.

b. “Impossibility” in the History of Implementation

The second “Mission Impossible” derives from this paradox: The church itself has rendered mission impossible. For the mission of the Christian church was and is a success story. There is no need for me to recount this story nor to elaborate on how not everything that led to this success was in harmony with the message of the gospel. Forced conversions, bloody conflicts, inquisition – the list of incredible and impossible acts that have been perpetrated in the name of Jesus is long. A shadow darkens the dissemination of Christianity.

In the eyes of many contemporaries, the criminal history of the mission makes it impossible. They ask how much suffering and misery came with and through the mission. And how much good has been done and is being done in and through the mission is completely overlooked. The distrust of all that is 'missionary' is deeply ingrained. People associate it with cultural violence, colonisation and civilisation of the savage. Every child knows that. The fact that this sombre picture of the mission is also connected with the romantic perception of the noble savage and a growing cultural scepticism is completely overlooked.

c. Missionary Either-Or

What happens, when these congregations find themselves the object of mission, find themselves on the mission field again? One of the consequences of enlightenment, modernisation and secularisation is that our churches no longer have a monopoly on the interpretation of meaning; again I do not have to explain this at length. The history of European Christianity also embraces evangelising, awakening, church building, mission within and beyond the church. But here again – for the third time – an "impossible"! The so-called inner mission has left scars. "Missionary zeal" is proverbial. Whoever, from no other motive but fear, must convince others that baptism is not enough and mere membership is too little, has no alternative but to exert pressure. The missionary assumes the role of the hero in Mission Impossible despite himself. The decisive argument is used like a weapon: "do or die".

d. State Church versus Missionary

Naturally, for many people there are also theological grounds making it impossible for our "communities" to be "missionary churches". Missionary communication is asymmetric and pervasive. That makes it suspicious. Mission wants to convince and is therefore overwhelming. That makes it problematic, ethically and legally. The term "missionary" is then used promiscue with "free church" or "evangelical", or even worse "fanatical". Against this sombre background, it is clear and simple: we rather have the attitude of a mainline church, a state church!

There is an unwritten law within our state church – among the baptised or those who pay church taxes: no missionising! It is one of the principles of responsible membership that members can themselves determine how intensive they want their faith, and above all their participation in community life, to be. In the state church religious service is rendered on call, so to speak, without having to fear that the pastor or – even worse – the fellow Christians come too close. There is no *must*. Some 97% of the church population cheerfully avail themselves of this freedom Sunday for Sunday.

However, there is a reserve for mission in the state church as well. There is a pastoral office for "ecumenism, mission and development" in our Swiss protestant churches. Mission is delegated to an office, usually held by one of the pastoral personnel at the church services centre. Mission is like the ham in the sandwich, enclosed, wrapped up and made tolerable by ecumenism on the one hand and development aid on the other. For nobody has anything against that, as long as the representatives do not overdo it or better, have an inclination to the left.

II Mission Possible

a. Theological Rehabilitation

Missionising mission is a polluted term. It is better if we do not talk about it! Everyone should become blessed in their own way, should they not? No! I do believe mission is a debatable issue. Now, in a second step, I should like to give the “mission possible” a chance.

First of all, the theological *founding* of mission, that has already been touched upon, should be emphasised again. The church does not merely have a mission, it *is* mission. That is its mandate (mission!) and its essence. But it is not the missionary success that is the criterion of whether the church is acting according to its character and mission. The mission of the church is very closely bound to the sending of Jesus and His fate. It is the downcast, persecuted and oppressed community who bears testimony to the gospel. Because it is weak it is credible. Jesus assures a handful of women and men: you *are* the light of the world, you *are* the salt of the earth! It is a fatal mission-theological misconception to deduce the church *has* the light from these words. No! It should read: a church that does not shine and does not bother about communicating the gospel is no longer following Jesus Christ. *Mission is therefore critical of the church, it does not render the church inviolate.* Whoever missionises in the church must expect a few to drop out. Therefore mission always encompasses the plea, the plea for the good spirit of God that gives strength for healing and reconciliation. Yet again! This is no harmless plea. Mission actuates a crisis because it recalls the moratorium between Good Friday and Easter morning, the discipleship, the cross, the weakness and then Pentecost. Only so can mission avoid becoming what always threatens: a totalitarian undertaking.

If we follow up the theological rehabilitation of mission in the theology of the 20th century, we discover this elementary truth – discipleship of Christ crucified and orientation to the Kingdom of God:

- Karl Barth’s theology, filtered through the ecumenical movement, inspired more recent mission theology. Mission based on the *missio dei*. It is not we who mediate God, it is God who embraces us in His mission. Consequently, the church comes after the Kingdom of God, not before.
- But it is also important that, after the second world war, not least due to the ecumenical movement, an awareness of the cultural dominance of the northern hemisphere over the southern was able to arise. When the essential is not the spreading of our culture and our churches and Christianity, but seeking the Kingdom of God, then the mission must strive to rediscover Christ deep in the other culture. And for this it is essential to have the room to be weak and not to feel obliged to outdo the others. The resurrection of Christ crucified offers this intermediate room, where I do not have to prove myself either as man or as Greek, nor as successful. Christians encounter one another in Christ.

It may be somewhat overdrawn, but I shall dare a thesis: in the second half of the 20th century the theologically, culturally and politically aware “new mission” primarily saw itself as making good for the “old mission”. That was the message of Gertrud Kurz and others: one corrects errors by helping; that is, by providing development aid. The objective of this new mission is not the overwhelming but the independence of the previous missionary targets. The mother church and daughter churches should become sister churches interacting ecumenically, dialogically and as partners: Mission possible. Only so is it still possible to talk about mission. The path has been a long one. Thank God that a few people persevered along that path.

b. Possible Types of Mission

However, the exciting aspect is that ‘missionary mission’ has again become possible in Europe. Naturally, not the mission of the 19th century that concentrated on the “planting and organisation of the Christian church among non-Christians” as Gustav Warneck defined it in his mission theory. The topic I was asked to speak on embodies this fantastic equivocality. Community mission can mean “community that does missionary work” or “community that is missionised”. But in both cases it is a question of the community and not a special pastoral office or mission society. Both have their justification, but I do not wish to go into this aspect at this juncture. However, to avoid any confusion, one must differentiate between the old “classic mission” and the new “partnership mission” and differentiate the latter from “community mission”. The mission of the community, namely, takes place within the church and the immediate social context. When the church missionises itself, we talk about “church building”, when it reaches out we talk about “evangelisation”. These three possible types of mission are once again in the shadow of mission impossible:

	<i>Mission Possible.</i>	<i>Mission Impossible!</i>
“Classic mission”	Spreading the gospel	Colonisation
“Partner-basis mission”	Dialogue of sister churches	Self-secularisation
“Community mission”	Church building and evangelisation	Self-ghettoization

It is striking how often the third type, “community mission”, has been under discussion in recent years. In Switzerland this is still rather low key, in Germany it has been intensifying over the past twenty years; in the eighties principally in conjunction with the debate on church building, more recently also in conjunction with evangelisation. Mission – the old emotive word – has become respectable again. Numerous publications, memoranda of the German Evangelical Church, congress documents evidence this trend. I have just differentiated between Germany and Switzerland. The reasons for these differences are historical. The German state churches have acquired a different attitude to community mission as one consequence of the struggle between church and state during the Nazi-regime; and after 1989 they were confronted with a religious situation in the new states where mission appeared to be the sole answer. But that is only one aspect. It is clear that there is no question of talking about a European situation. The religious landscape of Europe obliges us to consider smaller contexts. Switzerland is a Europe en miniature. Kleinbasel cannot be compared with the Upper Valais, nor Geneva with Lucerne or the Emmental with the Engadin.

c. A Formula

Before going on to consider such a context, I should like to concentrate the two elements, “mission” and “community” in the following formula:

Since mission has made community possible again, community renders "mission impossible" possible again.

There is no need to tell you that for many people my introduction has started the red warning lights flashing. Let them flash! What is important is to see our theme in the right light!

If the church is a sent church on account of the sending of Jesus then mission is an essential element of the church, pervading all its functions. If the church *is* mission, it must be anchored in the vital precepts of the Christian community. Where else? It is rooted in the Christian community (koinonia). It becomes concrete in outreaching service to our brothers and sisters (diakonia). It comes alive as testimony (martyria) and acquires its ceremonial form in the rite of the Eucharist (leitourgia)¹. Community makes mission possible. It is the subject of the mission. Everything else is theory.

Life and mission of the community go together. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say, mission *should* pervade the vital precepts of the Christian community, and the life of the community *should* in fact be a testimony of faith. At least, the fundamental articles of many church orders demand this. But theological ideal and institutional reality are far apart. The state church has members who do not practise any contact with the community, appear only occasionally at a church service and do not bother with religious communion. Should these people be emphatically urged to attend the church service? Should they be called on to take a more active part in the life of the community?

Church building is the mission of the church within the church. It is a thousand times easier to grumble about “mission impossible” than to make “mission possible”. I see three escape options for our church:

- We leave the challenge to share life and faith to the *individuals*: every individual should become blessed in his own way.
- We delegate church building to *specialists*: it should be left to the professionals, that is the church personnel.
- We leave the recruitment of new members to *missionary groups* within and outside our churches and are glad when a few who have heard the mission find their way to us.

I think it is time to leave the escape routes and to take up the challenge. Whoever builds on the community, who makes mission possible again, must accept the mission that builds community. For the socialisation mechanisms of our state church are no longer effective. They do not produce enough light, enough warmth. Only fools believe that the outreaching, liturgical and kerygmatic community is self generating.

You have just heard an enthusiastic plea for missionary church building. So I will follow up with an equally emphatic “but”. When one consults the pertinent literature on community mission, one cannot avoid a suspicion that it is intended as a church rescue action. An ailing institution is to be saved from foundering. In my opinion this is wretched mission theology. It is not a question of saving the church, it is a question of seeking righteousness. This does not mean saving souls and forming touchy-feely groups. The new mission theology has something very important, critical and decisive to say when it urges the priority of discipleship and the Kingdom of God. The fact is that missionary church building and mission

¹ More on this theme in Henning Wrogemann, *Identität und Struktur – Beobachtungen zu missionarischer Gemeinde heute* [Identity and Structure – Observations on the Missionary Community Today], in: *EvTh* 58 (1998), 424-432, 431ff. and Volkhard Krech, „Missionarische Gemeinde“ – Bedingungen und Möglichkeiten aus soziologischer Sicht, [Missionary Communities – Conditions and Possibilities from the Sociological Viewpoint] in: *op cit.* 433-444, 442ff.

theology have developed away from one another and no longer dialogue with one another. They are two worlds, two different groups, two different pieties with their own organisations and own conferences. The theme of the World Mission Conference is an opportunity to establish connections. It is high time that the *missio dei* becomes a subject for church building.

d. The Intercultural and Inter-religious Context

I have now come to the last link in the formulation of theme – the intercultural and inter-religious environment in Europe. As I have already said, this calls for differentiation: a multicultural and multi-religious environment is not simply a question of percentage, one cannot deal with this either on a European or on a Swiss average. This would entangle us in statistics-controlled comparisons: + 4% Muslim, - 10% church Christians + Bin Laden = downfall of the Occident. The deduction from this is that mission implies to produce more Christians, more good guys.

No, we must start from concentrations. The Aussersihl district in Zurich, for example, is multi-ethnic and this to a very high degree. But I find it interesting that, for the most part, the agitators do not live in one of these areas but in a Swiss ‘homeland’. And that is typical for the Switzerland we live in. In the case of Zurich, there are district kindergartens where not a single child speaks our Swiss dialect. In contrast, in the lakeside communities, the broad affluence belt with all its private houses, the proportion of foreigners is very small. What does community mission mean here? Where is the intercultural and inter-religious environment? I dare to put a question mark behind the “inter”. We live alongside one another and not with one another.

Ecumenism and mission heighten the acuity to take both own and foreign contexts into account when thinking about faith. One cannot practice theology in a cultural void. If people are to be won over to faith, their personal contexts must be taken into account. Faith is a form of life that encompasses ethics and ethos. One can also speak of a *life style* that does not streamline to the life style of the surrounding culture, but does not impose itself as a radical opposite. When community mission is effective and a community emerges that is healing, conciliatory and holistic in its actions, this will *not fail to have an effect on the environment*. The opportunities and the conflicts this generates are quite comparable with the experiences between the partner churches in both the southern and the northern hemisphere discussed in mission theology.

III So much will be possible ...

What do a multicultural and multi-religious society mean for community mission? Once again I differentiate between mission through community and community mission.

I do not think that the monocultural Swiss church communities will missionise successfully in the highly concentrated multicultural zones. Mission impossible. But what is possible? That missionary communities take up and transform the valuable impulses of the context. A many faceted with-one-another in the unity of Christ should emerge from the many faceted next-to-one-another. What is happening in the Kleinbasel “Mitenand“ [Together] work or in Zurich in the “Street Church” must set an example, but this does not mean that it is a pattern that can be copied one on one in other towns. But wherever community lives, whether in highly or less concentrated, mixed culture zones, it is important that a room for encounter be created where acceptance, love and forgiveness can be experienced. Mission will not make communities

opinionated, conceited or more self-assured; they will become hospices where the host is Christ the Saviour. Mission is not overcoming the other, but overcoming the frontiers that separate me from Christ in the other.

I chose an impossible introduction, I should like to close with a prospect of what will be possible. I believe that community mission begins in our imagination. It is possible that we will experience a departure in the coming years. Christian men and women are rediscovering their mission. In the cities and in the country. They are crossing borders like the missionaries of old and they are suffering others to come to them, like the new mission. Intercultural communities are arising that shall, at the same time, become inter-religious bridges. While the focus is no longer on ecclesiasticism but solely on the pursuit of righteousness. Let us make this possible.

Summary

“Mission Impossible” was the name of a film hit in the nineties. For many, mission has, in effect, become something impossible. In the film “impossibility” stands for the virtually superhuman task that the hero has to resolve. Contemporaries have misgivings about the missionary church because the church has acted impossibly in the course of history. But even those who can see the positive in the mission of Jesus, find it hard to believe that our church can master the missionary mandate. It is (virtually) impossible that our churches still have the strength and the energy to missionise.

But mission has transformed. In the renewal of mission theology, we see the impossible mission cured and rehabilitated with two theological core precepts. Mission does not serve the salvation and expansion of the church but is oriented to the Kingdom of God. And it does not orient to the triumphal but to the crucified and resurrected Christ. There is room for encounter, where people discover one another, in Christ. Mission is not overcoming the other, but overcoming the frontiers that separate me from Christ in the other. Mission has also transformed in so far as the original senders have become receivers. The church itself has become the mission field. The self-missionising or church building become a prerequisite for the possibility of mission. But, this also applies vice versa: Mission becomes the *conditio sine qua non* for church building.

It is expedient, to differentiate between the old "classic" mission and the new partner-basis mission, and this from the community mission whereby in the case of the latter we should again differentiate between community building and evangelisation. The differentiation should also help to keep track of the shadows of the relevant mission types (and not to confuse them). It is essential not to repeat the errors of the impossible mission, the colonisation, self-secularisation and self-ghettoization.

Finally, it is essential to see beyond the own church horizon and to let oneself be inspired by the coming of Christ. The communities that will become possible through the new trans-border mission are an opportunity for the multicultural society. The alongside-one-another will become a with-one-another. When the objective is no longer ecclesiasticism or Christianity but solely the pursuit of righteousness, intercultural communities will emerge that will at the same time become inter-religious bridges.

More on this theme in Henning Wrogemann, *Identität und Struktur – Beobachtungen zu missionarischer Gemeinde heute* [Identity and Structure – Observations on the Missionary Community Today], in: *EvTh* 58 (1998), 424-432, 431ff. and Volkhard Krech, „Missionarische Gemeinde“ – Bedingungen und Möglichkeiten aus soziologischer Sicht, [Missionary Communities – Conditions and Possibilities from the Sociological Viewpoint] in: *op cit.* 433-444, 442ff.

Slide 1

	<i>Mission Possible.</i>	<i>Mission Impossible!</i>
“Classic mission”	Spreading the gospel	Colonisation
“Partner-basis mission”	Dialogue of sister churches	Self-secularisation
“Community mission”	Church building and evangelisation	Self-ghettoization

Slide 2

Since mission has made community possible again,

community renders "mission impossible" possible again.