THE CHURCH WITNESS TO GOD’S DESIGN
Section II Report
WCC Amsterdam Assembly, 1948

Received by the Assembly and commended to the churches for their serious consideration and appropriate action.

I. THE PURPOSE OF GOD

The purpose of God is to reconcile all men to Himself and to one another in Jesus Christ His Son. That purpose was made manifest in Jesus Christ—His incarnation, His ministry of service, His death on the Cross, His resurrection and ascension. It continues in the gift of the Holy Spirit, in the command to make disciples of all nations, and in the abiding presence of Christ with His Church. It looks forward to its consummation in the gathering together of all things in Christ. Much in that purpose is still hidden from us. Three things are perfectly plain:
All that we need to know concerning God’s purpose is already revealed in Christ. It is God’s will that Gospel should be proclaimed to all men everywhere. God is pleased to use human obedience in the fulfilment of His purpose. To the Church, then, is given the privilege of so making Christ known to men that each is confronted with the necessity of a personal decision, Yes or No. The Gospel is the expression both of God’s love to man, and of His claim to man’s obedience. In this lies the solemnity of the decision. Those who obey are delivered from the power of the world in which sin reigns, and already, in the fellowship of the children of God, have the experience of eternal life. Those who reject the love of God remain under His judgment and are in danger of sharing in the impending doom of the world that is passing away.

II. THE PRESENT SITUATION

Two world wars have shaken the structure of the world. Social and political convulsions rage everywhere. The mood of many swings between despair, frustration and blind indifference. The millions of Asia and Africa, filled with new hope, are determined to seize now the opportunity of shaping their own destiny. Mankind, so clearly called even by its own interests to live at peace, seems still rent by a fanaticism of mutual destruction. The word “faith” has acquired a new context. For most men, it is now faith in new society, now to be founded once for all, in which the “goon life” will be realised. Even in the present-day confusion, there are still many who believe that man, by wise planning, can master his own situation. Such men are interested not in absolute truth, but in achievement. In face of many religions and philosophies, it is held that all truth is relative, and so the necessity of a costly personal decision is evaded. A formidable obstacle to Christian faith is the conviction that it belongs definitely to a historical phase now past. To those who know little of it, it seems merely irrelevant. More thoughtful men, who hold that it enshrines some spiritual and cultural values, regard it as no longer honestly tenable as a system of belief. And yet there is an earnest desire for clearly formulated truth. The religions of Asia and Africa are being challenged and profoundly modified. In the period of transition, the minds of millions are more than usual open to the Gospel. But the tendency in
these countries to press an ancient religion into service as one foundation for a politically homogeneous state already threatens the liberty of Christian action. So the Church sees the World. What does the World see, or think it sees, when it looks at the Church? It is a Church divided, and in its separated parts are often found hesitancy, complacency, or the desire to domineer. It is a Church that has largely lost touch with the dominant realities of modern life, and still tries to meet the modern world with language and a technique that may have been appropriate two hundred years ago. It is a Church that, by its failure to speak effectively on the subject of war, has appeared impotent to deal with the realities of the human situation. It is a Church accused by many of having been blind to the movement of God in history, of having sided with the vested interests of society and state, and of having failed to kindle the vision and to purify the wills of men in a changing world. It is a Church under suspicion in many quarters of having used its missionary enterprise to further the foreign policies of states and the imperialistic designs of the powers of the West. Much in this indictment may be untrue; but the Church is called to deep shame and penitence for its failure to manifest Jesus Christ to men as He really is. Yet the Church is still the Church of God, in which, and in which alone He is pleased to reveal Himself and His redemptive purpose in Jesus Christ, in whom and in whom alone the renewal of man’s life is possible. It is a Church to which, through the upheavals of the modern world, God cries aloud and says “Come let us reason together”(Isa. I, 18). It is a Church that is, to millions of faithful people, the place where they receive the grace of Christ and are given strength to live by the power of His victory. It is a Church awaking to its great opportunity to enter as the minister of the redemption wrought by Christ into that world with which God has confronted us. It is a Church that today desires to treat evangelism as the common task of the churches, and transcends the traditional distinction between all the so-called Christian and so-called non-Christian lands. The present day is the beginning of a new epoch of missionary enterprise, calling for the pioneering spirit, and for the dedication of many lives to the service of the Gospel of God.

III. THE CHURCH’S TASK IN THE PRESENT DAY

The duty of the Church at such a time can be expressed simply in one sentence—it is required to be faithful to the Gospel and to realise more fully its own nature as the Church. But fulfilment of his duty involves a revolution in thought and practice. A. Worship and Witness. Worship and witness have sometimes been held in separation, but they belong inseparably together, as the fulfilment of the great command that men should love God and should love their neighbour as themselves. When the ordinary man speaks of the Church, he thinks of a group of people worshiping in a building. By what that group is, the Church is judged. Effective witness becomes possible only as each worshipping group is so filled with the joy of the risen and living Lord that even the outsider becomes aware that, when the Church speaks, it speaks of real things. But a worshipping group of individuals is not necessarily a community. It is essential that each group become a real fellowship, through acceptance by all of full Christian responsibility for mutual service, and by breaking down the barriers of race and class. It is intolerable that anyone should be excluded, because of his race or colour, from any Christian place of worship. The world to-day is hungry for community. But to many it seems that the fellowship
of the churches is much less satisfying than that which they find in their own secular or religious organizations and brotherhood. This cannot be put right, until the churches more recognisably bear the marks of the Lord Jesus, and cease to hinder others, by the poverty of the fellowship they offer, from coming to Him.

**B. A People of God in the World.** The Church must find its way to the places where men really live. It must penetrate the alienated world from within, and make the minds of men familiar with the elementary realities of God, of sin and of purpose in life. This can be done partly through new ventures of self-identification by Christians with the life of that world, partly through Christians making the word of the Gospel heard in the places where decisions are made that affect the lives of men. It can be done fully only if, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Church recovers the spirit of prophecy to discern the signs of the times, to see the purpose of God working in the immense movements and revolutions of the present age, and again to speak to the nations the word of God with authority.

**C. The Ecumenical Sense.** Each Christian group must be conscious of the world-wide fellowship of which it is a part. Each Sunday as it comes, is a reminder of the innumerable company throughout the world, who on that day are worshiping the same Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour. It can attain to fulness of Christian life only as it accepts its place in the great purpose of God that all men shall be saved, and takes up the responsibility for prayer, service and sacrificial missionary enterprise involved in that acceptance.

**IV. MISSIONARY AND EVANGELISTIC STRATEGY**

The evident demand of God in this situation is that the whole Church should set itself to the total task of winning the whole world for Christ.

**A. Lay Work and Witness.** This is the day of opportunity for the lay membership of the Church. The work of God requires that every member of the Church, ordained and lay, be an active witness. The layman has his duties in the Church in worship and stewardship. He is charged also with a task in the world outside. The most obvious sphere of witness is the home, the place in which the Church of the coming generation is to be built up. Some are called to special ministries of preaching or intercession. For most people the field of witness lies in the place where they do their daily work. The way in which they do their job or exercise their profession must be unmistakably Christian. But also they are called to bear courageously, as God gives the opportunity, that witness in word through which others are confronted with the challenge of the Living Christ. Christian service is to be conceived in the widest possible terms. The variety of forms of witness is just the means by which God can make known the fulness of the Gospel as His answer to all the needs of mankind.

**B. Co-operation in Evangelism.** The Churches may find a denominational framework too narrow for its work today. Most evangelistic work is carried out by denominational agencies in separation. In many situations this is the natural way. But there are places where the work can best be done through co-operation in evangelism. Many difficulties may have to be faced. It is important that the constituent churches of the World Council of Churches seek comity among themselves in all matters relation to evangelistic effort and to their respective spheres of responsibility. But it is God Himself who is showing us the inadequacy of those things to which we have been accustomed. The Churches are called today to be much more flexible in organization than in the past. They must deal with every situation in the light of the total task. There are parts of the world where the Church is holding on under great difficulties, and where its liberty of action is restricted or denied. Its witness is carried out more by suffering than by preaching. Such churches rightly claim that within the
fellowship of faith they shall be supported by the prayers and succour of every member of the world-wide Church.

In other areas, God has set new opportunities before the Church. Millions of people are ready to listen to the Gospel, and are already considering whether it is their only hope. Such area should be considered the responsibility of the whole Church, and not only of those at present engaged in work in them; adequate resources in personnel and money should be made immediately available to the local churches, so that what needs to be done can be done effectively and without delay. The younger churches are crying out for the help of Christian colleagues from the West. Churches older and younger alike call urgently for the dedication of lives to the ordained ministry, and other full-time vocations of service to Christ in His Church.

C. The Problem of Our Divisions. If we take seriously our world-wide task, we are certain to be driven to think again of our divisions. Can we remain divided? St. Paul told his Corinthian converts that he could not give them solid food, because their divisions showed that they were still carnal. God gives the gift of His grace to churches even in their separation. We are persuaded that He has yet additional gifts to give to a Church united in accordance with His will. The pressure for corporate unity comes most strongly from the younger churches; the older manifest greater caution. The path to unity is always beset by many difficulties. But the ecumenical movement loses significance, unless all its constituent churches bear ceaselessly in mind the prayer of Christ “that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me” (John XVII, 21), and are prepared to move forward, as God guides them, to further unity in Faith, in fellowship, at the table of the Lord, and in united proclamation of the word of life.

V. “NOW IS THE ACCEPTED TIME”

As we have studied evangelism in its ecumenical setting we have been burdened by a sense of urgency. We have recaptured something of the spirit of the apostolic age, when the believers “went everywhere preaching the word.” If the Gospel really is a matter of life and death, it seems intolerable that any human being now in the world should live out his life without ever having the chance to hear and receive it. It is not within the power of man alone to create a new evangelistic movement. But the Holy Spirit is at work in men with men. In the past He has from time to time quickened the Church with power on high. It is our earnest hope and prayer that He will do a mighty work in our day, giving the Church again wisdom and power rightly to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to men. We rejoice that the World Council of Churches has included evangelism in its programme of development. Already we are seeing signs of renewal and fresh life.

Now, not tomorrow, is the time to act. God does not wait for us to be perfect; He is willing to use very imperfect instruments. What matters is that the instrument should be available for His use. The results of our efforts are not in our hands but in His. But He has given us the assurance that “it is required in stewards that a man be found faithful,” and that where that faithfulness is found. He is able “to do exceedingly abundantly, above all that we ask or think.”

Note: In this short statement, it has not been possible to indicate in any detail the new problems in evangelism that have to be solved, and the new methods of work that are available to the Church to-day. There is a great field of research open in such matters as the use of radio and television, and in the application to local conditions of principles generally agreed upon. We venture to refer readers to the preparatory volume of our section. The Church’s Witness to God’s Design, and to the Report of the Whitby Conference of the International Missionary Council The
Witness of a Revolutionary Church, and to the printed volume of the speeches delivered at that Conference, in which will be found much fuller discussion both of principles and of applications, and evidence of power of God at work in the world to-day.